

The
Natural
History
of Love
CAROLINE
PETIT

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Prologue

1901

The Fundamentals of the Case

Nathan Smithson

First visit to Mayfield, July 1901

I never had a madman for a client until I met Mr Edward Fonçeca at his country property. As the driver guided his horse up the long, winding entrance, I kept craning my neck out the window to see more of the half-wild grounds protected by an honour guard of tree ferns and stands of different types of eucalypts I could not name. Their scent was strong in the cold of that late winter morning. At the base of the gums, hardy plants flowered. Further on, a strange towering tree was crowned with huge nut pods. A flock of galahs circled round as if annoyed by our intrusion. The cabman stopped suddenly and pointed with his whip. On a low branch a koala sat munching leaves. Judicial in his disinterest, he made me smile and my unease dissolved.

We came to a substantial two-storey brick house, double-fronted with bay windows. Brilliant orange and red orchids grew in enormous porcelain pots on the veranda, lending the house an exotic, otherworldly air.

Mr Henry Kenny answered my knock. He was a tall man, nearly six feet,

with blacksmith arms and a fighter's fists, but his face was kind as he spoke in a calm, deliberate manner.

'Welcome, Mr Smithson. We don't get many visitors. Eddie is looking forward to meeting you.' He led me into a dusty sitting room to the sound of heavy footsteps racing down the staircase. With his arms swinging like pistons, Mr Edward Fonçeca powered into the room and sat down next to Kenny in one enormous harrumph. Then, as if remembering his manners, he jumped up saying, 'Hello. Hello. So glad you've come, sir,' and Kenny nodded approvingly.

It was strange to see a man of nearly forty who reeked of cheap tobacco behaving like an exuberant child. Although properly dressed, there was a spot of egg left from breakfast on his shirtfront; his trousers hung on his scarecrow frame while his skin had an indoor pallor; and his thick brown hair hung in a halo of unruly curls reaching almost to his shoulders. He needed a haircut.

'Eddie's not one for barbering. Doesn't like scissors or sitting still,' Kenny said.

On the sofa, Mr Fonçeca shook his legs in agitation, and fixed me with an accusatory stare, the pupils of his brown eyes pinpricks. 'Don't talk about me. It's not allowed.'

In a drawling, comforting voice, Kenny said, 'Now, Eddie, Mr Smithson is your solicitor, remember? He's a nice man. A good man. Your mother asked him to help you.'

'She's not here. Dead.'

'Yes, I've been told Madame Fonçeca was a fine woman. Please accept my condolences,' I said. 'Her death is why I'm here. She left everything to you in her will.' I hesitated, looking at Kenny to gauge if I should talk to my client like any other. Kenny nodded. 'Your brother Charles is contesting your mother's will.' I continued. 'He wants this house, all the considerable money and other property she left you and ...' Again I paused. Mr Fonçeca was murmuring to himself, shaking his head furiously, his pinprick eyes roving about in fear.

‘Charlie don’t have a hope in hell of winning, Eddie,’ Kenny soothed.

For the moment, I let Kenny’s words stand and did not explain his brother was also suing to become his guardian. In my defence, my client was too upset to take in any rational explanation of what might occur in court or the gravitas of the case. If he won, Mr Fonçeca’s life would change forever.

Pacified, Mr Fonçeca took out a pouch of tobacco, dug around in his pocket for papers to roll a cigarette. He offered it to me. I shook my head. ‘Sorry, don’t smoke.’

He looked distressed and, before I could retract my words, Kenny intervened. ‘Mr Smithson will have one later. I’ll keep it for him,’ and put the cigarette into his own pocket. Mr Fonçeca rolled another, puffing on it until a cloud of smoke swirled around his head.

‘Would you like to see the house?’ Kenny inquired, nodding at me to say yes. ‘Eddie likes to show visitors around.’

‘I’d like that,’ I replied.

Mr Fonçeca hopped up and bounded up the stairs. Kenny and I trailed behind.

The single bed was neatly made and a large painting of cows in a paddock hung on the wall. The stink of stale cigarette smoke filled the room. Inhaling the corrupt air, my stomach revolted and I swallowed hard.

‘Welcome to my room,’ Mr Fonçeca said and shot out his right hand.

I went to shake it.

‘No,’ Kenny cautioned, ‘Eddie just wants you to understand he’s friendly.’

Swiftly lowering my arm, I thanked him for letting me see his resting place.

In reply, Mr Fonçeca blew a perfect smoke ring. I felt he wanted me to applaud, but afraid that clapping might startle him, I grinned in appreciation.

His room resembled a nest of a strange crane-like creature. Heaped on the floor were piles of papers; an enormous wire basket overflowed with fern and eucalyptus leaves; an open cloth bag contained different kinds of wild

bird eggs, each with a pinprick at the top allowing the contents to be blown out to preserve the shell; and there was a jumble of open wooden boxes with insects and butterflies pinned to boards. Scattered on top of the chest of drawers were papery thin snakeskins.

‘You are a collector, Mr Fonçeca?’

Mr Fonçeca cocked his head to one side, scrutinising me. ‘I am a naturalist. Very important work.’

‘I can see that.’

‘Let’s not disturb your collections; show him you mother’s room, Eddie.’

In the hallway, we passed a closed door. I made to turn the knob.

‘Don’t. That’s my brother’s room. You wouldn’t like it. It’s a bad place,’ Mr Fonçeca said, his voice tightening, climbing a register in fear.

Kenny moved closer. ‘Eddie, Charlie don’t live here no more. You know that,’ he said in a steadying tone. ‘It’s just a boxroom now.’

‘It’s against the rules,’ Mr Fonçeca said, folding his arms. ‘Mustn’t enter.’

‘I needn’t go into the room, Mr Fonçeca,’ I said, thinking I would ask Kenny to show it to me later – perhaps the disinherited brother had left something there. It is always wise to know the opponent’s secrets. Mr Fonçeca nodded and ran past the closed door holding his breath, then exhaled in a rush once he was inside Madame Fonçeca’s room.

The floor-to-ceiling chintz curtains with sprigs of flowers were shut and the room full of shadows and heavy with the scent of a thick, sweet perfume. The narrow man paced around like a dog marking his territory, shaking his matted locks and muttering words I could not catch. He came to a stop by the four-poster bed with a mahogany carved bedhead and a canopy of mosquito netting. The bedside table held a gaslight lamp and, in the corner, there stood a magnificent stuffed lyrebird in full display. The room was large enough to accommodate an imposing chest of drawers with a large mirror arranged on top and a small settee with spindly legs over which was thrown a red woollen shawl, as if Madame Fonçeca had left it lying there and would be returning any moment to retrieve it. In the poor light I could not fully appreciate the

exotic paintings of birds with thick crescent beaks roosting in a fertile green jungle, but they did strike me as wondrous.

Mr Fonçeca stood as if transfixed by his surroundings, then fell onto the bed like a dead weight. He lay there spread-eagled, his eyes closed until his breathing became more regular. Unnerved by watching a madman pretend to sleep, I moved quickly away. As I did so, I caught a fleeting glimpse of an image in the mirror: a woman's olive face and a mass of silvery hair. Is madness catching?

Kenny broke in upon my alarming vision, saying, 'Mr Smithson and I have business to discuss, Eddie. You can join us for lunch in the dining room if you like. Or, I can have Cook bring up a tray. Mrs McKenna is doing a nice chicken for you, potatoes and cauliflower. All white, no greens today.' Kenny turned to me. 'Eddie likes white food.'

Mr Fonçeca opened his eyes and sat up. 'Poisons are green.'

'Good to know, Mr Fonçeca. Enjoy your lunch,' I said. This time he allowed me to shake his bone-dry hand and smiled. In the half-light, he didn't look so strange.

Kenny and I sat in the dusty dining room eating a good stew and roast potatoes. I asked if I could interview him over lunch.

He whispered, 'Once Eddie goes into his mother's room, he stays for hours, but better to wait.' He nodded toward the stairs. 'Ears like a dog. I've given him a little laudanum so he'll sleep soon.'

He noticed my alarm.

'Only a mild dose. Otherwise, he'll be down here in a shot. Might flap around, yell, or, if overcome, run away.' He sighed and waved his knife in the air for emphasis. 'Charlie mustn't be allowed to win. It'd kill Eddie if Charlie became his guardian. He's so sensitive, so sure people are out to harm him. No one is, except Charlie. A right Cain to his Abel. Biblical is his hate.'

'I've heard rumours. I need to take notes when we talk later. All right?'

'Anything to help Eddie ...' He stopped, and took a hard look at me before continuing. 'I don't want you to think I'm going to smear Charlie Fonçeca

just to keep my job. In my opinion he'd hurt Eddie. I want to do what's right and it's not the perks. Cook's made a trifle for us.'

'I can see, Mr Kenny, you have great empathy with my client, and a good pudding never goes astray.'

The big man flushed with pleasure.

Interview with Mr Henry Kenny¹

Nathan Smithson

NS: How did you come to care for Mr Fonçeca?

HK: If you are a strong man with no ties, you can be a logger anywhere in the colony. One day this kauri pine I were sawing broke wrong. Escaped death I did. If you're not dead, you can still lose an arm or crush a leg. It weren't worth it.

NS: I've handled injury cases. Loggers mostly lose. Owners insist the man wasn't paying attention and the fault is his, and the injury.

HK: Too right. Can't work and you get no money.

NS: So you left that job?

HK: Went to work at Yarra Bend Asylum as a kind of helper to the lunatics. Most lunatics won't hurt you. Just want to be left alone to fight their demons and misery. One doctor said there was a place going in the country with a young lad who was ... how did he put it ... yes, that's it, despondent and excitable. Good wages. And how much trouble could a fifteen-year-old be? Certainly better than caring for crazy drunks, syphilitic idiots and ... Mayfield ... it's like living in the Botanical Gardens without the visitors. (I

¹ These are my verbatim notes. I learned Pitman Shorthand by a correspondence course early in my law school days. It was a boon to my education. When I found it necessary to submit affidavits to the courts, I dictated my notes to my clerk who then typed them into a readable form. **NS**

was struck by how candid Mr Kenny was in answers, and thought he is a man I can trust. He is without guile.)

NS: Mayfield's a beautiful property, if isolated. What was it like being employed by the Count de Castelnau and Madame Fonçeca?

HK: The Count were a kind gentleman, old even when I knew him.² The house were full of his curio cabinets. Eddie apes him. He picks up leaves and insects around the property. You can't question or talk to him about them. Starts babbling or writes in a frenzy about nothing, breaks his pen nibs and gets very upset and hard to calm down. He looks like a feather would knock him over, but in his moods, he changes. The bruises I've got. Now don't look at me like that. I've done him no harm. Ever. I swear. You ask the others if you want.

NS: I can see Mr Fonçeca is not afraid of you. Considers you his friend. Were the Count and Mr Fonçeca close? Did he care about his nephew?

HK: The Count would take a leaf from a plant in his apothecary garden and let Eddie examine it under a magnifying glass, show him the veins and such like and talk about his travels, why collecting plants and animals are important, how they change in different parts of the world. See, my job were to be there just in case poor Eddie got upset. So I seen everything. Eddie, he'd sit there slowly rocking, not looking at his uncle but taking it all in, his head cocked to one side like an inquisitive bird, not a boy, mind you, but a bird who might at any moment fly into a rage or go all droop-like and quiet. But the Count, he were good with him like he were telling Eddie a bedtime story. Soothing. Later, when the Count were terrible ill, Eddie would sit for hours on the floor watching the old man dozing. The maids found it frightening, but I always thought it were Eddie's way of trying to protect him.

NS: How did Madame Fonçeca cope with the Count's illness?

HK: In a sense, Eddie helped her. If she became upset, he'd shriek or cry or run away. So she had to be calm, though she were excitable like foreign ladies

² Nota bene: A sad smile and a long pause from Mr Kenny and I wrote: *Must wait, don't hurry this man. He believes in confidences.* **NS**

are. Just before he died, the Count said to me, 'Look after them for me. I know you will.' And I've tried. When I first arrived, it were bloody awkward. She owned slaves as a girl, and she could be high-handed and demanding. But she loved Eddie in her way and didn't want to recognise he were mad. 'He's poorly,' she'd say. Or not well in himself when he were afraid and shouting that people were trying to kill him. She'd take him to every quack despite the Count's disapproval.

NS: Does the brother visit? Would you say they are close?

HK: Charlie is a bad 'un. She banned him after he came round after the Count's funeral over twenty years ago. Madame Fonçeca had taken to her bed so Charlie was free to do what he pleased. God knows what he told Eddie or done to him. He said to me, 'Don't come with us. I can look after him.' And poor mad Eddie were led away like a lamb to the slaughter. He came back soaking wet, terrified and didn't speak for a week. Charlie claimed he'd fallen into the creek. Liar. Eddie hates water. Afraid that fish want to bite him. Madame Fonçeca got out of bed in her nightclothes, black hair streaming down like a witch, and screamed at Charlie who just stood there and thundered back, 'Well, if I'm the devil, you're the one who spawned me.' It were then I threatened to knock him down. He snarled and said the place was a madhouse and he was the only sane one in the family. Got on his horse and rode away as if he were the injured party. Some guardian he'd make. No kindness in him. Don't expect anything has changed in twenty years. (Mr Kenny folded his arms, pleased he'd said his piece about Charles and watched me as I wrote. I smiled my acceptance of his opinion.)

NS: Did you ever discover what happened between the brothers that day?

HK: Nope. Eddie were trembling so, I had to undress him. There were red welts on his back as if he'd been beaten with a cane, which Charlie did have.

NS: What do you think will happen if Charles wins the case?

HK: He'd sell this place in a flash and put Eddie in an asylum. Is he going to win? Does he stand a chance?

NS: Did either brother ever refer to the Count de Castelnau as their father?

HK: Charlie and Eddie always called him Uncle.

NS: Did the Count and Madame Fonçeca share a bed?

HK: They had separate bedrooms. (Mr Kenny frowned deeply. And I saw I was stepping into difficult terrain; still I persisted.)

NS: You know what I mean. Their sleeping arrangements go to the heart of the case. (An awkward silence filled the room. I kept my eyes on my notebook, waiting and hoping he would let slip a confidence. When I looked up, I saw he had resolved not to.)

HK: Can't we let them rest in peace?

The Paper Trail

Nathan Smithson

This is the first report I found in the archives regarding the Count de Fonçeca. The Count's full name was François-Louis Nompur de Caumont La Port, the Count de Castelnau. Remarkable to think that less than sixty years ago men like him existed, hacking their intrepid way through jungles, risking their lives to understand more about the world and the plants, animals and people in it.

From *The London Times*, 1846

SCIENTIFIC MISSION OF COUNT CASTELNAU TO SOUTH AMERICA –

The Count de Castelnau, who was sent on a scientific mission by the French government to South America, has just sent in the following report to Minister of Public Instruction: 'Lima. Jan. 26, 1846. Monsieur le Ministre, – After travelling two and a half years in the interior of the continent, we have reached Lima by Arequipa. The distance we travelled over, including our excursions, is above 2,500 leagues. I already have the honour of informing your Excellency of our arrival at Chuquisaca; from that town we proceeded to Potosí, famed for its silver mines, once so rich, now so poor. For five-and-twenty leagues from that place, our road lay through the most difficult

passes of the highest summits of the Andes; the gigantic condor is the only inhabitant of the barren regions where vegetation is extinct. The road then improves. Once on the great Bolivian tableland, the land remains flat till you reach La Paz, though still in a barren region, where the rarefaction of the air, owing to the great elevation, causes the painful sensation known as *sarrache*. These vast tracts of tableland abound in large herds of llamas and merinos, – the latter are wild. Passing by Oruro, we reached La Paz, where the government of Bolivia was established. The anniversary of the Battle of Ingavi was being celebrated. On reaching the shores of Lake Titicaca we perceived the celebrated ruins of the ancient palace of the Incas of Tiahuanaco. One of the gateways is an admirable piece of workmanship, and we took different drawings of it. We entered Peru by the Bridge of Desaguadero. Having reaching Puno amidst violent and incessant storms of snow and hail, I deemed it advisable to relinquish for the moment our intended route to Cuzco, and to proceed along the coast to Lima, with the intention of returning to Cuzco after the rainy season. I therefore struck out in the direction Arequipa, and thence to Lima. When we have taken the rest we were much in need of, we will turn our steps towards Cuzco, whence we will endeavour to rejoin the Amazon River by embarking on the Apurimac. This will take us across the whole length of the Pampa del Sacramento, and presents many dangers to be overcome. I take the liberty of sending a list of the different objects forwarded for the Museum of Natural History.’ – F. DE CASTELNAU

Then there is Madame Fonçeca, Carolina D’Araujo Fonçeca, about whom little was ever written; or, if you will, written out of history. Her passport describes her as having a slim build, an oval face, dark hair and eyes. She must have been a beauty.

Throughout their lives, they kept diaries: the Count, most likely, because it was part of his scientific training to observe and record. Carolina – I fell into the habit of thinking of Madame Fonçeca as Carolina – had to share her thoughts with someone. As a girl, she lived on a Brazilian plantation miles from anywhere. Even the journey to the nearest city, Bahia, could take over a

day; there were no roads, only mule tracks. Her diary, I have come to believe, became her confidante and friend in a world often hostile to women like herself.

The untranslated diaries (his in French and hers in Portuguese) were in the custody of Mr William Scobie, retired managing partner from my firm, Blake & Riggall. Mr Scobie was aware I was handling Mr Edward Fonçeca's inheritance case. He wrote and asked to meet. He was an eminent man and I, a very junior solicitor, was flattered. We sat in his bachelor Toorak house before a crackling fire, drinking his excellent whisky. He said the Count and Madame Fonçeca were his closest friends. On her deathbed, Madame Fonçeca (the Count had died twenty years earlier) sent their diaries to Mr Scobie, requesting that he be their keeper for posterity because Edward was incapable of understanding them and Charles would likely burn them. Mr Scobie had intended to have them translated as a sort of living memorial to their extraordinary past. Sadly, Madame Fonçeca died a week later and, what with arranging her funeral, the estate and dealing with Edward, whom he had known from birth, he had not done it.

He regarded me from under his bushy white eyebrows, his eyes burrowing in to get my measure – I was on trial – and said the diaries might hold the key to the case. 'In those days we didn't discuss intimate matters. They were very discreet.' He sighed and his old eyes teared. 'You could see the love.'

His words moved me, a young man up to this point immune from love. I vowed to do my best.

I have extracted the diary entries that have bearing on Edward Fonçeca's inheritance case. I begin with Madame Fonçeca's entries because she lived in a very different world and I needed to understand her world if I was to comprehend her state of mind and her actions. The Count's actions are easier to understand. Even a good brave man can't resist a beautiful girl in need of help.