



I Was There...

Step back into
the life of
a young actor

SHAKESPEARE'S GLOBE

CHAPTER ONE

I went home with my dog, Hoppy, one pot of honey, three duck eggs, a cut lip and a bashed nose.

Instead of sympathy, all I got from Aunt Meg was, 'Where is the fish, Billy? You didn't get the fish? Now what shall we do?'

'Big Tom was lurking by the fish stall, and I didn't want any more of this,' I said, catching blood drips in my hand.

Just then, Mother came through the back door and saw me. She dropped her laundry basket, grabbed a clean rag and dabbed at my face.

'Those ruffians again?' she asked.

I nodded. 'Big Tom. He tore my jerkin, too.'

'Never mind,' said Mother. 'Jerkins mend, so do lips and noses.'

I smiled. It made my mouth sting.

'He didn't get the fish!' wailed Aunt Meg.

'What will we have for dinner?'

'We'll have fish!' said Mother, crossly. She hates it when my aunt falls to pieces, as she calls it. Mother is strong-minded. She has to be, with Father away so much.

'Billy and I will go to the market together while Susan is having her nap,' she said. 'There will be plenty of fish left.'

Susan is my little sister. She's quite sweet, but everyone fusses around her because she's always getting sore throats or fevers.

'I'll put Hoppy in his doghouse,' I said. 'Another walk would be too much for his gammy leg.'

As Mother and I set off, I told her what happened.

'Big Tom and his mates were throwing stones at a kitten,' I said, 'so I picked it up

and put it behind a wall. Then they started on me, so I punched Big Tom.'

'Good boy, Billy,' said Mother. She likes kittens. 'I'm glad you stand up to those ruffians.'

I stopped talking then, because my lip hurt.

I call Aunt Meg's cottage 'home' but it's not really our home. I hate it here. It's all grass and trees and cows, and there's nothing to do. I wish I was back in London. It's the finest and biggest city in the world. From our house in Little Thames Lane it's a long walk to the countryside. Thank goodness.

But we must stay here, because London is full of plague. The last outbreak was in 1593, when I was little. All I can remember are bells being rung during burials, and seeing carts taking bodies away.

When it broke out this time, Mother stopped me seeing my friends. No visitors came, and people wouldn't speak to others

without covering their mouths and noses. Everyone is terrified they'll find huge buboes swelling under their arms, or hideous black spots. If they do, they're likely to die horribly. Hundreds of people have died already. There are red crosses on doors all over the city warning, 'Plague here - keep away'. That's why Mother decided that we should come to stay with her sister at Kinglake Manor.

Sounds grand, does it not? Me - William Watkins of Kinglake Manor.

Of course, we're not staying in the manor house! Aunt Meg and Uncle Jem live in Gate Cottage on the Kinglake estate. My uncle is the gamekeeper and my aunt does sewing for the ladies of the big house. She's pretty, and fun when she's not fretting about fish.

It's not my fault I'm unhappy here. Big Tom and his mates make my life miserable. They call me 'maggot-head' or 'Willy goat brain'.

I know why. I cannot catch frogs with my bare hands or trap rabbits, and I've no wish to climb trees to steal apples.

Catch frogs? I'm sure I could, but who would want to? As for trapping rabbits, it's not worth it. Uncle Jem keeps us supplied with meat. And I'm definitely not going to steal fruit, or anything else. I'd never take the chance. Imagine being locked up and whipped or, worse - hanged! Zooks, even being put in the pillory for people to pitch rotten cabbages at you would be bad enough.

So they pick on me because I'm different. I don't want to be a farmhand or butcher, like them, or go to sea like my father. I want to be a player. I want to be a player, acting on the stage at the Globe playhouse in London!

I remember telling Uncle Jem about my ambition.

'That's stupid, lad,' he said.

'It's not,' I told him. 'I've even stood on the stage.'

'Ha! You're jesting!' he said.

'It's true,' I said. 'I help at the Globe.'

'Doing what, lad?'

'Anything. They call me Billy-Odd-Job,' I said proudly. 'And Master Burbage and Master Shakespeare said that one day I can have a part.'

He didn't believe me. But they did say so. And I believe them. One day, I'll have a part in a play by Master William Shakespeare!

As Mother and I crossed the bridge into town, I said, 'I wish we were back in London.'

'So do I,' she said, 'in our own lovely house, with Jane helping to look after us, but we can't be.'

Jane was our maid and not more than a year older than me, so she was fun. She left London,

too, to live with her family in Kingston, a village further up the River Thames.

Mother smiled. 'At least you have Hoppy.'

That's true. I'd never have had him if I'd stayed in London.

We crossed Limping Lane, which made me smile, because that's what Hoppy does. Limp! Actually, he runs with a funny little hop, because of his gammy leg. He was attacked by a big dog when he was a pup. The stable man at the manor gave him to me.

Hoppy's the cleverest little dog in the world. I've taught him to beg, shut the door, and dance on his hind legs. If I clap twice, he bares his teeth and growls, looking so fierce. Yet the only thing he would ever bite is a bone!

I looked at the tiny cottages and tiny lanes in the tiny town. How much longer would we have to stay with Aunt Meg? I

was bored in the country. I missed helping at the Globe. How would I ever become a player if I never went near the playhouse? The plague was ruining my life.



CHAPTER TWO

Mother pointed along Cake Lane, which opened into the market place. 'A crowd's gathering,' she said, as more people headed that way talking excitedly.

I walked faster, but Mother stopped me. 'Come in here,' she said, pulling me into the apothecary's shop.

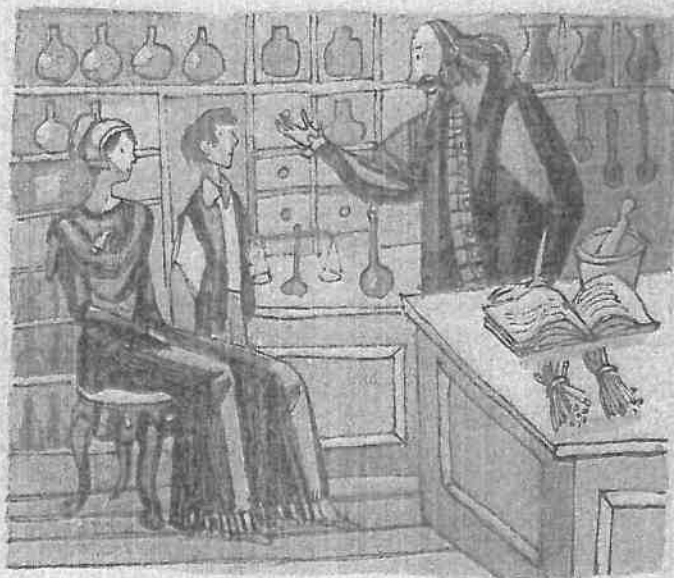
'Good day, Mistress,' said Master Bottell. 'May I make something for you?'

The apothecary was polite to Mother, because she looks like quality. That's what Aunt Meg said, in a very sharp voice. She is jealous of Mother's clothes. Father is secretary to a rich merchant, and they go to far-away countries to buy silk. Mother gets so much gorgeous stuff to make gowns that she often gives some to Aunt Meg, who

shouldn't grumble.

'Nothing, I thank you,' said Mother. 'Such a crowd...'

'I understand.' He fetched her a stool. 'But they are simply excited because an acting company is in town.'



'Acting company?' I said. 'Do you mean a company of players, sir?'

'I do.'

My heart leapt! Plays, in this very town, just like at the Globe! Well, not as grand as at the Globe, but plays all the same.

'Which company, sir?' I asked.

'The King's Men, no less. They will be several days here. Have you watched a play, boy?'

'Yes, sir!' I said. 'My father permits me to help at the Globe playhouse in London. It belongs to the Chamberlain's Men. Father says it's better that I work for Master Shakespeare and Master Burbage than run around the streets making mischief. He went to school with William Shakespeare in Stratford upon the Avon and—'

'That's enough, William,' said Mother.

When she calls me William, I know she means it. I didn't want a cuff round the ear to go with my cut lip and bashed nose. She dislikes me being at the Globe, but cannot

disobey Father's wishes. It annoys her when I speak of it.

But the apothecary said, 'You know William Shakespeare?'

'I do, sir.'

'William Shakespeare, the poet? The great play writer?'

'Yes, sir,' I said.

'That's *enough*,' said Mother. 'Master Bottell doesn't want to hear any more about William Shakespeare.'

He seemed most interested to me.

'Mother, may I go and watch them preparing for the plays?' I begged.

'Certainly not.' She rose and turned, swishing her skirts. 'Come, we have fish to buy.'

By the time we'd bought our trout the crowd had thinned. Two of the company's carts were still waiting to enter the inn yard.

'I know what's in those baskets on the

first cart,' I told Mother. 'Gorgeous costumes.'

'Really?' she said, in a not-interested voice. 'I should have thought players too poor to have finery.'

'Wealthy people give clothes they do not want to their favourite players. Lords do that. Ladies, too.'

Mother raised her eyebrows. 'Lords and ladies go to watch the plays?'

'They do,' I said. 'Nobles love plays. Lord Hunsdon, the Lord Chamberlain, is the company's patron. And Queen Elizabeth herself used to invite the Chamberlain's Men to perform in her palaces,' I said. 'She loved Master Shakespeare's plays above all.'

It was true about the palaces, but I do not know if Will Shakespeare's plays were her favourites. No matter. Mother cannot know otherwise.

She considered my words, then said,

'Queen Elizabeth is dead. Come, let's go before the fish rots and gives your aunt something else to complain about.'

I swung the basket as I walked. I felt so excited. It was months since I'd been in the playhouse. Now we could watch a play right here in town! And not just one, because players put on different plays each day. I remember the Chamberlain's Men acting *Julius Caesar* one afternoon after rehearsing *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that morning, and they would act another the next day! A player might perform a murder in ancient Rome after spending the morning as the king of the fairies or a poor weaver with the head of an ass, called Bottom!

I remember men and boys sitting in out-of-the-way places in the Globe, clutching pieces of paper. The words they would speak were written on those papers. They would

stare at the sky with their lips moving as they struggled to learn them by heart.

I am good at learning by heart, so it will be no problem for me when I am a player.

For that is what I will be. And nothing will stop me.

CHAPTER THREE

It was only as I shut Aunt Meg's hens in for the night that I remembered Master Bottell calling the company of players the King's Men. Now Queen Elizabeth is dead, we have a king called James. He is probably the patron of the King's Men. A king is higher than a chamberlain, so they must be very good.

I had to see them perform. I had to!

I raced inside, nearly tripping over Hoppy, who was curled up beside Aunt Meg. She looked fed up, because Uncle Jem was snoring by the fire, and Mother was mending my jerkin.

'For goodness sake, stop tearing around,' said Mother. 'Do some drawing.'

Aunt Meg sat up. 'Draw me, Billy!'

Not again, I thought. I went up to the

attic room where I sleep, and fetched the leather bag Father gave me when he last came home. Inside was a wooden box of charcoal that he bought on his journey, and a thick pile of paper from the ship. The paper has sketches and writing on one side, but the other side is perfect for drawing. Charcoal is messy, but good for sketching, and I love to draw.

Father said when I'm older I can go to sea with an explorer, and draw the things we discover, to show learned men back in England.

No. I will be a player, and bring pleasure to everyone who sees me. Players bring words alive. I have seen Master Shakespeare's words written down, and they do not have half the life they have when he speaks them.

I brought my drawing things to the fire, and fetched Mother a cup of ale. I wanted to please her.

First I drew an eye then, next to it, a heart. Finally, I drew a sheep. I wanted it to be a female sheep, but all sheep look the same, so I drew a riband round her neck, tied in a bow.

I took my drawing to Mother.

'What is this?' she asked.

'A letter,' I said. 'A letter to you.'

'But there is no writing,' she said.

Of course not. Mother cannot read, so what was the point of writing words?

'Read the pictures,' I said. 'What is this?'

'An eye.'

'And this?'

'A heart.'

'And what is a heart full of?' I asked.

'Love,' she said.

I pointed to the sheep. 'And this?'

She thought for a moment. 'A sheep, with a bow round its neck, so ... it must be a ewe.'

'That is right!' I said. 'So, what does your letter say?'

She looked again. 'Eye ... love ... ewe... Oh, Billy, it says "I love you!"' She hugged me. 'You sweet boy!'

I waited a while as Aunt Meg dozed and Mother sewed. She finished the jerkin, and picked up a chemise.

'I wonder,' I said, quietly, so as not to wake my aunt.

'Wonder what?'

I took a deep breath. 'May we go to the play tomorrow?'

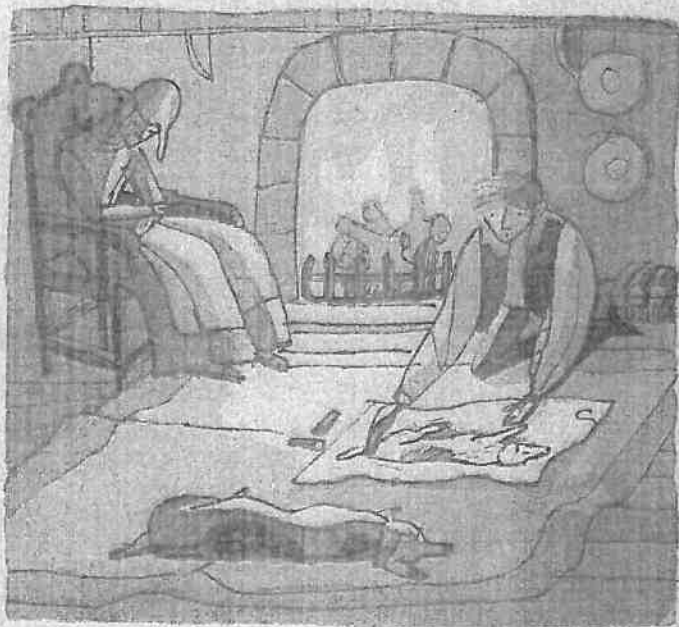
She sipped her ale. 'No.'

Without opening her eyes, Aunt Meg said sleepily, 'Why not?'

'Billy knows I disapprove of players. If it was not for him having his father's permission, he would not be allowed anywhere near the Globe.'

I wanted to cry. Why couldn't she understand?

I snapped my fingers. Hoppy got up obediently, and came to me. I gave him my signal to die for the king, and he lay down, perfectly still, while I drew him. The only sound was the *shch shch* of my charcoal, the crackle of the fire, and Aunt Meg's breathing.



I finished my drawing, and clicked with my tongue. Hoppy sprang up. I hugged him, feeling so miserable. One day, I thought. One day Mother will see me act, and she'll be proud of me.

But at that moment I didn't see how it could ever be possible. The thought brought tears to my eyes. I sniffed.

'Billy?' said Mother.

'Yes.'

'Look at me.'

'I don't want to.'

'Look at me!' she said.

I turned my face to her.

She gazed at me for a few moments, then said, 'All right.'

'What do you mean?'

'I'll take you to the play. You have little to entertain you here, I know. I also know how much it means to you. I suppose that

if your father were here, he would take you.

I leapt up, throwing my arms round her.

‘Thank you!’

‘But mind,’ she said, ‘no talking to players.’

I hardly slept that night. I felt so happy.