

The Storyteller

WINNIE.

I'm only a greyhound, it is true, and perhaps on that account owe an apology for usurping the privileges of man by reciting a few of my reminiscences. My species have not spoken over much since the time of Aesop; and, having ruminated in more or less unbroken silence for such a period, we may now crave your indulgence. On moonlight nights, when impressed with the beauties of the firmament, we sometimes address the moon in rhapsodies, but in a language unintelligible to man.

At times you may have seen us dreaming at the bedside of past adventures, or mayhap of future forebodings; but you cannot interpret our thoughts as we bark ourselves awake. My dreams are all framed round the same object, and are not as happy as those of less sentimental brutes; my thoughts, asleep or awake, by night and by day, all turn to the same subject; the same form is ever before my mind—it is the form of Winnie; and it is of Winnie I am about to tell you.

It is a romance, though not the kind of romance schoolgirls read in English novelettes—not the Percy and Angelina type, with the same monotonously happy endings: Percy is poor and will not speak because she is rich; then she becomes penniless, and he is enabled to pour forth the longings of a hungry heart; they embrace accordingly, and, lo! each inherits a legacy which is placed at the feet of the other, amidst golden sunsets, dewy evenings, silvery moonlights and diamond mornings, with moonbeams, rainbows, and the song of birds. Yet I write of love, pure love, the love which, methinks, ends more often in sorrow than in joy. Unlike your human writers, I will not 'magnify the exception into a rule, and dwarf the world into an exception'; nor will I, for the sake of sensation, hang the events of one life to the fortunes of another. I write of life, the things I have seen, what I have heard.

As I have already delayed over much with the preamble, I will pass lightly over my birth and earlier environment, which are shrouded in some obscurity. My first coherent recollections are of an eccentric old man, my first master. He was called 'The Professor' by some, but nicknamed 'Socrates' by the boys from the neighboring school; and as I am called 'Plato,' I know not whether his name was derived from mine or mine from his. Be this as it may, Socrates lived a lonely life in a large house, or, properly speaking, old castle, encircled by trees, some distance from the roadside. On a fine day he was usually to be seen in an armchair which he had formed in the hedge, reading some old and well-worn books; when it rained he read the same books in the house, and this was the only variation in habits which he appeared to permit himself. His farm he had let to the neighbors. He was his own butler, cook, and housemaid, all his food was supplied by contract; his tastes were simple and never varied, and the same supply was left daily at his gate. The house, of which he was the only occupant, was never entered save by him, and a kind of weird romance hung around the place. He was a bachelor, of course, and a 'woman-hater,' though I have heard it whispered that once upon a time his sentiments were otherwise towards the subtler sex, one of whom—whether a Circe or Hebe I know not—was the original cause of warping his mind, souring his temper, and giving rise to his numerous eccentricities. At times one of the more advanced students, vain with a passing triumph, attempted an encounter with Socrates, but invariably regretted his temerity; for, whatever the subject chosen, the old man put to shame his youthful adversary. My mother lay at our master's feet to answer the more impertinent in a suitable manner and see that no frivolous intruders disturbed with impunity the meditations with which he was wont to amuse himself.

For a time I also watched with my mother, but as I grew up I became restless, and longed for Kyrle Kelly who on occasion took me with him around the farm and taught me how to run and hunt. It was evident, however, that the old man did not view with favor these illicit excursions on my part, especially as, not infrequently, my mother was induced to leave her vigil to witness my performances.

So it came to pass that Kyrle, who had taken a great fancy to me—being the best-bred hound in the country—got permission to take me away with him, as I had become only a source of distraction to my erstwhile sedate mother. I well remember the day I was taken to my new home, a cheerful-looking house with rose-bushes in front and ivy entwining the ends, a

marked contrast to the forbidding look and bare walls of my previous abode. But as soon as I entered I no longer saw the house. A little girl ran to meet us, the prettiest brown-haired, blue-eyed doll I had ever seen, with a superb pose, and as graceful as a greyhound. She screamed with joy on seeing me, and, clasping her hands around my neck, she waltzed round the floor with me, and forthwith we became fast friends. Such was my first meeting with Winnie; henceforth everything in life seemed brighter and better.

I soon became a general favorite with my new and neighborly neighbors; even the beggars—the natural enemies of my species—used to praise me, but I fear it was only to please Winnie, for I have overheard them say when she was not present that 'twas a sin to waste so much good food on me while so many poor creatures were relying for their dinner on the scraps from a hundred charities. However, I believe they spoke more in hunger than in anger, and consequently I refrain from moralising on such little hypocrisies.

After a time Winnie, who previously attended the local school, changed to the higher school in the village, which was some distance from our home. Kyrle drove her at first, but she soon learned how to drive herself. I invariably accompanied her in the mornings, and longed all day for the hour to meet her in the evenings. The road to the village passed by my old home, and I had an opportunity of caressing my mother as I went by, mornings and evenings. I was also delighted to see my old master give me a kindly glance of recognition, and at sight of Winnie he almost looked pleased. At first the village youths endeavored to coax me hunting, but finding that their blandishments were of no avail, the more cruel of them ceased and annoyed me in a most un-Christian manner. Some boys have no sense of decency, and I was more hurt at the insult than at anything else, to be treated like an ordinary low-bred village cur was naturally tantalising to the best-bred hound in the country. I, however, treated them with the contempt which they deserved. I neither condescended to run from them nor to snarl at them like the base-born, ill-mannered whelps they were accustomed to, and they soon came to respect me accordingly.

These were the happiest days of my life, going to school with Winnie, and occasionally hunting with Kyrle. When I returned from a hunt tired and hungry Winnie dried and fed me, and placed me near the fire. She sometimes looked at me reproachfully when she saw the blood of the hares, and I felt ashamed, though I never did inflict unnecessary punishment or tear up a poor little hare like other dogs. My motto always has been a fair start and a fair run, and I never pursued a hare with a second hound, nor do I think it fair for two powerful brutes to hunt one little hare; hounds that do such things are no better than they ought to be, and have no finer principles than common, ugly mouthed beggars.

Kyrle, however, was before long called away to assist his uncle in business, and I was, therefore, left solely in Winnie's charge. I knew instinctively when school was over, and off I bounded to the village to meet Winnie, and well was I repaid by a loving smile and soft caress. With Winnie present all was sunshine, without her it was darkness. But, alas, these joyous times did not last for ever. Soon I had the mortification to see Winnie's affections shared by another, and that is how our troubles began.

II.

I have described my old master as a hermit, bachelor, philosopher, he was beloved by none of his kind, but was especially feared and hated by the schoolboys. One student, however, whom his colleagues called 'Conor,' more serious-minded than the others, but without a comely person, had recently come to the school, and by his manly and respectful bearing and kindly disposition had gradually succeeded in thawing the old man's frigidity and ingratiating himself into his good graces. He and Socrates read and talked together almost every evening, and I have seen them drawing strange lines on scraps of paper, but to what purpose I know not.

Con also had become a favorite with Winnie; he was less 'cheeky' than the other boys, who continually annoyed her by impertinently calling her the 'Beauty.' For some time I looked upon Con as an intruder, as I fancied that Winnie had become less attentive to me on his account; but eventually I valued him as my best friend outside Winnie and Kyrle. He sometimes walked alongside us, and said pleasant things to Winnie, for, although serious-minded, he had a ready wit and quaint fancy, and seemed full of anecdotes with which he amused us. We looked on anxiously for him every evening, and were disappointed if perchance we did not see