

## *Shakespeare Alive!*

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### Chapter One

#### One Day at a Time: What Daily Life Was Like

##### Give Us This Day Our Daily Bread

You are living in England in the late years of the sixteenth century. Like most people, you live with your family in the countryside, eking out a meager existence as best you can. If you're lucky, your father is a yeoman farmer who owns enough land to support his family, or a "husband-man" who has less property but supplements his income by wage-earning.

The land you live in is full of contradictions. A woman, Queen Elizabeth, rules the nation, while within the family, men still rule women. A highly-educated elite enjoys the fruits of literature, while many people can't even read. The government invests huge sums of money in voyages of exploration and wars with other nations, while science and medicine remain in an appallingly primitive state. In London, the royal Court glitters with jewels and finery, while misery reigns in rural hovels. Rich young men wander around Europe for fun, while in England, thousands of homeless people wander from parish to parish, begging and stealing to survive.

The gap between the rich and the poor seems to have widened in the 1570's and 1580's; wealth and power are concentrated in the hands of the few, and many people can't even find a job.

You come from a family of laborers. You don't have much land at all, hardly even a vegetable garden you can call your own, and you are completely dependent on whatever wages you can get by harvesting other people's crops and doing odd jobs around the village. There is no money for such "extras" as education or nice clothes or red meat. In fact, your father's daily income, even when combined with yours, barely covers the cost of feeding you and your brothers and sisters; thank goodness your mother is able to bring in a few extra pennies from her spinning.

There's no doubt about it, life is a struggle even in the best of circumstances. Of course, usually circumstances aren't anywhere near the best. Disease, malnutrition, and tragic natural disasters are givens of your daily existence and keep you from taking anything you have for granted. Just a month ago, for example, an old widow's thatched roof caught on fire, and even though you were right there along with everyone else in the village, pulling the flaming thatch down with iron hooks, it was too late. Her cottage burned to the ground, and she, too, is now among the homeless - and hopeless.

Your dependent status as a tenant makes your perch in life still more precarious. To an unjust and unscrupulous landlord, profit is more important than principles, and yours feels no obligation to look out for your best interests. If he decides to "enclose" the land - to stop using it for farming and turn it into grazing pastures for sheep - he has endless means of forcing you out: he might make you give up your lease, or renew it only at great expense, or, most commonly, charge you exorbitant rent.

While your family has been struggling against these odds and worrying about how to make ends meet from day to day, larger forces have been at work that are going to affect you drastically. First, England has been undergoing a huge increase in population. The two-and-a-half million English people who were alive when your grandparents were born will practically have doubled by the time your grandchildren die. This unprecedented population growth is already being translated into inflated prices, as too many people chase after scarce resources. It also means that wages stay unacceptably low; with so many laborers on the job market, farmers and other employers can easily find people willing to work for the pathetically low wages they offer if you're not interested.

Getting and spending have been a constant battle, and staying on the winning side has depended on plentiful harvests, which bring the twofold benefit of jobs and low grain prices. But in recent years the battle has become a losing one: the heavy rains of the last two summers have ruined the harvests, the population has been growing faster than the crops, and famine has begun to cast its long, thin shadows across your life. -

Grain - whether you eat the oatmeal cakes of northern England or the coarse wheat bread of the southerners - is a staple of your diet and, if you have no land and have to buy all your grain on the market, your single biggest expense. When prices shoot up, as they do in bad harvest years, it spells disaster for many a citizen; the Carriers in Shakespeare's *Henry IV Part 1* remember a comrade who "never joyed since the price of oats rose. It was the death of him." You try to find cheaper kinds of grain than your usual wheat, supplementing your diet with stomach-filling peas and beans - but even the prices of these are rising now, and you begin to realize, horrifying though it is, that there aren't many alternatives. Starvation seems inevitable.

You wonder how you and your family are going to cope with the steady advance of such hunger, the hair falling out and the skin turning gray and the bleak prospect of watching your fellow villagers "starving and dying in our streets and in the fields [because] of lack of bread," as a contemporary in the northern town of Newcastle writes.

Little do you know that the famine has darkened all of Europe, not just England. In Sweden, old women have reportedly been found dead in the fields with seeds and grass in their mouths, and in far-off Hungary, Tartar women are rumored to have eaten their own children!

To make matters worse, there has been an economic recession too, mainly because of a slump in the cloth trade that your mother had been depending on for her livelihood. Many people rely on the cloth and wool trades for their living, and now, "the deadness of the trade and want of money is such that they are for the most part without work, and know not how to live," as an official of one parish reports.

### **Hitting the Road**

Clearly, the situation is getting desperate. After a lot of agonizing, you decide that your only hope is to leave your family and village and migrate to London. "After all," you think, "it will be one less mouth to feed. And maybe I'll find an apprenticeship or something."

Anything would be better than staying here and slowly starving to death. And so you say goodbye to your parents, kiss your little sister on the head, punch your brother in

the arm, and head off to the big city - not roaring down the interstate highway on a Greyhound bus, as future generations of teenagers will do, but trudging along a dirt track on foot. At least it's not winter, when the quagmires of mud and hundreds of ruts and holes make the roads impassable. They're not in good repair as it is, and progress is slow and uneven.

Once you've reached the slightly larger London road, you find yourself being passed by wealthier travelers who can afford to ride on horseback. They are traveling at a leisurely enough pace now, but no doubt as the afternoon wears on they will pick up speed in order to reach one of the fashionable inns for the rich before nightfall; as Shakespeare observes in *Macbeth*, "Now spurs the lated traveler apace To gain the timely inn."

You're surprised at how many people are on the road, especially given the discomfort of traveling. A few well-heeled young gents are headed for the university life at Oxford and Cambridge. Important-looking government officials gallop by their swift post-horses. Most often, though, you see other pedestrians, for walking is the poor person's method of transportation, and there are lots of poor people on the move. Apparently you weren't the only one with the idea of going to London - the roads seem to be flooded with migrants like you.

As you strike up conversation with a few of your fellow walkers, you realize that everyone has a different story to tell. You meet an unwed and very pregnant servant girl who was fired from her job and kicked out of her parish when her pregnancy could no longer be hidden; she's been wandering for several weeks, hoping to find a parish that will take her in without a husband. A middle-aged man is going to give evidence in court. A newly-married young couple are on their way to visit relatives.

You also run into a peddler who, like Autolycus in Shakespeare's play *The Winter's Tale*, travels around the countryside, stopping at fairs and markets to sell his assortment of wares: gloves, bracelets, perfumes, pins and needles, and ballads. "Come buy of me, come. Come buy, come buy," he cries persuasively. "Buy, lads, or else your lasses cry."

The most depressing sight on the road is the old couple, sick, decrepit, and lame, who are "forced to walk the country from place to place" because there isn't any organized system of hospitals, shelters, or charitable institutions to take care of them. As a contemporary social critic writes, many of them, as they are driven from one parish to another, just die, "some in ditches, some in holes, some in caves and dens, some in fields . . . like dogs."

The majority of wanderers you run into, however, are solitary young men about your age who are traveling, like you, in the hope of finding work. Three amiable youths ask you to join up with them, but you decide that your chances of finding something are better if you're alone, so you thank them but turn down their invitation. If three is a crowd, four is an unemployment line.

At all times you keep an eye out for anyone who looks vaguely "official," for you don't have the required papers that state where and why you are traveling. If you're caught without them, you'll be in a lot of trouble; as an unofficial traveler, you are considered a vagrant, a vagabond - in short, an undesirable.

The prevailing opinion in government circles seems to be that vagrants are idle and lazy by choice, or even dangerous. From what you can tell, this is absurd. Of course

there a few pickpockets and petty thieves among the travelers, but most of them are like that old woman you saw picking the pocket of a sleeping man because she had no shoes for her feet - hardly a violent criminal! The fact is, of course, that with the famine and the trade depression, the majority of these people couldn't find work if they wanted to. And even if they could, their wages would hardly be enough to live on. For most of the people you meet, London is their only hope.

### **The City That Never Sleeps**

One hundred miles and several days later, as the sun comes up, London also rises above the green fields. As you enter the city gates, you draw your breath in wonder. The city you have come to - the largest in all of Europe - is noisy and bustling. At its heart is the River Thames, the center of trade and social life. You see the opulent state barge of the queen moored on the bank and marvel at how many "watermen," the taxi drivers of the river, are rowing from one riverbank to the other. You get lost in the narrow winding streets; as you stare up at the looming Tower of London, you are nearly run over by one of the many coaches that are causing perpetual gridlock in the city. You hear vendors hawking "hot peas!" or "new brooms, green brooms!"; their voices mix with the pitiful moans and cries of prisoners in the Tower to create a deafening and exhausting hubbub. It is hard to believe how many people live here now - well over 100,000.

Although you're slightly overwhelmed by it all, you decide to do what you came here for and begin looking for work. Unfortunately, everyone else is doing the same - the market is saturated with laborers, and prospects are not good. Most days you just sit around hoping something will come your way. You wonder what will become of you. There isn't any formal system of welfare to support the unemployed, no food stamps, no soup kitchens.

Together with other migrants just like you, you huddle in a cold attic and share memories of what each of you has left behind. You yourself recall the small stone cottage that you lived in all of your life. Although it was only one room, and what little furniture you had was very rough, although your bed was of straw and your sheets were of canvas - still, it was home, and it was better than this smelly tenement where all of you are sleeping on the floor.

An old man in the room, once the servant of a prosperous farmer, describes the opulent house of his former employer - so many rooms, and carpets on the floor, woven tapestries on the walls, carved oak woodwork, lots of candles giving light, and the ultimate luxury - feather beds. He remembers serving his first Christmas dinner at the house, at the long table in the great hall, or dining room. He'd never *seen* so much meat on one table - beef, pork, veal, venison, game. There were oysters and eel, cabbage and carrots, some delicious finely-ground bread, dried fruit, and wines imported from the French or German countryside. As you listen to his description, you wonder how the rich aren't chronically constipated with all that meat.

In your own little cottage, the fare was usually coarse brown bread, cheese and eggs, the occasional chicken or hunk of bacon. Everything used to be cheap - two loaves of bread for a penny - but in the last few wretched years, prices have risen enormously and food for the poor like you has become scarce. With the onset of famine you had to

resort to eating bread (still a staple), peas and beans, and whatever else you could hunt up in the woods around village.

Two would-be apprentices - fresh from the alehouse - tumble into the already crowded room, singing the praises of beer. Indeed, the constant friend of all of you during these times of tribulation is beer. Imported wines are too costly; tea and coffee are still luxuries; but beer is cheap to make and a regular feature of social life. Everyone drinks it, even your young brothers and sisters back in the village. Sometimes, admittedly, people go overboard - at local fairs and country markets, scores of people regularly end up lying dead drunk in the field.

And drinking seems to provide the same comfort here in London. The alehouses are always full; you can find one on nearly every corner. A Frenchman was provoked to remark that no business could be done in England without pots of beer. But the truth is that alcohol helps people forget the strains of life. It flows freely in the prisons and during outbreaks of the plague. At public executions the person condemned to death is always offered a drink. You can understand why. A beer or two eases the hardships of daily existence - the lack of jobs, the high prices, the scarcity of food, the awful diseases, and all the other things that make life so hard.

Indeed, sickness and death are regular features of life in this enormous city you've come to. Disease is even more prevalent here and in the squalid suburbs you passed on your way into London than in the impoverished village you left behind. The contagious bubonic plague is the number one killer. Coming in at a close second is smallpox, which blinds or disfigures the people it doesn't actually kill; your beautiful little sister has been left pock-marked for life. And tuberculosis takes lives daily.

The spread of infectious diseases is furthered by the total ignorance about personal and public hygiene. Rich and poor alike don't bathe very often; the poor can't afford the high price of soap and don't have the facilities. The toothbrush won't come on the scene for another seventy years. Most Elizabethans, and you are no exception, have bad breath, rotting teeth, constant stomach disorders, and scabs or running sores all over their skin.

Things are no better on a public scale. The city ditches are used as toilets. Butchers throw dead animal carcasses into the street to rot. Housewives nonchalantly toss putrid garbage into the river. Poor people are buried in mass graves, and the bodies of the rich, lying beneath the church building in burial vaults, force the congregation to evacuate because the stench of decomposition is so strong.

Not even trained doctors make a connection between these unhygienic conditions and the high incidence of disease. Medical care is not very advanced, and knowledge of the human body is still very primitive. The prevailing theory of illness is that it is a result of an imbalance in the four humors, the four chief fluids of the human body. Health requires a perfect balance of bile, phlegm, choler, and blood; when any one of these becomes excessive, a doctor tries to restore the balance by using leeches to suck out some of the sick person's blood. X-rays and stethoscopes haven't yet been invented; the most common operation is amputation, performed *without* anesthesia. In the city of London there are two hospitals and one doctor for every five thousand people. Health insurance such as Medicare or Medicaid doesn't exist, which means that doctors are pretty much only for the wealthy. In your opinion, doctors are more likely to kill than cure, and

you're probably better off consulting a faith healer, good witch, or wise woman who uses techniques of white magic.

While medical knowledge remains in a fairly backward state, liberal arts education is expanding prodigiously. But you yourself only got as far as basic reading skills at the village school. You weren't able to go to grammar school, the linchpin of the Elizabethan educational system, because your parents couldn't spare you from work in the field. Although, they had more schools to choose from, they couldn't afford the books, papers, and candles you'd have needed. To them, school seemed a luxury.

But what you can't experience, you can hear about from the down-at-the-heels scholar sitting next to you in the cold room, reminiscing fondly about his old schooldays. The morning session went from 6 A.M. to 11 A.M., with a two-hour lunch break; the afternoon session was from 1 P.M. to 6 P.M. - six days a week! Grammar school education made available to upper-class boys the wealth of Latin literature uncovered by Renaissance scholars - playwrights such as Plautus, Terence, Seneca; the poets Virgil and Horace; and prose writers such as Cicero and Casar. A lot was demanded of the pupils; and if any boy was lazy or inattentive, he might be whipped, sometimes savagely, by the schoolmaster.

Status-conscious families felt compelled to send their sons to school in order to prepare them for a career in politics of the Church. Only in the highest reaches of the aristocracy was any money spent on educating girls. Your queen, Elizabeth, for example, is an extremely accomplished speaker of Latin, Greek, French, and Italian. But she is certainly the exception.

Still, you don't have to be a queen or a scholar to learn about the world around you. Recent developments in communications have made literature more accessible to those, like you, who can at least read. The printing press, brought to England in the late fifteenth century by a man named William Caxton, has enabled a lot of people to share in the riches of Renaissance. Books, once the sole province of the wealthy, are now not only available but affordable. Translation of ancient classical and modern European writers are proliferating wildly.

There are also hundreds of devotional tracts on the market, and Bibles are everywhere - the most popular book in the nation. Of course, newspapers won't be invented until the eighteenth century, but topical pamphlets and broadside ballads are gobbled up by news-hungry Londoners.

News travels more slowly to the rest of the country. There are only four or five major roads in all of England. The roads connecting smaller towns and villages are just dirt tracks, frequented by bands of robbers. Even though the penalty for highway robbery is death, bandits continue to rob the rich (and leave the poor alone). The most famous highwayman in English legend is, of course, Robin Hood; you know the stories about him and his band of merry men and his love Maid Marian backward and forward.

If travel within England is limited, foreign travel is even more so, as it is almost exclusively for the rich. Gentlemen consider it necessary to their education and often aspire to study in a foreign university in Italy or France.

In order to go abroad, a license, similar to a passport, must first be obtained. Once a gentleman arrives in Europe, he speaks Latin, the universal language in educated circles.

But not everyone who travels abroad is in pursuit of higher education. Acting companies tour the Continent and are very popular there, even though they speak English. Merchants and traders are frequent travelers, too.

And as the ex-soldier across the room can attest, the fourth group that gets the chance to see foreign lands is the military. Although there isn't a permanent army that drafts and trains young men, English troops are constantly engaged in campaigns in Ireland, France, and elsewhere. This fellow spent some time - and lost an arm - on the battlefields of the Low Countries (or the Netherlands), in the Earl of Essex's campaign. There is a permanent navy, albeit a small one, whose expeditions make talk of foreign lands a part of Londoner's everyday conversation. Military service might seem like a good opportunity for unemployed men like you, but it is in fact extremely unpopular, and the grizzled veteran tells you why. The queen pays her soldiers only very grudgingly. And conditions are bad: the typical daily navy rations are a dry stale biscuit, some mouldy cheese, and sour beer. For all these reasons it is difficult to keep the military adequately manned. Often the ranks are filled with ex-convicts and disreputable sorts. And underhanded methods are used to press men into service. Just last Easter, when the church was more full than usual, army officers unexpectedly locked the church doors and walked through the aisles signing up every able-bodied man inside.

### **Playtime**

The constant warfare conducted outside of England is matched by the constant violence within its borders. Fights, brawls, and riots erupt at the drop of a hat. On the London streets you've gotten used to hearing the cry "Clubs!" which means a fight is breaking out somewhere. Favorite weapons in these street fights are daggers, swords, and old reliable fists. The police force that would be controlling this violence today is all but non-existent; the London constablers are petty and incompetent, utterly incapable of maintaining order. Even the activities you regard as "fun" are brutal by later standards. The leading national amusements are bearbaiting, in which several dogs are loosed on a bear tied to a stake, and cockfighting, gladiatorial contests between trained roosters that involve a good deal of blood.

Public executions are also popular. The convicted criminal often sits in a cart with a noose around his neck and is left hanging as it rides away; sometimes his friends pull at his legs to relieve him of his suffering. Death by the axe is even gorier, of course; it can often take two or three chops before the victim is dead. Then the executioner holds up the head for all to see. Witch-burnings are increasingly popular and always gruesome.

You prefer bearbaiting and spend many a Sunday afternoon across the river watching the dogs savagely bite and growl as the bear tosses and tugs in a rage. Recently, another activity has come to your notice, thanks to an attic mate who shares your floor - dramatic performances held in the public theater. He hopes to sign on with an acting company as a hired man and goes to the theater often. After talking with him for awhile, you think you'll probably go along. With an admission price of a penny, it doesn't cost any more than the bearbaiting - and may be just as much fun. You once saw a band of traveling players in a nearby village, putting on a play about Noah and his wife, but a performance in one of these outdoor public theaters must be a different experience

altogether. Maybe you'll even see a play by William Shakespeare, whose hometown of Stratford isn't too far from your old village.

You idly wonder if this Shakespeare is really as good as people say he is. Even if he's not, you think to yourself as you curl up on the floor in your crowded, wretched little attic, seeing a play may turn out to be a great way for you to forget about your worries for an hour or two. Certainly you have enough of them.

And yet, for all your troubles, you wouldn't go back to your village. You sense that a world your parents have never imagined is unfolding around you, and all you want is to be part of it.