

# The Lion-Tamer

By Dora Sigerson Shorter

“Up! Hector, Brutus, Nero.” The lion-tamer cracked his whip; he strode smiling cruelly among the snarling animals; he knew no fear; his pleasure was in the danger of his position. The strong, brutal natures always on the look-out for a sign of weakness in him to attack—he lashed them as he would disobedient curs if they did not obey him, and they crouched to him. Sometimes one would face him for a moment, and the two would look into each other’s eyes, till the brave beast would turn tail, subdued by the superior courage in the man’s gaze. Often it was but the weight of a straw in the balance who would have the victory. But the man always came from the conquest with a smile upon his lips, while the women in the audience would give little cries of fear, and lean fainting upon their male companions, envying the woman the while who might call such a man her master. Had they but known it, she stood over there by the door in the gold and scarlet costume of a lady gymnast—a nobody to be the wife of such a man! Now she did not even look as the lion-tamer strode amongst his animals—a figure that a sculptor might copy for a god. All the women’s eyes in the theatre followed him except hers; hers were downcast and turned away.

“Nora,” a voice said low in her ear, “he has beaten you again?”

Her eyes flashed as she turned them upon the speaker, then fell; a deep flush spread over her neck and face.

“He has never beaten me,” she said coldly; “how dare you say so!”

“He has beaten you,” the voice said, “as he will beat you again, and yet again.”

“He has not beaten me.” She spoke angrily, stamping her foot, her fierce gaze even yet not meeting the eyes of her questioner.

“Why are you wearing that silk scarf around your neck? It is not customary—not becoming.”

“Because I have a cold, Is it not enough?” She looked him up and down, challenging a denial, but he did not answer, gazing sadly before him at the crowded benches of the applauding house. The lion-tamer, astride a lion, was riding round the ring.

“I hate the life”—the woman spoke after a pause—“I hate the men’s eyes. I am not one to smile when my soul is full of bitterness, or to dance lightly when my heart is heavy; neither can I uplift my face for the admiration of men, nor do I care to twist and distort my body for their amusement. Every night, as I swing above their heads and prepare to launch myself into the air, I smile upon them, and hate them, hate them—the cruel faces with their look of mock terror upon them, all waiting for me to fall, to miss my mark, to become a crushed mass of death.”

“Nora,”—the man’s voice was strained,—“don’t.”

“I tell you, they are waiting for me to fall. What else do they come for? What else are they watching for there”—she waved her hands towards the cage of lions—“but the death that walks with the man behind those bars? Sometimes I say to myself up there above their heads: ‘Look how they sit with their breaths indrawn with suspense! Give them their sensation—miss this time.’ And I—whom no one loves, who has no hope, no happiness—I do not miss.”

“Whom no one loves?” The man’s voice rang eager and broken.”

“Whom no one has a right to love.” She spoke hastily and coldly, seeming to answer the question in his voice. The man turned away his face from her.

“What a handsome couple of gymnasts!” some one said from the audience. “I wonder if they are married?”

The man’s hand clenched. The woman drew her scarf more tightly round her.

“It is cold here,” she said, as if she had not heard. “I wish I could go home.” And again she repeated softly, full of yearning, “O God! I wish I could go home.”

“Home!” the man echoed. “The trees are well in leaf there now, and the little birds are quarrelling over the placing of their nests; there is peace in the valley, and the great hills are yellow with golden furze.”

The woman laid her hand upon his arm pleadingly. “Be silent!” she whispered. “Oh, be silent!”

“Far away from London, from its darkness, its weariness, its soul-killing noise and crowding,” the man continued, as though speaking aloud to himself. “There is silence from the crash of human tongues; only God speaks in the moving of the leaves and the falling of the waters.”

“And the countless eyes,” Nora whispered, as though afraid of being heard, “the eyes always watching for me to fall—they are not there, nor the ears always astrain to hear my dying cry.”

The man shuddered. He drew nearer and, laying his hand upon her arm, gazed intently into her eyes.

“Wherever you go, eyes are watching you, he said, “ears are listening to you, tongues are ready to be busy with your misfortunes in this great city. But at home there are no eyes to watch you save of those who love you. There are no ears to listen save of those to whom your voice is music. There are no tongues to speak of you except with kindness.”

The woman, crying silently, drew back into the shadow of the passage. The man followed, and, taking his place before her, gazed into her eyes. From the theatre came the sound of clapping and “bravos.” The attendants of the circus were busy; the two stood alone.

“Beneath the moon the fair valley smiles”—he spoke low and distinct. “The peat smoke curls upward, half seen in the faint light; its perfume is in the air. Here and there, among the purple gloom of fern and little trees, the star of a cottage light is seen. The contented lowing of lazy cattle, the bark of a watchful dog, or the chirp of some awaking bird is all that breaks the silence.” He made a downward motion over her face with his hands. She lay back against the wall half in a trance, his eyes seemed to command her soul, she was passing into his power under the mesmeric influence of his voice. He continued softly, “The shadowy mountains encircle all. The light of the passing moon moves like a benediction over the land. The scented breeze is warm, and the cottage doors stand open. There is no enemy here to bar them against, and the night is not yet begun. In one cottage alone there is mourning, an old woman sitting in solitude by a hearth where the turf lies grey, the fire in its heart.”

Nora passed her hand across her eyes, as if to see clearer. She sank upon a bench and spoke as in a dream.

“I see her,” she said. “Her hand is to her side. No tears come from her eyes—she is too old to weep—but her heart is crying always. She is ill and miserable.”

The man put his hand upon her forehead. “What does she say?” he said.

“She is calling ‘Nora, Nora, Nora,’ nothing but ‘Nora.’ ”

“Is there no reply?”

“There is a woman far away who is trying to reach her; but she cannot—she is tied, she is held back by some one very strong and very cruel. She is crying in her heart too, but she cannot go. She dare not go. God and man have bound her, so she must not break loose and go.

“And the old woman?”

“She is growing older and more weary. She is drifting away; she is dying. She cries, ‘Nora, come to me. Oh, my little Nora!’ ” She moved uneasily, as though in pain. The man passed his hand downward over her face.

“Tell her,” he said slowly, “tell her you will come. Tell her you will be strong and cast the chains from about you that are killing you. Tell her you were young, and had no knowledge of what life was when you left her. Tell her that as an inexperienced girl you thought all nobleness dwelt in a body that God had made strong and beautiful above other men, how you left everything you held dear for his sake. But now, disillusioned, loveless, a woman who has suffered, you are going back to her again.” He paused a moment, and continued with an effort: “Tell her that there is one who loves you as his own soul, one who you could not care for long ago. Tell her you love him now, and that he will shield you from all misfortunes, and take you away from suffering. Tell her, tell her.”

Nora pressed her hands together, as though in great pain. “I cannot tell her that,” she said, “I cannot tell her that.”

The man drew his breath in with a sob.

“No, of course not; I was mad. Be calm. Tell her you will go home alone.”

The woman opened her lips to speak, but the man passed his hand upward over her face a moment and disappeared. A strong hand fell upon her shoulder.

“Mother!” she cried, with a breath of joy or relief, “I have come home.”

“Asleep?” a hard voice said in her ear. “Why are you not outside in your place, you lazy sloven?”

She started to her feet, passing her hand across her eyes, staggering into consciousness.

Her husband seized her by the shoulder, shaking her. “By God!” he growled, “if I thought you were drunk I would lash the hide off your bones.”

“Don’t dare to speak to me like that!”—she faced him now like one of his lions—“and take your hand off me at once!”

“I’ll speak to you as I like and use you as I like.” He shook her to and fro, then pushed her roughly from him. “Don’t give me any of your infernal jaw, either.”

She seized the loaded whip he had laid beside him when he came upon her, and raised it above her head. Her hot Irish blood coursed madly through her veins. In her passion she stood high as himself. Her trained sinews stood out on her arms. She came upon him like a thunderbolt, but he seized her by her wrists, as in a vice.

“I am not afraid of you,” he said, and laughed. “I will tame you as I tame my lions, in spite of your claws.”

He twisted the whip from her hands, and for a moment held it over her, as though to strike. She crouched for the blow, but met his eyes with a gaze so like one of his beasts when he ill-treated it, that he flung the whip aside. His fearless, cruel soul was momentarily ashamed beneath eyes that reproached and condemned him. Sometimes in the arena he had felt the same look bent upon him, and shame had turned him that fear never stayed, and his lash would fall unsatisfied to the ground.

“I have never struck a woman in my life,” he said roughly, “but you are enough to make a man begin.”

She laughed, and did not answer. The light shawl fell from about her shoulders, and on the white of her skin he saw the black track of a cruel grasp.

“I have never struck a woman,” he repeated, sauntering away.

She sank down on a bench, drawing the scarf about her again. She could hear the rattle of ropes and pulleys. They were fixing the wires for her performance. She stood up, waiting her turn, and looked from her shadow into the theatre.

“Oh, the eyes! the eyes! the eyes!” she muttered, “all waiting to see me fall. Let the end come soon, God, if it be your will. I am weary, weary, weary of being alive!”

## II

There had been serious trouble at the Imperial Circus a few nights after this. The “shooting star,” the beautiful Madame Blumenthal, would not go through her performance. The manager had spent his patience and his time in remonstrating with her; her husband had argued with more force than effect. “For the first time in his life,” as he said himself, “he had struck a woman”; and the manager had looked on and not interfered. He was only sorry that he had no legal right himself to chastise her. He raved at her for a pig-headed coward.

A coward! And that was the reason the wonderful Madame Blumenthal was afraid to go through her performance, afraid to do the amazing flight through the air that all London was crowding to see. She sat and cried and trembled till her eyes were swollen and the red mark of her husband’s blow became even more vivid on her pale face.

“Oh, forgive me!” she sobbed; “let me off this one evening. I have never felt like this before, never been afraid.”

And the man who could not understand fear dragged her on to her feet,—“If you are not ready in five minutes, God help you!” he growled.

“They are all watching for me to fall,” she whispered. “There’s a man there that has followed us for the last six months, ever since I began my dangerous leap. He has followed us to Paris, to Vienna, to London—everywhere. He is a ghoul waiting for my blood; he gloats over my danger. I see his eyes as I go out and bow. They follow me as I climb the rope and mount into my seat. All the life in me trembles. I am afraid of him—afraid of all the eyes.”

“If you are afraid to go on you will be more afraid to stay away,” her husband said cruelly, his eyes on her. “Do you think I will stand being ruined by you? Here, enough of this fuss!” he shouted; “get yourself ready! The trapeze is up, and everybody will soon be waiting.”

She drew herself together and clenched her teeth. “I will go,” she said hoarsely. “After all, what does it matter?”

When she came into the ring she was smiling as usual. No one noticed that the beautiful Nora had rouged to simulate the natural roses that had left her cheeks, or that a dark scar was hidden beneath the powder on her face.

No one noticed she was troubled but Malachy O’Dermod, who loved her; and he said nothing, but clenched his teeth so that the blood came upon his lip.

“Hold my hand tight, Nora,” he said, as they went through one of their performances together. “You are not as fit as usual.”

The sound of his gentle, strong voice soothed her. She smiled, feeling braver. “Imagine I, was afraid! But I am not, now that you are here to avert the evil eyes!”

“Trust me,” he said, looking into her face, and seeing that she was afraid. “Nonsense!” he laughed. “After all this time!” He spoke to her, cheering her, to turn her thoughts from herself. He became nervous, thinking of her great jump through the air.

“I don’t know what it is to-night,” she said, smiling, “I feel as if something were going to happen.”

The rope was lowered, and she clung to it till it left her almost out of sight of the audience, up under the sparkling roof-lights.

Malachy O'Dermot swung in his place, his soul in his eyes. "O little figure, so lonely," he said through his teeth, "God protect you!" and he kept clenching and unclenching his hands, while she prepared for her spring into the air, saying all the time, as if he did not know he was speaking aloud, "God help me! God help me! God help me!" He turned over in his swing, holding on by his feet. He was to catch her. The terror of his position overcame him as it never had before. In a minute he would know if the precious weight hung upon him. If not, he resolved to loose his feet and drop head foremost to the ground, avoiding the net. His soul cried to her, "Come to me straight, be strong, do not miss," till he felt she must hear and obey. But she, far away, alone under the roof, did not hear him, but, pale and trembling, prepared to gather herself together to spring. For the first time she knew what intense fear was and the facing of death.

"It is my husband," she thought. "His continual ill-treatment of me is wearing me into a coward. Even the lions, who hate him, are afraid to strike. I am not as brave, and my spirit, too, is broken." She saw Malachy turn over on his swing and reach his hands out ready to catch her. Far away she saw the crowd of white faces of the audience uplifted and staring at her. "The place is all eyes," she whispered, "all eyes." She groaned as she thought what she had to do to amuse them, and felt more lonely than ever she had done in her life, standing up there with the crowd of upturned faces and eager eyes demanding her, by their gaze, and saying—"Come we are waiting: do not keep us." She crouched to spring, and, flinging herself into the air, opened her lips in a low, terrified cry. She felt she had sprung short. No one heard it but Malachy, and he hung upon his swing like one dead and blind. The next second hands grasped hands, and he heard the loud applause of the audience. Never had he enjoyed the agony of her weight as now, when it fell upon him almost unprepared.

"Why did you cry out?" he moaned. "You have almost killed me."

They swung hand from hand, recovering themselves. "I thought I had missed," she gasped. Then they dropped one after the other into the net. Hand in hand they bowed before the audience, delighting in the light and gaiety of the circus. In the memory of their terror they felt as though they had gone through the horrors of death, and out of the darkness had passed to the glory of day and living. Smiling, they went together out of the arena. When they reached a quiet passage outside they could hear the great cage rising round the ring in which her husband was to perform with his lions.

She sank down upon a box with a laugh. "I feel quite tired, like as if I had walked for miles," she said, lifting her damp hair from her forehead as she spoke.

Malachy leant forward. "I feel as if you had been lost and I had just found you," he whispered; then saw upon her brow—almost across her eyes—the vivid wound of a knotted whip lash. "My God!" he cried, his face changing. "Has he done that? Where is he?"

Nora started to her feet. She had never seen him so angry. She put her hand upon his arm to keep him. "Let him be," she said; "it is no use worrying. I am all right—it does not hurt. He was very angry because I would not go at once for my performance."

"Nora!" He grasped her hands in his. "Nora, leave it all, leave it all! It is no marriage of God's that keeps you tied to that brute. You do not love or honour him; he does not love or cherish you. My little Irish sweetheart, I have loved you beyond all telling since you were a tiny child."

Nora drew her hands away. "Do not dare to talk to me like that, or I shall hate you," she said; and then some one spoke behind her sneeringly,—

"A pretty scene, indeed, to come upon."

They turned, and faced her husband. Malachy threw himself before the lion-tamer and caught him by his coat. He was not a small man, yet did not come much over the other's shoulder.

"You have struck her," he said hoarsely, between his teeth. "You cowardly hound! you shall take the blow back from me."

The other forced him from him, and raised his whip. "I shall cut you in two if you lay a hand upon me."

Nora, without thinking of anything, only to separate them, flung herself between them, and the blow fell across her shoulders, making her cry out. Her husband laughed when he saw where the blow fell.

"That comes of being in the wrong place," he said, striding out into the circus.

Nora heard the applause that greeted him, and missed Malachy from her side. She sprang up, frightened. Where had he gone? She suddenly came upon him in the shadow, an iron bar in his hands. He was creeping towards the bowing figure in the ring. He made a spring as she came up, but the lion-tamer saw him, and with a smile slipped into the cage amongst his lions.

Nora caught the man by the arm, and pulled him roughly towards her. "What were you going to do?" she cried. "What were you going to do?"

The bar dropped from Malachy's hands. "Nothing," he said. "I was mad for the moment; I hate him. Would to God he were dead; but I shall not be his slayer."

Nora let go his arm. Her heart echoed his words, then ran cold at its own guilt.

"What is he making of us both?" she whispered; and thought of herself as she was when a girl—so innocent, so glad of the joy of living in herself and everything else; how she had welcomed the young birds whose nests she knew and would not harm; and the children, how they loved her! Now she looked upon young things with pity, feeling that they would come to misery with years, as she had done. Misery, aye, and even crime; for in her heart now was the unspoken thought, "As there is no other way, O God, separate us by death." That glorious gift of life she once so revelled in she was now ready to throw away; or was it possible she thought of gaining her freedom by another's death? She hid her face in her hands. "How can I bear it?" she thought. "My life is embittered and ruined, I am beaten and insulted at every turn, my love is cast back upon me, my tenderness repulsed. How can I help but hate him, O God?"

She looked up, and saw her husband smiling among his lions. The beasts crouched and growled when even he approached. She saw the vast audience staring at him with admiring eyes—the women, perhaps, envying her for the possession—of his beauty, the little children applauding with shrill voices every performance of the beasts, that had been taught them with cruel tortures. "If you only knew," she whispered to the women and children, as her eyes set again upon her husband. The great feat of the night was being prepared, lion after lion taking his position in the ring. Two of them refused for a moment to go, and she saw the smile come upon her husband's face that she knew so well. It was his smile of power, of his superior strength and will over anything that set itself against him. Now the lash fell upon the disobedient beasts with a biting shriek through the air. One of the lions crouched as if to spring upon him, and he smiled again and struck it across the eyes. Half-blinded, it slunk away.

One after the other they mounted into their places upon the platform prepared for them. Over the backs of these he was to climb, and mounting the central lion, hold aloft the united flags of England and America, the whole forming a *tableau* that he had done for many seasons, under many flags. Nora watched him making his last bow to the audience before he mounted into his place. The lions were ready in position, some growling softly to themselves, others licking their comrades, as they leaned towards each other.

“These men always get killed in the end,” she heard some one in the audience say; and her companion tittered, “I hope it won’t be to-night.”

Nora looked at her husband again. She saw him stand a moment and brush the hair back from his forehead. What was the matter? Why did he not move? He seemed to draw himself together, then make a step towards the impatient beasts. Then he stopped again and looked around. Was he afraid at last? No, there was no fear upon his face—only bewilderment. He brushed his hand again across his eyes and walked towards the lions. One of them made a stroke with its paw towards him, snarling. He did not seem to notice. Some of the attendants seemed to think something wrong, and crowded to the bars, whispering together. One of them called out, but the lion-tamer did not answer. He attempted to get upon the back of the first lion, and slipped; the brute snarled and half turned, but the cruel foot was again upon his back, and he fell into his accustomed place. The man mounted and stepped on to the next beast, then slipped again, and went down on his feet between them.

She heard a voice in the audience mutter, “This may be good for show, but, by Heaven! I don’t like it.” And some one from the theatre pushed by her, saying, “My God! is the fellow drunk? If he had fallen he was a dead man.” Again she saw her husband mount the back of the next lion in a bewildered way, as though he were half asleep. She saw the impatient animals growing conscious of something amiss. The angry lashing of their tails and the low, fierce growling was growing worse.

Even the audience became aware that all was not right, and relapsed into horrified silence. Some one called to the lion-tamer to come back, for God’s sake, but he looked round with a cruel smile upon his face and made a step forward; he prepared to mount the centre beast, and drew the two flags from his breast. The lions were snarling and moving impatiently from their positions. He shouted at them to go back; they obeyed him reluctantly, and eyed him with hatred. He put his foot half across the beast nearest him. Nora saw it was not the central lion, but a vicious brute which he could never trust. Her face was like death as she gazed round the audience. What in God’s name was the matter with her husband? She opened her mouth to scream, and her gaze fell upon Malachy O’Dermot. He was standing in the passage, his eyes fastened upon her husband like two burning torches, his face white and his thin lips muttering. She stretched her hands towards him, and then suddenly put them before her face. As she did so a great stricken cry arose from the theatre—women and children screaming and men shouting, the whole place in a tumult. She was hustled and jostled amongst the panic-stricken crowds and useless would-be helpers. She heard some one saying, “This is his wife, poor thing!” and knew she had shrieked out in horrible laughter before she fell under their feet unconscious.

### III

A year after this, in a green valley in Ireland, a woman went alone amongst the long fern and purple foxglove. Her face was raised from the lovely things at her feet and fixed upon the blue distance before her. Yet in her eyes, as she went thus, grew a great loneliness and longing. She clenched her hands and held them across her brow, as if in pain. As she passed, a man stepped out from a group of yellow furze straight in her path. He held out his hands to her, calling upon her name,—

“Nora! my Nora!” he cried.

With a great sob she turned, and held him as if he might slip away into a dream.

“Malachy! oh, Malachy!”

“I have waited a year,” he said, “since I brought you home. You did not know me then, Nora, when I took you from among their feet. Ah, my love, it was hard to watch others nurse you and see you slowly coming back from your fever and madness; but I knew it was right and best not to let you know till now.”

The woman drew herself back from him with an awful cry.

“O God! I had forgotten, and only remembered the agony of having lost you. Malachy, Malachy, we are outcasts from the happiness of God. Our ways are separate; we must not meet again.”

He took her by the two hands and looked into her eyes. He thought the fever that had burnt in her poor brain was returning.

“What do you mean?” he said tenderly. “We shall never part again.”

She drew her hands from his and stood before him like one turned into stone.

“The mark of Cain is upon you and upon me,” she said.

“What do you mean?” he stammered, a horror growing in his eyes.

“I mean you drew the strength from my husband’s limbs and the reason from his brain. You made him fall amongst the lions; you mesmerized him: and I knew, and could have stopped you, but I let him die.”

The man grew white as death, and staggered from her.

“Yes, it is true!” he gasped. “I did not know my own power, but I hated him and wished him dead. I watched him that night, and my spirit went out and encircled him in numbness and death. I knew it, I knew it but dared not breathe it to myself.”

“We are murderers,” the woman said, in a hard voice. “There is a dead man’s body between us and happiness for ever. Bid me good-bye and leave me.”

The man fell upon his knees before her, kissing her hands again and again.

“Is there no escape?” he groaned. “Is there no pardon? Is there no punishment less terrible than separation?”

“There is no punishment so just,” she said; then fell upon his shoulder weeping. “But I have seen you once more. Oh, my love, I have seen you once more!”

Then they fell to tears and embraces and long good-byes; and she, feeling him depart, slid upon the ground, her face amid the fern, crying, “Malachy! Malachy! Malachy!” as one cries upon the dead.