

CHAPTER X

BANKSIDE

WILL's comedy came to performance on a February day not five months after its acceptance, fast business for the theatre. To be sure, it was so altered that its own begetter would scarcely have known it. The Woman Clown's part was cut down to a shadow, the speeches between the lords and ladies were re-disposed so that the mocking lord should have the lion's share, and the Russian habits had been dragged in by the scruff of the neck. He had been obliged to add a scene for them to the last act, the patch showed abominably and their introduction was quite pointless, but the owner of the Theatre put in them large hopes for the play's success. That was the way with managers. You might half-slaughter yourself making perfect verse, you might labour till you got your plot flawless and your characters clear cut as crystal; managers fixed their fancy on some one situation or even scrap of dialogue and for it loved or damned a play. They said that audiences were just like them, and often remembered nothing of a piece until you reminded them that that was the Show in which the clown lost his dog or the murderers couldn't wake up the drunken porter.

The Spaniard, the Constable and the Schoolmaster in Will's comedy were all good, said the Great Burbage, women would come again to see the carnation gowns worn by the ladies in waiting (so keep them not on the stage too long, only a glimpse), and the mocking lord

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would please the fashionable who had read their "Euphues." But the moment upon which he counted was the entry of the ninny King and his courtiers disguised as Russians—swelling music, half the company crammed into blackamoors' dresses as attendants holding torches aloft to make a background for those gilt and glaring satins filing on, filling the place with their Orient scent. . . . (It would be dusk by the close of Act Five.) The Russian interlude would be unlike anything ever seen before in London and reeking of expense. People liked to be able to go about saying that you must have ruined yourself on your dresses.

He began to spread their fame within five minutes of having bought them. As they drove away from the Revels Office down a narrow street of monastic out-buildings lit by the colour of a few wisps of hay dropped from a passing waggon, he suddenly peered out his tortoise head and poked with his stick in the back of his coachman. In Will's ear as the vehicle screamed to a standstill he gave warning: "Master Greene has writ above forty plays and by his pamphlets can make or mar a man. We must speak."

The scene which followed might itself have come out of a comedy. Over the door of his pompous caroché leaned the owner of the Theatre and the Curtain, all gracious greeting and full-throated inquiry. His literary acquaintance, a puffy-faced, town-bred man wearing an ambitious suit and looking as if he seldom walked further than from his bedchamber to the tavern, kept his eyes on the ground while he gave brief answers in a toneless murmur. If he was pleased at the encounter he was concealing his bliss well. He was clearly on his way to the Revels Office with a roll of manuscript under his arm, but was disclosing nothing

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and seemed in a fret to be off, shifting from shank to shank. When with a sweep of the arm the manager made known to him a young gentleman has cast a new comedy for my Company, he dragged his unwilling gaze upwards and Will knew in a flash that there were already too many people writing plays in London. Not since he had been bitten by a dog on his way to school had he met such a look. "With a Russian interlude," added the abundant manager. "Ah!" Master Greene dropped his eyes. "You have been to Muscovia, Master—Master . . .?" "My name is Shakespeare, sir. Never in my life," said Will, and away wriggled the pamphleteer, a smile at last upon his features. You could see what he was going to say about that piece now. It would be hardly worth his while to witness it. "Good day, Master Burbage. I shall be all impatience to view your Muscovian piece, Master" (grunt) "Shakescene!"

The Great Burbage looked after his acquaintance frowning, said: "Alas! poor fellow, off to the tavern again. He loved the woman he married, but deserted her most devilishly on the birth of their child. He will die in foul ignominy!" then recovering reassurance poked the coachman in the back again and gave the order to drive on.

At the Newgate entrance to the City he put Will down. He had another visit to pay, and Will, he said, would be wanting to return to the Theatre. "But look you, my young companion," taking him by the button-hole, "to-morrow you shall not come to rehearsal as book-holder. Nay, for I have appointed yonder Sinkler to that office. Tarry a moment!" Grunting mysteriously he tugged forth from under his feet a bundle of dog-eared papers which he lolloped into Will's arms.

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"See!" with exactly the attitude of an angel urging an apostle to authorship. "Here be six broken-winded evil-written ancient plays. Set your wits to work. Despatch. Mend me these and we will speak again. Sup at my house on Sunday."

He nodded, gave the coachman another poke and was off, lying back with thumbs crossed on his belly and eyes closed. He was going down to the Bankside where he knew that this young man lodged, but he did not wish for any company upon the errand that he went now, for it was secret stuff and one of the troubles. Will, for his part, had promised Heminge to have those hose back in the property basket before the inventory of the wardrobe taken on tour was checked this evening, and if Sinkler was to prompt tomorrow he thought he would do well to run in and see him. The book-holder's copies of the plays being rehearsed were so cut and scribbled over that a newcomer would never understand them, and Sinkler was a needy fellow to whom that extra shilling a week would mean much.

The caroché rumbled on through the heart of the city and the manager of the Theatre sniffed the stale air of the old streets with satisfaction. Although the magistrates of London-within-the-walls were the enemies of his craft, the people over whom they ruled made up his audiences and were mostly his admirers. More than once when his vehicle was held up in the heavy late afternoon traffic he heard his name whispered and though he drove by apparently asleep he knew that he was observed and identified.

It was near the end of the dead season, the Court was out of town, no fear of being pushed to the wall while a passage was made for the Queen on her road to the

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Guildhall, or some favoured merchant's rare new house. The Queen was on a progress into the country, and had been for the past three months, but by the thirty-fifth year of her reign her capital like a well-ordered household could run on its own wheels during the owner's absence. She was in her sixtieth summer, and could not last for ever. The Great Burbage's thoughts turned naturally to changes this afternoon, for the business he was about had arisen out of a succession of deaths.

The Earl of Leicester, his master and the Queen's old sweetheart, had deceased a few weeks after the review at Tilbury. It may have been that she felt herself released from the long tyranny of an out-grown love-affair. It may have been that she was furious at someone of her own age doing something so elderly as dying for no especial reason. She was touchy on the subject of mortality, and there had been a storm the other night at a banquet when she had asked for the name of a dish and been told that it was called a coffin! Whatever her reason, she had displayed scarcely decent concern on hearing of her favourite's passing. To the Owner of the Theatre the loss had been an unmixed disaster. The plethoric Earl had been his Patron. He had to look for a new master without delay. He had found one in a certain Lord Strange, not an ideal arrangement, for this nobleman, partial to players, had already in his employ a Company of acrobats, a parcel of plaguey boys that ran upon ropes and did trick dances. Last winter its owner had managed to let the Theatre for a part of the season to the Lord Admiral's troupe. The Company bearing the proud name of The Queen's Players had lost caste since the death of their chief clown, Dick Tarleton.

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The truth seemed to be that the time for a change had come. Seven years ago there had been half a dozen flourishing Companies calling themselves the Servants of as many noblemen. Half of these were now insignificant and survived only in the provinces; in the remaining three the actors were quarrelling and changing their allegiance faster than you could keep count.

When James Burbage had erected his playhouse there had not been another such place in the land. A week ago the manager of the New Rose Theatre in Southwark had written to him, suggesting that they ought to meet for discussion. Affairs at present were out of the square. (Ay, thought James Burbage, knowing that the Rose had been leased for bull-baiting and archery displays last season.)

Philip Henslowe who had built the Rose had never been a player. He was a country-born man of good yeoman stock, his father having been master of the game in Ashdown Forest. The family had served Lord Montague, and on the death of Lord Montague's bailiff Philip Henslowe he married that official's widow, an excellent thing for him. Montague House and Winchester House, the town residences of the Viscount Montague and my Lord Bishop of Winchester arose in cynical indifference on the Bankside, the district of the stews. Possibly the proximity of his old master's mansion had influenced Henslowe's choice of a site for his playhouse. Let us hope so, at any rate, for some of the adjacent house property which he had amassed recently was of a questionable character by origin at least. There was an unkind rumour in sinless Shoreditch that the owner of the Rose was also landlord of the Bull, the Barge and the Cock, celebrated brothels.

He was a fine-looking, upstanding man of five and

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fifty, white-headed with a Roman nose and a cold, deep eye. He had no children of his own, but his widow bride had brought with her a daughter of her first marriage whom he was having educated at such expense that people said he meant to see Joan my lady. French masters and Italian masters came to his house to instruct her in languages, she had one musician to teach her the viols and virginals and another for the lute and singing, a silk-woman from the Revels Office arrived three mornings a week to sew with her, and when she went through the streets to church a poor relation walked by her side holding her hand ("Now we walk right fast and don't talk") while a footman trod ahead. Joan, whose dowry would be derived from the houses of the Bankside, had a wild-rose colour, unfortunately not always in the right place; her blushes invaded her throat and bosom and even the tip of her button nose. She had scared blue eyes and bright lights in the ends of her straight fair hair which stuck out wirily, however much brushing and crisping it got. Her shape, maidenly clad in lawn or serge according to the season, was unformed as yet and her movement, in spite of all her dancing lessons, gawky. James Burbage did not think that Henslowe was going to propose a match between her and his Richard, and did not regret the unlikelihood of such a solution. A player's wife who would be too much the lady to take an interest in her husband's playhouse was not good enough for James Burbage. The Henslowes had no player's blood in their veins. They were simply money-getters.

At the bottom of Fish Street Hill he alighted from his vehicle, bidding the coachman attend his return, and began his journey down to a district he detested on his own feet. There was no sense in paying the toll to

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cross London Bridge twice within an hour, besides there was always such a jam of traffic on it that you were quicker walking. So he told himself, 'eaving out his real reason, which was that he was not going to have it known in the stables, and thence inevitably in the Theatre, that Master Burbage had been holding conference with his rival in Southwark. Let them guess any iniquity they liked of his disappearance into the Bankside rather than that. A light shone in his tortoise eye and he tapped the flints smartly with his stick as he bundled off, a portly black figure soon lost to sight amongst the dusty dozens hurrying down into Southwark before sunset.

The bridge, which was mounted on nineteen arches, had timbered houses with overhanging lower stories, mostly shops, on either side of it, except at two places where for short intervals you proceeded alongside a wooden railing and could see the cobweb-coloured waters of the wide river whirling below, and overhead pacific skies. However close the day there always seemed to be a breeze on the bridge to fan your cheek, and deafening noise to sing in your ears, for screeching birds pursued the eel-boats which plied up and down between Paris Garden Stairs and the Pool. As the manager came out into the second clear space a wherry passed beneath with all upon it singing. He saw it approaching the bridge, the man at the tiller standing with legs astraddle and head cast back, a hieratic shape against the flashing trail of the craft with vexed waters reflecting all the colours of the rainbow or a fish's scales. Under the arch it shot, the tide was low and moss-green slime streamed like naiads' hair on the bubbles setting and unmaking round the piers. Towards Westminster the heavens were all gold, but

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eastwards the Tower reared an outline sharp and hard as a heap of oyster shells out of a settled mist. The Bridge Gate was adorned with the relics of those who had suffered on Tower Hill and elsewhere. Up at Westminster all is glitter and sparkle, God bless our gracious Princess and long preserve her to us! Yet while the ancient Tudor she-dragon leaps and dances rigged out still in the guise of her bloom, mortal men who have got caught in the grips of her machinery lie with the links around their ankles, chained to reechy underground walls in the dungeons of her capital, and hollow-eyed skulls weathered to the shade of parchment watch the wherries pass under London Bridge. Arden of Park Hall, that Papist gentleman of Warwickshire, is up there, and Roderigo Lopez, the Jew, who was once her own physician and got her fingers to kiss many a sunlit morning and dusk eve, when summoned to her silken daybed to allay a toothache or some slight malady.

The manager of the Theatre who had been walking too fast caught at the leathern belt of a fellow pushing a load of wholesome green vegetables on a hand-truck. He got these staggers sometimes nowadays, the heart seeming to cease its office for a moment and a blackness invading the vision. The coarse-headed fellow at whom he had clutchèd turned to curse, but at the sight of an old gentleman wearing a gold chain hurried off his legs on London Bridge, changed his snarl to a grin. In the old days, when kings and queens went over this bridge in procession, that several spectators should be crushed to death was a thing accepted, and once in this reign a sort of open hearse carrying a load of the damsels in waiting had been overturned, bringing language out of those high-born virgins' lips that had been a cause for admiration.

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When they got under the shadow of St. Saviour's Church the fellow carting green stuff roared in Master Burbage's ear to ask if he knew his way now, and was dismissed with a dignified speech of gratitude, not one word of which he could have heard, as the noise of Southwark High Street overtopped that of the Bridge. The manager always addressed a low-born artisan as if the creature was the third messenger bringing the news of an empire's fall to his monarch. He liked to think that he had the right touch with all classes.

He knew his way very well now along the back of the gabled mass of Winchester House, past the entry to the Clink Gaol and then down a twisting lane, Maid Lane was its name, because said the wicked, there was not a maid to be found in it. It did not look so dreadful at five o'clock on an early autumn evening. The houses, which stood back in small front gardens, were approached by little foot-bridges over a ditch. No ditch, however, could have been responsible for the strange smells which you noticed directly you entered the lane, and although it was quiet after the roar on the bridge-head, there were disturbing sounds of foreign voices quarrelling indoors and odd snatches of music to be heard. The backs of these houses overlooked the river, and between them you could catch slitted glimpses of mud-colour and mist, shrouded cargo boats moored at high tide and now inclining sideways, sails of fast craft travelling down in the midstream and, barely distinguishable, the straight faces of the buildings on the opposite shore.

The owner of the Theatre and the Curtain, shaking his head, marched down Maid Lane with short quick steps, keeping well in its centre. He was quite glad to mark two street vendors turning the corner and

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beginning to come towards him. One of them had a bundle of green rush mats and a number of old boots hanging from strings over his arm, the other was pushing a barrow, its contents being, as he presently announced in a bellow that made Master Burbage jump, small coals for sale. "Buy some small coals. Anyone down here lack small coals?" There was the sound of a casement clattering open and a voice with a low Dutch accent screamed to them to get to Hell out of here. Slam went the window again. Both the men were roaring with laughter at what they had seen—probably a woman in her night-rail—but Master Burbage was not going to look up, no, he was not going to look up, not though a pattering small boy had suddenly appeared from nowhere and was running alongside him plucking him by the sleeve and whispering the same things over and over again.

"Get thee home. I lack nothing," muttered Master Burbage walking faster. "Get thee home out of my path!" agitating his stick. "Go away," he uttered louder with such dramatic emphasis on the second word that the horrid little creature leapt a foot from his elbow. It knew better though than to be put off by a first refusal from an elderly gentleman, and crept up again, thrusting its face into his and making knowing gestures with both skinny claws.

"I have no money!" proclaimed Master Burbage, and then, an awful suspicion causing his fingers to fly to the pouch hanging from his girdle, came to a standstill, a look of wonder settling on his features. Vainly his fingers fumbled through his pockets, hanging sleeves and belt. "Hah! the villain with the vegetables!" he ejaculated, at which the sinful imp ran away bounding and whooping, only turning at the

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corner to cry hee-haw and make a foot of nose at an old fellow fooled again.

"Now a just pestilence light upon this quarter and all that dwell therein!" imprecated the Great Burbage, at which a pallid youth hanging in the shadow of the opposite wall with arms crossed and a smile upon his lips began to move sympathetically towards him. Rounding the next corner fast, the manager bumped into a lad wheeling away from a woman who stood with her hands on her hips, laughing at him. The shock of the collision knocked the lad's upraised right arm away from his face which was wet with tears, he reeled blindly off the portly bosom of Master Burbage, and came to rest against the corner of the wall down which his palms slipped until he lay a feebly heaving heap upon the cobbles. His companion with commendable change of manner gave good even to the manager, but he shaking his stick at her said: "Fie! ye should all be whipped down here," an opinion which he still held an hour later after his interview with his rival in the playhouse business. . . .

Will's comedy came to performance on a February day five months later. He had written it for the Company he knew, there was a suitable part in it for everyone. Early in December the Theatre was shaken by the news that an arrangement had been made with the manager of the Rose; all the best players in London were being taken up by Master Burbage and Master Henslowe and welded into two great first-rate companies, the Lord Admiral's and Lord Strange's. There was some question of the Rose being enlarged and re-decorated, and during its period of repairs the Curtain, which was closed now for the same reason, should house its Company. Players were coming from Lord

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Worcester's old troupe and the Queen's, Edward Alleyn was to be the star-performer in one of the Companies and young Richard Burbage in the other.

Will's comedy was to be produced at the Theatre. He would not get Philipps for his Clown now, nor Kempe for his Constable; Cowley would be gone to the Rose, and Lowin. On the other hand, they were gaining Bryan from Henslowe, he would probably play the Spaniard better than Philips, and Nid Field would certainly make a likelier King than Armin, for he was a gentleman by birth. Gabriel Spencer too was coming back to them, having had a fight with someone at the Rose. The two Companies had been made up by managers who knew to a hair the characters and capabilities of the men at their disposal. Who but Master Burbage would have realized that although Kempe and Cowley quarrelled they must not be separated, for either alone lost half his value; who but Master Henslowe would have parted with Field simply because the fool was jealous of Alleyn?

A good many people disliked Alleyn. He had one characteristic which is eternally unpopular amongst players. He had money of his own, did not need to act if he did not fancy a part offered, could afford to wait. The Owner of the Theatre, who ought to have known, said comfortingly that no player could ever afford to wait. People forgot him. If he rested for eighteen months people said that he drank or was getting past work or, worst of all, couldn't get any. Alleyn had been with Lord Worcester's troupe, and then, leaving them suddenly had played for a few weeks last season at the Theatre. His father was a wealthy inn-keeper and his mother a gentlewoman, a Townley from Lancashire. Gentleman Ned had driven them wild at the Theatre

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last winter. You ought to see Sly imitating him looking around the tire-room for a clean spot on which to hang his sweet mantle! You ought to see his face when Sly kindly pretends to pick a flea from his sleeve. Comes yawning in, drawing off his gloves, five minutes before the piece is due to begin, and then, at the end, nips off before the Jig in which everyone who has taken part is supposed to appear. He says coolly that the Jig ought to be abolished. When he has just died upon the stage in a tragedy, it hurts his soul to have to come back bowing and smirking, laying his hand on his heart. But people expect the Jig. They like to know that Ned Alleyn is alive and kicking, and it is no great sport for the lesser players to have to trim their faces into smiles and present themselves again and again, while everyone in the galleries is roaring for their Ned, who has gone off to a supper-party with a lord!

He is twenty-six, extremely handsome in a somewhat heavy-featured style, with curling hair of the true fashionable red-brown colour, well anointed with scented oil (Sniff? Sniff? Ned's arrived then?), and, when he considers it worth while, a most winning manner. He comes to rehearsal in clothes so good that once when he was unknown by the staff at the Theatre, he got shut into the Lord's Room while a scared assistant ran to find Cuthbert Burbage to tell him that a great gentleman had come to watch the players go through their parts this morning. Well, the laugh had been on him that time, and he had acknowledged it, not misliked it maybe, turning his gold ring on his little finger and giving his cloak to the property man to hold while he strode on to act. And he could act. Even those who disliked him acknowledged that, with the singular honesty which was another characteristic of the

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profession. In a few years Dick Burbage might be as good, but Ned Alleyn had never seemed to need teaching or practice. It was maddening them to hear him say that he did not truly care for mumming and would sooner have been at the University of Oxford studying to become a Master of Arts! He loved books and all kinds of learning. The only things he never could learn were his own parts. "Out upon it! dry again! You must pardon me that I read this speech. You know not what it is to be slow of study." He would go home swearing to be a good lad and give up an invitation for to-night so that he might arrive word perfect to-morrow. When he could not remember he could always put in stuff of his own, fully as apt as the author's only unluckily not possessing the cues expected by humbler folk.

Would this young gentleman ever work in harness, asked James Burbage. "He's not in your debt, I take it?"

Henslowe, forgetting that he was speaking to one who had been a player long before he had been the owner of a theatre, had said to the rival manager that the secret of getting work out of a Company was to have every man in it beholden to you. "Should these fellows ever come out of my debt I should have no further rule over them. That's my worst fear for your scheme of reformation: You will be sending me free men."

It then appeared that Alleyn would not be a free man at the Rose. He was buying a partnership in the management with Henslowe and getting Henslowe's heiress to wife. Next autumn the wedding should be. Joan was not sixteen yet and must learn to like her lover. A month ago mother had called her into her own bedchamber and looking strangely, said that at sixteen she had been a mother, so Joan was now old enough to

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go to the playhouse. Mother had then kissed her and poor cousin Blanche had shown her how to fix on a mask. . . . And the very next morning as she sat at her sewing she heard a voice outside made her drop her needle, and in comes father with a smile on his face and his arm round the shoulders of Prince Hal himself. . . .

James Burbage, looking like a pleased sea-monster, had to admit that if that was the way of it Alleyn might work.

The new arrangement did not stop at exchange of players. There were also large exchanges of playbooks and music; even pieces by eminent authors, promised but not yet delivered, were peddled between the rivals. Henslowe dearly wanted three plays called *Faustus*, *The Jew of Malta* and *Tamburlaine*, for Alleyn who had made his name in them. Now anyone at the Theatre could have told him that though Burbage's Company acted Marley, and Marley was one of their most popular authors, that gentleman himself had never seen the inside of James Burbage's house. No Sunday suppers with Mistress Burbage and the girls for Kit Marley. He drank, of course, but it was not that. Since nobody from the Theatre was present at this horrific interview Master Burbage was able to drive a fair bargain. Carefully drawing on the sheet of paper in front of him a curious pattern of someone with a tail and trident, he asked whether Master Henslowe would be wanting the new play Kit Marley was even now writing for the Theatre. "Good neighbour," murmured Master Henslowe moved, "I must not leave you bare!" "Marry," said James Burbage, "then you must give me somewhat." He got eight old plays in return for Marley's four new ones. Henslowe was a little loath to give up the chronicle piece containing the freaks of Prince Hal in which Alleyn was excellent, still it was a

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very young man's part, and Dick Burbage must be granted his chance. Personally he thought nothing of the play with the ghost and the prince who couldn't make up his mind to murder his uncle, and less still of the *Tamer Tamed*, that old wife-beating plot.

James said: "I can maybe get a young fellow I have up at my place mend these for me. Since they once took, there should be somewhat in them." Then more sharply: "None of these ever printed, heh?"

Henslowesaid: "None, upon my soul. But they have been played so often, the galleries can give you the words of the most of them ere they are spoken on the stage."

"Humph! Then my man must fit new words."

"Let him do that and you will be no loser by this change."

The playhouses never gave the same piece two days running. Throughout their seasons they must present a different show every afternoon, turning the tub at decent intervals. About six brand-new plays were produced every season, the remainder being certain old favourites, or last year's successes refurbished. A hand bill of the stuff advertised for a week in February looked somewhat like this:

	THE THEATRE	THE ROSE
Monday	<i>The Seven Deadly Sins</i>	<i>Titus and Vespasian</i>
Tuesday	<i>Fair Em</i>	<i>A Knack to Know a Knav</i>
Wednesday	<i>God Speed the Plough</i>	<i>Jew of Malta</i>
Thursday	<i>Cruelty of a Step-Mother</i>	<i>Pope Joan</i>
Friday	<i>Love's Labour's Lost</i>	<i>Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay</i>
Saturday	<i>All Husbands Cuckolds</i>	<i>Orlando Furioso</i>
Sunday	<i>James IV</i>	<i>Costly Whore</i>

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If the two managers could but have found themselves two new patrons while they were at their bargain, the prospect for next season would have been golden. But patrons were far to find and ill to please. When Master Burbage wrote humbly to my Lord Strange to beg permission for certain new servants to join the Company, a secretary sent word that my lord's father was very sick and my lord must not be disturbed. When Master Henslowe wrote to the Lord Admiral he got an answer with that nobleman's own signature, but what an answer. *Pope Joan* crossed out of the list, and *A Knack to Know a Knave* queried. "*My lord must see this. Is this not lewd stuff?*" A second application begging for the return of the play sent for approval brought no play only a message that so long as there was something fit to be shown to the Court on Shrove Tuesday my Lord Admiral melled him no more in the matter. Out alas! how unlike the days when Lord Leicester was master with his "*Spare noe expense.*" "*Doe this hantumble.*" "*Have two fresh fair plays ready to show the Queen at my house next week.*" . . . The Queen had got a new favourite, her old love's stepson, but the young man did not know how to handle her, and was as often in disgrace as favour. He had committed the unpardonable folly of marrying. He had already a very inferior company of actors using his name, and could not be counted upon to put his hand in his pocket. The managers had to agree to make do for the nonce with what they had in the way of patrons. Naturally each knew what the other was thinking—a few more years of this, and then there will be a King's Company and a Prince of Wales's. They made show of being very confidential, but neither said anything like that. Burbage confessed that he would much have liked the Lord

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Chamberlain's name for his house. Henslowe in return mentioned that in about two seasons' time a worthy nobleman would be coming of age, the grandson of his old master.

Lord Southampton's widowed mother was Lord Montague's daughter, and she clucked after her only son like a hen on the edge of a duck-pond—a pretty sight. Lord Burleigh, who was the fair youth's guardian, had sent him to Cambridge where he had taken his degree eighteen months ago. He was now in London, though few had seen him yet, a member of Gray's Inn, fast held by his studies. Last autumn when the Queen had visited Lord Montague's mansion of Cowdray on her progress, my young lord had been brought to her notice. Lord Burleigh was of the opposite faction to her present favourite. It was considered that if he could get that position for his young ward he would have done a clever thing.

Not a very seemly subject for debate between two elderly gentlemen sitting in the upper chamber of a house overlooking the dark Bankside, this totting up of the chances for a lad of nineteen with a lady of sixty. It was business to them, and therefore worthy of consideration. The rise of a new star at court was ever a player's business.

For himself, said Henslowe, he feared my lord unapt. He was an Adonis, oh ay, a marvel to look upon and to hear, but that half of his brain that was not stuffed with book-learning seemed to be crammed with hopes of military action. This must not be noised abroad, but he happened to know that a few weeks ago the young nobleman had slipped across to France under his own sails, his scheme being no less than an attempt to aid the new King of France against our common enemies.

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He had made a brother of the one man he should have avoided, the present favourite, Lord Essex, and together they had hatched some wild boy's plot of forcing the Queen's hand by raising an English expedition to muster at Dieppe. Lord Essex had failed to join his sworn companion and my young lord, after three weeks of staring in vain across grey-green waters, three weeks of his own company in a foreign sea-port town, had been commanded tamely home again.

What an escapade for one who had been deemed too precious to be sent to Italy with a tutor! His mother had been in a frenzy lest he should fall into a low fever and die abroad like poor Sir Philip. He was one of your over-tall lads with a vermeil colour in his cheeks and great hare-coloured eyes that looked as if they sought for somewhat not of this world. "He can express his mind as well in Latin and French as English," said Henslowe, "and is very courteous, modest and rather disposed to hear than to answer, very comely and greatly given to learning, and desirous to excel in sport, but as yet rather weak and tender of body." That was picture enough to show you that he would never prosper with a certain person. Nay, for she liked more to fill the eye so to speak, something broader in every sense. All the gentlemen that she had favoured had possessed, when one came to think of it, a touch of her father in them. My Lord Robert had been a fellow of thews, and so was his step-son, with his magnificent sapphire-blue eyes, chestnut locks growing low on his broad forehead, and surprising reddish beard. Like many courtiers he had dyed that red out of compliment to his mistress. "He means to visit the playhouses, though, I hear," said Henslowe, returning to the

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younger earl. "When he did me the honour to send for my bill of Shows I sent him yours too."

If a play was a failure at its first performance it might never be given again, and there were divers and manifold causes for a failure. Will's comedy rehearsed ill. It was the sort of piece that demanded polished performance and showed at its worst half-baked. Young Jeffes, who was the princess, was nervous at first showings and when he was nervous did not speak grammar. There was a lovely opening for the fourth act:

*"Was that the king, that spurred his horse so hard
Against the steep uprising of the hill?"*

"Act four! Act four!" bawls Sinkler, hurrying on to the stage. "Beginners; First, Second and Third ladies; Princess!" They are rehearsing in their costumes, for this is their last chance before to-morrow's showing. Cuthbert Burbage is looking at his watch. Already they are ten minutes behind, and there is the change into the Russian dresses in the next act, so that can't be cut. He whispers to his father, who holds up a finger for silence as the princess sweeps on. There is a smile upon the Great Burbage's face. "Nothing like a white robe," he is thinking. And then that damnable shaver opens its lips and in a frightened squeak inquires:

"Were that the King?"

It ought not to have gone so ill. There were no properties to be lugged on and off. The only properties to be remembered in the whole play were six love letters and one document lying ready for signature on a table. Yet even to-day, when the time came for Dick to sign that paper—within the first ten minutes—after a blank pause, amidst gasps and sniggers from behind, on

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limped a messenger bearing a pottle of ink in one hand and a quill in the other. "Hoy! What's here? what's here?" comes from that awful form half hidden by curtains up in the Lord's Room. "Please you, sir, we forgot the pen and ink again," calls Dick, nobly taking blame for what is the shaking Sinkler's business. "And who was that brought pen and ink on as if summoned by a dumb spirit—a rare piece of invention?" "Please you, sir, only Will that put pen to this piece."

Will was at the Theatre by eight o'clock next morning. He had a right to be there. Since he had been promoted from the post of book-holder he got small parts. He had to rehearse to-day as a blind beggar, a ghost and a Scottish earl—one of those earls who stand about at the back of the tent while kings make speeches. Otherwise there would have been no excuse for an author presenting himself in the tire-room while his own first play was being shown. Authors were nothing, unless they happened to be notable scholars—like Greenc, who had "Master of Arts, Cambridge" printed after his name on all playbills. In such case they were the devil.

Snow began to fall about ten o'clock. "Drives folk into the playhouse," smiled Heminge too cheerfully. "If they have coaches to drive them to its doors," added Richards, meaning no unkindness. Most people in the playhouse meant no unkindness to Will. They knew that he was one of themselves. He had been through the mill and no mistake. They had watched him clinging to employment in the manner that tells its own tale. Will did not mind how dirty or dull a job was, or even if it was not truly his. "I'll see to't." "Ay, ay, sir." "Coming, sir." "Anon, anon!" You might fairly say of him that for the past seven years he

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had never refused to help anybody in a fix or scamped a distasteful chore. Cheerful with it too, poor soul.

By half an hour after noon the tiring-rooms were beginning to fill. The players strayed in and began to get into their habits. King, Braggart, Clown, Constable, Pedant and Curate, slowly came to life under their begetter's sick eyes. Dick Burbage, always fighting-fit before a first showing, took the author by the shoulders.

"Dost thou know what is my father's practice and counsel on such occasions? Give ear then, give ear, I say, for I am about to speak better sense than thou shalt understand. Will, we're all thy friends here and mean well by thee, for my part I warrant I shall never have had more admiration than I mean to get to-day in this play. But we may not endure thy presence behind here, peeping between the curtains so fearfully that a bottle of ale cannot be opened but thou thinkest somebody hisses. Go hence! Go round to the doors and watch sely folk paying precious pence to witness thy stinkard comedy. If thou hast tuppence in thine own pocket spend it on a gallery seat and when this day's work is done—not one moment earlier—return to tell us if thou hast gotten tuppence worth. Thus the sire! Hear and obey!"

Far away, the shouts of the booksellers with their long boxes full of printed plays and pamphlets gathering at the theatre doors hung upon the raw air. The house must be filling. The principals' tiring-room had grown crowded and noisy. Sweat was running down its glazed windows; there was not a space left vacant on table or bench upon which to lay down a pin. The walls were hidden by cloaks bulging from pegs and the floor was piled up with cast underclothes and footwear.

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Every personality had doubled itself, and there was not room for so many legs and elbows, so many intent figures all in a hurry. Let the players begin to change never so early, at the end there was always a rush.

The musicians came through on their way to their gallery, taking their instruments out of their bags and running their fingers over strings and stops, raising ghosts of melodies warranted to trickle up and down an author's spine. "What sort of a house?" whispered someone, and in the silence that followed someone else was heard saying had not this new piece an unlucky name?

The Great Burbage had a personal servant, whose real name was Wilkinson, but at first showings when he accompanied his master to the theatre he changed his name with his dress and called himself "Tooley." "Tooley's come. That means the master's here."

The call boy slopped past in shoes that did not fit, bleating for beginners, and that table with the ink and pen safe on it was carried by. Sinkler's anxious face peered round the door, and half the Company went out towards him, throwing last looks in the mirror on the wall, twitching down doublets, nodding and grimacing. Several of them stopped and shook Will by the hand.

They went out into echoing space, and a cold gust blew in, raising a multitude of odours in the tire-room where only Dick now remained. Dick, looking splendid as the mocking lord, had brought an apple out of his puffed breeches, and was calmly crunching it, standing with one leg hoisted on a box while a tight-lipped dresser ran a swift needle up a ladder as swiftly ascending his hose. "Anchor up," commented Dick, casting away his apple core as the trumpets blared from the

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tower, and after a flutter like the sound of birds' wings overhead, silence descended upon the room.

Sinkler's face reappeared, the dresser bit off her thread and Dick stepped out on tiptoe, blowing a kiss to Will.

"This life will be the death of me," said Will aloud, and the kneeling dresser snuffing the extra candle she had used to her darning, replied with a chuckle: "Ay, sir. Puff! Like that. We all goes out to play our parts when the trumpet calls, and there is nobody cares. . . ."