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Animal Lovers

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ANIMAL LOVERS

AUNT MINNIE died first, then the dog. They wept for Minnie, buried her, mourned for her; before long Aunt Minnie had really become dead. She reappeared off and on in a photo album and looked at the one who disturbed her with a lean, reproachful face turning yellow. At times somebody spilled water on the table and said: "Poor Aunt Minnie"—then wondered why he had said that. There were days when someone remembered Minnie while tying his necktie; once, years before, Aunt Minnie had spilled water and all of them became angry with her. But now he looked into the mirror, yanked at his necktie and forgave Aunt Minnie.

It was different with the dog. It would be ridiculous to mourn for a dog, but nobody could forbid that; in the bottom of their hearts, they mourned for him with sincere grief. And the memory of James, the Scotch terrier, has grown enormous as time has passed. There is no terrier, there is no dog which would be similar to him even approximately. Members of the family, at supper time, gave an account to one another of where they had been, what kind of dogs they had seen, and at the end they always assured themselves that no kind of dog was similar to the deceased James. James was irreplaceable; it was useless to make an effort with a new dog. Thus, they took no other.

It was all the more unusual that one night old Hallam, the head of the family, was awakened by the barking of a dog. The barking, in itself, was not unusual; there were dogs everywhere in the neighboring houses. The inexplicable thing about this barking was that it sounded as if it had been immediately in front of the door; then it moved away and resounded, in a lower tone, in another part of the house. Hallam sat up in his bed, he did not want to wake up his wife. I am nervous, he thought; my heart is not what it used to be. He sighed and lay back. Had the children heard that? No, they had not.

Next morning at breakfast he asked them, Roderick, his son, and Blanche, his daughter. Neither heard anything. "Had a dog been barking inside the house?" Roderick asked incredulously. Hallam nodded. "You were dreaming," his son said casually.

"It is exactly that, that I was not dreaming. You were dreaming that the dog was *not* barking."

Roderick shrugged his shoulders. "I am going to keep vigil tonight," he said. Indeed, he kept awake all night. The dog did not bark either that night or the night following.

In a week it was Roderick, however, who woke up at a violent yelp. He put on his bathrobe and staggered down into the dining room. The room was dark, but as his eyes became used to the darkness, Roderick noticed two figures, Aunt Minnie and James, the dog; and the dog was barking cheerfully.

"Look, here is James!" Roderick said in amazement. "This is a pleasant surprise!"

Aunt Minnie took a step toward him.

"Oh, Auntie," Roderick said indignantly, "we buried you in an orderly manner; why are you wandering about here now?"

But Aunt Minnie did not say a word, she was just smiling sorrowfully. She was wearing a long dress adorned with lace and held James' ghost by a leash with her right hand.

"James, my little dog," Roderick babbled as he crouched down, "have you forgotten your good masters? Aren't you going to come back to us, doggie?"

The dog wagged his tail, his leash became taut.

"Let him go, Aunt Minnie," Roderick said. But his aunt just kept smiling sorrowfully and looked over Roderick's head. Roderick was angry, but his aunt did not listen and did not speak; suddenly she turned around and disappeared with James through the closed door.

Next morning Roderick told the family everything.

"What an exceptionally loyal dog," Mrs. Hallam said. "He deserves one of my special pies."

"What was Aunt Minnie like?" Blanche asked.

"Who asked Aunt Minnie to come here?" Hallam broke in. "After all, we buried her, mourned for her; indeed, she ought to be decent enough to leave us alone."

They all were drinking their tea silently and admitted to themselves that Hallam was right. Such a hopeless old maid should take her death seriously and should not walk about at night. Especially, she should not stroll about through closed doors.

That night they all were sitting in the dining room. After supper they turned the light off and waited for James. After midnight they heard barking. James stepped out of the cabinet followed by Aunt Minnie.

"James!" they all shouted—Blanche, Mrs. Hallam, her husband, and Roderick too. They all hustled and squatted around the dog. Everyone wanted to touch him, but James licked their hands with his rough tongue and whimpered joyfully.

"Here is the pie, James!" Mrs. Hallam said, and as she stood up she caught a glimpse of Aunt Minnie. "Hello, Minnie," she said to her sister.

Aunt Minnie smiled sadly and stared at the wall. Then, when they gave the pie to James, she slowly turned around and disappeared with the dog.

"She always had a heart of stone," Hallam, the head of the family, said the next day. His wife remorsefully bowed her head as if she also were responsible for Minnie's unfeeling heart.

"Our poor mother," she said almost as if asking for forgiveness, "she just could not help it. She did not raise Minnie to become such a mean person."

"She does not like animals!" Blanche fumed. "She disappeared with poor James at the very moment when he wanted to eat the pie."

"Who knows," Roderick said pensively, "if dogs are getting pies in the other world?"

They sat in silence.

Then Hallam said: "Tonight, I am going to tell Aunt Minnie she shall let the dog come here alone. He surely could find his way."

After midnight, when Aunt Minnie and the cheerfully barking James appeared, Hallam, forcing politeness upon himself, said, "Minnie dear, I think it would be better if you would not exert yourself night after night. It is enough if James comes alone."

They were waiting for an answer. Aunt Minnie, as always, was smiling, but did not say a word. They pushed the pie toward the dog, but James just smelled it, then left it untouched.

"This is the work of Aunt Minnie too," Roderick said later when the visitors disappeared; then he started kicking the pie slowly into the corner.

They sat every night in the dining room, but James did not come. Undoubtedly, either Aunt Minnie was too lazy to get up at midnight or, simply, did not want to let James come alone. Night after night they

conversed in the dark room. Everybody recalled some story casting light on Aunt Minnie's maliciousness, on her determined wickedness. When they ran out of stories, they made up new ones. "Do you remember?" they asked one another and, indeed, everyone did remember now. Aunt Minnie's image grew in its frightful wickedness, and the dear dog, James, with his golden heart stood there trembling in Minnie's dark shadow.

In about ten minutes, just when Roderick was telling the story about Minnie's urging a wagoner to strike his horses, Minnie showed up. Roderick, frightened, stopped talking since not a word of his story was true. But Aunt Minnie was just smiling. The dog was not with her.

"Where is James?" Hallam asked.

"Resting," answered Aunt Minnie in a tuneful voice. While she was talking, it appeared as if her gray-white lace dress was trembling.

"Resting, resting nicely," Blanche said angrily. "This is surely your work. You know that we love James."

"I love James too," Aunt Minnie said somewhat timidly. "But the dog needs rest. The dog cannot go out every night."

"And you, Aunt Minnie?" Roderick broke in rudely. "Can you keep going out every night?"

"Yes, I can," answered their aunt with a soft smile.

"Why?"

"Because over there those who are loved in this world are being carefully looked after. They have to take a rest. But I will come in the future, too. Every night."

A heavy silence followed Aunt Minnie's words. They had just realized what a wicked ghost she was.

"Auntie," said Roderick, gasping for breath, "dear Aunt Minnie, we all love you very much."

Aunt Minnie did not answer. She sat down in an armchair and began a long needlework.

translated by Stephen L. Sass