A Georgia Shakespeare

By HARRY STILLWELL EDWARDS

Yon trim Shakespeare on the tree.—*Lanier.*

WHEN I crossed the orchard the nest was empty. Where were they, the youngsters whose careers I had watched through courtship, eggship, and fellowship? Quite by accident I found one of the little adventurers. His yellow mouth moved within my vision, opening in a circle almost large enough to admit himself, and plaintively expressing his discontent. He was on a gray fence rail, and I had but to stretch forth a hand to lift him. Both parents witnessed the act; both parents came with excitement, whirling, darting, rising, and dipping about me, mixing protest with pleading. It seemed for a time that I might lose both sight and hearing, so loud the clamor, so fierce the attack. I lost only my patience.

When I entered the orchard, scene of the tragedy, I had no thought of crime, nor of experiment in the interest of science (the motive is everything). I was thinking of the song of a distant mockingbird, and wondering if, since he wove into it the notes of all the woodland tribes, his ancestors had bequeathed to him the voice notes of species now extinct. Did he indeed "sum the world in song," the world of Sappho as well as of Shakespeare; of Solomon as well as of Lanier? Is bird song transmissible by heredity? Are the gray bards of the pinelands and the orchards bards in the proper sense, passing the loves and the love notes, the romance, the madrigals, from fathers to sons, from sons to grandsons? Was the prolonged and varied song of the artist of the woods a recital of brave deeds, or the plaint of some lovelorn lady bird of long ago,—Lochinvar or Dido?

What a chance to test a theory! I thought. Why not teach one of these great musicians a world song? Would he or she, as the case might be, teach it to the birds to come? Oh, the ecstasy of the moment when, opening the cage, I might press my lips against his gray breast, bid him Godspeed, and hurl him into the blue of heaven, a song from my own heart to someone who could understand! Science? I know now I made a prisoner of that feathered youth of the orchard for a supreme reason,—to teach him to sing something from my own life and give him back to freedom.

So I took the abandoned nest from the haw tree and stuffed it with down from the breast of a panic-stricken goose and hung the cage behind the kitchen stove at night until my pupil's feathers grew. For he lived despite my style of feeding. The first day I caught for him thirty-one grasshoppers, the second seventeen, and the third none. To take the contract to raise young birds on worms one should acquire, first, wings and microscopic eyes.

I surrendered the position of nurse. It was not a gentleman's work anyway. Grandmother brought the bird in at nightfall, and Aunt Cindy prepared his mash twice a day. I reserved myself for his higher education.

In the meantime Shakespeare covered himself with feathers and learned to keep his mouth closed except at lunch.

ILEXHURST, our home, was a vast estate. So was its neighbor, Featherstone. In the beginning the first Gordons and Witherspoons had built their homes close together, impelled by friendship. A slight depression lay between the two residences, and along this ran the dividing line. The line was buried under a privet hedge. The great orchard of Ilexhurst ran down to the hedge, and was met by the great orchard of Featherstone. The fine old house on our side was shielded from the view of the Witherspoons, and the fine old house of Featherstone was shielded from the view of the Gordons by clumps of trees.

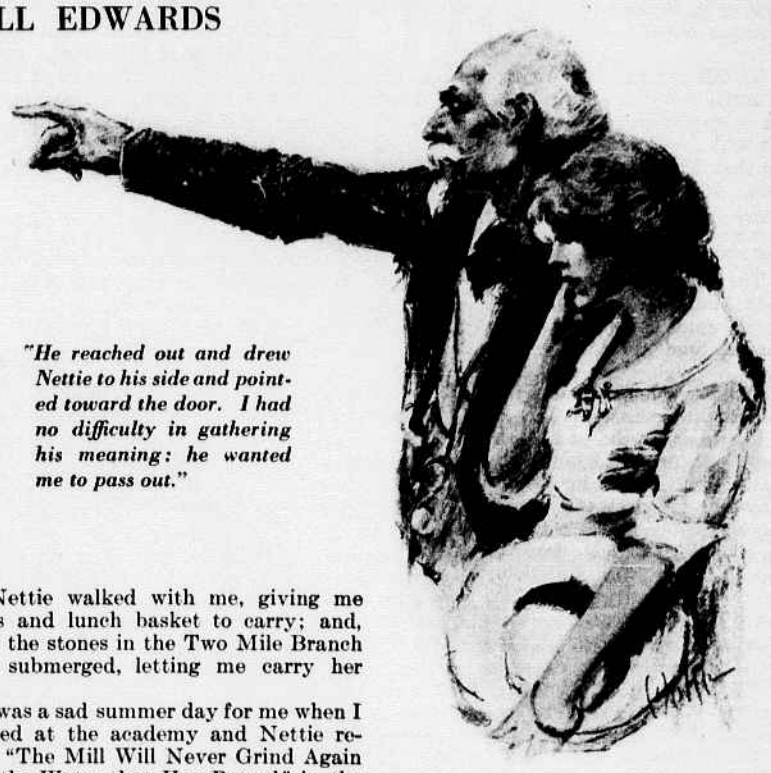
Only one of our windows was visible to our neighbors, and that was mine. It was in the rear upstairs, opening to the east. One rear window at Featherstone would have been visible but for a limb of a great water oak. But one of our Gordon ancestors had thoughtfully dropped a few pecan nuts in the rear of our orchard, and time had given us some trees whose spreading branches almost touched the ground.

My hat is off whenever I think of this ancestor; for it was under these trees that I first saw the little orphan Nettie Moore. Nettie had found a weak spot in the hedge, and one day my eyes caught the flutter of white under our pecans and I raced for it. Nettie saw me, and raced for a hole in the hedge. She reached the spot first and passed through, not stopping to lift the obstructing limbs: no, Nettie simply dived, and diving left one of her bare little feet in my hand. I drew her back and loaded her down with pecans. And thus I, aged twelve, first met Nettie Moore, who, aged seven and last of the Witherspoons, thus came into my life!

AND Nettie came through the hedge again. Well, they found us there. The enemy arrived, and it was goodby, little sweetheart, for many a day. Then at length, being a true Gordon, I climbed a giant oak by moonlight and sawed away a great limb. It fell noisily; but Featherstone slept on. The next morning my window looked full into Nettie Moore's across the fruited orchards. From "The Boy's Own Book" I copied the wigwag code and bribed Aunt Cindy to carry it with a set of flags to Nettie. Great was our happiness; for I wigged love to Nettie with military precision, and Nettie wagged back her affection in full regulation style, barring occasional typographical errors.

Then came the school, the old hillside academy two miles away. It was certainly a spectacle, Nettie's arrival behind the grays with her mammy Phyllis by her side and the old black driver holding the lines.

This happened daily for a while; but it was too grand to last. The ceremony finally diminished to pony transportation—and there was where I got back into the running; for day after day, month after month, and year after year I waited for Nettie beyond the bend of the road, or Nettie waited for me. And the pony seldom arrived at the academy with a rider; for Nettie walked with me, giving me books and lunch basket to carry; and, when the stones in the Two Mile Branch were submerged, letting me carry her also.



"He reached out and drew Nettie to his side and pointed toward the door. I had no difficulty in gathering his meaning: he wanted me to pass out."

It was a sad summer day for me when I finished at the academy and Nettie recited "The Mill Will Never Grind Again with the Water that Has Passed" in the presence of our frigid and hostile forebears.

We were to see each other again before I left for college, and we did. She was then fourteen and—but words to describe Nettie Moore have not yet been coined. She was the life of all things beautiful.

THE fatal last meeting that summer occurred near the lake that curved round our front and narrowed into Featherstone.

One afternoon Nettie chose to wander down and, leaning where the fence entered the lake, lost herself in contemplation of the sunset that arched above our end. As luck would have it, we had visitors that day at Ilexhurst, and I had taken one of them up the lake. And I had felt in the dignity of my young manhood that my position as assistant host required me to kiss a very tempting pair of lips that smiled a challenge. Then I saw Nettie Moore twenty feet away. She had been seeing me all the way up the lake.

Nettie Moore added herself to the feud. The window that looked toward Ilexhurst ceased to look. It closed its eyes behind green blinds. I hung the white flag of peace from mine, and it stayed there three days. When the washwoman came for the towels she took it away. It was just as well. I went off to college with my chin in air. But the three years that followed I class as the "Dark Ages" of my personal history.

WHEN I came home to Ilexhurst again good luck had blessed me. I was done with college, had traveled, and had found my mission in life. I became a designer of stained-glass windows, and my first design was accepted.

Happy the man whose first work succeeds!

I came home and set up my studio there. But before I did this I hung a white flag from my window. Nettie did not reply, and for good reason. She was in Mont De Sales Convent, over in the city. When I saw her name in the list of graduates I went in. I had never been in the convent hall, and it seemed to me that I was due. I sat near the front and faced Nettie when, robed in white, she came forward and sang "The Last Rose of Summer." I had sent her roses; but she wore none of them. The one she tore to pieces and scattered looked like one of mine.

As for me, I was suddenly unhappy and oppressed. Once only her eyes encountered mine. They held no recognition. I went home and—met Shakespeare in the orchard.

Little by little I lost interest in art and became gloomy and taciturn. I took up science as a substitute, and when Shakespeare got his plumage and began to venture little trills in reply to the voices floating out of the woodlands I selected a melody and began patiently to teach him. And this melody?

When the bands play in the parks and theaters and at great political speakings inevitably they drift into a Southern medley that brings ofttimes cheers and sometimes tears,—"Suwanee River," "My Old Kentucky Home," "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," and "Dixie,"—but woven into these is a song that no one in a thousand can name but nearly all may whistle. And this song is "Nettie Moore"; the words deficient as poetry, but the melody sublime in its beauty and simplicity. I found it in my mother's music book. And it was this song I selected for Shakespeare:

I love you, Nettie Moore, but my happiness is o'er,
For you've gone from my little cabin home!

MY grandmother laid aside her knitting one day and took me gently in hand. "Philip," she said, "when you have finished the piece of work you are now engaged on I want you to go out in the world and meet more young people. It isn't good for a young man to isolate himself as you are doing. And it is time you are thinking of marriage and settling down."

"I shall never marry," I said.

She was silent for a long while, and then came the astounding question, "Do you still love Nettie Moore?"

I was too honest to be other than dumb.

After a while she added, "I think you should put aside that childish affair. You know how unhappily situated the two families are. The enmity is very silly and foolish, of course; but you can never expect to bring your grandfather and Major Witherspoon into friendly relations."

I was still silent, the plainest kind of confession in the circumstances. I rallied feebly when too late. "Why do you think I have been in love with Nettie, grandmother?"

A little smile trembled round the still pretty mouth. Her eyes looked off through the window into the heart of her faraway youth; then they rested on Featherstone.

"I know, Philip, because I was once young and had a sweetheart. A woman knows a love affair by instinct." And