

# **A Lesson in Pets**

by

**Bram Stoker**

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'Once before, I spent some time with the Company in a saloon which was not altogether ideal.

'Oh, do tell us about it,' said the Leading Lady. 'We have hours at least to spend here, and it will help to pass the time.'

'Hear! hear!' came from the rest of the Company, who at least always seemed to like to hear the Manager speak. The Manager rose and bowed with his hand on his heart as though before the curtain, sat down again, and began:

'It was a good many years ago - about ten, I should think - when I had out the No 1 Company of "Revelations of Society". Some of you will remember the piece. It had a long run both in town and country.'

'I know it well,' said the Heavy Father. 'When I was a Leading Juvenile I played Geoffroi D'Almontiere, the French villain, in the Smalls in old George Bucknill's Company, with Evangeline Destrude as Lady Margaret Skeffington. A ripping good piece it was, too. I often wonder that someone doesn't revive it. It's worth a dozen of these namby-pamby - rot-gut-problem -'

'Hush! hush!' came the universal interruption, and the growing indignation of the speaker calmed down. The Manager went on:

'That time we had an eruption of dogs.'

'Of what's?'

'How?'

'Of dogs?'

'How that time?'

'Oh, do explain!' from the Company. The Manager resumed:

'Of dogs, and other things. But I had better begin at the beginning. On the previous tour I had out "The Lesson of the Cross", and as we were out to rake in all the goody-goodies, I thought it best to have an ostensibly moral tone about the whole outfit. So I picked them out on purpose for family reasons. There were with us none but married folk, and no matter how old and ugly the women were, I knew they'd pass muster with the outside crowd that we were catering for. But I did not quite expect what would happen. Every one of them brought children. I wouldn't have minded so much if they had brought the bigger ones that could have gone on to swell the crowds. I'd have paid their fares for them, too. But they only took babies and little kiddies that needed someone to look after them all the time. The number of young nursemaids and slips of girls from the workhouse and institutions that we had with us you wouldn't credit. When I got down to the station and saw the train that the Inspector pointed out as my special, I could not believe my eyes. There was hardly a window that hadn't a baby being held out of it, and the platform was full of old women and children all crowing, laughing, and crying and snapping

their fingers and wiping their eyes and waving pocket-handkerchiefs. Somehow the crowd outside had tumbled to it, and it being Sunday afternoon, they kept pouring in and guying the whole outfit. I could do nothing then but get into my own compartment and pull down the blind, and pray that we might get away on time.

'When we got to Manchester, where we opened, there was the usual Sunday crowd to see the actors. When we came sliding round the curve of the Exchange I looked out, and saw with pleasure the public anxiety to catch the first glimpse of the celebrated "Lesson of the Cross" Company, as they had it well displayed on our bills. But I saw run along all the faces in the line, just as you see a breeze sweep over a cornfield, a look of wonder; and then a white flash as the teeth of every man, woman, and child became open with a grin. I looked back, and there again was that infernal row of babies being dandled in front of the windows. The crowd began to cheer; I waited till they closed round the babies, and then I bolted for my hotel.

'It was the same thing over and over again all through that tour. Every place at which we arrived or from which we went away had the same crowd; and we went and came in howls of laughter. I wouldn't have minded so much if it did us any good; but somehow it only disappointed a lot of people who came to the play to see the crowd of babies, and wanted their money back when they found they weren't on. I spoke to some of the Company quietly as to whether they couldn't manage to send some of the young 'uns home; but they all told me that domestic arrangements were complete, and that they couldn't change them. The only fun I had was with one young couple who I knew were only just married. They had with them a little girl about three years old, whom they had dressed up as a boy. When I remonstrated with them they frankly told me that as all the others had children with them they thought it would look too conspicuous without, and so they had hired the child from a poor relation, and were responsible for it for the tour. This made me laugh, and I could say no more.

'Then there was another drawback from all the children; there wasn't an infant epidemic within a hundred miles of us that some of them didn't get - measles, whooping-cough, chicken-pock, mumps, ringworm - the whole lot of them, till the train not only looked like a creche, but smelt like a baby-farm and a hospital in one. Why, if you will believe me, during the year that I toured that blessed Company - and we had a mighty prosperous time of it, take it for all in all - the entire railway system of England was strewn with feeding-bottles and rusks.'

'Oh, Mr Benville Nonplusser, how can you?' remonstrated the First Old Woman. The Manager went on:

'Just before the end of the tour I got all the Company together, and told them that never again would I allow a baby to be taken on any tour of mine; at all events, in my special trains. And that resolution I've kept from that day to this.

'Well, the next tour we went on was very different. It was, as I said, with the "Revelations of Society", and, of course, the cast was quite different. We wanted to get a sort of toney, upper-crust effect; so I got a lot of society amateurs to walk on. The big parts were, of course, done by good people, but all the small ones were done by swells. It wasn't altogether a pleasant time, for there was no end to the jealousies. The society amateurs were, as usual, more theatrical than the theatricals; the airs that some of them gave themselves would make you laugh. This put up the backs of our own crowd - and they got their shirts out, I can tell you. At first I tried to keep the peace, for these swell supers were mighty good and just what we wanted in the play; but after a bit it got to a regular division of camps, and I found that whatever I did must be wrong. Whatever one got or did they all wanted, and nothing was allowed to pass that gave even a momentary advantage or distinction to any of the crowd. By-and-by I began to have to put my foot down, but every time I did so there was a kick somewhere; so I had to be careful lest I should have no one at all to play the piece.

'I seemed never to be able to get an hour's rest from some of the jealousies that were constantly springing up. If I could have managed to forestall any of them it would have been easy enough, but the worst of it all was that they were perpetually breaking out in a new place; and it was only when it was too late to do anything to prevent a row that I came to know the cause of the one then on.

'Having forbidden babies on the former tour, I did not think it was necessary to forbid anything else; and the consequence was that I suddenly found that we had broken out in an eruption of Pets. My Leading Lady then, Miss Flora Montessor, who had been with me on seven tours and was an established favourite all over the Provinces, had a little toy wheaten terrier that she had taken with her everywhere since ever she had been with me. Often other members had asked my Acting Manager if they too might bring dogs; but he had always put them off, telling them that the railway people didn't allow it, and that it would be better not to press the matter, as Miss Montessor from her position was a privileged person. This had

always been enough with the regular Company, but the new lot had all of them got pets of some kind, and after the first journey, when their attention had been called to the irregularity, they simply produced dog-tickets, and said they would pay for them themselves. That was enough for the other lot, and before the next journey came there wasn't a soul in the whole crowd but had a pet of some kind. Of course, they were mostly dogs - and a queer lot they were, from the tiniest kind of toy up to the biggest sort of mastiff. The railway people weren't ready for them - it would have taken a new kind of van for them all - and I wasn't ready for them either; so I said nothing then. The following Sunday I got them all together, and told them that after that journey I was afraid I could not permit the thing to go on. The station was then like a dog-show, and I could hardly hear myself speak for the barking and yelping and howling. There were mastiffs and St Bernards, and collies and poodles and terriers and bull-dogs and Skyes, and King Charleys and dachshunds and turnspits - every kind of odd illustration of the family of the canine world. One man had got a cat with a silver collar, and led it by a string; another had a tame frog; and several had squirrels, white mice, rabbits, rats, a canary in a cage, and a tame duck. Our Second Low Comedy Merchant had got a young pig, but it got away at the station, and he hadn't time to follow it up. When I spoke to the Company they were silent, and they all held up their dog-tickets - all except Miss Flora Montessor, who said quietly:

"You gave me leave years ago to bring my little dog."

'Well, I saw that nothing could be done then except with the kind of row that I didn't want. So I went to my own compartment to think the matter over.

'I soon came to the conclusion that an object-lesson of some kind was required; and then a bright idea struck me:

"I should get a pet myself."

'We were then bound for Liverpool, and early in the week I slipped down to my old friend Ross, the animal importer, to consult with him. In my early days I had had to do with a circus, and I thought that on this occasion I might turn my knowledge to account. He was out, so I asked one of the men if he could recommend me some sort of pet that wouldn't be pleasant for a nervous person to travel with. He wasn't a humorous man, and at once suggested a tiger. "We have a lovely full-grown one," he said, "just in from Bombay. He's as savage as they make 'em. We have to keep him in a place by himself, for when we put him 'in a room with any of the others, he terrifies them so that they

are like to quit in a body."

'I thought this cure might be too drastic, and I didn't want to close my tour in a cemetery or a gaol, so I suggested something milder. He tried me with pumas, leopards, crocodiles, wolves, bears, gorillas, and even with a young elephant; but none of them seemed as if it would suit. Just then Ross himself came in, and took me off to see something new.

"Just come in," he said; "three ton of boa-constrictor from Surinam. The finest lot I've ever come across." When I looked at them, although my early training had somewhat accustomed me to such matters, I felt a little uneasy. There they lay in cases like melonbeds, with nothing over them but a glass frame, with not even a hasp to hold it down. A great slimy, many-coloured mass all folded about and coiled up and down and round and round; - except for a head sticking out here and there one would have thought that it was all one big reptile. Ross saw me move a little, so he said, to reassure me:

"You needn't be skeered. This weather they're half torpid. It's pretty cold now, and even if the heat were to get at them they wouldn't wake up." I didn't like them, all the same, for whenever one of them would give a gulp, swallowing whatever food he was on at the moment - a rat or a rabbit or what not - the whole mass would stir and heave and writhe a little. I thought how nice a lot of them would look amongst my crowd; so there and then I agreed with Ross to hire a lot of them for the next journey. One of his men was to come down with my workmen to Carlisle, whither we were bound, to take them back again.

'I arranged with the railway company to have for that journey one of their large excursion saloons, so that all the members of the Company would have to travel together instead of going into separate compartments grouped in parties. When they gathered at the station none of them were satisfied. There was, however, no overt grumbling. I had casually mentioned, and the word had gone round, that I was coming with them myself, and had prepared a treat for them. That they evidently expected something in the way of a picnic was manifested by the frequent inquiries of some of them from the porters and the Baggage Master as to whether my personal luggage had arrived. I had carefully arranged with Ross's people that my contribution was not to be brought till the last moment, and I had privately tipped the Guard and asked him to be ready for an immediate start after its arrival. The special train had been scheduled for a quick run, and was not to stop between Liverpool and Carlisle.

'As the starting time drew near, the Company took their places

as they had secured them in the saloon, the first comers getting to the furthest ends. The carriage became by a sort of natural selection divided into two camps. The dogs belonging to either side were in the centre. When "all aboard" had been called out by my Acting Manager after his usual custom, the last of the Company took their places. Then a heavy truck came quickly along the platform, surrounded by several men. It contained two great boxes with unfastened lids, and as there were many hands available these were quickly lifted into the saloon. One was placed opposite the door on the off-side of the carriage, and the other put just inside the door of entry, which it blocked.

'Then the door was slammed and locked; the Guard's whistle sounded, and we were off.

I needn't tell you that all this time the dogs were barking and howling for all they were worth, and some of them were only held back by their owners from flying at each other. The cat had taken refuge on a hat-rack, and stood growling, with her tail thickened and lashing about. The frog sat complacently in its box beside its master, and the rats and mice were nowhere to be seen in their cages. When the baskets came in some of the dogs cowered down and shivered, whilst others barked fiercely and could hardly be held back. I got out my Sunday paper and began to read quietly, awaiting developments.

'For a while the angry dogs kept up their clamour, and one of them, the mastiff, became almost unmanageable. His master called out to me:

"I can't hold him much longer. There must be something in that box that upsets him."

"Indeed!" I said, and went on reading. Then one or two of the Company began to get alarmed; one of them came over and looked curiously at the box, bent close and sniffed suspiciously, and drew back. This whetted the curiosity of others, and several more came around and bent down and sniffed. Then they began to whisper amongst themselves, and one of them asked me point-blank:

"Mr Benville Nonplusser, what is in that box?"

"Only some pets of mine," I answered, without looking up from my paper.

"Very nasty pets, whatever they are," she answered tartly. "They smell very nasty." To which I replied:

"We all have our fancies, my dear. You have yours and I have mine; and since all you belonging to this Company have your pets with you, I have determined to establish some of mine. You'll doubtless grow to like them in time. In fact, you'd better begin, for they are likely to be with you every journey henceforth."

"May we look?" asked one of the young men. I nodded acquiescence, and as he stooped to lift the lid the rest gathered round - all except the man with the mastiff, who had his hands full with that clamorous beast. The young man raised the lid, and as he saw what was within, threw it back as he recoiled, so that it fell over, leaving the whole interior exposed. Then the crowd drew back with a shudder, and some of the women began to scream. I was afraid that they might attract attention, as we were then nearing a station, so I said quietly:

"You had better be as quiet as you can. Nothing irritates serpents so much as noise. They think it is their opportunity for seeking prey!" This bold statement seemed to be verified by the fact that some of the boa-constrictors sleepily raised their heads with a faint hissing. Whereupon the crowd simply tumbled over each other in their efforts to reach the further corners of the saloon. By this time the man with the mastiff was becoming exhausted by his struggling with the powerful animal. As I wished to push home my lesson, I said:

"You had better keep those dogs quiet. If you don't, I shall not answer for the consequences. If that mastiff manages to attack the serpents, as he is trying to, they will spring out and fight, and then -" I was silent, for at such a point silence is the true eloquence. The fear of all was manifested by their blanched faces and trembling forms.

"I'm afraid I can't hold him any longer!" gasped out the man.

"Then," said I, "some of your companions who have dogs also should try to help you. If not, it will be too late!" So several others came, and by the aid of their rug-straps they managed to tie the brute securely to a leg of the bench. Seeing that they were nearly all half-paralysed with fright, I lifted the lid to the top of the box again; at which they seemed to breathe more freely. When they saw me actually sitting on the box, something like a far-off smile began to glow on the countenances of some of them. I kept urging them to keep the animals quiet; and as this was a never-ceasing work, they had something to occupy them.



'I was a little nervous myself at first, and had any of the boa-constrictors knocked his head against the lid of the box I should have made a jump away. However, as they remained absolutely tranquil, my own courage grew.

'And so some hours passed, with occasional episodes, such as when some one of the many pets would make a disturbance. The singing of the canary, for instance, was resisted with angry curses. But the vials of the wrath of all were emptied forth at its owner when the hitherto silent duck began its homely song, "Quack, quack!"

"Will you keep that blasted brute quiet?" came an angry whisper from the worn-out owner of the mastiff. Upon which a good many of those on whom time had had a quieting effect smiled.

'When my watch told me that we were within a short distance of Carlisle, I stood upon the box and made a little speech:

"Ladies and Gentlemen, I trust that the episode of to-day, unpleasant though it may have been, will not be ultimately without beneficial effect. You have learned that each one of you owes something to the general good, and that the selfish pursuance of your own pleasure in small ways has sooner or later to be accounted for. When I remonstrated with each of you as to this animal business, you chose to take your own way, and even went so far as to reconcile your personal and sectional jealousies in order to unite against me. I therefore thought that I would bring the difficulty home to you in a striking way! Have I done so?"

'For a while there was silence; and then a smile and a faint affirmative answer here and there, so I went on:

"Now I hope you will all take it in as good part as I have taken all that went before. Anyhow, my mind is made up. Pets shall be included with babies in the Index Expurgatorius of our tour. In the meantime, for the remainder of this tour, if anyone else brings pets, so shall I; and I think you know that I know how to choose my own. Anyone objecting to this can cancel the engagement right here. Has anyone got anything to say?" Some shrugged their shoulders, but all were silent; and I knew that my victory was complete. As I was stepping down, however, I caught Miss Montessor's eye as tearfully she looked at me and then at her little dog, so I added:

"This does not apply to Miss Montessor, who years ago had permission to take her dog. I shall certainly not deprive her of that privilege now."

'And not a soul objected.'

'Next!' said the Acting Manager, Mr Wragge, who, being by the needs of his calling a pushful person, usually took such prominent responsibilities as were unallotted or unattached, and who in the present instance had become by a sort of natural selection, manifested by tacit consent of the Company, Master of the Ceremonies.

There was dead silence, for the seance was as yet so young that no one seemed to wish to be put forward. The keen-eyed MC recognised the situation at a glance, and, turning to the Leading Lady on the Manager's left, said:

'You'll have to go on next, Miss Venables. The turn will travel with the wine - if we had any for it to travel with.' The hint was not lost on the First Low Comedian, who promptly unscrewed the top of his flask and gallantly pushed it, together with a tumbler and the water-bottle, in front of the blushing girl. 'Here is the wine,' he said; 'vin du pays.' She made a gentle motion of protest, but the Manager poured a small portion of whiskey in the glass, together with a fair supply of water. She acknowledged the courtesy with a pretty little bow, and then turned an appealing eye round the Company. 'I will with pleasure do what I can for the public good,' she said, 'but I am really and truly at a loss to know what to tell. My life has not yet been a very adventurous one, and I don't know anything worth telling that has ever happened to myself.'

One of the Young Gentlemen, who secretly admired her from afar, blurted out:

'I know something which would interest us all.'

'What is that?' asked the MC quickly. The Young Man blushed and stammered as he answered, looking apprehensively at the object of his devotion, who gazed at him inquiringly with bent brows:

'It was some joke - something - I don't know what it was - that they had in the "Her Grace the Blanchisseuse" Company just before I joined them. Someone had sworn them all to secrecy, so no one would tell me why it was that they always spoke of Miss Venables as "Coggins's Property."'

The girl laughed merrily. 'Oh, I did that. It was too funny

altogether. I didn't mind it myself; but there was another; poor Coggins, who was an excellent fellow, took to heart so much the perpetual chaff of the Company that he sent in his resignation. I knew that he had a wife and family, and would not leave a good situation unless he was really hurt; so I made a personal request to everyone, and they all promised not to tell how the name came to be. But I am not bound, so if you like I will tell you; for the thing is all over long ago, and Coggins is a prosperous builder in the Midlands'

'Hear! hear!' came from all, for their expectations were aroused. So the Leading Lady began: