

# **THE CHILDREN'S SHAKESPEARE**

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The Children's Shakespeare by E. Nesbit

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**E. NESBIT**

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SHAKESPEARE**





ROMEO AND JULIET.

"He climbed the rope-ladder among the flowers."

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**SHAKESPEARE**

BY  
**E. NESBIT**

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*William Shakespeare*

WILLIAM  
SHAKESPEARE  
1564-1616

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**I**T was evening. The fire burned brightly in the inn parlor. We had been that day to see Shakespeare's house, and I had told the children all that I could about him and his work. Now they were sitting by the table, poring over a big volume of the Master's plays, lent them by the landlord. And I, with eyes fixed on the fire, was wandering happily in the immortal dreamland peopled by Rosalind and Imogen, Lear and Hamlet. A small sigh roused me—

"I can't understand a word of it," said Iris.

"And you said it was so beautiful," Rosamund added, reproachfully. "What does it all mean?"

"Yes," Iris went on, "you said it was a fairy tale, and we've read three pages, and there's nothing about fairies, not even a dwarf, or a fairy god-mother."

"And what does 'misgraffed' mean?"

"And 'vantage,' and 'austerity,' and 'belike,' and 'edict,' and—"

"Stop, stop," I cried; "I will tell you the story."

In a moment they were nestling beside me, cooing with the pleasure that the promise of a story always brings them.



"But you must be quiet a moment, and let me think."

In truth it was not easy to arrange the story simply. Even with the recollection of Lamb's tales to help me I found it hard to tell the "Midsummer Night's Dream" in words that these little ones could understand. But presently I began the tale, and then the words came fast enough. When the story was ended, Iris drew a long breath.

"It is a lovely story," he said; "but it doesn't look at all like that in the book."

"It is only put differently," I answered. "You will understand when you grow up that the stories are the least part of Shakespeare."

"But it's the stories *we* like," said Rosamund.

"You see he did not write for children."

"No, but you might," cried Iris, flushed with a sudden idea. "Why don't you write the stories for us so that we can understand them, just as you told us that, and then, when we are grown up, we shall understand the plays so much better. Do! do!"

"Ah, do! You will, won't you? *You must!*"

"Oh, well, if I must, I must," I said.

So they settled it for me, and for them these tales were written.

## ROMEO AND JULIET.

ONCE upon a time there lived in Verona two great families named Montagu and Capulet. They were both rich, and I suppose they were as sensible, in most things, as other rich people. But in one thing they were extremely silly. There was an old, old quarrel between the two families, and instead of making it up like reasonable folks, they made a sort of a pet of their quarrel, and would not let it die out. So that a Montagu wouldn't speak to a Capulet if he met one in the street—nor a Capulet to a Montagu—or if they did speak, it was to say rude and unpleasant things, which often ended in a fight. And their relations and servants were just as foolish, so that street fights and duels and uncomfortablenesses of that kind were always growing out of the Montagu-and-Capulet quarrel.

Now Lord Capulet, the head of that family, gave a party—a grand supper and dance—and he was so hospitable that he said any one might come to it—*except* (of course) the Montagues. But there was a young Montagu named Romeo, who very much wanted to be there, because Rosaline, the lady he loved, had been asked. This lady had never been at all kind to him, and he had no reason to love her; but the fact was that he wanted to love *somebody*, and as he hadn't seen the right lady, he was obliged to love the wrong one. So to the Capulets' grand party he came, with his friends Mercutio and Benvolio.

Old Capulet welcomed him and his two friends very kindly—and young Romeo moved about among the crowd of courtly folk dressed in their velvets and satins, the men with jewelled sword hilts and collars, and the ladies with brilliant gems on breast and arms, and stones of price set in their bright girdles. Romeo was in his best too, and though he wore a black mask over his eyes and nose, every one could see by his mouth and his hair, and the way he held his head, that he was twelve times handsomer than any one else in the room.

Presently amid the dancers he saw a lady so beautiful and so lovable, that from that moment he never again gave one thought to that Rosaline whom he had thought he loved. And he looked at this other fair lady, as she moved in the dance in her white satin and pearls, and all the world seemed vain and worthless to him compared with her. And he was saying this—or something like it—to his friend, when Tybalt, Lady Capulet's nephew, hearing his voice, knew him to be Romeo. Tybalt, being very angry, went at once to his uncle, and told him how a Montagu had come uninvited to the feast; but old Capulet was too fine a gentleman to be discourteous to any man under his own roof, and he bade Tybalt be quiet. But this young man only waited for a chance to quarrel with Romeo.

In the meantime Romeo made his way to the fair lady, and told her in sweet words that he loved her, and kissed her. Just then her mother sent for her, and then Romeo found out that the lady on whom he had set his heart's hopes was Juliet, the daughter of Lord Capulet, his sworn foe. So he went away, sorrowing indeed, but loving her none the less.

Then Juliet said to her nurse.

"Who is that gentleman that would not dance?"

"His name is Romeo, and a Montagu, the only son of your great enemy," answered the nurse.

Then Juliet went to her room, and looked out of her window over the beautiful green-grey garden, where the moon was shining. And Romeo was hidden in that garden among the trees—because he could not bear to go right away without trying to see her again. So she—not knowing him to be there—spoke her secret thought aloud, and told the quiet garden how she loved Romeo.

And Romeo heard and was glad beyond measure; hidden below, he looked up and saw her fair face in the moonlight, framed in the blossoming creepers that grew round her window, and as he looked and listened, he felt as though he had been carried away in a dream, and set down by some magician in that beautiful and enchanted garden.

"Ah—why are you called Romeo?" said Juliet. "Since I love you, what does it matter what you are called?"

"Call me but love, and I'll be new baptised—henceforth I never will be Romeo," he cried, stepping into the full white moonlight