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Opening extract from

More William

Written by

Richmal Crompton

Illustrated by

Thomas Henry

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Macmillan Children's Books

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FOREWORD

More William? Yes, please.

This is one of the funniest books I've ever read. When I was recording it for BBC Audio a few years ago there were times when I could hardly keep going, simply because of the situations in which William gets embroiled and the brilliant hilarity of Richmal Crompton's writing. I'd be hooting with laughter and have to start a paragraph all over again. Then, just when I thought I'd regained some semblance of professional control, I'd glance up from the microphone, only to see the studio engineer and my co-producer doubled up with mirth on the other side of the glass . . . which would set me off once more. Exquisite agony!

Richmal Crompton was a hugely popular author: her timeless brainchild, eleven-year-old William Brown, was certainly the Harry Potter of the 1920s. Children, and parents, would wait anxiously for William's latest adventures before

pouncing on them and racing away to devour more exploits of their lateral-thinking hero.

William's magic lies in his own personality, uniquely endowed by the generous genius of his creator. It's true that some of the starchier folk in William's village consider him mischievous, naughty, probably mendacious. His long-suffering family can think of even less flattering words to describe him. But we know that William pretty well always sets out with good intentions. It's just that, being him, things often go wrong; though, as in 'The May King' or 'William and the Smuggler', they can go surprisingly, gloriously right.

His motto invariably is 'Doin good, ritin' rongs and persuin' happiness for all'. Not a bad motive for life in any generation, let alone a world recovering from the staggering tragedies of World War I. 'Let me show you a good time,' William seems to say. 'It's jus' over there.' He's keen to bring justice (as he sees it) to an often unjust world, to prick the bubble of pomposity and, as the dance bands of the 1920s were already expressing in musical terms, to paint the clouds with sunshine.

Here, in this joyous book, William is at his imaginative best. Whether he's conjuring up a ghost

to give a batty aunt a spiritual thrill, attempting (with unexpected results) to assist a team of removal men or airily offering the hospitality of his home to a tramp with no ears, it's all approached with an utmost seriousness of purpose that can only result in laugh-out-loud comedy.

Crompton's world is still real, still recognizable, reflecting both the absurdity and blessedness of British life. William, though of his time, is for all time. Throughout Richmal Crompton's long writing career, until her death in 1969, William, always aged eleven, celebrated many birthdays and Christmases, righted numerous wrongs and brought much happiness to generations of fans. He still does.

William Brown's voice resonates down the years. Surely he's telling us, even now: 'Seems to me those people who keep sayin' I'm scruffy or a scamp, or worse – an' want to see and hear *less* of me – well, they'd better read this book, that's all I can say. S'jolly funny, an' it's all about me. S'called *More William*, not less, an' – ackshully – that's the way I like it.'

Martin Jarvis OBE

CHAPTER 1

A BUSY DAY

William awoke and rubbed his eyes. It was Christmas Day – the day to which he had looked forward with mingled feelings for twelve months. It was a jolly day, of course – presents and turkey and crackers and staying up late. On the other hand, there were generally too many relations about, too much was often expected of one, the curious taste displayed by people who gave one presents often marred one's pleasure.

He looked round his bedroom expectantly. On the wall, just opposite his bed, was a large illuminated card hanging by a string from a nail – 'A Busy Day is a Happy Day'. That had not been there the day before. Brightly coloured roses and forget-me-nots and honeysuckle twined round all the words. William hastily thought over the three aunts staying in the house, and put it down to Aunt Lucy. He looked at it with a doubtful frown. He distrusted the sentiment.

A copy of *Portraits of our Kings and Queens* he put aside as beneath contempt. *Things a Boy Can Do* was

more promising. *Much* more promising. After inspecting a penknife, a pocket compass, and a pencil box (which shared the fate of *Portraits of our Kings and Queens*), William returned to *Things a Boy Can Do*. As he turned the pages, his face lit up.

He leapt lightly out of bed and dressed. Then he began to arrange his own gifts to his family. For his father he had bought a bottle of highly coloured sweets, for his elder brother Robert (aged nineteen) he had expended a vast sum of money on a copy of *The Pirates of the Bloody Hand*. These gifts had cost him much thought. The knowledge that his father never touched sweets, and that Robert professed scorn of pirate stories, had led him to hope that the recipients of his gifts would make no objection to the unobtrusive theft of them by their recent donor in the course of the next few days. For his grown-up sister Ethel he had bought a box of coloured chalks. That also might come in useful later. Funds now had been running low, but for his mother he had bought a small cream jug which, after fierce bargaining, the man had let him have at half price because it was cracked.

Singing 'Christians, Awake!' at the top of his lusty young voice, he went along the landing, putting his gifts outside the doors of his family, and pausing to yell 'Happy

Christmas' as he did so. From within he was greeted in each case by muffled groans.

He went downstairs into the hall, still singing. It was earlier than he thought – just five o'clock. The maids were not down yet. He switched on lights recklessly, and discovered that he was not the only person in the hall. His four-year-old cousin Jimmy was sitting on the bottom step in an attitude of despondency, holding an empty tin.

Jimmy's mother had influenza at home, and Jimmy and his small sister Barbara were in the happy position of spending Christmas with relations, but immune from parental or maternal interference.

'They've gotten out,' said Jimmy, sadly. 'I got 'em for presents yesterday, an' they've gotten out. I've been feeling for 'em in the dark, but I can't find 'em.'

'What?' said William.

'Snails. Great big suge ones wiv great big suge shells. I put 'em in a tin for presents an' they've gotten out an' I've gotten no presents for nobody.'

He relapsed into despondency.

William surveyed the hall.

'They've got out right enough!' he said, sternly. 'They've got out right *enough*. Jus' look at our hall! Jus' look at our clothes! They've got out *right* enough.'

Innumerable slimy iridescent trails shone over hats, and coats, and umbrellas, and wallpaper.

'Huh!' grunted William, who was apt to overwork his phrases. 'They got *out* right enough.'

He looked at the tracks again and brightened. Jimmy was frankly delighted.

'Oo! Look!' he cried. 'Oo *funny*!'

William's thought flew back to his bedroom wall – 'A Busy Day is a Happy Day'.

'Let's clean it up!' he said. 'Let's have it all nice an' clean for when they come down. We'll be busy. You tell me if you feel happy when we've done. It might be true wot it says, but I don't like the flowers messin' all over it.'

Investigation in the kitchen provided them with a large pail of water and scrubbing brush each.

For a long time they worked in silence. They used plenty of water. When they had finished the trails were all gone. Each soaked garment on the hatstand was sending a steady drip on to the already flooded floor. The wallpaper was sodden. With a feeling of blankness they realised that there was nothing else to clean.

It was Jimmy who conceived the exquisite idea of dipping his brush in the bucket and sprinkling William with water. A scrubbing brush is in many ways almost

as good as a hose. Each had a pail of ammunition. Each had a good-sized brush. During the next few minutes they experienced purest joy. Then William heard threatening movements above, and decided hastily that the battle must cease.

'Backstairs,' he said shortly. 'Come on.'

Marking their track by a running stream of water, they crept up the backstairs.

But two small boys soaked to the skin could not disclaim all knowledge of a flooded hall.

William was calm and collected when confronted with a distracted mother.

'We was tryin' to clean up,' he said. 'We found all snail marks an' we was tryin' to clean up. We was tryin' to help. You said so last night, you know, when you was talkin' to me. You said to *help*. Well, I thought it was helpin' to try an' clean up. You can't clean up with water an' not get wet – not if you do it prop'ly. You said to try an' make Christmas Day happy for other folks and then I'd be happy. Well, I don't know as I'm very happy,' he said, bitterly, 'but I've been workin' hard enough since early this mornin'. I've been workin',' he went on pathetically. His eye wandered to the notice on his wall. 'I've been *busy* all right, but it doesn't make me *happy* – not jus' now,' he added, with memories of the rapture of the fight.

That certainly must be repeated some time. Buckets of water and scrubbing brushes. He wondered he'd never thought of that before.

William's mother looked down at his dripping form.

'Did you get all that water with just cleaning up the snail marks?' she said.

William coughed and cleared his throat. 'Well,' he said, deprecatingly, 'most of it. I think I got most of it.'

'If it wasn't Christmas Day . . .' she went on darkly.

William's spirits rose. There was certainly something to be said for Christmas Day.

It was decided to hide the traces of the crime as far as possible from William's father. It was felt – and not without reason – that William's father's feelings of respect for the sanctity of Christmas Day might be overcome by his feelings of paternal ire.

Half an hour later William, dried, dressed, brushed, and chastened, descended the stairs as the gong sounded in a hall which was bare of hats and coats, and whose floor shone with cleanliness.

'And jus to think,' said William, despondently, 'that it's only jus' got to brekfust time.'

William's father was at the bottom of the stairs. William's father frankly disliked Christmas Day.

'Good morning, William,' he said, 'and a happy

Christmas, and I hope it's not too much to ask of you that on this relation-infested day one's feelings may be harrowed by you as little as possible. And why the deu—dickens they think it necessary to wash the hall floor before breakfast, heaven only knows!'

William coughed, a cough meant to be a polite mixture of greeting and deference. William's face was a study in holy innocence. His father glanced at him suspiciously. There were certain expressions of William's that he distrusted.

William entered the dining-room morosely. Jimmy's sister Barbara – a small bundle of curls and white frills – was already beginning her porridge.

'Goo' mornin',' she said, politely, 'did you hear me cleanin' my teef?'

He crushed her with a glance.

He sat eating in silence till everyone had come down, and Aunts Jane, Evangeline, and Lucy were consuming porridge with that mixture of festivity and solemnity that they felt the occasion demanded.

Then Jimmy entered, radiant, with a tin in his hand.

'Got presents,' he said, proudly. 'Got presents, lots of presents.'

He deposited on Barbara's plate a worm which Barbara promptly threw at his face. Jimmy looked at her

reproachfully and proceeded to Aunt Evangeline. Aunt Evangeline's gift was a centipede – a live centipede that ran gaily off the tablecloth on to Aunt Evangeline's lap before anyone could stop it. With a yell that sent William's father to the library with his hands to his ears, Aunt Evangeline leapt to her chair and stood with her skirts held to her knees.

'Help! Help!' she cried. 'The horrible boy! Catch it! Kill it!'

Jimmy gazed at her in amazement, and Barbara looked with interest at Aunt Evangeline's long expanse of shin.

'*My* legs isn't like *your* legs,' she said pleasantly and conversationally. 'My legs is knees.'

It was some time before order was restored, the centipede killed, and Jimmy's remaining gifts thrown out of the window. William looked across the table at Jimmy with respect in his eye. Jimmy, in spite of his youth, was an acquaintance worth cultivating. Jimmy was eating porridge unconcernedly.

Aunt Evangeline had rushed from the room when the slaughter of the centipede had left the coast clear, and refused to return. She carried on a conversation from the top of the stairs.

'When that horrible child has gone, I'll come in. He

may have insects concealed on his person. And someone's been dropping water all over these stairs. They're *damp*!'

'Dear, dear!' murmured Aunt Jane, sadly.

Jimmy looked up from his porridge.

'How was I to know she didn't like insecks?' he said, aggrievedly. '*I* like 'em.'

William's mother's despair was only tempered by the fact that this time William was not the culprit. To William also it was a novel sensation. He realised the advantages of a fellow criminal.

After breakfast peace reigned. William's father went out for a walk with Robert. The aunts sat round the drawing-room fire talking and doing crochet work. In this consists the whole art and duty of aunthood. *All* aunts do crochet work.

They had made careful inquiries about the time of the service.

'You needn't worry,' had said William's mother. 'It's at ten thirty, and if you go to get ready when the clock in the library strikes ten it will give you heaps of time.'

Peace . . . calm . . . quiet. Mrs Brown and Ethel in the kitchen supervising the arrangements for the day. The aunts in the drawing-room discussing over their crochet work the terrible way in which their sisters had brought

up their children. That, also, is a necessary part of aunthood.

Time slipped by happily and peacefully. Then William's mother came into the drawing-room.

'I thought you were going to church,' she said.

'We are. The clock hasn't struck.'

'But – it's eleven o'clock!'

There was a gasp of dismay.

'The clock never struck!'

Indignantly they set off to the library. Peace and quiet reigned also in the library. On the floor sat William and Jimmy gazing with frowns of concentration at an open page of *Things a Boy Can Do*. Around them lay most indecently exposed the internal arrangements of the library clock.

'William! You *wicked* boy!'

William raised a frowning face.

'It's not put together right,' he said; 'it's not been put together right all this time. We're makin' it right now. It must have wanted mendin' for ever so long. *I* dunno how it's been goin' at all. It's lucky we found it out. It's put together wrong. I guess it's *made* wrong. It's goin' to be a lot of trouble to us to put it right, an' we can't do much when you're all standin' in the light. We're very busy – workin' at tryin' to mend this ole clock for you all.'



AROUND THEM LAY MOST INDECENTLY EXPOSED THE INTERNAL ARRANGEMENTS OF THE LIBRARY CLOCK.

'Clever,' said Jimmy, admiringly. 'Mendin' the clock. *Clever!*'

'William!' groaned his mother. 'You've ruined the clock. What *will* your father say?'

'Well, the cog wheels was wrong,' said William doggedly. 'See? An' this ratchet-wheel isn't on the pawl prop'ly – not like what this book says it ought to be. Seems we've got to take it all to pieces to get it right. Seems to me the person wot made this clock didn't know much about clock-making. Seems to me—'

'Be *quiet*, William!'

'We was be quietin' 'fore you came in,' said Jimmy severely. 'You 'sturbed us.'

'Leave it just as it is, William,' said his mother.

'You don't *unnerstand*,' said William with the excitement of the fanatic. 'The cog wheel an' the ratchet ought to be put on the arbor different. See, this is the cog wheel. Well, it oughtn't to be like wot it was. It was put on all *wrong*. Well, we was mendin' it. An' we was doin' it for *you*,' he ended, bitterly, 'jus' to help an' – to – to make other folks happy. It makes folks happy havin' clocks goin' right, anyone would *think*. But if you *want* your clocks put together wrong, *I* don't care.'

He picked up his book and walked proudly from the room followed by the admiring Jimmy.

'William,' said Aunt Lucy patiently, as he passed, 'I don't want to say anything unkind, and I hope you won't remember all your life that you have completely spoilt this Christmas Day for me.'

'Oh, dear!' murmured Aunt Jane, sadly.

William, with a look before which she should have sunk into the earth, answered shortly that he didn't think he would.

During the midday dinner the grown-ups, as is the foolish fashion of grown-ups, wasted much valuable time in the discussion of such futilities as the weather and the political state of the nation. Aunt Lucy was still suffering and aggrieved.

'I can go this evening, of course,' she said, 'but it's not quite the same. The morning service is different. Yes, please, dear – *and* stuffing. Yes, I'll have a little more turkey, too. And, of course, the Vicar may not preach tonight. That makes such a difference. The gravy on the potatoes, please. It's almost the first Christmas I've not been in the morning. It seems quite to have spoilt the day for me.'

She bent on William a glance of gentle reproach. William was quite capable of meeting adequately that or any other glance, but at present he was too busy for minor hostilities. He was *extremely* busy. He was doing

his utmost to do full justice to a meal that only happens once a year.

'William,' said Barbara pleasantly, 'I can *dweam*. Can you?'

He made no answer.

'Answer your cousin, William,' said his mother.

He swallowed, then spoke plaintively. 'You always say not to talk with my mouth full,' he said.

'You could speak when you've finished the mouthful.'

'Dear, *dear*!' murmured Aunt Jane.

This was Aunt Jane's usual contribution to any conversation.

He looked coldly at the three pairs of horrified aunts' eyes around him, then placidly continued his meal.

Mrs Brown hastily changed the subject of conversation. The art of combining the duties of mother and hostess is sometimes a difficult one.

Christmas afternoon is a time of rest. The three aunts withdrew from public life. Aunt Lucy found a book of sermons in the library and retired to her bedroom with it.

'It's the next best thing, I think,' she said with a sad glance at William.

William was beginning definitely to dislike Aunt Lucy.

'Please'm,' said the cook an hour later, 'the mincing machine's disappeared.'

'Disappeared?' said William's mother, raising her hand to her head.

'Clean gone'm. 'Ow'm I to get the supper'm? You said as 'ow I could get it done this afternoon so as to go to church this evening. I can't do nuffink with the mincing machine gone.'

'I'll come and look.'

They searched every corner of the kitchen, then William's mother had an idea. William's mother had not been William's mother for eleven years without learning many things. She went wearily up to William's bedroom.

William was sitting on the floor. Open beside him was *Things a Boy Can Do*. Around him lay various parts of the mincing machine. His face was set and strained in mental and physical effort. He looked up as she entered.

'It's a funny kind of mincing machine,' he said, crushingly. 'It's not got enough parts. It's *made* wrong—'

'Do you know,' she said, slowly, 'that we've all been

looking for that mincing machine for the last half-hour?'

'No,' he said without much interest, 'I di'n't. I'd have told you I was mendin' it if you'd told me you was lookin' for it. It's *wrong*,' he went on aggrievedly. 'I can't make anything with it. Look! It says in my book "How to make a model railway signal with parts of a mincing machine". Listen! It says, "Borrow a mincing machine from your mother—"'

'Did you borrow it?' said Mrs Brown.

'Yes. Well, I've got it, haven't I? I went all the way down to the kitchen for it.'

'Who lent it to you?'

'No one *lent* it to me. I *borrowed* it. I thought you'd like to see a model railway signal. I thought you'd be interested. Anyone would think anyone would be interested in seein' a railway signal made out of a mincin' machine.'

His tone implied that the dullness of people in general was simply beyond him. 'An' you haven't got a right sort of mincin' machine. It's wrong. Its parts are the wrong shape. I've been hammerin' them, tryin' to make them right, but they're *made* wrong.'

Mrs Brown was past expostulating. 'Take them all down to the kitchen to Cook,' she said. 'She's waiting for them.'

On the stairs William met Aunt Lucy carrying her volume of sermons.

'It's not quite the same as the spoken word, William dear,' she said. 'It hasn't the *force*. The written word doesn't reach the *heart* as the spoken word does, but I don't want you to worry about it.'

William walked on as if he had not heard her.

It was Aunt Jane who insisted on the little entertainment after tea.

'I *love* to hear the dear children recite,' she said. 'I'm sure they all have some little recitation they can say.'

Barbara arose with shy delight to say her piece.

Lickle bwown seed, lickle bwown bwother,
And what, pway, are you goin' to be?
I'll be a poppy as white as my mother,
Oh, DO be a poppy like me!
What, you'll be a sunflower? Oh, how I shall miss you
When you are golden and high!
But I'll send all the bees up to tiss you.
Lickle bwown bwother, goodbye!

She sat down blushing, amid rapturous applause.

Next Jimmy was dragged from his corner. He stood up

as one prepared for the worst, shut his eyes, and –

Licklaxokindness lickledeedsolove –
make – thisearfanedenliketheeav'nabovethasalliknow.

He gasped it all in one breath, and sat down panting.

This was greeted with slightly milder applause.

'Now, William!'

'I don't know any,' he said.

'Oh, you *do*,' said his mother. 'Say the one you learnt at school last term. Stand up, dear, and speak clearly.'

Slowly William rose to his feet.

'It was the schooner Hesperus that sailed the wintry sea,'

he began.

Here he stopped, coughed, cleared his throat, and began again.

It was the schooner Hesperus that sailed the wintry sea.

'Oh, get *on*!' muttered his brother, irritably.

'I can't get on if you keep talkin' to me,' said William

sternly. 'How can I get on if you keep takin' all the time up, *sayin'* get on? I can't get on if you're talkin', can I?'

'It was the Hesper Schoonerus that sailed the wintry sea an' I'm not goin' on if Ethel's goin' to keep gigglin'. It's not a funny piece, an' if she's goin' on gigglin' like that I'm not sayin' any more of it.'

'Ethel, dear!' murmured Mrs Brown, reproachfully.



'IT WAS THE HESPER SCHOONERUS THAT SAILED THE WINTRY SEA AN' I'M NOT GOIN' ON IF ETHEL'S GOIN' TO KEEP GIGGLIN'.'

Ethel turned her chair completely round and left only her back exposed to William's view. He glared at it suspiciously.

'Now, William, dear,' continued his mother, 'begin again and no one shall interrupt you.'

William again went through the preliminaries of coughing and clearing his throat.

It was the schooner Hesperus that sailed the wintry seas.

He stopped again, and slowly and carefully straightened his collar and smoothed back the lock of hair which was dangling over his brow.

'The skipper had brought—' prompted Aunt Jane, kindly.

William turned on her.

'I was *goin'* to say that if you'd left me alone,' he said. 'I was jus' thinkin'. I've got to think sometimes. I can't say off a great long pome like that without stoppin' to think sometimes, can I? I'll – I'll do a conjuring trick for you instead,' he burst out, desperately. 'I've learnt one from my book. I'll go an' get it ready.'

He went out of the room. Mr Brown took out his handkerchief and mopped his brow.

'May I ask,' he said patiently, 'how long this exhibition is to be allowed to continue?'

Here William returned, his pockets bulging. He held a large handkerchief in his hand.

'This is a handkerchief,' he announced. 'If anyone'd like to feel it to see if it's a real one, they can. Now I want a shilling.' He looked round expectantly, but no one moved. 'Or a penny would do,' he said, with a slightly disgusted air. Robert threw one across the room. 'Well, I put the penny into the handkerchief. You can see me do it, can't you? If anyone wants to come an' feel the penny is in the handkerchief, they can. Well,' he turned his back on them and took something out of his pocket. After a few contortions he turned round again, holding the handkerchief tightly. 'Now, you look close' – he went over to them – 'an' you'll see the shil— I mean, penny,' he looked scornfully at Robert, 'has changed to an egg. It's a real egg. If anyone thinks it isn't a real egg—'

But it *was* a real egg. It confirmed his statement by giving a resounding crack and sending a shining stream partly on to the carpet and partly on to Aunt Evangeline's black silk knee. A storm of reproaches burst out.

'First that horrible insect,' almost wept Aunt Evangeline, 'and then this messy stuff all over me. It's a good

thing I don't live here. One day a year is enough . . . My nerves! . . .'

'Dear, dear!' said Aunt Jane.

'Fancy taking a new-laid *egg* for that,' said Ethel severely.

William was pale and indignant.

'Well, I did jus' what the book said to do. Look at it. It says: "Take an egg. Conceal it in the pocket." Well, I took an egg an' I concealed it in the pocket. Seems to me,' he said bitterly, 'seems to me this book isn't *Things a Boy Can Do*. It's *Things a Boy Can't Do*.'

Mr Brown rose slowly from his chair.

'You're just about right there, my son. Thank *you*,' he said with elaborate politeness, as he took the book from William's reluctant hands and went over with it to a small cupboard in the wall. In this cupboard reposed an airgun, a bugle, a catapult, and a mouth organ. As he unlocked it to put the book inside, the fleeting glimpse of his confiscated treasures added to the bitterness of William's soul.

'On Christmas Day, too!'

While he was still afire with silent indignation Aunt Lucy returned from church.

'The Vicar *didn't* preach,' she said. 'They say that this morning's sermon was beautiful. As I say, I don't

want William to reproach himself, but I feel that he has deprived me of a very great treat.'

'*Nice* William!' murmured Jimmy sleepily from his corner.

As William undressed that night his gaze fell upon the flower-bedecked motto: 'A Busy Day is a Happy Day'.

'It's a story,' he said, indignantly. 'It's jus' a wicked ole story.'