

Androcles and the Lion

by

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Prologue

Overture; forest sounds, roaring of lions, Christian hymn faintly.

A jungle path. A lion's roar, a melancholy suffering roar, comes from the jungle. It is repeated nearer. The lion limps from the jungle on three legs, holding up his right forepaw, in which a huge thorn sticks. He sits down and contemplates it. He licks it. He shakes it. He tries to extract it by scraping it along the ground, and hurts himself worse. He roars piteously. He licks it again. Tears drop from his eyes. He limps painfully off the path and lies down under the trees, exhausted with pain. Heaving a long sigh, like wind in a trombone, he goes to sleep.

Androcles and his wife Megaera come along the path. He is a small, thin, ridiculous little man who might be any age from thirty to fifty-five. He has sandy hair, watery compassionate blue eyes, sensitive nostrils, and a very presentable forehead; but his good points go no further; his arms and legs and back, though wiry of their kind, look shrivelled and starved. He carries a big bundle, is very poorly clad, and seems tired and hungry.

His wife is a rather handsome pampered slattern, well fed and in the prime of life. She has nothing to carry, and has a stout stick to help her along.

MEGAERA (suddenly throwing down her stick) I won't go another step.

ANDROCLES (pleading wearily) Oh, not again, dear. What's the good of stopping every two miles and saying you won't go another step? We must get on to the next village before night. There are wild beasts in this wood: lions, they say.

MEGAERA. I don't believe a word of it. You are always threatening me with wild beasts to make me walk the very soul out of my body when I can hardly drag one foot before another. We haven't seen a single lion yet.

ANDROCLES. Well, dear, do you want to see one?

MEGAERA (tearing the bundle from his back) You cruel beast, you don't care how tired I am, or what becomes of me (she throws the bundle on the ground): always thinking of yourself. Self! self! self! always yourself! (She sits down on the bundle).

ANDROCLES (sitting down sadly on the ground with his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands) We all have to think of ourselves occasionally, dear.

MEGAERA. A man ought to think of his wife sometimes.

ANDROCLES. He can't always help it, dear. You make me think of you a good deal. Not that I blame you.

MEGAERA. Blame me! I should think not indeed. Is it my fault that I'm married to you?

ANDROCLES. No, dear: that is my fault.

MEGAERA. That's a nice thing to say to me. Aren't you happy with me?

ANDROCLES. I don't complain, my love.

MEGAERA. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.

ANDROCLES. I am, my dear.

MEGAERA. You're not: you glory in it.

ANDROCLES. In what, darling?

MEGAERA. In everything. In making me a slave, and making yourself a laughing-stock. Its not fair. You get me the name of being a shrew with your meek ways, always talking as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth. And just because I look a big strong woman, and because I'm good-hearted and a bit hasty, and because you're always driving me to do things I'm sorry for afterwards, people say "Poor man: what a life his wife leads him!" Oh, if they only knew! And you think I don't know. But I do, I do, (screaming) I do.

ANDROCLES. Yes, my dear: I know you do.

MEGAERA. Then why don't you treat me properly and be a good husband to me?

ANDROCLES. What can I do, my dear?

MEGAERA. What can you do! You can return to your duty, and come back to your home and your friends, and sacrifice to the gods as all respectable people do, instead of having us hunted out of house and home for being dirty, disreputable, blaspheming atheists.

ANDROCLES. I'm not an atheist, dear: I am a Christian.

MEGAERA. Well, isn't that the same thing, only ten times worse? Everybody knows that the Christians are the very lowest of the low.

ANDROCLES. Just like us, dear.

MEGAERA. Speak for yourself. Don't you dare to compare me to common people. My father owned his own public-house; and sorrowful was the day for me when you first came drinking in our bar.

ANDROCLES. I confess I was addicted to it, dear. But I gave it up when I became a Christian.

MEGAERA. You'd much better have remained a drunkard. I can forgive a man being addicted to drink: its only natural; and I don't deny I like a drop myself sometimes. What I can't stand is your being addicted to Christianity. And what's worse again, your being addicted to animals. How is any woman to keep her house clean when you bring in every stray cat and lost cur and lame duck in the whole countryside? You took the bread out of my mouth to feed them: you know you did: don't attempt to deny it.

ANDROCLES. Only when they were hungry and you were getting too stout, dearie.

MEGAERA. Yes, insult me, do. (Rising) Oh! I won't bear it another moment. You used to sit and talk to those dumb brute beasts for hours, when you hadn't a word for me.

ANDROCLES. They never answered back, darling. (He rises and again shoulders the bundle).

MEGAERA. Well, if you're fonder of animals than of your own wife, you can live with them here in the jungle. I've had enough of them and enough of you. I'm going back. I'm going home.

ANDROCLES (barring the way back) No, dearie: don't take on like that. We can't go back. We've sold everything: we should starve; and I should be sent to Rome and thrown to the lions--

MEGAERA. Serve you right! I wish the lions joy of you. (Screaming) Are you going to get out of my way and let me go home?

ANDROCLES. No, dear--

MEGAERA. Then I'll make my way through the forest; and when I'm eaten by the wild beasts you'll know what a wife you've lost. (She dashes into the jungle and nearly falls over the sleeping lion). Oh! Oh! Andy! Andy! (She totters back and collapses into the arms of Androcles, who, crushed by her weight, falls on his bundle).

ANDROCLES (extracting himself from beneath her and slapping her hands in great anxiety) What is it, my precious, my pet? What's the matter? (He raises her head. Speechless with terror, she points in the direction of the sleeping lion. He steals cautiously towards the spot indicated by Megaera. She rises with an effort and totters after him).

MEGAERA. No, Andy: you'll be killed. Come back.

The lion utters a long snoring sigh. Androcles sees the lion and recoils fainting into the arms of Megaera, who falls back on the bundle. They roll apart and lie staring in terror at one another. The lion is heard groaning heavily in the jungle.

ANDROCLES (whispering) Did you see? A lion.

MEGAERA (despairing) The gods have sent him to punish us because you're a Christian. Take me away, Andy. Save me.

ANDROCLES (rising) Meggy: there's one chance for you. It'll take him pretty nigh twenty minutes to eat me (I'm rather stringy and tough) and you can escape in less time than that.

MEGAERA. Oh, don't talk about eating. (The lion rises with a great groan and limps towards them). Oh! (She faints).

ANDROCLES (quaking, but keeping between the lion and Megaera) Don't you come near my wife, do you hear? (The lion groans. Androcles can hardly stand for trembling). Meggy: run. Run for your life. If I take my eye off him, its all up. (The lion holds up his wounded paw and flaps it piteously before Androcles). Oh, he's lame, poor old chap! He's got a thorn in his paw. A frightfully big thorn. (Full of sympathy) Oh, poor old man! Did um get an awful thorn into um's tootsums wootsums? Has it made um too sick to eat a nice little Christian man for um's breakfast? Oh, a nice little Christian man will get um's thorn out for um; and then um shall eat the nice Christian man and the nice Christian man's nice big tender wifey pifey. (The lion responds by moans of self-pity). Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. Now, now (taking the paw in his hand) um is not to bite and not to scratch, not even if it hurts a very, very little. Now make velvet paws. That's right. (He pulls gingerly at the thorn. The lion, with an angry yell of pain, jerks back his paw so abruptly that Androcles is thrown on his back). Steadeeee! Oh, did the nasty cruel little Christian man hurt the sore paw? (The lion moans assentingly but apologetically). Well, one more little pull and it will be all over. Just one little, little, little pull; and then um will live happily ever after. (He gives the thorn another pull. The lion roars and snaps his jaws with a terrifying clash). Oh, mustn't frighten um's good kind doctor, um's affectionate nurse. That didn't hurt at all: not a bit. Just one more. Just to show how the brave big lion can bear pain, not like the little crybaby Christian man. Oopsh! (The thorn comes out. The lion yells with pain, and shakes his paw wildly). That's it! (Holding up the thorn). Now it's out. Now lick um's paw to take away the nasty inflammation. See? (He licks his own hand. The lion nods intelligently and licks his paw industriously). Clever little lion-piony! Understands um's dear old friend Andy Wandy. (The lion licks his face). Yes, kissums Andy Wandy. (The lion, wagging his tail violently, rises on his hind legs and embraces Androcles, who makes a wry face and cries) Velvet paws! Velvet paws! (The lion draws in his claws). That's right. (He embraces the lion, who finally takes the end of his tail in one paw, places that tight around Androcles' waist, resting it on his hip. Androcles takes the other paw in his hand, stretches out his arm, and the two waltz rapturously round and round and finally away through the jungle).

MEGAERA (who has revived during the waltz) Oh, you coward, you haven't danced with me for years; and now you go off dancing with a great brute beast that you haven't known for ten minutes and that wants to eat your own wife. Coward! Coward! Coward! (She rushes off after them into the jungle).

ACT I

Evening. The end of three converging roads to Rome. Three triumphal arches span them where they debouch on a square at the gate of the city. Looking north through the arches one can see the campagna threaded by the three long dusty tracks. On the east and west sides of the square are long stone benches. An old beggar sits on the east side of the square, his bowl at his feet. Through the eastern arch a squad of Roman soldiers tramps along escorting a batch of Christian prisoners of both sexes and all ages, among them one Lavinia, a goodlooking resolute young woman, apparently of higher social standing than her fellow-prisoners. A centurion, carrying his vinewood cudgel, trudges alongside the squad, on its right, in command of it. All are tired and dusty; but the soldiers are dogged and indifferent, the Christians light-hearted and determined to treat their hardships as a joke and encourage one another.

A bugle is heard far behind on the road, where the rest of the cohort is following.

CENTURION (stopping) Halt! Orders from the Captain. (They halt and wait). Now then, you Christians, none of your larks. The captain's coming. Mind you behave yourselves. No singing. Look respectful. Look serious, if you're capable of it. See that big building over there? That's the Coliseum. That's where you'll be thrown to the lions or set to fight the gladiators presently. Think of that; and it'll help you to behave properly before the captain. (The Captain arrives). Attention! Salute! (The soldiers salute).

A CHRISTIAN (cheerfully) God bless you, Captain.

THE CENTURION (scandalised) Silence!

The Captain, a patrician, handsome, about thirty-five, very cold and distinguished, very superior and authoritative, steps up on a stone seat at the west side of the square, behind the centurion, so as to dominate the others more effectually.

THE CAPTAIN. Centurion.

THE CENTURION. (standing at attention and saluting) Sir?

THE CAPTAIN (speaking stiffly and officially) You will remind your men, Centurion, that we are now entering Rome. You will instruct them that once inside the gates of Rome they are in the presence of the Emperor. You will make them understand that the lax discipline of the march cannot be permitted here. You will instruct them to shave every day, not every week. You will impress on them particularly that there must be an end to the profanity and blasphemy of

singing Christian hymns on the march. I have to reprimand you, Centurion, for not only allowing this, but actually doing it yourself.

THE CENTURION. The men march better, Captain.

THE CAPTAIN. No doubt. For that reason an exception is made in the case of the march called Onward Christian Soldiers. This may be sung, except when marching through the forum or within hearing of the Emperor's palace; but the words must be altered to "Throw them to the Lions."

The Christians burst into shrieks of uncontrollable laughter, to the great scandal of the Centurion.

CENTURION. Silence! Silen-n-n-n-nce! Where's your behavior? Is that the way to listen to an officer? (To the Captain) That's what we have to put up with from these Christians every day, sir. They're always laughing and joking something scandalous. They've no religion: that's how it is.

LAVINIA. But I think the Captain meant us to laugh, Centurion. It was so funny.

CENTURION. You'll find out how funny it is when you're thrown to the lions tomorrow. (To the Captain, who looks displeased) Beg pardon, Sir. (To the Christians) Silennnnce!

THE CAPTAIN. You are to instruct your men that all intimacy with Christian prisoners must now cease. The men have fallen into habits of dependence upon the prisoners, especially the female prisoners, for cooking, repairs to uniforms, writing letters, and advice in their private affairs. In a Roman soldier such dependence is inadmissible. Let me see no more of it whilst we are in the city. Further, your orders are that in addressing Christian prisoners, the manners and tone of your men must express abhorrence and contempt. Any shortcoming in this respect will be regarded as a breach of discipline.(He turns to the prisoners) Prisoners.

CENTURION (fiercely) Prisonerrrrs! Tention! Silence!

THE CAPTAIN. I call your attention, prisoners, to the fact that you may be called on to appear in the Imperial Circus at any time from tomorrow onwards according to the requirements of the managers. I may inform you that as there is a shortage of Christians just now, you may expect to be called on very soon.

LAVINIA. What will they do to us, Captain?

CENTURION. Silence!

THE CAPTAIN. The women will be conducted into the arena with the wild beasts of the Imperial Menagerie, and will suffer the consequences. The men, if of an age to bear arms, will be given weapons to defend themselves, if they choose, against the Imperial Gladiators.

LAVINIA. Captain: is there no hope that this cruel persecution--

CENTURION (shocked) Silence! Hold your tongue, there. Persecution, indeed!

THE CAPTAIN (unmoved and somewhat sardonic) Persecution is not a term applicable to the acts of the Emperor. The Emperor is the Defender of the Faith. In throwing you to the lions he will be upholding the interests of religion in Rome. If you were to throw him to the lions, that would no doubt be persecution.

The Christians again laugh heartily.

CENTURION (horrified) Silence, I tell you! Keep silence there. Did anyone ever hear the like of this?

LAVINIA. Captain: there will be nobody to appreciate your jokes when we are gone.

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