

That Imp of a Dog.

BY MRS. MOLESWORTH.

PART II.

"He is bewitched," said Margie.

It looked like it. We had not seen him coming, and yet we were on a bare shrubless piece of ground where even a tiny bird could have been noticed.

How had he got there?

But there he was.

There was nothing to be done for the moment but to endure him, for there was no possibility of getting rid of him. No gate we could entice him through and then shut upon him, no shelter of any kind where we could hide ourselves till he got tired of waiting for us—no one to apply to for help, nothing!

We gave up all thought of enjoying the sunset, and set of towards home as fast as we could, not of course by the way we had come, for that had been roundabout. But just as we began to come in sight of houses and trees Margie stopped short.

"We must fix what we are going to do," she said. "If he once finds out which is our house, it will be hopeless. We should never get rid of him without absolute brutality. He is capable of waiting outside all night on the chance of slipping in, I verily believe."

I believed it too. We stood and considered. A little in front of us was a sort of small quarry, where a few men were usually employed in breaking up stones. They had all left work, but the rough door of a little hut where they left their coats and dinners, I daresay, during the day, stood open. The hut was empty.

"I have it," I said. "We'll get him in there, and then we can close the door and put a heavy stone against it—there are lots about."

"He'll have nothing to eat," said Margie, doubtfully.

"Well—can we help it? The men will find him quite early in the morning, and if he howls or barks, some passers-by—there are always workmen and boys coming this way—may take pity upon him. If he belongs to anybody, the owner may be looking for him, hideous creature that he is."

Then seeing by my sister's face that she still thought me inhuman, to my relief a sudden remembrance struck me.

"Oh," I said, thrusting my hand into my pocket, "I have a bun—a stale bun, that I had meant to feed those dear silly geese with that we always pass a little farther on. He shall have it, horrid imp that he is."

The bun saved Margie's conscience. With immense difficulty—I am sure it took us a quarter of an hour—by dint of persuasion and shoo'ing and scolding, we got our tormentor into the hut, where the broken bun awaited him, and closed the door firmly with heavy stones, which it took the two of us to drag into their place.

Then tired out and shaking with our exertions, we set off again—no sound pursuing us.

"Let us go home by the back of the house," said Margie, "it is not so pretty, but it is shorter."

I made no objection. I was too worried to care for the view, and indeed it was now almost dusk. We were very glad to find ourselves on the hillside immediately above our house, and were preparing to descend the incline when—would anyone have believed it possible?—there on the path some yards before us, stood that imp of a dog! At first we thought our eyes had misled us, but no—it was he—with all his grotesque leaping and gambolling just as usual.

We felt really frightened. It was too uncanny as well as unbearable. We dared not go in. We turned and fled up the hill again, followed of course. Then by a circuitous route we came down to the main road of the village, some way from our house, near the church. It was lighted up—an organ practice was going on. In we crept—sneaked—and there for half an hour we hid ourselves in a dark corner, only emerging when we heard the organist shutting up. And to our inexpressible relief when we came out, the coast was clear. You can imagine how we hurried home.

The next morning found us almost afraid to venture out. But we determined to walk in a contrary direction, and for some time

we flattered ourselves that the "ruse" had succeeded. We were close to home again when Margie suddenly remembered that she wanted some stamps, and as it was not yet luncheon time we turned back again a quarter of a mile or so to the post office. Dear, dear, how we regretted it! For as we came out of the shop, there he was—uglier, dirtier, more demonstrative than ever.

"Your dog, ma'am," said the shop woman, groceress and post mistress in one, "I'm glad he's found you, for he have been a-plaguin' about here all the morning."

"Our dog," we exclaimed, "no indeed."

But I doubt if she believed us—for as we fled, the wretch pursued us, till at last too disgusted and tired to try any more dodging, we went home, contenting ourselves with banging the garden gate in his face, which of course was no use whatever. He climbed over or squeezed through somehow, for all during luncheon we heard—our ears seeming magically sharpened—scratching at the front door and an occasional faint sort of whine. He was not a noisy dog, so much must be said of him.

That afternoon we did not go out till late and then it was by the back—but not far up the hill we met him of course. He was worse than ever, jumping so high that he tore Margie's feather boa and left paw marks on my sleeves. But we were growing—not resigned—but desperate. The only way to have a decent walk was to let him follow us, so all along the road we had the pleasure of being looked upon by every urchin that met us as "the ladies as b'long to that there dog."

For no one knew him in the village. We had ventured on some enquiries—you see we did not want to seem to show any interest in the creature—and were satisfied that he was as much a stranger to our neighbors as to ourselves.

We shut him out again when we came home. But it turned out a miserable evening, cold and rainy, and all through our comfortable five o'clock tea and later, we heard that detestable scratching.

Once Margie looked out—it seemed quite dark. Then she left the room for a few moments, and when she came back there was a curious look on her face.

"Sister," she said, Margie only says "Sister" when she is very serious indeed. I have been a sort of second mother to her, for she is only eighteen and I am seven years older. "I am afraid there is no help for it—we must look after that dog. No, it is not that I've taken a fancy to him—I'm afraid I'm not even sorry for him. But I fear it's a case of duty—for our little man's sake—the imp's a dog after all."

"Are you sure?" I said bitterly. "I think he is more like a—no I can't find the right word—'brownie' and 'pixie,' and all those are too pretty. He is just a horrid little imp."

But it was no use. My conscience too was touched, and it ended in our letting the creature in and humbling ourselves to the cook to get some food for him and leave for him to spend the night in an outhouse.

"Just for a light or two," we said, though in our hearts we knew there was no more prospect in getting rid of him in a week than there was to-day. And as for admitting him into our little drawing-room till he was washed and who would wash him?

And all the next day we had to take him out with us! Oh the mortification of it—we felt that everyone was laughing at us.

"Two silly old maids," said Margie.

So the next day we went off in another direction, determining to get luncheon somewhere and not to come home till dusk. It was market day at the little town two or three miles away. We had not known this till we met droves of cattle and ever so many spring-carts and basketed old women, etc. But we did not mind. Down in our hearts was there the thought—might not the imp get lost?

Suddenly, when only a short distance from the town, a voice made us jump. It came from a dog-cart that had just passed us, down from which scrambled a rosy-cheeked girl of fourteen or so, the driver, evidently her father looking on with interest.

"Oh ma'am, oh please ma'am," said the child breathlessly, "it's my Fido—oh Fido, my beauty, my sweet!"—she was positively crying, "where have you been, and how dirty you are! Oh ma'am, oh miss, he is really mine—may I have him back?"

"By all means," we cried together. Take him, my dear, at once. He didn't want him—he followed us."

"He took you for sister and me," she said, "being in black too," and then we noticed that she like ourselves, was in deep mourning. Oh I don't know how to thank you. He strayed away four days ago. Oh Fido—may I put him in the cart, daddy? Oh my, but you are dirty, Fido."

She did not mean to reproach us—but all the same I think she was surprised that we had not fought for the honour of performing the imp's ablutions.

We returned home with lightened hearts and approving consciences.

We never saw the rosy-faced girl again, though we stayed some weeks longer in those parts. She thinks of us with gratitude I have no doubt—except about the washing—but also, I feel sure, with pity, for being deprived of her charming pet's society.

HIDDEN TEXT AND CATECHISM.

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