

Puppies and Otherwise

By Evelyn Sharp

THE philologist threw down his pen with an exclamation. "It is really annoying, most annoying," he said querulously, "I can't endure children. They are worse than dogs. You can kick a dog. But it is impossible to kick a child. What is a man to do, Parker? Why did that dolt of a Tom recognise her? He might at least have waited till the morning. And how am I to send over the hills at this time of night to tell her father? I am the most unfortunate of men."

"Twenty mile if it be a step, and a proper rough night," murmured his housekeeper, who never allowed the details of a catastrophe to be neglected.

The philologist cast a distracted look over his papers and swore softly.

"Can't you suggest something, Parker?" he demanded irritably. "Am I to be put to all this inconvenience just because Tom finds a bit of a girl thrown from her pony and is misguided enough to bring her home? Who did he say she was, confound his memory?"

"Miss Agnes, sir, only child of the Rector of Astley, sir, and the very happle of his eye, so Tom says, he does. And sleeping like a lamb in the best bedroom now, sir."

The

The philologist savagely kicked a footstool that was not in his way, and took a turn round the room. "What's the use of standing there and gossiping?" he shouted suddenly; "did I ask who the brat was? Do I want to know whether her fool of a father dotes upon her? Tell Tom to saddle the roan at once and ride across with my compliments to the Reverend What's-his-name, and say that his daughter is here, and be hanged to him.

"Do you hear? And don't let me be disturbed again to-night. Supper? Who said supper? Did I say supper, Parker? Then go and don't make purposeless remarks."

His housekeeper vanished precipitately, and the philologist returned to his great work on the Aryan roots. He was a man to whom fame had come late in life, when he had wholly ignored his youth in a passionate toil after it. At the age of twenty he had resolved to be a successful man, and at the age of forty-six he found himself one, albeit a piece of soulless mechanism with the wine of life left untasted behind him and its richest possibilities lying buried in his past.

He sighed self-pityingly, and pulled his manuscript towards him once more. And just as he did so, the door opened from without and the child came in.

He did not know, as any other man could have told him, that she was already almost a woman, even a beautiful woman with awakening eyes and most seductive hair; but he did recognise with a vague feeling of dissatisfaction that she was not what he usually meant by a child, and that he could not class her with kittens and colts and all other irresponsible animals whom he was accustomed to regard with prejudice. And this discovery gave him a sharper sense of injury than before, and he sat staring stupidly while she walked swiftly across the room to him, holding
up

up her riding skirt with one hand and brushing back her tumbled curls with the other.

"They didn't wake me in time as they promised," she said, "and I want to get back to Daddy. People are such idiots. Did she take me for a baby, that woman? Why does every one think that children have got to be lied to? And how soon can I have my pony, please?"

A violent gust of wind rushed round the house at that moment and rattled viciously at the bolts of the shutters as though mocking her words. But the girl paid no heed to it, and merely tapped her toe impatiently on the ground, and waited expectantly for an answer to her question. The philologist stood up and put on his spectacles and looked down at her.

"I—I am at a loss," he said slowly, "are you the—the person whom Tom picked up and brought home in the gig?"

"Yes, yes, I suppose so! At least, I think he said he was Tom. But what does that matter now? Oh, do order my pony before we talk any more, won't you? Daddy wants me, don't you see?"

"Daddy wants you," said the philologist absently, for he was following the train of his own thoughts rather than the meaning of her words; "I don't quite understand you."

"You don't look as though you did," said Agnes candidly; "perhaps I scared you, did I? You see, I thought if I came across that woman again she would tell me some more lies. And I smelt smoke so I guessed that meant a man in here. Men generally stick to the truth, don't you know; at least, you can always tell if they don't. But I say, why don't you ring for my pony?"

"How old are you?" said the philologist, rousing himself with an effort.

"What's

"What's that got to do with it?" cried the girl angrily. "Don't you know that all this time Daddy is——"

"Daddy be——" began the philologist, and checked himself with a smile; "my dear little girl, nobody is going to hurt you here, and I shall certainly not allow you to go out in this storm. I really think," he continued tentatively, "I really think you had almost better go to bed. It's bedtime now, isn't it?"

"Bedtime?" cried Agnes, opening her eyes, "why it's not nine o'clock. Besides, I told you I was going home. What's the matter with the weather?"

"The weather is—well, inclement," said the man of learning feebly, "and Tom has already gone to set your father's mind at rest. It seems to me——"

"Then why didn't you say so before? It was rather stupid of you, wasn't it?" rejoined Agnes cheerfully. "Well, I'm very glad I haven't got to ride any more to-day, my arm's horribly stiff. Gobbo's all right, that's one blessing."

She was sitting in the arm-chair now, with her feet on the fender, and the philologist, who was accustomed to be the autocrat of his household, somehow felt ousted from his own sanctum. He glanced sideways at the ruddy head that was bent towards the blaze, and he felt a curious sensation of discomfort.

"Gobbo? Ah, yes, my man said something about the pony being unhurt," was all he said, though she paid not the slightest attention to his words, for they might just as well have been left unsaid.

"That's not a bad little stable you've got," she went on in her fresh voice, "and the puppies are just ripping, ever so much jollier than the Persian kittens. You shouldn't have crossed your Persian with a tabby, it's such a pity. Why did you?"

The philologist became suddenly conscious of being wonder-
fully

fully ignorant by the side of this child with the red hair and the large open eyes, and the discovery did not add to his composure.

"I didn't know I had," he said, and sat down where he could see her face.

"Didn't you really? And the puppies are such beauties too, five of them. You almost don't deserve to have puppies, do you?"

"I'm afraid I am hardly worthy of them," owned the philologist meekly. "But do you really like them yourself?"

"Why, I couldn't help it of course. They're such jolly little warm snoozling things. Don't you know the *feel* of a puppy? What! you don't? Only wait, that's all."

She was gone before he could protest, and five minutes later she was teaching him how to keep two puppies warm inside his coat, while he wondered grimly what it was that the Aryan languages had not succeeded in teaching him.

"What else do you like besides puppies?" he asked; "dolls?"

"Dolls!" she said contemptuously. "As if any one who could get animals would ever want dead things. I've always hated dolls."

"I," said the philologist slowly, "have lived with dead things for twenty years."

"Oh well," said the child, "that was really quite unnecessary. There are always lots of puppies about everywhere. So it was clearly your own fault, wasn't it?"

"Perhaps it was," said the philologist.

"Any one can see," she went on in her frank manner, "that you're not really fond of puppies, or else you would be able to hold them without strangling them. I think I'd better take them, hadn't I?"

While she was gone the philologist lay back in his chair and pondered.

pondered. And he was looking critically at himself in the mirror when she opened the door and came in again.

"Sit down child, and get warm," he said brusquely; "you shouldn't have gone to that cold stable this time of night."

"Why not? I always do things like that. There's no one to stop me, you see. Besides I expect no one knows except Rob."

"Who's Rob?" was his inevitable question.

"Oh, don't you know? Rob is Daddy's pupil of course. Daddy teaches him lots of things, like Latin and physiology. Rob is awfully clever, and he can breed better terriers than Upton at the lodge. I'm awfully fond of Rob."

The philologist made a mental synopsis of Rob's character which depicted him as anything but a pleasant young fellow.

"I suppose you're clever too, aren't you?" he heard her saying.

"No," he replied irritably, "I don't know anything. Go on telling me about yourself, child."

"But," persisted Agnes, "why do you have such a lot of papers if you are not clever?"

"That's just what I don't know," he said, "they have not taught me how to hold a puppy without strangling it, have they?"

"No," said the child, still looking straight at him with wide open eyes, "but you could soon learn that. It's awfully easy, really. There's something about a puppy that won't let you hurt it, however stupid you are. I could soon teach you all there is to learn about puppies. It's the other things I can't learn."

"Never mind about the other things, they are not worth learning, my child," said the philologist, as he boldly passed his fingers through her thick hair. She moved a little restively, and then looked up at him quickly with a comical expression of concern on her face.

"I say,"

"I say," she began, and paused.

"What's the matter now?" he asked.

"Well, you know, I'm—I'm hungry," she said, and then laughed as he called himself a brute and sprang to his feet. "No, don't ring," she added imploringly, "I can't stand any more of that woman to-night. Don't you think you could go and forage?"

Their friendship was in no way weakened by their impromptu meal over the fire; and when they had finished, and the writing table with its sheets of valuable manuscript was strewn with crumbs, the philologist ventured to renew the conversation on a more natural basis than before.

"Hands cold?" he said, and touched one of them.

"A little," she said, and put them both into his.

"It's very good of you to come and cheer a lonely old man like this," he went on, half expecting her to contradict his words.

"Oh, but I couldn't help coming, could I?" she cried laughing.

"And the first thing I did was to want to go back again!"

"And I wouldn't let you, would I?" he pursued, glancing, still nervously, at the large grey eyes that met his so unflinchingly.

"All the same, I don't believe you are a bit lonely," said the child, looking away into the fire, "you have got your book about the Aryan things, haven't you?"

"Of course I have got my book about the Aryan things, but that isn't everything," exclaimed the philologist with an indefinite feeling of irritation; "for instance, it does not help me to amuse you when you pay me a visit. And to-morrow, when you get home to your father and Rob, you won't want to come back again to an old man who can only talk about Aryan roots. Do you think you will, child?"

The last words were added insinuatingly, and the philologist held

held his breath when he had said them, but Agnes only laughed again and kicked away a lighted coal that had fallen into the fender.

"Why not?" she said carelessly, "I don't suppose you'd be any worse than Daddy when he is writing a new sermon. Only of course that isn't often."

The philologist was seized with one of his fits of unreasonable anger.

"Really, you are a singularly dense child," he exclaimed, dropping her hands roughly and thrusting his own into his pockets; "I always knew that children were tiresome little beasts, but I did think they had some perspicacity as well."

Agnes stared and asked if she had done anything.

"Done anything?" shouted the philologist, jumping out of his chair and scowling down at her, "it's time you learned I am not here to be laughed at just because I am an intellectual old fool! Don't you know why I am here, eh? I am here to benefit mankind by the knowledge I have been accumulating for twenty years and more; and you may stare at me as much as you like with those confounded great eyes of yours, but I'll drive something into your bit of a head before I've done with you. Oh yes, I will. And if you don't ride that pony of yours over here once a week and do as I tell you when you get here, I'll be——"

He did not mention his ultimate destination, for he caught sight of her face in time, and he thought she looked frightened. So he sat down again abruptly, and growled out an apology.

"I say, do you often do that?" she asked, hiding her face from him with her hand. "Because it's most awfully funny."

The astonished philologist had no time to reply before she broke into a great peal of maddening laughter, such mirthful, mocking laughter that he was almost stunned by it, and yet was
possessed

possessed at the same time of a desperate impulse to flee from her.

When she looked up again he was lighting a candle with his back turned to her.

"Allow me to tell you it is bedtime," he said shortly.

She got up and came across the room, and stood just behind him.

"I say, you—you are not wild with me, are you?" she asked wistfully.

"I think you are an exceedingly ill-mannered child," he replied without turning round.

She sighed penitently.

"I'm so sorry, because, you know, I do really think it was nice of you to offer to teach me. And if you still mean it, I will really come over every week and try to learn something. And—and—do you know, I think I'm rather glad Gobbo did put his foot into that rabbit-hole to-day."

The philologist moved slowly round and scanned her upturned anxious face. The extreme innocence of her expression, and the utter absence of mischief in the recesses of her deep eyes, succeeded in dispelling his anger. But he had a dim idea that the situation demanded something more definite from him, and the brilliant thought came to him, that of course she was only a child after all, and had therefore to be treated like a child, and he believed that children always expected to be kissed when they said they were sorry. So he hastily put both his hands behind him, and stooped very stiffly, and placed a kiss on her cheek, and then backed into the table and pushed her towards the door.

"There, there, bedtime now, and we won't say any more about it," he muttered awkwardly.

But to his discomfiture, she whirled round and faced him with her eyes blazing and her lips parted.

"How

"How dare you?" she gasped. "I—it—it is a great shame, and I shall tell Rob. That's the second time I've been treated like a baby to-day. You're a horrid, musty old man!"

The door slammed, and her exit was succeeded by a profound silence. Then the bewildered man returned slowly to the fire-place, and looked at the chair in which she had just been sitting.

"Yes," he said out loud with an effort, "I suppose there is still my book about the Aryan things."

* * * * *

One sunny day in the late spring, they were sitting together in the garden. It was their last lesson, but they were making no pretence of learning anything. The philologist was feeling conscious of something he wanted to say to her before she went, and he did not know how to say it, and he did not attempt to begin. And Agnes, as usual, was doing most of the talking, though when she asked him the natural questions that belonged to her age and her womanhood, he ran the risk of her youthful contempt and shook his head silently in reply, for he knew he had ignored the same questions years ago, and it was too late now to go back and search for the answers to them. And the dew came at their feet and made them shiver, and the sun went down behind the hedge and sent fluttering rays of light across their faces, and the chestnut-tree dropped fluttering showers of pink blossoms on their bare heads, until at last Agnes cried out that she must be going, and they walked across the lawn with their arms locked.

When he lifted her on her pony he would have given all the languages he knew to be able to speak the one language he was too old to learn.

"Agnes," he said, "have you enjoyed your lessons?"

She darted him a mischievous look.

"Well,

"Well, there hasn't been much Sanskrit about them, has there?" she said demurely.

"I suppose you mean," said the philologist a little sulkily, "that I can't even teach you what I do know."

"No, I didn't mean that," she said composedly; "I meant that I was too stupid, or too old, or something, to learn."

"Old? What are you talking about, you absurd child?" he cried angrily. "You will never know what it is to be old, *you*. It is the deepest hell in God's earth. Don't be ridiculous!"

"Then I don't know how it was, and it doesn't matter much, does it? Anyhow we have had great fun, and that is the principal thing. Good-bye," she said.

He only ventured to kiss her riding glove passionately, as he guided her pony out of the gate, though the knowledge he had once thrown away, would have told him that he might have done more, and yet not offended her.

"How queer he is," thought the child at the bottom of the lane, as she stopped to arrange her stirrup. "I don't think I ever knew any one quite so musty. I shall ask Rob——"

A shout from behind made her look round, and there was the philologist running after her as fast as he could, with his odd shambling gait and his loosely swinging arms.

"It is only, that is——" he gasped wildly, "I—I have the intention of driving down to see your father to-morrow."

"Is *that* all? How awfully funny you are sometimes," cried Agnes with a shout of laughter, as she gave her pony a cut with the whip. And they both vanished round the corner, and left the philologist standing where he was, staring silently after them.

"I don't think he has often been laughed at before," she told Rob that evening, as they gave Gobbo his feed in the dimly lighted stable at home.

Rob's arm was round her waist, and Rob's face was close to hers as she said this ; and he kissed her three times very gently at the end of her confession, and whispered in her ear :

“Poor chap! He's got something to learn. And it isn't Sanskrit, is it, dear?”

But the philologist never learned it. And he never drove over to see her father as he had intended. He went for a long walk instead, and his path led him by chance through a wood some miles off, where he found Gobbo grazing by himself among the bracken, and whence he returned in hot haste, and without his hat, and very dishevelled.

He found Tom waiting to speak to him when he at last reached home and burst into his study.

“What the dev——?” he began furiously, and then stopped for sheer want of breath, for he had run all the way back without stopping.

“If you please, sir,” began Tom stolidly, “what be I to do with them two puppies you was a-keeping of for Miss Agnes? They be nigh upon ten weeks——”

“Do with them?” shouted the exasperated philologist. “Drown them, of course, you fool! Drown them, and never mention such farmyard details to me again. Do you take *me* for a young animal with insolent eyes and a dandy moustache and a soft voice? Eh? Do you, sir? Then clear out of my sight at once and go to the deuce with your puppies. Don't you know I have got my book to write on the Aryan——?”

But the philologist's words ended in a great sob, and he dropped heavily into a chair, while Tom slouched awkwardly out of the room.

For Tom, too, understood.