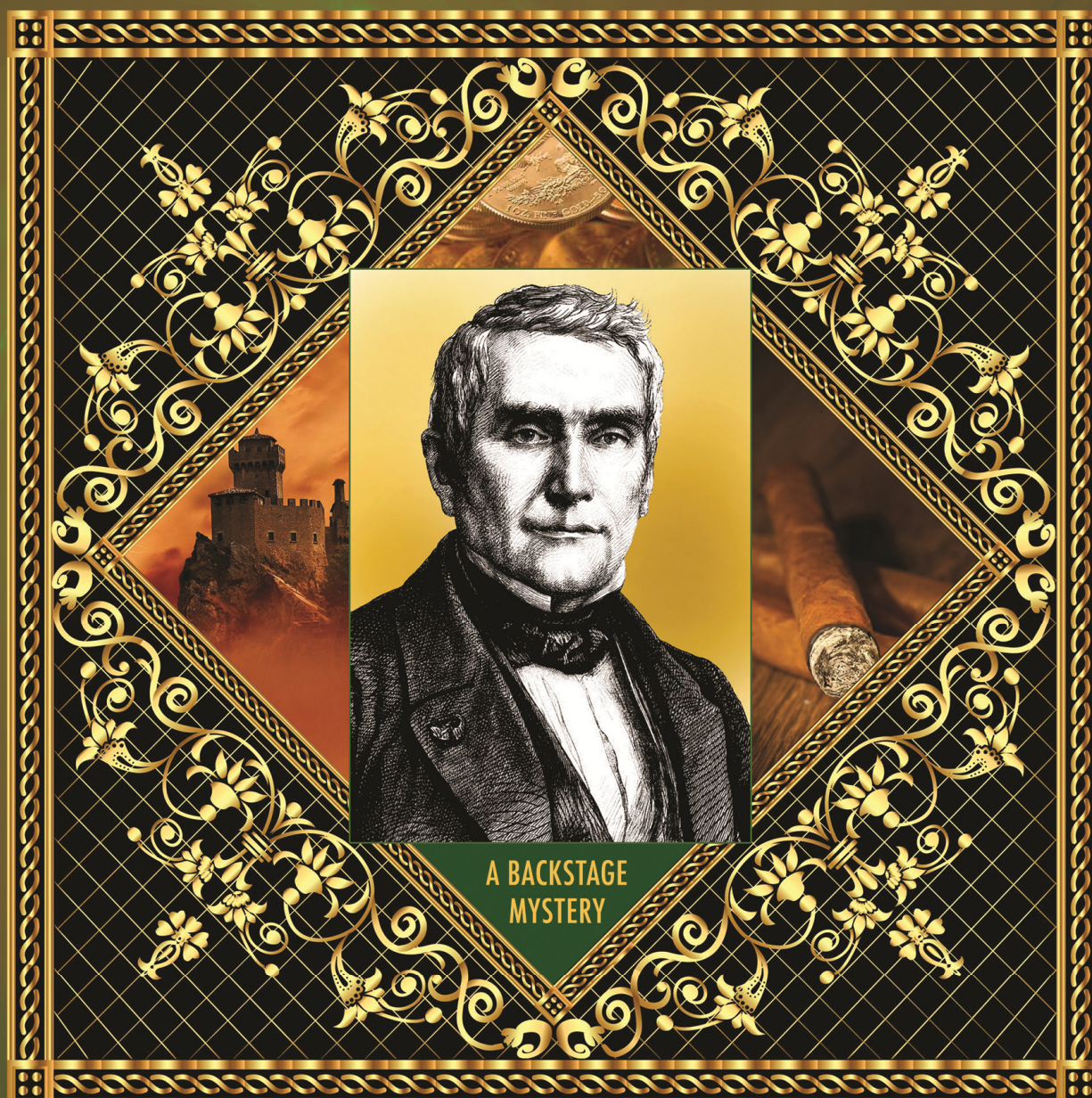


Death Stalks the Dress Circle



Elizabeth Ireland

Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.
Hamlet, Act I, Scene 4

PROLOGUE

Phillip Kincaid felt his life spinning out of control. It was absurd to him because control was paramount. Even when the panic of 1873 hit – and it had hit hard here in Chicago - he remained calm. Although he lost a tremendous amount of money, he knew he would completely recover. Within only two years he had already almost doubled back what he had lost. Money was easy if you knew how to get it – and he did. But it was his body that troubled him now. The tremors were worsening. He could not control his own limbs and it infuriated him. He didn't understand it. Never before sick a day in his life, now there were times when he could not restrain – nor hide – the sudden and unexpected quivering of his hands. Only, the tremors had spread to other parts of his body – his legs, his feet, and at times, even the muscles in his face twitched. As if that were not enough, he had become aware that, occasionally – at least he hoped it was occasionally – he experienced an inability to speak the correct word he wanted to say. He could clearly think of the word he wanted to use to express his thoughts, but when he actually went to speak, a completely foreign word would come out of his mouth. The other day he knew he said 'apples' when he meant 'applause'. He could tell by the expression on the face of Edward Hearne, the actor who portrayed Claudius and to whom he was speaking at the time, that he thought Phillip was drunk. Hearne would certainly know the symptoms. Damn him! Damn them all!

He sat behind the large mahogany desk in his comfortable private office and looked up at the three over-sized, beautifully framed color lithograph posters on the wall.

Othello, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and his favorite, *The Merchant of Venice*. They were his three most memorable productions, all of which starred his incomparable wife, Regina Ellicott. It was an expensive proposition having them framed, but they were worth every penny for they represented his success on every level. Success was very important to Phillip Kincaid. Soon the lithograph for *Hamlet* would join the others. It was already at the framers.

His stomach started to burn and the pain took his breath away. He grabbed onto the edge of the desk and waited for it to pass. As soon as it started to fade, his right hand began to tremble. He reached inside his pants pocket for the key to unlock the upper right hand drawer of his desk. With difficulty he inserted the key, unlocked the drawer and removed the glass bottle of medicine marked ‘Dover’s Powders’ that his doctor had prescribed for him. *I’m not taking enough*, he thought to himself. *That’s the problem*. He hated the idea of dependency on anything – worst of all a bottle of tablets to cure his ‘affliction’ as he called it. “Too many nights with cheap women of unknown origins,” his doctor had said. What did that quack know? It was none of his business who he slept with or when. “A common ailment, a common treatment,” was all the doctor had said and prescribed the bottle of medicine Phillip now held in his hand.

The dosage called for one tablet. Phillip figured if one was good, three were better. He uncorked the bottle, shook out three tablets onto the desk, re-corked the bottle and returned it to the drawer and re-locked it. He reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a silver flask. Holding his hand steady, he popped the pills into his mouth and followed it with a good swig from the flask. He grimaced. The aftertaste of the pills was horrible. *Ghastly stuff*. He brought the flask back up to his lips and swallowed a generous

amount. He felt the familiar burn, the wonderful, comfortable feeling of warmth which always soothed him. *That's more like it* he said to himself. He took a deep breath and let it out in one long sigh. One more swig and the flask was empty. He would have to refill it later. He placed it on his desk, relaxed, took a deep breath and the tremor subsided. He then reached for the wooden box with the colorful picture of a man dancing on the paper cover, and the words "*Dulce con dulce, dulce de Aquello*" written across the top.

He opened it and selected one of the fine Cuban cigars resting there and quickly lit it. He filled his lungs and then slowly expelled the smoke. Delicious.

There was a tentative knock at the door.

"Enter."

Charles Ellicott opened the door but did not step into the room. Auburn haired like his mother, Charles was a handsome boy - too good looking, if truth be told. Slightly gangly, thin, he seemed somehow younger than his nine years, and weak. But Phillip liked his boys that way. Phillip was training his stepson, showing him the ropes of theatrical management – and disciplining him where he erred.

"Sir. The last act is about to begin – you wanted me to tell you –," Charles said in his quiet and serious voice.

"Yes, yes. I'll be out in a moment," he grunted. He wasn't in the mood to deal with Charles' insecurities right now.

The boy turned to leave.

"Tell your mother I want to talk to her after the show."

"Yes sir."

"And Charles..."

The boy turned back to face his stepfather, but did not look him in the eye.

“...I want to see you after that.”

Charles paled, but said nothing, merely nodded and quickly left, closing the door quietly behind him.

Phillip smiled. He felt better now, more in control. He wanted to talk to his wife, Regina. She was doing rather well as Gertrude in this production of *Hamlet* but she needed to be on the road again. He had received an offer from the booking manager he had used the last time; they were begging to have Regina tour again and willing to pay almost any price. He was not about to turn that offer down.

Ellicott's Theater – the theater Regina and Joseph, her first husband, had built based on her reputation and his business acumen - would certainly have closed without the intervention of Phillip Kincaid. Regina was fortunate to get him to run it after Joseph died. She most certainly would have gone bankrupt and he made sure she knew it. He wanted her and she wanted to keep the theater running and thus an assured livelihood. She reluctantly acquiesced when he said his price was marriage. He knew she was talented, but with no mind for business. Everyone knew that. She needed him.

When the railroad bubble burst in 1873, it had been a struggle to maintain the theater, but he had done it. His strategy of sending Regina to tour had been a gamble, but one that had paid off. At the same time, he had rented the theater out to other managers and had made sure they paid. Now she had friends and admirers across the county and the next tour he had planned for her would make three or four times as much as the last. He didn't care in the least that Regina hated being on the road. He had plans for that money

and they didn't involve her. Soon he would have enough and then he could leave Regina and her ineffectual son far behind.

He knew the last act of *Hamlet* well and he knew he had plenty of time to get up to the dress circle to watch the final scene. He sat and smoked and contemplated the future. He thought about the investors in his current play. He took their money and almost all went straight into his pocket. Very soon, he would execute his plans, he just needed a little more time. He kept what he had in a very safe place – he never trusted banks. As soon as Regina left on the next tour, he would be gone with all that lovely cash. No one knew where he had hidden it, not even Arthur Stonewell, his “silent” partner. It didn't matter, Arthur trusted him – he had to. Of course, Arthur had no idea how much there was. Phillip had not told him the truth about that. Phillip Kincaid always played his cards close to the vest.

He took out his pocket watch and checked the time. The fifth act! He had to leave now. He wanted to check the audience – see what effect that James O'Neill – his Hamlet – was having on them. What an achievement to get O'Neill – and at such a good price.

He stubbed out the last of his cigar and ran his hand through his hair. He was stunned to see that it came back with strands of hair entwined in his fingers. He was losing hair regularly now. He couldn't understand that either. He was not an old man, only forty-five. He stood and made for the door. His stomach churned and once more he felt the pain sear through him. He almost lost his balance, but grabbed the corner of the desk and steadied himself. Suddenly, the overpowering urge to vomit swept over him and he fell to his knees, projecting the contents of his stomach into the wastebasket next to the desk. *What the hell was going on?* Damned medicine. He would see the quack

tomorrow. The pain subsided. Slowly, he took a white handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his mouth. He did not notice the droplets of blood on the linen as he rolled it back up and stuck it in his pocket. He straightened himself and stood up. *That was better*, he thought. *A momentary weakness only*. He walked out of his office and locked the door behind him. Making his way across the lobby to the main stairway, he noticed a light on in the box office so he stopped and peeked through the window. There he saw Luke Tyson, his box office manager, working on the accounts from that evening's take. The play had been open a week and was doing very good business.

Luke was bent over a piece of paper, making notations and there was a frown on his face. Phillip walked into the small office.

"Can't get it to balance?" asked Phillip.

Short, corpulent and balding, Luke put a chubby hand to his chest. "Oh, Mr. Kincaid, you startled me."

"Well?"

"I'm just checking my addition."

Phillip noticed a trickle of sweat course down Luke's fat right cheek.

"Any problems?" He asked more forcefully.

Luke's face was a mask of worry.

"I seem to be off about fifteen dollars."

Phillip exploded. "God damn it, Luke can't you add – or did you put some in your own pocket?"

"Mr. Kincaid! I would never –"

A fury suddenly gripped Phillip and it seemed to seep into every pore of his body. He aimed that anger straight at the box office manager, blasting him with everything he had.

“Are you totally incompetent? Have you forgotten how to add or did you ever really know? Find the mistake or it just doesn’t come out of your pocket – you can forget your job!”

Luke went absolutely white.

“I mean it – and you’ll get no refreshments from me!”

Luke’s expression went from fear to curiosity and then caution.

There was a pause.

“Of course, Mr. Kincaid. I’ll find it.”

Phillip then realized he had not used the word ‘references’ which had clearly been in his thoughts. By the expression on Luke’s face he knew that he had made another mistake. He had used another inappropriate word. The word “refreshments” came to mind and he inwardly groaned at the thought that that was the word he might have used. He turned his frustration back onto Luke.

“See that you do!”

He left the box office and as he strode across the lobby of the theater and up the marble steps to the dress circle. The fury slowly dissipated, leaving him suddenly weakened and tired.

He carefully opened the double doors on the left side of the landing and quietly stepped into the dark theater. He nodded to the usher who was on guard just inside. The usher straightened and nodded back, acknowledging his recognition of Phillip.

Onstage, Hamlet was just having his conversation with Osric about the wager Laertes had made with the king over their upcoming sword fight. Plenty of time.

He stood at the very back of the dress circle and watched for a moment. He observed that the audience was focused completely on the action on the stage. He stepped into the empty row next to him and sat in the aisle seat. There was no one in front of him for several rows. When he looked across the aisle to his right, he noticed that Arthur Stonewell sat two rows down in front of him with his wife, Marion. Marion was simply but elegantly dressed in an evening gown of dark maroon silk. Phillip stared at her for a moment. He would not describe her as a beautiful woman, but there was an air of beauty about her that was very compelling.

Across the aisle, Marion looked at Phillip out of the corner of her eye. *He looks awful*, she thought. *He is pale and – is he sweating?* His face looked damp and clammy.

She whispered to her husband, “Phillip Kincaid just came in and he looks terrible. Is he all right?”

Her husband glanced over his shoulder and saw Kincaid sitting two rows behind and to the left of them and then turned back to his wife.

“I’m sure he’s fine, my dear, just overworked.”

“He looks sick.”

Arthur was fifteen years her senior, gray haired and slightly hump-backed in stature. He was not a particularly attractive man, but he always dressed neatly and made an immaculate presentation. She knew he cared for her and she had always been grateful for the security he provided her. Married for fifteen years, they had no children so they had become important to one another on a level most other couples never achieved.

“Perhaps you should speak with him,” Marion said.

Arthur sighed and then smiled at his wife and patted her hand. He stood and moved into the aisle and walked three stairs up to just behind Phillip. He sat down in the aisle seat directly behind Phillip.

“Are you all right?”

“Of course it is, why shouldn’t it be? “I just had a difference of opinion with Luke Tyson.”

“Is there a problem?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

Phillip reached for the flask in his vest pocket and remembered he left it on his desk.

“Damn it. What I would give for a drink.”

Arthur looked over at his wife who had become completely absorbed in the play.

He removed a flask from his jacket pocket and passed it over Phillip’s left shoulder. Phillip grabbed it and took a long draught.

“Thanks. That will do for me.” He handed it back to Arthur who glanced toward his wife but she continued to be enraptured by the play. Surreptitiously, he took a drink. He returned the flask to his pocket.

“You can go back to your wife now Arthur – but don’t forget our meeting tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll be there.”

Arthur stood up and walked across the aisle to Marion.

“Is he all right?” she asked.

“He’s fine.”

She gestured toward the stage. “James O’Neill is very good, isn’t he?”

“You think so?”

“I’m not the only one.”

Arthur looked around at the audience and saw that almost everyone was focused on the stage where O’Neill performed Hamlet’s fight with Laertes with grace and great athleticism. He was an actor with substantial ability and not a little charm and was using every ounce of it to his advantage in the scene.

They watched enthralled. The crash of swords, the cries from those onstage – and the gasps from the audience members — forced them to place their complete attention on the play as one after another of the royal family of Denmark died onstage in a vision of Shakespearian death. It was all very loud, very dramatic and captivating. Like the rest of the audience, Arthur and Marion were mesmerized.

Phillip watched as well. He was pleased. He knew he had made the right decision about O’Neill. Suddenly, a mind-numbing pain shot through the center of his chest and he found he could not breathe. His entire body felt as if it were clamped in a vise. Sweat poured down his face. He wrapped his arms around his chest but it gave him no relief.

What the hell is happening to me?

He tried to call out, to reach out to Arthur but the noise from the stage was so loud and he simply could not form the words. Pain pulsed through him once again and he doubled over in agony. At the very instant he thought he could not take one more moment of it, the pain stopped, the vise miraculously released and he fell back into his

seat and slumped over to the side. A long sigh escaped from his body and the world went dark for Phillip Kincaid.

On the stage trumpets sounded and the character of Forinbras stood dead center and spoke the last words of the play:

*Take up the bodies: such a sight as this
Becomes the field, but here shows much amiss.
Go, bid the soldiers shoot.*

The bodies of Hamlet, Gertrude, Claudius and Laertes were lifted up. In a march to the slow beat of a drum they were carried from the stage as the act curtain closed.

The response from the audience was overwhelming. Waves of applause greeted the actors as they came out for their last bows. Everyone was on their feet – including Arthur and Marion who smiled at one another and continued to applaud.

As James O'Neill stepped forward, the audience seemed to go wild with their praise. He turned to the young actress that played Ophelia and held out his hand. She came forward and made a bow as well. Then the company, as one, turned and walked from the stage.

The applause died down, the gas lights came up in the house and the hum of excited chatter could be heard. As the well dressed men and women merged into the aisles, Arthur and Marion sat and waited. Marion's mind was on the performance.

"I thought O'Neill did an admirable job."

"Of course, he's quite handsome," Arthur teased.

She smiled but chose not to respond, instead saying, "And that Ophelia – she did very well, didn't she?"

"Amazing talent for one so young. But Regina Ellicott as Gertrude –"

“Well, of course, she’s always wonderful, isn’t she?”

Arthur looked over at Phillip and turned to his wife. “I want a word with Phillip. You go on ahead.”

“You do remember, we’re expected for a late supper at the Edwards’?”

“Of course.”

The audience had almost completely left the dress circle when they stood and Arthur walked up the steps and over to Kincaid.

Kincaid was slumped in his seat and his eyes were closed.

“Oh dear, Mr. Kincaid is asleep. Shall we wake him?” Marion asked.

“He must be exhausted – I know he’s been burning the candle at both ends. Let’s leave him, I’ll tell the usher to wake him. What I wanted can wait. I am going to see him in the morning anyway.”

They exited the aisle and walked through the open double doors to the landing. Arthur found the usher and told him about Kincaid. Then he escorted his wife down the stairs into the lobby and they left the theater.

The dress circle was very quiet as the usher walked through the opened double doors and down the few steps to where Phillip Kincaid sat drooped over in his seat. He approached Phillip carefully as he knew how quickly Phillip’s temper could flare over the slightest thing. He lightly touched him on the shoulder.

“Mr. Kincaid? Mr. Kincaid, sir? The play is over.”

Phillip appeared to ignore him. The usher shook his shoulder harder this time and suddenly Phillip slid out of his chair and sprawled onto the steps in the aisle.

The usher leaned in to take a good look at Phillip, covered his mouth to muffle the scream that rose in his throat, turned and ran for the exit.

There was a moment of complete and utter silence in the empty theater. And then, Phillip rose out of his body, stood, and looked at the corpse on the floor.

“Bit of a shock at first, isn’t it?”

He turned to see a man sitting across the aisle from him, his right leg casually crossed over his left. He was middle aged, not particularly handsome, not particularly tall, but his posture was perfect. He had an immaculately trimmed beard that came to a point and a magnificent mustache. The oddest thing about him was that he was dressed in what appeared to be some kind of costume – almost as if he walked out of English renaissance painting.

“What is?” Phillip asked.

“Death,” the man calmly answered.

“I’m not dead,” Phillip laughed. The notion was preposterous.

“Oh, my good sir, you most assuredly are.”

“That’s impossible,” Kincaid said. “Do you know who I am?”

“Indeed,” responded the strange man complacently, “You sir, are a dead man.”

He gestured to Kincaid’s body lying across the aisle floor.

Phillip turned back and stared at his body. He did not understand what had happened. It was unbelievable to him that he could be dead. And then he realized he felt nothing – no pain, no anger, no feeling at all. It was the oddest thing. And yet, he realized what he did feel was what he could only describe as - a great sense of relief, as if some great burden had been lifted from his shoulders.

The man sighed. "I'm afraid it is a common trait that most deny the fact of death even when the evidence is right in front of them. It was certainly that way for me so it is quite likely that it must be the same for you."

"Who are you?" Phillip demanded.

"That need not concern you as I am waiting to speak to someone else. However, I might as well take this moment to help you along your way. Come with me."

All Kincaid could think to say was, "I don't know you."

"Nor is there any need for you to do so. My name is of no importance to you. Just take my hand and the journey will go much easier for you."

"What journey?"

The man simply stretched out his right hand to Phillip as if he were inviting him to shake it. When Phillip tentatively took it, an intense white light suddenly surrounded them both and, in the blink of an eye, they quickly disappeared into it.

In the quiet and emptiness of Ellicott's Theater, the lifeless body of Phillip Kincaid remained, awkwardly sprawled across the aisle floor of the dress circle.