

Blue Ribbon Fiction

A Little Cure For Bachelors By Hugh Walpole

If There Is a Moral to This Diverging Tale, It Is: Beware How You Befriend a Dog with a Tin Can Tied to His Tail.



"You couldn't help liking some people at first sight."

SOME marriages are inevitable, some accidental, some so marvelously unexpected that only a miracle surely can have created them. Of such a miracle was the marriage of James Todhunter. Not one of his immediate circle, a small and perceptive circle, it may be said, understood in the very least how it had come about. Here he was, the most confirmed, the most fortunate, the most reserved of all bachelors, and there he was, only a month later, engaged to a pretty but silly young woman, and then a fortnight after that married and done for.

It was not as though he were a chicken, being 43 years of age, long, tall, thin, and black in appearance, with the heaviest of black mustaches and black, beetle-browed eyebrows that would have frightened most women out of their senses, and if the black eyebrows hadn't done it his literary reputation certainly would, because it's natural for any woman to suppose that the author of books with such titles as "The Esoteric Tendency Toward Art in the Early Hebrews" and "The Mathematical Principles of Milton's Prosody," and "Aether and Ether; or Gas and Common Sense" (this last his only really frivolous work), must be so clever and so superior that mundane affairs like clothes and tea parties should never enter his head at all.

This was well enough for women who knew Todhunter only from a distance, but it was surprising that his lifelong friend Mallory, also a confirmed bachelor, should be so deeply amazed at this marriage. It took Mallory off his feet and laid him on his back and stamped upon him. He was a little, round, fat man with rosy cheeks, very tempting to stamp upon, and as he explained to his friends in his rather high, excited treble, "I can't understand it. It isn't as though she had an idea in her head. No one knew better than Todhunter the absurdity of getting married. It must be witchcraft." It was not, however, witchcraft, and the way that it happened was this.

One thing that very few people knew about James Todhunter was that he was exceedingly lonely, and another thing that nobody knew was that he was exceedingly shy. Every one of his friends and acquaintances would have roared with laughter had you spoken of him as a shy man, but, as is so often the case, that same brazen exterior, with its supercilious glance from beneath the beetle-browed eyebrows; that rather lazy, drawing "O, do you think so?"—all this that looked like conceit was in truth timidity. Very few suspected him of being a lonely man, and yet they might have done so had they considered with any real attention the

large house looking on to Regents park in which he lived in solitary grandeur with a butler, a cook and a maid servant, in whose confines he occasionally gave dreary little parties and in whose library he sat studying hour after hour, absorbed in a way and yet suddenly starting to consciousness and wishing that he had somebody suddenly to come in and shout at him or clap him on the back.

On most afternoons he took his walk in Regents park, viewing from an apparently supercilious distance the children playing their games, the lovers exchanging confidences, the unemployed discussing wages in sinister twos and threes, the animals on the Mappin terraces looking up to heaven and wondering when on earth they would taste freedom.

One fine afternoon in May he sat down on a seat under a tree, a long way from anybody, and tried to puzzle out the intricacies of a chapter of his book, "The Lake Poets and Natural Symbolism," which he was then writing.

It was just then that he perceived, not very far from him, sprung apparently from nowhere and gazing at him with nervous, eager apprehension, a little dog. Todhunter could perceive that it was in a state of great nervousness, that it was ill fed, and that it had tied to its stumpy tail a dirty piece of string with a tin can adhering thereto. The dog was saying, as plainly as a dog could say, "Please relieve me of this horrible thing—take it and throw it away so that I may never see it again." At the same time it was also saying, "Relieve me of it without coming any closer to me, because I trust no man and have the very best reasons in the world for that misbelief."

Todhunter looked as he always looked, as though he had but just come out of a tailor's show, his black clothes as stiff and stern as though they were a suit of armor. He was, indeed, sitting upright on the seat, more like a model from Madam Tassaud's than anything else you can imagine. Nevertheless, within this iron exterior his heart was soft and was touched in spite of itself by the trembling image that looked at him with such beseeching eyes, but refused to move an inch nearer to him.

Todhunter got up from his seat, took a step forward, and the dog backed away. Irritated and determined now to achieve his purpose, Todhunter moved resolutely on, the dog resolutely back. There then began a strange sort of game, the animal moving round in a kind of circle. The dog's eyes never left Todhunter's face. They were appealing, miserable, sensitive, starved, longing eyes, but they had not in them an atom of trust in any hu-

man being in this world. Todhunter then had an inspiration. He went back to his seat, took off his top hat, and put it down on the grass in front of him. This action alone showed what a long way his soul had progressed since he first sighted the little dog, as he was normally terrified of sitting in the open without any covering to his head, especially on a warm day like this.

The dog saw the hat, so large and black and strange, growing apparently straight out of the grass, something that he had never seen before, something possibly that was good to eat. His puppy spirit also, long defeated and stamped upon, nevertheless finally indestructible, rose again within him. His curiosity began to get the better of him. He made a little wriggle, expecting the strange black thing to wriggle also, but when it did not reply he was more intrigued than ever. He advanced a little, and so eager was his excitement that he never noticed the rattle of the can behind him. He put out a paw and touched it. The surface was strange, unlike anything that he had ever known before. He bit the edge of it with his teeth and at that moment Todhunter caught him by the scruff of his back and took him on to his knee.

Todhunter clumsily untied the can and kicked it into limbo. Then he stroked the dog, murmuring to it, trying to reassure it. Gradually it tranquilized, its heart beating with less and less fury, and even at last it put out its tongue, licked Todhunter's finger, and discovering there, I suppose, the essence of a soap new to its canine experience, began eagerly to devour the whole hand.

The feel of that rough tongue was something quite new to Todhunter. Very seldom in his long life had any beings, human or otherwise, made to him physical demonstrations of affection. He was desperately moved by the dog's advances, stared out across the grass in front of him, feeling the warm body beneath his hand, the little beating heart, realizing more than ever before what impossible sticks the Lake poets were, how remote, how absurd, how unworthy to lay toil upon the time and intelligence of later generations.

To cut a long story short, he started homeward with the dog creeping at his

heels. There was kindness beneath those eyebrows, tenderness in the stroke of that hand, and the dog knew it. So into 25 York terrace he crawled, slithered along the passage, and obscured himself as completely as possible beneath the umbrella stand. There the evil glance of Mordant, the butler, discovered him. Mordant was like a butler on the stage, one of those large, stout, red-faced butlers with immobile countenance, mouth sarcastically but discreetly shaped, and beautiful clothes. "Get out, you varmint," he murmured toward the umbrella stand, thinking that the dog had crawled in unnoticed from the street.

It was one of the really awkward moments of Todhunter's life. I am afraid that he feared Mordant. "It's all right," he said stammering in spite of himself and struggling to adopt that voice that he used when addressing girls' colleges and meetings of the Geographical society. "I brought him in."

"You, sir?" said Mordant, staring.

"Yes, poor little beast. He hasn't had anything to eat for days. I found him being teased by some boys. Give him some food and a bath and then bring him up to the library."

"You're not," said Mordant, "you're not intending, sir, then, to keep him?"

"I can say nothing about the future," said Todhunter, very haughtily. "Please do as I ask."

He sat up then in his library wondering whether the dog were being kindly treated, and waiting with an impatience that surprised himself for the animal's arrival. Nearly an hour later Mordant appeared in the doorway with a white, shivering object in his arms, and, most astonishing of all things, a smile on his face.

"He's not a bad little animal, sir," said Mordant. "Looks better when he's washed. Took to the cat in a surprising way." And he put him down on the floor and retired, with great dignity and dejection.

The dog staggered across the polished boards of the library floor, stopping every once and again to give himself a shake, as though he were trying to drive from his system the extraordinary bathing experience that he had just been through.

When he had staggered half way towards his new master he saw the tasseled end of the rope of the window curtain, a deep and magnificent red, swaying ever so slightly before him. He steadied himself to watch this; he moved a few paces towards it and staided himself again. He then went down on his front paws, his eyes staring at it with utter absorption,

and there proceeded from somewhere inside his body a strange noise like a kettle just on the boil. He advanced closer, raised a paw, and pushed it ever so slightly. Then what his soul had longed for, but scarcely dared to expect, occurred. The rope swung. He hit it again. It swung more violently. With excited rumblings he was at it and upon it, catching it between his teeth, worrying it, pulling it, letting it go again, tumbling in his eagerness, on his head, pulling himself again, rolling once, when he missed it altogether, over on to his back, and then suddenly pausing, sitting down on his haunches and looking up at Todhunter with eyes that were bright with happiness, a body quivering with excitement. From that moment he may be said to have been firmly established in the Todhunter household.

He was christened with the commonplace name of Bob, because Todhunter, with all his knowledge and erudition, could think of nothing better. He devoted himself completely to his master, following him about whenever he was in the house, refusing to have his meal anywhere but in Todhunter's presence, and sleeping on the end of Todhunter's bed. He very quickly acclimatized himself to the ways of the house, was no trouble to anybody, and the cook would have ensnared him body and soul and turned him into the merest kitchen dog (an ambition that every cook in the world most unfortunately possesses) had not his loyal soul been capable of only one attachment at a time.

Then came the great day which was to change Todhunter's life. There arrived an afternoon, fine, warm and beautiful, when Todhunter thought he would like a stroll in the park. The dog, as was his habit, presented himself in the hall, wagging his tail in a frenzied way, his eyes raised passionately to his master's face, his whole body one throbbing appeal. Todhunter yielded, took the lead which Mordant had purchased, and strode off, the dog at his heels. They went up into the inner circle, passed the Botanical Gardens, through the little gate, over the railings, on to the great sweep of green that faces the Zoo.

Today this green was covered with families, babies and cricketers. It was

early in June, and everybody who could was playing a ball game of one sort or another, from the very elegant teams in white flannel who were playing like aristocrats, with a large crowd watching them, to four small boys who had a stick and an old tattered ball and spent their time delightedly screaming the one at the other.

Now how should Todhunter have known that to this particular dog anything in the shape of a ball was like drugging a drunkard, opium to a Chinaman, and a hat shop to a woman? At three he was off, his tail up, his legs scuttling behind him, his nose in the air. First, he made for two nursemaids and some babies, but here the ball was too large for him to secure it with his teeth, so he merely wagged his tail at them and scuttled across to three little girls who had a tennis ball that they were throwing very inaccurately the one to the other.

The moment he had it in his mouth he was off again and all the three little girls set up a howl that could surely have been heard from one end of the park to the other, and that brought two stout, perspiring women hastily to the rescue. Todhunter reached them just as they were looking angrily around for some one to abuse. "I do beg your pardon," he began, quite breathless with his hurry (he was, of course, not in the very best condition), "my little dog . . . I assure you I didn't intend . . . nobody knew."

They were mollified by his obvious agitation. The dog was rescued and brought back, the tennis ball, punctured in several places, dragged from his mouth, some money offered to pay for the ball and haughtily rejected, and by the time this was just coming to an honorable but somewhat awkward conclusion, the dog was off again, this time plunging into the middle of the elegant cricket match, where two men were running for their lives between the wickets. Todhunter had just time to see the dog run gayly with them, bolt into the wickets and knock off the bales, leap delightedly upon a stout and indignant umpire, and then run after the cricket ball, which had been swung too far by one fielder, rush at it as though it were a live thing, push it with his feet and then go for the legs of the fielder who picked it up.

There followed then an enchanting half hour, enchanting, that was, for the onlookers, but not exactly so for the unfortunate man in a top hat and a tall coat who, trying to catch the dog, inevitably just missed him and was, as all the delighted observers agreed, a most ludicrous and helpless figure. Everyone watched, applauded, shouted, laughed and incited the animal to further exploits. The dog had never known such a half hour before and will pretty certainly never know such a half hour again. When at last he was caught by a stout woman attended by a large crowd of children, nursemaids and small boys, Todhunter was a wreck of heat and agitation.

"Poor little thing," said the woman, concernedly. "Must have a little bit of fun at times."

There followed then the agitating business of trying to fasten the lead on to his collar. The clasp was a new one and very stiff. The dog wriggled into every shape and size, and finally the really remarkable vision was offered to an admiring world of the author of "The Lake Poets and Natural Symbolism" kneeling in the middle of Regents park, his hat off, his tie waving in the wind, his face crimson, trying to attach a very small dog and a long piece of leather while a continually increasing crowd laughed, admired and expostulated.

The scene might have continued for a long time had not a soft voice been heard to say, "Perhaps I can do it for you," and Todhunter, looking up, beheld two of the loveliest eyes and one of the prettiest mouths in the world, set in a pattern of pink and white against the bluest of skies. A young lady bent towards him. For a moment his hand touched hers. In another second the lead was adjusted; for the general public the game was over, but for Todhunter it had only just begun.

It was that evening, in solitude in his own house, that showed Todhunter what he had really become. He, a settled and solidified bachelor, who had escaped the dangerous age, had decided quite finally that women were nothing to him, now he sat in his large, chilly library and sighed and even groaned and flung the poet laureate's erudite work on Milton's prosody from one end of the library to the other. He behaved, I am sorry to say, like a muddled sentimentalist over the dog. He fondled him, caressed him, tickled his ears, muttered absurd things into his mouth, and finally let him sleep on his lap, sitting there staring in front of him till every bone in his body ached, but he would not wake the animal, that little messenger of Jove, that little evoker of the goddess, that canine symbol of Cupid.

It was undoubtedly the dog's best evening. There never was, there probably never will be again, such a sentimentalist as that dog. It was not the dog's fault. He had been created a sentimentalist. The one thing in life that he wanted was to be loved and caressed, and it was the one thing in life that hitherto he had not obtained. Unlike most dogs, his stomach was nothing to his heart, and he would desert any bone for a caress. Not that with all this he was entirely soft. He had the fighting quality, he had his dislikes and showed them, but when he loved he loved with all his heart!

On that great evening he just gave himself up completely to his master, and how was he to tell that it was not of him that his master was thinking, but of something quite different, something far more dangerous? It was well that he made the most of that evening; so far as Todhunter was concerned, it was the dog's last, because on the next day, another lovely afternoon of sun and color and scented leaves, the goddess was evoked, stepped forth from the bushes,

gave a little startled smile of recognition when Todhunter raised his hat, said, "Why, there's the dear little dog," entered into conversation about dogs in general and of what particular breed this dog in the majority was, passed from that to remarks about the weather, how badly rain was needed, from thence to how the weather always broke when she took her holiday, and it was a shame, because she loved tennis so, and from that to why in general things were never quite as you would have them to be, and she supposed that it was because it wouldn't be good for people's characters if they were, and from that again to character and discipline, and finally the last step towards how you couldn't help liking some people at first sight, and she really didn't know why it was so, and she supposed it was foolish to go so often on first impressions as she did, but that one way and another she had never been deceived, although her mother kept on saying to her, "Look out, Dulcie, you'll be taken in one day," but up to now she hadn't been.

Here two things add to the development of my story. One was entrance of Mallory, the bachelor friend of Todhunter. The other was the beginning of the tragedy of the dog.

It is difficult, of course, to know exactly what goes on in a dog's mind, but we may suppose, without venturing into the realm of psycho-analysis or treading on Dr. Jung's German toes, that that evening made glorious by the caresses of his master had roused in him highest hopes of a splendid and lobbey future. In truth it was at that very moment that his decline in his master's affections began.

He could not understand it. The little jokes that had been so readily accepted only the week before were now not noticed at all, and one when with true unselfish disinterestedness he sprang up on the young lady and tried to embrace her, he was violently rebuked by his master, who told him not to be a nuisance and ordered Mordant to take him down to the basement. He was very unhappy.

The person who was unhappy was Michael Mallory. For years and years Mallory and Todhunter had been bachelors together, Mallory, having, after being twice rejected, flung women over the wall as being unworthy of further attention and took it for granted Todhunter had done the same. This sudden appearance of a young woman in a cherry-colored dress, with her silly, smirking smile and her way of looking at him when he was present as though she wished he would go away, and would tell him so as soon as she was more safely entrenched in Todhunter's affections, infuriated him.

Mallory was lonely as he had never been lonely before. He sat in the library with very much the same look on his round, chubby face that the dog was wearing down in the basement. If Todhunter deserted him he did not know what he would do.

Finally, with a deep breath like one coming up from a deep dive far below the salty sea, he ejaculated, "Anyway, Jim, it's good to think that you're too old for such silly things as matrimony." Surprising, indeed, then, to see Todhunter's anger, his eyebrows shoot out as though, like Mr. Tate's mustache, they were fixed on with elastic. "What do you mean?" he cried. "Too old? I'm not too old at all. I'll show you whether I'm too old," which he did by proposing that same evening and being instantly, even greedily, accepted.

If the dog's fate before the engagement had been a sad one, it was nothing to what it was afterwards. He was now entirely neglected. It was decided that the wedding should be soon, and that it should be rather a smart wedding. Miss Dulcie Pinkerton, the young lady, had reached just that age when her women friends were beginning to say, "Poor Dulcie, she'll never be married now," so that she was determined to invite them all and to have the finest ceremony possible. Todhunter was in that desperate state when he agreed to everything. He was to wake up just a year too late to wonder why he did the things he did.

The dog sat in the basement, and so desperate did things become that his meal was occasionally forgotten and he was forced to eat the cat's. His heart was broken. He would have preferred infinitely to return to the days of the tin can and the jeering boys, when he had no illusions as to love, when he knew exactly where he was.

The wedding was over, the guests were at the house, Todhunter and his Dulcie had stood in the middle of the room receiving endless superficial congratulations from supercilious guests. The moment had come when the happy man must go up and change his clothes for the journey. Outside in the hall there were two figures. In the middle of the hall, stout, chubby, and miserable, was Mallory, staring desolately in front of him. In the middle of the doorway, looking absurd with a piece of ribbon round his neck, was the dog, also staring in front of him, hoping against hope for a kind word, a pat of the hand, something from somebody. "Hallo, Jim," said Mallory. "Hallo, old man," said Todhunter. "I must hurry up and get changed. We're off in a quarter of an hour."

Mallory waited for Todhunter to say something of the more tender sort, but it is the first duty of the Dulcies of this world to slaughter the pre-matrimonial friends. She had already hinted to her dear James that Mr. Mallory was really the sweetest of men, but he was just a wee bit tiresome with his silly old stories over and over again and she wasn't sure whether he were quite so loyal to her dear James as her dear James thought him.

Mallory caught the eye of the dog. "I say, Jim," he suddenly said. "Hallo, what is it?" said Todhunter, turning at the foot of the stairs.

"Wasn't it through that dog," Mallory said, "that you met your wife?"

"Why, yes, it was," said Todhunter, (Concluded on Page 8.)