

CHAPTER XII

HISTORY

A MEANER man would have taken his book elsewhere and paid off a score. Will took his first volume of poetry to Dick Field, his old Stratford schoolmate, once apprentice to Vautrollier the well-known Huguenot printer in Blackfriars, now Vautrollier himself in effect, having married his master's widow and succeeded to the business. It was nearly seven years since that morning when Will had first visited Dick Field in London, cold correct Dick who had been in a hurry and not even asked him to dine. Well, no wonder he had been nervous. Nobody but a country cousin would have thought that you could walk into London with a wallet full of verses and get one of the first printers in the City to stand sponsor for them because you had been at school with one of his apprentices. "And who's your patron?" Dick had asked. Footsore Will, who had arrived in London yesterday, spent a whole day seeing the sights and knew nobody but Dick in the scarifying entrancing city, had gone quietly.

There were fifty-two other printers in London, but Vautrollier's were as good as any. Will took his first volume of poetry to his old schoolmate. He did not play about with Dick either. Unfastening his manuscript he produced a letter from his patron signed in a large youthful hand "H. Southampton." On the title-page of the manuscript came the dedication

HISTORY

TO THE
RIGHT HONOURABLE HENRY
WRIOTHESLEY,

Earl of Southampton, and Baron of Titchfield,

followed by a neat epistle, beginning "RIGHT HONOURABLE" and ending "Your Honour's in all duty, WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE."

A week later, on a London midsummer morning of grey heat, my lord, the pink of elegance, came to Vautrollier's with his friend and made a conquest of all, especially Madame the late master-printer's widow, a French lady with a remarkable bosom, twice the age and twice the size of her second husband. She said, squeezing her handkerchief and casting up her eyes, that the young Earl was an angel. She had ado to keep her tongue from addressing him as "*Mon prince.*" Those mantling blushes, that shy enthusiastic speech, his habit of unexpectedly bending a penetrating gaze upon you, followed by a smile like sunshine, quite vanquished Madame Vautrollier-Field. He was led over the printer's establishment, chatted with the black-palmed workmen who stood aside from their presses with respectfully downcast eyes, admired the books in the showcase hanging suspended by a single leaf to display how good their paper, and ordered several costly volumes to be emblazoned with his coat of arms and sent up to Southampton House.

The type for Will's book was chosen and the price agreed upon—sixpence a copy. It was to be bound in limp vellum, a slender quarto, and its title page was to be a thing of beauty enriched with an ornamental border depicting a classic mask, cornucopias and peacocks. The author did not put his name on the title

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

page. That came only at the end of the dedicatory epistle. Under the anchor sign of Vautrollier's house was the word LONDON in girthy block cajitals and "Imprinted by Richard Field, and are to be sold at the sign of the White Greyhound in Paules Church-yard."

Getting a book into the world soon began to show itself as slow an affair as getting a play accepted. Besides many conferences with Harrison the bookseller of the Greyhound, Field had to send proofs up to the Stationers' Company to obtain a licence. The date of publication was fixed for Michaelmas, then shifted to Christmas. The book was finally licensed on an April day and appeared in June, together with the Great Plague, the sort of fate not at all uncommon for a young author's first production.

It was a metrical version of a hackneyed classical love tale. It contained a fine description of a horse and another of a hare-hunt (boldly borrowed from a French Dramatist) : it was remarkable for its beauty of imagery, sweetness of language and another pronounced quality at which the puritanical took offence. Well, already someone else less scrupulous had dedicated to this toward youth of gentle condition a poem that could only be handed round amongst his friends, raising sniggers and whistles. The young Mæcenas caused this treasure to be served with the wine at his supper parties where the guests were all gentlemen with an expensive air, dressed in the highest accentuation of fashionable costume pearled and embroidered all the colours of the pheasant's plumage.

On his player friend's second visit to Southampton House my lord had divulged his love affair, or rather his un-love affair, for like the hero of Will's poem he had no heart for Venus.

HISTORY

They all wanted him to marry. When he complained that he could find nothing to do in London, they suggested that he might marry. What an occupation! Even his mother, from whom he had expected better sense, seeing how unhappy she had been in wedlock herself, wanted to see her dear Harry settled.

The late Earl had lived apart from his Countess for the last four years of his life. Nobody knew the reason. The most that anybody knew was that some of the gentlemen of the Earl's household, particularly his steward, had inflamed him against his lady. Had they carried lying tales of a fair wife's conduct to a husband always jealous? Had Harry's father been of perfect mind? The late Earl had suffered a long imprisonment in the Tower, which had broken his health, and certainly the continual arrests of his Catholic servants had preyed upon his spirits.

It was difficult to believe that the Countess had ever done that she should not, besides her father had always taken her part, taken her home again indeed after she had written to him that her life at Titchfield was such that she wished herself dead but for her children's sake.

That was the worst of being an earl. When you wanted to quarrel with your wife you could not cast cabbage ends and crockery at her, take your belt to her and throw her out of your house. After the exchange of enough letters to fill a book Viscount Montague had sent an escort to bring back to him his injured daughter, and for four years she had occupied herself writing letters to powerful friends—Lord Leicester was a connection—and to the two children whom she was not allowed to see. Harry and his sister had been dragged up by servants in a great country house whose master grew more and more withdrawn and suspicious.

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

On his father's death the wardship of the young Earl had fallen to the Crown and been sold in succession to the Lord Admiral and Lord Burleigh. As for little Lady Mall, the Earl's will had expressly commanded that if she ever went to live under the same roof as her mother she should lose her inheritance. That insane will had been the bane of Harry's youth and still pursued him. His father had left by testament five times as much as he possessed. All the same, the widowed Countess had got her daughter, though for a time it had meant having to hide the child and pretend she was not in the house when people came. Naturally her disputed person had been the subject of more letters. When a suitable Catholic bridegroom had offered for her little daughter the Countess had been thankful to agree to the match. Harry's only surviving sister had become a wife years ago and was a stranger to him.

And now his mother's one desire in life was to see him settled. He thought she would do better to marry again herself. She was, he told his new friend, still beautiful and only thirty-nine. But nobody could judge for themselves, for she never went about with her face uncovered. Sometimes Harry thought that it was a wonder he was not lunatic considering how oddly he was parented. His mother had been frantic with misery as a wife, yet now that she was delivered from her bondage and could do as she pleased, she insisted on living in retirement, the model of a disconsolate widow. Will had seen her from a window as she went to chapel with her gentlewomen in waiting, all sabie clad. Her gown was black velvet and on her head she wore a hideous erection known as a mourning hood, from which depended a thick veil of black cypress enveloping her figure to the waist. Her fancy for seclusion had gone

HISTORY

so far as having a curtain hung over her own portrait, taken as a bride at the age of thirteen. It was in the picture gallery, and her son had fingered its covering but shaken his head. "No. She would not like it. Yet it is a pity."

He was having himself painted at her request this season, and the platter-faced Dutch artist had succeeded in making a most deceiving copy of nature, a full length depicting the young Earl standing with one gloved hand resting lightly on a velvet-covered table, the other poised, thumb upwards, on his waist. The colouring was rich and subdued in the Dutch style and the balance excellent. On the bloomy tablecloth stood my lord's slippery dark blueish steel helmet damascened with gilt serpents, on the smooth pied marble floor behind him, his empty cuirass. His doublet was chalk white, his trunk hose and knee breeches oyster hue, thickly embroidered in coral pink, silver and olive green. The brightest note in the picture was his auburn hair. He wore with his court attire his most supercilious side-long studying look.

It did seem a pity that the Countess would not come back into the world upon the arm of her handsome son, for he was lonely. Until last year he had admired and loved his mother's parents and thought their castle in Sussex an enchanted place. The Queen's visit had spoilt Cowdray for him, and he had been ashamed of his family ever since.

A visit from the Queen was an awful affair. Unambitious gentlemen of small means would go to any lengths to escape the honour. They wrote to the Lord Chamberlain that the roads leading to their houses were so bad that no coaches could go down them, that the houses when you got to them were unin-

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

habitable and that their ladies were all pregnant. Excuses only determined the Queen to see a place. Even hints of infection would not put her off. She did not catch things. Every summer the indefatigable sovereign of Merry England set forth on a country progress riding on horseback or in a coach or litter, with her Master of the Horse at her bridle, and a great lord carrying her sword of state before her. At every county border the sheriffs must meet her, when she reached castles and cities constables and corporations must be ready to offer up their keys and maces. And with her came her household of Hall, Chamber and Stable, followed by such a procession of laden carts and so many beasts that you would have thought there was a second Ark a'filling. A party of officers of the Hall called Harbingers went ahead of her, making mischief and raising scares.

"At Liphook yesterday the beer offered was unwholesome, a thing that put her Grace far out of temper. God be praised this morning she is perfectly well and merry. Master Bailiff, have you ever met Royalty before?" "Oh no, sir. No in sooth, sir. In Midhurst we live very quiet." Sweating with horror, Master Bailiff tries to remember all that is being told to him at this eleventh hour. He must not ask her Majesty any questions. He must not kiss her hand unless she seems to wish it (how to judge?). He must not of course differ from her if she condescends to offer any opinion, or start a subject of his own, or mention the least thing to do with religion or funerals or Larrenness or old age. It is wisest not to allude to weddings. Birth, marriage and death being thus denied to him as topics, he is bidden keep up a good heart and answer forth-rightly.

HISTORY

The Court was ambulatory between June and October, a satisfactory arrangement for a lady that loved pageantry, but loved economy more, and from about March onwards the Lord Chamberlain's Office and the Office of Works were busy planning her routes. When there was positively no country house adjacent at dinner-time, a timber banqueting hall had to be built by the roadside. During the earlier years of her reign loose tongues had said that the Virgin Queen never went on a progress but when she wanted to be delivered. Time had dumbed that scandal, and the older she got the stronger she got and the more she relished her progresses. It was also possible that her new young favourite, Lord Essex, encouraged the taste, finding his part easier to play when on the move and not responsible for her entertainment.

The Montagues had the money and must not give offence, being Catholics. When Lord Burleigh wrote that the Queen intended to stay a week at Cowdray on her way from Farnham to Chichester there was nothing for the aged Viscount to do but express himself prostrated at the honour, and get about his duty. How to entertain an ageing lady of uncertain temper for seven days in the heart of Sussex? Nobody could ever hope to rival the shows provided for her Majesty when she had stayed for three weeks with Lord Leicester at Kenilworth, but everyone could do his best. Lord Montague ordered a torchlight pageant to greet her arrival at his gates. It meant having an indestructible wooden bridge and a tower built on his best lawn, from which a porter dressed as Hercules could give her a speech of welcome. Without a murmur he passed schemes for his park to be stuffed with mischievous village children attired as elves, village lads disguised

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

as Robin Hoods and lumpish maidens personating nymphs. (Only see that their dresses be sufficient in case of rain.) Sibyls and satyrs were posted amongst his most valuable shrubs, and a stage for musicians was built out over his good vegetable garden. On the Monday there was to be hunting—shooting with cross-bows at deer in the morning, and tearing down of bucks by greyhounds in the evening. One of his younger sons put in charge of that day's arrangements might get a knighthood out of it if all went out well, but he would have to pay his own fees. If you could get a neighbour to give her dinner it was a great easement to your own household. By the mercy of Providence Tuesday could be so planned, but she might refuse to go. Wednesday, fishing—the village schoolmaster dressed as a Triton puts a silver rod into her hands after a Latin speech—Thursday, inspection of the flower gardens and a great banquet. Or would it be wiser to have the gardens earlier in the week? One heard that the maids in waiting had stripped the gardens and let the cows in to eat the yew hedge somewhere last year. . . . All possible relations must be summoned. The Queen liked to see a family group ranged up to meet her. She hated her courtiers to marry, but if they were married men a thing called a wife must be forthcoming when she went to visit them at their country houses. "Where is the lady of this house? Why is she not here? Is she ill or making holiday?"

Harry had missed the festive preparations, as he only arrived from Cambridge a few hours before the Queen was expected. He found Cowdray unrecognizable, and all his relations creatures bewitched. An atmosphere like that before a thunderstorm enveloped the castle,

HISTORY

and from the kennels came a maddening lamentation of greyhounds kept hungry. He was a little surprised when he discovered that he was to sleep in a footman's bedroom, a little more so when his stately grandsire lost his temper over a matter of fish not yet here.

Worse was to come. The Queen was to come. She was coming, the lights were showing over the hill. She was almost here, the cheering was growing near and the musicians had struck up in the park.

It was eight o'clock and a balmy August night with a crescent moon when at last that unmistakable figure dismounted in a blaze of torchlight, bronze from top-most curl to stilt-heeled slipper, a heathen goddess that had been out in a storm of pearls and a frost of diamonds. Walking backwards before her advance, bowing himself double like a Jew, Lord Montague brought her to his wife, who quite losing her head now that the great moment was come, flopped weeping as it were in her guest's bosom, brokenly wailing: "O happie time! O joyful day!"

Harry could scarcely believe the witness of his own large eyes, had never been so disgusted, and the next day he was sickened. Hunting, they had called it! He had walked round the park in the early morning with one of the keepers and complimented the man on the condition of the velvet-coated deer tip-toeing down to drink in silver-sheeted standing pools surrounded by fallen acorns and crowded with jostling reflections of dappled flanks and waving oak-branches.

They had put thirty of the gentle deer into a paddock, driven them in, and then a pudgy girl dressed as a nymph had sung a song and given a cross-bow into the Queen's hands and the Queen had shot four of the animals dead, and a grinning Irish countess who was

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

Harry's great-aunt had killed one and wounded two.
Sport for ladies!

In the afternoon there had been more galloping about under a dull azure sky in sight of the castle towers, and bucks with their throats torn open and tendons hanging out had flashed past and through the cackle and cheers had cut piping cries of gored dogs limping away on three legs.

The wine at the banquet that night was good, and when the Queen had retired Harry went in search of his uncle, walking fast down the dark galleries clenching his fists and biting his underlip. He disturbed a family group taking its ease after the day's strain in a little chamber with all windows open to the scented midnight. "Sirrah! are you mad?" At that ominous word his lady mother covers her face and runs out of the room. "Keep that door! This is talk enough to send us all to the Tower." One of the bearded uncles leaning over the back of grandsire's chair and watching Harry with a smile, whispers something.

They had all preferred to think that he was drunk. Nevertheless, when he had gone up to change his clothes next afternoon he had found a bowing stranger in his chamber, a doctor. Since the doctor had pronounced the young Earl to be in perfect health, though somewhat over-grown for his age, they had to think of another cure for his sickly fancies.

She had come with her grandsire Lord Burleigh, and after the Court had moved on, stayed at Cowdray another fortnight. The Lady Elizabeth de Vere, only child of the Earl of Oxford. Her mother, who had been Lord Burleigh's daughter, was dead. The marriage had been most unhappy. What was she like, this lady of a noble name? There was no colour in her face.

HISTORY

"The more praise to her," said Will. Nay then, she was the colour of a water-lily or a cheese, according as you felt poetical or distempered, low-statured, thick-waisted with greenish tints under heavy-lidded eyes. She had lambs-wool fair hair with grey shadows in it, and was sixteen years old. On every formal occasion during that Royal week of over-feeding and under-exercise she had fallen to his share as the lady most suitable in rank and age. They said he must talk more to her.

And then on the last night of her grim visit he had gotten a great start. As he was undressing there came a scratch on his door, and with a flourish of skirts and a whiff of scent in slipped that one of the Queen's maids in waiting who had been left behind at the castle, sick in bed. Drawing a folded paper out of her bosom, she thrusts at the young Earl his first love-letter, short and sweet enough, indeed a hair-raiser. *Will you come to me? E. de Vere.*

"So it is true what they say of those cloistered maids," thinks Harry aghast, but glad to know. When he cannot well stare at the paper any longer, he looks up and meets the bird-like glance of love's messenger, a polished brunette who is standing demurely swaying her hoop to and fro, waiting for him to play the gentleman. With a short laugh which surprises himself, he catches up a cloak and signals to her to lead on, which she does, fluttering like a moth round three galleried sides of the sleeping castle. Once she turns at a corner to hitch her hoop aside, and he, buttoning up his doublet with shaking fingers notices that she has the prettiest shape. Outside a door she stops and nods to him to go on in while she keeps guard outside, striking a sentry's attitude. "I'm

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

hanged!' thinks Harry as he stumbles down a pair of steps into a moon-lit chamber and finds himself alone with a damsel in a bay window.

But it was not him at all that she wanted. This stiff little heiress with fumbling fingers and a heavy tear-blotched face was already the heroine of a great love tale. He thought her almost a heroine and almost likeable as she made known to him in blundering tangled sentences how she never could affect any man in this world but her old sweetheart who had sworn to die a bachelor for her sake, and how she was not allowed to see him since he had asked her grandsire for her and been sent away contemptuously because he was a younger son quite without fortune, and how she had sent for my lord because she could see that he had no love for her, but she thought that he might be willing to help her in her affliction because he had always used her with great gentleness.

The plot she proposed was one which suited Harry to the ground. He was asked to pretend to entertain the thought of marrying her, giving neither yea nor nay, but keeping the question in balance. Her father, that fine dancer, was on the road to a second wife. If he could get a son she would no longer be his heiress. And then her love's father Lord Derby, was sick to death, and when Lord Strange inherited she knew he would give his brother somewhat.

A pretty affair these two young creatures hoodwinking that great diplomatist my Lord Treasurer, and all their kin. When Harry clanked in to ask his mother if she had word for any in Lord Burleigh's house the poor Countess brightening said: "Tell his granddaughter I long to call her my daughter." "Go to, go to," said Harry. "You go too fast. Give me till one

HISTORY

and twenty before I set about wiving." And then he would sally forth to the lodgings of that desperate gentleman Lord William Stanley and get from him a love-lette, vowing death and destruction as long as a traitor's indictment, which he would slip into the Lady Elizabeth's sleeve as he handed her down to dinner, and she in her turn would press upon him the loan of a rare book from her grandsire's library which had something foreign between its leaves.

"Here's a brave lady in love with love," said Will. "And does your lordship woo thus patiently with a whole heart for Lord William? And does she never look twice upon his proxy? There was a de Vere came with the Conqueror to this island I have heard, and at Creçy and Agincourt battles it was a name honourably supported. Your lordship could not make alliance with a meeter house."

"You are as bad as all the rest of them," said Harry. "When I am towards a wife I will tell you, and you may start writing a sweet piece for our wedding. Take ten years about it."

Throughout a magical droughty March and April the player was a constant visitor to Southampton House. The stout deaf porter at the gatehouse got to know the figure of the lame writing gentleman who passed in from Holborn ~~on~~ foot, and as often as not passed out with my lord's arm around his shoulder or riding by my lord's side. Sometimes they dined at an ordinary in the City, sometimes my lord would forget all about dinner until it was announced and then, annoyed at the interruption and casting a disdainful eye over the boar's head and ice puddings awaiting his presence in the light of stained glass windows, would command that all that stuff should be cleared away and

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

a light meal be carried quickly into the small chamber where he was busy with his new friend amongst his new books.

There was a fine library at Southampt'on House and he was adding to it. Volumes bound in calf, elaborately tooled with the device of four falcons and a cross, and the initials H.W. surmounted by a coronet, found their way to a poor player's lodgings on the Bankside to be pored over by the light of a tallow dip. Will was at liberty to come in and borrow books whenever he liked and whether their owner was present or no.

On a spring afternoon when sunshine was lying in long slats across the floor and shelves of the stately library he had thought deserted, he heard a cough at his elbow and discovered that he had for companion that noiseless-footed Italian who was my lord's tutor. And he made a companion of the man. Quite unaware of the tortures of suspicion and jealousy that his daily presence had been arousing he turned upon Signor Florio with a smile and expressed himself so delighted to meet one whose works he admired so much, that Signor Florio looking up in his should-be enemy's face and finding nothing but honesty and civility written there had to give a smile in answer. *First Fruits*, a lovely volume with a rivulet of print meandering between wide margins, had already been given to the world and *Second Fruits* was soon to follow. When my lord came back for supper he found his two authors seated in a window of his fair house, arguing so learnedly and comradely that it was a pleasure to hear, and he saw himself already famous throughout Europe as a patron of discernment.

If Will could have spent an afternoon alone in a library with every fellow writer who was suspicious of

HISTORY

him he might have escaped some trouble and made some more friends, but he had neither the time nor the money to join those long-winded gentlemen of the pen who congregated daily in the fashionable taverns of the town belauding their own efforts and tearing into small pieces their absent neighbours. He was playing numbers of secondary parts at the Theatre, where two of his own comedies were being performed, he was wrestling with four broken-winded chronicle plays and a tragedy which Burbage had already sold to Henslowe, and he was writing another poem for his patron, a labour of love. This meant that nearly every morning he must be in Shoreditch for rehearsal with his part learned; at two o'clock came the daily performance of quite another piece at the Theatre, after which he often had to return to Bankside to see the Company at the Rose before making his way up to Southampton House for an evening of pleasure followed by a night of labour. He was covering miles of London streets on foot at this time, getting a good dinner or supper at least three days a week, and had for the moment shelved his private cares. Those would have to be resurrected when he visited home on tour with the company this summer, as he meant to do. His Mæcenas was curious to hear what family he had.

"A greater than your iordship, by your lordship's own unreason. I wedded young."

"Ho! ho! no more of that. And what does it count to, your great family?"

"Two daughters and a son, my lord. I have not seen them this seven years. The little lad I am told, is very fair."

"That's wrong that the boy should be the beauty. He'll live to rue it. And is he of your colour?"

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

"Nay, my lord, more upon your lordship's colour, I believe."

"Poor child! How gets he that?"

"Truly from his mother."

"Ha! and is she a great beauty?"

"She was accounted the fairest maid in her village, my lord, when I went a'wooing."

"And how great was her village?"

"Very small. Yet in seven years in London I have never seen such gold hair upon a lady."

"I should like them to hear you at Whitehall! From a village you say. She has no learning to match yours then?"

"Indeed she is innocent of much that plagues her husband."

"And you have not seen her this seven years?"

"Young ravens must have food, my lord."

"I believe you do not love her, or you would have her here in London."

"Your lordship is a great prince and of a great inheritance, but on the first day that I clapped eyes on my wife I thought myself an Emperor. My wealth was infinite, mine inheritance the Globe."

"Lord! then you did fall in love in the high style?"

"Ay, I fell into Hell for an eternal moment or so."

"What? what?"

"Marry, I would not have your lordship fall into such a love as I did. It would put your lordship to an unreasonable deal of brutish pain and trouble. It were far better for your honour to do as all the world desires, wed suitably and love your lady at leisure."

"Oh! are you back there again? Scoff away. I tell thee I'll not wed until I love as thou didst. There's a

HISTORY

raw oath for your honeyed hexameters. For what do you turn pale?"

"My advice to your lordship was sound."

"Oh, ay, solid as a Twelfth Night cake, I am sure, and as accloying. Come, let us look at these new lodgings for you, since you won't make your home under my poor acres of roofing."

When he came back to London in November Will was going to move from the Bankside. The house which my lord had chosen for him near the stately church of Great St. Helen's, Bishopsgate, was, he said, too highly priced and too large for his single need. My lord said "Pish!" throwing half a year's rent in advance on the landlord's table, and something mumbled about "I don't expect you to live chaste, you know."

At the end of July my lord left London to attend the pompous funeral of his cousin, Lord Montague's son and heir. The old gentleman himself was failing, and the grandson who would succeed was younger than my lord and easily to be led by him. About the same time Will took the dusty road with the Company from the Theatre, thirty odd figures oddly mounted on every variety of horseflesh to be picked up at the end of the season in Smithfield Market.

They made the usual southern round, playing at Maidstone, Faversham, Canterbury and Dover (where he got his first sight of the sea) and by Hastings and Chichester came to the noble grey walled port, bearing my lord's name. And so through Winchester, Bath and Gloucester they dragged at last on a mid-September day into the town of Will's birth.

He had sent word to Ham Sadler that he was coming, but had not been able to say on what day, so not knowing how far he might be welcome or expected, he landed

THE BEST OF 'HIS FAMILY

his baggage with the Company's before setting out to try his luck on some visits. He had always imagined that players, when they came to Stratford, must stay at the Swan or the Bear, and was surprised to find that they went to quite poor lodgings down in a part of the Old Town which was as strange to him as if it had been in Winchester or Bath, and whose houses differed in no respects from the sluttish accommodation offered to him and his fellows in those places.

It was a clear warm day with level sunshine casting a simplifying unimaginative light on every notable building of the small town. He set out with heart beating fast, walking so fast that when he got to Rother Market he had to slacken his pace, fancies crowded so thickly on his brain. They had re-pargeted the gables of several of the houses near the Cross and there was a new sign outside Perrot's tavern. The air, he thought, smelt fresher than that of Gloucester.

The hour was past noon and these back streets were rather empty. He found himself staring at the few people he encountered, searching for family likenesses in features or gait. Some of them stared back, but that must have been at his Londonish dress. Nobody stopped and held out a hand with loud exclams.

By Mere Lane, where the close peppery scent of nettles struck familiarly, he emerged into Henley Street only a few yards below his father's house. He came to a pause on the opposite pavement, standing with his arms folded on his breast—a player's attitude—and let his eye travel slowly over his birthplace, from blinking dormer windows to three street doors.

A tall lad was leaning against one of the doors, looking up and down the street on his own side, as if waiting for someone. Their eyes met and Will realized

HISTORY

that this must be his youngest brother. In the moment that it took him to cross over in answer to the lad's wave and whistle, he noticed a strong resemblance to himself as he had been at that age, only Num was better looking. A broad smile illuminated the boy's freckled face. His round eyes were dancing with excitement.

"You're to come in," said he, and his accent was that of Warwickshire. "Your old room is waiting, bed made."

"Why that's kind," said Will. "You must be Num."

"They used to call me that when I was little," said Num, pulling down his doublet. "I shall be thirteen come Christmas."

"I scantly knew you," said Will.

"Marry, I scantly knew you either, but ever since Master Sadler came round last Tuesday sen'night to tell us that you were coming with the players, mother has set me to watch outside here at dinner time. We heard early this morning that they were going to arrive to-day, so when I saw someone hanging about opposite I said to myself: 'That's him.' You've gone bald on the top, like father. What is it like being a player? We all want to know at school. I am coming to see you act. Master Sadler has given me money for seats at two showings. Why do you halt in your walk?"

It was dark in the living-room where dinner was ready waiting on the table for the returned hero or the prodigal son, Will did not know which they took him for until he found himself gripped on the shoulders by a trembling pair of hands. He bent and kissed the face of a woman he could not see, saying: "Mother!"

"There now, he's come. That's fair enough," said father's voice.

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

There 'was a noise of knives being laid down and benches being pushed back. Father was seated at the head of the board and alone of the company did not rise. Will made his way round towards him with outstretched hand and a murmur of "Sir, I hope I find you well. Will you give me your blessing?" "Nay, then," said father, "I'm not well. Old. Old. Old, lad. Take your place, come. God bless you. We've started and food grows cold."

"I am sorry," said Will, "that I come late." "Better late than never," quoted his brother Gib, clapping him on the back and wringing his palm. "You set you down here, see? 'Tis your old place and I give way. What, are you lame? We never heard."

"Thanks, old sinner," said Will. "First let me salute this fair lady. Ay, I got kicked by a horse."

Joan was not as good looking as he had left her, he was sorry to see. Her bright colouring was vanished. Her expression was kind and businesslike. He wished that she had married and said so to mother when he got alone with her in the upper room to which she led him on the pretence of seeing his chamber as soon as dinner was done.

It was not so awkward a meal as it might have been, for the two brothers questioned him without ceasing, both talking at once, pointing their knives at him, and telling him pieces of news which they thought must thrill him. The Ass was betrothed to Widow Shaw and school was getting a holiday for the wedding. Wasn't it foolery at their age? Had Will heard from his friend Master Sadler that Tom Sadler had sold the Bear Inn and run to the wars in Ireland? Will noted that cautious Ham Sadler had given the family no hint of their own ne'er-do-weel's better for-

HISTORY

tunes. They had heard that two of the plays he had written were being performed, but it seemed to mean nothing to them. He was being received as the prodigal son.

Father rubbed this in as he left the table, saying he was needed in the shop and would see Will later. Tapping his first-born on the chest, he announced his own attitude. "Let bygones be bygones say I. He's come to see his kin as he should. For the past, mum's the word."

Upstairs mother said: "Now let me see you in the light," so Will walked over into the window. This was the room to which the French doctor had been brought on that February morning of fanged winds, to inspect the shrivelled and wailing Susanna lying naked across mother's knee. This was the room to which mother had crept sick with the knowledge that she was carrying an eighth child—Num.

Will knew that there were pouches under his eyes, and his hair as Num had remarked had gone thin on the top. He had grown a scanty moustache since he had left home, and, more recently, a single tuft under his lower lip. In spite of his past two months on the open road his colour was pasty and his frame to one who knew it well would betray under-nourishment of no distant date. He had put on his company suit of black clothes this morning, those which he wore when he went to Southampton House or Sunday supper at the Burbages. They were plain ribbed camlet, but the Cornhill tailor had not been able to resist a little trimming of jet round the buttonholes and black satin buttons, probably in Stratford their cut would appear unfamiliar and aping the gentleman. He knew that he looked well over thirty.

Mother asked in her sharpest voice, as her eyes

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

filled with tears: "Your leg? How did it happen? Does it pain you?" He answered: "Not save to look down upon. It meant a weck abed and the day it befell me was Valentine's with a black frost. so I was nothing sorry. Look. I have brought something for you."

It was a copy of his poem which he believed at that time would be published at Christmas. He doubted whether she would be capable of reading it, which was all to the good.

"It was not written for your like," he warned her gently as he presented it to her with a bow. "Is it wicked?" she asked, passing a suspicious finger over its lovely limp vellum cover, shiny with gilt tooling a coat of arms and a coronet. The copy was one of a pair of proofs that had been struck off and bound up for my lord to see before he went into the country. Will made her open it, and she picked its pages apart, saying: "I don't see your name." He told her: "That's at the end of the epistle to my lord, my patron, a young prince that hath gold hair and rideth a proper bay palfrey and dwelleth softly in a spacious palace, as in your old chimney corner tales."

She was interested to hear of Will's earl and flattered to know that he had allowed this copy of her son's poem to be taken to her. When Will explained that the book was a child unborn as yet and must not meet the world's eye for another six months, she said: "Never fear!" it should not pass out of her hands. As soon as he was away she would lap it in a silk handkercher and put it out of sight she knew where.

They stayed standing in the window, forgetting their limbs' unease, they had so much to say. Gilbert was doing well in the shop and was pulling the ruined business together in a small way. "To tell truth, your

HISTORY

father does mighty little these days, and Gib tells in mine ear 'tis better so. Yet, if your father shall come in to supper breathing Lord! how amort he is and what a day's labour, it were best to fall in with his humour." Will was astonished to hear that Gib, who looked nothing but the snug small tradesman, spent his savings on racing dogs. He had two pure-bred greyhounds down at the bottom of the garden, in kennels he had made himself on Saturday afternoons. Ay, that was them thou heardest now. Dick had developed a strange liking for goat-bearded old Uncle Harry out at Snitterfield, whom nobody else could abear, and lived with him now on his starveling farm. The old uncle had no heir, but there would be little but debts for him to leave. Ay, mother too wished that Joan could wed. She had looked like getting a husband two years ago — a decent young hatter, one of the Harts from Walker Street, "not what we would have considered our equal in the old days, but as things are now I should have been glad of it." However he had ceased coming. "If things had been otherwise I would have sent round your brother Gib to say a word. . . ."

A player's time is not his own. Will pulled out his dial. "There's a fine piece," cried mother, in just the voice that he remembered asking: "Who's been at my honeypot?"

He unfastened its chain from his breeches-pocket and handed it to her. It was a present from the earl. "He said he was aweary of being asked the hour by me."

"It might have been handsomer given," said mother, "but 'tis a very handsome piece, and I warrant may have cost as much as fifty shillings."

"More than three times that I am afeared, madam."

She handed the watch back, saying: "Where are you

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

off to now?" again so like the old days, and: "Get you to school."

"We play late to-day, not till four o'clock," he said. "I should like to call upon the Sadlers in Wood Street—and all at the Cage."

At the first name she nodded, but at the mention of of all at the Cage her face went stony, and she said in a strangled voice: "The old woman could bring round your children if 'tis them you need to see. She is jump enough at sending them round when 'tis a pound of butter or some beef dripping they lack at the Cage." Then as he kept silence she added: running her forefinger up and down the window-sill: "Your wife has not been faithful to you, you know."

"Alas! nor I to her," said Will sadly.

"I always hated her," whispered mother, that finger still working up and down. "She took you from me. All this is her fault. My son a player and writing lewd toys to please lords!

On the stairs Will met Joan, who asked had mother remembered to say about the supper for the players? "Nay, I thought as much when you twain got together! Well, 'twill be here all ready any hour you like after your show's done, and enough for you to bring six friends. A larded shoulder of stuffed veal with lupins and an apricock tart. That's what you like, isn't it?" There was something bright and old-maidish in poor Joan's pats and smiles. "Truly we thought they might know that you had kin in this town and we would not have you seem a scrub and put to shame. Enough for six and yourself there will be, despatch! Oh! and if any of you should have ruffs or bands that need a rinsing out and a pinch of starch, bring them along. Travelling so many weeks and as like as not too

HISTORY

short time in any one place to get fine washing done, your bags must be full of foul linen."

The Sadlers had got new curtains and were at home. When Will knocked on their door in Wood Street he heard footsteps running upstairs, and a moment later Ham opened to him and drew him in. Ham, like Gib, had broadened and got the country tradesman look, a look so settled that you felt it would need gunpowder to move him out of Stratford. He was heartily glad to see Will and had much to tell him, not all of it pleasant. When Will asked for Judith he looked solemn and then said bluntly: "I am sorry. She will not see you."

"Why, I am sorry too," said Will.

"If she were a less good woman," enlarged Ham, who had evidently thought this out, "I think that she would consent to see you, but she is a most righteous woman, and a man may scantily urge a looser behaviour upon his wife when she thinks a thing wrong, without great peril to her good opinion of him and his own house."

"Indeed, no," agreed Will.

"She thinks, you see," continued Ham, "that you did very ill in leaving your wife and your babes as you did, with what results you know."

"Tell her," said Will after a silence, "that anything she may have wished upon me in her indignation did befall me—sevenfold. Now tell me of my family. How do my children?"

Ham relaxing into a smile said that truly the little boy his godson was the prettiest imp in this town, even your mother allows it, though she loves not his colour. The elder girl, he said, was hen-faced, but sharp as a needle. "She will put you to small cost towards her wedding." The younger girl, they thought must have thrown back to some unknown Hathaway strain, dish-

THE BEST OF HIS FAMILY

faced and black as an ouzel. Neither he nor his wife could descry any Shakespeare in her. Well, her mother's father had been a good man. He said with emphasis that all the children were active in mind and body. His wife had taught the eldest girl to read. The children were much enlarged at the thought of seeing their father, and had been playing a game about it ever since Ham had gone round with Will's letter.

Will said: "Good." Then: "Now tell me of my wife. Will she see me?"

Ham, who was nothing if not honest, confessed that Anne had not seemed pleased when she had been told that her husband was coming, and her only remark yet had been that there was no room for him in this house. She went abroad very little now, he kept on repeating, and sometimes for weeks together never left her bedchamber. He finally got out that with her years had not seemed to bring wisdom, she had rather decreased in intelligenc. You could scarcely say that she did more than eat, sleep and cosset her health these days. Was she violent? No, no, the old woman could do anything with her. There had never been any trouble of late, save that one day a chapman had come round from the market saying that she had picked up some ribbons off his stall and slipped them in her bag without paying. It had been easy to explain that the lady had been ill and the lady's husband was in London. Another time the sheriff's serjeant had arrived to complain that she had been throwing stones at him as he walked with his mace over his shoulder to join the municipal procession. Anything bright and glittering attracted her. A draught of beer had served to quench the serjeant's objections.

Will who had been nodding silently at intervals,

HISTORY

asked if all was well in that house now, and Ham getting red in the face said oh, ay, that had only gone on for the first two years or so, and he thought Will might be glad to know that none of them had been residents of this town or lived here now. One had been a travelling mercer from Shrewsbury and another . . .

Will said: "Enough, enough." He did not want to hear.

"The old woman was to blame," said Ham. His wife and he both blamed her for that business more than her mistress, who truly was not by nature wanton. The old woman had made money they knew, going round with her cards and crystal. Will bit his lip when he heard that his wife had borrowed from one source where repayment could not be made. Old Whittington, the shepherd, had left directions in his will that the sums owed to him by Mistress Shakespeare should be distributed amongst the poor of Stratford. "When your first letter came sending money we went round at once and put things to rights. Your mother also went in and read a blazing sermon on chastity. I know not whether that did great good."

Will interrupted: "I know that I do owe you more than you have told."

"And I think your wife was glad," concluded Ham, "for verily I do not think her a naughty liver by choice." Under his breath he added: "She lacks the spirit."

Will looking away asked: "Any children?" and Ham said hastily: "Nay, nay, my wife ever holds that since those twain at one birth she was little likely to bear again to any man. Now tell me of yourself."

Will sank down into a chair, and passing his hand over his brow, began: "I do believe my feet are upon rock at last."