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opening extract from
**The Life and Times of
William Shakespeare**

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Published by
The Templar Company

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Childhood Days & Stratford Ways

"WHEN THAT I WAS AN' A LITTLE
TINY BOY."

TWELFTH NIGHT, 5.1

I may dwell in London, the greatest city in Christendom, but in sooth I remain a country lad right enough, who walked the same lanes and hedgerows as you, dearest, and your sister *Swannab* and your poor brother *Hamnet*. My earliest memories are of *May Day* and harvest home, sailing ships of straw upon the *River Avon* and tormenting the geese in the cornfields. I loved well the forest of *Arden*, named for my mother's family. To myself and my adventurous siblings, *Joan*, *Gilbert*, *Dickon* and *Ned*, it was a magical wood where the fair folk watched us act our little plays of *hunters*, of *pirates* and of course, of *Robin Hood* and his *Merry Men*.



I have a hook when the wild trout comes,
When water and the sizzling violet grows,
Quite over-come with luscious scumblins,
With sweet mock-roses and with eglantine.
A Midsummer Night's Dream, 2.1

Small wonder my plays are filled with country folk – the shepherds, the herdsmen, the tillers and the sicklemen of my youth. Listen carefully – the wisest of my characters are 'hard-handed men', who know the ways of the land and the people who live in and on it. They may speak roughly, but they speak true.



Fishing on the Avon

Ah, sweet *Avon*, river of my dream! You were in my mind when I made my beautiful *Cleopatra* an avid fisherwoman. Give me more angling, we'll be the river then. My music playing far off, I will betray Treason-fish! Fishes, my bearded hook shall pierce Their slimy joints and, as I draw them up, I'll say, 'Ah, but you're caught.'

Antony & Cleopatra, 2.8

I fish only in the waters of memory now, but soon I will tackle trout in our own fresh stream once more.

Child-rearing Advice

Some old wives' advice from my mother's household book – though I do not recall boiling hares' brains for this – and heaven knows thou wast not slow to speak!

- The fastest napper comes from a wet nurse who is not drunk, or squint-eyed, nor with a misshapen nose or hula, or with black ill-favoured teeth or with stinking breath.
- A suckling child should be given hare's brains reduced to jelly.
- Thumb-suckers should be offered a piece of liquorice root to mouthe.
- If the child will not stop crying, try placing it in a freshly dug hole in the ground.
- For a child that is slow to speak, rub its tongue with honey, salt and frankincense.



John Shakespeare was prosperous and well-liked during his son's early years. He served as an alderman of their comfortable town and was even the high bailiff, or mayor, for a term. He also had the enviable post of town ale-taster. John was rich enough to send William to school, and to afford a large two-storey house with a vegetable garden. His wife's family owned several farms nearby, where William probably played and learned many of the country customs that are described in his plays.

John Shakespeare worked hard for a living, but he had hopes that his bright and imaginative son William would grow up to be someone special.

Shepherd's Calendar

Edmund Spenser, the great poet, gave us most joyful visions of shepherds and milkmaids in the rustic parts of his 'Shepherd's Calendar'. However, they bear little likeness to the hearty *Midland folk* I know. No furrer gossens or piping pastourels for my neighbours – give them a drum and fiddle, plenty of ale and the they can go bang!



IN JAN A GOATHEARD AND SHEPHERD ALONE OVER WHO IS MOST VIRTUOUS – THOSE IN HIGH PLACES OR THE LOWLY AND MEER.

