opening extract from

William Again (90th Anniversary Edition)

written by

Richmal Crompton

foreword by

Louise Rennison

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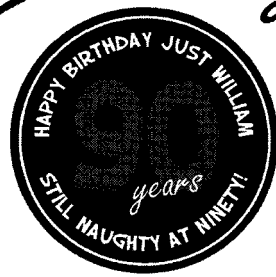
WILLIAM again



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Foreword by Louise Rennison

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FOREWORD

Oh I love William. I just love him.

Of course it is a love tinged with enormous relief that I don't actually know him.

And that he hasn't therefore been able to rifle through my drawers making my best underwear into hats and costumes for his mad plays. Which incidentally always star him. A lot.

And of course as I don't know him my slippers are not full of tadpoles.

But apart from that it is unqualified love I have for him.

And I don't mean because I read about him when I was a child.

Because I only read about him about three years ago.

And I am a grown-up.

Sort of.

Ish.

And oh I have laughed. You know that laughing that you can't stop and it goes on and on. And you really should shut up because everyone thought you

were quite sweet laughing at first. But then you didn't stop and there is snot coming out of your nose and they want to kill you.

That kind of laughing.

I know I am a 'girl' and therefore he would have not had much use for me. And that is an understatement and a half. When Violet Elizabeth Bott lisps at him, 'William, don't you wike girlth?' William just says, 'No,' and is almost sick when she suggests that he kisses her.

But apart from the girl disadvantage, I so agree with him in many areas.

On being eleven for instance. (Which he is for about a hundred years, it seems.)

His philosophy as an eleven-year-old is this:

'Why can't grown-ups just give me stuff, let me do what I like and then go away A LOT?'

I don't think people give William the praise he deserves as a deep philosophical thinker.

His ideas on parents, for example.

Why is it all so random and un-thought out?

Why are we not given more of a say in who we get as parents?

Is it so very much to ask?

William, for instance, would like his father to be a clown.

There is a bit in 'The Circus' when William is desperate to go to the circus, mostly to see the clowns. But when he asks his father if he can just pop off to the circus by himself at night-time his father says, 'Don't speak with your mouth full,' and William thinks, A clown would not have said this.

And he is right.

I think.

My parents were not clowns either so I don't really know. But I suspect a clown father would have had better things on his mind than table manners. Big shoes, say, or falling over ladders.

William's life is full of this sort of tragedy. Not only is William's father not a clown, William's father is not even someone who wants to be in the same room as William. Ever. When our hero decides to write one of his notorious – er, I mean, great – plays, and goes off to write it, his father, unnerved by the quietness of the house says, 'Where is he?' When he is told he is in the summer house writing his play, all his father can say in the way of encouragement is, 'I hope it's a nice long one.'

In fact the whole family, and usually everyone

else's family, is against him just because . . . well, just because he is William.

Richmal Compton, the author of Just William, to my huge surprise and delight turns out to have been a girl. Oh yes. And a comedy-genius girl. Double oh yes.

And she was writing when girls were mostly fainting or covered in net. (That, by the way, is my thumbnail sketch of the 1920s.)

So here it is, tales of clowns, pals, dogs, selling twins as slaves and general mayhem.

Get ready to laugh until you think your boots will never dry.

And also on a more practical level, learn new ways to annoy people.

And don't forget, these books are really all about standing up for what is right. Never bowing to things which just are not acceptable. These books show you how to display Just William-ness in the face of intolerable circumstances.

All right, so William may be forced to brush his hair and go to school for no reason day after day, or do stuff that grown-ups make him do when he could be making an insect zoo, but he never gives in.

For instance, when he is forced to visit a great-

aunt who may well be popping her clogs, William and his fat cousin (with ringlets) are introduced to each other for the first time. And left alone to sit quietly by the bedside.

Imagine the horror of the situation.

But does William crumble?

And sit quietly?

No.

After the grown-ups have gone William starts by politely and quietly saying across the bed to his cousin, 'Hello, Fatty.'

It escalates rapidly in whispers until the ringleted cousin says he will throw William through the window by his ears.

And William says he is too fat to do this.

Then they fight.

And what is more, the great-aunt who may be popping her clogs perks up and starts joining in by egging them on.

She says it is the most fun she has had for ages.

And this book will also be the most fun you have had for ages.

Go forth proud Williams and William-esses.

Louise Rennison

CHAPTER 1

WHAT DELAYED THE GREAT MAN

William, taking his character as a whole, was not of the artistic genre. He had none of the shrinking sensitiveness and delicate imaginativeness of the true artist. But the fact remains that this summer he was impelled by some inner prompting to write a play.

The idea had been growing in his mind for some time. He had seen plays acted by the village amateur dramatic society which was famous more for a touching reliance on the prompter than for any real histrionic talent.

William had considered them perfect. He had decided, after their last performance, to go on the stage. But none of his friends could inform him of the preliminary steps necessary for getting on the stage. It is true that the man in the boot shop, whose second cousin was a scene-shifter in a provincial music-hall, had promised to use his influence, but when William was told the next week that the second cousin had been dismissed for appearing in a state of undeniable intoxication and insisting on accompanying the heroine on to the stage, he felt that all hopes from that

direction must be abandoned. It was then that he had the brilliant idea. He would write a play himself and act in that.

William had great confidence in his own powers. He had no doubts whatever of his ability to write a play and act in it. If he couldn't go on *the* stage he'd go on *a* stage. Surely no one could object to that. All he'd want would be some paper and ink and a few clothes. Surely his family – bent as they always were on clouding his moments of purest happiness – couldn't object to that?

'Jus' ink an' paper an' a few ole clothes,' he said wistfully to his mother.

She eyed him with a mistrust that was less the result of a suspicious nature than of eleven years' experience of her younger son.

'Won't pencil do?' she said.

'Pencil!' he said scornfully. 'Did – did Shakespeare or – or the man wot wrote 'The Red Gang' – well, did *they* write in pencil?'

Mrs Brown, having no knowledge of the subject, shifted her point of attack.

'What sort of clothes will you want?' she said.

'Oh – jus' clothes,' said William vaguely.

'Yes, but what sort?'

'How can I tell,' said William irritably, 'till I've *wrote* the play?'

William's family long remembered the silence and peace that marked the next few afternoons. During them, William, outstretched upon the floor of the summer house, wrote his play with liberal application of ink over his person and clothes and the surrounding woodwork. William was not of that class of authors who neglect the needs of the body. After every few words he took a deep draught from a bottle of Orange Ale that stood on his right and a bite from an ink-coated apple on his left. He had laid in a store of apples and sweets and chocolates under the seat of the summer house for his term of authorship. Every now and then he raised a hand to his frowning brow in thought, leaving upon it yet another imprint of his ink-sodden fingers.

'Where is he?' said his father in a hushed wonder at the unwonted peace.

'He's in the summer house writing a play,' said his wife.

'I hope it's a nice long one,' said her husband.

William had assembled his cast and assigned them their parts. Little Molly Carter was to be the heroine, Ginger

the hero, Henry the hero's friend, Douglas a crowd of outlaws, William himself was to be the villain, stage-manager and prompter. He handed them their parts with a lofty frown. The parts were in a grimy exercise book.

'It's all wrote out,' he said. 'You jus' learn it where it says your names. Molly's Lady Elsabina—'

'Elsabina isn't a name *I've* ever heard,' said that lady pertly.

'I didn't say it was, did I?' said William coldly. 'I shu'n't be surprised if there was lots of names you'd never heard of. An' Ginger is Sir Rufus Archibald Green an' Henry is the Hon Lord Leopold, an' I'm Carlo Rupino, a villain. All you've gotter do is to learn your parts an' Wednesday morning we'll go through it jus' to practise it, an' Wednesday afternoon we'll do it.'

'We can't three learn out of one book,' said the leading lady, who was inclined to make objections.

'Yes, you *can*,' said William. 'You can take turns sitting in the middle.'

Lady Elsabina sniffed.

'And such writing!' she said scornfully.

'Well, I don't count on my fingers,' said William, returning scorn for scorn, 'not so's everyone can see me, at any rate.'

At which public allusion to her arithmetical powers,

Lady Elsabina took refuge in another sniff, followed by a haughty silence.

The rehearsal was not an unqualified success. The heroine, as is the way of heroines, got out of bed the wrong side. After a stirring domestic scene, during which she bit her nurse and flung a basin of bread and milk upon the floor, she arrived tearful and indignant and half an hour late at the rehearsal.

'Can't you come a bit later?' said the stage-manager bitterly.

'If you're going to be nasty to me,' returned the heroine stormily, 'I'm going back home.'

'All right,' muttered the stage-manager, cowed, like most stage-managers, by the threatening of tears.

The first item on the agenda was the question of the wardrobe. William had received an unpleasant surprise which considerably lowered his faith in human nature generally. On paying a quiet and entirely informal visit to his sister's bedroom in her absence, to collect some articles of festive female attire for his heroine, he had found every drawer, and even the wardrobe, locked. His sister had kept herself informed of the date of the performance, and had taken measures accordingly. He had collected only a crochet-edged towel, one of the short lace curtains from

the window, and a drawn threadwork toilet-cover. Otherwise his search was barren. Passing through the kitchen, however, he found one of her silk petticoats on a clothes horse and added it to his plunder. He found various other articles in other parts of the house. The dressing up took place in an outhouse that had once been a stable at the back of William's house. The heroine's dress consisted of Ethel's silk petticoat with holes cut for the arms. The lace curtain formed an effective head-dress, and the toilet-cover pinned on to the end of the petticoat made a handsome train.

The effect was completed by the crochet-edged towel pinned round her waist. Sir Rufus Archibald Green, swathed in an Indian embroidered table-cover, with a black satin cushion pinned on to his chest, a tea cosy on his head, and an umbrella in his hand, looked a princely hero. The Hon Lord Leopold wore the dining-room table-cloth and the morning-room wastepaper basket with a feather, forcibly wrested from the cock's tail by William, protruding jauntily from the middle. Douglas, as the crowd, was simply attired in William's father's top hat and a mackintosh.

William had quietly abstracted the top hat as soon as he heard definitely that his father would not be present at the performance. William's father was to preside at a

political meeting in the village hall, which was to be addressed by a Great Man from the Cabinet, who was coming down from London specially for the occasion.

'Vast as are the attractions of any enterprise promoted by you, William,' he had said politely at breakfast, 'duty calls me elsewhere.'

William, while murmuring perfunctory sorrow at these tidings, hastily ran over in his mind various articles of his father's attire that could therefore be safely utilised. The robing of William himself as the villain had cost him much care and thought. He had finally decided upon the drawing-room rug pinned across his shoulder and a fern-pot upon his head. It was a black china fern-pot and rather large, but it rested upon William's ears, and gave him a commanding and sinister appearance. He also carried an umbrella.

These preparations took longer than the cast had foreseen, and, when finally large moustaches had been corked upon the hero's, villain's and crowd's lips, the lunch-bell sounded from the hall.

'Jus' all finished in time!' said William the optimist.

'Yes, but wot about the rehearsal,' said the crowd gloomily, 'wot about that?'

'Well, you've had the book to learn the stuff,' said William. 'That's enough, isn't it? I don't s'pose real acting

people bother with rehearsals. It's quite easy. You jus' learn your stuff an' then say it. It's silly wasting time over rehearsals.'

'Have you learnt wot you say, William Brown?' said the heroine shrilly.

'I *know* wot I say,' said William loftily, 'I don't need to *learn*!'

'William!' called a stern sisterly voice from the house. 'Mother says come and get ready for lunch.'

William merely ejected his tongue in the direction of the voice and made no answer.

'We'd better be taking off the things,' he said, 'so's to be in time for this afternoon. Half past two it begins, then we can have a nice long go at it. Put all the things away careful behind that box so's bothering ole people can't get at them an' make a fuss.'

'William, where *are* you?' called the voice impatiently.

The tone goaded William into reply.

'I'm somewhere where *you* can't find me,' he called.

'You're in the stable,' said the voice triumphantly.

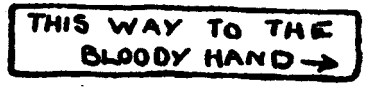
'Seems as if folks simply couldn't leave me alone,' said William wistfully, as he removed his fern-pot and fur rug and walked with slow dignity into the house.

'Wash yourself first, William,' said the obnoxious voice.

'I *am* washed,' returned William coldly, as he entered the dining-room, forgetting the presence of a smudgy, corked moustache upon lips and cheeks.

It was an unfortunate afternoon as far as the prospects of a large audience were concerned. Most of the adults of the place were going to listen to the Great Man. Most of the juveniles were going to watch a football match. Moreover, the cast, with the instincts of the very young, had shrouded the enterprise so deeply in mystery in order to enjoy the sensation of superiority, that they had omitted to mention either the exact nature of the enterprise or the time at which it would take place.

On the side-gate was pinned a notice:



In the stable was a row of old chairs all turned out of the house at various times because of broken backs and legs. As a matter of fact, the cast were little concerned with the audience. The great point was that they were going to act a play – they scarcely cared whether anyone watched it or not. Upon a broken chair in the middle sat

a small child, attracted by the notice. Her chair had only lost one leg, so, by sitting well on to one side, she managed to maintain an upright position on it. At a stern demand for money from William, she had shyly slipped a halfpenny into the fern-pot, which served the double purpose of head-gear and pay desk. She now sat – an enthralled spectator – while the cast dressed and argued before her.

Outside down the road came the Great Man. He had come by an earlier train by mistake and was walking slowly towards the village hall, intensely bored by the prospect of the afternoon. He stopped suddenly, arrested by a notice on a side gate:

He took out his watch. Half an hour to spare. He hesitated a moment, then walked firmly towards the Bloody Hand. Inside an outhouse a group of curiously dressed children stared at him unsmilingly. One of them, who was dressed in a rug and a fern-pot, addressed him with a stern frown.

INSIDE AN OUTHOUSE A GROUP OF CURIOUSLY DRESSED CHILDREN STARED AT HIM UNSMILINGLY.

'We're jus' going to begin,' he said, 'sit down.'

The Great Man sat down obediently and promptly collapsed upon the floor.

'You shu'n't have sat on a chair with two legs gone,'

said William impatiently. 'You've broke it altogether now. You can manage all right if you try one with only one gone. We're jus' going to begin.'

The Great Man picked up himself and his hat and sat down carefully upon the farthermost edge of a three-legged chair.

William, holding the mangled remains of an exercise book in his hand, strode forward.

'*The Bloody Hand*, by William Brown,' he announced in a resonant voice.

'Well, an' wot about us?' said the heroine shrilly.

'You didn't write it, did you?' said William. 'I'm only saying who wrote it.'

'Well, aren't you going to say who axe it?' she said pugnaciously.

'No, I'm *not*!' said the stage-manager firmly. 'You jus' say the one wot wrote it. You don't go on saying all them wot axe it.'

'Well, I'm not going to be in it, then,' she said. 'I'm going home.'

William decided to be a woman-hater for the rest of his life.

'All right,' he capitulated, 'if you're going to be so disagreeable – jus' like a girl' – he strode forward again and raised his voice, '*The Bloody Hand*, wrote, every bit of it,

by William Brown – acted by Molly Carter an' Ginger an' Douglas an' Henry – they jus' learnt wot William Brown wrote. Now, if you'll be quiet a minute,' he went on to his silent audience, 'we'll begin. You begin,' he said to the damsel in the lace curtain.

She advanced. The rest of them stood in a corner and watched.

'She's *on*,' William announced to the audience. 'We're *off*. Go on!' he repeated to her.

'I'm jus' going to,' she replied irritably, 'soon as you stop talking.' Then, changing her voice to one of shrill artificiality, 'Ho! Where am I? Lorst in a dreadful forest—'

'It's meant to be a forest,' explained the author to the audience.

'I wish you'd stop keep on saying things,' said the heroine. 'I forget where I am. Lorst in a dreadful forest. What shall I do? Ah, me! Crumbs! Who is this who yawns upon my sight?'

'*Dawns!*' corrected the prompter.

'A fierce villain,' went on the heroine, ignoring him, 'methinks. I shouldn't be surprised if it wasn't Carlo Rupino of the Bloody Hand. Oh Lor! What shall I do? Ah me! He draws nearer.'

'It is him,' prompted William.

'I was jus' going to say that, if you wouldn't keep on

interrupting. It is him. I was jus' going to say it. Ah me! What shall I do? Whither shall I flee? Nowhere. Gadzooks! He draws nearer.'

'I come on now,' explained William to the audience, holding on to his fern-pot with one hand to steady it. 'I'm him.' He advanced threateningly upon the maiden. 'Aha!' he sneered. 'Gadzooks! Doest thou happen to know who I am?'

'I am lorst in the dreadful forest,' she replied. 'Ah me! What shall I do?'

'I am Carlo Rupino of the Bloody Hand. Go on, *faint*!' he urged in an undertone.

''F you think I'm going to faint on this dirty ole floor,' she replied, 'I'm jus' not. You should have brushed it up a bit 'f you wanted me to faint on it.'

'You don't know how to,' he jeered.

'I *do*! I *can*! I can faint beautifully on our drawing-room carpet. I'm jus' not going to faint on a dirty ole stable floor an' I'm not going to be *in* your nasty ole play 'f you're not going to be nice to me.'

'All right, then, don't be. You jus' take off my sister's petticoat, an' our lace curtain an' don't be in it, if you don't want to be.'

'Well, I jus' *won't*, if you're going on like this at me.'

'Well, 'f you keep on talkin' not out of the play who's

to know when you're talkin' play an' when you're jus' talkin' yourself?'

'Anyone with any sense could—'

'Oh, get on with it,' said the hero off the scenes. 'You'll never get to where I come in, if you're going on like this all day. *Pretend* she's fainted and go on from there.'

'All right,' said the villain obligingly. 'Aha! I hast thee in my power. I wilt hang thee ere dawn dawns from my remote mountain lair.' The toilet-cover train caught on a nail and the petticoat tore with an echoing sound. 'That's right,' he went on, 'go on messin' up my sister's things, so's she'll never be able to wear them again.'

''F you're going to keep on being nasty to me,' said the heroine again, 'I'm going straight back home an' I'm not going to be *in* your ole play.'

'Well, anyway,' said William, with a mental determination that his next play should contain no heroines, 'now we go off and they come on.'

The hero and his friend advanced.

'Alas!' said Sir Rufus Archibald Green, 'I see no trace of her. What canst have happened to her? I hope she hast not met yon horrible ole villain, Carlo Rupino, of the Bloody Hand. Seest thou any footmarks of her, the Hon Lord Leopold?'

The Hon Lord Leopold examined the stable floor.

'Lookin' for footmarks,' explained the stage-manager to the audience.

'Ah me! None!' said the Hon Lord Leopold. Then, looking more closely. 'Crikey! Yes!' he said. 'I seest footmarks. 'Tis hers and Carlo Rupino's. I knowest their boots.'

'Ah me!' said the hero. 'What cattastrop is here? Gadzooks! Let us follow to his remote mountain lair. I will kill him dead and cut out his foul black heart and put an end to his foul black life.'

He waved Mrs Brown's best umbrella threateningly as he spoke. 'Now they come off,' explained William, 'an' we come on. Here's the gallows.'

He carried forward a small reading stand, taken from his father's study, then advanced holding the hand of the fair Elsabina. The crowd in his top hat and mackintosh stood in attendance.

'Aha!' said Carlo Rupino to his victim. 'I hast thee in my power, thou ole girl! I am now going to hang thee from yon lofty gallows! Go on!' he addressed the crowd.

The crowd took off his top hat and uttered a feeble 'Hurray!'

'You couldn't hang me from that old thing,' remarked the heroine scornfully.

'That's not in the play,' said William.

'I know it isn't. I'm just saying that myself.'

'Well, say wot's in the play.'

At that point the chair, upon which the Great Man was with difficulty sitting, collapsed suddenly, precipitating the Great Man among its fragments. William turned upon him sternly.

''F you're going to keep on making noises breaking chairs,' he said, 'how d'you think we're going to get on?'

The Great Man raised himself from the debris with a murmured apology, brushed himself as well as he could, and sat down quietly upon an adjacent packing-case.

'Well, go on!' said William to the heroine.

'Something about "Oh, mercy, spare me!" an' then I've forgot what comes after that.'

'Well, why didn't you learn it?'

'I can't read your nasty old writing – all blots an' things spilt on it.'

'Well, you can't write a play at all, so you needn't go making remarks about people's writing what can.'

'Oh, go on!' said the egotistical hero off the stage. 'Let's get to where I come on.'

William studied his exercise book carefully.

'Here's wot you say,' he said. '"Oh, mercy, spare me—"'

'I said that.'

'Be quiet! "Oh, mercy, spare me—"'

'I *said* that.'

'Be *quiet*! "Oh, mercy, spare me an' let me return to my dear ole mother an' father an' the young gentleman wot I'm going to marry. His name is Sir Rufus Archibald Green." That's wot you say.'

'Well, you've said it, so I needn't say it all over again.'

''F you think I'm going to say all your stuff for you—' began William.

Elsabina, bored with the question, pointed an accusing finger at the Great Man.

'Look at him!' she said. 'He's come in without paying any money.'

Overcome by embarrassment, the Great Man hastily took out a case and handed a ten-shilling note to William. A half-crown would have won rapturous gratitude. A ten-shilling note was beyond their ken. The entire cast gathered round it.

'It's paper money,' said Douglas, impressed.

'I don't suppose it's *real*,' said William gloomily. 'Well, where're we got to?'

He turned quickly, and the fern-pot descended, sharply, extinguishing his head. He struggled with it without success.

'Can't anyone do anything?' said his muffled voice

from inside the fern-pot. 'I can't go on acting like this – people can't *see* me. Well, isn't anyone going to *do* anything?'

The cast pulled without success.

'I didn't say pull my head off,' said the stern, sarcastic voice from inside the pot, 'I said pull the *thing* off!'

The Great Man arose from his packing-case and came to the rescue. Finally William's face appeared. William put his hands to his head. 'Any one'd think you wanted to pull my nose an' ears off – the way you did it,' he said. 'Now let's get on.' He turned to the heroine. '"No, I will not spare thee. I hatest thy mother and thy father and the young gentleman thou ist going to marry. Thy mother, thy father, and the young gentleman thou ist going to marry wilt see they lifeless body dangling on my remote mountain lair ere dawn dawns. Gadzooks!" Now go on! Scream!'

The heroine screamed.

The crowd took off his top hat and cheered.

'"I will keep thee in a deep, dark dungeon, with all sorts of rats an' things crawling about till even, and then – and then—"' He consulted his exercise book, '"and then I'll" – I've forgot this bit, and I can't read wot comes next—'

'*Yah!*' yelled the heroine in shrill triumph.

'Shut up!' retorted William. 'Now, you come on,' to the hero. 'Let's do the rest as quick as we can. I'm getting a bit tired of it. Let's go down to the pond an' race boats when we've done.'

'Golly! Yes – *let's*!' said the crowd enthusiastically.

'Girls won't be allowed,' said William to Elsabina. Elsabina elevated her small nose.

''S if I wanted to sail *boats*!' she said scornfully.

William's father entered the house hastily.

'Surely the meeting isn't over, dear?' said William's mother.

'He hasn't come,' said Mr Brown. 'Everybody's waiting. We met the train, but he wasn't on it. The station-master says that he came by an earlier one and walked up, but no one can find him. He must have lost his way.'

'William seems to have collected an old tramp in the stable,' said Mrs Brown; 'he may have seen him on the road.'

'I'll go and see,' said Mr Brown.

In the stable a fight was going on between his son in a fur rug and his son's friend in a tablecloth and a tea cosy. Upon both faces were the remains of corked moustaches. A broken fern-pot and a battered top hat were on the

'THOU BEASTLY OLE ROBBER,' DOUGLAS WAS SHOUTING. 'I WILL KILL THEE DEAD AND CUT OUT THY FOUL, BLACK HEART.'

floor. Another boy in a mackintosh and a little girl in a lace curtain were watching.

'Thou beastly ole robber,' Douglas was shouting, 'I will kill thee dead and cut out thy foul, black heart.'

'Nay!' yelled his son. 'I will hang thee from my mountain ere dawn dawns and thy body shall dangle from the gallows—'

A wistful-looking old man on a packing-case was an absorbed spectator of the proceedings. When he saw

William's father he took out his watch with a guilty start.

'Surely—' he said. 'I'd no idea – *Heavens*!'

He picked up his hat and almost ran.

The Great Man rose to address his audience.

'Ladies and gentlemen – I must begin by apologising for my late arrival,' he said with dignity. 'I have been unavoidably delayed.'

He tried not to meet William's father's eye as he made the statement.