



Beautiful Stories From Shakespeare

1



E. Nesbit

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C O N T E N T S

Volume 2

Preface

A Brief Life of Shakespeare

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Preface

The writings of Shakespeare have been justly termed “the richest, the purest, the fairest, that genius uninspired ever penned.” Shakespeare instructed by delighting. His plays alone (leaving mere science out of the question), contain more actual wisdom than the whole body of English learning.

He is the teacher of all good—pity, generosity, true courage, love. His bright wit is cut out “into little stars.” His solid masses of knowledge are meted out in morsels and proverbs, and thus distributed, there is scarcely a corner of the English-speaking world to-day which he does not illuminate, or a cottage which he does not enrich.

His bounty is like the sea, which, though often unacknowledged, is everywhere felt. As his friend, Ben Jonson, wrote of him, “He was not of an age but for all time.” He ever kept the highroad of human life whereon all travel. He did not pick out by-paths of feeling and sentiment.

In his creations we have no moral highwaymen, sentimental thieves, interesting villains, and amiable, elegant adventuresses—no delicate entanglements of situation, in which the grossest images are presented to the mind disguised under the superficial attraction of style and sentiment.

He flattered no bad passion, disguised no vice in the garb of virtue, trifled with no just and generous principle. While causing us to laugh at folly, and shudder at crime, he still preserves our love for our fellow-beings, and our reverence for ourselves.

Shakespeare was familiar with all beautiful forms and images, with all that is sweet or majestic in the simple aspects of nature, of that indestructible love of flowers and fragrance, and dews, and clear waters—and soft airs and sounds, and bright skies and woodland solitudes, and moon-light bowers, which are the material elements of poetry,—and with that fine sense of their indefinable relation to mental emotion, which is its essence and vivifying soul—and which, in the midst of his most busy and tragical scenes, falls like gleams of sunshine on rocks and ruins—contrasting with all that is rugged or repulsive, and reminding us of the existence of purer and brighter elements.

These things considered, what wonder is it that the works of Shakespeare, next to the Bible, are the most highly esteemed of all the classics of English literature. “So extensively have the characters of Shakespeare been drawn upon by artists, poets, and writers of fiction,” says an American author,—“So interwoven are these characters in the great body of English literature, that to be ignorant of the plot of these dramas is often a cause of embarrassment.” But Shakespeare wrote for grown-up people, for men and women, and in words that little folks cannot understand.

Hence this volume. To reproduce the entertaining stories contained in the plays of Shakespeare, in a form so simple that young people can understand and enjoy them, was the object had in view by the author of these Beautiful Stories from Shakespeare.

E.T.R.



William Shakespeare
(1564-1616)

It may be said of Shakespeare, that from his works may be collected a system of civil and economical prudence. He has been imitated by all succeeding writers; and it may be doubted whether from all his successors more maxims of theoretical knowledge, or more rules of practical prudence can be collected than he alone has given to his country.

—Dr. Samuel Johnson



Samuel Johnson
(1709-1784)



Shakespeare's birthplace in Stratford

A BRIEF LIFE OF SHAKESPEARE

In the register of baptisms of the parish church of Stratford-upon-Avon, a market town in Warwickshire, England, appears, under date of April 26, 1564, the entry of the baptism of William, the son of John Shakespeare. The entry is in Latin—"Gulielmus filius Johannis Shakespeare."

The date of William Shakespeare's birth has usually been taken as three days before his baptism, but there is certainly no evidence of this fact. The family name was variously spelled, the dramatist himself not always spelling it in the same way. While in the baptismal record the name is spelled "Shakespeare," in several authentic autographs of the dramatist it reads "Shakspeare," and in the first edition of his works it is printed "Shakespeare."

Halliwell tells us, that there are not less than thirty-four ways in which the various members of the Shakespeare family wrote the name.

Shakespeare's father, while an alderman at Stratford, appears to have been unable to write his name, but as at that time nine men out of ten were content to make their mark for a signature, the fact is not specially to his discredit.

The traditions and other sources of information about the occupation of Shakespeare's father differ. He is described as a butcher, a wool-stapler, and a glover, and it is not impossible that he may have been all of these simultaneously or at different times, or that if he could not properly be called any one of them, the nature of his occupation was such as to make it easy to understand how the various traditions sprang up.

He was a landed proprietor and cultivator of his own land even before his marriage, and he received with his wife, who was Mary Arden, daughter of a country gentleman, the estate of Asbies, 56 acres in extent.

William was the third child. The two older than he were daughters, and both probably died in infancy. After him was born three sons and a daughter. For ten or twelve years at least, after Shakespeare's birth his father continued to be in easy circumstances. In the year 1568 he was the high bailiff or chief magistrate of Stratford, and for many years afterwards he held the position of alderman as he had done for three years before.

To the completion of his tenth year, therefore, it is natural to suppose that William Shakespeare would get the best education that Stratford could afford. The free

school of the town was open to all boys and like all the grammar-schools of that time, was under the direction of men who, as graduates of the universities, were qualified to diffuse that sound scholarship which was once the boast of England.

There is no record of Shakespeare's having been at this school, but there can be no rational doubt that he was educated there. His father could not have procured for him a better education anywhere. To those who have studied Shakespeare's works without being influenced by the old traditional theory that he had received a very narrow education, they abound with evidences that he must have been solidly grounded in the learning, properly so called, was taught in the grammar schools.

Nor was Stratford shut out from the general world, as many country towns are. It was a great highway, and dealers with every variety of merchandise resorted to its markets. The eyes of the poet dramatist must always have been open for observation. But nothing is known positively of Shakespeare from his birth to his marriage to Anne Hathaway in 1582, and from that date nothing but the birth of three children until we find him an actor in London about 1589.

How long acting continued to be Shakespeare's sole profession we have no means of knowing, but it is in the highest degree probable that very soon after arriving in London he began that work of adaptation by which he is known to have begun his literary career.

To improve and alter older plays not up to the standard that was required at the time was a common practice even among the best dramatists of the day,

and Shakespeare's abilities would speedily mark him out as eminently fitted for this kind of work. When the alterations in plays originally composed by other writers became very extensive, the work of adaptation would become in reality a work of creation. And this is exactly what we have examples of in a few of Shakespeare's early works, which are known to have been founded on older plays.

It is unnecessary here to extol the published works of the world's greatest dramatist. Criticism has been exhausted upon them, and the finest minds of England, Germany, and America have devoted their powers to an elucidation of their worth.

Shakespeare died at Stratford on the 23rd of April, 1616. Shakespeare's fellow-actors, fellow-dramatists, and those who knew him in other ways, agree in expressing not only admiration of his genius, but their respect and love for the man. Ben Jonson said, "I love the man, and do honor his memory, on this side idolatry, as much as any. He was indeed honest, and of an open and free nature."

He was buried on the second day after his death, on the north side of the chancel of Stratford church. Over his grave there is a flat stone with this inscription, said to have been written by himself:



1 Hamlet



Hamlet was the only son of the King of Denmark. He loved his father and mother dearly—and was happy in the love of a sweet lady named Ophelia. Her father, Polonius, was the King's Chamberlain.

While Hamlet was away studying at Wittenberg, his father died. Young Hamlet hastened home in great grief to hear that a serpent¹ had stung the King, and that he was dead. The young Prince had loved his father so tenderly that you may judge what he felt when he found that the Queen, before yet the King had been laid in the ground a month, had determined to marry again—and to marry the dead King's brother.

Hamlet refused to put off mourning² for the wedding.

“It is not only the black I wear on my body,” he said, “that proves my loss. I wear mourning in my heart for my dead father. His son at least remembers him, and grieves³ still.”

Then said Claudius the King's brother, “This grief is unreasonable. Of course you must sorrow at the loss of your father, but . . .”

“Ah,” said Hamlet, bitterly, “I cannot in one little month forget those I love.”

1 serpent [ˈsɜːrpənt] (n.) a snake, especially a large one

2 mourning [ˈmɔːrniŋ] (n.) the period during which somebody's death is mourned

3 grieve [ˈɡriːv] (v.) to feel or express great sadness

With that the Queen and Claudius left him, to make merry over their wedding, forgetting the poor good King who had been so kind to them both.

And Hamlet, left alone, began to wonder and to question as to what he ought to do. For he could not believe the story about the snake-bite. It seemed to him all too plain that the wicked Claudius had killed the King, so as to get the crown and marry the Queen. Yet he had no proof, and could not accuse Claudius. And while he was thus thinking came Horatio, a fellow student of his, from Wittenberg.

“What brought you here?” asked Hamlet, when he had greeted his friend kindly.



Hamlet, Prince of Denmark



“I came, my lord, to see your father’s funeral⁴.”

“I think it was to see my mother’s wedding,” said Hamlet, bitterly. “My father! We shall not look upon his like again.”

“My lord,” answered Horatio, “I think I saw him yesternight⁵.”

Then, while Hamlet listened in surprise, Horatio told how he, with two gentlemen of the guard, had seen the King’s ghost on the battlements⁶.

Hamlet went that night, and true enough, at midnight, the ghost of the King, in the armor he had been wont⁷ to wear, appeared on the battlements in the chill⁸ moonlight.

Hamlet was a brave youth. Instead of running away from the ghost he spoke to it—and when it beckoned⁹ him he followed it to a quiet place, and there the ghost told him that what he had suspected was true.

4 funeral [ˈfjuːnərəl] (n.) a ceremony for burying or burning the body of a dead person

5 yesternight [ˈjestɜːnaɪt] (ad.) on the last night

6 battlements [ˈbætlmənts] (n.) (pl.) a low wall around the top of a castle, that has spaces to shoot guns or arrows through

7 wont [wɔːnt] (a.) be accustomed

8 chill [tʃɪl] (a.) unpleasantly cold

9 beckon [ˈbekən] (v.) to move your hand or head in a way that tells someone to come nearer



Hamlet and his father's ghost



The wicked Claudius had indeed killed his good brother the King, by dropping poison into his ear as he slept in his orchard¹⁰ in the afternoon.

“And you,” said the ghost, “must avenge¹¹ this cruel murder—on my wicked brother. But do nothing against the Queen—for I have loved her, and she is your mother. Remember me.”

Then seeing the morning approach¹², the ghost vanished¹³.

10 orchard [ʃC:rtN3rd] (n.) area of fruit or nut trees

11 avenge [3}vendI] (v.) to inflict injury in return for

12 approach [3}proUtN] (v.) come near

13 vanish [ʃv\$N0N] (v.) to disappear suddenly

“Now,” said Hamlet, “there is nothing left but revenge¹⁴. Remember thee¹⁵—I will remember nothing else—books, pleasure, youth—let all go—and your commands¹⁶ alone live on my brain.”

So when his friends came back he made them swear to keep the secret of the ghost, and then went in from the battlements, now gray with mingled¹⁷ dawn and moonlight, to think how he might best avenge his murdered father.

The shock of seeing and hearing his father’s ghost made him feel almost mad, and for fear that his uncle might notice that he was not himself, he determined to hide his mad longing for revenge under a pretended madness in other matters.

And when he met Ophelia, who loved him—and to whom he had given gifts, and letters, and many loving words—he behaved so wildly to her, that she could not but think him mad.



Hamlet, Ophelia,
Queen and Claudius



For she loved him so
that she could not believe
he would be as cruel as
this, unless he were quite
mad. So she told her
father, and showed him a
pretty letter from Hamlet.
And in the letter was
much folly¹⁸, and this
pretty verse¹⁹—

*Doubt that the stars are
fire;
Doubt that the sun doth
move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.*



Hamlet and Ophelia

And from that time everyone believed that the cause of Hamlet's supposed madness was love.

- 14 revenge [r0}vendl] (n.) harm done to someone as a punishment for harm that they have done to someone else
- 15 thee [Mi :] (n.) objective case of thou
- 16 command [k3}m\$nd] (n.) an order given by somebody in authority
- 17 mingle [}m0HE3l] (v.) to mix or combine
- 18 folly [}fA:li] (n.) stupidity, or a stupid action, idea
- 19 verse [v@:rs] (n.) writing which is arranged in short lines with a regular rhythm; poetry

Poor Hamlet was very unhappy. He longed to obey his father's ghost—and yet he was too gentle and kindly to wish to kill another man, even his father's murderer. And sometimes he wondered whether, after all, the ghost spoke truly.

Just at this time some actors came to the Court, and Hamlet ordered them to perform a certain play before the King and Queen. Now, this play was the story of a man who had been murdered in his garden by a near relation, who afterwards married the dead man's wife.

You may imagine the feelings of the wicked King, as he sat on his throne, with the Queen beside him and all his Court around, and saw, acted on the stage, the very wickedness that he had himself done.

And when, in the play, the wicked relation poured poison into the ear of the sleeping man, the wicked Claudius suddenly rose, and staggered²⁰ from the room—the Queen and others following.



Just at this time some actors came to the Court.

Then said Hamlet to his friends—“Now I am sure the ghost spoke true. For if Claudius had not done this murder, he could not have been so distressed²¹ to see it in a play.”

Now the Queen sent for Hamlet, by the King’s desire, to scold him for his conduct²² during the play, and for other matters; and Claudius, wishing to know exactly what happened, told old

Polonius to hide himself behind the hangings²³ in the Queen’s room.

And as they talked, the Queen got frightened at Hamlet’s rough, strange words, and cried for help, and Polonius behind the curtain cried out too.



In the play, the wicked relation poured poison into the ear of the sleeping man.

20 stagger [ˈstæɡər] (v.) to walk or move with a lack of balance as if you are going to fall

21 distressed [dɪˈstrest] (a.) very upset

22 conduct [kənˈdʌkt] (n.) the way someone behaves

23 hangings [ˈhæŋɡɪŋz] (n.) (pl.) a large piece of cloth, often with a picture on it, that is hung on a wall for decoration

Hamlet, thinking it was the King who was hidden there, thrust with his sword at the hangings, and killed, not the King, but poor old Polonius.

So now Hamlet had offended his uncle and his mother, and by bad hap²⁴ killed his true love's father.

“Oh! what a rash²⁵ and bloody deed is this,” cried the Queen.

And Hamlet answered bitterly, “Almost as bad as to kill a king, and marry his brother.”

Then Hamlet told the Queen plainly all his thoughts and how he knew of the murder, and begged her, at least, to have no more friendship or kindness of the base²⁶ Claudius, who had killed the good King.

And as they spoke the King's ghost again appeared before Hamlet, but the Queen could not see it. So when the ghost had gone, they parted.



Hamlet thought it was the King who was hidden there.

²⁴ hap [h\$ɹ] (n.) chance

²⁵ rash [r\$ɪ] (a.) careless or unwise, without thought for what might happen or result

²⁶ base [beɪs] (a.) not honorable and lacking in morals



When the Queen told Claudius what had passed, and how Polonius was dead, he said, “This shows plainly that Hamlet is mad, and since he has killed the Chancellor, it is for his own safety that we must carry out our plan, and send him away to England.”

So Hamlet was sent, under charge²⁷ of two courtiers²⁸ who served the King, and these bore letters to the English Court, requiring that Hamlet should be put to death.

But Hamlet had the good sense to get at these letters, and put in others instead, with the names of the two courtiers who were so ready to betray him.

Then, as the vessel went to England, Hamlet escaped on board a pirate ship, and the two wicked courtiers left him to his fate, and went on to meet theirs.



Hamlet escaped on board a pirate ship.

²⁷ charge [tʃɑːrdʒ] (n.) the responsibility or duty of looking after somebody or something

²⁸ courtier [ˈkjʊːrtɪər] (n.) one who is attached to a royal court

Hamlet hurried home, but in the meantime a dreadful thing had happened. Poor pretty Ophelia, having lost her lover and her father, lost her wits²⁹ too, and went in sad madness about the Court, with straws, and weeds, and flowers in her hair, singing strange scraps³⁰ of songs, and talking poor, foolish, pretty talk with no heart of meaning to it.



Ophelia has lost her wits.

And one day, coming to a stream where willows³¹ grew, she tried to bang a flowery garland³² on a willow, and fell into the water with all her flowers, and so died.

²⁹ wits [wɪts] (n.) (pl.) the basic human power of intelligent thought and perception

³⁰ scrap [skrɒp] (n.) a small irregular piece of something or a small amount of information

³¹ willow [ˈwɪlɒʊ] (n.) a tree that grows near water and has long, thin branches that hang down

³² garland [ˈɡɑːrlənd] (n.) a circle made of flowers and leaves worn around the neck or head as a decoration



Ophelia put straws, weeds, and flowers in her hair.



And Hamlet had loved her, though his plan of seeming madness had made him hide it; and when he came back, he found the King and Queen, and the Court, weeping at the funeral of his dear love and lady.

Ophelia's brother, Laertes, had also just come to Court to ask justice for the death of his father, old Polonius; and now, wild with grief, he leaped into his sister's grave, to clasp³³ her in his arms once more.

"I loved her more than forty thousand brothers," cried Hamlet, and leapt into the grave after him, and they fought till they were parted.

Afterwards Hamlet begged Laertes to forgive him. "I could not bear," he said, "that any, even a brother, should seem to love her more than I."

But the wicked Claudius would not let them be friends. He told Laertes how Hamlet had killed old Polonius, and between them they made a plot to slay Hamlet by treachery³⁴.



Ophelia and Laertes

³³ clasp [kɪˈsp] (v.) to embrace

³⁴ treachery [ˈtreɪtʃəri] (n.) an act of betrayal or deceit



Laertes challenged him to a fencing match, and all the Court were present.

Hamlet had the blunt³⁵ foil³⁶ always used in fencing, but Laertes had prepared for himself a sword, sharp, and tipped with poison.

And the wicked King had made ready a bowl of poisoned wine, which he meant to give poor Hamlet when he should grow warm with the sword play, and should call for drink.

So Laertes and Hamlet fought, and Laertes, after some fencing, gave Hamlet a sharp sword thrust.

Hamlet, angry at this treachery—for they had been fencing, not as men fight, but as they play—closed with Laertes in a struggle; both dropped their swords, and when they picked them up again, Hamlet, without noticing it, had exchanged his own blunt sword for Laertes' sharp and poisoned one.

And with one thrust of it he pierced Laertes, who fell dead by his own treachery.

At this moment the Queen cried out, “The drink, the drink! Oh, my dear Hamlet! I am poisoned!”

She had drunk of the poisoned bowl the King had prepared for Hamlet, and the King saw the Queen, whom, wicked as he was, he really loved, fall dead by his means³⁷.

³⁵ blunt [bɪknt] (a.) not sharp or pointed

³⁶ foil [fɔɪl] (n.) metal in a very thin flexible sheet

³⁷ means [mi:nz] (n.) (pl.) a method of doing something

Then Ophelia being dead, and Polonius, and the Queen, and Laertes, and the two courtiers who had been sent to England, Hamlet at last found courage to do the ghost's bidding and avenge his father's murder—which, if he had braced³⁸ up his heart to do long before, all these lives had been spared, and none had suffered but the wicked King, who well deserved to die.

Hamlet, his heart at last being great enough to do the deed he ought, turned the poisoned sword on the false King.

“Then—venom³⁹—do thy work!” he cried, and the King died. So Hamlet in the end kept the promise he had made his father. And all being now accomplished, he himself died.

And those who stood by saw him die, with prayers and tears, for his friends and his people loved him with their whole hearts. Thus ends the tragic tale of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark.



³⁸ brace [breɪs] (v.) to rouse oneself to greater effort

³⁹ venom [ˈvenəm] (n.) liquid poison that some snakes, insects etc produce when they bite or sting you