

Anstey F.

Love Among the Lions: A Matrimonial Experience



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Love Among the Lions: A Matrimonial Experience

PART I

In the following pages will be found the only authentic account of an affair which provided London, and indeed all England, with material for speculation and excitement for a period of at least nine days.

So many inaccurate versions have been circulated, so many ill-natured and unjust aspersions have been freely cast, that it seemed advisable for the sake of those principally concerned to make a plain unvarnished statement of the actual facts. And when I mention that I who write this am the Theodore Blenkinsop whose name was, not long since, as familiar in the public mouth as household words, I venture to think that I shall at once recall the matter to the shortest memory, and establish my right to speak with authority on the subject.

At the time I refer to I was – and for the matter of that still am – employed at a lucrative salary as taster to a well-known firm of tea-merchants in the City. I occupied furnished apartments, a sitting-room and bedroom, over a dairy establishment in Tadmor Terrace, near Baalbec Road, in the pleasant and salubrious district of Highbury.

Arrived at the age of twenty-eight, I was still a bachelor and had felt no serious inclination to change my condition until the memorable afternoon on which the universe became transformed for me in the course of a quiet stroll round Canonbury Square.

For the information of those who may be unacquainted with it, I may state that Canonbury Square is in Islington; the houses, though undeniably dingy as to their exteriors, are highly respectable, and mostly tenanted by members of the medical, musical, or scholastic professions; some have balconies and verandahs which make it difficult to believe that one has not met them, like their occupiers, at some watering place in the summer.

The square is divided into two by a road on which frequent tramcars run to the City, and the two central enclosures are neatly laid out with gravelled paths and garden seats; in the one there is a dovecot, in the other there are large terra-cotta oil-jars, bringing recollections of the Arabian Nights and the devoted Morgiana.

All this, I know, is not strictly to the point, but I am anxious to make it clear that the locality, though not perhaps a chosen haunt of Rank and Fashion, possesses compensations of its own.

Strolling round Canonbury Square, then, I happened to glance at a certain ground floor window in which an art-pot, in the form of a chipped egg hanging in gilded chains and enamelled shrimp-pink, gave a note of femininity that softened the dusty severity of a wire blind.

Under the chipped egg, and above the top of the blind, gazing out with an air of listless disdain and utter weariness, was a lovely vivid face, which, with its hint of pent-up passion and tropical languor, I mentally likened to a pomegranate flower; not that I have ever seen a pomegranate flower, though I am more familiar with the fruit – which, to my palate, has too much the flavour of firewood to be wholly agreeable – but somehow it seemed the only appropriate comparison.

After that, few days passed on which I did not saunter at least once round the square, and several times I was rewarded by the sight of that same exquisite face, looking out over the wire blind, always with the same look of intense boredom and haughty resentment of her surroundings – a kind of modern Mariana, with an area to represent the moat.

I was hopelessly in love from the very first; I thought of nothing but how to obtain admission to her presence; as time went on, I fancied that when I passed there was a gleam of recognition, of half-awakened interest in her long-lashed eyes, but it was difficult to be certain. On the railing by the door was a large brass plate, on which was engraved: "Æneas Polkinghorne, Professor of Elocution. Prospectus within." So I knew the name of my divinity. I can give no greater indication of the extent of my passion, even at this stage, than by saying that I found this surname musical, and lingered over each syllable with delight.

But that brought me no nearer to her, and at last a plan occurred to me by which the abyss of the area that separated us might possibly be bridged over. Nothing could be simpler than my device – and yet there was an audacity about it that rather startled me at first. It was this: the brass plate said "Prospectus within." Very well, all I had to do was to knock boldly and ask for one, which, after some natural hesitation, I did.

Any wild hope of obtaining an interview with Miss Polkinghorne was doomed to instant disappointment. I was received by the Professor himself, a tall, stout, flabby person, with sandy hair combed back over his brow and worn long behind, who showed a most sympathetic interest in me, inquiring whether I wished to be prepared for the Church, the Stage, or the Bar, or whether I had any idea of entering Parliament. I fear I allowed him to suppose the latter, although I am about as likely to get into Parliament as into an imperial pint measure; but I had to say something to account for my visit, and the tea-trade does not call for much in the way of oratorical skill from its votaries.

Our interview was brief, but I came away, not only with a prospectus, but with tickets, for which I paid cash, entitling me to a course of six lessons in elocution.

This was rather more than I had calculated upon – but, at least, it gave me the *entrée* to the house, and it might lead to something more.

It did not seem as if it was going to lead to much; the Professor's method of teaching was peculiar: he would post me in a study at the back of the house, where I was instructed to declaim some celebrated oration at the top of my voice while he retired upstairs to discover how far my voice would carry.

After twenty minutes or so he would return with the information, which I have no reason to disbelieve, that he had not heard a single word above the first landing.

Still I persevered, sustained by the thought that, when I was delivering the oration of Brutus over Cæsar, or the famous passage about the Queen of France and the "ten thousand swords leaping from their scabbards," my words might perchance reach Miss Polkinghorne's ear and excite in her a passing emotion.

But I came to the end of my tickets and still I was as far as ever from my goal, while the exertion of shouting had rendered me painfully husky.

Yet I would not give in; I set myself to gain the Professor's good opinion; I took more tickets. It was not till after I had run through these that I ascertained, by an apparently careless inquiry, that there was no such person as Miss Polkinghorne – the Professor was a widower and had never had a daughter!

The thought that I had wasted so much time and money for nothing was bitter at first, and I very nearly decided to discontinue my studies there and then. But I conquered my feelings. Though the Professor was no relation to this young lady, he must know her name, he must be able to give me some information about her; a little judicious pumping might render him communicative.

"My dear Sir," he said, after I had been beating about the bush for some time with cautious delicacy, "I think I understand. You are anxious to make this young lady's acquaintance with a view to paying your addresses to her? Is not that so?"

I confessed that he had managed to penetrate my motives, though I could not imagine how.

"You will not be the first who has sought to win Lurana's affections," he said; "more than one of my pupils – but the child is ambitious, difficult to please. Unfortunately, this is your final lesson

– otherwise I might, after preparing the ground, so to say, have presented you to her, and I daresay she would have been pleased to give you a cup of tea occasionally after your labours. Indeed, as Miss Lurana de Castro's stepfather, I can answer for that – however, since our acquaintance unhappily ceases here – "

It did not cease there; I took another dozen tickets at once, and if even Polkinghorne had sounded sweetly to my enamoured ear, you may conceive what enchanting melody lay in a name so romantic and so euphonious as Lurana de Castro.

The Professor was as good as his word; at the end of the very next lesson I was invited to follow him to the drawing-room, where I found the owner of the brilliant face that had so possessed me seated at her tea-table.

She gave me a cup of tea, and I can pay her witchery no higher compliment when I state that it seemed to me as nectar, even though my trained palate detected in it an inartistic and incongruous blend of broken teas, utterly without either style or quality. I am not sure that I did not ask for another.

She was astonishingly lovely; her Spanish descent was apparent in her magnificent black tresses, lustrous eyes, and oval face of olive tinted with richest carmine. As I afterwards learnt, she was the daughter of a Spanish Government official of an ancient Castilian family, who had left his widow in such straitened circumstances that she was compelled to support herself by exhibiting performing mice and canaries at juvenile parties, until she met and married the Professor, who at that time was delivering recitations illustrated by an oxy-hydrogen lantern.

The second marriage had not been altogether a success, and, now that the Professor was a widower, I fancy that his relations with his imperious stepdaughter were not invariably of the most cordial nature, and that he would have been grateful to any one who succeeded in winning her hand and freeing him from her sway.

I did not know that then, however, though I was struck by the deferential politeness of his manner towards her, and the alacrity with which, after he had refreshed himself, he shuffled out of the room, leaving Lurana to entertain me single-handed.

That first evening with her was not unmixed joy. I had the consciousness of being on trial. I knew that many had been tried and found wanting before me. Lurana's attitude was languid, indifferent, almost disdainful, and when I went away I had a forlorn conviction that I should never again be asked to tea with her, and that the last series of tickets represented money absolutely thrown away!

And yet I *was* asked again – not only once, but many times, which was favourable as far as it went, for I felt tolerably certain that the Professor would never have ventured to bring me a second time into his daughter's presence, unless he had been distinctly given to understand that my society was very far from distasteful to her.

As I grew to know her better, I learnt the secret of her listlessness and discontent with life. She was tormented by the unbounded ambitions and the distinct limitations which embitter existence for so many young girls of our day.

The admiration which her beauty excited gave her little satisfaction; such social success as Highbury or Canonbury could offer left her cold and unmoved. She was pining for some distinction which should travel beyond her own narrow little world, and there did not seem to be any obvious way of attaining it. She would not have minded being a popular author or artist – only she could find nothing worth writing about, and she did not know how to draw; she would have loved to be a great actress – but unfortunately she had never been able to commit the shortest part to memory, and the pride of a de Castro forbade her to accept anything but leading *rôles*.

No wonder that she was devoured by dulness, or that there were moments when she beat her pinions like some captive wild bird against the cage of her own incompetence. Even I, although fairly content with my lot, would sometimes flap my own wings, so to speak, from sheer sympathy.

"It's maddening to be a nobody!" she would declare, as she threw herself petulantly back in her chair, with her arms raised behind her and her interlaced fingers forming a charming cradle for her head – a favourite attitude of hers. "It does seem so stupid not to be celebrated when almost everybody is! And to think that I have a friend like Ruth Rakestraw, who knows ever so many editors and people, and could make me famous with a few strokes of the pen – if only I did something to give her the chance. But I never *do!*"

Miss Rakestraw, I should explain, was an enterprising young lady journalist, who contributed society news and "on dits" to the leading Islington and Holloway journals, and was understood to have had "leaderettes" and "turnovers" accepted by periodicals of even greater importance.

"If only," Lurana burst out on one of these occasions, "if only I could do something once which would get my name into all the papers, set everybody thinking of me, talking of me, staring after me wherever I went, make editors write for my photograph, and interviewers beg for my biography, I think I should be content."

I made the remark, which was true but not perhaps startling in its originality, that fame of this kind was apt to be of brief duration.

"What should I care?" she cried; "I should have *had* it. I could keep the cuttings; they would always be there to remind me that once at least – but what's the use of talking? I shall never see my name in all the papers. I know I shan't!"

"There *is* a way!" I ventured to observe; "you might have your name in all the papers, if you married."

"As if I meant *that!*" she said, with a deliciously contemptuous pout. "And whom should I marry, if you please, Mr Blenkinsop?"

"You might marry me!" I suggested humbly.

"You!" she retorted. "How would *that* make me a celebrity. You are not even one yourself."

"I do not care to boast," I said, "but it is the simple fact that nobody in the entire tea-trade has a palate approaching mine for keenness and delicacy. Ask any one and they will tell you the same."

"You may be the best tea-taster in the world," she said, "but the purity of your palate will never gain you a paragraph in a single society paper. And even if it did, what should *I* gain? At the best a reflected glory. I want to be a somebody myself!"

"What's the use of trying to make ourselves what we are not?" I broke out. "If Fate has made us wooden ninepins in the world's nursery, we may batter our head against the walls as much as we like – but we can never batter it into a profile!"

I thought this rather neatly put myself, but it did not appeal to Miss de Castro, who retorted with some asperity that I was the best judge of the material of my own head, but hers, at least, was not wooden, while she had hitherto been under the impression that it already possessed a profile – such as it was.

She could not be brought to understand that I was merely employing a metaphor, and for the remainder of the evening her demeanour was so crushingly chilling, that I left in the lowest spirits, persuaded that my unlucky tongue had estranged me from Lurana for ever.

For some time I avoided Canonbury Square altogether, for I felt unequal to facing an elocution lesson unrecompensed by tea with Miss de Castro, and the halfhour or more of delightful solitude *à deux* which followed the meal – for it had never occurred to the Professor to provide his stepdaughter with a chaperon.

At last, when on the verge of despair, hope returned in the form of a little note from Lurana, asking whether I was dead, and inviting me, if still in existence, to join a small party to visit the World's Fair at the Agricultural Hall the next evening, and return to supper afterwards at Canonbury Square, an invitation which, need I say, I joyfully accepted.

We were only four; Miss Rakestraw and her *fiancé*, a smart young solicitor's clerk, of the name of Archibald Chuck, whose employer had lately presented him with his articles; myself, and Lurana.

The Professor was unable to accompany us, having an engagement to read "Hiawatha" to a Young Men's Mutual Improvement Society that evening.

Part of the hall was taken up by various side-shows, shooting-galleries, and steam merry-go-rounds, which produced a discordant and deafening din until a certain hour of the evening, when the noises subsided, and Wooker and Sawkins' World-renowned Circus gave a performance in the arena, which occupied the centre.

Miss Rakestraw's connection with the Press procured us free passes to the reserved seats close to the ring; my chair was next to Lurana's, and she was graciously pleased to ignore our recent difference. The entertainment was of the usual variety, I suppose; but, to tell the truth, I was so absorbed in the bliss of being once more by her side and watching her face, which looked more dazzling than ever through the delicate meshes of her veil, that I have the vaguest recollection of the earlier items of the programme.

But towards the close there came a performance which I have good reason to remember.

An enormous elephant entered the circle, drawing a trolley, upon which was an iron cage containing forest-bred African lions. After the electric globes had been lowered, so as to illuminate the interior, "Niono, the Lion King," a dapper, well-made man, of very much my own height and figure, so far as I could judge, went into the cage and put the animals through various exercises. Niono was succeeded by Mlle. Léonie, the "Circe of the Carnivora," a pretty Frenchwoman, who, as it seemed to me, surpassed him in coolness and daring. There was nothing disagreeably sensational about the exhibition; all the animals were evidently under perfect control; the huge, black-maned lions leaped through paper hoops and blazing circles without the slightest loss of either temper or dignity; the females followed obediently. Only one lioness showed any disposition to be offensive, and *she* did not venture to go beyond yawning ostentatiously whenever Mlle. Léonie's eye was upon her.

Altogether it was, as I remarked to Lurana at the time, a wonderful instance of the natural dominion of man over the animal world. She enthusiastically commended the symmetry of Mr Niono's figure, which did not strike me as so very much above the average; and to pique her, I expressed equal admiration for Mlle. Léonie, and was gratified to observe unmistakable signs of jealousy on Lurana's part. But we were both agreed that the profession of lion-taming looked more dangerous than it actually was, and Archibald Chuck mentioned that some townsman in the provinces had, for a very trifling wager, entered a den of lions in a travelling menagerie with perfect impunity. Miss Rakestraw capped this by a case from America, in which a young couple had actually chosen a lion's cage to be married in, though she admitted that the story was possibly a fabrication.

I walked back with Lurana alone, as we somehow lost sight of Mr Chuck and his *fiancée* in the crush going out, and on the way home I could not refrain from pleading my cause once more. I told her how I had loved her at first sight, and how many elocution lessons I had endured for her sake; I pointed out that I was already receiving a salary sufficient to maintain a wife in comfort, if not luxury; and that her married life could hardly be more monotonous and uncongenial than her present existence.

She listened attentively, as if moved. Presently she said, "Theodore, I will be perfectly frank. I do like you; I believe I could even love you. But I have Spanish blood in my veins. I could never be satisfied with a humdrum conventional marriage."

I was inexpressibly shocked. I had no idea that her views were so emancipated.

"Lurana," I said, "believe me, never mind what the lady novelists say against marriage; it may have its disadvantages, but, after all, as society is constituted – "

"You don't understand," she said. "I am not opposed to marriage – with a man who is willing to make some concession, some slight sacrifice, to gratify me. But are you that *kind* of man, Theodore, I wonder?"

I saw that she was already beginning to yield. "I would do anything – anything in the world you bid me," I cried, "if only you will be my wife, Lurana."

"I should ask you to do nothing that I am not perfectly prepared to do myself," she said. "A temporary inconvenience, a risk which is the merest trifle. Still, you may think it too much, Theodore."

"Name it," I replied. "The opportunities which the tea trade affords for the cultivation of heroism are rare; but there are few risks that I would shrink from running with you."

"It is only this," she said. "I don't want a commonplace wedding. I want one that will be talked about and make a sensation. Will you let me be married in my own way?"

I was rather relieved by what seemed so moderate a demand. "Certainly, darling," I said; "we will be married in Westminster Abbey, by the Archbishop of Canterbury, if you wish it, and it can be arranged. What matter where or how the ceremony take place, or what it costs, provided it makes you mine for ever?"

"Then, Theodore," she said, pressing my arm impulsively with her slim fingers, while the rays of a street lamp in the square fell on her upturned face and shining eyes, "let us be married at the Agricultural Hall – in the Lions' Cage!"

I confess to being considerably startled. I had expected something rather out of the common, but nothing in the least like this.

"In the lions' cage!" I repeated, blankly. "Wouldn't that be rather *smelly*, Lurana? And, besides, the menagerie people would never lend it for such a purpose. Where would they put the lions, you know?"

"Why, the lions would be *there*, of course," she said, "or else there'd be nothing in it."

"If I am to be married in a lion-cage," I said, with a very feeble attempt at levity, "I should very much prefer that there *was* nothing in it."

"Ah, you may laugh, Theodore!" she said, "but, after all your professions, surely you won't refuse the very first indulgence I ask! You may think it a mere whim, a girlish caprice; but understand this – I am thoroughly in earnest about it. If you are willing to marry me as I wish, the wedding may be as soon as ever you please. But if not, tell me so plainly, and let us part for ever. Either I will be married in my own way, or not at all."

What could I do? It was simply impossible to give her up now, the very moment after she was won. And to lose her for such a mere punctilio; for, of course, this condition of hers was too fantastic to be practicable; the Professor would certainly refuse his consent to so eccentric a ceremony; Lurana herself would probably realise before long the absurdity of the idea. In the meantime, as her acknowledged *fiancé*, I should have the immense advantage of being on the spot when she returned to a more reasonable frame of mind.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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