ARTHUR QUILLER-COUCH

SHAKESPEARE'S CHRISTMAS

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Shakespeare's Christmas

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"*And moreover, at this Fair there is at all times to be seen Jugglings, Cheats, Games, Plays, Fools, Apes, Knaves, and Rogues, and that of every kind.... Now, as I said, the way to the Celestial City lies just through this town, where this lusty Fair is kept; and he that will go to the City, and yet not go through this Town, must needs go out of the World.*"—BUNYAN.

I

At the theatre in Shoreditch, on Christmas Eve, 1598, the Lord Chamberlain's servants presented a new comedy. Never had the Burbages played to such a house. It cheered every speech—good, bad, or indifferent. To be sure, some of the *dramatis personæ*—Prince Hal and Falstaff, Bardolph and Mistress Quickly—were old friends; but this alone would not account for such a welcome. A cutpurse in the twopenny gallery who had been paid to lead the applause gave up toiling in the wake of it, and leaned back with a puzzled grin.

"Bravo, master!" said he to his left-hand neighbour a burly, red-faced countryman well past middle age, whose laughter kept the bench rocking. "But have a care, lest they mistake you for the author!"

"The author? Ho-ho!"——but here he broke off to leap to his feet and lead another round of applause. "The author?" he repeated, dropping back and glancing an eye sidelong from under his handkerchief while he mopped his brow. "You shoot better than you know, my friend: the bolt grazes. But a miss, they say, is as good as a mile."

The cutpurse kept his furtive grin, but was evidently mystified. A while before it had been the countryman who showed signs of bewilderment. Until the drawing of the

curtains he had fidgeted nervously, then, as now, mopping his forehead in despite of the raw December air. The first shouts of applause had seemed to astonish as well as delight him. When, for example, a player stepped forward and flung an arm impressively towards heaven while he recited—

When we mean to build,
We first survey the plot, then draw the model—

and so paused with a smile, his voice drowned in thunder from every side of the house, our friend had rubbed his eyes and gazed around in amiable protest, as who should say, "Come, come, ... but let us discriminate!" By-and-by, however, as the indifferent applause grew warmer, he warmed with it. At the entrance of Falstaff he let out a bellowing laugh worthy of Olympian Jove, and from that moment led the house. The fops on the sixpenny stools began to mimic, the pit and lower gallery to crane necks for a sight of their fugleman; a few serious playgoers called to have him pitched out; but the mass of the audience backed him with shouts of encouragement. Some wag hailed him as "Burbage's Landlord," and apparently there was meaning, if not merit, in the jest. Without understanding it he played up to it royally, leaning forward for each tally-ho! and afterwards waving his hat as a huntsman laying on his hounds.

The pace of the performance (it had begun at one o'clock) dragged sensibly with all this, and midway in Act IV., as the edge of a grey river-fog overlapped and settled gradually upon the well of the unroofed theatre, voices began to cough and call for lanterns. Two lackeys ran with a dozen. Some they hung from the balcony at the back, others they disposed along both sides of the stage, in front of the sixpenny stools, the audience all the while chaffing them by their Christian names and affectionately pelting them with

nuts. Still the fog gathered, until the lantern-rays criss-crossed the stage in separate shafts, and among them the actors moved through Act V. in a luminous haze, their figures looming large, their voices muffled and incredibly remote.

An idle apprentice, seated on the right of the cutpurse, began for a game to stop and unstop his ears. This gave the cutpurse an opportunity to search his pockets. *Cantat vacuus*: the apprentice felt him at it and went on with his game. Whenever he stopped his ears the steaming breath of the players reminded him of the painted figures he had seen carried in my Lord Mayor's Show, with labels issuing from their mouths.

He had stopped his ears during the scene of King Henry's reconciliation with Chief Justice Gascoigne, and unstopped them eagerly again when his old friends reappeared—Falstaff and Bardolph and Pistol, all agog and hurrying, hot-foot, boot-and-saddle, to salute the rising sun of favour. "Welcome these pleasant days!" He stamped and clapped, following his neighbours' lead, and also because his feet and hands were cold.

Eh? What was the matter? Surely the fog had taken hold of the rogues! What was happening to Mistress Quickly and Doll Tearsheet? Poor souls, they were but children: they had meant no harm. For certain this plaguy fog was infecting the play; and yet, for all the fog, the play was a play no longer, but of a sudden had become savagely real. Why was this man turning on his puppets and rending them? The worst was, they bled—not sawdust, but real blood.

The apprentice cracked a nut and peeled it meditatively, with a glance along the bench. The countryman still fugled; the cutpurse cackled, with lips drawn back like a wolf's, showing his yellow teeth.

"Hist, thou silly knave!" said the apprentice. "Canst not see 'tis a tragedy?"

The rascal peered at him for a moment, burst out laughing, and nudged the countryman.

"Hi, master! Breeds your common at home any such goose as this, that cannot tell tickling from roasting?"

The apprentice cracked another nut. "Give it time," he answered. "I said a tragedy. Yours, if you will, my friend; *his* too, may be"—with a long and curious stare at the countryman.

II

> "*My tongue is weary: when my legs are too, I will bid you good-night: and so kneel down before you; but indeed to pray for the Queen.*"

Play, epilogue, dance, all were over; the curtains drawn, the lanterns hidden behind them. The cutpurse had slipped away, and the countryman and apprentice found themselves side by side waiting while the gallery dissolved its crowd into the fog.

"A brisk fellow," remarked the one, nodding at the vacant seat as he stowed away his handkerchief. "But why should he guess me a rustic?"

"The fellow has no discernment," the apprentice answered dryly. "He even took the play for a merry one."

The countryman peered forward into the young-old face silhouetted against the glow which, cast upward and over the curtain-rod across the stage, but faintly reached the gallery.

"I love wit, Sir, wherever I meet it. For a pint of sack you shall prove me this play a sad one, and choose your tavern!"

"I thank you, but had liefer begin and discuss the epilogue: and the epilogue is 'Who's to pay?'"

"A gentleman of Warwickshire, Master What-d'ye-lack—will that content you? A gentleman of Warwickshire, with a coat-of-arms, or the College's promise—which, I take it,

amounts to the same thing." The countryman puffed his cheeks.

"So-so?" The apprentice chuckled.

"*When we mean to build*
We first survey the plot, then search our pockets.

How goes it? Either so, or to that effect."

"The devil!" The countryman, who had been fumbling in his breek pockets, drew forth two hands blankly, spreading empty fingers.

"That was your neighbour, Sir: a brisk fellow, as you were clever enough to detect, albeit unserviceably late. I wish we had made acquaintance sooner: 'twould have given me liberty to warn you."

"It had been a Christian's merest duty."

"La, la, master! In London the sneaking of a purse is no such rarity that a poor 'prentice pays twopence to gape at it. I paid to see the play, Sir, and fought hard for my seat. Before my master gave over beating me, in fear of my inches and his wife (who has a liking for me), he taught me to husband my time. For your purse, the back of my head had eyes enough to tell me what befalls when a lean dog finds himself alongside a bone."

He seated himself on the bench, unstrapped a shoe, slipped two fingers beneath his stocking, and drew forth a silver piece. "If a gentleman of Warwickshire will be beholden to a poor apprentice of Cheapside?"

"Put it up, boy; put it up! I need not your money, good lad: but I like the spirit of that offer, and to meet it will enlarge my promise. A pint of sack, did I say? You shall sup with me to-night, and of the best, or I am a Dutchman. We will go see the town together, the roaring, gallant town. I will make you free of great company: you shall hear the talk of gods! Lord, how a man rusts in the country!—for, I will

confess it to you, lad, the rogue hit the mark: the country is my home."

"I cannot think how he guessed it."

"Nor I. And yet he was wrong, too: for that cannot be called home where a man is never at his ease. I had passed your years, lad, before ever I saw London; and ever since, when my boots have been deepest in Midland clay, I have heard her bells summon me, clear as ever they called to Whittington, 'London, thou art of townes *a per se*.' Nay, almost on that first pilgrimage I came to her as a son. *Urbem quam dicunt Romam*—I was no such clodpate as that rustic of Virgil's. I came expecting all things, and of none did she disappoint me. Give me the capital before all! 'Tis only there a man measures himself with men."

"And cutpurses?" the apprentice interjected.

"Good and bad, rough and smooth," the countryman assented, with a large and catholic smile. "'Tis no question of degrees, my friend, but of kind. I begin to think that, dwelling in London, you have not made her acquaintance. But you shall. As a father, lad,—for I like you,—I will open your eyes and teach your inheritance. What say you to the Bankside, for example?"

"The Bankside—hem!—and as a father!" scoffed the youth, but his eyes glistened. He was wise beyond his opportunities, and knew all about the Bankside, albeit he had never walked through that quarter but in daylight, wondering at the histories behind its house-fronts.

"As a father, I said; and evil be to him who evil thinks."

"I can tell you of one who will think evil; and that is my master. I can tell you of another; and that will be the sheriff, when I am haled before him."

"You said just now—or my hearing played a trick—that your mistress had a liking for you."

"And *you* said, 'Evil be to him that evil thinks.' She hath a double chin, and owns to fifty-five."

"What, chins!"

"Years, years, master. Like a grandmother she dotes on me and looks after my morals. Nathless when you talk of Bankside——" The apprentice hesitated: in the dusk his shrewd young eyes glistened. "Say that I risk it?" He hesitated again.

"Lads were not so cautious in my young days. I pay the shot, I tell you—a gentleman of Warwickshire and known to the College of Arms."

"It standeth on Paul's Wharf and handy for the ferry to Bankside: but the College closes early on Christmas Eve, and the Heralds be all at holiday. An you think of pawning your coat-of-arms with them to raise the wind, never say that I let you take that long way round without warning."

"Leave the cost to me, once more!" The countryman gazed down into the well of the theatre as if seeking an acquaintance among the figures below. "But what are they doing? What a plague means this hammering? A man cannot hear himself speak for it."

"'Tis the play."

"The play?"

"The true play—the play you applauded: and writ by the same Will Shakespeare, they tell me—some share of it at least. Cometh he not, by the way, from your part of the world?"

The countryman's eyes glistened in their turn: almost in the dusk they appeared to shine with tears.

"Ay, I knew him, down in Warwickshire: a good lad he was, though his mother wept over him for a wild one. Hast ever seen a hen when her duckling takes to water? So it is with woman when, haply, she has hatched out genius."

The apprentice slapped his leg. "I could have sworn it!"

"Hey?"

"Nay, question me not, master, for I cannot bring it to words. You tell me that you knew him: and I—on the instant I clapped eyes on you it seemed that somehow you were

part of his world and somehow had belonged to him. Nearer I cannot get, unless you tell me more."

"I knew him: to be sure, down in Warwickshire: but he has gone somedel beyond my ken, living in London, you see."

"He goes beyond any man's kenning: he that has taught us to ken the world with new eyes. I tell you, master,"—the apprentice stretched out a hand,—"I go seeking him like one seeking a father who has begotten him into a new world, seeking him with eyes derived from him. Tell me——"

But the countryman was leaning over the gallery-rail and scanning the pit again. He seemed a trifle bored by a conversation if not of less, then certainly of other, wit than he had bargained for. Somebody had drawn the curtains back from the stage, where the two lackeys who had decked the balcony with lanterns were busy now with crowbars, levering its wooden supports from their sockets.

"Sure," said he, musing, "they don't lift and pack away the stage every night, do they? Or is this some new law to harass players?" He brought his attention back to the apprentice with an effort. "If you feel that way towards him, lad," he answered, "why not accost him? He walks London streets; and he has, if I remember, a courteous, easy manner."

"If the man and his secret were one! But they are not, and there lies the fear—that by finding one I shall miss the other and recover it never. I cannot dare either risk: I want them both. You saw, this afternoon, how, when the secret came within grasp, the man slipped away; how, having taught us to know Falstaff as a foot its old shoe, he left us wondering on a sudden why we laughed! And yet 'twas not sudden, but bred in the play from the beginning; no, nor cruel, but merely right: only he had persuaded us to forget it."

The countryman put up a hand to hide a yawn: and the yawn ended in a slow chuckle.

"Eh? that rogue Falstaff was served out handsomely: though, to tell the truth, I paid no great heed to the last scene, my midriff being sore with laughing."

The apprentice sighed.

"But what is happening below?" the other went on impatiently. "Are they taking the whole theatre to pieces?"

"That is part of the play."

"A whole regiment of workmen!"

"And no stage-army, neither. Yet they come into the play—not the play you saw without understanding, but the play you understood without seeing. They call it *The Phœnix*. Be seated, master, while I unfold the plot: this hammering deafens me. The Burbages, you must know——"

"I knew old James, the father. He brought me down a company of players to our town the year I was High Bailiff; the first that ever played in our Guildhall. Though a countryman, I have loved the arts—even to the length of losing much money by them. A boon fellow, old James! and yet dignified as any alderman. He died—let me see—was it two year agone? The news kept me sad for a week."

"A good player, too,"—the apprentice nodded,—"though not a patch upon his son Richard. Cuthbert will serve, in ripe sententious parts that need gravity and a good memory for the lines. But Richard bears the bell of the Burbages. Well, Sir, old James being dead, and suddenly, and (as you say) these two years come February, his sons must go suing to the ground landlord, the theatre being leased upon their dad's life. You follow me?"

The countryman nodded in his turn.

"Very well. The landlord, being a skinflint, was willing to renew the lease, but must raise the rent. If they refuse to pay it, the playhouse fell to him. You may fancy how the Burbages called gods and men to witness. Being acquainted with players, you must know how little they enjoy affliction until the whole town shares it. Never so rang Jerusalem with all the woes of Jeremy as did City and suburb,—from north

beyond Bishopsgate to south along the river, with the cursings of this landlord, who—to cap the humour of it—is a precisian, and never goes near a playhouse. Nevertheless, he patched up a truce for two years ending to-night, raising the rent a little, but not to the stretch of his demands. To-morrow—or, rather, the day after, since to-morrow is Christmas—the word is pay or quit. But in yielding this he yielded our friends the counterstroke. They have bought a plot across the water, in the Clink Liberty: and to-morrow, should he pass this way to church, no theatre will be here for him to smack his Puritan lips over. But for this hammering and the deep slush outside you might even now hear the rumbling of wagons; for wagons there be, a dozen of them, ready to cart the Muses over the bridge before midnight. 'Tis the proper vehicle of Thespis. See those dozen stout rascals lifting the proscenium——"

The countryman smote his great hands together, flung back his head, and let his lungs open in shout after shout of laughter.

"But, master——"

"Oh—oh—oh! Hold my sides, lad, or I start a rib.... Nay, if you keep st-staring at me with that s-sol-ol-ol-emn face. Don't—oh, *don't*!"

"Now I know," murmured the apprentice, "what kind of jest goes down in the country: and, by'r Lady, it goes deep!"

But an instant later the man had heaved himself upon his feet; his eyes expanded from their creases into great O's; his whole body towered and distended itself in gigantic indignation. "The villain! The nipcheese curmudgeonly villain! And we tarry here, talking, while such things are done in England! A Nabal, I say. Give me a hammer!" He heaved up an enormous thigh and bestrode the gallery-rail.

"Have a care, master: the rail——"

"A hammer! Below there. A hammer!" He leaned over, bellowing. The gang of workmen lifting the proscenium

stared up open-mouthed into the foggy gloom—a ring of ghostly faces upturned in a luminous haze.

Already the man's legs dangled over the void. Twelve, fifteen feet perhaps, beneath him projected a lower gallery, empty but for three tiers of disordered benches. Plumb as a gannet he dropped, and an eloquent crash of timber reported his arrival below. The apprentice, craning over, saw him regain his feet, scramble over the second rail, and vanish. Followed an instant's silence, a dull thud, a cry from the workmen in the area. The apprentice ran for the gallery stairs and leapt down them, three steps at a time.

It took him, maybe, forty seconds to reach the area. There already, stripped to the shirt, in a whirl of dust and voices, stood his friend waving a hammer and shouting down the loudest. The man was possessed, transformed, a Boanerges; his hammer, a hammer of Thor! He had caught it from the hand of a douce, sober-looking man in a plum-coloured doublet, who stood watching but taking no active share in the work.

"By your leave, Sir!"

"With or without my leave, good Sir, since you are determined to have it," said the quiet man, surrendering the hammer.

The countryman snatched and thrust it between his knees while he stripped. Then, having spat on both hands, he grasped the hammer and tried its poise. "'Tis odd, now," said he, as if upon an afterthought, staring down on the quiet man, "but methinks I know your voice?"

"Marry and there's justice in that," the quiet man answered; "for 'tis the ghost of one you drowned erewhile."

III

"Tom! What, Tom! Where be the others? I tell thee, Tom, there have been doings...."

"Is that Dick Burbage?" A frail, thin windle-straw of a man came coughing across the foggy courtyard with a stable-lantern, holding it high. Its rays wavered on his own face, which was young but extraordinarily haggard, and on the piles of timber between and over which he picked his way—timbers heaped pell-mell in the slush of the yard or stacked against the boundary wall, some daubed with paint, others gilded wholly or in part, and twinkling as the lantern swung. "Dick Burbage already? Has it miscarried, then?"

"Miscarried? What in the world was there to miscarry? I tell thee, Tom—but where be the others?"

The frail man jerked a thumb at the darkness behind his shoulder. "Hark to them, back yonder, stacking the beams! Where should they be? and what doing but at work like galley-slaves, by the pace you have kept us going? Look around. I tell you from the first 'twas busy-all to get the yard clear between the wagons' coming, and at the fifth load we gave it up. My shirt clings like a dish-clout; a chill on this will be the death o' me. What a plague! How many scoundrels did you hire, that they take a house to pieces and cart it across Thames faster than we can unload it?"

"That's the kernel of the story, lad. I hired the two-score rogues agreed on, neither more nor less: but one descended out of heaven and raised the number to twelve-score. Ten-score extra, as I am a sinner; and yet but one man, for I counted him. His name, he told me, was Legion."

"Dick," said the other sadly, "when a sober man gives way to drinking—I don't blame you: and your pocket will be the loser more than all the rest if you've boggled to-night's work; but poor Cuthbert will take it to heart."

"There was a man, I tell you——"

"Tut, tut, pull yourself together and run back across bridge. Or let me go: take my arm now, before the others see you. You shall tell me on the way what's wrong at Shoreditch."

"There is naught wrong with Shoreditch, forby that it has lost a theatre: and I am not drunk, Tom Nashe—no, not by one-tenth as drunk as I deserve to be, seeing that the house is down, every stick of it, and the bells scarce yet tolling midnight. 'Twas all this man, I tell you!"

"Down? The Theatre down? Oh, go back, Dick Burbage!"

"Level with the ground, I tell you—his site a habitation for the satyr. *Cecidit, cecidit Babylon illa magna!* and the last remains of it, more by token, following close on my heels in six wagons. Hist, then, my Thomas, my Didymus, my doubting one!—Canst not hear the rumble of their wheels? and—and—oh, good Lord!" Burbage caught his friend by the arm and leaned against him heavily. "*He's* there, and following!"

The wagons came rolling over the cobbles of the Clink along the roadway outside the high boundary-wall of the yard: and as they came, clear above their rumble and the slow clatter of hoofs a voice like a trumpet declaimed into the night—

"*Above all ryvers thy Ryver hath renowne,*
Whose beryall streamys, pleasaunt and preclare,
Under thy lusty wallys renneth downe,
Where many a swan doth swymme with wyngis fair,
Where many a barge doth sail and row with are——

We had done better—a murrain on their cobbles!—we had done better, lad, to step around by Paul's Wharf and take boat.... This jolting ill agrees with a man of my weight....

Where many a barge doth sail aund row with are—

Gr-r-r! Did I not warn thee beware, master wagoner, of the kerbstones at the corners? We had done better by water, what though it be dark.... Lights of Bankside on the water ... no such sight in Europe, they tell me.... My Lord of Surrey took boat one night from Westminster and fired into

their windows with a stone-bow, breaking much glass ... drove all the long-shore queans screaming into the streets in their night-rails.... He went to the Fleet for it ... a Privy Council matter.... I forgive the lad, for my part: for only think of it—all those windows aflame on the river, and no such river in Europe!—

Where many a barge doth sail and row with are;
Where many a ship doth rest with top-royall.
O towne of townes! patrone and not compare,
London, thou art the flow'r of Cities all!

Who-oop!"

"In the name of——" stammered Nashe, as he listened, Burbage all the while clutching his arm.

"He dropped from the top gallery, I tell you—clean into the pit from the top gallery—and he weighs eighteen stone if an ounce. 'Your servant, Sir, and of all the Muses,' he says, picking himself up; and with that takes the hammer from my hand and plays Pyrrhus in Troy—Pyrrhus with all the ravening Danai behind him: for those hired scoundrels of mine took fire, and started ripping out the bowels of the poor old theatre as though it had been the Fleet and lodged all their cronies within! It went down before my eyes like a sand-castle before the tide. Within three hours they had wiped the earth of it. The Lord be praised that Philip Gosson had ne'er such an arm, nor could command such! Oh, but he's a portent! Troy's horse and Bankes's bay gelding together are a fool to him: he would harness them as Samson did the little foxes, and fire brushwood under their tails...."

"Of a certainty you are drunk, Dick."

"Drunk? I?" Burbage gripped the other's thin arm hysterically. "If you want to see a man drunk come to the gate. Nay, then, stay where you are: for there's no escaping him."

Nor was there. Between them and the wagoners' lanterns at the gate a huge shadow thrust itself, the owner of it rolling like a ship in a sea-way, while he yet recited—

"*Strong be thy wallis that about thee standis*,
(meaning the Clink, my son),
Wise be the people that within thee dwellis,
(which you may take for the inhabitants thereof),

Fresh is thy ryver with his lusty strandis,
Blith be thy chirches, wele sowning be thy bellis."

"Well sounding is my belly, master, any way," put in a high, thin voice; "and it calls on a gentleman of Warwickshire to redeem his promise."

"He shall, he shall, lad—in the fullness of time: 'but before dining ring at the bell,' says the proverb. Grope, lad, feel along the gate-posts if this yard, this courtlage, this base-court, hath any such thing as bell or knocker.

And when they came to mery Carleile
All in the mornyng tyde-a,
They found the gates shut them until
About on every syde-a.

Then Adam Bell bete on the gates
With strokes great and stronge-a

Step warely, lad. Plague of this forest! Have we brought timber to Sherwood?

With strokes great and stronge-a
The porter marveiled who was thereat,
And to the gates he thronge-a.

They called the porter to counsell,
And wrange his necke in two-a,

And caste him in a depe dungeon,
And took hys keys hym fro-a.

Within! You rascal, there, with the lantern!... Eh? but these be two gentlemen, it appears? I cry your mercy, Sirs."

"For calling us rascals?" Nashe stepped forward. "'T hath been done to me before now, in print, upon as good evidence; and to my friend here by Act of Parliament."

"But seeing you with a common stable-lantern——"

"Yet Diogenes was a gentleman. Put it that, like him, I am searching for an honest man."

"Then we are well met. I' faith we are very well met," responded the countryman, recognising Burbage's grave face and plum-coloured doublet.

"Or, as one might better say, well overtaken," said Burbage.

"Marry, and with a suit. I have some acquaintance, Sir, with members of your honourable calling, as in detail and at large I could prove to you. Either I have made poor use of it or I guess aright, as I guess with confidence, that after the triumph will come the speech-making, and the supper's already bespoken."

"At Nance Witwold's, by the corner of Paris Garden, Sir, where you shall be welcome."

"I thank you, Sir. But my suit is rather for this young friend of mine, to whom I have pledged my word."

"He shall be welcome, too."

"He tells me, Sir, that you are Richard Burbage. I knew your father well, Sir—an honest Warwickshire man: he condescended to my roof and tasted my poor hospitality many a time; and belike you, too, Sir, being then a child, may have done the same: for I talk of prosperous days long since past—nay, so long since that 'twould be a wonder indeed had you remembered me. The more pleasure it gives me, Sir, to find James Burbage's sappy virtues flourishing in

the young wood, and by the branch be reminded of the noble stock."

"The happier am I, Sir, to have given you welcome or ever I heard your claim."

"Faith!" said the apprentice to himself, "compliments begin to fly when gentlefolks meet." But he had not bargained to sup in this high company, and the prospect thrilled him with delicious terror. He glanced nervously across the yard, where some one was approaching with another lantern.

"My claim?" the countryman answered Burbage. "You have heard but a part of it as yet. Nay, you have heard none of it, since I use not past hospitalities with old friends to claim a return from their children. My claim, Sir, is a livelier one——"

"Tom Nashe! Tom Nashe!" called a voice, clear and strong and masculine, from the darkness behind the advancing lantern.

"Anon, anon, Sir," quoted Nashe, swinging his own lantern about and mimicking.

"Don't tell me there be yet more wagons arrived?" asked the voice.

"Six, lad—six, as I hope for mercy: and outside the gate at this moment."

"There they must tarry, then, till our fellows take breath to unload 'em. But—six? How is it managed, think you? Has Dick Burbage called out the train-bands to help him? Why, hullo, Dick! What means——" The newcomer's eyes, round with wonder as they rested a moment on Burbage, grew rounder yet as they travelled past him to the countryman. "Father?" he stammered, incredulous.

"Good evening, Will! Give ye good evening, my son! Set down that lantern and embrace me, like a good boy: a good boy, albeit a man of fame. Didst not see me, then, in the theatre this afternoon? Yet was I to the fore there, methinks, and proud to be called John Shakespeare."

"Nay, I was not there; having other fish to fry."

"Shouldst have heard the applause, lad; it warmed your old father's heart. Yet 'twas no more than the play deserved. A very neat, pretty drollery—upon my faith, no man's son could have written a neater!"

"But what hath fetched you to London?"

"Business, business: a touch, too, maybe, of the old homesickness: but business first. Dick Quiney——But pass me the lantern, my son, that I may take a look at thee. Ay, thou hast sobered, thou hast solidified: thy beard hath ta'en the right citizen's cut—'twould ha' been a cordial to thy poor mother to see thee wear so staid a beard. Rest her soul! There's nothing like property for filling out a man's frame, firming his eye, his frame, bearing, footstep. Talking of property, I have been none so idle a steward for thee. New Place I have made habitable—the house at least; patched up the roof, taken down and rebuilt the west chimney that was overleaning the road, repaired the launders, enlarged the parlour-window, run out the kitchen passage to a new back-entrance. The garden I cropped with peas this summer, and have set lettuce and winter-kale between the young apple-trees, whereof the whole are doing well, and the mulberry likewise I look for to thrive. Well, as I was saying, Dick Quiney——"

"—Is in trouble again, you need not tell."

"None so bad but it could be mended by the thirty pounds whereof I wrote. Mytton will be security with him, now that Bushell draws back. He offers better than those few acres at Shottery you dealt upon in January."

"Land is land."

"And ale is ale: you may take up a mortgage on the brewhouse. Hast ever heard, Mr. Burbage"—John Shakespeare swung about—"of a proverb we have down in our Warwickshire? It goes—