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## A Little Cure for Bachelors



By Hugh Walpole

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 peripatetic circle, it may be said, understood in the very least how it had come about. Here he was, the most confirmed, the most saturnine, 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 lone 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, beetling 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 beetling eyebrows, that rather lazy, drawling "O, do you think so?" all this that looked like conceit was in truth timidity. He was a shy man because he was a modest man, and he was a modest man because he knew that he had not touched even the fringes of the great subjects that he was studying. 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 again. Supercilious, yes, but only apparently. He would have loved to collect one or two of the dirty children, to have given 5 shillings to one of the unemployed. He sighed with a kind of pathetic curiosity as he watched the lovers and he looked at the animals as though they alone of all the creatures in the park had feelings that he himself could understand.

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. Lake Poets on that lovely May afternoon seemed surprisingly gray and distant. Wordsworth was a silly old prig, Southey a conceited ass, Coleridge a drug-taking maniac, and De Quincey a spiteful old woman. He hated the lot of them and he looked at two babies far away on the green grass and cursed himself for a self-contained idiot because he had not one or two of his own whose noses he could blow, whose eyes he could wipe, and whose hair he could curl beneath his hand when he felt lonely and despondent.

It was just then he perceived, not very far from him, someone apparently from nowhere and gazing at him with nervous, eager apprehension, a little dog. Now he fancied that he had no love of animals and he was encouraged in this belief by his admirable servants, who hated animals in the house and said so, but there was something about this little dog which inevitably attracted his attention. It was perhaps a puppy, but not a very young puppy, and one of its immediate characteristics was that it was very difficult to be sure of anything about it, so indeterminate was it, so long where it ought to have been short, so thick where it should have been thin, containing, indeed, so many dogs in one dog that it was impossible to give it a real family name. It was perhaps more of the Sledzyham tribe than of any other—that is, it was some sort of a terrier with rough hair that nature had intended to be white, that was now here gray and there entirely black.

Todhunter could perceive that it was in a state of great nervousness, that it was ill fed, and that it had tied to its stomach (or rather to its chest) a tin can adhering thereto. One of its immediate absurdities of it was that the can was almost as large as the dog, being, indeed, a sort of basket, and when it made an apprehensive movement the can seemed to have a life of its own and to bump about on the grass in a most alarming manner. The dog was say-

*If There Is a Moral to This Diverting 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."

ing 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."

It was a pathetic little face that looked at Todhunter, the more pathetic from the fact that its rather over-large nose had a big black spot like a penny piece on one nostril which was ill balanced by another big black spot on the opposite ear. The nose quivered in the air, the eyes glittered with unshed tears, the tail with its hideous appendage bumped up and down with eager anxiety and excitement.

Todhunter looked as he always looked, though he had just come out of a tailor's shop, 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 Madame Tussaud'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. He attempted to lure the dog toward him; he made those absurd noises that human beings make to animals and babies, a kind of chirrup, a sort of drunken whistle, a manner of gurgling in the throat. The dog recognized these advances and banged his tail and the can with it more vigorously than before, but he refused to budge an inch.

"Come, then," said Todhunter, "pretty little dog, come along, then. I'll take it off for you. Come and let me take it off."

The dog sniggered a little at the mouth, but refused to come an inch further. 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 human 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 indomitable, rose again within him. This might be something to play with as well as something to eat. The puppy expected it to move. It did not. The puppy expected it to sniff. That perhaps it did, but from the distance he was keeping he could not be quite sure. There was a smell, but whether it was of the earth, or of the sky, or of some unknown animal he could not be sure. 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 im-

trigued than ever. He advanced a little, and so eager was his excitement that he never noticed the rattle of the can behind him. He advanced closer yet, and then lay down flat on the ground, his nose on his front paws, and stared steadily at the thing, his appetite rising, his tail as erect as the can would allow it to be. Still the black thing did not respond. Then he came quite close to it, forgetting in his eagerness the human being behind it. He put out a paw and touched it. The surface was strange, unlike anything that he had ever known before. He gave it a push and it moved backward. He bit the edge of it with his teeth and at the same moment Todhunter caught him by the scruff of his back and took him on to his knee.

When Mr. Todhunter felt upon his lap the trembling body of the dog some strange thing happened to his soul. Even as the dog was anticipating at every moment some blow from above, so had he all his life been anticipating. Even as the dog wriggled under his hand, trying to withdraw himself into some dark corner of safe obscurity, so had he wriggled, so had he longed for darkness. The wretched creature squinted up at him, showing a large piece of white in each eye, then stopped as though it suddenly occurred to him that this show of amiability might be dangerous, then lay quite flat, awkwardly on Todhunter's rather bony knees, sagging through in the space between his legs, hanging on, as it were, "with nails set and terror free," to quote a long-forgotten poem by Mr. Thomas Campbell.

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. But few men had patted him on the back or laid a friendly hand on his shoulder. Women had kissed him from duty and family custom, never because they thought him kissable. No one had grasped him by the hand as though to hurt him. No one, even when a small boy, had tucked him up in bed and told him not to be afraid of the dark. 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 and the little beating heart, realizing more than ever before what impossible sticks the Lake poets were, how remote, how absurd, how unworthy to lay toll upon the time and intelligence of later generations.

To cut a long story short, he started homeward with the dog creeping at his heels. To an uninitiated observer it must have seemed that the dog had but now been severely chastised and was crawling miserably behind his severe and inhuman master. Indeed, one or two threw indignant glances at the tall, black-browed, striding man and wondered how so large a human being could be cruel to so small a morsel of a dog, but as a matter of fact it had been this dog's way for a long time past to creep about the earth like the accursed serpent, having discovered that the more he crept, the less likely he was to be abused, the less likely, in fact, to be noticed at all, and, although he crept, he was entirely determined not to desert his new friend. There was kindness beneath those eyebrows, tenderness in the stroke of that hand, and he 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, immovable butlers with immobile countenance, mouth sarcastically but discreetly shaped, and beautiful clothes. "Get out, yer varmint," he murmured toward the um-

rella 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, ahem, 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 with great dignity and condescension.

The dog staggered across the polished boards of the library floor, stopping every now 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

