

# SHAKESPEARE'S CHILDHOOD

Foreword by Hector Bolitho

*When I was in Australia some years ago, I found Shakespearean interest so keen that there was a permanent company of players touring the country all the time. They have given four thousand consecutive performances of the plays; a world's record. This is all the more wonderful when you remember that these countries of the antipodes were delivered from cannibalism within the last hundred years. Also, I found two interesting Shakespearean associations: one a portrait of Shakespeare which the owner claimed to be by Jansen, the famous portrait painter of that time; and the other, the following statement by a lady who claimed to be the direct descendant of Jenkins, Shakespeare's schoolmaster. This interesting and amusing record was given to me by Allan Wilkie, who was the founder of "The Shakespearean Quarterly" and also the enthusiast responsible for the permanent company of Shakespearean players. It is foolish and almost impossible to vouch for such documents. One can only present them with the assurance that to the best of one's knowledge, there is nothing of the literary fake about them. Shakespearean study is not going to be deeply aided by this limelight thrown on his schooldays, but any facts or theories are interesting and worthy of print when they surround so great a name. This then is my excuse for being the means of introducing this story to the already mighty deluge of Shakespeareana. — H. B.*

**W**ILLIAM SHAKSPEAR was born in Henley Street Stratford-on-Avon, and he was a healthy, lively child, and was described by the old wives as being as "full of mischief as an egg was full of meat". He was very quick to learn any children's games, but when he was sent to Grammar School he was one of the dullest ones there. The Head Master Rev. Thomas Jenkins, was sent down from London with a royal commission to take charge of school, and being a highly educated and gifted scholar, in those times received the highest salary outside London. As the child was too fond of looking at everything and everybody but his horn-book the teacher took charge of him, and himself, taught him beside his desk, until he knew enough to join his class. It has been well known to us that he was as dull at first as he was quick later on and he needed much patience and forbearance at first. Later on his father wished him to be taught the Protestant religion as his mothers family were

Catholic and Mr. Jenkins undertook to do so and formed a class which Willie joined and afterwards became a good Sunday scholar. He used to sit under the trees in garden for his lesson and marked his texts with sprigs of rosemary between leaves. Later on he taught a form himself for some time and being so clever had loan of books from the Headmaster to continue his studies as there were no books in Stratford at that time and only those who travelled and could read a little carried them down.

The child became a quiet industrious lad, but when about twelve years old Queen Elizabeth came to Kenilworth Castle, passing through Stratford where she was entertained. It was I think on this occasion that John Shakspear offended Sir Thomas Lucy by walking before him as an older Knight's privilege. The name of Shakspear was first borne by a tall man who was attached to the royal body guard and who was present during one

of the battles and saw an assassin stealing up to a royal person either king or next heir (I cannot remember which) he snatched a spear from an armour bearer, and ran him through, just in time to save the victim intended. For this he was sent for and knighted on the field and given a spear and commanded to walk before royalty on public occasions for three generations and to receive a grant of five yards of scarlet cloth annually. After this a settlement of an estate a days journey from London was given and kept for many years, and the owner had to appear at court and wave or shake a spear to prevent any one coming too near to do harm to the King and that gave them their name and rank. So that was the reason John Shakspear took his right place before the pompous old Sir Thomas who never forgave it. The strolling players staying in Stratford on their way to Kenilworth attracted the attention of Willie then a smart lad and turned his attention to the play and being coaxed to try some parts he quickly picked it up and was easily the best. Next he was persuaded to leave home at night disguised as a "Mummer" and taken on to Kenilworth and afterwards found there by his father. During the festivities he played the part of a "Merry Andrew" before the Queen who daily watched him and for which she tossed him a gold token from the balcony at end of festival and he kept it till after he went to London. As he grew up he never forgot the first sight of court life and it un-hinged his teachers plans who had his parents consent to train him for the Church and never could they forgive him for doing so as they had set their hearts on it and taught him for that purpose. A clergyman who preached his funeral sermon said, if Willie had entered the Church so

great was his knowledge he would have become one of the greatest Bishops of his time. However his life was upset and he could not settle his mind to any trade, and for some reason he did not do so well at teaching and through the losses by plague and other trouble, his father (who owned a small farm and also a glover trade in town) he had to put his son to work to help to maintain the family. He used to write accounts for tradesmen who could not do it and he always made a verse on every one he worked for, but after trying several things he was a failure. Now the cause of this was his fancy for play: his mind was not in any work in the rural district and he longed to go and see life. He got a name for laziness, classed as too dull to learn a trade, as other boys less gifted could do and he was disheartened and discontented with his life. He would lie on the banks of the river and write on any paper he could get hold of, his first long poem being "The Swan on the Avon" in which he paints the Queen as a graceful swan surrounded by three cygnets or three ladies-in-waiting sailing gayly down the Avon. This afterwards gave him great favour with the Queen who had a long neck and was flattered by it and ever afterwards wore the frills round her neck to draw attention to it. Soon after, being so discouraged and not often in work, he was too much in company of young men who led him into pranks and he joined them in stealing deer from Charlcott Park, but not to take home although he joined in the suppers in the meadow, for his mother's family and Sir Thomas Lucy's were old enemies and he would not insult his mother by bringing anything from Charlcott into the house. It was the moonlight chase with the keepers that was the best fun, not the meat supper. However he was recognised

and locked up with the others, but escaped. The verses written and put on the Lodge Gates were really written by Willie, for revenge for suing his father, but purposely written in very vulgar language, to avoid suspicion, but as he was the only one who wrote verses he was soon discovered. One could never pass Charlcott without a smile at the recollection of the Squire's anger when an apparently ignorant lad went up to the Great House to inform him that a Proclamation or something else was fastened to his front gates, bringing Sir Thomas with his gold topped cane to read it for them. However things went too far and Willie to avoid trouble to his wife and family went to London riding all the way up. He had previously been kind to a troupe of gypsies at Smitherfield where they camped being afraid of Sir Thomas who was a bitter, hard old squire, and on one occasion a very old gypsy, or wich as they were called offered to brew a pot and tell him his future life.

This was amusing to him and he agreed and she told him he dreamed too much, to act would be better than idling his time away and that a great change in his life would take place and that he would see great sights and become a great man. He would be the last of his name in his house, quickly given, quickly taken, but after his death which would be in prime of life, his fame like a star would rise and shine in every part of the world and never dim, but in ages to come with a lesser star would light the world. That was the reason he went to London to try his fortune. When he went there he had many trials but the first chance he had of doing any real good, was by being what he called himself a "Printer's devil" at a printing house owned by a printer named Ford, and from that

time he had a home amongst them till he was better known. Then he joined literary friends and success crowned his efforts through his writings and stage plays. He came once a year, harvest time, to Stratford to spend a holiday with his friends and was always welcomed in town, as he brought news from the great city. He had great trials at first, as I am told people were not then educated and could not understand his not working at a trade in his own town. He was received at court and it was the Queen herself who gave him the name of "Sweet William" and handed him the token, a flower well known. I do not know much of his life in London, but some of his schoolmates also went up and settled there and there were some who were partners with him in theatres, I believe and made money. Shakspear's shortest speech — I had this in an old print until about four years ago when I lost it — but I remember it well.

At a meeting at Chapter House where some religious conference was held, Queen Elizabeth and her court and bishops were present, a learned divine gave a long tiresome speech making everyone present weary. After it was at last finished the Queen who had observed Shakspear crossing and recrossing his knees during the long debate said to him, "What hast thou, William to say in this matter". All his literary friends looked at him knowing he was not prepared to give an address, but he rose at once and facing her said "This only Madam, read more, teach more, pray more", and bowing low sat down. Silence fell and court soon broke up. His friends who knew he could quote Scripture from cover to cover had discussion on his short speech, but they recognised that in those few words he had conveyed as much as the learned Bishop in his long

speech. The rest of his life you know better than I who never yet had a copy of his works. But some were not published for many were found in his desk and some sent to friends but the final one was the Kenilworth one, in which the masked knight and Grey Lady walked the terrace at night and for the plans of which he went to the ruined castle to see. He grew careless of his writings in later years. It was about 50 or 60 years after his death that the world realised that he was a great man and then they wished for more of his plays and sought out those whom they thought had them. I do not know how it was they found his friends so easily but the Jenkins family and connections were very faithful friends to the Shakspears in their misfortunes and it was to some members of that family they went. Instead of using courtesy, they sent a party of "play actors" to demand from them certain writings, they desired, but especially the Kenilworth tragedy. Had they stated that it was for the honour of Shakspear they wished to get them they would have got some, but they boasted that they had made him in London. They were quickly told that he had written verses and acted before he went to the city, and they refused to give them up, as they were not satisfied. Then they used threats and were sent away. Again another party went to enquire the part played by Willie at Kenilworth as they wished to produce the act as he had himself played it, but at a theatre objected to owing to the leader a Gentleman player, trying to bribe them to silence and let him produce and publish the Kenilworth play as his own work, they indignantly told him they valued the Shakspear honour and Stratford rights. More than a

purse of gold and forbade them to return and by fraud produce his work at the coronation. After this some of the manuscripts were placed in safety, but I do not know where but no more was heard from the players. It is certain that Witty Will never left England, for though tempting offers to France and Italy came, he refused to go, being warned by the gypsy previously that if he ever trod on foreign soils he would be killed by a jealous rival abroad. I used the name "Witty Will" forgetting that you did not perhaps know it, but is the most familiar to my family, as it was bestowed on him as a schoolboy as he had such a ready excuse for his mischief and his wit often saved him punishment. After his visit to Kenilworth he used to round up town boys and teach them, Tom fool games and many are still played there. I never heard much of his wife, but certainly he sent money when any trustworthy friend came back from London and strange to say many of his earlier school friends married connections of Jenkins and Ford family, my fathers side some on both male and female line and they were evidently faithful to Witty Will's memory. I am sorry that more of his works were not published, since seeing your performance and I now realize what the world has lost. My object in writing to you before, was to ask you to contradict any statement that he was born or lived in any other part of the world, as he was well known taught and a lifelong friend of my ancestors and his memory still lives in our hearts. My memory is not very good now, I ought to have written this earlier in life. Should circumstances bring to my mind anything worth adding, I will let you know.

## THE SKETCH BOOK

### WHAT THE LOGGERS READ

By Stewart H. Holbrook

**S**PEAKING as a logger with several years of professional experience behind me, and as one with a high regard for the boys who cut the tall timber, I should like to say that loggers enjoy sound reading matter. I should prefer, for instance, to tell the literati that loggers fight over possession of a copy of "The Atlantic Monthly"; that they gouge out eyes in a scramble for a dog eared "Harper's"; that they plant calked boots in the hams of the thief who removed "The Century" from the bunkhouse; and that they mass and give three rousing cheers when the tote team brings in the monthly supply of THE BOOKMAN. . . . But I can't honestly make such a statement any more than could a spokesman for store clerks, barbers, traveling salesmen, farmers, or even captains of industry.

Because of their extended isolation from moving pictures, Ford automobiles, bootleggers, and other things that distract the minds of people living near civilization, loggers do more actual reading than do most farmers or city dwellers. And on the whole I think the logger's literary taste will compare favorably with that of his city cousins; while it is assuredly on a stratum that would reject the dismal farm journals.

In New England and the Lake States loggers, or lumberjacks, hibernate from late fall to early spring; many camps are busy throughout the year. In the Pacific northwest, where there is at present more logging going on than ever was seen in Maine, Michigan, or Wisconsin, the loggers emerge from the

timber at Christmas time for a month or two, and again just before the Fourth of July. In camp there is ample time for reading. Long evenings and longer Sundays, when the only attraction is a poker game or a lecture by some often ignorant and long winded evangelist, present unusual opportunities to study the confessions of J.-J. Rousseau, or to contemplate and marvel at the more recent, and possibly more erotic, "confessions" prepared for morons and published in the nation's intellectual capital.

Most loggers like their literary meat red. They want a story with black, curly hair on its chest and smoke and fire blowing forth from every chapter. During the long evenings in camp, when poker happens to be financially impossible and when chewing plug or snuff is the only amusement, loggers often crave to be somewhere else. How? . . . Zane Grey . . . Jack London . . . Harold Bell Wright . . . and that feller who wrote "Graustark". These are among the leaders of camp literature.

In New England and Quebec, and only there, Holman Day's books are supreme with English speaking loggers. Day wrote "King Spruce", a tale of the northeastern woods with a hero in whose doings every incipient camp foreman has seen himself ideally reflected. I have bought and loaned three copies of this book.

In the Lake States and in the Pacific northwest, however, loggers strongly favor the gallon hat, two gun cowboy school of literature. There have been few novels written around the type of