CHAPTER VIII

THE THEATRE

THERE was a strong rumour amongst the various companies who performed in them, that the great Burbage, proprietor of the two first playhouses in London, had started life as a joiner. Peter Street his head carpenter allowed that the master knew too much to have been picked up in any other manner, and if you wanted to convince yourself, said he, you had only to look at the difference between the construction of Our Theatre and That Curtain. Like many who had been with Burbage from his beginnings as a manager, Peter had never really been able to grasp that the upstart Curtain had now been quietly absorbed by his master.

The Theatre was the northernmost of the two houses, and it had the right to be called THE Theatre, for when it had gone up there had not been another building of its kind in England. Plays were being performed in private houses, street squares, barns, town halls, moot-courts, school houses, churches, and, most frequently, the yards of carriers' inns. Some innkeepers kept permanent stages in their yards and benches in their galleries, and from the point of view of the audience a show given in a yard had the great advantage that you could generally escape before the collection was taken. The poor players tried to get over this by having the collection in the middle of the play and by posting men at all the exits, but those large carriers' inns in the very

centre of the city were as full of bolt holes as a rabbit's warren, besides there must be continual traffic in and out. When at the very end of Act Five a heavy waggon thundered on the gates for admittance, James Burbage, player, standing with his foot upon the Dragon *Luxuria*, which he had just slain after ten minutes' fast fight, lost his lines and cursed instead, because his haggard eyes were watching fifty potential tuppences preparing to slip out as that wain came in.

There was money to be made out of plays, or else the keepers of such famous houses as the Cross Keys in Gracious Street and the Belle Sauvage on Ludgate Hill would never have exposed themselves to the incessant annoyance and interference that the loan of their yards occasioned. They turned a pretty penny of course by the sale of nuts and ale and fresh fruit during the performances, but James Burbage knew that what made the business worth while for them was their private arrangement with the managers of the companies, and year by year he grew more certain that the man who could provide a place where plays could be performed secure from interruption would be a rich man. At this time there was no such place. In theory if you found a play going on at one of the five principal inns that kept those defiant-looking stages in their yards all the year round, it must mean that some great lord's servants were rehearsing a piece to entertain the Queen next winter.

For the Queen, thank God! liked plays and so did nearly all the nobility of her realm. The courtiers and the rabble were the players' friends, the Church and the Civic Authorities their enemies. And it was a more evenly matched contest than it sounded, for though the players were brisk to seek the protection of some great

name and all styled themselves the Earl of so and so's Company or my lord such-an-one's Servants, the Lord Mayor had the right to prohibit any performance within the liberties of the City and to order the pulling down of any taverns and hostelries that continued to exhibit shows.

Shows! that was what James Burbage called them, that was what he and all his family lived for. He had infected even his rich brother-in-law Brayne, the grocer of Bucklersbury. James was at the head of Lord Leicester's company and rehearsing at the Cross Keys an excellent show which was bringing in a tidy sum every afternoon and might as like as not be commanded at Whitehall for Twelfth Night, when affairs in the showman's world came to a crisis.

The Lord Mayor had secured from the Common Court an ordinance which as good as nullified the special licence painfully obtained from the Queen for her favourite's troupe only eight months before. Some of its restrictions were within reason. James Burbage smiled when he read that all plays must be submitted to the censorship of a committee of Aldermen, but when he discovered that innkeepers were to give up an unspecified quantity of their profits to the City charities, and that no plays should be given during time of sickness or any other time named by the Lord Mayor, he knew that the days of the players within the walls of London were numbered.

Without letting anyone in his Company suspect anything (a thing most difficult when you knew what a Company was), he went away to hold the first of many haggling private conferences with his brother-in-law, and sixteen months later an enormous scaffolding was arising on a piece of waste ground, part of the dissolved

Priory of Holywell, half a mile north of the Bishop's Gate in the liberty of Shoreditch. It was safely outside the City walls and yet not too far from the City, it was in a suburb already associated in the minds of the Londoners with sports and pastimes, best of all it was in a district with a spotless reputation. Never throughout his career did James Burbage forget the value of respectability. His own family life exhibited it, his own wife read every play offered to him, as playwrights learnt to their cost. "You have come for your play, sir? There's your play!" hurling it in a startled face. "Your play is a filthy thing, sir, and so are you. Your heroine's a slut and your hero's a lewdster. The people who come to my shows don't care for sluts and lewdsters and neither do I! Get out of my sight before I do you a mischief" (bawling over the stairhead). "Go and wash your mouth out! Go to Hell and ask them to help you write somewhat with lambs and young love and virgin's prayers in't."

That was the spirit that had made James Burbage choose for his theatre an unfashionable district north of the City. The Bankside, south of the river was the obvious site for a place of entertainment, since it already had the Bear and Bull Baiting grounds, the Archery Butts and Paris Gardens. But the Bankside also had gaming dens and numbers of houses with scarlet lattices and the sign of a winking Cupid outside, windows over-looking the black waters at which beckoning creatures displayed themselves, narrow lanes haunted by foot-pads and worse. Ladies would not venture into them, solid citizens would not take their families down there. No! no! sinless Shoreditch for him, vowed James Burbage, standing astraddle in the centre of his half-finished venture, seeing through its

unfilled windows the blameless Finsbury fields through which the sort of people he meant to catch should stroll in confidence to pay good money for a Show produced by a manager who would not betray them.

No more quarrels with nervous and greedy innkeepers, no more alarms of arrest and imprisonment, no more shamming that you were merely rehearsing for an occasion at court, no more having to take the road into that deadly country every summer whether you liked it or not! James Burbage was providing a home for the homeless, a Christian act, and he knew, he felt in his bones that he was to be rewarded. He had provided the plans and brother-in-law Brayne was providing the large means called for by them. It was no use doing things on a small scale, said James. Room for a thousand spectators was his scheme. Brother-in-law, thrilled by the sight of that vast structure rising on the same spot where he had been carried last winter to observe some tumbledown cottages, a wilderness of nettles and brambles and a particularly stagnant horse-pond, saw the future with James's eyes, sold his stock of groceries, disposed of his mansion in Bucklersbury, and like James took a house in Shoreditch whence he could watch the work proceeding day by day. He got into trouble with his wife for doing all this, but as he pointed out to her they had no children, his fortune would in any case have descended to James's family, and as soon as the Theatre opened they would be richer than they had ever been. The Theatre opened in October before it was actually finished, because it had cost so much more than anyone could have foreseen. James bravely pawned the twenty-one years' lease, an act which caused his first disagreement with the cautious Brayne, ran round getting friends to lend him

money (he was always a genius at borrowing) and finally he said that the building would have to be completed with the first profits that came in.

He had now been a manager for sixteen years, and though his early struggles as a player had been dire, he sometimes thought that he had never known what trouble meant until he had built a theatre. For a manager's life was not easy, was not the golden bliss that he had once expected, and that most people still believed. The money was there ready to flow in, he had been right about that; people wanted plays, and he was ready to give them plays, sometimes the profits were as large as he had ever hoped, but somehow there were always losses equally staggering, and then there were always, always the troubles. There was the trouble with Alleyn, who had seemed so obliging a landlord until it had transpired that it was quite doubtful if the ground he had leased belonged to him at all. Peckham was the name of the man who had brought a suit against Alleyn for the recovery of the land on which the playhouse was built, and there had been a time when James Burbage had been forced to keep a guard in his theatre day and night to prevent Peckham coming to take possession of it, or failing that, wreck it. He had tried to get Alleyn to make common cause with him against Peckham, but Alleyn was refusing to extend their twenty-one years' lease at the end of the first ten years as had been agreed, because he said that James had not rebuilt some tenements on the premises. James spent two hundred pounds doing that, but Alleyn still refused to consider a new lease. After expending another forty pounds on repairs and engaging six experts to pass judgment on them, James went to Alleyn armed with a copy of the lease which his landlord—

if he had indeed the right to the title—maintained was not a verbatim copy of the old one. Alleyn then propounded his idea of an agreement, a document which included a rise in the rent to nearly double the original figure, a proposal that James should, after five years, convert the building to other uses, and a demand that James should ultimately leave it in the possession of the landlord.

Then there was the trouble about the mortgage inextricably mixed up in the quarrel with Brayne, which had begun within a year of the opening of the Theatre, and though less dangerous to its very existence than the Alleyn trouble, which only cropped up on quarter days, was far more present and insistent. The Brayne quarrel was as bitter as only a quarrel between two close relatives over money can be, and when brother-in-law had died (as he did after having accused James of possessing a secret key to the common box of theatre takings, and after James had hit him in the presence of a notary to whom they had gone for the purpose of arbitration) the trouble with the executors and the widow began. James and the deceased had mortgaged the Theatre to one Hyde and had forfeited the mortgage by non-payment. Hyde could not turn James out, but he could go to law against him, and did for the course of eleven years.

Meanwhile James was growing old and his family had grown up. Cuthbert never would make a player. In any other household he would have been allowed to follow his natural bent, which was for business of almost any kind. Since he was a Burbage, work was awaiting him within a few steps of home. He drifted without the slightest wriggle for escape, into his inevitable place as his father's right-hand business man in

the Theatre. As for Richard, he had made his first appearance on the stage at nine years old. With nameless unspoken fears his father had watched him pass unscratched through the critical period of the early teens; now that his younger son was getting towards twenty, James would not lightly have unbosomed what private hopes he nourished for Richard's future as a player.

Richard had not all things in his favour. He was not strictly to be called handsome. He was a little under middle height with disproportionately long arms and broad shoulders. Like his father, from whom he had got his olive complexion and tightly curling black hair, he would grow stout with middle age. No Adonis, Richard, yet from that first afternoon when he had alighted upon the boards, let down by wires, dressed in a wisp of silver loin-cloth, a pair of spangled gauze wings and a wreath of roses, he had shot Cupid's dart into every female breast.

James Burbage walking slowly home after rehearsal, walking with head bent and both hands fumbling full of papers half the length of Halliwell lane behind his younger son, watched with interest the effect that Dick produced on all the womenkind of Shoreditch liberty. James watched not with pride, not with anxiety; a look that his company knew was in his eye, the Showman's look, appraising, calculating. Dick capless, with his hands in his pockets, is striding along whistling like a young lord; although he is not tall he easily outsteps Kempe the clown, who plays all the comic servant's parts at the Theatre. Ellen must have bidden Dick bring Kempe back to dinner. Excellent woman, she knows every player in the Company by heart and everyone whose life is not a disgrace gets his invitation

to her table in turn. Odd the way all clowns seem to be afflicted with settled melancholy and more often than not vinegary tongues. Kempe has in addition a perpetual rheum in his head throughout the winter season, so misfortunate that the winter is the playgoers' season. Some days you can hardly hear a word he is saying. But that blank face with its potato nose is a fortune in itself, and people are beginning to recognize him by his snorting sniffs and continual handkercher business. Perhaps they think he does it on purpose. Now Dick has linked arms with the company-hating clown to detain him while he speaks to some matrons of his mother's acquaintance. What a rogue, what a merry graceless rogue is this broad-shouldered impudent lad, with his long black lashes veiling his twinkling dark eyes, his twisting red mouth as large as a horseman's wallet. None of your lady-faced young masters, Dick. He's all the old Adam, has been from his mother's womb. In spite of the fact that he can act anything from a drowning kitten to a grave-digger, he is deliberately vile in women's parts, and has tried by every means to get out of playing them. James chuckles, remembering poor Cuthbert arriving with a scarlet rag to his nose ten minutes before the performance one day, to explain to his father with abject apology that his younger brother would not be able to play the Princess Saba this afternoon, the princess, in full costume, having just received two blue eyes from other members of the company in just recompense for an arrangement of buckets of water on the top of the tire-room door. "Tell him to play Saba in a mask" was James's unmoved reply, "and tell him to play her spritely, for I shall be waiting for him in the tiring-room with my rod as soon as he comes off."

Dick has no cap to doff on meeting ladies, but he makes a leg—he has a good leg for a boot—lays his hand on his heart. Oh! he is your Orlando fantastico to the manner born, has the right word for everyone, would charm a blind mole from its mate. "Do you come to see our new Show, Mistress Bridget? *The Faithful Fishwife*, has a ghost in't rises in two white sheets out of a tomb and kills a man. You have had a trouble in your teeth? I am truly sorry. Have you ever tried a hot salt bag? Oh! your little son is troubled with his teeth. You should fret his gums with your thimble, or if it like you I will lightly come round and slit the child's gums with my palette knife. Bring him to our show too, for 'tis a piece most tragic and pathetical, meet stuff for tears, save when Mr. Kempe here sets all London a'roaring from the moment he pokes out his head. *The Faithful Fishwife*. We open on Tuesday. God ye good den."

Just as Cuthbert must have been a lawyer if he had not happened to be born a Burbage, so Dick would have made a painter. He spends all his pocket money on tubes and boards, all his spare time standing in front of an easel, turns up at rehearsals daubed all the colours of a herald pursuivant, and has by insinuating flattery persuaded one after another member of his father's gradually embittered troupe to sit as model for him. James Burbage views Dick's painting much as he viewed Cuthbert's early marriage, both are things not to be unduly deprecated, since they keep young men out of the way of sin, and as long as they do not interfere with the real business of life. Sons may marry, children be born to them, but the only things that really matter to a Burbage take place in the theatre.

The women of the family are as much enslaved by the

stage as the men. Nobody in the Company can imagine a time when the great Burbage's wife was not the mistress of a player's household. Ellen Burbage at fifty is generally untidy, since she never has time to do more than huddle up her greying hair and leap into her gown, her prominent nose is a little red at the tip from indigestion, her gaunt jaw a little wolfish, she has a voice like a trumpet, and in her blue eyes shines the wild light of a single enthusiasm. Yet like her untidy friendly house she can startle you by unexpected moments of beauty and interest. Her sweeping curtsey is a noble thing even when all that awaits you after it is a cold supper indifferently served. For thirty years she has been a player's wife, searching for plays, giving audience to people (often doubtfully sober) who have written plays, buying, mending, patching and preparing clothes for plays, running through music for plays, drawing designs for stage properties, and in her spare time giving meals to unexpected persons at inconvenient hours, nursing strangers through sickness, and bearing five children to a player. She and two anxious elderly-looking daughters attend many rehearsals, but James Burbage, true to his character for respectability, will never allow women of his family to enter the tiring-rooms or the stage door of his theatre. They sit in the Lord's Room, a piece of the lower gallery at that end of its curve nearest to the stage, closed off by a wooden partition from the rows of ordinary seats, containing five chairs and hung with curtains. There were four Rooms for hire in the Theatre, and they were the most expensive places in the house. Ellen often wondered why, as from them you could see less of what you were meant to and more of what you were not meant to than from the tuppenny gallery or the penny

standing room, but like many things in the Theatre they were the decided choice of patrons and not to be questioned. Ellen Burbage never made trouble. She was the only person in James Burbage's life who never made trouble, a paragon, a pearl amongst women, even when she stood spilling something which she was heating in a saucepan all over her skirts in the parlour as she showed a sheepish lad of fifteen how to act a virtuous gentlewoman unjustly suspected by a jealous lord.

The lawsuits with Alleyn, Peckham, Hyde, the executors and Widow Brayne were not James Burbage's only troubles even outside the Theatre. Besides them there was always the plague to be reckoned with, and fire and earthquake. One could not really reckon with the plague, but thanks to God and Peter Street there had never been a fire in the Theatre yet, and when the earthquake had come not a single soul had been killed rushing out of the building, although some had done their best to trample one another to death, and the only visible result of the occurrence the next morning had been a fissure in one of the outer walls.

The Curtain, James's second theatre—and what a trouble that had been to him for those seven years until its disappointed owner had sold it to him—was not built like the Theatre of seasoned wood, solidly planned and soundly fixed. He remembered that triumphal morning when he had gone round his new purchase with his head carpenter, poking his finger into holes, jumping on planks that creaked. All the wire-work had been flimsy and rotten. "Ay, Venus's parents is getting a pension for life out o' them," said Peter Street pointing upwards. "Venus's parents?" frowned James. "Poor child dropped from fifty feet

and was taken up . . ." began Peter. "Enough! enough!" breathed James, covering his face. The Great Burbage's attitudes were naturally theatrical and guests at his table liked to see him turn really pale when a dish was dropped in the kitchen, or when he described the funeral of Sir Philip Sidney which he considered the only creditable Show ever given to London not staged by himself.

As well as the Theatre and the Curtain—which was named after Curtain Close in the old Priory, not as everyone imagined on account of its own handsome back-cloth of rayed silk—James was master of a livery stable near Smithfield and an Inn close to the two playhouses in Shoreditch. He had recently, at Cuthbert's instigation, made over the Inn to Myles, who was one of the Brayne executors. This was better, as Cuthbert pointed out, than having the widow and Myles arriving to post themselves at the Theatre doors to take entrance money from the audience and much better than having Richard beat them thence with a broomstick. Jack Alleyn, one of the Company, (no relation to that accursed Alleyn the landlord down in Essex, but a brother of the famous player Ned Alleyn of the Rose Theatre, Bankside,) had been on the spot at the time of the affray and warned James that one of these days Richard's temper would land them in the Clink. From his account it must have been a capital show, young Richard, Harry the Fifth come again, vaulting lightly down amongst the invaders laying about him to right and left with foam-flecked lips and black eyes gone lantern-green like those of a cat at night. James, who knew whence Richard got his temper, said with two fingers stuck in his vest and his beetling brows drawn thunderously together, that next time there was

a disturbance at his theatre doors he would give both his sons pistols loaded with powder and hempseed to shoot the murderous thieves in the legs. Nevertheless he made over the George Inn to Myles.

He was in the habit of enjoying jests all his own and had framed and hanging on the wall above his crowded desk in his Halliwell Street residence a paragraph cut from a printed sermon preached fourteen years ago by a reverend gentleman called Stockwood. Persons waiting to see the Great Burbage got a start when they found staring them in the face from the walls of his house:

"WILL NOT A FILTHY PLAY, WITH THE BLAST OF A TRUMPET, SOONER CALL THITHER A THOUSAND THAN ONE HOUR'S TOLLING OF THE BELL BRING TO THE SERMON AN HUNDRED?"

Not that James was against the Church. The Great Burbage attended his parish fane of St. Leonard's, Shoreditch on as many Sundays as he could spare, bringing with him Ellen, his daughters, his two fine sons and his daughter-in-law. When Cuthbert's eldest child could be trusted not to bawl her grandfather added a telling touch by appearing leading the little maid by the hand.

He tried not to give performances on Sundays, perhaps as much from piety as from fear of the Privy Council. Shoreditch was without the city walls, but the Mayor and Aldermen had an ungentlemanly custom of complaining of matters beyond their jurisdiction to the Lord Chamberlain, and James did not want to offend the Lord Chamberlain. He wanted, some day, to get that gentleman to be patron of his Company.

Lord Hunsdon, of whom they said that his Latin was as bad as his diplomacy, had a surreptitious liking for Shows.

So as often as possible on Sundays James Burbage went to St. Leonard's, and after dinner in the bosom of his family retired to his own chamber for an afternoon of meditation. To Sunday supper the Burbages always entertained at least a dozen guests, all of the only profession in the world that mattered. That was James's day of rest as far as the public eye could see. Only Peter Street had proved and Ellen Burbage guessed that towards dusk on Sunday afternoons the Great Burbage rose from his chair like a sailor hearing the mermaidens calling, chose two keys from the bunch in his desk, and slipping furtively down his own stairs, made his way to his own theatre alone and unrecognized. He must do this, or he could not know on Monday mornings things that one had only noticed late on Saturdays before locking up. He must do this, for no voice answered when one knocked at his door, and when one went in his chamber was void and his gown and hood gone and the two great keys of the Theatre.

"The hound returns to his vomit," sighed James Burbage to himself as with hood pulled up and lantern held low he came in sight of the mass of buildings rising black against the star-pricked skies, that dark castle of dreams from which he was never absent in thought and very seldom in body.

The Theatre was built of timber and its exterior was of lime and plaster pierced at intervals by pairs of windows. It was circular in shape and on its little tower rose a flag-staff from which, when a play was being produced, a flag that could be seen from Whitehall and in Chepeside fluttered defiantly against the northern

skies. The George Hostelry and several antique cottages with smoke twisting from their wry chimneys leant helplessly against one another amongst green tree-tops, all dwarfed into insignificance by their proximity to the mammoth building raised by James Burbage for London's entertainment.

It was quite in the suburbs still, in spite of the fact that new houses were being added to an increasingly fashionable district every year. In the scarred fields to the south of it heaps of ivy-clad ruins spoke of the old priory, and behind it on the east shone the waters of that horse-pond which Master Brayne had viewed with such misgiving on a winter afternoon sixteen seasons ago. A well kept ditch now ran from the pond along the side of the George's barn and thence, passing under a long brick wall, was conducted into a sewer. In the middle of the brick wall were two high wooden gates, and this was the first point at which the secret visitor must set down his lantern and fumble for his keys. It was James Burbage's pleasure on these stolen opportunities to arrive at his playhouse as if he was a member of an audience. After entering the mysterious precincts closed to the world by those tall doors in the brick wall he would disdain to hurry round to the back of the edifice, but proceeding boldly up to the front of the deserted pile fit his second key into the great gates giving admission to the auditorium.

And however often he did this, however many Sundays he played this trick on himself, he never failed to recapture a moment of excitement when the key turned in its wards, and breathing a little faster than usual, the builder of the first theatre in London stepped into the silent echoing interior of his own playhouse.

It was never wholly dark inside, because the yard in

s centre was unroofed. Standing in the middle of the yard and looking up you could see the stars twinkling in the deep blue night sky overhead, and in daytime it was beautiful during performances to watch swift birds dipping and flashing across azure or sunset heavens. It was not so beautiful when it came on to rain; that meant a stampede for the galleries, but there was an extra charge for gallery seats, so even rain was not an unmixed evil. Spectators in the yard had to stand during the entire show, penny fare. They were called the "groundlings" and their manners were frequently bad. Gay youths amongst them were apt to stroll in and stand with hands on hips taking stock of all the faces in the galleries and when they saw one that they liked, fly up to that entrance, burst another penny, and press as near to the object of their choice as they could. They also spat on the sanded floor, cracked and ate nuts, sucked fruit and headed the applause and hissing. The Great Burbage catered for them. "Never forget the groundlings," was his advice to his Company. "Don't let your stuff come loosely off your tongue. Remember that there's a fellow at the back of the yard has paid to see your Show and his penny is as valuable to you as the shillings of the ladies in the patrons' Rooms. The ladies come to see you when they list, but the groundlings are our constant lovers."

There were three galleries at the Theatre constructed one above the other, their front supports painted to represent marble, their back curtains of scarlet cloth. In them were set rows of benches, of which the first row was much the best, provided that the wind was not driving the rain that way. The Lord's Room and the four other Rooms with their padded chairs so closely overlooking the stage had front cur-

tains as well as back, and on very wet days it was almost as good as the play to see the masked faces of ladies and the curled heads of gallants poking out between curtains held tightly together over raiment that would spoil. The stage itself, projecting far into the yard though raised by several steps above its level, had front curtains opening in the middle, but these were very little used after the beginning of a performance which was signified by the appearance of heralds on the turret top by the flagstaff blowing a sennet of trumpets. Like the galleries and the turret the stage was mercifully provided with a tiled roof upheld by a couple of sham marble pillars, and under it came a balcony occupied by musicians when they were needed, and by members of the Company when a speech had to be spoken or a scene acted as from the windows of a house or the walls of a castle.

It was on a fine night in September that James Burbage gave away to his wife the secret of his Sunday evening visits. "To what are we descended!" said he, waving at her a tangled flutter of manuscript pages. "The book-holder hath written a play!"

The book-holder was the menial who had to prompt and call the players. Whatever his age, he was usually known as The Boy.

Ellen was very much engaged sewing gold tissue leopards with glass emerald eyes on to the skirts of a tremendous scarlet cloak, the folds of which cluttered up half the floor. She said, poking her needle through the pink silk nose of a human-faced monster, "Gregory or Will?"

James Burbage knit his famous brows at her.

"The Boy at the Curtain is Gregory, Peter Street's nephew, the lame one at the Theatre, Will. He has a

wife in the country and three children and sends them money every week. You would do well to pay him more," said Ellen who knew everything, biting off a fresh thread.

"Will is the man," confessed James, with the bemused smile of one who knows that he has been betrayed into promising a kindness which will mean pains for someone else. "I trod upon his belly," he mentioned, shuddering at the memory. "He was asleep in the tuppenny gallery, crouched up close against the wall of the Lord's Room with the curtains swathed around his limbs. I had sudden need to go over to the Theatre this night to see for myself the condition of one of the galleries," he added hastily. "To-morrow I shall be pressed, and there shall not be the slaughter of many folk from falling through rotten timbers as at Paris Garden, laid upon the conscience of James Burbage while yet he has legs left to carry him to his playhouse at howsoever untimely hour."

"And what said Will when thou laidst foot upon his belly?" asked Ellen.

"Like an honest servitor," said James, "he waited for the master to speak first, which I, being affrighted by his uprearing and the feel of his belly soft through my boot, did incontinent, calling aloud 'Unhand me villain!' in a great voice. I took him for a creature of Peckham, or maybe Hyde himself in hiding, ha! He then had leave to utter, which he did, saying humbly, 'Master Burbage, God hath sent you!' I said 'What man art thou, that so bescreens't by night, stumblest on my secret counsel?' He said 'Oh! glad Heavens that voice! Speak again, let mine ears have surfeit of it.' "

"He does not drink," considered Ellen.

"So he would have me think. When he had exactly rehearsed to me his calling, I rated him sorely both for

the Horror he had brought upon me and for the use of my gallery and curtain. I asked him where he dwelt and he told me the naughty Bankside. 'I can afford no better.' 'And why,' quoth I, 'when you have a lodging, let it be never so loathly, shall you use my playhouse as your dormitory?' I knew what answer he must give if he was a true man, marry, that on Friday night, being pay day, he had spent all his comings-in upon some tavern or wench. But stepping past me to the edge of the gallery and looking out with a wonderful sad air upon the empty stage and the blue arc above spangled with the whole heavenly alphabet, raising his arms thus, and letting them drop again to his sides thus—it may be that he was stretching himself after his sleep—he said with his back to me, nigh in a whisper 'In the Theatre o' night I dream of Plays. . . .'

"For the moment—you know my habit—it seemed to me that we were two lutes racked to one pitch, then bringing in a twanging discord he wheeled upon me and in tones of huddling haste began, 'Master Burbage, I have written a play.'

"It may be that I leapt away as if a snake had fanged me. Lightly recovering myself and waving him off, 'Good fellow, good Will,' quoth I, 'I am sure that you have. You shall send it to Master Armin, my deputy in such things.' 'Nay,' said he, clawing at me, 'the gods cannot be so jealous. Single speech with you is a favour for which I have been hungry these five years.' He spake that word 'hungry' well. I wish I could get Dick to mouth it half so well in the prison scene, but that's not here. . . . It presently appeared that he had a play, fostered privately in his bosom these five years. 'Master,' said he, 'I have been a servitor in your playhouse for five winters and five summers. I have

heard what the young lords say as they arrive and depart on their horses. I have marked what the galleries clap. I have noted down what makes the groundlings cheer. . . .' 'That's nought,' smiled I, pitying him. 'I once met a gentleman had sailed to the New World with Sir Walter Raleigh. When I asked him what manner of land it was he told me that it was an ill one for a man plagued with boils.'

" 'Moreover,' said I, 'my wedded mistress reads every play that comes to our house. Your naughty play would not be meet for Mistress Burbage's eyes.' 'It would like me best to have Mistress Burbage read my play,' said he. 'She reminds me of my mother, who was a gentlewoman.' "

There was a moment's silence in the house of Burbage when James ended his tale on this note. Ellen knew that after the mention of a mother (as of an old wound) a player must start and fall musing awhile. James laid in her lap the dog-eared manuscript he had been using as a baton during his speech and went off to shift his gown. Both the Alleyns and several smaller fry were bidden to supper, but Ellen began to read the play at once, crouched as she was upon a cushion on the floor with all the leopards of that scarlet cloak squinting disapproval at her. If James had wanted her to be ready for his guests he should not have given her a play to read half an hour before they were due. As he hurried down the stairs in answer to a knocking on the front door fit to wake the dead, she called to him, and entering the cluttered room he discovered her moved by not one inch from the position in which he had quitted her. With shining eyes and flushed cheeks she cried out in her trumpet-loud voice:

"Husband, you have stumbled on a Get-Penny!"