

LYDIA DREAMS

A NOVEL

BY

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Brief Notes for Novel: *Lydia Dreams...*

The novel has **four** plots.

ONE:

The character who **opens** the novel in the **Prologue** is **Valentine DelaRue**, a theatre critic, extremely disturbed and probably psychotic. His wife (**Marianna**) is dying of cancer at their Chiswick home. **DelaRue** who hardly ever lives at home has employed a companion for his wife, a dour Swedish woman called **Christina**. Part of the novel is **Christina's** story and her hatred of **Marianna's** husband **DelaRue**, who is, in fact, deeply upset by his wife's incurable illness and while watching a show in Hamburg makes a Faustian pact that he will take the life of a perfect stranger (in this case an acrobat) for **Marianna's** life and perhaps save her. So he goes to Dublin to accomplish the acrobat's death. **Christina** makes plans to go back to *Malmö* in order to visit her old Mother and middle-aged fiancé. However, because she has to stay on in the Chiswick house until **DelaRue** returns, a completely unexpected turn of events takes place, involving an unscrupulous young solicitor called Mr Jacob.

* * *

TWO:

The novel proper starts with the marriage of **Arthur Lloyd** (*Music-hall*) and **Katty King** (*Legit actress and dancer*) who were my real-life great-grandparents. This was an intermarriage of two already existing and successful theatrical families who had known each other for years. Immediately after their marriage they get ready to 'play' Dublin for a week with a brand-new Concert Party. They were the originators of this form of entertainment. The other *thesps* in the 'Party' are a mixture of fictional and real characters. It is also the portrait of a modern marriage, circa 1871 and the stresses and strains of the theatrical life and strange inner life of the characters.

* * *

THREE:

Irish Republican Brotherhood movement (called the **Fenians**) were a forerunner of the **IRA**. They were mostly based in the USA and funded from there. All the Dublin uprisings over the last two centuries were botched affairs and the ones of 1867 and 1868 no better. **DeLa Rue** uses an informer (**Mr Sinbad**) to kill the acrobat (**Laetitia**). But the police (**Sergeant Fergusson**) have knowledge of most things and are keeping close tabs on **Sinbad** and **DeLaRue**. In fact, **Laetitia** probably dies accidentally. The other acrobat **Aurelia** (her sister) has long since been dissatisfied

with her work on the 'high-wire' and longs to become an opera singer and visits the management at the unfinished Gaiety Theatre to further this aim.

* * *

FOUR:

The Fenian informer, con-man etc called Sinbad and his relationship with **Aurelia** (the acrobat) and their determination to make her a success as an opera singer and his appointment of himself as her manager.

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I aim to bring all the disparate characters and events together as the novel progresses. My own ancestors and the other 'theatricals' do not form such a major part of the novel as I'd once envisaged. However, they are nevertheless the backbone to the story.

After the Dublin setting, I envisage: London (Kensington Park), Great Yarmouth, Edinburgh and Malmo. I use a mixture of exact and vague locations.

In a way, I suppose what I am writing about is the vast differences of feeling and emotion between individuals. The incredible coincidences of life; so many different forms of love and betrayal; identity and how easy it is to lose it. A sort of non-historical novel involving how people lived and felt in the nineteenth-century and how the consequences are still affecting our lives today.

It seems to me that the problems with a construction of a novel of this type are the same as are applicable to a Picturesque Novel - a series of events with the reader asking why is one event more important than another? Will the constant leaving of one set of characters for another group be very off-putting? They will hopefully all connect eventually.

.....

August 2001

PROLOGUE - THE MIND OF A DANGEROUS MAN

A tall cantankerous-looking gentleman strode purposefully across Kensington Gardens. He was noticeable for not wearing a hat.

Last night, he had cleverly evaded the park patrols. The problem had been when a young woman had stood over him, swaying in the darkness. 'A sharp and cutting Christian night, is it not, Sir? Fancy an Angel's company. Sixpence for the company, a shilling for your dreams and half-a-crown for your pleasure?'

They had shared a bottle of brandy but she soon become a nuisance with her religiosity and wild clutching hands. He had been forced to speak plainly. 'Don't bother me with your ridiculous Deity. Your precious God is no more than a country-house butler obsessed with rules and protocol.' The young woman looked nonplussed; her face grey under the moonlight. *She reached out but he brushed her hand aside. 'Your God, greets you oh... so deferentially, folds your pathetic hopes and dreams over his arm before sweetly taking your soul between his fingers. Then asks rudely how he should announce you.'*

He was wondering how long it would take the slight mist, which hovered no more than a foot or so above the grass, to finally disappear, when a ball struck him hard in the pit of the stomach. This would have winded him but for his heavy topcoat. Some childish screams came from the trees to his left. He waited; clenching the hard rubber ball tightly in his fist. But no ragamuffins showed themselves. He threw the ball into the middle of the Round Pond then walked briskly towards the Bayswater Road.

His wife was lying at home gravely ill. But these days his long absences went unnoticed. He doubted Marianna even remembered him. Disease had rotted her brain. But it was an equal trade, for had he not contracted a virulent syphilis of the spirit? Her smell pervaded every room of the house. A home, once so full of light and laughter; with parties every Saturday night. It was about this time that he had 'filed in' his first piece for ¹'The Era'. But after very few years, he had found the parties boring and expensive; the plays he had to sit through, empty and ridiculous.

But there was somebody in that unhappy household who had noticed his dereliction. His wife's companion - a Swedish woman who would not easily forget his callous behaviour. Too bad! He supposed Marianna would die soon and that almost certainly

¹ 'The Era' was a weekly stage and music-hall, journal. It was the forerunner to 'The Stage'

he would not be there when it happened. He could safely leave everything in the hands of the capable Swedish spinster.

Seven-thirty, on that chilly first day of August, found him approaching the lanes and byways of Notting-Hill. He stopped at a dairy for breakfast. In the cramped, back-room, unshaven men sprawled morosely. By the door, there was a scruffy lad of about ten; and sitting next to him, a woman, her face obscured by a heavy scarf as if she had toothache. The boy was eating voraciously. If only they knew of his own ferocity of purpose! A red-cheeked woman served him with a bowl of steaming-hot, bread and milk. She kept glancing at his hands. Some people found the abnormal length of his fingers repulsive. He was suddenly struck by the need of a ring. Why had he not thought of it before? What better than a heavy ring. A garnet, perhaps? He required more of his hands than just elegant skin and bone. They ought to look human. He slapped a hand against the damp tiling of the wall, then stood and splayed out his other hand. 'Look at these monsters! Hands that stand out in a crowd are asking for trouble'. He called for a pot of strong tea and enquired of the nearest jewellers. The serving woman instructed him. 'And a hatter too!' He patted the woman's hips. 'Yes, a hat too, don't you think? A new hat is an absolute necessity. I cannot imagine how I've lived so long without a hat.' When the woman nervously told him that no hatter's were open on a Sunday, he banged the table with his fist, threw down a coin and left. Shouts and threats followed him out. They caused him not the slightest concern.

He was, after all, a man with a mission.

** * **

CHAPTER THE FIRST : KENSINGTON PARK

‘What a ceremony!’ His bride rushed past in her new and extraordinary Spanish costume. ‘What a *completely* funny old wedding, Arthur!’

Katty ran along the garden-path and up the stone steps to the house, then stood motionless inside the darkened porch; her back towards him - right hand outstretched as if about to pull the bell-handle. No sign of breath or movement. A perfect little statue!

As the onlookers applauded, she turned around and slowly unpinned her hat. Then holding it at arm’s length like a tambourine, she began her little Spanish dance.

Arthur put another lozenge in his mouth. A bridegroom with a *sore throat* was the stuff of comic songs.

‘My *Boléro* is *specialé* for you, dearest Arthur,’ Katty had whispered in church, squeezing his arm after the exchange of vows. ‘My frog, my own handsomest frog!’ Kissing him after his painfully croaked response. This created a considerable diversion. The vicar’s face was immensely disapproving. He did not relish a music-hall act in *his* church.

The *Boléro* became quite frenzied. Behind Arthur, friends and well-wishers clapped out the rhythm. At the wildest part - and it was amazing what she could do in the crowded space of the porch - she shouted ‘*Ole!*’ and flinging her hat high into the air, pirouetted down the steps before throwing her head back and catching it neatly between her teeth. She hobbled up to Arthur and curtsied to enthusiastic applause. ‘Don’t scold,’ she said, catching his look.

He wondered if she had turned an ankle. Dublin tomorrow, and they opened in less than a week. It was a risk to build the show so completely around her. He heard his father-in-law’s deep voice: ‘Take care, Arthur. Katty is only a *mitten* of nineteen.’

He slackened his grip on the gate and wiped his forehead. Was he a touch feverish? The early evening sun slanted over the rooftops into his eyes. His wife had disappeared into the elegant but gloomy house. Surely, he had shown *some* appreciation of her wonderful dance? It simply *had* to be taken in to the show. More guests strolled by rather the worse for wear.

‘Some wedding, Arthur! What a ‘to-do’ with poor Emmy Bishop. What a fuss! What a furore!’

Yes, the wedding had been an ordeal. *All Saints*, indeed! Poor Emmy Bishop bursting into tears, then his father-in-law bent double and screaming with his back in spasm. And as old Tom had the most thunderous voice playing Drury Lane, it was a truly, blood-curdling cry that echoed round the church.

‘Might rent a villa here myself, Arthur,’ an old friend called out. ‘They tell me ²*Mozart Wilson’s* gone on to Dublin.’

His sister-in-law gently prised his hands off the front-gate. Dear Bessie. Far too substantial for Orphelia but wonderful pathos. ‘Mozart’s setting things up at the ³*Rotunda*,’ he called out but the guests had gone on their way. She opened the gate, took his arm and walked with him to the house. ‘My sister’s a very straightforward girl, Arthur. Don’t be fooled by her *frippances*. She’s a worker. Give her a proper start and you won’t go far wrong.’ She turned up her coat collar. Not end of July weather at all. He waved her off and sang softly:

A slightly sad man
On his wedding day,
Is a sight too sad to see...
So, in a trice, he smiled, and said:

He would work it up on the boat-train tomorrow. He pushed against the front-door. Upstairs, Katty was singing:

For, she said, you’ve hardly
Ever seen me since the engagement

On the sideboard, Mrs Halloran had laid out an extensive supper. Arthur gave a cursory look at the wedding-cards on the mantel-piece, then smothered a leg of chicken in mustard. His wife called down that she was changing. Was not a wedding-day worse than a first night! He checked the pantry and found two bottles of champagne. It had become dark again, another squall on the way. He returned to the drawing-room and sat at the long oak table. Retrieved his notes for the Dublin programme... What did Katty mean when she’d asked him outside the church - Did

² Arthur’s pianist and accompanist.

³ The Rotunda Hospital, Dublin was founded in 1745. It was the first Maternity or ‘Lying-In’ hospital in Europe. In order to bring in revenue it had within its precincts an entertainment complex known as The Round Rooms. Some of this remains today as the Ambassador Cinema/Gate Theatre.

he know anything about parachutes? What confounded things were parachutes? Still, the word had a certain ring to it...

Katty stood just inside the doorway, wriggling a stockinged foot, 'Aren't I a shocker, Arthur? Aren't I a truly, shocking wife to be landed with?'

He laughed, gathered her into his arms and swung her up on to the table. 'Now, let's have a good look at you. A really good look.'

'Arthur! People can see in from the street! Gawkers, gapers and peepers, don't you know! And please do leave hold of my ankles otherwise I shall fall headlong into your arms and wouldn't that be forward!'

He drew the curtains and lit the lamp. Then circling around the table, imitated her father's best Drury Lane manner, thundering:

"Ecstasy? My pulse as yours doth
Temperately keep time, and makes
As healthful music...
Bring me to the test!"

'Admit it's very close to your father. Tom at his best, I think. "Bring me to the test!" Wait, I can give you the moment when Hamlet sees his...'

'You beast!' she screamed, jumping off the table. 'It's not funny. Not *amusing* at all!'

'My fault,' he shouted, following her into the garden, where she stood with her back towards him. She would not turn round. He handed her his bride-groom's handkerchief. 'I'm sorry, I should not have teased you.'

She spoke, softly. 'I'm so worried about papa. I fear his back will give out altogether...' She slid round to face him. 'His pain is quite dreadful.' Arthur held her close. The red rose in her black, shiny hair brushed his mouth. She reached up, her face wet and glowing, her eyes on fire. 'Kiss Katty!' she whispered.

When they were back in the front-room, he asked what was the opinion of her father's doctor. 'Oh, sea air, rest... the usual stupidities.' She laughed. 'I doubt if father's ever walked the length of a promenade anywhere. What he does know all about are cold theatres, timetables and bookies-dens.'

Arthur lowered his wife into the nearest armchair. 'My dear... Dublin will *go* for you.' She drew him down beside her. 'I don't fear Dublin,' she said, slightly put out. 'No, I do not fear Dublin at all. Father's always been well received and I'm not totally unknown. Do you remember the first time you came backstage to see Harry and me?' Arthur spoke softly. 'Indeed, I do. You were such a pretty little ⁴*Duo*,' he sighed,

'Your poor, dear brother...'

Katty looked up. 'Harry was only twenty, Arthur... We'd been so close.'

'So good-looking and talented. Everyone was shocked.'

'I loved him. And we were *more* than a pretty, little *Duo*, as you put it.'

They turned away from each other, slightly embarrassed, both focusing on the mantelpiece clock under its glass-dome. Katty said it reminded her of a favourite song of his...

"Just by the 'Angel' at Islington,
Close by the clock that is always wrong..."

'And I'm sorry I risked my ankle.'

'No matter. As I always say: nothing attempted, nothing gained. And you made quite a diversion. As for beginnings... For me it was playing Plymouth when I was fourteen. Sometimes, I feel I've been on the go ever since.'

'You have, Arthur,' she replied, slipping her arms around him. 'And I shall make it my business to see that you work and *rest*.'

Supper was eaten in companionable silence. Katty stitching her costume and Arthur going through his notes. Once, he looked up to ask her opinion on the 'Programme' and stopped when he saw her staring into the distant corner of the room. Almost immediately she turned and smiled, 'I think the 'Colleen' sketch is too simplified. Let us make the bully stronger.' Arthur was amazed. This was the very question he had framed.

⁴ Katty King and her brother Harry performed the *Irish Duettists and Dancers* 'Act' all over Great Britain. Katty was twelve year's old at the start. Their 'act' finished with the death of her brother in 1870.

‘What are you staring at so intently?’ he asked.

‘Fruit.’

‘I see no fruit.’

‘Tangerines!’ she said, sharply. ‘In the cut-glass bowl!’

‘Where?’

‘Behind that...’

‘Ah, I see them! Under the rosewood table.’ Arthur leant forward, upsetting his ‘Programme Notes’. ‘But why is the bowl of fruit *on* the rug?’

Katty slipped on her shoes; calling back as she went into the garden: ‘Mrs Halloran no doubt forgot to put it back after dusting. *Really*, Arthur.’

After about ten-minutes, she returned a bit put out that nothing was growing; just bare soil. Arthur answered that they were absolutely the newest villas in town but he had spied in next-door’s garden - a healthy specimen of a lavender bush. Katty replied that she had noticed no such thing, but the house was nice and much better than her poky digs in Holloway. And how good of his Edinburgh friends to let them stay the night. Later, she helped him with the ‘Programme’ and became very excited about her ‘Billing’. They lit every lamp and opened more champagne. Katty undid the rose from her hair and held the stem between her teeth. ‘If you can take it out of my mouth without scratching yourself on a thorn... our happiness will be everlasting. No, eyes shut, please!’ Arthur tried and kept getting mouthfuls of petals. ‘My, what a business you made of that!’ she said, after Arthur had at length fastened his teeth on the stem and successfully withdrawn it. He went to the piano. ‘And if you keep smiling at me, Arthur, I shall have to sing. And you know what a small, everyday voice I have!’

Arthur rattled off an *Intro* and before they knew it they were really going something...

“What a completely, funny old wedding...

‘Kensington Park, Kensington Park,
So pleasant, so shady, so *dark!*”

They laughed and hugged one another. Arthur struck up a polka. Then a waltz which Katty danced cleverly around the furniture. After that, a mazurka, a quadrille...

‘The church of *All Saint’s*... could do with a paint...’

As the evening wore on, they decided to have a cordial. Declaring that champagne, though nice, was too much of a fizz! About ten o’clock, Arthur asked for a little time to work up his latest song. And of course, he was expecting old ⁵Henry D’Alcorn with the latest accounts. ‘We are more than solvent, my dear, but depending on the ‘figures’ we shall see if the show can afford the crimson damask curtains you wanted, not to mention our baritone’s heavy remuneration. Mind you, I doubt Henry will come on such a wretched night.’

At the door, Katty smiled, ‘When we are settled... when our first born... I mean... where shall we live?’

Arthur considered. ‘I thought, Chiswick. The river, the country, but near enough to town.’ Katty reflected, ‘Chiswick is lovely...’ her hand went to her mouth, yawning. ‘You know, Arthur, every time you speak... you sound like a song. “The river, the country, but near enough to town.” Or you could say: “Far enough out and far enough in.”’

Arthur worked. It was nearly midnight. Rain lashed the windows. He banked up the fire and took another draught of cordial. It certainly eased his throat wonderfully. He scribbled some notes for Katty’s ‘*Statue Act*’.

The Wife Left at Home... Illness...

Death of the Little One... Despair...

News of Husband’s Homecoming... Delay...

The Husband’s Return... Joyful Reunion...

He wanted her to work on a more ambitious programme - with say, twelve different *poses* and to practise the speed work in between her ‘*freezes*.’ It was a lot to ask, what with her work in the other sketches.

The fire crackled in the hearth. The comic sketches must be cut to no more than fifteen-minutes each... Just one more sip of the cordial and he would go upstairs, accounts or no accounts.

⁵ His General Manager.

He was startled by a cold touch on his forehead. His eyes had become almost too heavy to keep open. From the warm glow of the fireplace, there came a steady humming sound. 'Parachutes,' he mumbled. From a long way off, a woman's voice: 'Some fool of a man... some fool of a man...'

A large coal caused a sudden flare up. And there he was - standing in the porch of *All Saint's*, Church. Rushing from their 'Growlers', the guests called out their greetings. Inside, the church door was banging in the blustery weather until Fred Foster had the good sense to lean against it. Only, it was soon discovered that Fred Foster was extremely drunk and ogling a pale young woman sitting by herself in the back row. Without warning, Fred Foster collapsed in a heap which meant that latecomers found themselves unable to get inside the church without a great deal of pushing and banging on the door. Then, poor Emmy Bishop running down the aisle, sobbing uncontrollably. Arthur thought he had never seen her so stunning. Her colour was up as she pulled off hat and gloves and threw them onto the floor. There were gasps from the congregation as she trampled on her hat. But when she started using that dreadful *language* ... she had to be got out. This involved a most unseemly chase around the church until, Mr Light, the vicar, like some Old Testament prophet, barred her way, waving a prayer-book high above her head. This quietened her down and she was led docilely enough from the church and told to repair to the 'Pelican' where all would soon join her. Then everyone settled back in their seats and the wedding-march started up. The bride and father were already on their dignified processional down the aisle... (Arthur could see how stiffly his father-in-law moved) when suddenly old Tom snatched his arm away from the bride and clutching his back like a man possessed, bent over double, gasping with pain.

Everyone laughing. Believing it was *entertainment*! Was old Tom not giving just the finest of all *Quasimodo's* down the Adelphi?

Katty was beside herself, screaming for her sister... the two girls dragging their father to a side-chapel and with considerable difficulty, getting him to lie flat. To *straighten* out!

'Cushions!' shouted the congregation. 'Cushions everyone for Tom King!' Instantly, from every part of the church, cushions were thrown. Along the pews, over their heads, some were even booted into the air by some drunken members of the congregation, one hitting the remonstrating vicar... until Katty implored them that half-a-dozen were more than adequate and *quiet please*! Suddenly, a particularly bad spasm hit her father - and there was Katty on her knees, stroking her father's forehead, her wedding-dress soiled and torn. Her sister Bessie shaking herself out of shock and calling for water.

‘The fount! The fount!’ The cry went up. A woman shouted that there was not a drop to be had - it was empty. ‘It’s a wedding not a bloody christening!’ someone called out.

An actor seated behind Arthur confided to a companion. ‘It’s not a fit, dearie boy. Tom’s third débâcle this month. It’s the strain of *Quasimodo*. Being too long, *hunched*! In my opinion, it’s that confounded metal and leather harness!’ His companion laughed. ‘Three matinees a week. Must be murder. Only dear little Katty knew what the terrible harness was doing to him. She must be most dreadfully worried. But the man insisted on being properly and definitively hunched!’

Arthur sunk deeper into the armchair. Cool fingers caressed his face... He blinked and found himself staring at the ceiling which dissolved into a misty, day in a park. A tall, stooping man strode across the dew-wet grass. He felt he should cry out: ‘You are spoiling your shoes!’ All at once Emmy Bishop’s vibrant face came close to his. She whispered, ‘You made me so unhappy.’ Then as he reached for her, a curtain came down. ‘You were not meant to see that!’ the voice said, angrily. And at once, he was outside in the darkest night, engulfed, as tiny, glistening, worm-like creatures spun around him. Then he heard the voice for the last time. ‘Goodbye, Arthur. Your show will be a resounding success. But beware the venture in Watson Street. And keep an eye on that Irishman, Johnny Toole. He has designs on your wife.’

How he longed for a glass of water, or more of the cordial. Henry would not be coming. Suddenly, the thought occurred to him that it was a damned suspicious cordial! From a long way off, he saw a coloured ball bouncing towards him... he reached out to catch it...

As he overbalanced and fell, he heard Katty’s voice. ‘Look properly, dearest.’ She sounded distressed. ‘Little Harry’s got a temperature. Do please send out for a doctor!’

It was a hot Summer evening. He found himself looking down into a strange room. A thin, muslin curtain blew in the wind. A pair of candles flickered in a wall-alcove. Sitting in a chair close to the candles, his wife was nursing a child. Her hair was much shorter and differently styled. The more he strained to see mother and child, the more he became aware of his own body. Impossible as it seemed, his back was resting on the ceiling! Katty was prettier than ever and heavily pregnant again. Again? What on earth was he thinking about? His back ached. The child started to cry. He slowly glided downwards and saw that he was now in a different room. Only one candle burned. On the bed, below him, Katty was lying with her hands clasped behind her head. Then she sat up abruptly, surprised. She had seen him. ‘I believe we

will have a child called Harry,' he said. She stretched out her arms, clasping him around the neck. 'Arthur, dearest, I have been lying here *hours*.'

'I know what you did! You laced the cordial! You put a *tincture* in that bloody cordial! I know your fondness for that stuff! It's worse than the drink.'

Katty drew him down. 'What you need is a parachute,' she pulled him closer. 'How safe and sound you would fall with a great, white sail billowing out behind you.' He stroked her hair. 'Did you hear what I said about one of our children?' he asked. 'I did,' she whispered, '*Harry* is a such a good solid name.' And with a small movement of her body, held him even tighter.
