

The Wisdom of Nicodemus

Short Story by L. H. BICKFORD.

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The Sunrise Limited swept past the lower pasture of Mrs. O'Hearn's Nebraska farm every afternoon at 3 o'clock and Mrs. O'Hearn's dog, Nicodemus, sallied down to the fence and barked at it. He was an untoward animal of no breeding whatever, a canine outcast deserted by an emigrant, and his hostility to all railway movements was pronounced and even excessive, although his best effort and longest run were reserved for the flying vestibule train that came so fleetly out of the east and shot by him with contemptuous roar and shriek, leaving a black cloud to hover over the landscape long after the noise of it had disappeared from sight and hearing. The seeming ambition of Nicodemus was to some day overtake this disturber at a moment of downspaced when, he no doubt calculated, he might scale the fence and cripple it by an attack in some vulnerable spot among the little revolving things that sped it along the rails. In this hope the dog had made his energetic, if resultless, race every day for three months, and that he was encouraged, if not abetted, by Mrs. O'Hearn herself was county gossip.

A year after Mrs. O'Hearn's husband had been snatched from the field of toil she lost the companionship and nourishing daily gift of her only cow. That the double calamity distressed her was not phenomenal, but the departure of Michael O'Hearn was within the number of things recognizable since the movements of Providence are to be accepted of the unexpected and the unexpected, but instance of the expected, Mrs. O'Hearn, a faithfully and notoriously religious person, resigned herself to the simple hope that Michael was to be met in another country. The taking off of the cow left no such solace, since its spiritual future did not concern her.

From the day the engine of the Sunrise Limited swept the animal in all literalness from the face of the earth—it had been rather foolishly investigating the nutritious qualities of the cinders—Mrs. O'Hearn faced a world that appeared to be singularly unsympathetic. Where it had condescended with her in her first bereavement it merely smiled over her second. Obviously, in the eyes of the community, the least fitting place for a cow to browse was in the line of a lightning express. The station agent at Exeter intimated as much when Mrs. O'Hearn called upon him and depicted, with elaborate detail, the circumstances of her misfortune. He would, he declared, lay the matter before the proper officials, but this concession came only after her angry insistence had shown him the folly of attempting to pass lightly over her loss and after she had somewhat freely given voice to her opinions of himself and the company he so modestly represented. When the conversation prolonged to the point of tedium to the station agent he closed the ticket window and retreated to the baggage room; she withdrew, reiterating her sentiments throughout the town.

A week later she came again and her visit left memories of life, color and action. She demanded to know whether the equivalent had been sent. The equivalent, she had somewhat exactly figured, was \$30.15—this itemization included \$30 for cow and 15 cents for the purchase of milk three weeks from a neighbor. Her following visit disclosed fully as close calculation, and the equivalent mounted to \$20.30 and it was plain to the agent that her arithmetic carried with it rules of interest and equity that would never be accepted by the company, even if it desired to recognize her claim for the cow itself. On this occasion, and on many occasions thereafter, she mentally convinced that his prevarication would not outlive his tenure of office, asserted that only the president of the road had authority in the matter of destroyed cows, and, having made it clear to her that her claim had been duly forwarded, besought her to follow methods less spectacular and to exercise some patience. At the same time he expressed his grief that she should select a more minion of the great corporation—who had in himself no power of restitution—to make the object of her expressions of disapproval. For by this time the agent was annoyed over sundry salutes of village wit that expended itself in solicitous inquiries regarding the visits of Mrs. O'Hearn.

Having so frankly thrown himself on her mercy, he made a personal truce with the lady, but each week a new bill was presented with its accumulation of figures, together with verbal expressions of disregard for the president of the company and his lax methods of business. During the interim and while on her own acres Mrs. O'Hearn had incited her watchdog to manifestations of violence as, in dumb show, she shook one very red flat in the direction of each passing train. Quick to observe and with the rare wisdom of the dog, Nicodemus conceived that loyalty to his mistress demanded some outward expression on his own part and that these noisy and disturbing monsters, hitherto unnoticed, were by some process of reasoning considered enemies to the house. And he, too, missed the cow, for her absence left nothing in particular to be barked at.

At first the efforts of Nicodemus amused the freight crews, who threw lumps of coal at him. This was to the advantage of Mrs. O'Hearn, since coal was a luxury, and the daily performance resulted in a small measure of the precious fuel to add to her store of wood. She began to wish, indeed, that the attention of the passenger engineers might be equally attracted and that their resentment might take the same form. After a time, however, and from long familiarity, the sport ceased to interest the passing trainmen, and but for an occasional missile the dog barked without

out purpose, although he never relaxed his endeavors. The flight of time brought no spirit of charity to overcome the bitterness of Mrs. O'Hearn. And it was quite by way of coincidence that on the day she had prepared her weekly statement—which now had \$1.50 added to the principal—something entirely unusual in railway equipment should engage, although tardily, the attention of Nicodemus. This was an abbreviated edition of the despised "Flyer," for the engine drew but two cars, the last a wonder of luxurious construction and painted so high a yellow that it vied with the ripe corn in the fields through which it passed. It was a still summer day and the special came into view without the knowledge of the dog, who now knew the time tables with amazing accuracy, and was consequently off guard at this unexpected advent. His slumber was interrupted by voices that floated up from the pasture and he arose and scanned the air. Then he roared to the corner of the barn and with head cocked to one side viewed that which amazed him greatly.

The train had stopped, and around one of the sets of wheels stood three men variously engaged in drawing smoking cotton from an aperture, poking it about with a stick, or dousing water upon the steaming mess. A venerable gentleman who had descended from the gorgeous car to watch the operation, finally strode over to the fence, and, attracted by some wild blossoms, somewhat awkwardly scaled the barrier and ambled pleasantly about the green fields, lost in contemplation of the simplicity of nature's wonders.

Nicodemus came into action by a spring in the air, a shrill bark and a series of con-

came to a halt just beneath the branch on which the Venerable Gentleman was perched, and the dog wagged her a welcome and made another dash for the fence, describing as he returned, a circle. The man in the tree viewed her advent with positive pleasure. He at once connected Mrs. O'Hearn with the ownership of the dog, and he was also impressed that his position was absurd; so, although his tones were pleasant, chagrin was somewhere apparent.

"My dear woman, if you will call off your dog you will oblige me greatly. I must confess to trespassing here, but an accident forced us to stop, and I was attracted by some wild flowers, and so invaded your domain."

He smiled genially, conscious that he had put the case concisely at least, while Mrs. O'Hearn, with an authoritative "but shut, now," forced Nicodemus to lie down, although his body still quivered from the exertions of the chase and the consequent canine delirium. His owner was at once impressed by the Venerable Gentleman, whose manner was seemly, and who suggested aristocratic courtesies even under the embarrassing condition of maintaining a balance on the tree limb. He won her as he looked benevolently through his eyeglasses which, by great fortune, he had not lost in this sudden adventure. At the moment Mrs. O'Hearn experienced a pang of feminine regret at the absence of her best apron, and the rolling pin hung heavily in her hand. It was clear that this unfortunate prisoner had at once the sympathy of the honest woman, and but for an unfortunate admission on the part of the Venerable Gentleman, and a rash attempt at levity, the incident might have closed forthwith.

"You're bain' wan of these flower-pickers that preserves them in scrapbooks, mebbe," ventured Mrs. O'Hearn in a spirit of conciliation, as she grasped Nicodemus



"INTO THIS EXCITEMENT CAME MRS. O'HEARNE."

tortions that brought his haunches almost to his chin. When he felt the ground after the first flight he had made two yards and his hair swept the wind as he rushed on. Here, in his dog's comprehension, was something tangible, something not only to bark at, but to bite. The venerable gentleman dropped the flowers he had gathered and turned unsteadily to the fence, but made such poor progress that Nicodemus, with terribly gleaming teeth and a bouncy fence was still a great way off. There was then a fall of dog and man, with a singularly active display of man, considering age and lack of recent athletic training, and as the venerable gentleman came upright he did the only thing that seemed to his bewildered mind of rational response. The fence was still a great way off, and the speed of the dog had impelled that animal on a few feet, but he was even now reverting himself. Nearer than the fence branched a tree. Two comforting knobs, within easy reach, projected from the trunk. And now, he quite knew how he did it, the venerable gentleman, with amazing agility, was seating himself on a lower branch of the tree, while the dog was making earnest and savage efforts to reach his dangling legs.

The man breathed heavily, and, in a split of conciliation, snapped his fingers childishly, smacked his lips and assured Nicodemus that he was a good and a sweet and an altogether estimable doggie, in none of which compliments did the venerable gentleman actually believe; nor did the dog accept them. Contrarily, and knowing that the pantomime and expressions of this stranger were intended, in effect to be friendly, the miserable animal, pleased that he had freed the victim who, for all the dog knew, was the very person who had formerly thrown coal at him, took these manifestations as signs of rage, and when he dropped a handkerchief he seized and shook it victoriously.

The interest naturally served to interest the men at the car wheels. They came to the fence in a body, calling to the dog to desist, and one, braver than his fellows, mounted the rails in an effort to distract Nicodemus from his prey. He put one foot down on the opposite side as if his companions came into the pasture. It was withdrawn almost on the instant, for the dog, now animated by a desire to engage all comers, sprang at the would-be intruder and his white teeth closed on a boot heel. The man of courage, giving way to reasonable proportion, fell back into the arms of his companions. The three stood in doubt and conference, but made no new move, while Nicodemus returned to guard the tree with now and then sudden sportive excursions in their direction. Thus, with tall wagging, he kept alert, while suggestions were renewed and there was more snapping of fingers, calls and whistles. The porter on the car came forth to view the proceedings, but was equally vague in suggestions, although he referred to hot water. Into this excitement, after some minutes, came Mrs. O'Hearn, her arms bared to the elbows, and a rolling pin in one hand. She waddled down, red and breathless, her flour smeared apron telling of baking day, her bearing that of poudrous surprise. She

by one ear and shook him roughly, "or praps wan of these professors that can till the varieties av the poles by the smell of 'em."

"I am not a botanist," said the Venerable Gentleman, preparing to descend, but eyeing the dog warily, "although you must confess that either a botanist or a railway president would appear equally out of place in a position such as I have found myself."

"The manner of Mrs. O'Hearn changed as the face of nature under the sudden burst of the varieties. She released the dog, which sprang again at the tree trunk, and her utterance was one long inspiration. "O, ho-o-o-o-o-o," she emitted with a slight questioning inflection, and her blue eyes showed the glitter of steel.

"O, ho-o-o-o-o-o!"

"So ye are the president av the railroad?"

The Venerable Gentleman, reconsidering his determination to come down, clutched the tree branch firmly and called out a warning to the engineer, who had again sought to climb the fence and again found himself beset by Nicodemus.

"That," he answered, "is my office."

He wondered why the woman was so interested in this fact, but his affirmation, calculated to impress, was cut short by an exultant cry from the squat figure beneath him.

"This ye are the same wan that's been kapin' me out av the price av a cow this 'tree months,'" proceeded Mrs. O'Hearn.

"Ye—"

She cast about for an expression that would at once convey her contempt and anger.

"Ye murderer," she concluded.

ably been delayed. Mrs. O'Hearn glared, while Nicodemus, rushing past her in gleeful pursuit of a rock thrown by the engineer, came wiggling back, ticked the rolling pin and returned to the fence.

"Consideration!" exclaimed the woman. "It's today that me equivlunt comes to forty dollars and eighty cents, an' it's to the three ye'll a'way an' ye're hired murderers looking on from the fence beyant like gorillas in a cage before I stir from the spot or call off me dog—an' luck to him for knowin' a thafe whin he sees wan."

The Venerable Gentleman started to parley, looked bewildered, sighed and fumbled in the breast pocket of his coat. He finally withdrew a somewhat worn pocketbook, bulging with papers. From these he extracted two greenbacks. Then he searched, as well as he could in personal safety, the pockets of his trousers. He finally gave up in dismay.

"I am sorry to say that I haven't the amount you ask. If you will accept \$20 I assure you the remainder will be forthcoming."

Mrs. O'Hearn raised the rolling pin. "It's the equivalent or not one cent," she declared.

"But, as I have told you, I do not possess the amount. I rarely carry with me any ready money," he added with a shade of exasperation, as if Mrs. O'Hearn could have been previously acquainted with his habit in that regard.

"You can git it," asserted the amazon inflexibly.

The venerable gentleman sighed again and called out to the engineer: "I say, Hawkins, do you happen to have any money?"

"A few dollars, sir."

"I have a little change," supplemented the freeman, while the conductor reached into a pocket.

"If the three of you could make up a purse—the thing is absolutely absurd, but we cannot remain here arguing with this woman. I shall ask you to loan me \$20."

"An' 80 cents," interrupted Mrs. O'Hearn. "Exactly," acknowledged the Venerable Gentleman, although not agreeably, "and 80 cents."

There was a search of overalls and blouses, and, in the moment of suspense, the president considered that it would not be at all unlikely that the ridiculous situation would be further complicated by the discovery that the combined wealth of the crowd did not make up the meager sum required. He was also conscious that Mrs. O'Hearn's "equivlunt," even if forthcoming, was financially small beside the sums he would consider it a pleasure to spend on gold watches and other presents for at least four of his employees. There are incidents in the lives of railway presidents that should not become common gossip, and the Venerable Gentleman particularly disliked to be featured in anecdote.

He was, consequently, relieved when the balance was forthcoming, to the final 10-cent piece, a contribution from the porter. This, by direction, was thrown over the fence, to be guarded by Nicodemus. The two bills fluttered from the hand of the president, and Mrs. O'Hearn, picking them up, turned them over carefully. Then she moved over to the second collection, and, satisfied with the accuracy of her count, and she was not quick at coin values, called the dog, grasped it by one ear, and ambled back toward the house with no concluding word. But she evidenced her faith in looking Nicodemus in the barn, whereupon the Venerable Gentleman descended. When the dog was released and shot off down the pasture to renew the sport, the special had gone. He sniffed at the tree, and, presumably living over the late adventure in his imagination, barked in a paroxysm of joy.

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