Scally; The Story Of A Perfect Gentleman

By

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Freeditorial

SCALLY THE STORY OF A PERFECT GENTLEMAN

I

"BETTERSEA trem? Right, miss!" My wife, who has been married long enough to feel deeply gratified at being mistaken for a maiden lady, smiled seraphically at the conductor, and allowed herself to be hoisted up the steps of the majestic vehicle provided by a paternal county council to convey passengers—at a loss to the ratepayers, I understand—from the Embankment to Battersea.

Presently we ground our way round a curve and began to cross Westminster Bridge. The conductor, whose innate cockney bonhomie his high official position had failed to eradicate, presented himself before us and collected our fares.

"What part of Bettersea did you require, sir?" he asked of me.

I coughed and answered evasively:—

"Oh, about the middle."

"We haven't been there before," added my wife, quite gratuitously.

The conductor smiled indulgently and punched our tickets.

"I'll tell you when to get down," he said, and left us.

For some months we had been considering the question of buying a dog, and a good deal of our spare time—or perhaps I should say of my spare time, for a woman's time is naturally all her own—had been pleasantly occupied in discussing the matter. Having at length committed ourselves to the purchase of the animal, we proceeded to consider such details as breed, sex, and age.

My wife vacillated between a bloodhound, because bloodhounds are so aristocratic in appearance, and a Pekinese, because they are dernier cri. We like to be dernier cri even in Much Moreham. Her younger sister, Eileen, who spends a good deal of time with us, having no parents of her own, suggested an Old English sheep dog, explaining that it would be company for my wife when I was away from home. I coldly recommended a mastiff.

Our son John, aged three, on being consulted, expressed a preference for twelve tigers in a box, and was not again invited to participate in the debate.

Finally we decided on an Aberdeen terrier, of an age and sex to be settled by circumstances, and I was instructed to communicate with a gentleman in the North who advertised in our morning paper that Aberdeen terriers were his specialty. In due course we received a reply. The advertiser recommended two animals—namely, Celtic Chief, aged four months, and Scotia's Pride, aged one year. Pedigrees were inclosed, each about as complicated as the family tree of the House of Hapsburg; and the favor of an early reply was requested, as both dogs were being hotly bid for by an anonymous client in Constantinople.

The price of Celtic Chief was twenty guineas; that of Scotia's Pride, for reasons heavily underlined in the pedigree, was twenty-seven. The advertiser, who resided in Aberdeen, added that these prices did not cover cost of carriage. We decided not to stand in the way of the gentleman in Constantinople, and having sent back the pedigrees by return of post, resumed the debate.

Finally Stella, my wife, said:—

"We don't really want a dog with a pedigree. We only want something that will bark at beggars and be gentle with baby. Why not go to the Home for Lost Dogs at Battersea? I believe you can get any dog you like there for five shillings. We will run up to town next Wednesday and see about it—and I might get some clothes as well."

Hence our presence on the tram.

Presently the conductor, who had kindly pointed out to us such objects of local interest as the River Thames and the Houses of Parliament, stopped the tram in a crowded thoroughfare and announced that we were in Battersea.

"Alight here," he announced facetiously, "for 'Ome for Lost Dawgs!"

Guiltily realizing that there is many a true word spoken in jest, we obeyed him, and the tram went rocking and whizzing out of sight. We had eschewed a cab.

"When you are only going to pay five shillings for a dog," my wife had pointed out, with convincing logic, "it is silly to go and pay perhaps another five shillings for a cab. It doubles the price of the dog at once. If we had been buying an expensive dog we might have taken a cab; but not for a five-shilling one."

"Now," I inquired briskly, "how are we going to find this place?"

"Haven't you any idea where it is?"

"No. I have a sort of vague notion that it is on an island in the middle of the river, called the Isle of Dogs, or Barking Reach, or something like that. However, I have no doubt—"

"Hadn't we better ask some one?" suggested Stella.

I demurred.

"If there is one thing I dislike," I said, "it is accosting total strangers and badgering them for information they don't possess—not that that will prevent them from giving it. If we start asking the way we shall find ourselves in Putney or Woolwich in no time!"

"Yes, dear," said Stella soothingly.

"Now I suggest—" My hand went to my pocket.

"No, darling," interposed my wife, hastily; "not a map, please!" It is a curious psychological fact that women have a constitutional aversion to maps and railroad time-tables. They would rather consult a half-witted errand boy or a deaf railroad porter. "Do not let us make a spectacle of ourselves in the public streets again! I have not yet forgotten the day when you tried to find the Crystal Palace. Besides, it will only blow away. Ask that dear little boy there. He is looking at us so wistfully."

Yes; I admit it was criminal folly. A man who asks a London street boy to be so kind as to direct him to a Home for Lost Dogs has only himself to thank for the consequence.

The wistful little boy smiled up at us. He had a pinched face and large eyes.

"Lost Dogs' 'Ome, sir?" he said courteously. "It's a good long way. Do you want to get there quick?"

"Yes."

"Then if I was you, sir," replied the infant, edging to the mouth of an alleyway, "I should bite a policeman!" And, with an ear-splitting yell, he vanished.

We walked on, hot-faced.

"Little wretch!" said Stella.

"We simply asked for it," I rejoined. "What are we going to do next?"

My question was answered in a most incredible fashion, for at this moment a man emerged from a shop on our right and set off down the street before us. He wore a species of uniform; and emblazoned on the front of his hat was the information that he was an official of the Battersea Home for Lost and Starving Dogs.

"Wait a minute and I will ask him," I said, starting forward.

But my wife would not hear of it.

"Certainly not," she replied. "If we ask him he will simply offer to show us the way. Then we shall have to talk to him—about hydrophobia, and lethal chambers, and distemper—and it may be for miles. I simply couldn't bear it! We shall have to tip him, too. Let us follow him quietly."

To those who have never attempted to track a fellow creature surreptitiously through the streets of London on a hot day, the feat may appear simple. It is in reality a most exhausting, dilatory, and humiliating exercise. Our difficulty lay not so much in keeping our friend in sight as in avoiding frequent and unexpected collisions with him. The general idea, as they say on field days, was to keep about twenty yards behind him; but under certain circumstances distance has an uncanny habit of annihilating itself. The man himself was no hustler. Once or twice he stopped to light his pipe or converse with a friend.

During these interludes Stella and I loafed guiltily on the pavement, pointing out to one another objects of local interest with the fatuous officiousness of people in the foreground of hotel advertisements. Occasionally he paused to contemplate the contents of a shop window. We gazed industriously into the window next door. Our first window, I recollect, was an undertaker's, with ready-printed expressions of grief for sale on white porcelain disks. We had time to read them all. The next was a butcher's. Here we stayed, perforce, so long that the proprietor, who was of the tribe that disposes of its wares almost entirely by personal canvass, came out into the street and endeavored to sell us a bullock's heart.

Our quarry's next proceeding was to dive into a public house. We turned and surveyed one another.

"What are we to do now?" inquired my wife.

"Go inside, too," I replied with more enthusiasm than I had hitherto displayed. "At least, I think I ought to. You can please yourself."

"I will not be left in the street," said Stella firmly. "We must just wait here together until he comes out."

"There may be another exit," I objected. "We had better go in. I shall take something, just to keep up appearances; and you must sit down in the ladies' bar, or the snug, or whatever they call it."

"Certainly not!" said Stella.

We had arrived at this impasse when the man suddenly reappeared, wiping his mouth. Instantly and silently we fell in behind him.

For the first time the man appeared to notice our presence. He regarded us curiously, with a faint gleam of recognition in his eyes, and then set off down the street at a good pace. We followed, panting. Once or twice he looked back over his shoulder a little apprehensively, I thought. But we ploughed on.

"We ought to get there soon at this pace," I gasped. "Hello! He's gone again!"

"He turned down to the right," said Stella excitedly.

The lust of the chase was fairly on us now. We swung eagerly round the corner into a quiet by-street. Our man was nowhere to be seen and the street was almost empty.

"Come on!" said Stella. "He may have turned in somewhere."

We hurried down the street. Suddenly, warned by a newly awakened and primitive instinct, I looked back. We had overrun our quarry. He had just emerged from some hiding place and was heading back toward the main street, looking fearfully over his shoulder. Once more we were in full cry.

For the next five minutes we practically ran—all three of us. The man was obviously frightened out of his wits, and kept making frenzied and spasmodic spurts, from which we surmised that he was getting to the end of his powers of endurance.

"If only we could overtake him," I said, hauling my exhausted spouse along by the arm, "we could explain that—"

"He's gone again!" exclaimed Stella.

She was right. The man had turned another corner. We followed him round hotfoot, and found ourselves in a prim little cul-de-sac, with villas on each side. Across the end of the street ran a high wall, obviously screening a railroad track.

"We've got him!" I exclaimed.

I felt as Moltke must have felt when he closed the circle at Sedan.

"But where is the Dogs' Home, dear?" inquired Stella.

The question was never answered, for at this moment the man ran up the steps of the fourth villa on the left and slipped a latchkey into the lock. The door closed behind him with a venomous snap and we were left alone in the street, guideless and dogless.

A minute later the man appeared at the ground-floor window, accompanied by a female of commanding appearance. He pointed us out to her. Behind them we could dimly descry a white tablecloth, a tea cozy and covered dishes.

The commanding female, after a prolonged and withering glare, plucked a hairpin from her head and ostentatiously proceeded to skewer together the starchy white curtains that framed the window. Privacy secured and the sanctity of the English home thus pointedly vindicated, she and her husband disappeared into the murky background, where they doubtless sat down to an excellent high tea. Exhausted and discomfited, we drifted away.

"I am going home," said Stella in a hollow voice. "And I think," she added bitterly, "that it might have occurred to you to suggest that the creature might possibly be going from the Dogs' Home and not to it."

I apologized. It is the simplest plan, really.

II

IT was almost dark when the train arrived at our little country station. We set out to walk home by the short cut across the golf course.

"Anyhow, we have saved five shillings," remarked Stella.

"We paid half a crown for that taxi which took us back to Victoria Station," I reminded her.

"Do not argue to-night, darling," responded my wife. "I simply cannot endure anything more."

Plainly she was a little unstrung. Very considerately, I selected another topic.

"I think our best plan," I said cheerfully, "would be to advertise for a dog."

"I never wish to see a dog again," replied Stella.

I surveyed her with some concern and said gently:—

"I am afraid you are tired, dear."

"No; I'm not."

"A little shaken, perhaps?"

"Nothing of the kind. Joe, what is that?"

Stella's fingers bit deep into my biceps muscle, causing me considerable pain. We were passing a small sheet of water which guards the thirteenth green on the golf course. It is a stagnant and unclean pool, but we make rather a fuss of it. We call it the pond; and if you play a ball into it you send a blasphemous caddie in after it and count one stroke.

A young moon was struggling up over the trees, dismally illuminating the scene. On the slimy shores of the pond we beheld a small moving object.

A yard behind it was another object, a little smaller, moving at exactly the same pace. One of the objects was emitting sounds of distress.

Abandoning my quaking consort I advanced to the edge of the pond and leaned down to investigate the mystery.

The leading object proved to be a small, wet, shivering, whimpering puppy. The satellite was a brick. The two were connected by a string. The puppy had just emerged from the depths of the pond, towing the brick behind it.

"What is it, dear?" repeated Stella fearfully.

"Your dog!" I replied, and cut the string.

III

WE spent three days deciding on a name for him. Stella suggested Tiny, on account of his size. I pointed out that time might stultify this selection of a title.

"I don't think so," said Eileen, supporting her sister. "That kind of dog does not grow very big."

"What kind of dog is he?" I inquired swiftly.

Eileen said no more. There are problems that even girls of twenty cannot solve.

A warm bath had revealed to us the fact that the puppy was of a dingy yellow hue. I suggested that we should call him Mustard. Our son John, on being consulted—against my advice—by his mother, addressed the animal as Pussy. Stella continued to favor Tiny. Finally Eileen, who was at the romantic age, produced a copy of Tennyson and suggested Excalibur, alleging in support of her preposterous proposition that

It rose from out the bosom of the lake.

"The darling rose from out the bosom of the lake, too, just like the sword Excalibur," she said; "so I think it would make a lovely name for him."

"The little brute waded out of a muddy pond towing a brick," I replied. "I see no parallel. He was not the product of the pond. Some one must have thrown him in, and he came out."

"That is just what some one must have done with the sword," retorted Eileen. "So we'll call you Excalibur, won't we, darling little Scally?"

She embraced the puppy warmly and the unsuspecting animal replied by frantically licking her face.

However, the name stuck, with variations. When the puppy was big enough he was presented with a collar, engraved with the name Excalibur, together with my name and address. Among ourselves we usually addressed him as Scally. The children in the village called him the Scalawag.

His time during his first year in our household was fully occupied in growing up. Stella declared that if one could have persuaded him to stand still for five minutes it would have been actually possible to see him grow. He grew at the rate of about an inch a week for the best part of a year. When he had finished he looked like nothing on earth. At one time we cherished a brief but illusory hope that he was going to turn into some sort of an imitation of a St. Bernard; but the symptoms rapidly passed off, and his final and permanent aspect was that of a rather badly stuffed lion.

Like most overgrown creatures he was top-heavy and lethargic and very humble-minded. Still, there was a kind of respectful pertinacity about him. It requires some strength of character, for instance, to wade along the bottom of a pond to dry land, accompanied by a brick as big as yourself. It was quite impossible, too, short of locking him up, to prevent him from accompanying us when we took our walks abroad, if he had made up his mind to do so.

The first time this happened I was going to shoot with my neighbors, the Hoods. It was only a mile to the first covert and I set off after breakfast to walk. I was hardly out on the road when Excalibur was beside me, ambling uncertainly on his weedy legs and smiling up into my face with an air of imbecile affection.

"You have many qualities, old friend," I said, "but I don't think you are a sporting dog. Go home!"

Excalibur sat down on the road with a dejected air. Then, having given me fifty yards start, he rose and crawled sheepishly after me. I stopped, called him up, pointed him with some difficulty in the required direction, gave him a resounding spank and bade him begone. He responded by collapsing like a camp bedstead, and I left him.

Two minutes later I looked round. Excalibur was ten yards behind me, propelling himself along on his stomach. This time I thrashed him severely. After he began to howl I let him go, and he lumbered away homeward, the picture of misery.

In due course I reached the crossroads where I had arranged to meet the rest of the party. They had not arrived, but Excalibur had. He had made a détour and headed me off. Not certain which route I would take after reaching the crossroads, he was sitting very sensibly under the signpost, awaiting my arrival. On seeing me he immediately came forward, wagging his tail, and placed himself at my feet in the position most convenient to me for inflicting chastisement.

I wonder how many of our human friends would be willing to pay such a price for the pleasure of our company.

As time went on Excalibur filled out into one of the most terrifying spectacles I have ever beheld. In one respect, though, he lived up to his knightly name. His manners were of the most courtly description and he had an affectionate greeting for all, beggars included. He was particularly fond of children. If he saw children in the distance he would canter up and offer to play with them. If the children had not met him before they would run shrieking to their nurses. If they had they would fall on Excalibur in a body and roll him over and pull him about.

On wet afternoons, in the nursery, my own family used to play at dentist with him, assigning to Excalibur the rôle of patient. Gas was administered with a bicycle pump, and a shoehorn and buttonhook were employed in place of the ordinary instruments of torture; but Excalibur did not mind. He lay on his back on the hearth rug, with the principal dentist sitting astride his ribs, as happy as a king.

He was particularly attracted by babies; and being able by reason of his stature to look right down into perambulators, he was accustomed whenever he met one of those vehicles to amble alongside and peer inquiringly into the face of its occupant. Most of the babies in the district got to know him in time, but until they did we had a good deal of correspondence to attend to on the subject.

Excalibur's intellect may have been lofty, but his memory was treacherous. Our household will never forget the day on which he was given the shoulder of mutton.

One morning after breakfast Eileen, accompanied by Excalibur, intercepted the kitchen maid hastening in the direction of the potting shed, carrying the joint in question at arm's length. The damsel explained that its premature maturity was due to the recent warm weather and that she was even now in search of the gardener's boy, who would be commissioned to perform the duties of sexton.

"It seems a waste, miss," observed the kitchen maid; "but cook says it can't be ate nohow now."

Loud but respectful snuffings from Excalibur moved a direct negative to this statement. Eileen and the kitchen maid, who were both criminally weak where Excalibur was concerned, saw a way to gratify their economical instincts and their natural affection simultaneously. The next moment Excalibur was lurching contentedly down the gravel path with a presentation shoulder of mutton in his mouth.

Then Joy Day began. Excalibur took his prize into the middle of the tennis lawn. It was a very large shoulder of mutton, but Excalibur finished it in ten minutes. After that, distended to his utmost limits, he went to sleep in the sun, with the bone between his paws. Occasionally he woke up and, raising his head, stared solemnly into space, in the attitude of a Trafalgar Square lion.

The bone now lay white and gleaming on the grass beside him. Then he fell asleep again. About four o'clock he roused himself and began to look for a suitable place of interment for the bone. By four-thirty the deed was done and he went to sleep once more. At five he woke up and pandemonium began. He could not remember where he had buried the bone!

He started systematically with the rose beds, but met with no success. After that he tried two or three shrubberies without avail, and thenembarked on a frantic but thorough excavation of the tennis lawn. We were taking tea on the lawn at the time, and our attention was first drawn to Excalibur's bereavement by a temporary but unshakable conviction on his part that the bone was buried immediately underneath the tea table.

As the tennis lawn was fast beginning to resemble a golf course we locked Excalibur up in the washhouse, where his hyena-like howls rent the air for the rest of the evening, penetrating even to the dining-room. This was particularly unfortunate, because we were having a dinner party in honor of a neighbor who had recently come to the district, no less a personage, in fact, than the new lord-lieutenant of the county and his lady. Stella was naturally anxious that there should be no embarrassments on such an occasion, and it distressed her to think that these people should imagine that we kept a private torture chamber on the premises.

However, dinner passed off quite successfully and we adjourned to the drawing-room. It was a chilly September evening and Lady Wickham was accommodated with a seat by the fire in a large armchair, with a cushion at her back. When the gentlemen came in Eileen sang to us. Fortunately the drawing-room is out of range of the washhouse.

During Eileen's first song I sat by Lady Wickham. Her expression was one of patrician calm and well-bred repose, but it seemed to me she wasnot looking quite comfortable. I was not feeling quite comfortable myself. The atmosphere seemed a trifle oppressive: perhaps we had done wrong in having a fire after all. Lady Wickham appeared to notice it too. She sat very upright, fanning herself mechanically, and seemed disinclined to lean back in her chair.

After the song was finished I said:

"I am afraid you are not quite comfortable, Lady Wickham. Let me get you a larger cushion."

"Thank you," said Lady Wickham, "the cushion I have is delightfully comfortable; but I think there is something hard behind it."

Apologetically I plucked away the cushion. Lady Wickham was right; there was something behind it.

It was Excalibur's bone!

IV

A WALK along the village street was always a great event for Excalibur. Still, it must have contained many humiliating moments for one of his sensitive disposition; for he was always pathetically anxious to make friends with other dogs, but was rarely successful. Little dogs merely bit his legs and big dogs cut him dead.

I think this was why he usually commenced his morning round by calling on a rabbit. The rabbit lived in a hutch in a yard at the end of a passage between two cottages, the first turning on the right after you entered the village, and Excalibur always dived down this at the earliest opportunity. It was no use for Eileen, who usually took him out on these occasions, to endeavor to hold him back. Either Excalibur called on the rabbit by himself or Eileen went with him; there was no other alternative.

Arrived at the hutch, Excalibur wagged his tail and contemplated the rabbit with his usual air of vacuous benevolence. The rabbit made not the faintest response, but continued to munch green feed, twitching its nose in a superior manner. Finally, when it could endure Excalibur's admiring inspection and hard breathing no longer, it turned its back and retired into its bedroom.

Excalibur's next call was usually at the butcher's shop, where he was presented with a specially selected and quite unsalable fragment of meat. He then crossed the road to the baker's, where he purchased a halfpenny bun, for which his escort was expected to pay. After that he walked from shop to shop, wherever he was taken, with great docility and enjoyment; for he was a gregarious animal and had a friend behind or underneath almost every counter in the village. Men, women, babies, kittens, even ducks—they were all one to him.

At one time Eileen had endeavored to teach him a few simple accomplishments, such as begging for food, dying for his country, and carrying parcels. She was unsuccessful in all three instances. Excalibur on his hind legs stood about five feet six, and when he fell from that eminence, as he invariably did when he tried to beg, he usually broke something. He was hampered, too, by inability to distinguish one order from another.

More than once he narrowly escaped with his life through mistaking an urgent appeal to come to heel out of the way of an approaching automobile for a command to die for his country in the middle of the road.

As for educating him to carry parcels, a single attempt was sufficient. The parcel in question contained a miscellaneous assortment of articles from the grocer's, including lard, soap, and safety matches. It was securely tied up, and the grocer kindly attached it by a short length of string to a wooden clothespin, in order to make it easier for Excalibur to carry. They set off home.

Excalibur was most apologetic about it afterward, besides being extremely unwell; but he had no idea, he explained to Eileen, that anything put into his mouth was not meant to be eaten. He then tendered the clothespin and some mangled brown paper, with an air of profound abasement. After that no further attempts at compulsory education were undertaken.

It was his daily walk with Eileen, however, which introduced Excalibur to life—life in its broadest and most romantic sense. As I was not privileged to be present at the opening incident of this episode, or at most of its subsequent developments, the direct conduct of this narrative here passes out of my hands.

One sunny morning in July a young man in clerical attire sat breakfasting in his rooms at Mrs. Tice's. Mrs. Tice's establishment was situated on the village street and Mrs. Tice was in the habit of letting her ground floor to lodgers of impeccable respectability.

It was half-past eleven, which is a late hour for the clergy to breakfast; but this young man appeared to be suffering from no qualms of conscience on the subject. He was making an excellent breakfast and reading the Henley results with a mixture of rapture and longing.

He had just removed the "Sportsman" from the convenient buttress of the teapot and substituted "Punch" when he became aware that day had turned to night. Looking up he perceived that his open window, which was rather small and of the casement variety, was completely blocked by a huge, shapeless, and opaque mass. Next moment the mass resolved itself into an

animal of enormous size and surprising appearance, which fell heavily into the room, and

Like a stream that, spouting from a cliff,

Fails in mid-air, but, gathering at the base,

Remakes itself,

rose to its feet and, advancing to the table, laid a heavy head on the white cloth and lovingly passed its tongue—which resembled that of the great anteater—round a cold chicken conveniently adjacent.

Five minutes later the window framed another picture—this time a girl of twenty, white-clad and wearing a powder-blue felt hat, caught up on one side by a silver buckle which twinkled in the hot morning sun. The curate started to his feet. Excalibur, who was now lying on the hearthrug dismembering the chicken, thumped his tail guiltily on the floor, but made no attempt to rise.

"I am very sorry," said Eileen, "but I am afraid my dog is trespassing. May I call him out?"

"Certainly!" said the curate. "But"—he racked his brains to devise some means of delaying the departure of this radiant, fragrant vision—"he is not the least in the way. I am very glad of his company; it was most neighborly of him to call. After all, I suppose he is one of my parishioners. And—and"—he blushed—"I hope you are, too."

Eileen gave him her most entrancing smile, and from that hour the curate ceased to be his own master.

"I suppose you are Mr. Gilmore," said Eileen.

"Yes. I have been here only three weeks and I have not met every one yet."

"I have been away for two months," Eileen mentioned.

"I thought you must have been," said the curate, rather subtly for him.

"I think my brother-in-law called on you a few days ago," continued Eileen, on whom the curate's last remark had made a most favorable impression. She mentioned my name.

"I was going to return the call this very afternoon," said the curate. And he firmly believed that he was speaking the truth. "Won't you come in? We have an excellent chaperon," indicating Excalibur. "I will come and open the door."

"Well, he certainly won't come out unless I come and fetch him," admitted Eileen thoughtfully.

A moment later the curate was at the front door and led his visitor across the little hall into the sitting-room. He had not been absent more than thirty seconds, but during that time a plateful of sausages had mysteriously disappeared; and, as they entered, Excalibur was apologetically settling down on the hearthrug with a cottage loaf between his paws.

Eileen uttered cries of dismay and apology, but the curate would have none of them.

"My fault entirely!" he insisted. "I have no right to be breakfasting at this hour; but this is my day off. You see I take early Service every morning at seven; but on Wednesdays we cut it out—omit it and have full Matins at ten. So I get up at half-past nine, take Service at ten, and come back to my rooms at eleven and have breakfast. It is my weekly treat."

"You deserve it," said Eileen feelingly. Her religious exercises were limited to going to church on Sunday morning and coming out, if possible, after the Litany. "And how do you like Much Moreham?"

"I did not like it at all when I came," said the curate, "but recently I have begun to enjoy myself immensely." He did not say how recently.

"Were you in London before?"

"Yes—in the East End. It was pretty hard work, but a useful experience. I feel rather lost here during my spare time. I get so little exercise. In London I used to slip away for an occasional outing in a Leander scratch eight, and that kept me fit. I am inclined," he added ruefully, "to put on flesh."

"Leander? Are you a Blue?"

The curate nodded.

"You know about rowing, I see," he said appreciatively. "The worst of rowing," he continued, "is that it takes up so much of a man's time that he has no opportunity of practicing anything else—cricket, for instance. All curates ought to be able to play cricket. I do my best; but there isn't a single boy in the Sunday School who can't bowl me. It's humiliating!"

"Do you play tennis at all?" asked Eileen.

"Yes, in a way."

"I am sure my sister will be pleased if you come and have a game with us some afternoon."

The enraptured curate had already opened his mouth to accept this demure invitation when Excalibur, rising from the hearthrug, stretched himself luxuriously and wagged his tail, thereby removing three pipes, an inkstand, a tobacco jar, and a half-completed sermon from the writing table.

V

EXCALIBUR was heavily overworked in his new rôle of chaperon during the next three or four weeks, and any dog less ready to oblige than himself might have felt a little aggrieved at the treatment to which he was subjected.

There was the case of the tennis lawn, for instance. He had always regarded this as his own particular sanctuary, dedicated to reflection and repose; but now the net was stretched across it and Eileen and the curate performed antics all over the court with rackets and small white balls which, though they did not hurt Excalibur, kept him awake. It did not occur to him to convey himself elsewhere, for his mind moved slowly; and the united blandishments of the players failed to bring the desirability of such a course home to him. He continued to lie in his favorite spot on the sunny side of the court, looking injured but forgiving, or slumbering perseveringly amid the storm that raged round him.

It was quite impossible to move Excalibur once he had decided to remain where he was; so Eileen and the curate agreed to regard him as a sort of artificial excrescence, like the buttress in a fives court. If the ball hit him, as it frequently did, the player waiting for it was at liberty either to play it or claim a let. This arrangement added a piquant and pleasing variety to what is too often—especially when indulged in by mediocre players—a very dull game.

Worse was to follow, however. One day Eileen and the curate conducted Excalibur to a neighboring mountain range—at least, so it appeared to Excalibur—and played another ball game. This time they employed long sticks with iron heads, and two balls, which, though they were much smaller than tennis balls, were incredibly hard and painful. Excalibur, though willing to help and anxious to please, could not supervise both the balls at once. As sure as he ran to retrieve one the other came after him and took him unfairly in the rear. Excalibur was the gentlest of creatures, but the most perfect gentleman has his dignity to consider.

After having been struck for the third time by one of these balls he whipped round, picked it up in his mouth and gave it a tiny pinch, just as a

warning. At least, he thought it was a tiny pinch. The ball retaliated with unexpected ferocity. It twisted and turned. It emitted long, snaky spirals of some elastic substance, which clogged his teeth and tickled his throat and wound themselves round his tongue and nearly choked him. Panic-stricken, he ran to his mistress, who, with weeping and with laughter, removed the writhing horror from his jaws and comforted him with fair words.

After that Excalibur realized that it is wiser to walk behind golfers than in front of them. It was a boring business, though, and very exhausting, for he loathed exercise of every kind; and his only periods of repose were the occasions on which the expedition came to a halt on certain small, flat lawns, each of which contained a hole with a flag in it.

Here Excalibur would lie down, with the contented sigh of a tired child, and go to sleep. As he almost invariably lay down between the hole and the ball, the players agreed to regard him as a bunker. Eileen putted round him; but the curate—who had little regard for the humbler works of creation, Excalibur thought—used to take his mashie and attempt a lofting shot, an enterprise in which he almost invariably failed, to Excalibur's great inconvenience.

Country walks were more tolerable, for Eileen's supervision of his movements, which was usually marked by an officious severity, was sensibly relaxed on these days and Excalibur found himself at liberty to range abroad amid the heath and through the coppices, engaged in a pastime that he imagined was hunting.

One hot afternoon, wandering into a clearing, he encountered a hare. The hare, which was suffering from extreme panic, owing to a terrifying noise behind it,—the blast of the newest and most vulgar motor horn, to be precise,—was bolting right across the clearing. After the manner of hares where objects directly in front of them are concerned, the fugitive entirely failed to perceive Excalibur and, indeed, ran right underneath him on its way to cover. Excalibur was so unstrung by this adventure that he ran back to where he had left Eileen and the curate.

They were sitting side by side on the grass and the curate was holding Eileen's hand.

Excalibur advanced on them thankfully and indicated by an ingratiating smile that a friendly remark or other recognition of his presence would be gratefully received; but neither took the slightest notice of him. They continued to gaze straight before them in a mournful and abstracted fashion. They looked not so much at Excalibur as through him. First the hare, then Eileen and the curate! Excalibur began to fear that he had become invisible, or at least transparent. Greatly agitated he drifted away into a neighboring plantation full of young pheasants. Here he encountered a keeper, who was able to dissipate his gloomy suspicions for him without any difficulty whatsoever. But Eileen and the curate sat on.

"A hundred pounds a year!" repeated the curate. "A pass degree and no influence! I can't preach and I have no money of my own. Dearest, I ought never to have told you."

"Told me what?" inquired Eileen softly. She knew quite well; but she was a woman, and a woman can never let well enough alone.

The curate, turning to Eileen, delivered himself of a statement of three words. Eileen's reply was a softly whispered Tu quoque!

"It had to happen, dear," she added cheerfully, for she did not share the curate's burden of responsibility in the matter. "If you had not told me we should have been miserable separately. Now that you have told me, we can be miserable together. And when two people who—who—" She hesitated.

The curate supplied the relative sentence. Eileen nodded her head in acknowledgment.

"Yes; who are—like you and me—are miserable together, they are happy! See?"

"I see," said the curate gravely. "Yes, you are right there; but we can't go on living on a diet of joint misery. We shall have to face the future. What are we going to do about it?"

Then Eileen spoke up boldly for the first time.

"Gerald," she said, "we shall simply have to manage on a hundred a year."

But the curate shook his head.

"Dearest, I should be an utter cad if I allowed you to do such a thing," he said. "A hundred a year is less than two pounds a week!"

"A lot of people live on less than two pounds a week," Eileen pointed out longingly.

"Yes; I know. If we could rent a three-shilling cottage and I could go about with a spotted handkerchief round my neck, and you could scrub the doorsteps coram populo, we might be very comfortable; but the clergy belong to the black-coated class, and people in the lower ranks of the black-coated class are the poorest people in the whole wide world. They have to spend money on luxuries—collars and charwomen, and so on—which a workingman can spend entirely on necessities. It wouldn't merely mean no pretty dresses and a lot of hard work for you, Eileen. It would mean starvation! Believe me—I know! Some of my friends have tried it—and I know!"

"What happened to them?" asked Eileen fearfully.

"They all had to come down in the end—some soon, some late, but all in time—to taking parish relief."

"Parish relief?"

"Yes; not official, regulation, rate-aided charity, but the infinitely more humiliating charity of their well-to-do neighbors—quiet checks, second-hand dresses, and things like that. No, little girl; you and I are too proud—too proud of the cloth—for that. We will never give a handle to the people who are always waiting to have a fling at the improvident clergy—not if it breaks our hearts, we won't!"

"You are quite right, dear," said Eileen quietly. "We must wait."

Then the curate said the most difficult thing he had said yet:—

"I shall have to go away from here."

Eileen's hand turned cold in his.

"Why?" she whispered; but she knew.

"Because if we wait here we shall wait forever. The last curate in Much Moreham—what happened to him?"

"He died."

"Yes—at fifty-five; and he had been here for thirty years. Preferment does not come in sleepy villages. I must go back to London."

"The East End?"

"East or south or north—it doesn't signify. Anywhere but west. In the east and south and north there is always work to be done—hard work. And if a parson has no money and no brains and no influence, and can only work—run clothing clubs and soup kitchens, and reclaim drunkards—London is the place for him. So off I go to London, my beloved, to lay the foundations of Paradise for you and me—for you and me!"

There was a long silence. Then the pair rose to their feet and smiled on each other extremely cheerfully, because each suspected the other—rightly—of low spirits.

"Shall we tell people?" asked the curate.

Eileen thought, and shook her head.

"No," she said; "nicer not. It will make a splendid secret."

"Just between us two, eh?" said the curate, kindling at the thought.

"Just between us two," agreed Eileen. And the curate kissed her very solemnly. A secret is a comfortable thing to lovers, especially when they are young and about to be lonely.

At this moment a leonine head, supported on a lumbering and ill-balanced body, was thrust in between them. It was Excalibur, taking sanctuary with the Church from the vengeance of the Law.

"We might tell Scally, I think," said Eileen.

"Rather!" assented the curate. "He introduced us."

So Eileen communicated the great news to Excalibur.

"You do approve, dear—don't you?" she said.

Excalibur, instinctively realizing that this was an occasion when liberties might be taken, stood up on his hind legs and placed his forepaws on his mistress's shoulders. The curate supported them both.

"And you will use your influence to get us a living wage from somewhere—won't you, old man?" added the curate.

Excalibur tried to lick both their faces at once—and succeeded.

VI

SO the curate went away, but not to London. He was sent instead to a great manufacturing town in the north, where the work was equally hard, and where Anglican and Roman and Salvationist fought grimly side by side against the powers of drink and disease and crime. During these days, which ultimately rolled into years, the curate lost his boyish freshness and his unfortunate tendency to put on flesh. He grew thin and lathy; and, though his smile was as ready and as magnetic as ever, he seldom laughed.

He never failed, however, to write a cheerful letter to Eileen every Monday morning. He was getting a hundred and twenty pounds a year now; so his chances of becoming a millionaire had increased by twenty per cent.

Meantime his two confederates, Excalibur and Eileen, continued to reside at Much Moreham. Eileen was still the recognized beauty of the district, but she spread her net less promiscuously than of yore. Girl friends she always had in plenty, but it was noticed that she avoided intimacy with all eligible males of over twenty and under forty-five years of age. No one knew the reason for this except Excalibur. Eileen used to read Gerald's letters aloud to him every Tuesday morning; sometimes the letter contained a friendly message to Excalibur himself.

In acknowledgment of this courtesy Excalibur always sent his love to the curate—Eileen wrote every Friday—and he and Eileen walked together, rain or shine, on Friday afternoons to post the letter in the next village. Much Moreham's post office was too small to remain oblivious to such a regular correspondence.

The curate was seen no more in his old parish. Railroad journeys are costly things and curates' holidays rare. Besides, he had no overt excuse for coming. And so life went on for five years. The curate and Eileen may have met during that period, for Eileen sometimes went away visiting. As Excalibur was not privileged to accompany her on these occasions he had no means of checking her movements; but the chances are that she never saw the curate, or I think she would have told Excalibur about it. We simply have to tell some one.

Then, quite suddenly, came a tremendous change in Excalibur's life. Eileen's brother-in-law—he was Excalibur's master no longer, for Excalibur had been transferred to Eileen by deed of gift, at her own request, on her first birthday after the curate's departure—fell ill. There was an operation and a crisis, and a deal of unhappiness at Much Moreham; then came convalescence, followed by directions for a sea voyage of six months. It was arranged that the house should be shut up and the children sent to their grandmother at Bath.

"That settles everything and everybody," said the gaunt man on the sofa, "except you, Eileen? What about you?"

"What about Scally?" inquired Eileen.

Her brother-in-law apologetically admitted that he had forgotten Scally.

"Not quite myself at present," he mentioned in extenuation.

"I am going to Aunt Phœbe," announced Eileen.

"You are never going to introduce Scally into Aunt Phœbe's establishment!" cried Eileen's sister.

"No," said Eileen, "I am not." She rubbed Excalibur's matted head affectionately. "But I have arranged for the dear man's future. He is going to visit friends in the north. Aren't you, darling?"

Excalibur, to whom this arrangement had been privately communicated some days before, wagged his tail and endeavored to look as intelligent and knowing as possible. He was not going to put his beloved mistress to shame by admitting to her relatives that he had not the faintest idea what she was talking about.

However, he was soon to understand. The next day Eileen took him up to London by train. This in itself was a tremendous adventure, though alarming at first. He traveled in the guard's van, it having been found quite impossible to get him into an ordinary compartment—or, rather, to get any one else into the compartment after he lay down on the floor. So he traveled with the guard, chained to the vacuum brake, and shared that kindly official's dinner.

When they reached the terminus there was much bustle and confusion. The door of the van was thrown open and porters dragged out the luggage and submitted samples thereof to overheated passengers, who invariably failed to recognize their own property and claimed someone else's.

Finally, when the luggage was all cleared out, the guard took off Excalibur's chain and facetiously invited him to alight for London Town. Excalibur, lumbering delicately across the ribbed floor of the van, arrived at the open doorway. Outside on the platform he espied Eileen. Beside her stood a tall figure in black.

With one tremendous roar of rapturous recognition, Excalibur leaped straight out of the van and launched himself fairly and squarely at the curate's chest. Luckily the curate saw him coming.

"He knows you, all right," said Eileen with satisfaction.

"He appears to," replied the curate. "Afraid I don't dance the tango, Scally, old man; but thanks for the invitation, all the same!"

Excalibur spent the rest of the day in London, where it must be admitted he caused a genuine sensation—no mean feat in such a blasé place.

In Bond Street the traffic had to be held up both ways by benevolent policemen, because Excalibur, feeling pleasantly tired, lay down to rest.

When evening came they all dined together in a cheap little restaurant in Soho and were very gay, with the gayety of people who are whistling to keep their courage up. After dinner Eileen said good-bye, first to Excalibur and then to the curate. She was much more demonstrative toward the former than toward the latter, which is the way of women.

Then the curate put Eileen into a taxi and, having with the aid of the commissionaire extracted Excalibur from underneath—he had gone there under some confused impression that it was the guard's van again—said good-bye for the last time; and Eileen, smiling bravely, was whirled away out of sight.

As the taxi turned a distant corner and disappeared from view, it suddenly occurred to Excalibur that he had been left behind. Accordingly he set off in pursuit.

The curate finally ran him to earth in Buckingham Palace Road, which is a long chase from Soho, where he was sitting on the pavement, to the grave inconvenience of the inhabitants of Pimlico, and refusing to be comforted. It took his new master the best part of an hour to get him to Euston Road, where it was discovered they had missed the night mail to the north. Accordingly they walked to a rival station and took another train.

In all this Excalibur was the instrument of Destiny, as you shall hear.

VII

THE coroner's jury was inclined at the time to blame the signalman, but the Board of Trade inquiry established the fact that the accident was due to the engine-driver's neglect to keep a proper lookout. However, as the driver was dead and his fireman with him, the law very leniently took no further action in the matter.

About three o'clock in the morning, as the train was crossing a bleak Yorkshire moor seven miles from Tetley Junction, the curate suddenly left the seat on which he lay stretched dreaming of Eileen and flew across the compartment on to the recumbent form of a stout commercial traveler.Then he rebounded to the floor and woke up—unhurt.

"'Tis an accident, lad!" gasped the commercial traveler as he got his wind.

"So it seems," said the curate. "Hold tight! She's rocking!"

The commercial traveler, who was mechanically groping under the seat for his boots,—commercial travelers always remove their boots in third-class railroad compartments when on night journeys,—followed the curate's advice and braced himself with his feet against the opposite seat for the coming bouleversement.

After the first shock the train had gathered way again—the light engine into which it had charged had been thrown clear off the track—but only for a moment. Suddenly the reeling engine of the express left the rails and staggered drunkenly along the ballast. A moment later it turned over, taking the guard's van and the first four coaches with it, and the whole train came to a standstill.

It was a corridor train, and unfortunately for Gerald Gilmore and the commercial traveler their coach fell over corridor side downward. There was no door on the other side of the compartment—only three windows, crossed by a stout brass bar. These windows had suddenly become sky-lights.

They fought their way out at last. Once he got the window open, the curate experienced little difficulty in getting through; but the commercial traveler was corpulent and tenacious of his boots, which he held persistently in one

hand while Gerald tugged at the other. Still, he was hauled up at last, and the two slid down the perpendicular roof of the coach to the permanent way.

"That's done, anyway!" panted the drummer; and sitting down he began to put on his boots.

"There's plenty more to do," said the curate grimly, pulling off his coat. "The front of the train is on fire. Come!"

He turned and ran. Almost at his first step he cannoned into a heavy body in rapid motion. It was Excalibur.

"That you, old friend?" observed the curate. "I was on my way to see about you. Now that you are out, you may as well come and bear a hand."

The pair sprinted along the line toward the blazing coaches.

It was dawn—gray, weeping, and cheerless—on Tetley Moor. Another engine had come up from behind to take what was left of the train back to the Junction. Seven coaches, including the lordly sleeping saloon, stood intact; four, with the engine and tender, lay where they had fallen, a mass of charred wood and twisted metal.

A motor car belonging to a doctor stood in the roadway a hundred yards off, and its owner, with a brother of the craft who had been a passenger on the train, was attending to the injured. There were fourteen of these altogether, mostly suffering from burns. These were made as comfortable as possible in sleeping berths their owners had vacated.

"Take your seats, please!" said the surviving guard in a subdued voice. He spoke at the direction of a big man in a heavy overcoat, who appeared to have taken charge of the salvage operations. The passengers clambered up into the train.

Only one hesitated. He was a long, lean young man, black from head to foot with soot and oil. His left arm was badly burned; and seeing a doctor disengaged at last, he came forward to have it dressed.

The big man in the heavy overcoat approached him.

"My name is Caversham," he said. "I happen to be a director of the company. If you will give me your name and address I will see to it that your services to-night are suitably recognized. The way you got those two children out of the first coach was splendid, if I may be allowed to say so. We did not even know they were there."

The young man's teeth suddenly flashed out into a white smile against the blackness of his face.

"Neither did I, sir," he said. "Let me introduce you to the responsible party."

He whistled. Out of the gray dawn loomed an eerie monster, badly singed, wagging its tail.

"Scally, old man," said the curate, "this gentleman wants to present you with an illuminated address. Thank him prettily!" Then, to the doctor: "I'm ever so much obliged to you; it's quite comfortable now."

He began stiffly to pull on his coat and waistcoat. Lord Caversham, lending a hand, noted the waistcoat and said quickly:—

"Will you travel in my compartment? I should like to have a word with you if I may."

"I think I had better go and have a look at those poor folks in the sleeper first," replied the curate. "They may require my services professionally."

"At the Junction, then, perhaps?" suggested Lord Caversham.

At the Junction, however, the curate found a special waiting to proceed north by a loop line; and, being in no mind to receive compliments or waste his substance on a hotel, he departed forthwith, taking his charred confederate, Excalibur, with him.

VIII

FORTUNE, once she takes a fancy to you, is not readily shaken off, however, as most successful men are always trying to forget. A fortnight later Lord Caversham, leaving his hotel in a great northern town, encountered an acquaintance he had no difficulty whatever in recognizing.

It was Excalibur, jammed fast between two stationary tramcars—he had not yet shaken down to town life—submitting to a painful but effective process of extraction at the hands of a posse of policemen and tram conductors, shrilly directed by a small but commanding girl of the lodging-house-drudge variety.

When this enterprise had been brought to a successful conclusion and the congested traffic moved on by the overheated policemen, Lord Caversham crossed the street and tapped the damsel on the shoulder.

"Can you kindly inform me where the owner of that dog may be found?" he inquired politely.

"Yas. Se'nty-one Pilgrim Street. But 'e won't sell him."

"Should I be likely to find him at home if I called now?"

"Yas. Bin in bed since the accident. Got a nasty arm."

"Perhaps you would not mind accompanying me back to Pilgrim Street in my car?"

After that Mary Ellen's mind became an incoherent blur. A stately limousine glided up; Mary Ellen was handed in by a footman and Excalibur was stuffed in after her in installments. The grand gentleman entered by the opposite door and sat down beside her; but Mary Ellen was much too dazed to converse with him.

The arrival of the equipage in Pilgrim Street was the greatest moment of Mary Ellen's life.

Meantime upstairs in the first-floor front the curate, lying in his uncomfortable flock bed, was saying:—

"If you really mean it, sir—"

"I do mean it. If those two children had been burned to death unnoticed I should never have forgiven myself, and the public would never have forgiven the company."

"Well, sir, since you say that, you—well, you could do me a service. Could you possibly use your influence to get me a billet—I'm not asking for an incumbency; any old curacy would do—a billet I could marry on?" He flushed scarlet. "I—we have been waiting a long time now."

There was a long silence, and the curate wondered whether he had been too mercenary in his request. Then Lord Caversham asked:—

"What are you getting at present?"

"A hundred and twenty a year."

This was about two thirds of the salary Lord Caversham paid his chauffeur. He asked another question in his curious, abrupt staccato manner:—

"How much do you want?"

"We could make both ends meet on two hundred; but another fifty would enable me to make her a lot more comfortable," said the curate wistfully.

The great man surveyed him silently—wonderingly, too, if the curate had known. Presently he asked:

"Afraid of hard work?"

"No work is hard to a man with a wife and a home of his own," replied the curate with simple fervor.

Lord Caversham smiled grimly. He had more homes of his own than he could conveniently live in, and he had been married three times; but even he found work hard now and then.

"I wonder!" he said. "Well, good-afternoon. I should like to be introduced to your fiancée some day."

IX

A TRAMP opened the rectory gate and shambled up the neat gravel walk toward the house. Taking a short cut through the shrubbery he emerged suddenly on a little lawn.

On the lawn a lady was sitting in a basket chair beside a perambulator, the occupant of which was slumbering peacefully. A small but intensely capable nursemaid, prone on the grass in a curvilinear attitude, was acting as tunnel to a young gentleman of three who was impersonating a locomotive.

The tramp approached the group and asked huskily for alms. He was a burly and unpleasant specimen of his class—a class all too numerous on the outskirts of the great industrial parish of Smeltingborough. The lady in the basket chair looked up.

"The rector is out," she said. "If you go into the town you will find him at the Church Hall and he will investigate your case."

"Oh, the rector is out, is he?" repeated the tramp in tones of distinct satisfaction.

"Yes," said Eileen.

The tramp advanced another pace.

"Give us half a crown!" he said. "I haven't had a bite of food since yesterday, lady—nor a drink neither," he added humorously.

"Please go away!" said the lady. "You know where to find the rector."

The tramp smiled unpleasantly, but made no attempt to move.

"You refuse to go away?" the lady said.

"I'll go for half a crown," replied the tramp with the gracious air of one anxious to oblige a lady.

"Watch baby for a moment, Mary Ellen," said Eileen.

She rose and disappeared into the house, followed by the gratified smile of the tramp. He was a reasonable man and knew that ladies did not wear pockets.

"Thirsty weather," he remarked affably.

Mary Ellen, keeping one hand on the shoulder of Master Gerald Caversham Gilmore and the other on the edge of the baby's perambulator, merely chuckled sardonically.

The next moment there were footsteps round the corner of the house and Eileen reappeared. She was clinging with both hands to the collar of an enormous dog. Its tongue lolled from its great jaws; its tail waved menacingly from side to side; its great limbs were bent as though for a spring. Its eyes were half closed as though to focus the exact distance.

"Run!" cried Eileen to the tramp. "I can't hold him in much longer!"

This was true enough, except that when Eileen said "in" she meant "up." But the tramp did not linger to discuss grammar. There was a scurry of feet, the gate banged and he was gone.

With a sigh of relief Eileen let go of Excalibur's collar. Excalibur promptly collapsed on the grass and went to sleep again.