

MAY BYRON

A DAY WITH
WILLIAM
SHAKESPEARE

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Maurice Clare

A Day with William Shakespeare

"Some ardent love-scene in the rich dim gardens of Verona."

Juliet. This bud of love, by summer's ripening heat,
May prove a beauteous flower when next we meet.

(Romeo and Juliet).

A DAY WITH WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

IT was early on a bright June morning of the year 1599. The household of Christopher Mountjoy, the wig-maker, at the corner of Silver Street in Cripplegate, was already up and astir. Mountjoy, his wife and daughter, and his apprentice, Stephen Bellott, were each refreshing themselves with a hasty mouthful – one could not term it breakfast – before beginning their day's work. For town wig-makers were busy folk, then as now. Every fashionable dame wore "transformations," and some noble ladies, like the late Queen of Scots and – breathe it low – the great Elizabeth herself, changed the colour of their tresses every day.

Breakfast, in 1599, was a rite "more honoured in the breach than in the observance." Most people, having supped with exceeding heartiness the previous night, ignored breakfast altogether: especially as dinner would occur some time between 10 and 12 a.m. Those who could not go long without food had no idea of a regular sit-down meal during that precious morning hour which "has a piece of gold in its mouth." They contented themselves with beaten-up eggs in muscadel wine, as now the Mountjoy family; who, being of French origin, boggled somewhat at the only alternative – a very English one – small ale and bread-and-butter.

To these good folk, standing up and swallowing their morning draught, entered their well-to-do lodger, Mr. William Shakespeare, up betimes like them – for he was a very busy person, – and shared their jug of eggs and muscadel. Mr. Shakespeare was thirty-five years of age, "a handsome, well-shap't man," in the words of his friend Aubrey, – his eyes light hazel, his hair and beard auburn. He still retained, in some degree, the complexion which accompanies auburn hair, and this imparted a tinge of delicacy to his sensitive and mobile face. He was already slightly inclined to *embonpoint*: for in the seventeenth century people aged soon, and thirty-five was much more like forty-five nowadays.

In all company, with all people, Shakespeare was charmingly pleasant-spoken. He had long since shed any provincial *gaucherie*, and was of an exquisite courtesy, "of a very ready and pleasant smooth wit," – again to quote his intimates, "a good-natured man, of a great sweetness in his bearing, and a most agreeable company." Moreover, that indefinable ease of bearing, which accrues with success, was evident in the gracious *bonhomie* of his mien. For, after many years of stress and struggle, many hard bouts with fortune, innumerable humiliations and adverse events, he was now prosperous, popular, possessed of this world's goods. Although a self-made man in every sense of the word, – although still a member of that despised theatrical profession against which the pulpit thundered, at which the decent citizen looked askance, – he was a distinctly

marked personality, not to be ignored. He was part proprietor of the *Globe* Theatre, the *Blackfriars*, and the *Rose*, – he had house property in Southwark and Blackfriars, lands and houses at Stratford-upon-Avon. He had obtained a coat-of-arms for his family from the College of Heralds, thus constituting himself legally a "gentleman"; he was the brilliant author of immensely popular plays. And he was reputed to earn at the rate of £600 per annum – which would be now worth nearly eight times as much.

Such was the man who presently sauntered out into the summer sunlight, this June morning, and went leisurely westward towards Holborn. He strolled along, thoughtfully ruminating the day's work before him, but courteously alert to every greeting from passing acquaintances in the streets. He encountered, as he went, warm and invigorating scents, which floated round each corner – and rose, for the nonce, above the malodours of the open gutter – pleasant midsummer perfumes which were exhaled, in the clear and smokeless air of those days, from a multiplicity of blossoming London gardens. For every house had its private garden, large or small. Every householder garnished his dwelling-rooms with flowers, instead of ornaments of potter's ware or metal: the floors were still strewn with leaves and grasses, and the doorways often decked with boughs. Cherries and strawberries were ripening in the ancient monastery gardens, among the majestic precincts of ruined priories: blackbirds were singing in the trees. If the actual dewy freshness of the Warwickshire water-meadows were not present in the London air – if the wild roses of

the Avon-side did not bloom in Holborn – yet Shakespeare had only to close his eyes one moment, to project himself back into his boyhood's scenes. For London was emphatically a "garden city," encircled by forests, and fields, and farms, and wooded hills; and the ecstatic sweetness of an English June was wafted over its cobbled thoroughfares.

Of all seasons, this was the most enjoyable to Shakespeare – because of his passion for flowers. He delighted to make long luscious lists of flowers – their very names were a pleasure to him, each fraught with its own special significance. He loved to write of

Daffodils,
That come before the swallow dares, and take
The winds of March with beauty; violets dim,
But sweeter than the lids of Juno's eyes,
Or Cytherea's breath: pale primroses...
The crown-imperial, – lilies of all kinds,
The flower-de-luce being one.

– to collect, in imagination,

Roses, their sharp spines being gone,
Not royal in their scent alone,
But in their hue.
Maiden pinks of odour faint,
Daisies smell-less yet most quaint,
And sweet thyme true;

"Carnations and streaked gillyflowers," and all the lovely company of the garden, were a joy to him; and equally so the wild flowers in woodlands where "the wild thyme grows, And oxlips and the nodding violet blows," over which the south wind breathes softly, "stealing and giving odour." Beneath the tangled woodbines and musk-roses, the poet could linger in fantasy, if not in fact, – in dream, if not in deed. A passionate enjoyment of wild nature distinguished him pre-eminently above all his town-bred compeers. Trees and birds and forest brooks, but flowers especially, claimed an equal place with music in his affections. Beauty of sight and sound appealed, with magic power, to the man on whom the robuster joys failed to make any permanent mark. For towards all the salient characteristics of the Elizabethan age, – the volcanic vigour, the incandescent longing for adventure, the magnificent dare-devilry of seamanship, the fierce and splendid valour, inciting men to desperate deeds, – William Shakespeare was strangely impassive and unimpressionable. The wave of Elizabethan ardour surged past, and left him not even sprinkled by its spray. He was quite content to go on clothing with new flesh – glowing and Giorgione-like – the antique bones of old romances; to infuse new life into forgotten mediæval episodes, crudely treated by his predecessors, the men who supplied stock plays for travelling companies. He preferred some ardent love-scene in the rich, dim gardens of Verona to all the opulent possibilities of the

New World: some pageantry in Venice or in Athens to any present splendour of the Elizabethan court. He secretly revelled, with conscious and justifiable pride, in pouring forth imperial passages of words, reverberant with rolling sound; but frequently, for the sheer pleasure of musical effect, as it would seem, he introduced those exquisite lyrics, – bird-like in their careless spontaneity, flower-like in their grace and daintiness, – which float like flakes of thistledown above his plays. These songs say all that need be said: they condense into a few swift words the essential spirit of a whole drama. So in *Othello*:

"My mother had a maid call'd Barbara," says Desdemona, standing unwittingly upon the threshold of death,

"She had a song of 'willow';
An old thing 'twas, *but it expressed the future*,
And she died singing it. That song, to-night,
Will not go from my head."

The most apparently casual and irrelevant ditties of Shakespeare's dramas, in like manner, "express the future" of the story.

"Come unto these yellow sands,
And there take hands"...

So, eventually, Ferdinand and Miranda avow their mutual love beside the lapping of the long blue waves.

"Under the greenwood tree
Who loves to lie with me," —

might be the very *leit-motiv* of *As You Like It*.

"Sigh no more, ladies, – ladies, sigh no more,
Men were deceivers ever:
One foot on sea, and one on shore,
To one thing constant never," —

– here you have the treachery of Don John, and the vacillating mistrust of Claudio, succinctly summed up.

"Journeys end in lovers' meeting,
Every wise man's son doth know," —

thus the Clown in *Twelfth Night* becomes mouthpiece of the *dénouement* which was never long in doubt.

To every man his *métier*: and that of William Shakespeare was not to be the mouthpiece of those "spacious times," tingling with sensation, with excitement, with huge enterprise. Exhibiting, throughout, the curious patient persistence of the essential Midlander, he had worked his way right up from the bottom rung of the ladder. The ill-mated young man of twenty-three, who had left Stratford with a travelling company of players in 1587, – who had (whether conscious or unconscious of his genius) plodded

industriously onward as a literary hack of drama – tinkering, adapting, re-shaping and re-writing the stale old stock plays, until they suffered a change "into something rich and strange," – whose colossal greatness his contemporaries were not great enough to appreciate; – that same man was now arriving – like so many other Midlanders – at a point where criticism could not touch him. He had gained no giddy pinnacle of sudden success, but a safe and solid summit of assured position. That he should attain it in his own way, and after his own methods, – that, after all, was his business. There were plenty of other poets to utter
Arma virumque cano

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