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WEST POINT OF  
TOMORROW

A Novel of the  
Planet Patrol  
By ARTHUR  
J. BURKS



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# THE COMEDY OF ERAS

*A Pete Manx Story*

By

Henry Kuttner

Writing under the pseudonym Kelvin Kent.

*Author of "Knight Must Fall," "Science is Golden," etc.*

First published *Thrilling Wonder Stories*, September 1940.

*Shakespeare Goes to Town When the Year Leaper Merrily Trips From Bard to Verse!*



*Pete Manx*

Pete Manx was hurt. There he stood, resplendent in a bright green suit, specially tailored to fit his squat form, with a maroon shirt and a salmon-pink necktie that was positively blinding. Not Solomon in all his glory had ever been arrayed thus. A little admiration—even a casual comment—would have bucked Pete up tremendously. But, instead, he was being ignored while Doctor Mayhem and Professor Aker were arguing excitedly.

“I repeat—Bacon!” Mayhem said firmly, and set down a test-tube in its rack with more force than was strictly necessary. His small, scrawny figure trembled with indignation.

So that was it. They were talking about chow. Well, Pete could give them a few pointers on that. He had once run a hamburger stand at Ocean Park between jobs as barker and concessionaire.

“Ever try a cheeseburger, Doc?” he put in. “I can—”

“Shakespeare!” bellowed Professor Aker. The shout shook rheostats and power cables as the scientist slammed one fat fist into another. He clutched at his pince-nez as they fell to dangle by a black ribbon against his bulky paunch. “Every principle of psychology tends to prove that William Shakespeare wrote the plays.”

Mayhem sneered. “I admit the sonnets,” he observed, “but you have the colossal nerve to contend—in my own laboratory—that Francis Bacon did not write *Romeo and Macbeth* and —”

“Hey!” said Pete. “You’re both wrong. MGM wrote *Romeo and Juliet*—or maybe it was Paramount, I forget. I saw it at the Capital.”

Aker turned to confront this new antagonist.

“Pete,” he murmured, “this may be a shock to you, but *Romeo* was first written during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, in England. And where in the sacred name of Einstein did you get that fantastic garment you’re wearing?”

“You like it?” Pete preened himself. “Pipe the shoes. Two-tone. Yellow and red. Latest thing out. Boy, do I wow ’em down along Broadway.”

Aker moaned slightly, but said nothing.

“That ain’t what I dropped in for, though,” Mr. Manx beamed. “I just wanted to say adios. I’m taking a vacation.”

Professor Aker, still mumbling about Shakespeare, paid little attention as Pete went on.



*The contagion of swing swept the Mermaid Tavern*

"I'm kinda strapped just now, but I figure I can pick up some dough in Florida. Start a concession or something. I need a change of air, anyhow—"

"Bacon!" said Doctor Mayhem. "If I could prove it—"

"Whup!" said Professor Aker, his jaw sagging into his chins. "Mayhem! You can!"

The eyes of the two men met, exchanged understanding glances. Then, slowly, their gaze swiveled to Pete, who suddenly began to sweat.

"No!" he burst out. "I ain't going to do it."

"What?" There was an ominous note in Aker's silky tone.

"I dunno, but whatever it is—"

"Look," said Mayhem ingratiatingly, "you said you needed a vacation and were short of dough. How'd you like to make a thousand dollars and get a free vacation at the same time?"

"Where to?" Pete demanded suspiciously.

"Er—England."

"I been to England. In that screwy time machine of yours. One time I went back to Robin Hood's time, and once to King Arthur's administration. I—hey! You don't mean?"

“Ah, yes.” Mayhem smiled. “It won’t hurt a bit, Pete. You know that. Just a little trip into time to prove that Bacon wrote the plays attributed to Shakespeare.”

“No.” Mr. Manx sounded stubborn. “Look—you send me back to Rome and I get thrown to the lions. In Egypt I get put on a chain gang. Last time I was in England they tried to burn me at the stake. Nineteen-forty suits me. All I have to worry about is the census and my income tax.”

“But those were uncivilized times,” Aker put in his oar. “Elizabethan England was a cultured period. They had bowling, football—and when you met anybody, you didn’t have to shake hands. You could kiss them. Erasmus and Cavendish mention that particularly.”

“Nuts,” Pete observed, but there was a twinkle in his eyes. “Dames is poison. Bowling, huh?”

“Yes. And—dice, card parties—Sir Christopher Hatton once gave a party and put a thousand pounds at the disposal of his guests.”

“Five grand, huh? Well—”

“All you have to do is just drop into England, find out who wrote the Shakespearean plays, and then return. That’s one question only you can settle for us. For many years scholars have debated whether or not Shakespeare himself wrote all the plays credited to his name. Some savants claim that the famous Francis Bacon wrote Shakespeare’s plays. You won’t have to stay long to get the real lowdown.”

Mayhem thrust a wad of greenbacks into Pete’s hand and led the slightly hypnotized man to a seat that resembled an electric chair, what with wires and gadgets strewn all over it. “Sit down,” the professor said silkily. “That’s it. Now—” He turned to make adjustments on a switchboard.

“But I ain’t sure—” Pete was counting the money.

“Time has no objective reality,” said Mayhem, flipping a control lever. “We may consider it as a closed circle revolving about a Central Time Consciousness. We live on the rim of the wheel. All we need do is send the ego toward the hub of that circle, and then back out to the other side. There it emerges in a different time-sector, inhabiting the body of some contemporary organism. I send your consciousness back into time—”

“Now wait,” said Pete, pocketing the dough. “I got an idea I’m being high-pressured into—*urp!*”

*Woosh!*

Manx, after a momentary stiffness, relaxed in the chair. He was not breathing. He looked very much like a corpse.

“Good,” said Mayhem, rubbing his hands. “I’ll bring him back in a few hours, and then he’ll tell you that Bacon wrote the plays, not Shakespeare. You’ll see.”

Aker was lighting a cigar.

“A few hours? I hate to mention this, Mayhem, but you’ve just burned out that condenser. I told you weeks ago to get it replaced. It’ll take days or longer to have a duplicate made.”

“What?” Mayhem rushed over to examine the apparatus. “You’re right! Good Lord, I’d forgotten. Why didn’t you say something before?”

Aker smiled unpleasantly.

“As our friend Mr. Manx would remark, I hesitate to stick my neck out.” He shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. How do you expect Pete to find out anything in a few hours? It’ll take days—and now there’s no chance of your getting soft-hearted and bringing him back before he has a chance to learn the truth.”

“But—but—” Mayhem sputtered. “He may get in trouble!”

“He always does,” the professor admitted. “But he always gets out of it!”

---

The world stopped whirling about Pete Manx. He drew a deep breath, opened his eyes, and looked around. He was staring at a corpse.

It was very old, and very dead. It hung in a sloppy-looking fashion from a gallows, against which a ladder had been placed, and a starved cur was crouching nearby, licking its chops. Pete said “*Ulp*” in a shocked voice and turned hastily away.

He was only a few feet from a stone bridge, so covered with houses that it resembled a continued street. On this was built a tower, on the top of which several human heads were stuck on spikes. The general effect was neat but not gaudy.

Several people were standing beside Pete, examining the corpse on the gallows. They were dressed, apparently, for a masquerade. The women wore voluminous garments and hoods, and the men were clad in ruffs, knee-breeches and leather jerkins. Pete, examining his own figure, found that he was clad similarly, though in somewhat finer apparel.

“Cultured period, huh?” Manx inquired bitterly of thin air. “It looks like it. First thing happens I run into a stiff!”

“By’r lakin, he does look stiff,” said a swarthy ragamuffin who was contemplatively picking his teeth. “Poor Enas. Well, he’ll cut no more purse-strings.”

“Oh,” Pete responded blankly. “Petty larceny. And they hang you for that?”

“He got off easy,” said the other. “He might have been drawn and quartered.”

Pete considered. This was a murderously active time-sector, it appeared, but at least he wouldn’t have to stay long. What had Doctor Mayhem promised? A few hours . . . well, that didn’t leave much time to do his job. He’d have to get busy.

“I’m looking for a ham named Shakespeare,” he said to the dark man. “Know anything about him?”

“Mayhap. Who are you?”

Pete felt in his pockets. No card-case. He didn’t even know what he looked like, whose body he was inhabiting in Elizabethan England. Well—

“Manx,” he said. “Pete Manx.”

“You’re dressed like a noble, but—you mean Master Will no harm?”

“Nope. I just want some inside dope.”

The other pondered, and finally gave Pete instructions.

“The Globe Theatre is the place. Or he may be at the Mermaid Tavern. Follow this street  
—”

It wasn’t difficult to find the Globe Theatre, even though it resembled an inn more than anything else. But Master Will wasn’t there. Pete was told to try the Mermaid Tavern.

“He’ll be swilling ale with Ben and Kit,” said the informant, a tall man with haggard eyes. “God knows *I* can’t do anything with him. We need a third act and he keeps yelling that he’s in a slump. Preserve me from writers and temperament!” He threw up his hands and left.

Pete found the Tavern, without further adventure. It looked like a beer-joint on Hallowe’en. Men in bizarre costumes were sitting at the oaken tables, banging their drinking cups and shouting a song in loud chorus.

*“Sleep, I say, fond fancy,  
And leave my thoughts molesting—”*

---

Pete grunted and stood staring around until a fat man in a white apron came bustling up.

“How may I serve you, my lord?”

“I’m looking for a guy named Shakespeare.”

“Master Will? He’ll be along presently. He ran out when one of his creditors came in. Why do you wish to see him?”

Pete made a placating gesture.

“It’s okay. Everything’s on the up and up. I’m just one of the boys.”

The inn-keeper still looked suspicious, but gestured toward a table.

“There sit Kit Marlowe and Ben Jonson, two of his closest friends. Oh, Ben! Here’s a man to see Will.”

A burly gentleman in stained garments pushed a blonde off his knee and turned to stare at Pete. He hiccuped slightly, drank ale, and nodded.

“Sit with us, stranger. Who are you?”

Pete told them.

“Manx? Then you’re no gentleman.”

“Oh, yeah? Listen, wise guy, my old man used to be a Tammany alderman and—”

“Nay, nay,” said Ben Jonson. “I meant not to offend you. We strolling players and playwrights aren’t lords, you know.”

Pete was pacified. He made a broad gesture.

“I get it. I’m in the same racket myself. Ran a bingo joint in Ocean Park till the D. A. clamped down.”

The other man, Kit Marlowe, frowned, his lean face twisting surprisingly.

“Yet you’re dressed as a noble. How—”

Manx searched his capacious memory and brought up a gem to help explain himself.

“A rose by any other monicker smells the same,” he misquoted.

Marlowe and Jonson exchanged surprised glances.

“You know our Will’s plays! Come, we must drink to that. He’ll be glad to see you when he returns.”

Ale was supplied—heady, strong stuff, which Pete gulped thirstily.

“Okay,” he said. “Have one on me. Make it a boilermaker, Doc,” he instructed the inn-keeper, who merely gaped.

Pete had to explain what a boilermaker was. Jonson and Marlowe were delighted with the new concoction.

“’Tis a wondrous combination, Pete,” Ben chuckled. “I like it!”

Manx, luckily, found gold in a purse at his belt, and paid the bill. For not the first time he wondered whose body he was inhabiting. There was, of course, no clue.

Time passed and liquor flowed. Occasionally a group would burst into song. Each time Pete writhed.

“That’s corny,” Manx finally said in disgust. “Wish there was an electric phonograph here.”

A minstrel in green tights wandered by the table. He exhibited a lute and plucked at its strings, bursting into a dreary song about a lady who looked like a dove.

“Corny,” said Pete. “Come on. Give. Shake it, hep-cat.”

The minstrel turned purple.

“I suppose you could do better!”

“Sure,” Manx agreed, with slightly intoxicated assurance. “Gimme that zither.”



"I used to handle a banjo in a medicine show," he told his companions. "Let's see, now. . . ."

He launched into song. He was, it appeared, heading for the last roundup. The room grew still.

"Odd," said Ben, when the solo was finished. "Methinks 'tis odd enough. But—"

"Okay." Pete grunted. "I'll give you some jive."

Manx's rendition of the "Yodelin' Jive" was greeted with a storm of applause. Men banged cups on their tables and yelled for more. A sad looking chap with a high, bald forehead wandered in and looked around vaguely.

"Here's Will!" Ben yelled. "Will! Over here!"

---

Master Shakespeare dragged himself to the table.

"I am going mad," he announced, peering around in a dazed fashion. "Commercialism will ruin art yet. How in God's name can I write my novel when they keep yelling for those awful plays?"

"You and your novel," Ben boomed with affectionate contempt. "Money's the thing, my lad. Forget about art and stick to your plays. They're making pounds and guineas—"

"If the Queen would only condescend to view a performance, my fortune would be made. But I'm stuck for a third act on that thrice-cursed *Midsummer Night's Dream*. Bah."

Pete looked hazily at Will. "It's been done," he remarked. "Warner Brothers made it a couple of years ago. Boy, did it smell. Mickey Rooney was good, though."

Shakespeare downed a stoup of ale in one swallow.

"What d'you mean, it's been done! I haven't finished writing it."

"All I know is what I saw. Guy with a donkey's head. Bottom, his name was—that was Jimmy Cagney."

"A donkey's head for Bottom!" Shakespeare leaned forward, his eyes glittering. "What an idea! It's ridiculous—"

"It's great!" Ben Jonson boomed. "The audience would go wild. They love that stuff."

"It's—eh? Perchance you're right." Will looked at Pete again. "Tell me more of this, friend."

Manx obliged. His memory was rather hazy, but it improved as he drank on. He detailed the plot of the *Midsummer Night's Dream*.

"Wonderful!" Shakespeare was beaming. "Those added scenes will make my play! I'll write it up just like that."

Marlowe shook his head.

"It's plagiarism, Will. They're still talking about your *Othello*."

Will considered.

"Where was this play produced? America, you say? Well! Some little kingdom in Europe—it doesn't matter. Nobody'll know the difference."

"I got a million of 'em," Pete said generously. "But what makes a good play is blood. Lots of it. Say, I remember a Karloff picture—or was it *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*?—where a guy kept changing from a hero to a heel. He—"

Manx rambled on, while Shakespeare listened. Presently the great playwright began to murmur something about Ariel and Caliban.

"Say, you guys should have seen Bette Davis in *Elizabeth and Essex*," Manx went on.

There was a dead silence. Pete looked around.

“What’s the matter? Did I say something?”

“Quiet,” Marlowe hissed. “There may be spies here. ’Tis dangerous to hint at such matters—even treasonable.”

“Oh,” said Pete, remembering. “I get it. Then Bette and Errol really are that way about each other.”

The silence grew strained. Manx broke it by reaching for the lute.

“You birds never heard Cab Calloway,” he announced. “Brothers, prepare for something. I’m going to dish out some boogie-woogie.”

“It was daooon in Chinatown. . . .” Pete caroled. His fingers flashed over the strings. This, he decided, was fun. “Come on, Pete,” he whispered to himself. “Give! Get hot!—*and there was Minnie—join in, boys!*”

*“Minnie the Moocher!”*

*“Kicking the gong around!”*

---

Other lutes appeared and followed the tune Pete set. One by one voices were raised, with Ben Jonson’s bull-like bass leading all the rest.

*“Some were high—”*

*“And some were mighty low!”*

The inn-keeper stood against the wall with his mouth wide open, staring at this madhouse. Dignity was lost. The contagion of swing swept the Mermaid Tavern.

Pete tossed the lute away and sprang up, indulging in some fancy rug-cutting. Ben Jonson joined him, and then Shakespeare. Several girls appeared, and, with feminine instinct of rhythm, quickly joined the jive.

“Madmen!” gasped the inn-keeper. “They are possessed.”

“Hi-de-hi—” shrilled Will Shakespeare.

“Ho-de-ho—” boomed Ben Jonson.

“And there was Minnie!” That was Kit Marlowe, the renowned Elizabethan dramatist and poet.

*“Kicking the gong around!”*

That was the Mermaid Tavern!

“Hold!”

An icy voice cut in on the merriment. Slowly silence descended. Pete felt Jonson’s huge hand grip his shoulder.

“Friends of yours?” Ben asked.

Two men—nobles by their apparel—were pushing forward. One was fairly young, with a weak, foppish face. The other was about fifty or more and resembled a rather vicious gopher.

“Hah!” said the gopher. “There you are!”

“Zooks!” the other gasped. “You gave us a merry chase. Why you spend your time in these low haunts I don’t know. The Queen wants to see you. It’s important.”

“The Queen!” Ben Jonson stared at Pete. “You *are* a noble, then.”

“I ain’t,” Manx snapped, annoyed at the interruption. “Go ’way. I’m busy.”

“But, cousin—”

“Nuts.”

Will Shakespeare came forward unsteadily and examined the two new arrivals.

“To be or not to be,” he announced. “That is the question. Who are you—uh—”

“Mugs,” Pete supplied.

“Thanks,” Will beamed. “Who are you mugs?”

“I am Robert Cecil,” said the young man. “And this is Lord Burghley.”

“I’m your uncle, in case you’re too befuddled to remember,” Burghley snapped, glaring at Pete, who blandly picked up a lute from a nearby table.

“Scram, pickle-puss,” he murmured. “I’m busy.” And he began to sing about Minnie the Moocher. With a booming snort of disgust Lord Burghley fled.

---

Robert Cecil lingered.

“You must see the Queen,” he urged. “Edward Coke is trying to ruin you, and not even Essex can help you unless—”

His voice was drowned in a thundering chorus.

“Hi-de-hi! Ho-de-ho! And there was Minnie—”

“Kicking the gong around,” caroled Pete Manx and Will Shakespeare, their arms about each other’s necks, while the inn-keeper of the Mermaid Tavern stared in shocked horror at the unprecedented sight of Kit Marlowe and Ben Jonson indulging in a display of rug-cutting that had never been seen in Elizabethan England.

Well, he had really achieved his aim, Manx told himself. Shakespeare had written his own plays; that was obvious. But, somehow, the expected return to 1940 and the Doc’s laboratory did not come. For some reason this delay did not worry the happy-go-lucky Manx. He was having a swell time.

He visited the Globe Theatre and suggested certain changes—seats, for example, in the balcony and the pit. His purse still bulged with gold, and he roomed in the Mermaid Tavern, spending his nights carousing with Will, Ben, and Kit. The inn shook with shag. It shuddered with swing and jerked with jive. The word spread.

Gentlemen flocked to the Tavern. First came the gay blades, and then the older men. They lost their dignity and joined in the chorus of Minnie the Moocher. Pete bent his energies to constructing an orchestra, and finally succeeded. The boys gave for all they were worth.

The Globe Theatre was altered in several respects. Boys wandered about between acts selling sweets and certain small boxes which, they contended, contained valuable prizes. *Midsummer Night’s Dream* was produced and went over with a bang. Meanwhile, Shakespeare persisted in pumping Pete for anecdotes he was quite willing to supply.

“So this guy’s moll waits till he’s asleep and pours hot lead in his ear, see?”

“*Hamlet!* The very thing!” Shakespeare enthused.

“But the old gag’s still the best,” Manx told the playwright. “Boy meets girl—boy loses girl—boy gets girl.”

“Ah,” said Will Shakespeare, “that’s an idea. My Verona plot needs further development. I’m stuck for a twist.”

“What’s it about?”

“Oh, I don’t really know, yet. A man named Montague is at odds with one named Capulet.”

“That reminds me of something,” Manx pondered. “I got it. A picture I saw a while ago. . . . Look, why not give Capulet a daughter and Montague a son, and let the sprouts fall in love? Call the boy Romeo and the girl Juliet.”

“’Tis an idea,” Will Shakespeare nodded. “Tell me more. Though I wish I had time to write my novel. . . .”

He fell silent as Pete recounted the plot of *Romeo and Juliet*.

The idea struck fire. Master Will fell to work, scribbling busily with his quill. And, presently, the new play was put into rehearsal.

“That balcony scene’s swell,” Manx applauded, but Will shook his head gloomily.

“I think I’d better cut that out. It lacks fire.”

---

The play opened and was a tremendous success. On the fourth night of the run trouble started. A handsome, well-dressed noble in a short beard cornered Pete.

“Good heavens, where have you been? I’ve been looking for you everywhere!”

“Oh, hello,” Manx said vaguely. “I’ve been staying here at the Mermaid.”

“They told me I’d find you here. Elizabeth’s foaming at the mouth. Coke’s trying to get that job of Attorney-General away from you—”

“Coke?” Pete remembered that Lord Burghley or Robert Cecil had mentioned the name some time before, during his first night at the Mermaid.

“Yes, yes, yes, Coke. Edward Coke, the lawyer. Your deadliest enemy. Listen to me. I may be able to calm Elizabeth, but I’m not sure. Coke’s told her where you’ve been hiding—with a gang of strolling players. I did my best for you. Said Will Shakespeare was the greatest dramatist in England. But she’s—well, you know how Elizabeth is.”

“Yeah,” Pete nodded. “I know how she is. Or do I?”

“I’ve done what I could. The Queen’s going to attend a performance two nights from now, at the Globe Theatre, in disguise. She said if Shakespeare is really as good as I said, she’ll forgive you. But if he’s a flop you’ll be beheaded. And I’ll be in trouble myself.”

“Wow,” Manx groaned. “What a dame. I still don’t get it. Just what—”

“In two nights, the Queen will be in the audience. Tell these scoundrelly players of yours to do their utmost. Everything depends on Elizabeth’s liking the play. If she does, you’ll get the job of Attorney-General instead of Coke.”

A page rushed in and handed the visitor a paper. The short beard wiggled.

“I must go. Good luck. I’ll be with Elizabeth at the performance.”

He fled, but Pete detained the page. Apparently he was supposed to know the bearded man, who certainly knew him. He asked the boy.

“The Earl of Essex,” said the page, bowing low as he departed. Pete staggered to a table and called for a boilermaker.

“Essex! Elizabeth and—ouch! These things always happen to me! I still don’t know who I am—but I’m a pal of Essex, if that means anything.”

“A pal of Essex?” boomed Ben Jonson as he entered the tavern and lumbered forward. “Who? Never mind. I’ve news for you, Pete. Will’s troupe has been arrested.”

“What?” Manx spilled his drink. “Arrested? But—”

“Vagrancy’s the charge,” Ben said, smiling wryly. “The whole troupe’s in gaol. They’ll be released in a week, I hear. Some lawyer named Coke arranged it.”

“Coke! Edward Coke? Wait a minute.” Pete sat silently considering. He was beginning to understand. The Queen would attend a performance of *Romeo and Juliet* in two nights. But there’d be nobody to act out the play. Coke’s stratagem would mean—

“Why, the double-crossing mouthpiece,” Manx exploded. “I’ll put the bee on him. Where’s Will? We gotta get hold of the understudies.”

“They’re in gaol too,” Ben explained.

“But we gotta put on the play in two nights! We—we—”

“We can’t. Coke’s got guards at the Globe and threatens to arrest any players on the stage for vagrancy.”

Shakespeare wandered in, shaking his head.

“Hello, Pete. Hello, Ben. This business may give me time to write my novel, but I don’t know. I wax despondent.”

“You wax—eh?” Pete’s jaw dropped. “Say! I’ve got an idea. You say Coke won’t let any actors on the stage, Ben? And the players are all in the calaboose?”

“Right.”

“Okay.” Mr. Manx nodded slowly. “If I can get in to see the boys, I may be able to fix it yet. But it’ll mean work. Listen!” He bent forward over the table and began to talk rapidly.

---

Half an hour later several skilled artisans stood around Pete, watching him sketch on the table-top.

“The diaphragm goes here. Maybe parchment will do for that, or vellum. The needle arm’s connected to the center of the diaphragm, and it sort of bends down—like that. There’s the needle. The wax rolls—you do have wax in this time, don’t you?”

“Of course,” said one of the artisans. “But I don’t understand—”

“You don’t have to. Just do as I tell you. You talk into this horn and your voice hits the diaphragm and jiggles it. That jiggles the needle, which keeps sliding over the wax rolls. They’re turning, you see, and—”

Kit Marlowe dashed in.

“Here’s the pass from Essex,” he gasped. “It’ll get you into the gaol and out again.”

“Swell. Now I want a rush job, boys, and I’ll check every step with you.” His eyes twinkled mischievously. . .

---

It was almost curtain time. Manx peeped through the curtain at the audience.

“She ain’t come yet,” he said, “I guess. Wait a minute. There’s Essex—and a frail with him. She’s got a mask on.”

Ben Jonson looked.

“That’s the Queen, all right. Shall we get started?”

A burly man in uniform tapped Pete on the shoulder.

“We have our orders. If any player sets foot on this stage—”

“Yeah. We know. But Ben and Kit and Will and I ain’t players. Come on, Will. Make your speech.”

Master Shakespeare, however, had stage-fright. He was hiding in the wings, and Manx hastily took his place. As he marched on, he was horridly conscious of hundreds of eyes focused at him. Essex looked worried. The Queen’s face was impassive.

“Uh—ladies and gentlemen,” Pete gulped. “You’re going to witness something entirely new and different. You got a habit of putting on plays here without scenery. Well, we’re going one step further. We’re putting on *Romeo and Juliet* tonight with plenty of scenery—but without actors!”

There was a dead silence as Manx fled. He rushed off the stage, ducked behind a screen set in the center, and gestured wildly at Kit Marlowe, who obediently lifted the curtain. The audience saw a back-drop painted to represent a street—supposedly in Verona, but, since Pete had sketched the scene, it was a bit puzzling to see an elevated railway near a palace that bore a suspicious resemblance to the Empire State Building. A voice said:

*“Two households, both alike in dignity—”*

The guards stood in the wings, staring. Neither Pete nor the others was talking. The voice, seemingly, emerged from a horn connected to a box over which Manx hovered, vigorously turning a crank. Manx had made the waxen records for his simple phonograph in the gaol.

The Prologue ended. Sampson and Gregory, of the house of Capulet, appeared invisibly on the stage.

*“Gregory, o’ my word, we’ll not carry coals.”*

*“No, for then we should be colliers.”*

Will Shakespeare had quietly fainted against a back-drop. Kit Marlowe was staring out at the audience and shaking his head despairingly. Only Ben was happy. He was slightly tipsy.

“What a time we had last night,” he gurgled. “After you went to bed, Pete. We played your—what is it?—phonograph in the tavern, and even made a recording. What fun!”

“Sh-h!” Manx hissed. “The next record, quick!”

The guards were worried. Obviously they couldn’t arrest players if there weren’t any, but the performance was going on regardless. Yet the audience was cold.

Shakespeare woke up and passed out again. Kit was dripping with perspiration. Pete felt sick. This wasn’t going over. Maybe it was too novel. And if the Queen didn’t like it—what had Essex said? Beheading? Or maybe burning at the stake. Pete shut his eyes and shuddered. It was just a toss-up between a stake and a chop.

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The silence grew deadly. People began to leave. Kit had his hands over his eyes. Will awoke, listened a moment, gasped, “That damned balcony scene!” and passed out once more.

It was act two, scene two—Capulet’s orchard. The famous balcony scene. Romeo entered invisibly.

His deep voice came out of the phonograph horn.

“He jests at scars that never felt a wound. But soft! What light through yonder window breaks. . . .” The record ended. Pete automatically reached for the next, which should have been extended ready in Ben’s hand. But Jonson was having trouble. He was fumbling desperately amid the cylinders.

“They’re mixed up,” he gurgled. “Quick! Ad lib!”

With a groan of horror Pete snatched the script from his pocket and searched for the place. Already hisses were coming from the audience on the other side of the screen. A moment more—

Pete found the place, but the letters blurred before his eyes. The old English script was difficult for him to read. He tried to imitate Romeo’s voice, bending low over the phonograph so the guards would not notice that he was speaking.

“It—it is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise—f-f-fair sun, and—what the hell is this!—and—and blackout the moon, who is—who’s got the pip . . . that thou art—art—art a honey more fair than she. . . .”

“Oh, my God!” Will Shakespeare gurgled, and collapsed once more. “What a profession! I’m going out and dig ditches for a living!”

The audience was in an uproar. Kit Marlowe was running around in circles. Ben Jonson was hopelessly fumbling with the wax records. Pete plunged on frantically.

“Two of the fairest stars . . . what if her lamps were there . . . her glims in heaven . . . oh, that I were a glove upon her hand, that I might—might—what is this, anyhow? . . . that I might get a handout!”

“Ay me!” Ben Jonson squeaked in Juliet’s voice.

“She speaks!” Pete babbled hysterically. “Oh, speak again—”

“Got it!” Ben said jubilantly, slipping a record on the phonograph.

“Oh, speak, bright angel—”

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Ben was busy, and the needle scratched across the wax. The phonograph’s horn blared out sound. The bright angel spoke again:

“It was *down* in *Chinatown*—the cokeys lay around—some were *high* and some were mighty *looooooow!*”

“*Mighty low!*” boomed the chorus of the Mermaid Tavern.

“There were millions on the floor—”

“Oh-oh,” Ben said. “Wrong record. That’s the one we made last night in the tavern.”

“And *theeeeah* was Minnie—*Minnie the Moocher!*—kicking the gong around!”

“Take it off!” Pete babbled. “Oh, we’re sunk now! We—”

“Hold!” Kit Marlowe called from the wings. “Pete, they like it! They’re going wild.”

A chorus of shouts rose from the audience. The contagion of the jive swept out. Some of the onlookers had visited the Mermaid Tavern lately, and they began to jitterbug in the aisles. In a moment the Globe Theatre swung into action!

“If you don’t know Minnie—”

“If you don’t know Minnie!” roared the audience.

“Yahooo!” That was Ben Jonson, capering into view on the stage and setting the pace. “Swing it, boys! Give!”

“*There was Minnie!*”

Even the guards joined in, unable to resist. And Queen Elizabeth rose daintily to her feet, assisted by Essex, and—*swung!*

“There was Minnie—”

“MINNIE THE MOOCHER!”

“Kicking the gong around!”

By the time the record ended, the audience had collapsed in their seats. But Pete’s quick brain had already made a plan. He continued *Romeo*—with certain additions. Between each act he played Minnie the Moocher.

Essex found him after the show.

“It’s wonderful,” the Earl babbled. “You’ll be the next Attorney-General! The Queen’s delighted. It’s—”

“Aw, it’s nothing,” Pete said modestly. “Just a little idea of mine, that’s all. Hey, Ben?”

“I hear you talking,” remarked Ben Jonson. “Hi-de—”

*Woosh!*

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Doctor Mayhem had at last repaired his time machine.

Pete opened his eyes in the laboratory. He beamed happily at Professor Aker and the Doc.

“Hi,” he greeted. “Had a swell time. Wish you’d been along.”

“What happened?” Aker demanded. “Shakespeare wrote the plays, didn’t he?”

“Bacon!” Mayhem snapped. “Tell us just what happened, Pete.”

“Okay,” said Manx, gratefully lighting a cigarette. “Bacon had nothing to do with the set-up. Shakespeare wrote his own stuff. Listen. . . .” He launched into his tale, ignoring Mayhem’s look of disappointment.

“So that’s the whole thing,” he finished. “Sorry, Doc, but you lose.”

Aker was grinning.

“Next time don’t argue with a psychologist,” he said maliciously. “If—”

“Just a minute.” Mayhem had an eyebrow cocked up. “You gave Will Shakespeare a lot of ideas, didn’t you, Pete?”

“Oh, sure. He liked most of ’em. Wrote ’em up—”

“Never mind that. You gave Shakespeare ideas!” Mayhem turned to Aker.

“Professor,” he told him, “I think you missed a few points. The man whose body Pete inhabited in the sixteenth century was a close friend of Essex. He was a cousin to Robert Cecil and a nephew of Lord Burghley. And his deadliest enemy was Edward Coke, the lawyer.”

“So what?” Pete asked. “I never did find out who I was.”

Mayhem was chuckling. “Ask Aker. He knows. That’s right, Pete—you were a pal of Essex and an enemy of Coke. Your uncle was Lord Burghley. And—ha!—d’you know who Lord Burghley’s nephew was?”

“No,” Manx said blankly. “Who was he?”

“Sir Francis Bacon!” Mayhem howled, and bent double with laughter. “So Shakespeare wrote the plays! Wow! But Pete Manx gave Shakespeare the ideas—and it was Bacon’s body you were inhabiting in Elizabethan times! Yaaah!” the Doctor observed, with a lamentable lack of dignity, to the departing back of Professor Aker. “Wise guy, huh? Come on, Pete. I’m going to buy you a drink.”

“Okay, Doc,” Manx smiled, rising. “I guess I earned it. That’s what I call bringing home the Bacon!”

[The end of *The Comedy of Eras* by Henry Kuttner (as Kelvin Kent)]