

H O W
B E A U T I F U L
T H E Y
W E R E

B O S T O N T E R A N



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PROLOGUE

CHAPTER 1

IT APPEARS THAT I, JEREMIAH FIELDS, have been cast to portray the character who steps from the shadows of the stage and into the footlights to talk directly to the audience.

A simple youth rising quietly from my work desk and stacks of ledgers to introduce the play.

I am not an actor. I have neither the talent nor the vanity. I am what is called in the theatre — the stage manager. My job is to keep the machinery of a play running smoothly. I work behind the scenes. I am unsung and unnoticed, but essential. And I might say, that in my era, there was not another like me.

Colonel Tearwood's American Theatre Company was my youth, my home, my family. And I was part of the company from its volatile beginnings in 1848 to its much written about final act.

Of course, I am here because of Nathaniel Luck. He was my mentor, my teacher, a reluctant father figure, a man driven, joyous. He was the reason newspaper reporters dogged me for his story. Why publishers tried to seduce me with their promises if I could sell the truth of him. Was he the violent murderer from London known as John James Beaufort as was alleged, or a tragic actor that life conspired against? Was he something else altogether?

If you are familiar with the theatre of those times, you might well recognize the term *la piece bien faite*. Translated, it reads — the well-made play.

La piece bien faite was a popular genre and offered to entertain its audience with a tight plot and pacing, reversals of fortune that created suspense, while

constantly building to a climactic resolution. And... most importantly, a central part of the action takes place before the story begins and is not known to all the characters...but is to the audience. Such is what follows.

ACT I

CHAPTER 2

THE SCENE IS LONDON, the theatre district, the taverns and boarding houses where the beggarly of entertainment repose. The year is 1836. It is the era before birth of the greatest theatres and the rise of spectacles. An actor not quite twenty by the name of John James Beaufort is garnering heady reviews as a talent to be reckoned with. Be it drama or comedy, he performs either with equal dexterity. He can be dashing and handsome, or unassuming and inward. He slips from playing the fool to a dangerous adversary in the space of a throwaway line.

For him being on stage was the ultimate act of freedom. Freedom from the constraints of the present as well as one's past. A chance to escape inner demons and torments by channeling their fury and creating a complete masterpiece of the self, when that self is someone else, and that self can be shed when the lights draw down.

There is a kind of freedom in the unreal world. There are no actual ghosts in that world, no all too human adversaries, no loneliness, no despair. In life man is disconnected, a fragment here, a fragment there, a lost feeling, an isolated thought, like disparate needs far flung on a map. On stage, man is a landscape, a mural with the sunrise in one hand and sunset in the other. He is darkness and light and all shadows in between. He is what no human can achieve in life.

John James sat on the brick ledge of the roof to the rooming house where he lived, looking down upon the nightstreet and its dark ranks of social insecurity. This is where it would all rise and fall, where the blackness of life becomes a grave cancer or the genesis of creation.

Inside of him he knew, as well as he knew the lines of a play, that wealth and success were within his reach. But in and of themselves, these meant nothing, except for the freedom they would give him to act upon the world, creating performances out of his willful soul that would match the great characters of literature. Foolish, maybe...but as necessary as air to distinguish the *me* from *them*.

It was while having this private dialogue with himself that the stairwell door opened. Light spilled out upon the darkness and a lantern rose and

there was a girl near about his own age, caught off guard at picking up a presence there in the shadows, a slip of air rushing out of her, her free hand suddenly flat and open against her chest.

“I’m sorry, sir. I didn’t know anyone was up here.”

“Why should you?” he said.

“I came up here...” She pointed back toward the stairwell doorway. “It’s so unbearably hot downstairs. I thought to escape it.”

She came forward holding the lantern high up.

That kind of light can deceive you about someone’s looks, it can cheat you with its shadows, just as it does on stage. But there was no denying the girl had singular features, a high forehead where the light glistened, and a long straight nose that seemed befitting European royalty, with black rich hair and eyes to match. She was neatly dressed and appointed, surely a step up in class from the likes of this rooming house.

“Is it all right, my being here?” she said. “Or would you prefer to be alone?”

“There’s room for both of us at the ledge.”

“I’m not partial to ledges,” she said, handing him the lantern. “Although I’ve had my share of them on rooftops...and off.” There was a touch of amusement in her expression and she turned away and he wasn’t sure if she were being shy or coy.

He heard shouting now coming up through the well of the stairway. Two men arguing, their voices growing louder, angrier, their tone crass and vulgar.

“I wanted to escape that also.” She pointed to the stairway with a look of embarrassment, if not outright shame.

“The louder and more antagonistic of the two voices is my father. He’s having it out with one of the actors in his troupe.”

John James recognized one of the voices as belonging to an arrogant half talent by the name of Taversham.

“Your father is no Falstaff, I gather,” said John James.

“On stage...absolutely, yes. But as for the rest...” She whispered, “He’s closer in kind to a Cassius.”

“Might you give me your name?” he said.

“Lucretia McCarthy,” she said.

“The Dyer McCarthy Troupe.” He looked toward the stairwell. “Is that your father?”

“He’s not the whole troupe. He only believes he is. Some of us are foot soldiers, or other interesting background.”

John James began to introduce himself when Lucretia softly interrupted, “I saw you in Liverpool. In *A Tale of Mystery*.”

“Talk about a showpiece of tired passions.”

“The audience didn’t feel that way. I found them wildly animated.”

The shouting got worse. Her father sounded like a man who could easily turn violent. She walked to the ledge, the lantern guiding her steps. She took to studying the street, watching the strangers below. It was the same comings and goings as yesterday, and probably the same as tomorrow, but she watched nonetheless, as if seeking to escape somewhere in all that foot traffic and be freed of a father’s intolerable voice that echoed up that funnel of a stairwell.

“Did you ever just feel like running away?” she said.

Her voice spoke with such unhappiness.

“I have run away,” he said.

“Really?” How alive her eyes suddenly were. “Was it a wise decision? No...don’t answer. If you say it was, I will be distraught that I have not run away. And if you say it wasn’t wise, I will be dismayed I have devoted so much emotion to the idea.”

Her father’s voice now could be heard up through the rough dark.

“Lucretia...where are you girl?”

“I could quote the lines from many plays here, but I will not.” She started back toward the doorway. “Come meet my father. He will want to know you. Fine actors are his life.”

CHAPTER 3

DYER MCCARTHY STOOD ON THE SECOND FLOOR LANDING searching the hallway and unpleasantly calling out to his daughter when a light descended through the board work of the stairwell.

“I’m here, Father.”

“Where have you been?”

“On the roof. It was too warm down here.”

McCarthy made note of the young man who seemed to be shadowing along behind his daughter. “And what is this?” he said.

She held the lantern up near John James’ face. “Do you recognize him, father?”

John James got his first real look at this Dyer McCarthy. He dressed like your self-serving gent, with a velvet coat and hat to match and a starched collar that his neck looked to have been squeezed into. He was taller and broader than John James and with a nose that had looked to have been broken years before and etched cheeklines, and eyes that were even blacker than his daughter’s. And there was no masking the aura of disdain in the way he cocked his head.

“Hold the lantern closer,” he said.

The girl obeyed and after one look McCarthy raised a twitchy finger and started in. “I was coming home. It was dark, everything was still. I was winding along the dale, and the rocks were all, as it was turning black. Of a sudden I heard cries! A man was murdering. I shook from head to foot. Presently the cries died away, and I beheld two bloody men with their daggers in their hands steal off——”

He was running dialogue from the play *A Tale of Mystery*. He had a scratchy, baritone’s voice, but his acting was too broad and overwrought for John James’ tastes.

“I saw you in that play.” He put out his hand and introductions were made. McCarthy asked John James to walk with them to where a carriage waited.

“You know the old Saint Paul’s church in Liverpool?” said McCarthy. “The auditorium. I’ll be there tomorrow working out new troupe members.

Money has come to me, and I'll be staging *The Pickwick Papers*. Be there at wretched noon and let's see what you're made of."

He started for the carriage and there was a moment, as Lucretia blew out the lantern and she and John James were in darkness and alone, for her to safely whisper, "For your sake...don't come tomorrow."

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The Low and the Mighty was a gin hole where theatre people congregated to trade news, spread gossip, and indulge in prior glories. It had a low roof and a loud piano, and the air was ripe from tanning bins across the alley. There was a notion there that was "bible" — one actor will pat another on the back to get a feel for where to put the knife.

A drunken Colonel Tearwood was at his usual post at the far end of the bar to be close to the door that led to an alley where gents went to piss. He was an aging lifewrecked performer who maintained his good will toward the world even as it turned its back on him. John James eased in beside him.

"Colonel, can you go another round?"

"Break my wrists and watch me."

John James called to the barkeep for two gins.

"And how does the world look from where you're sitting?" said the Colonel.

"What's your opinion of Dyer McCarthy?"

"The man travels with a dark cloud over him. Why?"

"He's asked me about possibly joining his troupe."

"*The Pickwick Papers*."

"How did you know?"

Tearwood jutted his chin out. And there in a smoky corner a loud and drunken Taversham was parading his anger over a table full of fellow players.

The drinks came. Reaching for their glasses, John James saw the Colonel was without his prized gold dice cufflinks.

"You pawned them again, didn't you?"

"Needed money for lodging." He raised his glass. "To Lord Eldon... who gave pawnshops a good name!"

They drank away. "Tell me about McCarthy."

“There’s whispers among the Peelers,” said the Colonel, “he’s got some kind of business relationship with that madam down on Hellum Street with her flogging rack.”

“The Barkeley woman?”

“He’s got at least one Bow Street runner who does dirty work for him. It wouldn’t surprise me that’s where he gets his money.”

“And his daughter?”

“Promising actress...I’ve heard rumors she’s his mistress.”

“You can see from their resemblance they’re related.”

“There’s been many a father who ransacks their own.”

While they talked, someone back in the bar was shouting, “Hey you... Beaufort. You hear me, you god damn coquette.”

John James and the Colonel both heard him, but they paid no attention until a glass whistled past their heads and caromed off the wall before shattering.

“I believe you’re being paged,” said Tearwood.

John James now turned his attention to Taversham who stood off a half-dozen paces, his tall frame shrouded in bar smoke.

“I don’t believe we’ve ever talked,” said John James.

“You don’t act like you’re better than the next man, you just do it with a look or an expression. And I saw you tonight.”

“You saw me what?”

“Playing the coquette with McCarthy. You’re not gonna steal my livelihood from me without me exercising my right to kick your guts out. What do you have to say about that?”

John James said, “I steal no man’s livelihood. I know my lines and wait like the rest of us. And I play the coquette only on stage and when I’m dressed for it.”

There was a ripple of laughter among the murky faces that only made Taversham feel outsmarted and slighted and he started forward and John James was quick to pull a pocket pistol he kept tucked away inside his vest.

“You better hope I’m not as good a shot as I am an actor,” said John James.

Some of Taversham’s friends were up by now and gathering around him, trying to console and quiet him enough to get him out of that shoddy drinking hole. “This ain’t a play...coquette. Understand?”

As the patrons settled out, the Colonel said to John James, “We’ve

been friends about two years now. And I have no idea still where you're from or if you've family. And I had no idea you carried a weapon."

"Silence is better than lying, isn't it?"

"Stay away from McCarthy and his daughter. Find another part of the street to stake your fame."

"But he puts on successful plays."

"All actors suffer the same sin."

"And what is that?"

"They'll sell their souls to the devil for the right part."

John James began to laugh and slapped old Colonel Tearwood on the back. "Maybe that's because good parts are a lot harder to come by than souls."

CHAPTER 4

THE MCCARTHYS LIVED OFF DRURY LANE on Craven. They had a series of well-appointed apartments above a spirits shop that catered to the carriage trade. The neighborhood beggars knew enough to keep clear of the McCarthys except when the daughter was alone. The girl climbed the stairs ahead of her father, so she might draw up the light. She had navigated his moods enough to know silence was her only ally.

His grey white face walked through the doorway and past her as if she did not exist. She closed the door behind him and hoped there was no white hot rage to come.

He set his hat down on the entry sideboard and took off his coat, passing on her help with the dismissive brush of a hand. He gave her the coat and started to undo his cravat as he walked down the hall to the bedroom.

She carried the coat like a servant and passed a mirror above the sideboard to see a seventeen-year-old stranger staring desperately back at her. Lucretia McCarthy was a frightened creature whose youth had been poisoned and her dreams stolen, who was desperate to escape her circumstances, but helpless to do so, and who went about the streets of the world smiling and polite, living out these lies to hide a private sickness of anger and shame at her plight. She wondered if there were other girls like herself living out the desperate helplessness she endured.

The light was golden in the glass and it made her beautiful, and it made her skin shine and her coal black eyes lustrous. She could have been a girl in a painting. But she did not feel like a girl in a painting and her skin did not shine in her heart and her coal black hair and coal black eyes were not lustrous but bleak and desolate. She was not a girl in any painting she knew.

She prayed he would not come, and she prayed that he would come, and she hated herself for either prayer because they spoke to her helplessness.

“Insignificant footsteps.”

His voice was suddenly there in the darkness of the hallway.

“Excuse me, Father?”

She saw him now in the mirror at the edge of the light, his eyes squinting with their incurable malice.

“Some of us leave insignificant footsteps.”

He took a step forward. She saw now his hands were behind his back. She wished he were dead.

“When you were alone with that boy for a few moments by the carriage, you told him something. What did you tell him?”

“Tell him, Father?”

“What—did—you—tell—him?”

“I said...I...we hoped to see him tomorrow.”

He moved a step closer. His boots caused the floorboards to creak. She saw now that he carried the leather strap.

“You will not willfully ruin my plans. What did you tell him?”

“I——”

“Your trembling gives you away. What did you tell him?”

• • •

“Had my instinct about people failed me that night? Was I being drawn and quartered without my knowledge for some nefarious purpose, and I did not appreciate the tensions at work?”

John James was already known on the American stage as Nathaniel Luck when we first had this conversation. It took place in his dressing room long after the theatre was empty, and one could hear it creak with the ghosts of age.

“What about Lucretia?” I said.

Just her name caused hints of shadow around his green eyes. Eyes that when still seemed to open like the sea when the sun was upon it.

“You did go to Saint Charles Auditorium to meet with McCarthy?”

“Yes, Jeremiah...When she whispered to me to not come the next day...Her face...It was always so utterly human and expressive. She could convey any number of emotions in the turn of a look. Innocent

victim...consummate actress. She was both.”

It had begun to rain. It had been threatening all that day and all that evening. You could hear the first trace of it high up in the theatre rafters. And that is where he had taken to staring. I imagined he was remembering some intimate moment with her. His expression spoke of suffering and loss.

“Jeremiah, I had a tintype of Lucretia. But it was lost to me while I was being hunted for her murder.”

“Why did you go to St. Charles the next day? Truly?”

He took to rubbing the tips of his long fingers slowly down his rouged cheek. He was somewhere in the depths of a thought.

“Good old Colonel Tearwood,” he said. “He once told me, ‘The eyes of reason are blind to what one sees through emotion.’ I assumed he stole that line from a play. Now I know better.”

• • •

The church was up in Saint Giles rookery off Great Russell Street. It was a slum of Irish immigrants. A tome to squalor and overcrowding. Born of affluence a century before, it had become a warren of misery and decay, courtesy of man’s lesser angels. The church was in a state of distress and disrepair thanks to fire. The auditorium still stood and was used on Sundays for Mass, but during the week the priests rented it out to help feed the poor. Dyer McCarthy was notorious for finding places in the worst neighborhoods to rent for cheap. The surroundings to him were nothing more than a fiction.

When John James entered the auditorium the high sun commanded light down through the stained glass windows and cast colored images of divinity and sainthood across the sets and upon the stage and the pulpit placed there. While on the other side of the auditorium the windows had been smashed to the sashboards and partly boarded up with slatwood. It was a scene befitting a night at the theatre.

McCarthy was on stage rehearsing a trio of pantomimists while a handful of actors sat together over by the boarded up windows waiting

on their turn to be ordered about like prisoners to be flogged or carted off to the guillotine. The curse of the actor — always victim to the gnawing insecurity they are not good enough.

And adding to the scene, a dozen set of eyes and partial faces peering through slivery openings in the board work. A gang of street children giving out their unfettered and saucy opinions of the performers and the awaiting actors. A humorous and heartless ragtag chorus of opinionaters.

But it was her that had his attention, sitting alone at a table below the stage, taking down on writing paper whatever her father stormed on about.

McCarthy paused when he saw John James with his hands in his pockets back up the aisle. His eyes narrowed under heavy brows and this sudden change caused his daughter to turn.

“You’re late,” said McCarthy.

“Noon is five minutes yet,” said John James.

“Five minutes early for everyone else is five minutes late for me.”

“I’ll take that as bible for later.”

“Later...is now.”

“Let’s save our disagreements for after I’m with the troupe.”

John James now came forward. The players taking him under consideration, and McCarthy noting John James may have been answering him, but the young man’s attention was clearly on his daughter.

“Good noon to you,” he said to the girl.

She tried to smile through a look of anguish, but she turned away to hide her feelings.

John James had lived with that expression. Off stage and on. It still wandered his memory in all its shadowy fragments. Terrible sorrow knows terrible sorrow when it sees it.

There were figs in a bowl on the table and he reached out. “Might I take one?” he said.

“Do you think management is here to feed the actors?” said McCarthy.

“No sir,” said John James, popping a fig into his mouth. “It is the actor who is here to feed management.”

John James saw now there was another man in the theatre sitting off alone. He was no performer, that was sure. He had the look and feel of a man whose business was threats and blunt force. He was well dressed but the clothes seemed to wear him clumsily. Too snug or loose in the wrong

places. He couldn't be over thirty by John James' estimation, but the bald head did his youth no justice.

"Well," said McCarthy, "show off your talents. But let's not turn it into a crucifixion scene."

John James thrashed about a few thoughts and looked over his surroundings. He reached out and took Lucretia by the hand. "Favor me. I'll need an assist."

She had no idea and was reticent and looked to her father. John James grabbed a handful of figs as her father watched silently and stone faced as John James led her up the steps to the stage. She followed, the hesitant soul, till they were at the pulpit steps.

Here is where he spoke to her quietly, "I'm sorry for coming, but the thought of you was too much to resist."

No one had taken her hand like that before, ever. Was it the actor talking, or the youth with the spearing eyes and combed back fine hair? Everything in her life had been manipulative or mean spirited, that's what she knew.

This moment was pure physical sensation. The warm sun through painted glass, the unwashed peering children's faces, the curious pantomimists in their baroque costumes silent in the half shadows. She was alive to it all, and the dishonesty and violence around her life, the strap wounds down her body. Alive...free of it all, for those moments.

John James leaned over and whispered in her ear, and as he did, she saw her father nod to that soulless creature sitting off alone. Then as he asked, she slipped down and sat on the pulpit steps.

John James crossed the stage from the pulpit to where the windows were boarded up. The three pantomimists began to stalk along behind him, hands to their chins, comically thoughtful until John James turned on them and they scattered, stumbling over each other to escape his faux ire. Children's laughter through the window boards.

John James yelled to them. "Get back from the windows for a moment. Go on now. Keep clear." And then with his hobnail boots he kicked at the slats until they broke apart and dust filled light poured in the huge opening. "Now you can see," he said.

There was a flurry of faces and shoulders fighting, arguing for position. And John James right there in the mad scramble handing out figs. Then when he had their attention, he put a finger to his lips for them to quiet.

He pointed to the pulpit across the stage. “What light through yonder window breaks.”

On that cue, Lucretia stood. The light from the stained glass window gracing her.

He was not dramatizing for an audience of seats. He was speaking quietly, in little more than a whisper, really, to the unwashed urchins squeezed into the opening beside him. He’d made them the world and they were all huddled together secretly in the shadows and his voice was all their voice.

“It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon...”

As she experienced the lines she reached up and took the pins from her hair and shook it loose and the hair fell about her face, black and sweeping. The gesture so refined and straight from the heart. He had not cued her to do this. This was the actor in her reaching down into the soul of who she was to capture a moment of freedom.