

The Boy Will

BY ROBERT EMMONS ROGERS

Within the White Luces Inn on a late afternoon in spring, 1582. The room is of heavy-beamed dark oak, stained by age and smoke, with a great, hooded fireplace on the left. At the back is a door with the upper half thrown back, and two wide windows through whose open lattices, overgrown with columbine, one can see the fresh country side in the setting sun. Under them are broad window seats. At the right, a door and a tall dresser filled with pewter plates and tankards. A couple of chairs, a stool and a low table stand about. ANNE, a slim girl of sixteen, is mending the fire. MASTER GEORGE PEELE, a bold and comely young man, in worn riding dress and spattered boots, sprawls against the disordered table. GILES, a plump and peevish old rogue in tapster's cap and apron, stands by the door looking out.

PEELE [*rousing himself*]. Giles! Gi-les!

GILES [*hurries to him*]. What more, zur? Wilt ha' the pastry or--?

PEELE. Another quart of sack.

GILES. Yus, zur! Anne, bist asleep? [*The girl rises slowly.*]

ANNE [*takes the tankard*]. He hath had three a'ready.

PEELE [*cheerfully*]. And shall have three more so I will. This player's life of mine is a weary one.

ANNE [*pertly*]. And a thirsty one, too, methinks.

GILES [*scandalized*]. Come, wench! Ha' done gawking about, and haste! [*ANNE goes at right.*] 'Er be a forrard gel, zur, though hendy. I be glad 'er's none o' mine, but my brother's in Shottery. He canna say I love 'is way o' making wenches so saucy.

PEELE. A pox on you! The best-spirited maid I ha' seen in Warwickshire, I say. Forward? Man alive, wouldst have her like your blowsy wenches here, that lie i' the sun all day? I have seen no one so comely since I left London.

GILES [*feebly*]. But 'ere, zur, in Stratford--

PEELE [*hotly*]. Stratford? I doubt if God made Stratford! Another day here and I should die in torment. Your grass lanes, your rubbly houses, fat burgesses, old women, your young clouter-heads who have no care for a bravely acted stage-play. [*Bitingly.*] "Can any good come out of Stratford?"

GILES. Noa, Maister Peele! Others ha' spoke more fairly--

PEELE [*impatiently*]. My sack, man! Is the girl a-brewing it?

GILES. Anne! Anne! (I'll learn she to mess about.) Anne!

ANNE [*hurries in and serves PEELE*]. I heard you.

GILES. Then whoi cunst thee not bustle? Be I to lose my loongs over 'ee?

ANNE [*simply*]. Mistress Shakespeare called me to the butt'ry door. Will hath not been home all day, and she is fair anxious. She bade me send him home once I saw him.

PEELE [*drinking noisily*]. Who is it? [*ANNE is clearing the table.*]

GILES [*shortly*]. Poor John Shakespeare's son Will.

PEELE. A Stratford lad? A straw-headed beater of clods!

GILES. Nay, zur. A wild young un, as 'ull do noa honest work, but dreams the day long, or poaches the graät woods wi' young loons o' like stomach.

ANNE [*indignantly, dropping a dish*]. It's not true! He is no poacher.

PEELE [*grinning*]. What a touchy lass! No poacher, eh?

ANNE. Nay, sir, but the brightest lad in Stratford. He hath learning beyond the rest of us--and if he likes to wander i' the woods, 'tis for no

ill--he loves the open air--and you should hear the little songs he makes!

PEELE. Do all the lads find in you such a defender, or only--? [*She turns away.*] Nay, no offense! I should like to see this Will.

GILES [*grumpily*]. 'E 'ave noa will to help 'is father in these sorry times, but ever gawks at stage-plays. 'E 'ull come to noa good end. [*The player starts up.*]

PEELE. Stage-plays--no good end? Have a care, man!

GILES. Nay, zur--noa harm, zur! I--I--canna bide longer. [*Backs out.*]

ANNE [*at the window, wonderingly*]. He should be here. He hath never lingered till sunset before. [*PEELE comes up behind her.*]

PEELE. Troubled, lass?

ANNE. Nay, sir, but--but--[*Suddenly*] Listen!

PEELE [*blankly*]. To what? [*A faint singing without.*]

ANNE [*eagerly*]. Canst hear nothing--a lilt afar off?

PEELE [*nodding*]. Like a May-day catch? I hear it.

ANNE. 'Tis Will! Cousin, Will is coming. [*GILES comes back.*]

GILES [*peevishly*]. I canna help it. Byunt 'e later'n common?

A VOICE. [*The clear, boyish singing is coming very near.*]

When springtime frights the winter cold, 5 (Hark to the children singing!) The cowslip turns the fields to gold, The bird from 's nest is winging--

PEELE. Look you! There the boy comes.

ANNE [*leaning out the window*]. Isn't he coming here? Will! Will!
[*He passes by the window singing the last words*

Young hearts are gay, while yet 'tis May, Hark to the children singing!

and leaps in over the lower part of the door, a sturdy, ruddy boy, with merry face and a mop of brown hair. ANNE greets him with outstretched hands.]

ANNE [*reproachfully*]. Will! Thy mother was so anxious!

WILL. I did na' think. I ha' been in the woods all day and forgot everything till the sun set.

ANNE. All the day long? Thou must be weary.

WILL [*frankly*]. Nay, not very weary--but hungry.

ANNE. Poor boy. He shall have his supper now.

GILES [*protesting*]. 'E be allus eating 'ere, and I canna a-bear it. Let him sup at his own whoam.

WILL [*shaking his head*]. I dare na go home, for na doubt my father'll beat me rarely. I'll bide here till he be asleep. [*He places himself easily in the armchair by the fire.*]

GILES [*going sulkily*]. Thriftless young loon!

ANNE [*laying the table*]. Hast had a splendid day?

WILL [*absently*]. Aye. In the great park at Charlecote. There you can lie on your back in the grass under the high arches of the trees, where the sun rarely peeps in, and you can listen to the wind in the trees, and see it shake the blossoms about you, and watch the red deer and the rabbits and the birds--where everything is lovely and still. [*His voice trails off into silence. ANNE smiles knowingly.*]

ANNE. Thou'lt be making poetry before long, eh, Will?--Will? [*To PEELE*] The boy hath not heard a word I spoke.

PEELE [*coming forward*]. Would he hear me, I wonder! Boy!

WILL [*starting*]. Sir? [*PEELE looks down on him sternly.*]

PEELE. Dost know thou'rt in my chair?

WILL [*coolly*]. Thine? Indeed, 'tis very easy.

PEELE. Hark 'ee! Dost know my name?

WILL. I canna say I do.

PEELE [*distinctly*]. Master George Peele.

WILL. I thank thee, sir.

PEELE. Player in my Lord Admiral's Company.

WILL. [*His whole manner changes and he jumps up eagerly.*] A player? Oh--I did not know. Pray, take the seat.

PEELE [*amused*]. Dost think players are as lords? Most men have other views. [*Sits. WILL watches him, fascinated.*]

WILL. Nay, but--oh, I love to see stage-plays! Didst not play in Coventry three days ago, "The History of the Wicked King Richard"?

PEELE. Aye, aye. Behold in me the tyrant.

WILL. Thou? Rarely done! I mind me yet how the hump-backed king frowned and stamped about--thus [*imitating*]. Ha! Ha! 'Twas a brave play!

ANNE. Thy supper is ready, Will.

PEELE [*amused*]. The true player-instinct, on my soul!

WILL [*flattered*]. Dost truly think so? [*ANNE plucks his sleeve.*]

ANNE. Will, where are thy wits? Supper waits.

WILL [*apologetically*]. Oh--I--I--did na hear thee. [*He tries to eat, but his attention is ever distracted by the player's words.*]

PEELE. Is my reckoning ready, girl?

ANNE. Reckoning now, sir? Wilt thou--?

PEELE. Yes, yes, I go to-night. To-morrow Warwick, then the long road to Oxford, playing by the way--and London at last!

ANNE. And then? [*WILL listens intently.*]

PEELE. Then back to the old Blackfriars, where all the city will flock to our tragedies and chronicles--a long, merry life of it.

ANNE [*interested*]. And does the Queen ever come?

PEELE. Nay, child, we go to her. Last Christmas I played before her at court, in the great room at Whitehall, before the nobles and ambassadors and ladies--oh, a gay time--and the Queen said--

WILL [*starting up*]. What was the play?

ANNE. Eat thy supper, Will.

WILL [*impatiently*]. I want no more.

PEELE. So my young cockerel is awake again. Will, a boy of thy stamp is lost here in Stratford. Thou shouldst be in London with us. By cock and pie, I have a mind to steal thee for the company! [*Rises to pace the floor.*]

WILL [*breathlessly*]. To play in London?

ANNE. Nay, Will, he but jests. Thou'rt happier here than traipsing about wi' the players. [*GILES appears at back.*]

GILES. Nags be ready, zur, at sunset as thee'st bid. Shall I put the gear on?

PEELE [*sharply*]. Well fed and groomed? Nay, I will see them myself. [*GILES vanishes. PEELE turns at the door.*] Hark'ee, lass. Thy lad could do far worse than become a player. Good meat and drink, gold in 's pouch, favor at court, and true friends. I like the lad's spirit. [*He goes. ANNE drops into his chair by the fire. Twilight is coming on rapidly. WILL stands silent at the window looking after the player.*]

ANNE [*troubled*]. Will, what is it? Thou'rt very strange to-night.

WILL [*wistfully*]. I--I--Oh, Anne, I want to go to London. I am a-weary of rusting in Stratford, where I can learn nothing new, save to grow old, following my father's trade.

ANNE. But in London?

WILL [*kindling*]. In London one can learn more marvels in a day than in a lifetime here; for there the streets are in a bustle all day long, and the whole world meets in them, soldiers and courtiers and men of war, from France and Spain and the new lands beyond the sea, all full of learning and pleasant tales of foreign wars and the wondrous things in the colonies. My schoolmaster told me of it. You can stand in St. Paul's and the whole world passes by, mad for knowledge and adventure. And then the stage-plays--!

ANNE. Oh, Will, why long for them?

WILL. Think how splendid they must be when the Queen herself loves to see 'em. If I were like this player-fellow, and acted with the Admiral's company! He laughed that he would take me with him--to be a player and perchance *write* plays, interludes, and noble tragedies! Think of it, Anne--to live in London and be one of all the rare company there, to write brave plays wi' sounding lines for all to wonder at, and have folk turn on the streets when I passed and whisper, "That be Will Shakespeare, the play-maker"--to act them even at court and gain the Queen's own thanks! Anne, London is so great and splendid! It beckons me wi' all its turmoil of affairs and its

noble hearts ready to love a new comrade. [*Disconsolately*] And I must bide in Stratford?

ANNE [*gently*]. Come now, Will. No need to be so feverish. Sit down by me. What canst thou know of play-making? What canst thou do in London?

WILL [*he sits down by the hearth at her feet, looking into the firelight*]. I'll tell thee, Anne. Thy father and half the village call me a lazy oaf, that I stray i' the woods some days instead of helping my father. I canna help it. The fit comes on me, and I must be alone, out i' the great woods.

ANNE [*gladly*]. Then thou dost not poach?

WILL [*hastily*]. No, no--that is--sometimes I am with Hodge and Diccon and John a' Field, and 'tis hard not to chase the deer. Nay, look not so grave--I try to do no harm.

ANNE [*quietly*]. And when thou'rt alone?

WILL. Then I lie under the trees or wander through the fields, and make plays to myself, as though I writ them in my mind, and cry the lines forth to the birds--they sound nobly, too--or make little songs and sing them i' the sunshine. They are but dreams, I know, but splendid ones--and the player looked wi' favor on me, and said I might make a good player, and he would take me with him.

ANNE. But he only jested.

WILL. No jest to me! I'll take him at his word and go with him to London. [*He starts up eagerly.*]

ANNE [*troubled*]. Will, Will! [*PEELE enters at the back.*]

PEELE. Hark 'ee, Giles, I go in half an hour!

WILL. Master Peele! [*Catches at his arm.*]

PEELE. Well, youngster?

WILL [*slowly*]. Thou--thou saidst I had a good spirit and would do well in London--in a stage company. Thou wert in jest, but--I will go with thee, if I may.

PEELE [*taken all aback*]. Go with me?

WILL [*earnestly*]. With the player's company--to London.

PEELE [*laughing*]. 'S wounds! Thou hast assurance! Dost think to become a great player at once?

WILL [*impatiently*]. Oh, I care not for the playing. Let me but be in London, to see the people there and be near the theatre. I'll be the players' servant, I'll hold the nobles' horses in the street--I'll do anything!

PEELE [*seriously*]. And go with us all over England on hard journeys to play to ignorant rustics?

WILL. Anywhere--I'll follow on to the world's end--only take me with you to London! [*As he speaks GILES and MISTRESS SHAKESPEARE, a kindly faced woman of middle age, dressed in housewife's cap and gown, appear at the door.*]

GILES. There 'e be, Mistress Shixpur.

MISTRESS S. [*as she enters*]. Oh, Will. [*He turns sharply.*]

WILL [*confusedly*]. Mother! I--I--did not know thou wert here.

MISTRESS S. Why didst not come home--and what dost thou want with this stranger?

ANNE. He would go to London with him.

MISTRESS S. [*aghast*]. To London. My Will?

WILL [*quietly*]. Thou knowest, mother, what I ha' told thee, things I told to no other, and now the good time has come that I can see more of England.

MISTRESS S. But I canna let thee go. Oh, Anne, I knew the boy was restless, but I did not think for it so soon. He is only a boy.

WILL [*coloring*]. In two years I shall be a man--I am a man now in spirit. I canna stay in Stratford. [*MISTRESS SHAKESPEARE sinks down in a chair.*]

MISTRESS S. What o' me? And, Will, 'twill break thy father's heart! [*WILL looks ashamed.*]

WILL. I know, he would not understand. 'Tis hard. He must not know till I be gone.

MISTRESS S. [*To PEELE*]. Oh, sir, how could you wish to lead the lad away? Hath not London enough a'ready?

PEELE [*who has been listening uncomfortably, faces her gravely*]. I but played with the lad at first, till I saw how earnest he was; then I would take him, for I loved his boldness. But, boy, I'll tell thee fairly, thou'lt do better here. Thou'st seen the brave side of it, the gay dresses, the good horses, the cheering crowds and the court-favor. But 'tis dark sometimes, too. The pouches often hang empty when the people turn away--the lords are as the clouded sun, now smiling, now cold--and there come the bitter days, when a man has no friends but the pot-mates of the moment, when every man's hand is against him for a vagabond and a rascal, when the prison-gates lay ever wide before him, and the fickle folk, crying after a *new* favorite, leave the old to starve.

ANNE. Will, canst not see? Thou'rt better here--

WILL [*bravely*]. I know--all this may wait me--but I must go.

MISTRESS S. [*alarmed*]. Must go, Will? [*He kneels by her side.*]

WILL. [*tenderly*]. Hush, mother, I'll tell thee. 'Tis not entirely my longing, for this morning the keeper of old Lucy--

GILES. Ha, poaching again, young scamp!

WILL. Brought me before him--I was na poaching, I'll swear it, not so much as chasing the deer--but Sir Thomas had no patience, and bade me clear out, else he would seize me. I--I--dare na stay.

MISTRESS S. I feared it; thy father forbade thee in the great park. And now--Oh, Will, Will--I know well how thou'st longed to go from here--and now thou must--what shall I do, lacking thee?

PEELE [*frankly*]. Will, if thou must go, thou must. London is greater than Stratford, and there is much evil there, but thou'rt true-hearted, and--by my player's honor--I will stand by thee, till the hangman get me. But we must go soon. 'Tis a dark road to Warwick--I'll see to the horses. Is it a compact? [*WILL gives him his hands.*]

WILL [*huskily*]. A compact, sir--to the end. [*PEELE hurries out.*]

GILES. Look at 'e now, breaking 'is mother's heart, and mad wi' joy to revel in London. 'Tis little 'e recks of she.

WILL [*hotly*]. Thou liest. [*Bending over her*] Mother, 'tis not true. I do love thee and father, I love Stratford. I'll never forget it. But 'tis so little here, and I must get away to gain learning and do things i' the world, that I may bring home all I get; fame, if God grant it, money, if I gain it, all to those at home.

ANNE. Thou'rt over-confident.

WILL. Aye, because I'm young. God knows there is enough pain in London, and I'll get my share--but I'm *young*! Mother, thou'rt not angry?

MISTRESS S. I knew 'twas coming, and 'tis not so hard. We will always wait for thee at home, when thou'rt weary.

GILES [*at the door*]. The horses are waiting. 'Tis dark, Will.

WILL [*breaking down*]. Mother, mother!

MISTRESS S. The good God keep thee safe. Kiss me, Will. [*He bends over her, then stumbles to the door, ANNE following.*]

WILL [*turning*]. Anne--Anne--thou dost not despise me for deserting Stratford. I *must* go.

ANNE. Oh, I know. Thou'lt go to London and forget us all.

WILL. No, no, thou--I couldn't forget. I'll remember thee, Anne--I'll put thee in my plays; all my young maids and lovers shall be thee, as thou'rt now--and I'll bring thee rare gifts when I come home.

ANNE. I do na want them. Will--I--I--did na mean to be unkind. We were good friends, and I trust in thee, for the future, that thou'lt be great. Good-by--and do na forget the little playmate.

WILL. I will na forget [*kissing her*], and, Anne, be good to my mother. [*She goes back to MISTRESS SHAKESPEARE, and he stands watching them in the dusk.*]

PEELE [*at the window*]. Come, come, Will! We must go.

WILL [*turning slowly*]. I--I'm coming, sir.

[THE CURTAIN.]