

Chapter One

Saturday, 7 September 1850

Ned Farquhar Pratt has steadfastly refused to learn the dialogue in his own play *Jack Larceny the Pickpocket*, and he will not hear of anyone but himself playing the role of Old Sewell. Last evening, Tobias Smith the prompter supplied him with nearly all of his lines. Tonight, he seemed oblivious even to Mr. Smith's promptings, stumbling about on the stage with the look of a man who'd just soiled his underwear but wasn't sure anyone would notice.

I should have known that something was amiss, or rather, more amiss than usual, when he was standing by my desk behind the stage left arch, waiting for his first entrance. His usual method of preparing for his entrances is to rock gently from one foot to another, all the while whispering rather harshly to himself something about Kean and *Hamlet* and backflips. Tonight, his waistcoat hung loosely over his slumped shoulders, and he stood like an axe-struck cow, peering intently at some empty seats or perhaps at the sparse number of spectators in attendance. It did not seem to occur to the old man that if he could see the audience so too could the audience see him. With a fixed gaze, as though he had suddenly discovered some hitherto unknown meaninglessness, he peered at them. His breathing was heavy – heavier than usual – and as audible as sighing.

Trying gently to prod him back out of sight of the auditorium, I whispered, "My dear Mr. Farquhar Pratt, I believe you can be seen where you are."

He did not move; he did not look at me. His gaze grew even more intent and he said, "I suppose I can."

I know how unhappy Pratty becomes when he feels he has

been insulted, and so I thought it best to let the few spectators who were in attendance have a partial view of him. At last his cue came and still he stood immoveable by my desk, like a man fixed to a post. I placed my hand on his stage-left shoulder and said, in a louder voice, "It's your cue, Mr. Farquhar Pratt." This seemed to arouse some urgency in him, or at least some memory of other plays and cues, and he ventured unsteadily on to the boards near where the Parisian Phenomenon stood, her eyes wide, anxious to see what new wonder would occur.

I knew what his line was supposed to be. I'm sure the Parisian Phenomenon knew, as well, and I could see that Mr. Smith knew it too, as he was not bothering to look at his prompt script. For aught I understood, everyone in the theatre knew Mr. Farquhar Pratt's line. Except Mr. Farquhar Pratt.

We are also quite aware that Pratty does not like to be prompted. Well I remember him regaling us with stories of his apprenticeship to Edmund Kean, in Exeter or somewhere. "The eminent Kean," he declaimed, "would not countenance a prompt. Rather would he dance a hornpipe or improvise ten thousand lines than hear the prompter give him one."

Having heard this story approximately five thousand times, Mr. Smith was in no hurry to offer up the required prompt, but I could see him mouthing the line with the exaggerated gesticulations that were characteristic of Grimaldi in the pantomimes. "Beg the storm for mercy," he mouthed, "beg the sun not to shine, but henceforth beg for no mercy from me."

Pratty stood transfixed. He has been upon this stage in a hundred different roles in a hundred different plays, all of them clanging inside his head at that moment. He gazed unseeingly at the Parisian Phenomenon, who on this unhappy occasion was playing his daughter. She gazed archly back.

At that precise moment, the proprietor's wife (and the Parisian Phenomenon's mother), Mrs. Sarah Wilton, appeared

at my elbow. She was gotten up with three inches of pancake – I could actually smell the rouge on her cheekbones – and her usual ill-fitting maidservant’s costume. Observing Mr. Farquhar Pratt in a state of perplexity, she hissed to no one in particular, “It is time the old fart retired!”

Mr. Farquhar Pratt’s lips parted. His mouth moved inarticulately for some moments, and then I could see him running his tongue over his lips, as is his habit. He cleared his throat rather volubly and declaimed, “Mark Ingestre is dead!”

There was a titter in the auditorium. It could not justifiably be called more than a titter since fewer than fifty people can hardly produce a genuine belly laugh. The titter began in the front row and gradually spread to other corners of the house. Somebody in the balcony shouted out merrily, “Ello, ‘ello, Pratty, *Sweeney Todd* was last month’s bill.”

Something in Mr. Farquhar Pratt’s face seemed to alter. Perhaps it was the almost imperceptible shaking of his jowls or the slow widening of his eyes. He smiled faintly and said “Excuse me” in his best theatrical voice. Mrs. Wilton charged on to the stage and took him forcibly by the ragged shirtsleeve.

“Master!” she exhorted. “I know that you feel your daughter has been ungrateful. You blame her for the death of your good wife.” She was looking searchingly into Mr. Farquhar Pratt’s dull eyes but could find no sign of recognition. “But have patience, old man! Have faith that all will yet be well!” Mrs. Wilton was still tugging at Pratty’s sleeve, pulling him like a dazed and maddened bull from the ring. He followed her reluctantly, his face a mask of suspicion. One faltering step after another, and at last he was backstage again and out of view of the audience.

“Look to Mr. Farquhar Pratt!” Mrs. Wilton hissed at me, her face taut and stern. She returned to the stage and reassured the Parisian Phenomenon that she must only wait and allow Fate to act in her behalf. The play ran relatively smoothly after that,

although one of the stagehands, Samuel Forbes, had to be dressed as a messenger and brought on in the last scene. His part in the fiasco was to reveal that the venerable Old Sewell had just passed away and that his last words were a halting “I – forgive – you – Eliza!” The effort of articulating these seven syllables were, Mr. Forbes told the audience, a strain upon the old master’s constitution and so he had succumbed to his eternal reward.

I ushered Mr. Farquhar Pratt downstairs to the dressing room which was fortunately almost vacant because the other actors were required on stage through the remaining acts. Only Algernon the cat remained there with us, curling up in Pratty’s lap, as is the feline’s habit, while the old man sat vacantly in front of his mirror. There was no need to wash Mr. Farquhar Pratt’s face since he had forgotten to apply any makeup before going out on to the stage. I managed to pull off his rich waistcoat and shirt, noting how angular his ancient frame had become. His left shoulder jutted out at an almost impossible angle. I asked him if he had ever broken his collarbone, but he did not answer. At last I was able to dress him in his street apparel. He frowned at himself in the mirror through all of this, his eyebrows arched and his forehead even more crevassed than usual.

“What have I done?” he murmured into the mirror.

“Nothing that cannot be repaired with a good night’s sleep,” I replied, as cheerily as I could. “We’ll have Master West walk you to your apartments when the play’s over.”

“What have I done?” he asked again, oblivious to my comments.

I do not know why, but I found a comb on Mr. Farquhar Pratt’s dressing table and gently ran it through his white hair.



Late that evening, I was summoned to the proprietor’s office. The door was open, and Thomas Wilton was standing, straight

as the soldier he once had been, peering out of his greasy window at the few audience members who were leaving the theatre and wending their way towards Bishopsgate.

I knocked on the doorjamb. Mr. Wilton turned toward me and sighed. He is a man clearly more at home upon the field of battle than in a London theatre. His grey eyes bore into me. "What's to be done, Phillips?" he said.

"Done, sir?"

"About Mr. Farquhar Pratt?"

"You've heard."

His nod was almost imperceptible. Old Stoneface, as the actors call him behind his back, is difficult to read. "My wife was in to see me during the final act." He looked, for a moment, at the red satin wallpaper lifting at the seams on his wall. The only decorations in Mr. Wilton's office are renderings of his other theatre up in Penrith and of his textile factories in Spitalfields and Manchester. "Damn it, Phillips, this theatre is a family. Like all my other undertakings."

"I know, sir." I did not feel that it was necessary to prod Mr. Wilton to do what was proper. Mr. Wilton usually solves his own problems when listened to attentively.

He shook his head slowly. His magnificent eyebrows shook as well, eyebrows which would do any patriarch proud, from Abraham to King Lear. "If we cannot keep him acting, he will not survive. A stock playwright's wage is no wage to live by."

"Perhaps we could give him smaller roles."

Mr. Wilton's eyes narrowed. "Do not toy with me, Phillips. I am no man of the theatre, but I do know that there are no roles smaller than those which Mr. Farquhar Pratt is currently playing."

"Perhaps then," I ventured, "we might raise his commission for the plays he writes?"

He glanced at me sharply. "A dangerous precedent, Phillips.

The other lessees would be taking out advertisements in the *Theatre-Goers Guide*, vilifying me for unfair business practices.”

I looked over my shoulder to see if eavesdroppers were near at hand. They weren't. “Would they have to know?” I asked quietly. “We could sign Mr. Farquhar Pratt to a letter of confidentiality.”

The lowering storm abated in Mr. Wilton's face, and he almost seemed to smile. “If the old man could only remember that he had signed the agreement.” Just as suddenly, he laughed one loud bark of a laugh. “But I like your line of thinking, Phillips. We'll offer him three pounds instead of the usual two and six. That's fair, isn't it?”

“Extremely fair and generous,” I said.

“Good.” He clapped me on both shoulders simultaneously, in the manner of congratulating a foot soldier who has executed his responsibilities with valour. “Thank you for your sage advice, Phillips,” he fairly shouted. “You are indeed one of the best stage managers in all London.”

Sunday, 8 September 1850

I do not abuse myself with the notion that my scribblings in this diary will outlive me. It is enough that I use the time and the ink to organize my own thoughts. To that end, I will restrict myself mostly to the complicated inner workings of one of London's minor theatres, the theatre to which I am attached, the New Albion. Nevertheless, I hope that my older self, when he reads the contents herein, will forgive me for the odd entry about my domestic circumstances.

I am afraid my daughters have succumbed to the polite immoralities of life in London. The eldest, Sophie, has taken to flouncing about at all hours dressed in her best finery, her hair got up in studied ringlets. I have also detected a subtle use of

makeup. This newfound attention to fashion has, of course, filtered down to the youngest, Susan, who comes out of her bedroom, occasionally, her cheeks plastered with crimson greasepaint. It is not the most wholesome spectacle I have witnessed in recent memory, and that is much for a man to say who has spent the last fourteen years in the employ of a theatre.

They have also reserved certain occasions for the Queen's English instead of their native North London dialect. Any day now, I expect to see a rented coach and four pull up to our modest apartments and spirit them away to the Palace. This new accent they especially love to use when enacting one of their theatrical playlets in our sitting room. Theatrical presentations have been alarmingly regular occurrences in our household of late, usually involving an adaptation of the latest novel Sophie has read. She enlists all of her sisters in these enactments. For my own part, I have been relegated (correctly) to the position of spectator, but I rue the day when Sophie will persuade me that I must be Mr. Earnshaw or some other character in her play.

Speaking of Earnshaw, this new novel, *Wuthering Heights*, was the latest installment produced by Sophie's homespun troupe. The story of Heathcliff and Catherine has made the rounds of almost every female inhabitant of the household, only excluding little Susan who cannot yet read at that level. There has been much discussion around the dinner table of Edgar and Hareton and the Grange; my daughters have lived with these characters and places as though they were not mere fabrications but realities. It was only a matter of time before they found their way into the oeuvre of Sophie's theatrical enterprise.

I witnessed the finished production of *Wuthering Heights* last Sunday evening. Hortense, who is thirteen now, was given the role of Heathcliff because, as Sophie told her, she is taller than her sisters and of darker complexion. "Why do I always have to be the man in the play?" she complained, rather loudly, as they

were preparing for the event. "Why can't father sometimes be the man?"

I was in the parlour at the time, but I heard Sophie's reply. "Because father works too hard to take part in entertainments."

"What about Davina?" came Hortense's quick retort. "She could play the man."

"She's playing all the other parts," Sophie said. "Besides, she's too short." Davina, the nine year-old peace maker, said nothing.

There was a great sigh. "Why can't I be Catherine then?" said Hortense.

"Because my dress befits Catherine best."

"Well, I won't do it!" was Hortense's impassioned response.

"Please, please, just this once," Sophie pleaded. "Next time, I'll let you be the heroine."

"You always say that!"

They nattered back and forth for some time in that vein, and at last Sophie lost her patience. "Oh, don't be a spoiled child," she scolded, her voice now harder and sounding like her mother.

"Yes, Hortense," six year-old Susan piped up, "don't be a spoiled child. If you won't play Heathcliffe, then I can't be young Catherine. And the play will not go on."

There was a brief silence, during which the fate of the drama hung on gossamer threads or, rather, on Hortense's slender shoulders. "Well, I will do it this once," Hortense said finally. "But I will not be the man again."

The play was produced without a hitch after that contentious negotiation. In the first scene, Mr. Lytton interviewed Amelia, and the rain clouds gathered ominously. Wuthering indeed! Hortense was aptly sullen as Heathcliffe, her hair pulled back under an old beaver hat of mine. She is quite tall and slender now, having lost her baby fat almost magically in the last six months, and my greatcoat hung from her shoulders like a militia man's tent. I wonder, if her dear mother Jane could see

her now, what would she think?

O dear dear Jane! How I have missed you these five years! How I have spent every long dark night with your image before me! Our bed is a marble sepulcher. I read until my eyes burn and the candles sputter and wane. I inhabit this house like a ghost in one of Mr. Dickens' novels, wandering from room to room, stopping to peer out the windows into the dimly lit street, thinking that I might see you again coming up the walk.

I have tried to be a good father for these daughters of ours, but it has been difficult. I am not father and mother both. I do not know how to speak to them in their own language. They have humoured me by trying to speak in mine. They mother each other. Sophie mothers more than the rest, but Hortense and Davina and Susan are mothers too.

And I have failed you in many other ways.

Our old Norwegian clock chimes thrice, and I know that I must sleep. I pray for sleep to come, for the happy circumstance that I may see you in my dreams.

Monday, 9 September 1850

I was delighted to inform Mr. Farquhar Pratt of his rise in commission for each new play he writes. He seemed to be expecting the news that he would no longer be playing his traditional line of business on our boards as well, and he accepted it with stifled resignation. We were standing by my desk at the stage-left arch after the other actors had gone downstairs. Pratty seemed smaller than usual. He was never a large man, but with his waistcoat off and his trousers pulled high over his faded white shirt he appeared no more than five feet tall.

He was looking at the scuffed stage floor as though searching for some lost article. "But who will play the old men?"

I cleared my throat and tried to find an innocuous phrasing.

“The suggestion was that Mr. Simpson might be able to do it.”

There was a shadow of hurt in the old man’s face for a moment – theatre people are such open books! “Kean was wise enough to die early,” he murmured. “Have I told you about my time with the eminent Kean?”

“I seem to have heard something about it,” I said. Indeed I had heard many parts of it, almost ad nauseam, nearly every day for the last six months. How Kean used to gauge his performances by the number of females who fainted in the stalls. How he would deliver Lear in a ranting singsong fit to crack the cheeks of the storm on one evening and how he would be performing back flips as Arlecchino the next.

“An enormous talent,” Pratty began in reverentially hushed tones, “but he drank himself to death.” I must confess that I had not heard this part of the story before or anything that could be said to be critical of the great thespian. Farquhar Pratt’s face was as craggy as the inside of those Roman caves at Chiselhurst. “I had often thought what a great waste of genius that had been,” he went on, “but now I begin to understand that it is preferable to die young than to grow old in this business.”

Fourteen years in a London theatre have taught me that one can never go wrong by stroking the egos of artistes. “You have many many years in front of you, Mr. Farquhar Pratt,” I said, “as the well-respected playwright that you are.”

He studied the scratched hardwood again with searching eyes until, at last, he said, “What’s to be done then, Mr. Phillips? I cannot complain that this is unexpected.” He chuckled morosely, the way I would imagine that a condemned man chuckles before the gibbet. “What’s to be done then, eh?” he repeated, but he did not wait for an answer. “We shall simply have to make a go of it, I suppose, shan’t we?” He laughed again, softly. His grey eyes met mine for an instant, and then he turned and picked his way down the stairs to the dressing room.

Tuesday, 10 September 1850

Another milestone in the changing of the guard. Mr. August Levy retired from the theatre today. I believe he saw his future before him when Ernest Holman was hired, some months ago, direct from Bath and with excellent references, to play the comic gentlemen opposite Elias Bancroft. These were the parts that Mr. Levy used to play with such abandon in his heyday. Well I remember, six short years ago, during the Shakespeare Festival and a performance of a butchered version of *Hamlet*, when he and Mr. Bancroft as gravediggers removed innumerable waistcoats in preparation for their labours and danced a final somber hornpipe on Ophelia's grave when their scene was finished.

Mr. Levy had chosen to go out of his own volition and on his own terms, unlike Mr. Farquhar Pratt who seems to be hanging on at all costs. "I'm seventy-two years old," Mr. Levy said to me the other day. "I get winded going up the stairs from the Green Room."

For his part, Mr. Wilton has tried to do right by a man who has given his soul to the theatre. When arthritis began crippling Mr. Levy, making it impossible for him to go on stage with regularity, Mr. Wilton kept him on the payroll for several months. I think Mr. Wilton has been hoping that Mr. Smith might also be retiring soon, in which case Mr. Levy might have served as prompter. But the venerable Mr. Smith has showed no signs of slowing down. Mr. Wilton also offered Mr. Levy a posting in the front of house, which Mr. Levy declined. "What?" he said. "And give up the smell of the greasepaint?"

There was a small fête for Mr. Levy this afternoon in the rehearsal hall. Many glorious speeches were made about how Mr. Levy had had an efficacious effect upon the future of the national drama. Mrs. Wilton gave Mr. Levy a gift of ten pounds, collected from the actors and stagehands, "as a small token of our appreciation for the many years of service" he had given to this theatre.

Still I cannot help but wonder at Mr. Levy's decision to retire. Is he simply taking the high road and refusing the charity of his colleagues? He was always a proud man. How will he fend for himself now that he is no longer employed at the New Albion? "Do not worry about me, Phillips," he said blithely. "My good wife has come into an inheritance."

I watched him leave the theatre after a final goodbye from Mr. Wilton and the rest. He marched resolutely down the cobblestones in the direction of the Angel, where he resides. He did not look back.