

CHAPTER ONE

1855

Nigel Buckmaster knew how to make an entrance. When he swept into the bustling concourse at Paddington Station, the crowd parted before him as for royalty. Those close to the actor-manager gaped and gasped as he strode past. Those farther away craned their necks to see what all the fuss was about. Tall, lean and lithe, Buckmaster wore a black cloak that swished behind him and a wide-brimmed black felt hat out of which long, lustrous, dark locks fell to his shoulders. His face was striking rather than handsome, his most significant features being a pointed chin and two large, smouldering eyes separated by a narrow, tapering nose. It was the face both of a hero and a villain, combining bravado with menace in identical proportions and exuding a sense of unassailable purpose.

Contributing in equal part to their dramatic arrival was the stately leading lady whom Buckmaster led on his arm.

Kate Linnane was approaching thirty but she still had the stunning bloom and beauty of a much younger woman, features glowing, eyes dancing, delicate chin uplifted with regal disdain. Blond curls peeped out from a poke bonnet trimmed with ostrich feathers. Her light blue waistcoat was in subtle contrast to the exquisitely tailored navy jacket. Hidden beneath a decorated navy skirt that ballooned outwards, her feet tripped along so gracefully that she appeared to be gliding in unison with the majestic gait of her companion. Opened the previous year, the London terminus of the Great Western Railway was a spectacular cathedral of wrought iron and glass where thousands of passengers came to worship daily at the altar of steam. Nigel Buckmaster and Kate Linnane had momentarily transformed it into a vast apron stage on which they could perform before an open-mouthed audience.

As befitted such a splendid couple, there was a sizeable retinue in their wake. Where they led, other members of the troupe followed. First was a group of strutting, long-haired actors of varying ages along with some pretty, perfumed, gesticulating young actresses, eager to grab their share of attention. Behind these preening peacocks was a motley stage crew, noticeably less well-dressed and marked by an air of collective resignation. The cavalcade was completed by a line of porters wheeling well-worn trunks on their rumbling trolleys or carrying costume baskets, scenery and stage properties on their rattling carts. Buckmaster's Players were on the move. They surged on to the platform as if commandeering the whole train. A strict order of precedence was observed. While the two luminaries headed for a first

class carriage, the other artistes had to travel second class and the remainder of the company was forced to supervise the loading of the luggage and the theatrical paraphernalia before being received into the comfortless embrace of third class.

Buckmaster opened a carriage door with a flourish so that Kitty could step into the compartment. When he climbed in after her, he shut the door, flung off his hat, whisked off his cloak and sat with his back to the engine. Kate lowered herself on to the seat opposite him. Now that there were no spectators to impress, she let her features rearrange themselves into an expression of sheer boredom.

‘I hate all this travelling, Nigel,’ she said, peevishly.

‘Needs must when the devil drives,’ he told her. ‘If the mountain will not come to Mahomet, then Mahomet must go to the mountain.’

‘Why can we not play at Drury Lane or Covent Garden?’

‘Because they don’t yet deserve us, my love,’ he said with a grandiloquent gesture. ‘Until they do, we must seek pastures new.’

Kate sighed. ‘But why on earth must we do so in *Wales*?’ she complained, bitterly. ‘It’s like being cast into outer darkness.’

Twenty minutes later, just before the train was due to depart, two figures suddenly appeared outside their carriage. Kate was annoyed that their privacy was about to be invaded but Buckmaster took an interest in the touching little scene that was being played out only feet away from him. Though he could hear no words, he found the mime eloquent. A short,

whiskery old man with rounded shoulders was giving a set of instructions to the passenger, peering over his glasses and wagging his finger repeatedly. Still in his twenties, his companion had a fresh-faced, boyish look to him, nodding dutifully in obedience and releasing an occasional affectionate smile. He was carrying a large bag, its heavy weight making him shift it from one hand to the other. Judging from his apparel, his bowler hat and the worried glances the young man threw at the train, Buckmaster surmised that he was not a regular traveller in first class. Indeed, when he eventually opened the door, he looked around warily as if unsure if he was entitled to climb aboard.

‘Come in, come in, my friend,’ said Buckmaster, beckoning him forward. ‘We are delighted to have some company.’

Resenting the newcomer, Kate hid her irritation behind a dazzling smile. He gave them both a nod of gratitude then stepped between them and sat by the window on the opposite side of the compartment. Buckmaster pulled the door shut and nodded to the man on the platform. Within a minute, a whistle sounded and the locomotive exploded into life. As the train moved forward, the young man gave a farewell wave to his erstwhile escort. Mouthing some last advice and with one hand holding his top hat in place, the old man scurried solicitously alongside the carriage until he ran out of breath and platform. Buckmaster was intrigued.

‘You are a regular Laertes, my friend,’ he observed.

The newcomer blinked. ‘I beg your pardon, sir.’

‘You are clearly not familiar with the greatest play ever written. I refer, of course, to William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*,

a role in which I have garnered endless plaudits. In earlier days, however, when I was a juvenile in the company, I often took the role of Laertes and received wise counsel from my father, Polonius, in much the same way as you took advice from your own revered parent just now.'

'Mr Voke is not my father, sir.'

Buckmaster was surprised. 'Really? Did my eyes deceive me?'

'It's true that he has been like a father to me in some ways,' said the other, nervously, 'especially since his own son deserted the business, but we are in no way related. Mr Voke is my employer.'

'Ah, I see. And what form does that employment take?'

'We are silversmiths.'

It took a long time to draw him out. Hugh Kellow had clearly never met any Thespians before. Arresting upon any stage, Buckmaster and Kate were positively overwhelming in the smaller confines of a railway carriage, albeit one on the broader gauge of just over seven feet. The silversmith was uneasy and tongue-tied at first. He sat in the corner with an arm looped protectively around his bag. They slowly won his confidence, eliciting his name and destination from him. It was almost half an hour before he had the courage to look Kate full in the face. Buckmaster resorted to flattery.

'You have never trod the boards, I take it?' he began.

'No, sir,' replied Kellow, modestly. 'I've been to a few Penny Gaffs in London but that is all.'

Kate snorted. 'Contemptible places!'

'They provide a service, my love,' said Buckmaster,

tolerantly. 'What they can never do, of course, is to reach the heights to which we soar. While they offer base amusement for the uneducated, we deal in true art, profound drama that can reach into the very soul of those privileged to watch.' He studied Kellow. 'Unless I am mistaken, you could have the makings of a fine actor.'

'Not me, sir,' protested the silversmith. 'I lack any talent.'

'You have a good voice and a handsome face, two necessary attributes of any actor. If you can master the craft of a silversmith, you obviously have the dedication needed to train for the stage.' He looked across at Kate. 'Do you not agree?'

'I was struck by his appearance the moment I set eyes on him,' she said, taking her cue. 'You have *presence*, Mr Kellow, and that is the most important quality of all. Vocal tricks and histrionic gestures can be taught but stage presence is a natural gift. Come now, there must have been times when you felt the urge to perform in public.'

'Never, Miss Linnane,' said Kellow with a self-effacing laugh. 'The truth of it is I'm rather a timid fellow.'

'Timidity is something that can easily be shed.'

'Kate is right,' added Buckmaster, taking a silver case from his pocket and extracting a card. 'Here – take this. If ever you change your mind, there will always be a place for you in my company.' Kellow took the gold-edged card and inspected it. 'You would have to start at the bottom, you understand, with small parts and meagre rewards but think what glories might lie ahead – Hugh Kellow in *Hamlet*!'

The silversmith shrugged. 'I think I will stick to my trade, sir.'

‘Keep my card and come to see us perform in Cardiff.’

‘Oh, I am not staying in the town, sir.’

‘No?’

‘I simply have to make a delivery,’ said Kellow, slipping the card into his pocket, ‘then I catch a return train to London. On that journey, I fear, I will not have such distinguished company in first class. Mr Voke bought me a second class ticket.’

‘I fancy that I see why,’ said Kate, who had been watching the way his arm never left the bag. ‘You must be carrying something of great value if you would not let your luggage be stowed on top of the carriage. May we ask what it is?’

Kellow bit his lip before speaking. ‘It’s a locomotive,’ he said. ‘To be more exact, it’s a silver coffee pot in the shape of a locomotive.’

‘How singular!’ cried Buckmaster. ‘Pray, let us see it.’

‘Mr Voke forbade me to show it to anyone, sir.’

‘But we are not anyone, Mr Kellow – we are friends.’

‘Trusted friends, I hope,’ said Kate, her appetite whetted. ‘What harm is there in letting us have a peep at it? We are very discreet and it is not as if your employer will ever know.’

Hugh Kellow wrestled with his conscience for several minutes, unwilling to open the bag yet not wishing to let them down. He did not wish to spend the rest of a long journey in a strained atmosphere. They had offered him friendship and he needed to respond.

‘Very well,’ he said, capitulating. ‘But you must promise not to touch it.’ The others nodded their consent. Kellow undid the straps on the bag and took out an object that was wrapped in muslin. He drew back the folds of the material.

‘Here it is – a replica of the Firefly class of 1840, exact in every particular.’

Buckmaster and Kate were astounded. What they were looking at was nothing less than a miniature masterpiece, a scale model that was well over a foot long and that had the substance and sheen of high quality silver. The boiler was fitted to a tall, domed, gleaming firebox. Either side of the two large driving wheels were much smaller carrying wheels. While Buckmaster whistled in amazement, Kate’s eyes widened covetously. Kellow was pleased at their reaction.

‘The framing has been simplified a little,’ he explained, ‘and we added some boiler mountings. As for this little embellishment,’ he went on, indicating a silver crown at the top of the smokestack, ‘it is not mere decoration. It has an important function.’ He flicked the crown back on its hinge. ‘It keeps the coffee warm before it is poured.’

‘It’s magnificent,’ said Buckmaster. ‘I’ve never seen such fine detail. It must have taken an age to make.’

‘It did, sir. Mr Voke is a perfectionist. He worked for an eternity on this commission. He even sent me to Swindon to make some drawings of Firefly locomotives.’

Buckmaster’s eye twinkled. ‘Did you travel first class?’

‘I had to make do with third class on that occasion,’ admitted Kellow, sadly. ‘Mr Voke is very careful with his money. Some call him mean – his son certainly did – but I think he’s being sensible. He’s taught me to manage my own income with similar caution.’

‘I’ve never seen anything like it,’ said Kate, feasting her eyes on the locomotive. ‘Your employer has turned an ugly, dirty, noisy, iron contraption into a thing of real beauty. It

must be an honour to work for such a superb craftsman.'

'It is, indeed,' returned Kellow, gratefully, 'though the coffee pot is not entirely Mr Voke's handiwork. The truth of it is that his eyesight is not what it was so he asked me to take over some of the more intricate work such as the crown and the insignia on the side of the firebox. I was also responsible for the pistons and for the railings on either side of the footplate.' A note of pride intruded. 'It was because I was so involved in making it that Mr Voke gave me the honour of delivering it to its new owner.'

'And who is that?'

'Mrs Tomkins of Cardiff – her name is on the boiler plate.'

'I envy her!' said Kate with feeling. 'I *adore* silver. No, no,' she went on quickly as Kellow tried to cover the locomotive up again. 'Don't hide it away, I beseech you. Let me gloat!'

Amid clouds of smoke, sulphur and soot, the train roared into Cardiff General Station and slowed to a juddering halt. The passengers alighted and waited for their luggage to be unloaded from the roofs of the carriages. Larger items had travelled in the guard's van. Before he stepped on to the platform, Nigel Buckmaster put on his hat, cloak and imperious expression. He helped Kate Linnane to get out then he shook hands with Hugh Kellow. The silversmith was anxious to deliver the coffee pot but Kate was reluctant to let him go, clutching his arm with one hand while surreptitiously stroking his bag with the other. When he finally pulled away, she let out an involuntary cry of distress.

'What ails you, my love?' asked Buckmaster.

She watched Kellow until he was swallowed up by the crowd.

‘It’s that silver coffee pot,’ she confessed, a palm to her breast. ‘It’s stolen my heart, Nigel – I’d *kill* to own it!’

The corpse lay on the bed, impervious to the breeze that blew in through the open window to rustle the curtains. When a fly came into the room, it described endless circles in the air before settling on the top of a large, open, empty leather bag.