

OCTOPUS
or
Octavius Guy
and the Case of the Throttled Tragedienne

by Michael Gallagher

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THE PROLOGUE

London. Thursday, July 1st, 1852; 9.30 pm.

THE APRON STAGE AT Sadler's Wells is a large one; it extends well beyond the theatre's proscenium arch, which marks the traditional boundary to any normal stage. Our private box was situated directly above it, which meant we got a bird's-eye view of the proceedings.

I've seen plays before—well, maybe not *plays* exactly, but I've seen *a play*. Ned, the one-time leader of London's criminal underworld, took me to see it just before he made me his deuce...his second-in-command, that's to say. It was called "*Macbeth*", and for nigh on three hours I sat transfixed. The blood! The gore! All a young boy could wish for! Afterwards he asked me what I thought the moral of the story was. I considered replying, 'Go trafficking with witches at your peril,' which seemed like a perfectly appropriate moral to me, but I found myself saying, 'You shouldn't betray someone's trust, the way that Macbeth betrayed Duncan's.' He seemed to appreciate this answer, for he smiled and slapped me on the back. Of course, this was a lifetime ago—well, half of my lifetime, at least—before I was reformed of my felonious ways and began taking my responsibilities more seriously.

If you find it hard to believe that a criminal overlord would make a seven-year-old boy his deuce, let me tell you there are reasons, good reasons, which will no doubt

become obvious to you, astute reader, long before you and I finish this tale.

The play I was currently enjoying, *The Duchess of Malfi*, concerned itself with the greed and corruption that can fester even in the highest-born families. Oh, the poor duchess! She had no chance of happiness, not with brothers like hers! Her despicable siblings distrusted her so, they planted a spy in her household. Their man, a fellow named Bosola, was for ever wrestling with his conscience, for he could see that the duchess was pure at heart, whereas his spy masters were naught but evil.

I was beginning to despair of any bloodthirstiness, however, for so far there had not been a single death. Mercifully, with the arrival of act four—and a new set of orders for the troubled Mr Bosola—this oversight was about to be addressed.

First the spy drove the duchess to despair by showing her the bodies of her slaughtered offspring (waxworks, one and all—not that she was aware of the fact—but my point is, *as waxworks*, they can hardly be included in the final body count, now can they?). Ah, but I digress!

Next he tried to taunt her by filling her house with madmen. That didn't go too well for him, for by now she was indifferent to their company.

It forced him to put his final humiliation for her into play. A tingle—a thrill—ran down my spine as he ushered his band of assassins on stage. They were dressed as monks, and with their cowls drawn over their heads it was impossible to see anything of their faces. How exquisitely

creepy they looked!

‘Pull, and pull strongly,’ the duchess cried out, as they each strung a cord round her neck.

Oh, but she was a feisty one! Refusing to utter so much as a whimper, she writhed and convulsed in heart-rending silence before crumpling in a heap on the floor. Any caterwauling was left up to the big, brawny chambermaid—who was next for the chop—as the thugs dragged her screaming from the stage. I had to sit on my hands to stop myself clapping! And, yes, even *I* know you clap at the end of an act and not at some point in the middle—well, I do now, having clapped at a seemingly inappropriate moment during *Macbeth*.

The leading actress, Miss Prynn—or Bella, as I’d already begun to think of her again, for it turned out that I’d known her in the past—had given us a sterling performance as the throttled duchess. Even now she lay face-up and motionless on the stage some fifteen feet below me. So perfect was the effect, in fact, that, in the narrow beam of limelight that fell across her throat, I could have sworn I saw signs of actual bruising. I was only sorry that our host, Mr Willoughby, had had to miss all the fun, having withdrawn from the box some time earlier to answer a call of nature.

When one of the brothers who’d come to gloat over her corpse eventually made his exit, Bosola stood surveying the duchess’s body, then suddenly gave a start.

‘She stirs, here’s life!’ he marvelled, hurrying to her side. ‘Return, fair soul, from darkness and lead mine out of this

sensible hell.'

The actor knelt down and, grasping Bella's hand, raked her fingers along his smooth, jutting jaw.

'She's warm, she breathes,' he murmured. 'Upon thy pale lips I will melt my heart, to store them with fresh colour.'

He leaned forward and kissed her. Everybody in the theatre leaned forward too.

'Her eye opes...'

He was staring down at her face, as were we, so we could see just as he could that her eyelids hadn't budged.

'Her eye opes...'

This time he said it louder, emphasizing the words, but still to no effect as far as I could see. Both Bella's eyes remained stubbornly closed.

'HER EYE OPES...'

He was almost shouting the line now, and I could hear the panic in his voice.

'You said that twice already!' came a heckler from the balcony. A number of people burst out laughing.

Mr Jacobs—the actor playing Bosola—rose to his feet and approached the front of the stage. White-faced and trembling, he addressed the audience directly: 'Ladies and gentlemen, I beg your forgiveness. Miss Prynne appears to have been taken ill.'

A low, rumbling mutter started somewhere in the dress circle, then spread rapidly to other sections of the building.

'Ladies and gentlemen, please,' Mr Jacobs appealed over the din, 'is there a doctor in the house?'

Mr Bone, a man whose acquaintance we'd only just made whilst on our way to the theatre, sprang up from his chair beside me. He was obviously intending to help, but was unsure quite how to proceed. All of a sudden he spied a figure racing down the aisle of the stalls. 'Look,' he said, pointing.

As we watched, the fellow hopped the barrier into the orchestra pit, then hauled himself on to the stage. He knelt beside Bella and, after loosening her ruff, he felt for a pulse in her wrist. The mumblings in the auditorium faded to a whisper.

The man removed his hat and bent over Bella, obscuring our view of her face.

'The procedure he's attempting is known as mouth-to-mouth resuscitation,' Mr Bone informed us tensely.

Since he claimed to have some medical training, I could only assume he knew what he was talking about. I could see the rise and fall of Bella's chest with every breath the man delivered, but apart from this she remained unnaturally still. After what seemed like an age, he stopped what he was doing and leaned back on his haunches.

'What's going on here?' asked Mr Willoughby, as he made his way back to his seat. 'Did I miss summat while I was away?'

His return to the box was met with a '*Shush!*'

Frowning at this unexpected reception—for he'd been the one to fork out for this evening's entertainment—he sat himself down with as much dignity as he could muster and peered over the balustrade with the rest of us.

‘Miss Prynn’s been taken poorly,’ my employer whispered in his ear. ‘That’s the doctor with her now.’

‘I fear one of the executioners may have got a little overzealous with his cord,’ muttered his partner-in-the-making, the flashily-dressed Mr Peacock.

Mr Willoughby shot him a look. ‘Then why’s the doctor doing nowt? Why don’t he try to bring her round?’

‘He *has* tried to revive her,’ explained Mr Bone, with a touch of exasperation in his voice. ‘He’s just sent backstage for a hand mirror.’

‘A hand mirror? What the heck for? That lass is in no state to be fussing with make-up!’

‘He’ll want to check for her breath on the glass, sir. It’s exactly what I would do in his position. Look, someone is bringing one now.’

An actress, who’d had a very minor role in the play, entered from the wings, carrying a mirror. She passed it to the doctor, who held it first to Bella’s mouth and then up to her nose.

“*“O fly your fate. Thou art a dead thing. Never see her more,”*” intoned Mr Bone, and, though he was murmuring these phrases under his breath, in the silence that had fallen in the auditorium we all heard every word.

‘What’s he on about?’ demanded Mr Willoughby.

Mr Bone looked at him and blinked. ‘They’re lines from later in the play, sir, that the duchess speaks from her grave. It seemed an appropriate tribute to the late Miss Prynn.’

‘*The late—?*’

‘Miss Isabella Prynn. She is dead, sir. She is dead.’

*My former friend, with whom I'd just been reunited,
dead? How had a day that had started out so promisingly
come to such a dreadful pass?*

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