

# MAUBIKECK,

## THE LION-TAMER.

By Seward W. Hopkins.

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### CHAPTER II.

'GRAVISCOURT'S genius for entertaining is indisputable,' said the major, on the following evening, as he, Dilkins and I sat together, among a score or more kindred spirits, all forming an appreciative audience at Graviscourt's 'stag' entertainment.

'True,' I replied, 'with a tinge of malice. One almost forgets who his host is, with so much to amuse.'

The programme was a sort of vaudeville. There were songs, skirt dances, comic sketches by more or less famous artists in their line, and the time was so well filled and passed so pleasantly that the hours glided by almost imperceptibly.

Midnight was the hour for supper, and a royal supper it was.

It was understood that after supper cards would be in order. An interval of half an hour was allowed for chat. During this interlude, the guests sauntered to and fro in the elegant parlours, crony meeting crony and together admiring the paintings, bric-a-brac and sculpture, in the gathering of which Graviscourt was a master.

Dilkins with his usual curiosity and push, was ramming around in some cabinets he had succeeded in opening, and he suddenly electrified us all by exclaiming:

'By Jove! Dick! Major! Look at this!'

The major, Graviscourt and I reached him at the same moment.

'By Heaven! That face!' he cried, thrusting a photograph into the major's hand.

'That is a likeness of Alice Graviscourt, my Mother's wife, taken some four years before she died,' said our host, calmly.

'Is it?' almost shouted Dilkins. 'If it isn't the Queen of the Flying Trapeze, I'm a Dutchman.'

Even the major's face was a little pale. I looked over his shoulder. Sure enough, the face in the picture was very like the face of Nita Barlotti, but lacked the sadness that characterised the beautiful countenance of the circus girl.

'What do you mean?' asked Graviscourt.

And the major told him about Nita and Maligni's circus.

'Probably more a fancied resemblance than a true one,' he said calmly, as he took the photograph and replaced it in the cabinet from which Dilkins had removed it.

Nothing more was said that night about the occurrence, but it had produced in my mind an impression that could not be shaken off. At a late hour I left, pondering deeply over the striking features in the photograph and their resemblance to the face of Nita Barlotti.

On the following day when I awoke the first thoughts that came to me were of Graviscourt's picture of the dead woman. Having eaten my breakfast and taken a stroll, I found that no effort of my will could efface from my mind the horrid suspicion that had lodged there. I was in the grasp of an impulse, and could not shake it off. Having fought it to no purpose, I resolved to give it full rein—to give myself up to the work of explaining, if explanation could be found, the resemblance between the wife of Charles Graviscourt and Nita Barlotti.

With some wild fancy that I was furthering my own affairs and helping myself by seeking to overthrow Graviscourt, I was led by the extravagant phantom of my brain to Trinity Cemetery. Having arrived there, I sought and found the family plot of the Graviscourts, in which a marble monument reared its head over three graves.

Three sides of the monument were carved. On one I read:

SACRED TO THE MEMORY OF CHARLES GRAVISCOURT.

Born, Feb. 18, 18--; Died, June 10, 18--.

On another I read:

ALICE,

BELOVED WIFE OF CHARLES GRAVISCOURT. Born, April 6, 18--; Died, July 21, 18--.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. She has joined her Saviour.

On the third:

ALICE,

INFANT DAUGHTER OF CHARLES AND ALICE GRAVISCOURT. Died, Oct. 4th, 18--. Aged 2 years.

'What a fool I am!' I muttered, as I

turned away. The air seemed to have grown chilly since I had come there, and I drew my coat close around me and returned to my carriage.

Like all meddlers, having been disappointed, I was determined to try again, and my next visit was to the Bureau of Vital Statistics, at 301 Mott street.

Upon making my errand known, some little wonder was apparent among the clerks, but I was readily accommodated, and was soon looking over the death records of sixteen years before, the year in which occurred, according to the marble shaft in Trinity, the death of Alice, daughter of Charles and Alice Graviscourt.

At last I found what I was looking for. I held in my hand the certificate of death of the child whose timely removal had made Ralph Graviscourt a millionaire.

Nothing was wrong about the certificate. Every form of law had been complied with. The cause of death was small-pox. The signature of the physician attached was 'C. Sigmotta, M.D.'

'Well, I am an infernal fool,' I said to myself, as I again started homeward, foiled in my attempt to stir up a tragedy. 'Really, I must learn to mind my own business. I have wasted an entire day trying to stir up ghosts that won't be stirred. But having gone so far, I am going to take one step more and find out who "C. Sigmotta" was. I never heard of him, but it must be all right or the certificate would not have been accepted.'

Doctor Dinmore, the Secretary of the New York Medical Society, was a friend of long standing. I felt that I could rely upon him, and was soon at his door.

He greeted me cordially, and I had no difficulty in telling him what I wanted to know. He smiled, and proceeded to look over some old folios he had taken from a recess in his bookcase.

After a few minutes spent thus, he said: 'I find here the name of Charles Sigmotta as a member of our society fourteen—fifteen—even twenty years ago. He does not seem to have been prominent, but little mention being made of him, except the fact that he attended meetings. I hardly recall the name and do not recollect the man. But there is no doubt he was a physician in good standing. He is not a member now. Wait. Ah, here it is! He resigned thirteen years ago. Where he is now, I do not know.'

'It is not important,' I said. 'What I want to know is this: Sixteen years ago documents—say death certificates—signed by him would be above suspicion, would they not?'

'To the best of my knowledge and belief they would,' replied Doctor Dinmore. 'I know of nothing that indicates to the contrary.'

Having once more had my suspicions laid to the ground I thanked the doctor and hurried home.

I had finished with Graviscourt, but not with Nita Barlotti. The impulse to see her again was too strong to be controlled, and that evening I again occupied a box in Madison Square Garden.

The programme was exactly the same as it had been before, but I felt no interest in the opening act. Even the lion tamer failed to amuse, though I could not help being charmed by the massive beauty of the man. But I was there to see Nita Barlotti, and I sat impatiently until it came her turn to appear.

But now I was doomed to a disappointment that was keen in the same measure as my former eagerness. Instead of Barlotti, there appeared on a small balcony, near the bandstand, the same greasy, mean-looking Italian who had led the trapeze queen away on the night of her successful debut. He was flimsily dressed, this Italian, in the taste of a man fond of display and devoid of good taste. His clothes were long and flaunting. He wore diamonds of prodigious size. He was his own ideal of a successful circus owner. Of that there could be no doubt.

This creature bowed low to the audience that had poured their silver into his coffers, and in a thick voice said:

LADIES AND SHENTLEMENS: It haf become my sad duty to inform you dat you will be disappointed great dis evening. De bright star, de von shining jewel, of this great aggregate of mammoth attractions, will not be able to appear before you dis evening. Signorina Barlotti haf been suddenly taken ill, and my regard for dis young lady is so great dat I haf insisted dat she remain quiet under de care of a doctaire, until she haf fully recovered. I know, my dear friends, dat you will sympathize wif our favourite trapeze queen, and will bear in good part dis great disappointment. And I will assure you dat Signorina Barlotti is sad, and sends many regrets dat she is not able to attend dis evening. But if she is better to-morrow evening, so dat it will not do her any harm, don, maybe, I will allow her to come once more and gif you pleasure. My friends, I thank you.

Bowing again, the Italian disappeared. I had been, perhaps, the most eager listener in that vast audience, and was certainly the most disappointed. I had, half risen in my place while Maligni was speak-

ing, and was watching him through my glass. Standing near him, I saw Maubikeck, clad in ordinary garb, and a finer specimen of man I never saw. The lion-tamer stood firmly on both feet, his arms were folded and his head was bent as if listening to the speaker. On his handsome face there was an intense look—his brow was stern, his eyes cold and menacing, his lips slightly curved in a sneering smile. When Maligni had finished, Maubikeck shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

'He loves Barlotti,' I said to myself, 'and he loves her as few men love or have the power of loving. Some day, if Barlotti should return that love, there will be a clash, a crash and somebody's blood will be spilled. And as between Maubikeck and Maligni, I would not give much for the latter gentleman's chances.'

I did not tarry long. With a feeling of keen disappointment I left the Garden and went to my hotel. As I was going up the stairs to my room I met Major Simmons coming down.

'Well, well!' he said, seizing me and turning me round under the electric light. 'What the deuce has happened to you, boy? You are not given to sudden disappearances that worry your friends. Explain why you have not been to the club. I came to see if you were ill.'

I was touched by this evidence of friendship on the part of a man so many years my senior, and shook his hand gratefully.

'I am well, major. Come back with me and smoke a cigar while I tell you all about it.'

The resolve to unburden myself to my kind friend had come to me suddenly. It seemed to me that I needed a confidant, and there were only two men in New York to whom I was close enough to talk about this matter, and of these the major was surely the safest and best able to advise. The blundering Dilkins was not the man to be intrusted with a suspicion the mere breathing of which would undoubtedly cause a social Vesuvius that would envelop the fashionable world of New York.

The major accompanied me back to my room, and I turned on the light. I had comfortable quarters, even elegant. I was not a millionaire like Graviscourt, but my income was sufficient to enable me to occupy my present quarters. Keep a team of horses, and dress in the prevailing fashion, leaving still a balance for traveling, books, or any expenditure for luxuries in which I might wish to indulge. I occupied two rooms—one a bed-room, and the other a large handsome room in which I had placed the most comfortable furniture I could get. And the room was made larger still by an alcove opening from it, in which there was a well filled bookcase, a huge lounge, and, in a good spot by the window, a desk.

It was not my habit to keep a stock of cigars in my room, because I was seldom there when I wanted a smoke, and I found that the last cigars in a box that had dragged out its last days in my room were apt to be dry and cracked, and the flavour greatly injured.

I rang for a night waiter and ordered some cigars of a brand that I knew the major liked, and also some wine.

These comforts of a bachelor's life having appeared, the major lighted a cigar, and enconced himself comfortably in a large arm-chair, resting his head on the high back and throwing one leg over the other, settled into a lazy position.

'Now go on,' he said. 'Tell me what you have been doing, and where you have been hiding all day.'

'I have turned ghoul,' I said, half laughing and half earnestly. 'I have become addicted to the very reprehensible habit of turning up graves.'

The major looked at me gravely for a moment, puffing energetically at his cigar, while I did the same at mine.

'That is bad business,' he said, after the pause. 'In the first place, it is dangerous. You are liable to be caught and sent to prison, and another thing, you might contract disease.'

'Yes—small-pox, for instance,' I said. 'Ah! I did think you were joking,' said the major, 'but now I begin to see light. How many nights have you spent in your new enterprise of body-snatching, and whom have you snatched?'

'None,' I replied. 'My ghoul-h exploits are confined entirely to the hours of day.'

'You are reckless. Still, I must say I admire your courage. But you have only answered part of my question.'

'Oh, I haven't snatched any body, really. I am in a sort of resurrection business.'

'Don't you think you might better leave that to Gabriel? Those things are managed better at headquarters, you know.'

'Pshaw! You know well enough what I mean. I won't beat about the bush any longer;' and I thereupon told him all that I had done, leaving out no detail.

While I was speaking, the major looked at me gravely, and when I had finished, he merely b'w his cigar smoke into the air and said nothing.

'I could not help it,' I said in apology. 'That story of yours about the lucky uncle, and the remarkable similarity in the faces, left an impression that I could not shake off. Nor could I resist the impulse to investigate.'

'Nor I.' 'You! I jumped from my chair in excitement.' 'You?'

'Yes. When Graviscourt held that photograph in his hand, I detected evidence of agitation in his manner. The impression the whole thing gave me was very like yours—the impulse the same. This morning I rose early and visited Trinity Cemetery. In the afternoon I visited 301 Mott street, the Bureau of Vital Statistics.'

'And were disappointed—or—pleased—at finding just what I found,' I said; 'that everything was all right.'

'I saw just what you saw,' said the major; 'and had it not been for a chance meeting, I would have reached the same conclusion that you have.'

'My breath was coming hard from me now.' 'Well?' I gasped.

'When I left 301 Mott street, I saw Graviscourt's carriage. Thinking it a strange coincidence that he should be in the vicinity, I followed it. It stopped before one of the most miserable places in the Italian quarter. In the lower portion of the building was a dirty-looking drug store. Over the door was the sign, "L. Tortoni." I saw Graviscourt get out of the carriage and enter the drug store. I hurried past, hoping to get a look into the window. I was not disappointed. I saw the proprietor greet Graviscourt as an acquaintance, and they went into a back room. When I returned the carriage was still there, and a woman was in attendance in the store. The conference between Graviscourt and Tortoni was a long one.

'There is certainly something in the wind,' I exclaimed. 'There is—there is—I am certain of it. What do you think? What do you advise?'

'We must move cautiously. Even yet there may be some hideous mistake, and a false move would put us in an unpleasant position. But there is something. I have not told you the most important fact.'

'What is it?' I asked. 'If I am not mistaken—I may be, because dissipation changes faces—but if I am not mistaken, L. Tortoni is no other than Doctor Charles Sigmotta, Graviscourt's old friend.'

'Sigmotta?' I exclaimed. 'The man who signed the death certificate of the Graviscourt child?'

'The same.'

This news was so overwhelming that I sat silently smoking for several minutes. In fact, but little more was said by either of us. After a few minutes the major reached over, poured himself out some wine, drank it, and took his hat as if to go. I saw him to the door, and promising to meet him at the Lotus Club the following day, I returned to my room, where I threw myself down on the couch in the alcove, utterly lost in the bewildering sensations that the major's story had aroused.

### CHAPTER III.

ACCORDING to my promise, I met Major Simmons at the Lotus Club at four o'clock on the following afternoon. Dilkins was there, and stuck so close to us that we found no opportunity to speak on the subject which I now knew seemed as important to my elderly friend as it had to myself. We went to supper together, all three, and at my suggestion—in fact, upon my invitation—all agreed to spend the evening at Madison Square Garden. To Dilkins, of course, this was nothing else than the prospect of an evening's pleasure. To the major and me it was the prompting of the same irresistible impulse that had guided our movements since Dilkins had unearthed the photograph of Alice Graviscourt. I wished to be present at the circus to see if Signorina Barlotti actually appeared; and if she did, how she looked and acted. If she did not, I wanted to hear Maligni's excuse for her non-appearance. Anything pertaining to Barlotti was eagerly sought, so that my suspicious

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