

CHAPTER I

RETURNING HOME

A large black coach slowly rolled its way along the rutted tree-lined road in the English Midlands in June of 1662. It was pulled by a team of four sleek and powerful horses with jet black coats of hair that shimmered as they were struck by rays of sunlight streaking through the canopy above. Tom skillfully used the reins to manage his team. His friend Jack rode shotgun. They were bringing Lady Elizabeth Barnard back to Stratford-upon-Avon to visit the remaining members of her family and pay her respects at the grave of her recently deceased Aunt Judith. Sir John Barnard, Lady Elizabeth's second husband, was occupied with urgent parliamentary business preventing him from making this journey.

Sir John entrusted Tom and Jack with the care and protection of his esteemed wife. Wrapped in a tarpaulin, among numerous pieces of luggage secured to the roof, was an elegant hardwood chair. The chair back contained separate engravings of a shield, and a falcon holding an upright spear. They comprised portions of the hard-won coat of arms of Lady Elizabeth's grandfather, Stratford poet and playwright, William Shakespeare.

A generation ago, Shakespeare's fame was far greater than it was now. He and his fellow playwrights Christopher Marlowe, Ben Johnson, Francis Beaumont, and John Fletcher were the leading cultural lights of their age. For theater was by far the most popular form of public entertainment during the reigns of Queen Elizabeth and King James.

Among his contemporaries, Shakespeare's fame was greatly enhanced by his astonishing versatility. He was a fine actor and poet, as well as a great playwright. As Ben Johnson said, Shakespeare was "not of an age, but for all time!"

LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON

The cultural light created by Shakespeare and his colleagues could not last forever. Storm clouds of immense proportions merged, creating one of the worst tempests experienced by any nation. With the increasing dominance of the black garbed and narrowminded Puritans in English society and politics, the theaters, which the Puritans called hotbeds of sin, were closed in September 1642. They remained shuttered through the bloody and protracted period of the Civil War and the dictatorial regime of the self-styled Lord Protector, Oliver Cromwell.

The atrocities of the war years and the Cromwell regime were too numerous to catalog. The most earth shattering was the execution of King Charles I. Such atrocities prove the truth of the adage that mankind's capacity for brutality is limitless.

Although much of William Shakespeare's work was a plea against the violence and destruction which would be brought upon the realm if Civil War occurred, given the silence forced upon the theaters and the playwrights making their living in them, his mere words, printed on aging pages, were powerless to stop the scourge of war from riding forth.

After twenty years of chaos and repression, the people and their ruling elite grew weary of the bloodshed of war and joyless oppression. Following Cromwell's death in 1658, they invited the exiled son of the executed King back to assume the throne.

With the return of King Charles II in 1660, a new day arrived for the nation. Since John's and Elizabeth's families had been strong supporters of Charles I, John became a member of Parliament and obtained the title of baronet. Given this good fortune, Elizabeth and John moved from Stratford and took up residence in John's family seat, an elegant manor house in Abington, thirty-five miles east of Stratford.

If this were not enough to give Elizabeth cause for thanksgiving, shortly after assuming the throne, Charles II, a man who thoroughly enjoyed good living and entertainment

Chapter I: Returning Home

of all types and fashion, reopened the theaters. The nobility, gentry, and commoners once again enjoyed the plays of William Shakespeare and his contemporaries. If not yet in the ascendant position they once occupied, William Shakespeare's name and reputation were on the rise. At least that was the opinion of the elegantly dressed and coiffured Elizabeth as she sat silently in the coach watching the mossy tree trunks stream by.

Despite the causes for celebration, Elizabeth's heart was tinged with wistful sadness, a longing for the people and places making up the daily fabric of her life in days gone by. Like most of us, Elizabeth viewed her days of yore through rose-colored glasses — filtering out the difficult and unsavory portions of her early life — while preserving what was good and worthy in the treasure chamber of her mind. The wooden box resting on the cushion beside her contained keys which would open a way back to those precious memories.

Lifting the hinged top, the first item she saw was a fashionable pair of kid gloves, a gift from her grandfather to her grandmother, Anne Hathaway, during their Stratford courtship in 1582. The exquisitely stitched gloves had cuffs fringed with delicate lace. Just before her death, her grandmother told Elizabeth they were made by her grandfather in the family glove shop on Henley Street. Placing one of the gloves on her left hand, Elizabeth marveled at its suppleness.

Elizabeth next retrieved a finely made bugle-beaded purse. Her grandmother told Elizabeth her grandfather brought it for her from his brother Gilbert, who once made his living as a peddler. Great Uncle Gil was a kind and funny man who loved to play harmless pranks upon family members and friends. He knew skillful card tricks. And he once discovered a penny behind Elizabeth's ear, giving it to her as a birthday present.

Elizabeth smiled as she opened the purse, revealing an exquisitely engraved silver gilt locket. It contained a beautiful

LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON

miniature portrait of her grandfather by society artist Nicholas Hilliard. The portrait was set in the locket and given to Elizabeth's grandmother as an anniversary present during her grandfather's first taste of fame in the early 1590s.

In Mr. Hilliard's painting, Elizabeth's grandfather sports the reddish, curly-brown hair, neatly trimmed beard, and mustache he wore in his twenties and early thirties. He is stylishly dressed in a beautifully textured and rounded grey hat with an ostrich feather cockade and felt brim. He wears an elegant dark doublet jacket with a white collar and cuffs of knotted lace. His bright eyes have a look of steady intensity.

Gazing upon the portrait, Elizabeth remembered her grandfather's friendly manner, twinkling eyes, and joyful laugh. In his later years, he loved to tell jokes. Like his brother Gil, he enjoyed playing little pranks upon everyone in the family, especially her grandmother. She would scowl playfully, calling out: "Will Shakespeare, stop pulling my leg!" Her grandfather would saunter over and give her grandmother a hug saying: "Don't take it seriously. Just a jest!" Pretending to fuss a bit, her grandmother would relent, joining in the laughter.

How fast the years flew by. The eternal clock keeps ticking no matter how much one wishes to slow it down. And here Elizabeth was now, in this coach, with the trees passing by and sunlight splashing in the coachman's eyes. Sadly, there was no way to return home again. She was the sole survivor of her immediate family. She would not live forever. While still here, she must do her best to finish the remaining duties owed to those who raised her and preserve her family's hard-won reputation.

With joyful anticipation, Elizabeth turned her attention to the remaining item in the box. It was a dog-eared manuscript in old fashioned secretary hand. This simple sheaf of aging papers contained the most important legacy her grandfather left Elizabeth and the other members of his family — the true

Chapter I: Returning Home

and secret history of his remarkable life. The stories it contained were a precious lifeline to the ones she loved best on this earth. Unfortunately, the manuscript also created great risks for Elizabeth and her husband.

For there were facts, beliefs and opinions expressed within those pages that could damage John's career and their family's hard-won social status. Now that Elizabeth and John were finally able to bask in the rays of success, something must be done to extinguish the risk posed by the contents of this memoir.

In years past, Elizabeth, her parents and other members of the family would sit around the parlor fire in New Place, their spacious home in Stratford, reading portions of this precious manuscript. They were the stories she and the others in her family circle knew by heart. Elizabeth's grandfather wrote it during the last three months of his terminal illness. He left it to them as a parting gift — a little piece of his heart and soul containing the essence of his wit and wisdom.

As Elizabeth picked up the first page and began reading, a secret door opened to reveal the brilliant vistas of the past. It was one she walked through enthusiastically as she began a final journey into the true map of her family's heart.

CHAPTER II

ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

I once wrote a play called *As You Like It* which spoke of the joys of true love and a simple pastoral life. In that play, a character called Jaques, whose view of life somewhat mirrors my own, spoke the following lines:

“All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players: They have their exits, and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.”

Like each of us in this world, I have been called to play many parts in the drama that was my life. Whether that drama was a comedy, a tragedy, or a tragi-comedy, I leave to you, the heirs and readers of this manuscript, to judge. That it was also a history filled with adventure, love, sadness, and some success, is not to be doubted.

I begin the story of my life at its beginning, on a cold April St. George’s Day in 1564. The year of my birth was unforgiving for the twelve hundred or so souls dwelling in our town of Stratford. The plague took the lives of over ten percent of Stratford’s citizens. My mother, Mary Arden Shakespeare, and my father, John Shakespeare, who already lost my two older sisters, Margaret and Joan, to the Black Death within a year or so of their births, were fearful they would lose yet a third child to the virulent disease that has taken the lives of countless millions.

Consulting with other family members, my parents decided it was best for my mother and my wet nurse, Margery, to temporarily take me to my mother’s family home in Wilmcote, a few miles outside Stratford. My father remained in town to oversee his glove-making business. As a rising member of the Town Council, it would have damaged his public image and political future if he ran out at the first sign of the pestilence.

Chapter II: All the World's a Stage

It might seem old-fashioned to those of us survivors living in the present age, but personal courage mattered a great deal in those times. As my parents taught by example, when a crisis occurs, one owes it to one's family to bear it as best one can and carry on with the business of living.

My father did what came naturally to those like him; he showed courage and fortitude during the plague year, continuing to operate his business while fulfilling his civic duties, and trusting in God to protect and preserve us. Fortunately, his and my mother's prayers were answered. The plague eventually drifted off into the mists and miasmas from whence it came.

Once the threat of plague subsided, my mother and I returned to Stratford and resumed residing with my father in the fine home they owned on Henley Street. A marvelous house it was, with parlor, kitchen, dining area, a large workshop located on the ground floor, several bedrooms on the second story, and a spacious loft on the third. There were numerous windows at front and back. I recall spending many a contented hour as a child in my "box seat" before a large front bay window that looked out upon busy Henley Street — watching the world go by.

Go by it did, in what seemed to be a never-ending cavalcade of people, animals, costumes and faces. There was an old man named Adam, who strolled by the house every day playing his flute, his equally aged but energetic mutt, Crab, barking and dancing beside him. There were sunburnt farmers leading work horses pulling produce-filled carts to market, straw-hatted shepherds and cattle drovers driving flocks and herds down the street, and stylish gentry riding sleek coursers.

Young, attractively dressed saleswomen came sashaying by selling flowers, cherries, apples and pears. "Sweet pears!" And the occasional jingle chiming peddler singing out, leading his gelded pack horse carrying leather clad trunks filled with needles,

LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON

pins, ribbons, bows, caps, bonnets, fringes of lawn and lace, and sundry other items gathered from far and wide. The sales pitch of a peddler named Jimmy, who I saw hawking his wares on numerous occasions, went like this:

Lawn, as white as driven snow;
Cyprus, black as e'er was crow;
Gloves, as sweet as damask roses;
Masks for faces, and for noses;
Bugle bracelet, necklace-amber,
Perfume for a lady's chamber:
Golden quoifs, and stomachers,
For my lads to give their dears;
Pins and poking-sticks of steel,
What maids lack from head to heel:
Come, buy of me, come; come buy,
 come buy,
Buy, lads, or else your lasses cry;
Come, buy, come buy!

On occasion, one of these peddlers would stop at our door. If my mother thought she could get away with it, she would listen to the latest gossip gathered by the peddler on his travels down the highways and byways. Perhaps she would purchase a little trifle or bauble before my father would discover there was another of those "ragged solicitors" trying to take advantage of "your mother's exceedingly kind heart."

Shooing the peddler out of the house, my father would say: "Mary! How many times do I have to tell you not to give these vermin the time of day? They part foolhardy housewives from

Chapter II: All the World's a Stage

their purses. Despite the drabble and babble, they're silver-tongued thieves!"

"John! You're exaggerating. They're fun to talk to. Gentlemen like that are the only source of news we have around here about what goes on in the outside world. The trifles I buy brighten up the day. They don't cost much in the grand scheme of things," my mother would say, arching her eyebrows, and giving an "if looks could kill" stare.

"Gentlemen! News! You call the trashy rumors those arrant knaves pass on news! They're better at lying than Satan himself!" my father would continue his peddler bashing, before turning his attention to the "poor quality" of whatever it was my mother obtained from the peddler.

Because everything my parents did and said was laid upon a firm foundation of love and respect, the squabbles they occasionally had over such things as soliciting peddlers never worried me much. Given the creative language employed in their verbal duels of wits, it was often quite entertaining.

Most often, my silent sympathies were with my mother in these domestic squabbles. For some of the purchases she made, including colorful marbles, a spinning top, and a small set of carved wooden chessmen, were for my benefit.

Despite my father's outward protests of "You're spoiling the boy!" I sensed he inwardly approved of those purchases, although the position he took on peddlers and such "riff-raff" prevented him from publicly saying so.

CHAPTER III

SISTERS AND BROTHERS

Looking back upon those days four decades ago, there was never a dull moment. My brothers and sisters came into the world like clockwork; Gilbert in 1566, Joan in 1569, Anne in 1571, Richard in 1574, and Edmund, nicknamed “Babe,” in 1580.

As the first child to survive infancy, I occupied a special place in my parents’ hearts. But, as all oldest children know, there was a heavier burden of parental expectations placed upon my shoulders. The oldest is expected to be the trailblazer. The one the younger children are supposed to emulate. The example setter. The name bearer. The carrier of Great Expectations.

Whether those expectations are fulfilled, or founder upon the inevitable rocks and shoals of life, is completely out of one’s hands. As the Good Book says, the rain falls upon the just and the unjust. The obverse is also true. The sun shines upon the deserving and undeserving.

Each of my brothers and sisters were special and unique people in their own rights. Like lilies of the field, no two of us are exactly alike. It takes all kinds to make the world a place of wonder. But, due to our nearness in age, the sibling closest to me during my youth was my brother Gilbert. With only two years between us, Gil and I shared the same circle of friends and we struggled through school together.

I was the better student. Gil was more athletic. For years we were inseparable: sleeping in the same bedroom, taught in the same schoolroom, memorizing and reciting Latin ten hours a day, six days a week, learning our father’s trade as a glover, hunting, hawking, fishing, practicing archery, playing at chess, bowls and football with our schoolmates, and at childhood games like leap

Chapter III: Sisters and Brothers

frog, hoop rolling, spinning tops, marbles, and hide and seek, with our younger siblings.

Despite limited time for play, Gil and I formed a circle of friends called the Henley Street Gang. It included a baker's son, Hamnet Sadler, and Robin Wright, a butcher's son a year older than I. Though my closest friend is Hamnet, Robin was the most intelligent and clever. Our verbal sparring matches were essential to honing my own wit.

Robin and I challenged each other in contests to determine who could tell the better jokes, jingles and stories. Gil, Hamnet and some of our other schoolmates acted as judge and jury. Robin had an edge in jokes and jingles. I often won when it came to storytelling. Forty years later, I can still recall Robin's jingles. I can hear him singing as he skipped along a leaf strewn road in an outfit that made him look like a pied-piper.

Where's your silly nightcap?
Put it on your head.
Tuck yourself right in,
When you go to bed!

First you slurp your porridge,
Then you crunch your greens.
The sound I hate the most,
Is when you eat your beans!

Whistles made of tin.
Patches sewn with thread.
Better watch your step,
That's what Mother said!

LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON

I often wonder where Robin's talents would have taken him if he lived to adulthood. Sadly, that was not to be. Robin died of the flu when only ten years old. When I heard the news, I cried myself to sleep.

It seems the Grim Reaper is never far from our doors. Our family is not immune from his terrible visitations. When I was fifteen, his scythe took the life of my sister, Anne. Anne was the gentlest soul in our family. She loved every person and everything she encountered. They say St. Francis spoke to the animals. At times, it seemed Anne had a similar gift. Our cats, dogs and horses showed her more affection than they did the rest of our family combined.

Anne's mind was a fine one in other respects. I was teaching her to read and she was making good progress. She was a talented artist. As young as she was, Anne already drew a fine line. The drawings she made of our cats, Sheba and Calico, and our dogs, Gabriel and Troubadour, still hang in my study. Fortunately, it will not be long before I have the pleasure of seeing Anne's smiling face again.

CHAPTER IV

THE OLD RELIGION

As well as being astute businesspeople, my parents were devout Roman Catholics. In the times in which we live, this is not only inconvenient, it's illegal. Fortunately, in the early part of her reign, Queen Elizabeth's government practiced a less coercive policy of enforced religious belief and repression of "recusants" who refused to attend government mandated services than they did later on.

Even in those early years, my parents took precautions. They hired servants and apprentices from Roman Catholic families. The few items associated with Catholic worship we owned, such as my mother's crucifix, rosary beads, and the small statuette of the Blessed Virgin Mary, were hidden and kept under lock and key.

The early instruction in the faith we children received came from our parents. They limited the daily prayer we said out loud as a family to the Lord's Prayer because it was said by Protestants and Catholics alike.

Once or twice a year, when we conspired to get the servants and the apprentices out of the house, my mother would remove her crucifix, rosary beads and painted statuette of the Virgin from their hiding place. We would say the five decades of the Rosary, including the Apostles' Creed, the Our Father, and the ten Hail Marys per decade. We children cherished these moments of special family unity.

I thank God we grew up in a town as tolerant of differing religious views as Stratford was in the days of my youth. Over half the town's population was Roman Catholic or Catholic leaning. If we lived in a less accepting part of the country, I am sure our lives would have been much bleaker.

LOVE'S LABOUR'S WON

Because my parents were both good and decent people, none of our neighbors ever informed upon us to the authorities. Live and let live was the order of the day for most people in Stratford.

And live we did, through many revolutions of the ever-changing seasons. As a boy, my favorite time of year was early summer. The leaves were green and bright rays of sunlight sparkled off the ripples in the current of the steadily flowing Avon. On rare days when I had time to myself, I would run down to the banks of the river, lie under the shade of one of the nearby trees, and bask in the warm weather. As I did so, I daydreamed of the future, singing little songs to myself. One of my own compositions I later used as a song in a play went like this:

Under the greenwood tree,
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat,
Come hither, come hither, come hither;
Here shall he see
No enemy,
But winter and rough weather.

Another song I sang was one I learned from a wizened, cross-eyed shepherd we nicknamed Tom O'Bedlam because he looked and acted a bit zany.

When daffodils begin to peer, —
With, heigh! the doxy over the dale, —
Why, then comes in the sweet o' the
year;

Chapter IV: The Old Religion

For the red blood reigns in the winter's
pale.

The white sheet bleaching on the hedge,—
With, heigh! the sweet birds, O, how
they sing! —

Doth set my pugging tooth on edge;
For a quart of ale is a dish for a king.

The lark, that tirra-lirra chants, —
With, hey! with, hey! the thrush and the
jay: —

Are summer-songs for me and my aunts,
While we lie tumbling in the hay.

My youth was lived in a joyful age of song!

Copyright © 2020 William Gray