

THE KINGDOM OF BONES

Excerpt

It was on an August night in the year of eighteen hundred and eighty-eight that the curtain fell on the week's final presentation of *The Purple Diamond*, a play in two acts performed by the Edmund Whitlock Touring Theatrical Company.

The Lyric was a small provincial house, and a packed one. The play, which could stand alone or serve as the second half of a variety bill, was a sentimental barnstormer with a leading role full of old-style rant, cant and claptrap. Actor-manager Edmund Whitlock had honed his delivery over more than eight hundred performances, all of them in theatres and music halls just like this.

If anything, he'd honed it a little too well. The others in the company could see that he was becoming bored in the role. When "the boss" got bored, his performance might carry on at full volume but his mind would start to wander. He'd bought the play from its author and put money into the set, so he was bound to keep it in repertoire as long as there was a venue somewhere in the British Isles that remained unvisited. But tonight he'd missed a piece of business in the second scene, and the Low Comedian had been forced to cover with a lengthy ad lib. Had any other member of the company made such a mistake, there would have been hell to pay. But Whitlock was the boss, so no one would ever hear it mentioned.

The five supporting actors came in from the wings and took their calls, then moved to the sides ready for Whitlock to take centre stage.

He sprang through the curtain and then froze there, as if astonished at this unexpected level of attention; a man of sixty in a tight corset, hair blacked and cheeks rouged, fresh – if fresh can be the word – from playing a hero half his age. But so forgiving was the limelight, and so powerful the spell of theatre, that nobody ever seemed to find this remarkable.

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He came forward to the footlights, hands clasped together, beaming out at the audience with humility and delight. Their whistling and cheering seemed set to go on forever.

And not without reason. Backstage, Tom Sayers leaned out to get a view from the wings. One hand was raised and ready to give a signal to an assembled choir that included the company's carpenter, both stagehands, the teenaged Call Boy and the sewing-woman. With slapsticks, rattles and whistles, they were lined up behind the curtain to give the boss's reception the extra lift that he sometimes felt it needed.

Whitlock raised a hand for calm; Sayers dropped his, and the stage crew immediately stopped making noise and started taking down the set.

As the house quietened, the actor-manager gave every corner of it the benefit of his most penetrating and affectionate gaze. This was a mining town and he gazed out upon starched linen, bad teeth, and brilliantine. The women's faces were mostly indistinguishable from the men's. To a visitor's eye all the children appeared simple, or vaguely criminal.

"My friends," Whitlock boomed. "My friends. My dear, dear friends. The warmth and the love that you have shown to us tonight will ensure that the name of..."

Here he seemed to choke with emotion. Sayers knew why. Yet again, the boss had failed to take note of where they were playing. Once, long ago, Sayers had given him a prompt at this point. It had brought the house down, and he would never repeat the mistake. He held his breath.

"...of your town will be engraved forever on our hearts."

Whitlock smacked a fist against his chest, where he kept his heart.

"Ours has been a glorious time together. Tonight we must leave you... yes!" he cried quickly, forestalling any cries of protest, "but as our parting gift, let us leave you with a song in the Italian style from the newest addition to our company, Miss Louise Porter."

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The waiting cast led the applause as Louise, twenty-two years old and the company's soubrette, stepped forward to join Whitlock. He pressed his lips to her gloved hand and then showed her to the crowd as the other company members melted silently into the wings.

Miss Porter might have been significantly easier on the eye than her employer, but he left no doubt as to which of them was the major figure. Having conferred his patronage he made an exit through the curtain, leaving her alone on the stage.

The company had a Musical Director who played piano in the pit, and conducted the resident band at the bigger dates. This playhouse was on the small side, but it had a good piano and the piano was in tune.

Miss Porter began to sing.

As soon as Whitlock came back through the curtain, he was met with a silver tray bearing a clean towel and a glass of port. The tray was brought by a stagehand who doubled as Whitlock's personal valet, and who was known to all as the Silent Man. He'd been with Whitlock for longer than anyone could remember. He wasn't entirely without speech, but came from some distant part of Europe and spoke no more than he needed to. His wife, inevitably known as the Mute Woman, appeared to have no English at all.

Glass in hand, Whitlock passed within a couple of feet of Tom Sayers. Sayers was supervising the removal of their stage properties and ticking off each item from a list in his leather-bound notebook. The stagehands moved in silence. By the time the audience rose to leave, the stage behind the curtain would be all but bared.

Whitlock lowered his voice and said to Sayers, "I've seen more enthusiastic welcomes for the mortuary trolley in a sanatorium. When do we get out of this Godforsaken pit?"

"We've a special that pulls out at midnight," Sayers told him.

"Amen to that," said Whitlock. He raised his glass as if in a toast, and walked off to seek out the House Manager.

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Sayers, left behind, felt able to relax his vigilance over the striking of the set and to move back to the spot in the wings from where he had a view of the forestage. There was Louise. Here was her song.

And this was Tom Sayers' nightly moment of weakness.

Sayers was Edmund Whitlock's acting-manager, charged with all the business dealings of a company on the road. He booked the dates, he arranged the travel, he hired the staff and he fired those who drank or disgraced themselves. He dealt with correspondence and sometimes stepped in to serve as stage-manager or baggage master. To all he was a shoulder to lean upon, and for some a shoulder to cry on.

It was Sayers who'd read *The Purple Diamond* and recommended its purchase to Whitlock, and it was Sayers who had found Louise when their last soubrette had jumped ship in Leicester and left them without cover. Louise was a young woman who had written a letter to Bertram's enquiring about the possibility of a stage career, with no other qualification than that she sang and spoke poetry well.

She'd had little idea of what a theatrical life entailed. Sayers' understanding was that her family faced reduced circumstances after her father's death. Going into service was no option for a child who had grown up in a house with a maid, and life as a governess or companion held no appeal. From the tone of her letter to the agency, it was clear that the stage represented some girlish dream. But inexperienced though she was, she was available to play and willing to take Whitlock's wages.

She'd since begun to mature into a considerable beauty. Not every man's ideal, but enough for most. For those who liked their women big and broad and always ready to scrap, she would never do. But to a man like Sayers, largely inexperienced in romance, she represented perfection.

Every performance ended with her song, and every night Sayers would pause in the wings and watch her. It was always the same; the graceful line of her neck and the angle of her shoulder, that profile when she turned her head. Against the darkness of the house, she

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seemed to glow. Dazzled by the white of her skin, he could have counted every hair.

Most nights he would stay to the end, and join in the applause. But tonight he dared not. There was too much to be done and when the sound of footsteps backstage brought him out of his reverie, he quickly consulted his notebook and returned to his work.

Sayers made his way down to the scene dock, where the removers' wagon was due to arrive at any moment. Some of the scenery was already folded and stacked there, and most of the properties numbered and wrapped in sacking and placed in wicker baskets. The costume hampers and the company's personal luggage would be joining them shortly. All was darkness until the scenery doors began to roll back, whereupon a widening crack of light began to reveal the bricks and rain of the gaslit alley behind the theatre.

The wagon was already waiting there. It was high-sided, horse-drawn, and on time. The rain was coming down in silver darts under the gas lamps and the drays stood there in harness, stoical and unprotesting as it fell upon them. A man in oilskins was clambering down from the driver's seat and another was around the back and opening up the tailgate.

Satisfied that all was progressing as it should, Sayers went back up the iron stairs toward the dressing room corridor.

At the top of the stairway he met James Caspar, about to descend. Caspar had wiped off his makeup but had done no more than throw a coat over his stage costume of black tie, wing collar and tails. He stepped aside and indicated, with an overstated grace that had an air of mockery, that Sayers should pass.

"Thank you, Caspar," Sayers said. "Cabs at the stage door in twenty minutes."

Caspar made no comment, and his smile didn't change. He was the company's Leading Male Juvenile and, just as Louise had been 'found' by Sayers, Caspar was Whitlock's own discovery. He was

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very dark, very slick, and very handsome. He had few gifts as an actor, but he moved well and held the eye. Sayers had an athlete's physique, but clothes never sat on him the way they suited Caspar. Caspar dressed like a prince in disguise. Sometimes Sayers would catch sight of himself in a mirror and think that his hardwearing checked suit and brogues made him look like a country farmer scrubbed-up for a wedding.

Sayers felt no reason to envy Caspar. But all the same, he could not like him.

He appeared to be set on leaving the building.

"Caspar!"

Sayers called out his name, but too late. James Caspar had ducked out of the open scene dock and into the rain, slipping out like a cat through a kitchen door. He clearly had plans of his own for the scant hour or so between now and midnight.

Well, so be it. Caspar was his own man. And if being his own man led him to miss the midnight special and so their first date in a new town... well, again, so be it. No one here was irreplaceable.

And replacing James Caspar was a job that Sayers would have been more than happy to add to his duties. Sayers could hear the applause for Louise as he returned to the dressing-room corridor and rapped on the first of the doors. They loved her, all those misshapen miners and their hardworking women. All the shop girls and the sweepers and the factory hands out there. Their applause echoed through the backstage spaces of the house like that of ghosts from some earlier time. He could picture Louise, giving her single bow and backing through the curtain that one of the stagehands had been assigned to hold open for her.

When a shout came in response to his knock, he swung it open to find the Low Comedian and Ricks, the company's First Heavy, already dressed for the street and removing the last traces of pancake from their faces.

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"Cabs at the stage door in twenty minutes," Sayers repeated. "Make sure you're ready."

"Cabs!" the Low Comedian said. "Does this mean the boss finally remembered what his pockets are for?"

"It means we've a train that goes at midnight and if we miss it, no matinee tomorrow."

Usually a run would end on a Saturday night and then the company would have all of Sunday to travel. All over the British Isles, stations like Crewe or the Exchange in Manchester would be abuzz with actors and stage workers, all meeting on the platforms and in the public rooms and catching up with the news as they awaited their connections. The public would turn out, just to see the spectacle of it all.

But with half-week bookings—Monday to Wednesday in one town, Thursday to Saturday in the next—everyone had to scramble. And when the dates were so many miles apart, as sometimes they had to be, then there was little room for error in the acting-manager's organisation.

As Sayers pulled the dressing room door shut and turned away, he had to step back for fifteen year-old Arthur Steffens, the company's call boy. Arthur had an armload of newspapers and was moving at his usual speed. He was always running five errands at once, being in no position to refuse any of them. Caspar used him more than anyone, and did not treat him well.

"Arthur!" Sayers called after him.

"Mister Sayers?"

"Don't waste your time looking for Mister Caspar when the cabs arrive. I just saw him leave the building."

"No, sir. I mean, yes, sir. Was there anything else, sir?"

"If he comes back with his costume ruined, you can tell him it'll come out of his wages."

The boy looked so stricken at the thought of the task that Sayers had to relent and let him off the hook.

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"All right, then, Arthur," he said. "I'll tell him myself. Get on with you."

Arthur scuttled off down the corridor, and Sayers moved along to the next dressing room. Without contriving it, he somehow reached the door in the same moment as Louise.

"Miss Porter," he said.

"Mister Sayers," she responded. Their formality was only half-serious. It was a joke that they'd been sharing for most of the year. Sayers liked to believe that her ease in these exchanges signalled the eventual possibility of some deeper feeling.

"I watched you sing," Sayers said.

"You always do. I'd think my luck had turned bad if I didn't see my little mascot standing there."

Sayers affected dismay. "Your little mascot?" he said. "Thank you, ma'am."

"You know I'm teasing. Was I good?"

"I could hear their hearts turning over. How do you do it?"

"I don't know," she said. "It must be all the great suffering I've endured. I suppose it's third class again tonight."

"I've reserved a private compartment for you."

"Oh, Tom," she said, genuinely surprised. "However did you manage that?"

"Never ask a magician to explain his effects."

"Bless you, Tom. Whatever would I do without you?"

"I've no doubt some other devoted servant would rush forward in my place."

"I'd never find one as devoted as you are, Tom," she said, and with that she seemed to float into her dressing room with the sewing-woman following close behind.

The dressing rooms were small and had bare walls of painted brick. Louise Porter's had a stove and folding screen behind which she could get out of her stage costume. As she sat to unpin her hair, the sewing-woman showed her the tray that she was carrying. Silver-

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plated and a prop from their last production, it had borne Whitlock's port and towel only a few minutes before. Now it carried a number of engraved visiting cards and a single red rose.

"For you, Miss Porter," said the sewing-woman. "Sent through by the stage doorkeeper. With the compliments of various gentlemen."

Louise looked over the cards with the mildest of interest. Gentlemen? Here? Mining engineers and merchants at best.

"Only five?" she said after a quick count. "How ancient and ugly I must have become." And then, shaking her head once so that her unpinned hair fell loose, she rose to go behind the screen.

Raising her voice, the sewing-woman said, "Shall I deal with them in the usual way, ma'am?"

"Have the doorman give them each a picture." During their last London dates, Whitlock had sent her along to Window and Grove's on Baker Street to sit for a postcard. She'd posed as Desdemona, a role she'd never played. Then he'd docked the cost of the prints from her wages.

As Louise shrugged herself out of her stage dress and the first layer of the underwear that went with it, the sewing-woman moved to the iron stove. She picked up some tongs with which to lift the lid.

She said, "Tom Sayers stopped to hear your song."

"Yes," Louise said absently. "Isn't he sweet." She might share jokes with Sayers about service and devotion. But the truth of it was that the acting-manager usually went from her thoughts in the same moment that he left her sight.

"Last night, Mister Caspar did the same."

Louise stopped. She put her head out from behind the screen.

"Did he really?" she said.

The sewing-woman made a face of assent as, tongs in one hand and tray in the other, she let cards and flower all slide into the flames together before replacing the stove lid with a clank.

"Well," said Louise.

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She drew back behind the screen. But she mused on the thought for a moment before she continued to undress.

Well, indeed.

Members of the company were now starting to gather around the stage door keeper's office, where Sayers had posted the movement order and from where the cabs would pick them up. Whitlock had stepped inside with the doorman and was still keeping a tight hold upon his cash box. Usually the Silent Man was at his side, shaven of head and bony of skull, a forbidding presence and a deterrent to all.

When Whitlock saw Sayers through the glass, he beckoned him in. Like all doorkeepers' offices it was a cramped and cosy space, and the doorman was unhappy to share it.

Whitlock said, "What do I hear about Caspar?"

"He didn't wait for the carriages," Sayers told him.

"Does he know where to go?"

Sayers made a helpless gesture. "If he read the order. Who can say?"

Whitlock glanced away for a moment, thinking hard and none too pleased.

"I'll speak to him on the train," he decided.

"Assuming he catches it," Sayers said. "I don't know where he's gone."

When Sayers came out of the doorkeeper's office he was collared by the Low Comedian. The man's true name was Gulliford, but in the profession he went as Billy Danson (A Baggy Suit and a Big Smile). He had his travelling-bag in his hand and he'd been reading the movement order over the heads of the others.

He said, "The train list says you're in with me."

"That's right."

"You always get a private compartment."

"Not tonight," Sayers said, and went off to make sure that the scenery and props were on their way.