

The Brogue

Saki

The hunting season had come to an end, and the Mullets had not succeeded in selling the Brogue. There had been a kind of tradition in the family for the past three or four years, a sort of fatalistic hope, that the Brogue would find a purchaser before the hunting was over; but seasons came and went without anything happening to justify such ill-founded optimism. The animal had been named Berserker in the earlier stages of its career; it had been rechristened the Brogue later on, in recognition of the fact that, once acquired, it was extremely difficult to get rid of. The unkind wits of the neighbourhood had been known to suggest that the first letter of its name was superfluous. The Brogue had been variously described in sale catalogues as a light-weight hunter, a lady's hack, and, more simply, but still with a touch of imagination, as a useful brown gelding, standing 15.1. Toby Mullet had ridden him for four seasons with the West Wessex; you can ride almost any sort of horse with the West Wessex as long as it is an animal that knows the country. The Brogue knew the country intimately, having personally created most of the gaps that were to be met with in banks and hedges for many miles round. His manners and characteristics were not ideal in the hunting field, but he was probably rather safer to ride to hounds than he was as a hack on country roads. According to the Mullet family, he was not really road-shy, but there were one or two objects of dislike that brought on sudden attacks of what Toby called the swerving sickness. Motors and cycles he treated with tolerant disregard, but pigs, wheelbarrows, piles of stones by the roadside, perambulators in a village street, gates painted too aggressively white, and sometimes, but not always, the newer kind of beehives, turned him aside from his tracks in vivid imitation of the zigzag course of forked lightning. If a pheasant rose noisily from the other side of a hedgerow the Brogue would spring into the air at the same moment, but this may have been due to a desire to be companionable. The Mullet family contradicted the widely prevalent report that the horse was a confirmed crib-biter.

It was about the third week in May that Mrs. Mullet, relict of the late Sylvester Mullet, and mother of Toby and a bunch of daughters, assailed Clovis Sangrail on the outskirts of the village with a breathless catalogue of local happenings.

"You know our new neighbour, Mr. Penricarde?" she vociferated; "awfully rich, owns tin mines in Cornwall, middle-aged and rather quiet. He's taken the Red House on a long lease and spent a lot of money on alterations and improvements. Well, Toby's sold him the Brogue!"

Clovis spent a moment or two in assimilating the astonishing news; then he broke out into unstinted congratulation. If he had belonged to a more emotional race he would probably have kissed Mrs. Mullet.

“How wonderfully lucky to have pulled it off at last! Now you can buy a decent animal. I’ve always said that Toby was clever. Ever so many congratulations.”

“Don’t congratulate me. It’s the most unfortunate thing that could have happened!” said Mrs. Mullet dramatically.

Clovis stared at her in amazement.

“Mr. Penricarde,” said Mrs. Mullet, sinking her voice to what she imagined to be an impressive whisper, though it rather resembled a hoarse, excited squeak, “Mr. Penricarde has just begun to pay attentions to Jessie. Slight at first, but now unmistakable. I was a fool not to have seen it sooner. Yesterday, at the Rectory garden party, he asked her what her favourite flowers were, and she told him carnations, and to-day a whole stack of carnations has arrived, clove and malmaison and lovely dark red ones, regular exhibition blooms, and a box of chocolates that he must have got on purpose from London. And he’s asked her to go round the links with him to-morrow. And now, just at this critical moment, Toby has sold him that animal. It’s a calamity!”

“But you’ve been trying to get the horse off your hands for years,” said Clovis.

“I’ve got a houseful of daughters,” said Mrs. Mullet, “and I’ve been trying—well, not to get them off my hands, of course, but a husband or two wouldn’t be amiss among the lot of them; there are six of them, you know.”

“I don’t know,” said Clovis, “I’ve never counted, but I expect you’re right as to the number; mothers generally know these things.”

“And now,” continued Mrs. Mullet, in her tragic whisper, “when there’s a rich husband-in-prospect imminent on the horizon Toby goes and sells him that miserable animal. It will probably kill him if he tries to ride it; anyway it will kill any affection he might have felt towards any member of our family. What is to be done? We can’t very well ask to have the horse back; you see, we praised it up like anything when we thought there was a chance of his buying it, and said it was just the animal to suit him.”

“Couldn’t you steal it out of his stable and send it to grass at some farm miles away?” suggested Clovis; “write ‘Votes for Women’ on the stable door, and the thing would pass for a Suffragette outrage. No one who knew the horse could possibly suspect you of wanting to get it back again.”

“Every newspaper in the country would ring with the affair,” said Mrs. Mullet; “can’t you imagine the headline, ‘Valuable Hunter Stolen by Suffragettes’? The police would scour the countryside till they found the animal.”

“Well, Jessie must try and get it back from Penricarde on the plea that it’s an old favourite. She can say it was only sold because the stable had to be pulled down under the terms of an old repairing lease, and that now it has been arranged that the stable is to stand for a couple of years longer.”

“It sounds a queer proceeding to ask for a horse back when you’ve just sold him,” said Mrs. Mullet, “but something must be done, and done at once. The man is not used to horses, and I believe I told him it was as quiet as a lamb. After all, lambs go kicking and twisting about as if they were demented, don’t they?”

“The lamb has an entirely unmerited character for sedateness,” agreed Clovis.

Jessie came back from the golf links next day in a state of mingled elation and concern.

“It’s all right about the proposal,” she announced; “he came out with it at the sixth hole. I said I must have time to think it over. I accepted him at the seventh.”

“My dear,” said her mother, “I think a little more maidenly reserve and hesitation would have been advisable, as you’ve known him so short a time. You might have waited till the ninth hole.”

“The seventh is a very long hole,” said Jessie; “besides, the tension was putting us both off our game. By the time we’d got to the ninth hole we’d settled lots of things. The honeymoon is to be spent in Corsica, with perhaps a flying visit to Naples if we feel like it, and a week in London to wind up with. Two of his nieces are to be asked to be bridesmaids, so with our lot there will be seven, which is rather a lucky number. You are to wear your pearl grey, with any amount of Honiton lace jabbed into it. By the way, he’s coming over this evening to ask your consent to the whole affair. So far all’s well, but about the Brogue it’s a different matter. I told him the legend about the stable, and how keen we were about buying the horse back, but he seems equally keen on keeping it. He said he must have horse exercise now that he’s living in the country, and he’s going to start riding to-morrow. He’s ridden a few times in the Row, on an animal that was accustomed to carry octogenarians and people undergoing rest cures, and that’s about all his experience in the saddle—oh, and he rode a pony once in Norfolk, when he was fifteen and the pony twenty-four; and to-morrow he’s going to ride the Brogue! I shall be a widow before I’m married, and I do so want to see what Corsica’s like; it looks so silly on the map.”

Clovis was sent for in haste, and the developments of the situation put before him.

“Nobody can ride that animal with any safety,” said Mrs. Mullet, “except Toby, and he knows by long experience what it is going to shy at, and manages to swerve at the same

time.”

“I did hint to Mr. Penricarde—to Vincent, I should say—that the Brogue didn’t like white gates,” said Jessie.

“White gates!” exclaimed Mrs. Mullet; “did you mention what effect a pig has on him? He’ll have to go past Lockyer’s farm to get to the high road, and there’s sure to be a pig or two grunting about in the lane.”

“He’s taken rather a dislike to turkeys lately,” said Toby.

“It’s obvious that Penricarde mustn’t be allowed to go out on that animal,” said Clovis, “at least not till Jessie has married him, and tired of him. I tell you what: ask him to a picnic tomorrow, starting at an early hour; he’s not the sort to go out for a ride before breakfast. The day after I’ll get the rector to drive him over to Crowleigh before lunch, to see the new cottage hospital they’re building there. The Brogue will be standing idle in the stable and Toby can offer to exercise it; then it can pick up a stone or something of the sort and go conveniently lame. If you hurry on the wedding a bit the lameness fiction can be kept up till the ceremony is safely over.”

Mrs. Mullet belonged to an emotional race, and she kissed Clovis.

It was nobody’s fault that the rain came down in torrents the next morning, making a picnic a fantastic impossibility. It was also nobody’s fault, but sheer ill-luck, that the weather cleared up sufficiently in the afternoon to tempt Mr. Penricarde to make his first essay with the Brogue. They did not get as far as the pigs at Lockyer’s farm; the rectory gate was painted a dull unobtrusive green, but it had been white a year or two ago, and the Brogue never forgot that he had been in the habit of making a violent curtsey, a back-pedal and a swerve at this particular point of the road. Subsequently, there being apparently no further call on his services, he broke his way into the rectory orchard, where he found a hen turkey in a coop; later visitors to the orchard found the coop almost intact, but very little left of the turkey.

Mr. Penricarde, a little stunned and shaken, and suffering from a bruised knee and some minor damages, good-naturedly ascribed the accident to his own inexperience with horses and country roads, and allowed Jessie to nurse him back into complete recovery and golf-fitness within something less than a week.

In the list of wedding presents which the local newspaper published a fortnight or so later appeared the following item:

“Brown saddle-horse, ‘The Brogue,’ bridegroom’s gift to bride.”

“Which shows,” said Toby Mullet, “that he knew nothing.”

“Or else,” said Clovis, “that he has a very pleasing wit.”

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