

JOCK AND SACCHARISSA.

BY E. NESBIT AND EDGAR JEPSON.

I THOUGHT of my aunt's money ; I thought of the dullness of the country ; and I looked at Jock.

"Take the little beast!" said Jock's master; and Jock, recognising the word used, looked up politely from the scarlet and gold wreck of the second Turkish slipper.

I thought of my aunt's money—but Jock would certainly brighten the dullness of the country. My aunt's invitation afforded me a welcome escape from the post secured for me by the energy and enthusiasm of my friends. For a month, at least, I should not have to get up at five to assist at the birth of the *Evening Firefly*, which justifies its name by appearing practically with the milk. I adore the country, of course; but I hate its dullness. Life amid flowering meadows and green lanes ever seems to lack purpose, earnestness, effort. In teaching Jock not to eat Turkish slippers I should be pursuing that arduous path of life which I have always set before me; and, somehow, never trodden.

So I took Jock. He travelled down in the pocket of my ulster—warm wear for May—and clamoured at the critical moment of ticket-taking in smothered but insistent yelps for a ticket of his very own, which the guard pressed upon me, taking no denial.

Between Waterloo and Dipling he only ate a corner of my Gladstone bag and the less instructive leaves of my Bradshaw.

I had not thought it necessary to herald the arrival of a mere fox-terrier pup, and I don't know that it would have made any difference if I had, though my aunt seemed

to think that it would; for I fail to see how the most courteous announcement of the dog's coming could have prevented his biting the butler in the leg—vigorously, and with a promptness which seemed inspired by personal enthusiasm. Nor could his engagement with the blind cat have been prevented, seeing that it took place during family prayers. And no one, I protest, could have foreseen or guarded against that business of the stuffed parrot.

However, we settled down—at least I did—and the days passed pleasantly enough. I was very careful to keep away from the house during the hours at which my aunt's friends called on her: the talk of the small gentry of the village runs on matters that do not touch my interest. My aunt did not entertain them in my honour, for in Dipling I have the worst of reputations—my habit of continuous smoking, my aversion from the respectable professions and the consequent lowness of my balance at the bank, the *Firefly* and all its words are abhorrent to my aunt; and she, good soul, has poured her sorrows into many sympathetic Dipling ears. Moreover, the services at the church are not of a kind I can bring myself to attend; and once I had been seen at a music-hall by a cousin of the Vicar's wife, who had visited it to learn what to avoid.

I was thus largely dependent on my own society and Jock's; and I think our companionship was not wholly unimproving to him. I taught him, waking the echoes of the large quiet house, to respect my boots; I taught him, with her heartfelt co-operation, to respect the blind

cat. I taught him that legs, either of tradesmen or domestic servants, were not the prescribed diet for small dogs. With a string and a switch, never paltering with humanitarian scruples, I taught him to follow—occasionally to heel. This lesson, the most frequent and the most difficult, engrossed us during the long walks we took through the beautiful country, so that the silver may-bushes and the golden buttercups, the green fern-fringed lanes and the dim woodland ways, left us almost equally unappreciative.

It was during one of these walks that we first met Saccharissa; and we met her on as many other walks as might be. I called her Saccharissa because she was so wonderfully sweet to look at—*belle à croquer*, as the French have it. She came to me a flutter of pink between the green hedges; she drew nearer the very spirit of spring incarnate in beautiful flesh; and she passed me as a dream passes. Her face had that ravishing complexion of the very tint of the wild-rose in the hedge, her eyes were of the blue of the speedwells on the bank. She left the country scene transformed and enchanted to my eye, invested with a meaning it had never before held in my mind. The necessity of calling Jock to heel compelled me to turn and observe the beautiful lines of her well-balanced figure, and her light, springy walk.

I passed her often, walking briskly over the cobble-stones of the village street, carrying a little basket, sauntering slowly along the lanes, her hands full of flowers; but she never gave me more than the corner of her eye, absolutely expressive of my place in the esteem of Dipling society.

The hope of meeting her played presently in my walks a part almost as important as the education of Jock. For five days, one after the other, I lay in ambush in the garden during calling hours; but Saccharissa never called. And each night I bewailed to Jock—always quite unsympathetic—the lost chance of meeting her in the lanes that day—twice instead of once.

Then one day Jock invented a new crime. He dashed upon a hapless chick, strayed from the last cottage in the village,

before I knew what he was about—my eyes, greedy for pink, were set on the green lane ahead—had it, squawking, by the wing. I choked him off—he was very pleased and proud, and his mouth was full of feathers—bore him by the scruff of the neck to the hedge, ripped out a little switch, and began to make it clear to him that for practical and penal purposes a chicken is the same as a stuffed parrot.

He was in very fine voice—so fine, indeed, as to drown all other sounds, so that it was a shock of something more than surprise that I felt myself taken by the coat and shaken, and turning, looked into the flushed face and flaming eyes of Saccharissa.

“You brute! You cruel, wicked wretch! What are you doing? Loose the dog at once! Let it loose!” she panted.

I loosed the little brute, who fled to the covert of the ditch and whined there.

“How dare you?” she said—indeed, she almost sobbed it. “A great hulking man like you to beat a poor little dog like that!”

She stopped a moment, breathing quickly, and before I could protest, she went on: “I’ve always been told it; and now I see it’s true: wicked men are always cruel! There ought to be a law to punish such fiends! And—and I think what they say about you is quite right. It’s—I wonder you aren’t ashamed! Oh, how can you do such wicked things!”

“Would you like to beat him yourself?” I asked gloomily.

Her lips—I think she had shut them on a sob—opened in a little gasp. She stepped back from the switch I held out to her; and, her eyes ablaze with a fresh anger, she cried, “To do it in cold blood and make a joke of it makes it worse—a thousand times worse! I didn’t know that such inhuman, cruel wretches existed, except in books, or”—she added viciously—“newspapers! But I know it now; and—and I shan’t forget it! You have no sense of shame at all!”

She was so amazingly pretty in her heat of righteous wrath that I had much ado to

prevent my pleasure at the sight of her overcoming the injured innocence I was forcing into my expression.

"I may be all that you say," I said coldly, "I may be the criminal you describe; but, at any rate, you are quite as bad: you have spoken to me without an introduction."

My gentle irrelevance took her aback a little; then she said, "Why, I would speak to—to—a tramp, if I saw him doing such a thing! I see what it is: you are so used to doing cruel things that you don't think anything of it. You are hardened. But I tell you quite plainly that if I see you ill-treating that poor, harmless little dog again, or hear of it, I will write to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and you will be punished." With that she turned on her heel.

"I do not care if you do," I said bitterly. "You have spoken to me without an introduction."

She went down the lane with a very fine dignity. I watched her out of sight, admiring the light swing of her walk; whistled Jock from the ditch, and set out for home, he sneaking along, subdued, at my heels. I could have wished that the ice had been broken without my plunging head over heels into hot water; but the consciousness of innocence sustained my drooping spirits.

For three days I saw nothing of Saccharissa. It was not my fault. Indeed, I lost weight beating the lanes, dingles, and field-paths with all a hunter's ardour. And the pleasures of the chase affected Jock to such a degree that all his home-time was spent in sleep—which relieved me a good deal. My aunt, to whom goodness and inaction were synonymous, patted Jock as he slumbered, and soothed his few waking moments with cake. So, two of us, at least, were the happier. It was not only the violence of the exercise that lessened my weight. I found that my desire to see Saccharissa was so keen that the disappointing of it was wearing me; I began to be afflicted with a fear, sometimes rising to a veritable terror, lest I might never see her again, lest she had gone from the village. In the end I was

driven to the pitch of doubting the discretion of my oblique defence.

"Country air is all very well, James," said my aunt one day at lunch; "but surely you get enough of it without having to bolt your food like that."

I was perhaps hurrying unduly through the celebration of a ceremony now grown, along with so many old interests, strangely unimportant; but no one but a moneyed aunt would have been so keen to remark the evidence of a perturbed spirit. In a fear of further betraying myself I ate custard pudding with a deliberation which went near to choke me.

"You don't seem to like this pudding," said my aunt; "too simple for your tastes, I am afraid."

After this, of course, I had to have some more custard pudding, becoming distracted in the effort to find the pace proper to the eating of it, and the growing consciousness that minutes were flying, and that even now Saccharissa might be leaving the spot where Fate had meant me to meet her.

I came away from that luncheon-table so desperate that I even allowed my mind to entertain the plan of breaking the silence I had imposed on myself by asking the village constable where a young lady in pink might dwell.

I roused Jock from sleep, and with hasty strides, crossed the three fields that lay between my aunt's house and the lane where I had first seen the pink vision, Jock following in a panting, uneven canter, still too sleepy to be troublesome: which was just as well for him.

I came into the lane, and found it empty, thrust my hands into my pockets, moved slowly and despondently along the grass by the hedge, came round the corner, almost into Saccharissa's arms. I think my mouth opened. I know that the graceful and correct bearing which I had always intended to preserve in this long longed-for meeting somehow escaped me.

In my surprise my feet, moving mechanically and entirely of their own will, carried me beyond her, and the golden moment was gone.

The only impression of her that my confused eyes brought to me was that she wore white, and that she passed me with her pretty nose in the air—a thing manifestly impossible in so charming a creature.

I had not even recovered my wits to the point of cursing my imbecile unreadiness when there came a bark, a snarl, and a cry. Jock, in an impossible gratitude for all my patient care of him, had once more played the god from the machine. His teeth were in her skirt.

I had my wits then. I sprang to her side, caught Jock, as always, by the throat, and choked him off almost tenderly.

"I beg your pardon! I hope to goodness he hasn't hurt you," I cried.

"Oh, no—at least, I don't think so, but he gave me such a start." She said it breathlessly.

"He's torn your dress, though, I'm afraid," and, indeed, a white strip of it dragged from the hem in the dust of the lane. "I am so sorry."

"It doesn't matter," said Saccharissa faintly, but she looked down at the rent with some concern, and I perceived that it did matter. It was a very nice dress, with lace all round it, at the bottom, and ribbons; her hat was very smart, and she had a white veil and a sunshade that was white and had lace on it too; and she wore gloves—new ones. People do not wear gloves—and new gloves—in country lanes for nothing. Plainly she was on her way to one of the Dipling social functions.

"But it does matter, indeed," I said earnestly. "And I am very sorry."

I turned to Jock, who stood a few yards off, wagging a careless tail. "Miserable wretch," I said in a terrible voice, "you have committed your last crime, and I shall have you executed!"

"Oh, no, no!" said Saccharissa. "Poor little dog, he didn't mean to!"

"Yes, indeed!" I said, with unabated spirit. "If it had been anyone else—but this is too much! Your hours are numbered, wretched monster!"

"I don't believe you mean it! You're only pretending!" cried Saccharissa, almost wringing her hands in the intensity of her disbelief.

"I will show you! I will bring you his head!" I said eagerly.

"Oh, no, no! You shall not! I won't have you do it!"

"It must be," I said with gloomy severity; and a thought came to me. Money is scarce in Dipling; and thanks to my aunt I know an Indian muslin when I see it.

"You won't kill him! Oh, promise me you won't! I could not bear it!" cried Saccharissa. Her voice was husky; she put her hand up to her eyes as though to shut out the picture of Jock's death agony; and her painful distress showed a tenderness of heart indeed amazing.

I had to be firm with myself not to promise unconditionally; but I said, "Well, I might spare him—on a condition."

"What condition? What condition?"

"That before three days are out a claim is sent to me for the amount of damage done to your gown."

"Impossible! How could I do such a thing?" she cried, with flaming cheeks.

"It's only fair, and I insist," I said. "But the little wretch has frightened you badly; I must see you on your way, till you are quite recovered. My aunt would be very angry with me if I didn't."

Saccharissa hesitated a moment; then she saw her duty, and her chance of persuading me to set aside my condition.

We set out in silence; and presently I saw her summon up, with a great effort, all her courage. "I cannot think that you really find pleasure in cruelty," she began; and went on to reproach me for my hardheartedness with a gentle, sincere earnestness infinitely touching. I made no haste to clear my character; I was well content to listen humbly to so sweet a teacher. I only said with a sigh in the middle of it, "I suppose my loneliness hardens me."

"Are you lonely?" she said with quick pity.

"Very," I said, sighing again.

She stopped at the gate of the Rectory: "About that condition. You won't insist on it, will you?"

"Indeed I will," I said stubbornly. "Three days."

"Oh, you are hard," she said, looking at me with troubled face.

"If it had been anyone else I wouldn't have been so severe on him," I said, looking straight into her eyes.

Her eyes fell, and she went into the gate.

I hurried home, and learned that my aunt was dressing to go to the Rectory. I dressed, too, and was waiting in the hall when she came downstairs.

"I am coming with you," I said firmly. "I cannot afford to buy nice clothes and not show them off."

"It is usual to wait to be asked," said my aunt; but was plainly pleased by my demand.

I found myself at a garden-party, and a curate was there who stuck to Saccharissa's side like a limpet to a rock. I hate curates. But my aunt was not the woman to do things by halves: I found myself well received by the local dignitaries; and at last I gained my end—a formal introduction to Saccharissa. I had to share her society with the tenacious curate, but I contrived in the most civil fashion to make his share of it unpleasant. She and I were alone for a moment at last, and she said, "You see—that tear—I've had it pinned up, and it doesn't show. It's nothing at all."

"There is time to discuss the matter again—three days," I said.

The pink in Saccharissa's cheeks deepened, but she said nothing.

We did discuss it in the lane, the very next day, and for many days after; Jock was from time to time reprieved, but never pardoned outright; and we never settled his fate definitely.

Having once appeared in Society under the ægis of my aunt, I was welcomed to all the little festivities of the village; it is exceedingly easy for a black sheep with expectations to bleach its fleece a proper white; and a fortunate chance of going one better than the curate on a point of church discipline won me golden opinions. It removed, too, that amiable young man to a somewhat lower pedestal than that on

which public opinion and, as I fancied, Saccharissa's had set him. I found that I had been wrong about the little gentry of Dipling. Their society is not boring: it is the most stimulating I have ever known. Besides, Saccharissa graced all their gatherings; and I took a keen interest—she had tried to do me good—in protecting her freshness and charm from too close a contact with the commonplaceness of the curate.

By a series of carefully calculated accidents I contrived to meet her with even greater frequency in the lanes. I liked those meetings better. We discussed at them matters more serious than the trivialities proper to garden-parties: the great things I might do were I encouraged by the sympathy I needed; the sweetness of Saccharissa's heart, and her humanising influence over me, a discussion that left her with flushed cheeks and grateful, swimming eyes; the loneliness of my life in London, the cold chill of my desolate hearth when I came home of nights, a picture that set her shivering with sympathetic pity. She grew very fond of Jock, and on his part he displayed an unexpected decency by returning her fondness. Whether she were fond of Jock's master or only pitied him, was a point on which I suffered the keenest anxiety and the most harassing doubt.

Then the time of my going away drew near, and on the Wednesday before I went we were sitting together on the bank of a dingle to which we had wandered. Saccharissa was in her usual charming spirits, playing with Jock, who was snarling little sharp snarls and pretending to bite her. I was watching them in a sadness she was too light-hearted to notice.

At last I said, "I am going away on Saturday—back to London."

Saccharissa's quick hands were stricken very still. She sat with her face turned away from me. Then, after a long pause, she said in a voice I scarcely knew, a voice that set my heart hammering, "You are going away?"

"I am going away," I said; "but I am not going to take Jock with me. You are fond of Jock, and he is fond of you. I am

going to leave him to you—if you will take him.”

Her words came faintly from a dry throat. “No,” she said; “I am fond of Jock—I should like him dearly, I should—but—but—I will not take him. You are so lonely—and he is—is all you have—I will not separate you.”

I sat upright. The little of her cheek I could see was very pale; and I took my courage in my hands, and said gruffly: “Well, don’t separate us. Take Jock, and take his master too!”

“Oh, don’t! Don’t laugh at me!” she said almost in a wail, turning a colourless

face to me. “I must—be going home—I feel—I feel——”

“Joke!” I cried. “I was never further from joking in my life! Take us both!”

And then, somehow, I had her in my arms; and she was crying; and I was saying, “Don’t; please don’t,” and kissing the tears as they welled out of her eyes.

“I never thought—you are so clever—Oh, do you really, really? And I’m not—I never dreamed—Oh—dear Jock!” sobbed Saccharissa.

One of her dearest charms is a sweet way of talking nonsense in the pretty accents of truth.

THE ROAD.

A LONG road to Spring, Sweet, a long road to Spring—
I hear the tired leaves whisper, I hear the robins sing—
It’s many a day both grim and grey for Joy to keep on wing.

We’d better go together, Sweet, we’d better go together,
And hold so near that each may fear but half the sorry weather;
Each with a place to hide the face if Joy should cast a feather.

Love isn’t like a load, Sweet, love isn’t like a load,
Nor yet a flower to flame an hour, as yon sweet summer showed.
We’ll never part!—’twould break my heart to lose you on the road.

A long road to Spring, Sweet, a long road to Spring—
I hear the tired leaves whisper, I hear the robins sing.
But every Autumn prophet has a sweetness in his sting—
It’s a dear road, a clear road, a royal road to Spring!

J. J. BELL.