

JOHN BENNETT master skylark

With Illustrations



Introduction by Alice H. Hogan

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

MASTER SKYLARK

A Story of
Shakspeare's Time

JOHN BENNETT

AIRMONT PUBLISHING COMPANY, INC.
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An Airmont Classic

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"WHUR BE-EST GOING, NICK?" ASKED ROGER DAWSON."

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*All that Nicholas Attwood's mother
was to him, and more, my own mother has been to me
And to her here I inscribe this book
with a never-failing love*

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MASTER SKYLARK

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JOHN BENNETT

Introduction

Master Skylark, by John Bennett, is the singularly fascinating story of Elizabethan England and of Nick Attwood, a young boy from Stratford-on-Avon, who is kidnapped by the master player of a band of traveling players and taken to London. As a choir boy at St. Paul's, Nick becomes famous for his "golden voice" and eventually performs before Queen Elizabeth and meets William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Tom Heywood, and other famous personages of the day. Before he is finally returned to his home in Stratford, Nick goes through a series of adventures that are bound to keep the reader reading.

Master Skylark was first published in *St. Nicholas* magazine about seventy years ago. It has since attained and retained such popularity and importance as an exciting story and as a truly remarkable and accurate reproduction of the life and color of Elizabethan England that critics consider it a classic. In 1916, the book was dramatized by Edgar White Burrill. It has been used as an auxiliary guide to Stratford-on-Avon, published in school editions in Germany and in the United States, and is still being reprinted and read with delight by thousands of young people and adults. The reasons for its enduring quality are many.

Probably no other contemporary fiction has portrayed with such fidelity the life and color of this brilliant age in English history. So naturally does the panorama of the times unfold for the reader that he absorbs the historical, economic, and social background almost unconsciously.

There is mention of Raleigh, of the Spanish Armada, and of Sir Francis Drake. At the same time, an enormous general background of the times is unrolled. Among the most memorable

items are the accurately detailed descriptions of the presentation of plays, both in inn-yards and in the theaters which were beginning to burgeon in London. Other interesting points described with convincing authenticity are the modes of travel on land and on water, the grandeur and extravagance of the court, and the lawlessness that existed on the city streets after dark or during heavy fogs and on the roads at all times. In contrast to the scenes of general prosperity, excitement, and grandeur are the descriptions of the high death rate among the poor and the sometimes almost impassable and foul gutters of the city streets.

As part of the kaleidoscope of the age, the reader is made familiar with the various popular inns, the schools, the musical instruments and songs, the amusements, the food, the language, the dress, the manners, and the innovations of the day.

"The board was loaded down with meat and drink and some of the players were eating with forks, a new trick from the London court which Nick had not seen before."

Nick notices with wonder at another point in the story:

"Some (gallants) were eating, some were drinking, and some were puffing on long clay pipes."

Yet *Master Skylark* is much more than the average historical novel. It is a story of human emotions, principally of love—the love of Nick Attwood for his mother, the love of Gaston Carew for his daughter. It is also a story of courage and fidelity, as well as of greed and faithlessness and cruelty, antithetical qualities often found in the same person.

Characterization in the book is realistic, whether the author is portraying a character of imagination or of history. Nick Attwood is a winsome, endearing figure who has sometimes been compared to Peter Pan; Gaston Carew, half-villain, half-hero, is a contrast of brutality and kindness; and Cicely Carew is a bewitching sprite who provides a suggestion of romance to the story.

The historical characters come to life in a remarkable way. Tom Heywood, kindly and human, writes diligently amid a roisterous tavern crowd, true to his writer's conviction that "a sheet a day doth a wonder in a year." Ben Jonson, a large man with curly hair, a pointed beard, and bright eyes, shows a faintly swaggering confidence as he announces, "We'll build the new Globe!" Present, too, are Queen Elizabeth, at once imperious and kindly with her small black eyes and her dyed red hair; Richard Burbage, the famous actor; and, running like a bright thread through the story, the brightest of them all, William Shakespeare.

It is the spirit of Shakespeare which, although he does not enter

the book until it is half over, dominates the story from the time Nick first muses on the amazing fact that Anne Hathaway is his mother's cousin until he dines with the great man at New Place in Stratford. Quiet, unostentatious, Shakespeare's sweet spirit and gentle personality impresses all who know him. In no other contemporary fiction has Shakespeare the man been presented with such fidelity as in *Master Skylark*. He says little, but his conversation, when he did speak, "sparkled like a little meadow brook." His contemporaries are hauntingly aware of him although he has not yet made a tremendous stir among them. In Stratford, he is still "Willy Shaxper" to the natives.

"Willy Shaxper a great man? Why, a's name be cut on the old beech tree up Smithfield Lane where Uncle Henry Shaxper lives, an' 'tis but poorly done. I could do better myself wi' my own whittle."

In the literary world, Shakespeare's growing popularity as a playwright is being felt, for references are made to *Henry V*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like it*, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*. His marvelous gift of using contemporary and antecedent material and enlivening it with his own talent is part of Shakespeare the man as well as Shakespeare the writer.

"Shakespeare had a magic way of going out and about the people he met, fitting his humor to them as though he were a glover with a measure in his hand."

With Nick, "he was nothing but a jolly, wise, gentle-hearted boy, wearing his greatness like an old cloth coat, as if it were a long-accustomed thing and quite beyond all pride, and went about his business in a very simple way."

One does not soon forget Bennett's description of him as "a quiet man with a little chestnut-colored beard and hazel eyes," nor his words of comfort to Nick's repentant father: "To see thyself mistaken is but to be the wiser. Why, never the wisest man but saw himself a fool a thousand times."

By its skillful references to great writers of the age, *Master Skylark* also awakens an appreciation of the literature of the time. The earlier morality plays, as well as the plays by Peele, Nash, Tom Heywood, Christopher Marlowe, and Ben Jonson, are part of the picture the author paints of the changing drama of the times.

The descriptions of London and Stratford and the intervening countryside are memorable in their authenticity and beauty.

"Against its hoary side, a small church leaned like a child against a mother's breast."

London is presented in all of her various moods.

"It was a cold, raw day. All morning long the sun had shone through the choking fog as the candle-flame through the dingy yellow horn of an old stable lantern. But at noon a wind sprang up that drove the mist through London streets in streaks and strings mixed with smoke and the reek of steaming roofs. Now and then the blue gleamed through the ragged patches overhead so that all the town turned out on pleasure bent, not minding if it rained stewed turnips, so they saw the sky."

The descriptions in *Master Skylark* fit beautifully with the mood of the story, whether that mood be loneliness, excitement, or joy. Perhaps no other description is so filled with poignancy than Nick's first glimpse of home after his long absence:

"There lay Stratford! as he had left it lying, not one stick or stack or stone but he could put his finger on it and say, 'This place I know.' Green pastures, grassy levels, streams, groves, mills, and the old grange and the manor-house, the road that forked in three, and the hills of Arden beyond it all. There was the tower of the Guildhall Chapel above the clustering dun-thatched roofs among the green and blossom-white; to left the spire of Holy Trinity sprang beside the shining Avon."

In addition to all its other attributes, *Master Skylark* is, finally, a first-rate adventure story—dramatic, exciting, suspenseful, and well constructed, with quickly shifting scenes, laced with practical philosophy, as well as with beauty.

John Bennett, the author of this unusual book, was born in Ohio in 1865, but lived most of his life in Charleston, South Carolina. He began work as a newspaper reporter and later became a newspaper editor and curator of the South Carolina Historical Society. An illustrator as well as an author, he illustrated several of his own stories. Although *Master Skylark* is, of course, his best, as well as his best-known book, he also wrote *Barnaby Lee*, which is still in print, *The Treasure of Peyre Gaillard*, *Madame Margot*, *Blue Jacket: War Chief of the Shawnees*, and *Doctor of the Dead*, and a charming juvenile tale, *The Pigtail of Ah Lee Ben Loo*. Mr. Bennett died in 1956.

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