

MAUBIKECK,

THE LION-TAMER.

By Seward W. Hopkins.

Author of 'JACK ROBBINS OF AMERICA,' 'IN THE CHINA SEA,' 'TWO GENTLEMEN OF HAWAII,' 'ON A FAIR CHARGE,' ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

'HELLO, Dick, old Gloomy-face! I'll bet a cigarette you haven't laughed since breakfast.'

'What breakfast? I haven't seen a smile on his face in a week.'

The scene was the Lotus Club, New York City, and I, Richard Wilberton, just entering, was the old Gloomy face alluded to. The facetious person who so alluded to my impassive face was Dilkins, the dude, and youthful member of our coterie. The second speaker was Major Simmons, who, besides being a first rate companion, a man of middle age or more, was Park Commissioner of New York.

There was, unknown to the major and Dilkins, a good reason for the absence of smiles. I had received a blow that crushed all my hope of happiness in this world, and that is enough to drive smiles from any one's face.

I was desperately in love with Edith Broughton, and Edith was in love with me. So far so good. But in an evil hour a rival came upon the scene, and though he did not succeed in winning Edith's heart, he did succeed in so far winning the father and the mother of Edith as to prevail upon them to espouse his cause; and in the effort to compel Edith to accept him, they had absolutely forbidden me the entrance to their house, and had so restricted all the movements of Edith that all intercourse between us was impossible.

The cause of this was plain enough. While I had a comfortable income, my rival, Ralph Gravis-court, was a millionaire, lived in magnificent style, drove splendid horses, spent money lavishly, and, notwithstanding his forty odd years, was the greatest catch of the season in New York.

I uttered some commonplace in reply to Dilkins, and taking the proffered cigar from Major Simmons, sat down in the bay-window with them.

We had sat there, saying little, for perhaps half an hour, when an elegant equipage rolled past, drawn by a team of prancing bays. Upon the box sat a coachman and a footman clad in the well-known livery of Ralph Gravis-court. Inside, lolled comfortably on the cushions, was Gravis-court himself.

A keen pang of envy touched my heart when I saw my rival, and something of my emotion showed in my face, for the major looked up quickly, and a look of interest came into his countenance.

'Is that the way the wind blows, my boy?' he asked, kindly.

I nodded.
'That's my evil star,' I replied, gloomily.
'Ho, ho!' roared Dilkins. 'Gravis-court's the luckiest man in New York. Luck never fails him. Years ago I believe he was called the "lucky uncle."

'Why?' I asked, with a morbid desire to learn something of the fellow who had wrecked my temptations.

'He was called the lucky uncle,' said the major, 'whose years gave him a deeper knowledge of the past than Dilkins or I possessed.' He had an elder brother, Charles Gravis-court, who was a successful stock-operator, and who amassed a fortune of over a million dollars. Charles had a wife and one child. His wife died when the child was only six months old. One year afterward Charles died, leaving the child, a girl, sole heiress of his fortune, and Ralph Gravis-court, next of kin, his executor and guardian of the child. Six months after Charles died, his daughter died, and Gravis-court inherited the fortune. That is why he was called the lucky uncle.'

When the major had finished, I sat moodily engaged with my thoughts, which were unpleasant enough.

'Come,' said the major, 'this will never do. Cheer up, Dick, my boy, Gravis-court's good luck may fall some day. Edith Broughton has not married him yet, and if I know the girl she never will.'

'If I know her father, she will,' I replied, curiously. The major and Dilkins were sufficiently intimate with me for me to speak openly of my affair to them, now that my secret had been divided.

'What?' said the major. 'Don't get blue. Let's go to the circus to-night. What do you say?'

'What circus?' I asked, but little interested.

The major tumbled in his pocket and at last produced a folded programme, which he handed to me. Mechanically I unfolded it and read the flaming headlines of the an-

nouncement of a circus that was to open at Madison Square Garden that evening.

'Here's a fine piece of aliteration,' I said, half laughing. "'Maligai's Magnificent Matelonic Menagerie and Hippodrome!" Barnum never equalled that! This Maligai must be a master. See here: "Signorina Barloti, daughter of the famous king of the trapeze. The most wonderful mid air performer the world has ever seen. Does somersaults in the air. Seems to have overcome the secret of gravitation!"'

'Promises well,' said Dilkins, gleefully.

'He took that from an old bill of Barnum's,' said the major. 'I remember it well. I also remember Barloti, the king of the trapeze. He was quite an attraction. He died a few years ago, the result of an accident. My interest in him was what awoke the desire to see his daughter. I care nothing about the rest of the show.'

'But here is another attraction,' said Dilkins, who had taken the programme from me and was reading. "'Maubikeck, the Lion-Tamer." Got some toothless old lion, I suppose, and prods it with an iron to make it growl.'

After a little more chaff about the programme, we both accepted the major's invitation, and a few hours later, having eaten a comfortable dinner at Delmonico's and smoked our cigars, we found ourselves at Madison Square Garden, elbowing our way, with the rest of the throng attracted by the flaming announcement, in through the entrance and into comfortable seats provided by the major.

As one circus is like another, so the gaudily uniformed band was like every other circus band, and blared out circus music until the throng was seated.

Then came the clown, and after him a herd of trained elephants. We watched attentively, and were rather sorry when the great, clumsy, sagacious brutes moved out of the ring.

'Sit! Here's a sight,' said Dilkins, digging me in the ribs.

It was a sight, indeed.

The next occupant of the ring was Maubikeck, the Lion-Tamer.'

From under the curtains that shrouded the entrance to the ring from the dressing and preparing-room, there rolled a gilded chariot, drawn by four lions, in rattling harness of shining chains, guided by leathern reins held by a man in the chariot, clad only in tights, as if for an acrobatic performance. Round and round the ring they rushed, the savage appearance and seeming freedom of the brutes bringing a startled exclamation to many a feminine tongue. Having made the rounds several times, Maubikeck halted his remarkable team, and stood with folded arms, while two attendants ran out and unfastened the lions from their chains.

Maubikeck himself was an attraction without his lions.

He was not particularly tall—not more so than myself, but of such massive muscularity that I gazed at him with undisguised admiration. I had, in my college days, been something of an athlete myself, and I had an honest admiration for the strength and iron-like limbs of the man before us. He was, as I said, clad only in tights, and through them the swelling muscles of his thighs seemed about to burst. About his waist he wore a jewelled girdle, the bangles on which seemed to be gold and silver coin.

From his waist up he wore nothing. His skin was white, and through it his iron muscles rolled and swelled like those of some giant of the past, whose deeds, as written now, seem groundless legends, in which there can be no probability of truth.

Upon a neck of massive beauty was poised a head over which sculptor might rave. It was like the head of a Greek god, so perfect was it in its outlines, its matchless poise, its perfect skin and its wealth of glossy black hair.

'A Roman gladiator!' exclaimed Major Simmons, in a burst of enthusiasm. 'Did you ever see such magnificent strength in man?'

'He is a wonderfully fine man, physically,' I replied. 'A combination of iron and marble. A greater sight than his lions, by far.'

Dilkins was studying the lion-tamer through a glass, and was apparently so overcome with awe that he said nothing—and it was an unusual thing for Dilkins to be so affected as to say nothing.

The lions were not the full-maned majestic African kings we see in menageries and in illustrations. They were a smaller variety, with a mottled brown coat, but with legs and neck of that bespeaking tremendous power, and eyes that flashed ominously and voices that were from time to time lifted in angry growls.

When the keepers had freed the lions from their chains, an act that seemed to fill the audience with fear, Maubikeck stepped from his chariot and went among them. They crouched as he approached, and cringed at his touch. It seemed to me as if they recognised and acknowledged the power of the man over them.

At his command they reared themselves upon their hind legs and folded their forelegs, much as a person would fold his arms.

Then Maubikeck passed along the line and shook hands with each of them, and spoke to them in a language which they only understood. From that time on there was no growling, no fierceness, but a tame submissiveness that allayed all fear among the timid ones who were looking on.

Released from their erect positions by Maubikeck's command, the lions romped and played like so many kittens. Then, with Maubikeck in the centre, they played 'Pass in the Corner' and 'Hide and Seek,' which brought forth round after round of applause from the audience.

In 'Pass in the Corner,' such of the lions was stationed on one of the four corners of a square, and they romped from one corner to another, tumbled over one another, and seemed to feel and display an exhilaration in the sport, and a keen enjoyment of their success in defeating Maubikeck, who strove by means of strength and speed to dis-place one of them and occupy its corner. And when at last this was done, the lion so displaced hung his head with shame, until, encouraged by Maubikeck, he tumbled and plunged in among the others until, when Maubikeck seemed to be off his guard, the beast regained his post and expressed his joy in truly lionine fashion.

And in playing 'Hide and Seek' they hid themselves behind the chariot, and Maubikeck hunted for them and found them. Then Maubikeck hid, and they found him. Like so many overgrown and playful kittens they romped and played, and we looked on and enjoyed the scene with the same zest as if we were boys again.

Then, as if to add to the exhibition a display of his own strength, Maubikeck wrestled with them, first covering himself with a leathern jacket to avoid their claws, and then, when they failed to dislodge him from him, and they roared, leaped upon him, and seemed to enter into the spirit of the thing with pleasure.

Then they were again harnessed to the chariot, Maubikeck, bowing and smiling in response to the continued applause, stepped in and drove twice round the ring, and out of sight through the entrance.

The major, Dilkins and I were now thoroughly enjoying ourselves, and I leaned back in my seat with a sense of pleasure such as I had not known in some time before.

Following Maubikeck came some acrobats and dancers, and while they pleased us, they failed to charm or to win from the audience the tremendous applause that had rewarded Maubikeck.

During the time they were out, some of the employees of the circus began working on a trapeze that hung high up above our heads. Ropes were pulled, bars were raised in position, and when the sustaining and guy ropes were made fast, there were two fixed horizontal bars, with a flying trapeze between them.

Suddenly a hush came over the audience as a girl appeared and walked to a spot directly under the trapeze.

The band then struck up a lively air, and two attendants stepped forward, and pacing the girl's feet in a loop at the end of the rope that dangled from the pulley above, they raised her slowly, and we had the pleasure of gazing upon the most beautiful creature that any of us, or anybody else, for that matter, ever saw.

The programme announced at this point the appearance of Nita Barloti; and those of the audience who, like the major, remembered her father, had waited impatiently for her appearance. And now that she had appeared, the entire audience was overcome by her transcendent beauty, and gazed, spellbound, as she clung to the loop of rope and bowed to us from her lofty perch.

Nita Barloti was, without doubt, the most beautiful girl who had ever appeared before a New York public. Her features were matchless. She had a wealth of dark-brown hair, which was tightly drawn into a knot so that it would not interfere with her in her performances on the bar. Her face was perfect in its contour and every feature was a poem. And yet it seemed to me that she looked sad—woefully sad—not like one who was enjoying the triumph of a successful appearance, but like one who was ashamed, or who loathed the part she played, or to whom some great sorrow or bitterness had come that had driven all the brightness from her life.

'By Heaven!' exclaimed Major Simmons. 'She is a goddess. Wilberton, did you ever see so perfect a form? Not a line out of proportion. Every curve of her figure is a poem. And such a face.'

Signorina Barloti's figure fully merited the enthusiastic praise bestowed upon it by the major. It was full without being voluptuous, and the hard training through which she must necessarily have gone to perfect her in her art had rounded out her muscles, made her joints supple, and added a grace that is seldom found in a woman.

'Let me take your glass, Dilkins,' said the major. 'You really seem beside yourself.'

'Ha!' exclaimed Dilkins. 'I have had this glass all to myself until now. But I

suppose I may say good-by to it while Nita Barloti is in sight.'

The major took the glass and through it carefully scanned the face of the trapeze girl.

'She is no Italian,' he said, handing the glass to me.

'You are right,' I replied, taking a good look and handing the glass back to Dilkins. 'No Italian ever had that soft brown hair, nor those clear brown eyes. Her face is distinctly of the Anglo-Saxon type, I think. But these show people are strange creatures. Who knows who Barloti's wife might have been. The girl may resemble her mother.'

'If she does, then Barloti had the most beautiful wife in the world,' said Dilkins, 'and the man that marries the Queen of the Flying Trapeze will have the match to her. Bogard! I never saw her equal in New York, and I have seen them all.'

The major seemed to be lost in thought. His head was bowed, and his brow furrowed, as if deeply studying some half-forgotten remembrance.

'I have seen that face before—or one like it,' he said, lifting his eyes again to look at the beauty above us.

'Not unlikely, if you saw Barloti frequently, you must have seen his wife,' I replied. 'And probably there is a resemblance.'

The trapeze queen drew herself onto one

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