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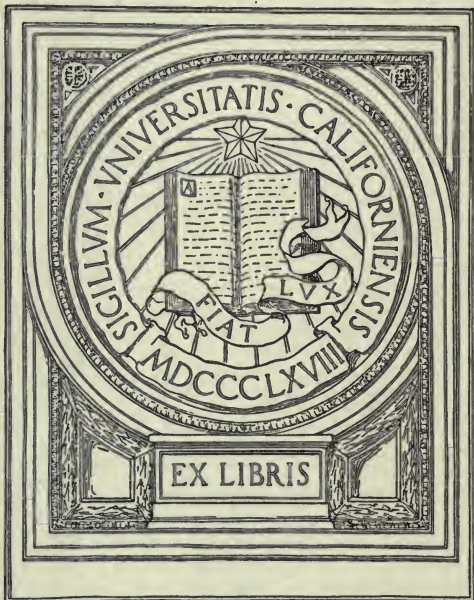
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THE TRUE STORY

OF

Mrs. Shakespeare's Life.



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PRICE, 10 CENTS.

Gift of Professor S. Morley



The True Story of Mrs. Shakespeare's Life.



ALTHOUGH it cannot be denied that the improved taste and higher moral sense of the more educated classes, both in England and America, have completely driven the plays of William Shakespeare from the stage, yet this advance is unfortunately more than counterbalanced by the enormous increase of cheap editions of his works, daily issuing from a corrupt and venal press; thus bringing the unreflecting populace and guileless youth of both countries again under the power of that brilliant and seductive genius, from which it was hoped they had escaped.

In order still further to ensnare and allure the thoughtless, these cheap editions are too often garnished with biographical notices of the author's life, described in garish and attractive language; and the editors of these dangerous works, not content with exalting to the skies a genius only too likely to enchant and enthrall the unwary, endeavor to blind the judgment of the

unthinking reader by unblushingly repeating as truth the fulsome adulation lavished upon Mr. Shakespeare by the boon companions of the tavern wherein he was accustomed to seek oblivion of the dark thoughts by which his soul was haunted, in the wildest excesses of maddening intoxication.

Thus it is upon the authority of his fellow-rioters that we are repeatedly told that he was a

“Gentle spirit, from whose pen
Large streams of honey and sweet nectar flow.”

“The man whom Nature’s self had made
To mock herself, and Truth to imitate
With kindly counter, under mimic shade;
Our pleasant Willy.”

Truth to imitate! we shall presently see with fell intent. Again, it has been said: —

“A *gentler* shepherd nowhere may be found.”

Such is the magic of genius, even when the life of its possessor is known to have been one of lewd and unhallowed riot, that it is a fact that the poet’s personality, fate, and happiness have had an interest for the whole civilized world, which we will venture to say was

unparalleled. It is within the writer's recollection how, in the obscure mountain town where she spent her early days, the life of William Shakespeare had penetrated, and the belief in the *gentleness* of "fancy's child" was universal.

All this while it does not appear to occur to the thousands of unreflecting readers that they are listening merely to the story of his fellow-mummers, and that the one witness whose evidence would be best worth having *has never spoken at all*. Nay, more, this witness, this unhappy but devoted *wife*, who was a being possessed of an almost supernatural power of moral divination, and a grasp of the very highest and most comprehensive things, that made her lightest opinions singularly impressive, has been assumed to have been unworthy of her accomplished husband; and the artless Mr. Moore, in his life of the lately-unmasked demon, Lord Byron, thus alludes to this angelic woman: "By whatever austerity of temper or habits the poets Dante and Milton may have drawn upon themselves such a fate, it might be expected that the 'gentle Shakespeare' would have stood exempt from the common calamity of his brethren. But amongst the very few facts of his life that have been transmitted to us there is none more clearly proved than the unhappiness of his marriage."

It was of this one witness, whose faithful lips were sealed by affection, and of her terrible existence while her husband was rioting in London, shut up in the lonely country home made hideous to her by her knowledge of the dark and guilty secret hidden within its walls, that the poet was evidently thinking when he wrote the awful lines : —

“ *But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison house,
I could a tale unfold, whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul ;*”

but she remained silent, even to her own parents, whose feelings she magnanimously spared.

The veil which has hitherto covered this dark history may now be withdrawn. The time has come when the truth may be told. All the actors in the scene have long disappeared from the stage of mortal existence, and passed, let us have faith to hope, into a world where they would desire to expiate their faults by instituting — did not the lapse of time unfortunately render all scientific investigation useless — *a coroner's inquest upon the remains* which, several centuries earlier, would have been found beneath a certain crab and a certain mulberry tree, in the vicinity of Stratford-upon-Avon.

From the height at which he might have been happy as a most successful dramatist, and the husband of an almost divine woman, Mr. Shakespeare fell into the depths of secret criminal homicide, assisted, in the latter part of his career, by a blood relation;—discovery must have been utter ruin and expulsion from civilized society.

From henceforth this damning, guilty secret became the ruling force in his life; holding him with a morbid fascination, yet filling him with remorse and anguish and insane dread of detection. His various friends, seeing that he was wretched, pressed marriage upon him.

In an hour of reckless desperation he proposed to Anne Hathaway. The world knows well that Mr. Shakespeare had the gift of expression, and will not be surprised that he wrote a very beautiful letter. It ran thus:—

“To the celestial, my soul’s idol, the most beautified Anne Hathaway. In her excellent white bosom, these:—

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

O dear Anne, I am ill at these numbers ; I have not art to reckon my groans ; but that I love thee best, O most best, believe it. Thine ever, most dear lady, while this machine is to him.

“ WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE.”

The woman who had already learned to love him fell at once into the snare. Her answer was a frank, outspoken avowal of her love for him ; giving herself to him heart and hand. The treasure of affection he had secured was like a vision of a lost heaven to a soul in hell. But he could follow his own maxim, he could

“ *Look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under it.*”

Before the world, therefore, and to his intimates, he was the successful *fiancé*, conscious all the while of the deadly secret that lay cold at the bottom of his heart.

Not all at once did the full knowledge of the dreadful reality into which she had entered come upon the young wife. She knew vaguely, from the wild avowals of the first hours of their marriage, that there was a dreadful secret of guilt ; that Mr. Shakespeare’s soul was torn with agonies of remorse. In one of her moonlight walks near the crab-tree, which, from Mr. Shakespeare’s being so frequently seen near it, tradition — though unsus-

picious of the dreadful truth — has connected with his name, there came an hour of revelation,— an hour when, in a manner which left no kind of room for doubt, she beheld her husband interring the corpse of one of those unfortunate minor playwrights, whom he had a morbid passion for destroying, after purloining the plots of their inferior dramas, which his genius then rendered immortal, and saw the full depth of the abyss of infamy which her marriage was expected to cover, and understood that she was expected to be the cloak and the accomplice of this villany. It was to their lonely country house in Warwickshire, that the victims were one by one enticed by him, when he returned there from the wild orgies of his tavern life in London; and there can be no doubt that a dark suspicion of the dreadful truth had flashed across the mind of the unhappy Robert Greene, when he wrote his dying exhortation to his friends, warning them against the “painted monsters” of whom Shakespeare’s troop was composed: “Yes, trust them not; for there is among them *an upstart crow*, beautified with our feathers, that *with his tiger’s heart wrapped in a player’s hide*,” etc.; and even Dr. Johnson, though he appears to have been too careless or too obtuse to penetrate farther into the

mystery, admits that "he fled to London from the terror of a *criminal* prosecution."

The hasty marriage of a youth scarcely nineteen with a woman of twenty-six is thus explained. He required an accomplice, a cloak; a gentle, uncomplaining wife to dwell in retirement in the lonely country house this London roisterer was compelled to maintain at a distance from the scene of his dramatic triumphs.

We have said that the young wife now beheld the full depths of the infamy her marriage was to cover. It was then that he bade her in his own forcible and terrible words: —

"look thou down into this den
 And see a fearful sight of blood and death.

 All on a heap like to a slaughtered lamb
 In this detested, dark, blood-drinking pit.
 this fell devouring receptacle
 As hateful as Cocytus' misty mouth.
 Look for thy reward
 Among the nettles at the *elder-tree* *
 Which overhangs the mouth of this same pit."

* The reason of this substitution of an *elder-tree* for a crab-tree in the drama is obvious. Even the morbid dwelling on his two crimes, which impelled him continually to allude to them in his writing, could not entirely blind him, even in his most

The evidences of an agonized conscience are so thickly strewn throughout his works, that we might almost quote at random : —

“I, as *his host*
That should against his murderer shut the door,
Not bear the knife myself.”

“Oh, my offence is rank, it smells to Heaven,
It hath the primal eldest curse upon it.”

“Now doth he feel
His secret murders sticking on his hands.”

“Better be the dead
Whom we, to gain our peace, have sent to peace.”

“And all our yesterdays,
Have lighted fools to dusty death.”

“What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother’s blood.”

“Oh, wretched state,
Oh, bosom black as death,” etc., etc.

Any one who reads the tragedies of “Macbeth,”

conscience-stricken moments, to the danger of being too explicit. At a later period, when Mr. Shakespeare removed to New Place, the guilty secret was hidden beneath a *mulberry-tree*.

“Hamlet,” “Titus Andronicus,” etc., with this story in his mind, will see that it is true.

Many women would have been utterly crushed by such a disclosure: some would have fled from him immediately, and exposed and denounced the crime. Mrs. Shakespeare did neither. She would neither leave her husband nor betray him; nor would she for one moment justify his sin; and hence came thirty-two years of convulsive struggle, in which sometimes for a time the good angel appeared to gain ground, and then the evil one returned with sevenfold vehemence.

His eldest daughter, Susanna, for whom his preference is so plainly shown in his will, became the partner of his guilt. Mr. Shakespeare argued his case with her, with his noble wife, and with himself, with all the sophistries of his powerful mind:—

“Do what you will, to you it doth belong
Yourself to pardon of self-doing crime.”

“’Tis better to be vile, than vile esteemed.”

“*I will acquaintance strangle, and look strange.*”

“No more be grieved at that which thou hast done:
Roses have thorns, and silver fountains mud;
Cloud and eclipses stain both moon and sun,
And loathsome canker lives in sweetest bud.
All men make faults, and even I in this,

Authorizing thy trespass with compare,
 Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,
 Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are."

These devilish sophistries, though unable to shake his lofty-minded wife, were ruinous to the unfortunate child of sin, born with a curse upon her, over whose wayward nature Mrs. Shakespeare watched with a mother's tenderness; though the task was a difficult one, from the strange, abnormal propensity to murder inherited by the object of her cares. But though he could thus warp this young soul, his divine wife followed him through all his sophistical reasonings with a keener reason. She besought and implored him in the name of his better nature and by all the glorious things he was capable of being and doing; and she had just power enough to convulse and agonize, but not power enough to subdue.

These thirty-two years, during which Mrs. Shakespeare was struggling to bring her husband back to his better self, were a series of passionate convulsions. Towards the last she and her husband saw less and less of each other, and he came more decidedly under evil influences, and seemed to acquire a sort of hatred to her.

"If ere I loved her, all that love is gone;
 My heart to her but as in guest-wise sojourned."

He had tried his strength with her fully; he had attempted to confuse her sense of right and wrong, and bring her into the ranks of those convenient women who regard marriage as a sort of friendly alliance to cover murder on both sides. When her husband described to her the Continental cities where midnight assassinations were habitual things, and the dark marriages in which complaisant couples mutually agreed to form the cloak for each other's murders, and gave her to understand that in this way alone could she have a peaceful and friendly life with him, she simply said, "Master Shakespeare, I am too truly thy friend to do this."

Mr. Shakespeare's treatment of his wife during the sensitive periods that preceded the births of her three children was always marked by paroxysms of unmanly brutality, for which the only possible charity on her part was the supposition of insanity. He himself, alludes to it, with his usual sophistry, where he speaks of "his eye in a *fine frenzy rolling*." Rowe sheds a significant light on these periods, by telling us that about those times, Shakespeare was drunk day after day with Ben Jonson, Marlowe, etc.

A day or two after the birth of her first child, Susannah, Mr. Shakespeare came suddenly into Mrs. Shakespeare's room, and told her that her mother, good

Mistress Hathaway, was dead. A day or two after the birth of the second child, Hamnet, he came with still greater suddenness into her room, and told her that her father, the venerable Master Hathaway, was dead; and a day or two after the birth of the third child, Judith, he came with greater suddenness than ever into the chamber, and harrowed her feelings by announcing the death of worthy Master John à Combe.

Never has more divine strength of love existed in a woman. Her conduct in these trying circumstances displays the breadth of Mrs. Shakespeare's mind, and, above all, her clear divining, moral discrimination; never mistaking wrong for right in the slightest degree; fully alive to the criminality of Mr. Shakespeare and his guilty daughter's murderous proceedings; yet with a mercifulness that made allowance for every weakness and pitied every sin. On one occasion, after their removal to New Place, she came upon him, sitting with the partner of his guilt, beneath the fatal mulberry-tree. She went up to them, and he, looking down upon the grave *among the nettles*, with a sarcastic smile, said: "When will those three down there meet us again?"

She answered, "*Not* in Heaven, I fear."

During all this trial, strange to say, her belief that the good in Mr. Shakespeare would finally conquer,

remained unshaken. She forgave him even the cruelty with which he strove to make her ridiculous in the eyes of the world, by his constant allusions to her being older than himself, and his false and unmanly attacks upon her disposition: —

“Too old, by Heaven! still let the woman take
An elder than herself.”

“Crabbed age and youth cannot live together.”

“Age, I do abhor thee!
Age, I do defy thee.”

“O spite! too old to be engaged to young!”

“Curster than she: why, 'tis impossible!”

“As old as Sibyl, and as curst and shrewd
As Socrates' Xantippe, or a worse.”

All these and more ribald and unmanly insults and obscenity fell at her pitying feet unheeded.

It has been thought by some friends who have read the proof-sheets of the foregoing pages, that the author should give more specifically her authority for these statements.

The great-great-grandmother of the present writer was one of those pilgrim mothers, devoted companions

of certain less widely known but surely not less deserving pilgrim fathers, who were despatched at the expense of an effete mother country to assist in colonizing the British possessions of the American continent. The writer's venerable ancestor and namesake, Mistress H— B. Cherstow, had occasion, before quitting her native land, to visit Warwickshire, and the circumstances which led her there at that time originated a friendship and correspondence with Mistress Shakespeare, which was always regarded as one of the greatest acquisitions of that visit. She there received a letter from Mrs. Shakespeare, indicating that she wished to have some private, confidential communication upon important subjects, and inviting her for that purpose to spend a day with her at her country-seat near Stratford.

Mrs. H— B. Cherstow went, and spent a day with Mrs. Shakespeare alone, and the object of the invitation was explained to her. Mrs. Shakespeare was in such a state of health that her physician, worthy Dr. Hall (the husband of the abnormal offspring "born in bitterness and nurtured in convulsion"), had warned her that she had very little time to live. She was engaged in those duties and retrospections, which every thoughtful person

finds necessary when coming deliberately and with open eyes to the boundaries of this mortal life.

At that period some cheap performances of Mr. Shakespeare's plays at the Globe Theatre were in contemplation, intended to bring his works before the eyes of the masses. Under these circumstances, some of Mrs. Shakespeare's friends had proposed the question to her *whether she had not a responsibility to society for the truth*; whether she *did right* to allow those dramas to gain influence over the popular mind, by giving a silent consent to what she knew to be utter falsehoods.

Mrs. Shakespeare's whole life had been passed in the most heroic self-abnegation and self-sacrifice, and she had now to consider whether one more act of self-denial was not required of her before leaving this world, — namely, to declare the absolute truth, no matter at what expense to her feelings.

For this reason it was her desire to recount the whole history to a person wholly out of the sphere of theatrical or local feelings, which might be supposed to influence those belonging to the county, or to the profession in life in which the events really happened; in order that she might be helped by such a person's views in making up an opinion as to her own duty.

The interview had almost the solemnity of a death-

bed avowal. Mrs. Shakespeare stated the facts which have been embodied above, and gave to the writer's revered ancestor, — the first to bear the henceforth immortal name of H— B. Cherstow, — a brief memorandum of the whole, with the dates affixed.

The words and actions of Mrs. Shakespeare during the last part of her life seemed more like those of a blessed being, detached from earth, than those of an ordinary mortal. What impressed Mrs. H— B. Cherstow more strongly than anything else was, Mrs. Shakespeare's conviction that Mr. Shakespeare was now a redeemed spirit, and that he looked back with shame and regret on the immense destruction of human life of which he had been guilty; and that, if he could speak or act in the case, he would desire to prohibit the representation of those dangerous dramas, the seductive poetry of which he had made the vehicle of his morbid love of slaughter, and unworthy passion for burying his fellow-playwrights beneath the mulberry-tree.

Mrs. Shakespeare's strongly philosophical mind had become satisfied that Mr. Shakespeare was one of those unfortunately constituted persons in whom the balance of nature is so critically hung that it is always in danger of dipping towards insanity, and that in certain periods of his life he was so far under the influence of

mental disorder as not to be fully responsible for his actions.

She went over, with a brief and clear analysis, the history of his whole life as she had thought it out in the lonely musings of her widowhood. She went through the mismanagement of his infancy, — how he was allowed to mule and puke in his nurse's arms; of his neglected childhood, whining, and creeping like snail unwillingly to school; yet so precocious in deceit, as when there to show a shining morning face. She sketched boldly and clearly the mixture of ferocity and hypocrisy characterizing the internal life of the youth in his father's slaughter-house, where, as old Aubrey tells us, "*he exercised his father's trade, and when he killed a calf would do it in high style, and make a speech.*" She dwelt on the account given by Davis of his being "much given to all unluckiness in stealing venison and rabbits," and showed how habits which, with less susceptible fibre and coarser strength of nature, were tolerable for his companions, were deadly to him; unhinging his nervous system, which she considered might have been still further unhinged, when Sir Lucy, whose venison he stole, "often had him whipped, and sometimes imprisoned," and she recalled to the listener's mind how the same chronicler adds, "but his revenge was great,"

quoting his own terrible description of the state of mind to which he had gradually been brought by unrestrained indulgence in every description of criminality and excess : —

“ *Lucius.* — Art thou not sorry for these heinous deeds? ”

“ *Aaron.* — Ay, that I had not done a thousand more,
 Even now I curse the day (and yet I think
 Few come within the compass of my curse)
 Wherein I did not some notorious ill :
As kill a man, or else devise his death. ”

Mrs. H— B. Cherstow was so impressed and excited by the whole scene and the recital, that she begged for two or three days to deliberate, before forming any opinion. She took the memorandum with her to London, and gave a day or two to the consideration of the subject. She wrote to Mrs. Shakespeare that while this act of consideration for the morals of the people of England did seem to be called for, yet if these dreadful disclosures were published during the lifetime of Mistress Susannah Hall, her husband, or relations, some steps might probably be taken to vindicate her reputation and Mr. Shakespeare’s memory; but that by waiting until they should all have been called to their account, there would be no possibility of refuting the charges contained in the memorandum, which would

thus become a document of considerable marketable value.

There is no doubt that the present writer's venerable ancestor was influenced in making these remarks by that prudent forethought for the worldly advancement of her family which regulated her course through life, and has caused her memory to be gratefully revered by whole generations of Cherstows; she probably foresaw that, if published at a fitting moment, these dreadful disclosures might be made instrumental, under Providence, in providing meat for those infant blossoms of the Cherstow family she was about to conduct to America.

After the death of the first H— B. Cherstow, her descendants sought eagerly among her papers for the important memorandum in question; but failed to discover it, and, indeed, it had long been supposed to be irrevocably lost or destroyed, when the providential fall (through dry rot) of the house inhabited by the first generation of Cherstows brought the missing document to light, when it was at once appropriated by the present writer, as an invaluable means of doing justice to the memory of one whom she considers the most remarkable woman the sixteenth century has produced. No such memoir has appeared on the part of her friends, and Mr. Shakespeare's editors have the ear of

the public; sowing far and wide those poisonous effusions of his genius, which are eagerly gathered up and read by an indiscriminating community.

However, Anne Hathaway Shakespeare has an American name, and an American existence, and reverence for pure womanhood is, we think, proved, by these pages, to be an American characteristic; and, what is even more to the point, there can be little doubt of the profit likely to accrue to one specimen of pure American womanhood through their publication by, it is hoped, a not unworthy descendant of the original H— B. Cherstow.



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