

THE WIDOW'S DOG

Mary Russell Mitford

Freeeditorial 

One of the most beautiful spots in the north of Hampshire—a part of the country which, from its winding green lanes, with the trees meeting over head-like a cradle, its winding roads between coppices, with wide turfy margents on either side, as if left on purpose for the picturesque and frequent gipsy camp, its abundance of hedgerow timber, and its extensive tracts of woodland, seems as if the fields were just dug out of the forest, as might have happened in the days of William Rufus—one of the loveliest scenes in this lovely county is the Great Pond at Ashley End.

Ashley End is itself a romantic and beautiful village, struggling down a steep hill to a clear and narrow running stream, which crosses the road in the bottom, crossed in its turn by a picturesque wooden bridge, and then winding with equal abruptness up the opposite acclivity, so that the scattered cottages, separated from each other by long strips of garden ground, the little country inn, and two or three old-fashioned tenements of somewhat higher pretensions, surrounded by their own moss-grown orchards, seemed to be completely shut out from this bustling world, buried in the sloping meadows so deeply green, and the hanging woods so rich in their various tinting, along which the slender wreaths of smoke from the old clustered chimneys went smiling peacefully in the pleasant autumn air. So profound was the tranquillity, that the slender streamlet which gushed along the valley, following its natural windings, and glittering in the noonday sun like a thread of silver, seemed to the unfrequent visitors of that remote hamlet the only trace of life and motion in the picture.

The source of this pretty brook was undoubtedly the Great Pond, although there was no other road to it than by climbing the steep hill beyond the village, and then turning suddenly to the right, and descending by a deep cart-track, which led between wild banks covered with heath and feathery broom, garlanded with bramble and briar roses, and gay with the purple heath-flower and the delicate harebell,* to a scene even more beautiful and more solitary than the hamlet itself.

** One of the pleasantest moments that I have ever known, was that of the introduction of an accomplished young American to the common harebell, upon the very spot which I have attempted to describe. He had never seen that English wild-flower, consecrated by the poetry of our common language, was struck even more than I expected by its delicate beauty, placed it in his button-hole, and repeated with enthusiasm the charming lines of Scott, from the Lady of the Lake:—*

*"For me,"—she stooped, and, looking round,
Plucked a blue harebell from the ground,—
"For me, whose memory scarce conveys
An image of more splendid days,
This little flower, that loves the lea,
May well my simple emblem be;
It drinks heaven's dew as blithe as rose
That in the King's own garden grows,
And when I place it in my hair,
Allan, a bard, is bound to swear*

He ne'er saw coronet so fair."

Still greater was the delight with which another American recognised that blossom of a thousand associations—the flower sacred to Milton and Shakspeare—the English primrose. He bent his knee to the ground in gathering a bunch, with a reverential expression which I shall not easily forget, as if the flower were to him an embodiment of the great poets by whom it has been consecrated to fame; and he also had the good taste not to be ashamed of his own enthusiasm. I have had the pleasure of exporting, this spring, to my friend Miss Sedgwick, (to whose family one of my visitors belongs,) roots and seeds of these wild flowers, of the common violet, the cowslip, and the ivy, another of our indigenous plants which our Transatlantic brethren want, and with which Mr. Theodore Sedgwick was especially delighted. It will be a real distinction to be the introductress of these plants into that Berkshire village of New England, where Miss Sedgwick, surrounded by relatives worthy of her in talent and in character, passes her summers.

It was a small clear lake almost embofomed in trees, across which an embankment, formed for the purpose of a decoy for the wildfowl with which it abounded, led into a wood which covered the opposite hill; an old forest-like wood, where the noble oaks, whose boughs almost dipped into the water, were surrounded by their sylvan accompaniments of birch, and holly, and hawthorn, where the tall trees met over the straggling paths, and waved across the grassy dells and turfy brakes with which it was interspersed. One low-browed cottage stood in a little meadow—it might almost be called a little orchard—just at the bottom of the winding road that led to the Great Pond: the cottage of the widow King.

Independently of its beautiful situation, there was much that was at once picturesque and comfortable about the cottage itself, with its irregularity of outline, its gable ends and jut-ting-out chimneys, its thatched roof and penthouse windows. A little yard, with a small building which just held an old donkey-chaise and an old donkey, a still older cow, and a few pens for geese and chickens, lay on one side of the house; in front, a flower court, surrounded by a mossy paling; a larger plot for vegetables behind; and, stretching down to the Great Pond on the side opposite the yard, was the greenest of all possible meadows, which, as I have before said, two noble walnut and mulberry-trees, and a few aged pears and apples, clustered near the dwelling, almost converted into that pleasantest appanage of country life, an orchard.

Notwithstanding, however, the exceeding neatness of the flower-court, and the little garden filled with choice beds of strawberries, and lavender, and old-fashioned flowers, stocks, carnations, roses, pinks; and in spite of the cottage itself being not only almost covered with climbing shrubs, woodbine, jessamine, clematis, and musk-roses, and in one southern nook a magnificent tree-like fuchsia, but the old chimney actually garlanded with delicate creepers, the maurandia, and the lotus spermus, whose pink and purple bells, peeping out from between their elegant foliage, and mingling with the bolder blossoms and darker leaves of the

passion-flower, give such a wreathy and airy grace to the humblest building;* in spite of this luxuriance of natural beauty, and of the evident care bestowed upon the cultivation of the beds, and the training of the climbing plants, we yet felt, we hardly could tell why, but yet we instinctively felt, that the moss-grown thatch, the mouldering paling, the hoary apple trees, in a word, the evidences of decay visible around the place, were but types of the fading fortunes of the inmates.

** I know nothing so pretty as the manner in which creeping plants interweath themselves one with another. We have at this moment a wall quite covered with honeysuckles, fuchsias, roses, clematis, passion flowers, myrtles, scobsea, acrima carpis, lotus spermus, and maurandia Barclayana, in which two long sprays of the last-mentioned climbers have jutted out from the wall, and entwined themselves together, like the handle of an antique basket. The rich profusion of leaves, those of the lotus spermus, comparatively rounded and dim, soft in texture and colour, with a darker patch in the middle, like the leaf of the old gum geranium; those of the maurandia, so bright, and shining, and sharply outlined—the stalks equally graceful in their varied green, and the roseate bells of the one contrasting and harmonising so finely with the rich violet flowers of the other, might really form a study for a painter. I never saw anything more graceful in quaint and cunning art than this bit of simple nature. But nature often takes a fancy to outvie her skilful and ambitious handmaiden, and is always certain to succeed in the competition.*

And such was really the case. The widow King had known better days. Her husband had been the head keeper, her only son head gardener, of the lord of the manor; but both were dead; and she, with an orphan grandchild, a thoughtful boy of eight or nine years old, now gained a scanty subsistence from the produce of their little dairy, their few poultry, their honey, (have I not said that a row of beehives held their station on the sunny side of the garden?). and the fruit and flowers which little Tom and the old donkey carried in their season to Belford every market-day.

Besides these their accustomed sources of income, Mrs. King and Tom neglected no means of earning an honest penny. They stripped the downy spikes of the bulrushes to stuff cushions and pillows, and wove the rushes themselves into mats. Poor Tom was as handy as a girl; and in the long winter evenings he would phut the straw hats in which he went to Belford market, and knit the stockings, which, kept rather for show than for use, were just assumed to go to church on Sundays, and then laid aside for the week. So exact was their economy.

The only extravagance in which Mrs. King indulged herself was keeping a pet spaniel, the descendant of a breed for which her husband had been famous, and which was so great a favourite, that it ranked next to Tom in her affections, and next to his grandmother in Tom's. The first time that I ever saw them, this pretty dog had brought her kind mistress into no small trouble.

We had been taking a drive through these beautiful lanes, never more beautiful than when the richly tinted autumnal foliage contrasts with the deep emerald hue of the autumnal herbage, and were admiring the fine effect of the majestic oaks, whose lower branches almost touched the clear water which reflected so brightly the bright blue sky, when Mrs. King, who was well known to my father, advanced to the gate of her little court, and modestly requested to speak with him.

The group in front of the cottage door was one which it was impossible to contemplate without strong interest. The poor widow, in her neat crimped cap, her well-worn mourning gown, her apron and handkerchief coarse, indeed, and of cheap material, but delicately clean, her grey hair parted on her brow, and her pale intelligent countenance, stood leaning against the doorway, holding in one thin trembling hand a letter newly opened, and in the other her spectacles, which she had been fain to take off, half hoping that they had played her false, and that the ill-omened epistle would not be found to contain what had so grieved her. Tom, a fine rosy boy, stout and manly for his years, sat on the ground with Chloe in his arms, giving vent to a most unmanly fit of crying; and Chloe, a dog worthy of Edwin Landseer's pencil, a large and beautiful spaniel, of the scarce old English breed, brown and white, with shining wavy hair feathering her thighs and legs, and clustering into curls towards her tail and forehead, and upon the long glossy magnificent ears which gave so much richness to her fine expressive countenance, looked at him wistfully, with eyes that expressed the fullest sympathy in his affliction, and stooped to lick his hand, and nestled her head in his bosom, as if trying, as far as her caresses had the power, to soothe and comfort him.

"And so, sir," continued Mrs. King, who had been telling her little story to my father, whilst I had been admiring her pet, "this Mr. Poulton, the tax-gatherer, because I refused to give him our Chloe, whom my boy is so fond of that he shares his meals with her, poor fellow, has laid an information against us for keeping a sporting dog—I don't know what the proper word is—and has had us surcharged; and the first that ever I have heard of it is by this letter, from which I find that I must pay I don't know how much money by Saturday next, or else my goods will be seized and sold. And I have but just managed to pay my rent, and where to get a farthing I can't tell. I dare say he would let us off now if I would but give him Chloe; but that I can't find in my heart to do. He's a hard man, and a bad dog-master. I've all along been afraid that we must part with Chloe, now that she's growing up like, because of our living so near the preserves—"

"Oh, grandmother!" interrupted Tom, "poor Chloe!"

"But I can't give her to *him*. Don't cry so, Tom! I'd sooner have my little goods sold, and lie upon the boards. I should not mind parting with her if she were taken good care of, but I never will give her to him."

"Is this the first you have heard of the matter?" inquired my father; "you ought to have had notice in time to appeal."

"I never heard a word till to-day."

"Poulton seems to say that he sent a letter, nevertheless, and offers to prove the sending, if need be; it's not in our division, not even in our county, and I am afraid that in this matter of the surcharge I can do nothing," observed my father; "though I

have no doubt but it's a rascally trick to come by the dog. She's a pretty creature," continued he, stooping to pat her, and examining her head and mouth with the air of a connoisseur in canine affairs, "a very fine creature! How old is she?"

"Not quite a twelvemonth, sir. She was pupped on the sixteenth of last October, grandmother's birthday, of all the days in the year," said Tom, somewhat comforted by his visiter's evident sympathy.

"The sixteenth of October! Then Mr. Poulton may bid good-bye to his surcharge; for unless she was six months old on the fifth of April, she cannot be taxed for this year—so his letter is so much waste paper. I'll write this very night to the chairman of the commissioners, and manage the matter for you. And I'll also write to Master Poulton, and let him know that I'll acquaint the board if he gives you any farther trouble. You're sure that you can prove the day she was pupped?" continued his worship, highly delighted. "Very lucky! You'll have nothing to pay for her till next half-year, and then I'm afraid that this fellow Poulton will insist upon her being entered as a sporting dog, which is fourteen shillings. But that's a future concern. As to the surcharge, I'll take care of that. A beautiful creature, is not she, Mary? Very lucky that we happened to drive this way." And with kind adieus to Tom and his grandmother, who were as grateful as people could be, we departed.

About a week after, Tom and Chloe in their turn appeared at our cottage. All had gone right in the matter of the surcharge. The commissioners had decided in Mrs. King's favour, and Mr. Poulton had been forced to succumb. But his grandmother had considered the danger of offending their good landlord Sir John, by keeping a sporting dog so near his coverts, and also the difficulty of paying the tax; and both she and Tom had made up their minds to offer Chloe to my father. He had admired her, and everybody said that he was as good a dog-master as Mr. Poulton was a bad one; and he came sometimes coursing to Ashley End, and then perhaps he would let them both see poor Chloe; "for grandmother," added Tom, "though she seemed somehow ashamed to confess as much, was at the bottom of her heart pretty nigh as fond of her as he was himself. Indeed, he did not know who could help being fond of Chloe, she had so many pretty ways." And Tom, making manful battle against the tears that would start into his eyes, almost as full of affection as the eyes of Chloe herself, and hugging his beautiful pet, who seemed upon her part to have a presentiment of the evil that awaited her, sate down as requested in the hall, whilst my father considered his proposition.

Upon the whole, it seemed to us kindest to the parties concerned, the widow King, Tom, and Chloe, to accept the gift. Sir John was a kind man, and a good landlord, but he was also a keen sportsman; and it was quite certain that he would have no great taste for a dog of such high sporting blood close to his best preserves; the keeper also would probably seize hold of such a neighbour as a scapegoat, in case of any deficiency in the number of hares and pheasants; and then their great enemy, Mr. Poulton, might avail himself of some technical deficiency to bring Mrs. King within the clutch of a surcharge. There might not always be an oversight in that Shylock's bond, nor a wise judge, young or old, to detect it if there were. So that, upon due consideration, my father (determined, of course, to make a proper return for the present) agreed to consider Chloe as his own property; and Tom, having seen her very comfortably installed in clean dry straw in a warm

stable, and fed in a manner which gave a satisfactory specimen of her future diet, and being himself regaled with plum-cake and cherry brandy, (a liquor of which he had, he said, heard much talk, and which proved, as my father had augured, exceedingly cheering and consolatory in the moment of affliction,) departed in much better spirits than could have been expected after such a separation. I myself, duly appreciating the merits of Chloe, was a little jealous for my own noble Dash, whom she resembled, with a slight inferiority of size and colouring; much such a resemblance as Viola, I suppose, bore to Sebastian. But upon being reminded of the affinity between the two dogs, (for Dash came originally from the Ashley End kennel, and was, as nearly as we could make out, grand-uncle to Chloe,) and of our singular good fortune, in having two such beautiful spaniels under one roof, my objections were entirely removed. Under the same roof they did not seem likely to continue. When sent after to the stable the next morning, Chloe was missing. Everybody declared that the door had not been opened, and Dick, who had her in charge, vowed that the key had never been out of his pocket. But accusations and affirmations were equally useless—the bird was flown. Of course she had returned to Ashley End. And upon being sent for to her old abode, Tom was found preparing to bring her to Aberleigh; and Mrs. King suggested, that, having been accustomed to live with them, she would, perhaps, sooner get accustomed to the kitchen fireside than to a stable, however comfortable.

The suggestion was followed. A mat was placed by the side of the kitchen fire; much pains were taken to coax the shy stranger; (Dick, who loved and understood dogs, devoting himself to the task of making himself agreeable to this gentle and beautiful creature;) and she seemed so far reconciled as to suffer his caresses, to lap a little milk when sure that nobody saw her, and even to bridle with instinctive coquetry, when Dash, head and tail up, advanced with a sort of stately and conscious courtesy to examine into the claims of the newcomer. For the first evening all seemed promising; but on the next morning, nobody knew how or when, Chloe eloped to her old quarters.

Again she was fetched back; this time to the parlour: and again she ran away. Then she was tied up, and she gnawed the string; chained up, and she slipped the collar; and we began to think, that unless we could find some good home for her at a distance, there was nothing for it but to return her altogether to Mrs. King, when a letter from a friend at Bath gave a new aspect to Chloe's affairs.

The letter was from a dear friend of mine—a young married lady, with an invalid husband, and one lovely little girl, a damsel of some two years old, commonly called "Pretty May." They wanted a pet dog to live in the parlour, and walk out with mother and daughter—not a cross yelping Blenheim spaniel, (those troublesome little creatures spoil every body's manners who is so unlucky as to possess them, the first five minutes of every morning call being invariably devoted to silencing the lapdog and apologising to the visiter,)—not a pigmy Blenheim, but a large, noble animal, something, in short, as like as might be to Dash, with whom Mrs. Keating had a personal acquaintance, and for whom, in common with most of his acquaintances, she entertained a very decided partiality: I do not believe that there is a dog in England who has more friends than my Dash. A spaniel was wanted at Bath like my Dash: and what spaniel could be more like Dash than

Chloe? A distant home was wanted for Chloe: and what home could open a brighter prospect of canine felicity than to be the pet of Mrs. Keating, and the playmate of Pretty May? It seemed one of those startling coincidences which amuse one by their singular fitness and propriety, and make one believe that there is more in the exploded doctrine of sympathies than can be found in our philosophy.

So, upon the matter being explained to her, thought Mrs. King; and writing duly to announce the arrival of Chloe, she was deposited, with a quantity of soft hay, in a large hamper, and conveyed into Belford by my father himself, who would entrust to none other the office of delivering her to the coachman, and charging that very civil member of a very civil body of men to have especial care of the pretty creature, who was parted with for no other fault than an excess of affection and fidelity to her first kind protectors.

Nothing could exceed the brilliancy of her reception. Pretty May, the sweet smiling child of a sweet smiling mother, had been kept up a full hour after her usual time to welcome the stranger, and was so charmed with this her first living toy, that it was difficult to get her to bed. She divided her own supper with poor Chloe, hungry after her long journey; rolled with her upon the Turkey carpet, and at last fell asleep with her arms clasped round her new pet's neck, and her bright face, coloured like lilies and roses, flung across her body; Chloe enduring these caresses with a careful, quiet gentleness, which immediately won for her the hearts of the lovely mother, of the fond father, (for to an accomplished and right-minded man, in delicate health, what a treasure is a little prattling girl, his only one!) of two grandmothers, of three or four young aunts, and of the whole tribe of nursery attendants. Never was debut so successful, as Chloe's first appearance in Camden Place.

As her new dog had been Pretty May's last thought at night, so was it her first on awakening. He shared her breakfast as he had shared her supper; and immediately after breakfast, mother and daughter, attended by nurserymaid and footman, sallied forth to provide proper luxuries for Chloe's accommodation. First they purchased a sheepskin rug; then a splendid porcelain trough for water, and a porcelain dish to match, for food; then a spaniel basket, duly lined, and stuffed, and curtained—a splendid piece of canine upholstery; then a necklace-like collar with silver bells, which was left to have the address engraved upon the clasp; and then May, finding herself in the vicinity of a hosier and a shoemaker, bethought herself of a want which undoubtedly had not occurred to any other of her party, and holding up her own pretty little foot, demanded "tilk tocks and boo thoose for Tloë."

For two days did Chloe endure the petting and the luxuries. On the third she disappeared. Great was the consternation in Camden Place. Pretty May cried as she had never been known to cry before; and papa, mamma, grandmamas, aunts, nursery and house-maids, fretted and wondered, wondered and fretted, and vented their distress in every variety of exclamation, from the refined language of the drawing-room to the patois of a Somersetshire kitchen. Rewards were offered, and handbills dispersed over the town. She was cried, and she was advertised; and at last, giving up every hope of her recovery, Mrs. Keating wrote to me.

It happened that we received the letter on one of those soft November days, which sometimes intervene between the rough winds of October and the crisp frosts of Christmas, and which, although too dirty under foot to be quite pleasant for walking, are yet, during the few hours that the sun is above the horizon, mild enough for an open carriage in our shady lanes, strewn as they are at that period with the yellow leaves of the elm, whilst the hedgerows are still rich with the tawny foliage of the oak, and the rich colouring of the hawthorn and the bramble. It was such weather as the Americans generally enjoy at this season, and call by the pretty name of the Indian summer. And we resolved to avail ourselves of the fineness of the day to drive to Ashley End, and inform Mrs. King and Tom (who we felt ought to know) of the loss of Chloe, and our fear, according with Mrs. Keating's, that she had been stolen; adding our persuasion, which was also that of Mrs. Keating, that, fall into whatever hands she might, she was too beautiful and valuable not to ensure good usage.

On the way we were overtaken by the good widow's landlord, returning from hunting, in his red coat and top-boots, who was also bound to Ashley End. As he rode chatting by the side of the carriage, we could not forbear telling him our present errand, and the whole story of poor Chloe. How often, without being particularly uncharitable in judging of our neighbours, we have the gratification of finding them even better than we had supposed! He blamed us for not having thought well enough of him to put the whole affair into his management from the first, and exclaimed against us for fearing that he would compare the preserves and the pheasant-shooting with such an attachment as had subsisted between his good old tenant and her faithful dog. "By Jove!" cried he, "I would have paid the tax myself rather than they should have been parted. But it's too late to talk of that now, for, of course, the dog is stolen. Eighty miles is too far even for a spaniel to find its way back! Carried by coach, too! I would give twenty pounds willingly to replace her with old Dame King and Master Tom. By the way, we must see what can be done for that boy—he's a fine spanking fellow. We must consult his grandmother. The descendant of two faithful servants has an hereditary claim to all that can be done for him. How could *you* imagine that I should be thinking of those coverts? I that am as great a dog-lover as Dame King herself! I have a great mind to be very angry with you."

These words, spoken in the good sportsman's earnest, hearty, joyous, kindly voice, (*that* ought to have given an assurance of his kindly nature,—I have a religious faith invoices,) these words brought us within sight of Ashley End, and there, in front of the cottage, we saw a group which fixed our attention at once: Chloe, her own identical self—poor, dear Chloe, apparently just arrived, dirty, weary, jaded, wet, lying in Tom's arms as he sat on the ground, feeding her with the bacon and cabbage, his own and his grandmother's dinner, all the contents of the platter; and she, too happy to eat, wagging her tail as if she would wag it off; now licking Mrs. King's hands as the good old dame leant over her, the tears streaming from her eyes: now kissing Tom's honest face, who broke into loud laughter for very joy, and, with looks that spoke as plain as ever looks did speak, "Here I am come home again to those whom I love best—to those who best love me!" Poor dear Chloe! Even we whom she left, sympathised with her fidelity. Poor

dear Chloe! there we found her, and there, I need not, I hope, say, we left her, one of the happiest of living creatures.

Freeeditorial 