

ANIMALS

famous and curious stories

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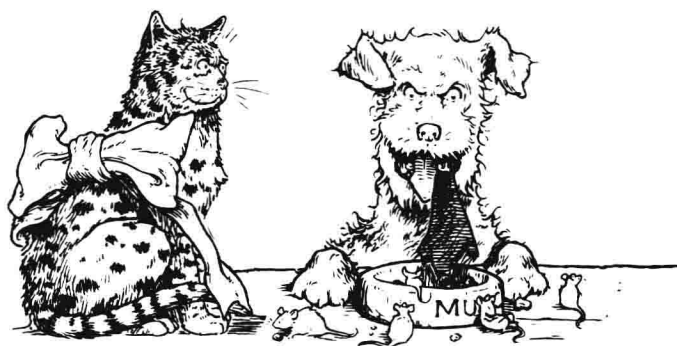


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Famous and Curious Stories

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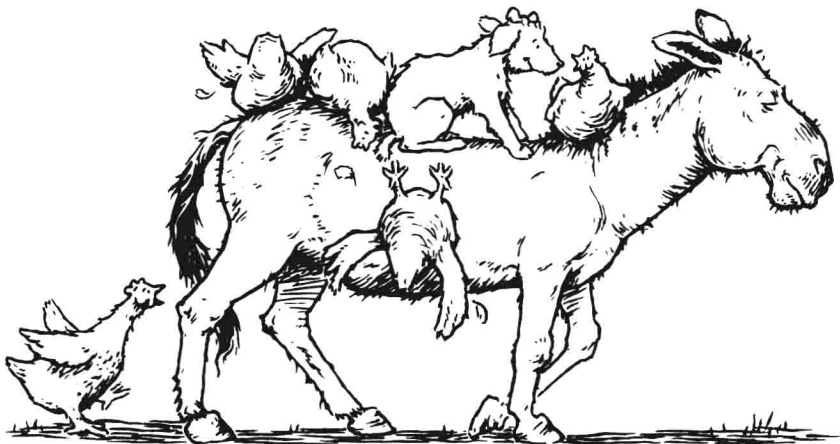
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Bel Ria

SHEILA BURNFORD

The wartime life of a tough little terrier among a travelling circus troupe in the Basque country, takes him through the rigours of life aboard a British naval vessel on active service, and leaves him, finally, in Plymouth at the height of an air raid . . .

ALICE TREMORNE HAD been trapped for two nights and days when the dog found her. She had been alone in the house as Miss Carpenter, her companion help, was away on a week's holiday, and the daily help had left soon after putting the evening meal in the oven. After listening to the nine o'clock news, restless and so bored with her own company that she had even cleared away the supper dishes for the first time in her life, Mrs. Tremorne suddenly thought of sloe gin. At the beginning of the war she had put up several bottles. They should be pleasantly aged by now, maturing in the inspection pit of the garage, a place which she had found, after much trial and error, maintained an excellent temperature for her home-made wines. She would tell Janet Carpenter to fetch a sample bottle when she returned . . .

But the more she thought about the sloe gin, the more she wanted to try it now; how very inconsiderate of the woman not to have foreseen this wish. Why should she have to wait five days before it was realised? She could not. She would not. *She would fetch some herself* – she would show Carpenter she was not indispensable. It would be interesting to see how the Elderflower '37 was faring too. Wincing, but still majestic, Mrs. Tremorne rose stiffly to her feet.

Taking a small torch, a fur wrap, and her stick from the hall cupboard, she shuffled slowly down the path to the garage, grimly enjoying the

outing, savouring each detail of the hazards of steps and path to relate to Carpenter in due course. She hoped she would be able to manipulate the bottles, for her hands as well as her legs were stiff and swollen with arthritis. Anticipating difficulty, she had put two small bottles and a funnel in the string bag over her arm so that at least she could transfer some of the contents in the garage itself.

Where the cobbles had been taken up from the stable yard, the surface had been paved; very easy to negotiate, even for an elderly woman who normally never set foot outside without her companion's arm being available. But when she opened the garage door and shone the light around, she realised that she had forgotten the fitted boards covering the pit. She would have to remove the ones over the steps. Her knees twinged at the thought. But Mrs. Tremorne was not one to turn back from her determined course; somehow she managed to lever up enough boards. Puffing and panting, giddy with the effort, cursing Carpenter, she now realised that it would be sheer foolhardiness to attempt the cement steps of the pit without a handrail. She decided to investigate instead the deep cupboard in which the matured bottles of Elderberry, Ginger and Blackcurrant wines were kept, under the stairs leading to the loft.

Outside the sirens wailed, such a normal event almost every evening since the war had begun that she took no notice. She unlocked the door, closing it carefully behind her before switching on the light. The neat rows of labelled bottles filled her orderly soul with pleasure, dating back to – let me see when – she adjusted her pince-nez and bent closer. It was at this precise moment that she realised the sirens had heralded business this time; the anti-aircraft defences ringing the town burst out into an excited crackling, and now the great thudding of the naval guns from the dockyard joined in. Above all this was another seldom heard but unmistakable noise, a very unpleasant noise indeed, with the spaced finality of its dreadful thuds rattling her bottles and sending the suspended light-bulb into a crazy flickering dance: *those unspeakable Germans were actually having the effrontery to bomb Plymouth.*

Mrs. Tremorne switched off the light, and re-opened the cupboard door. The open garage door now framed a bright orange sky across which searchlight fingers moved, and a garden illuminated as clearly as a stage setting. A flare floated down towards the paddock beyond, and as she watched her fascination changed to irritation as the bright unearthly glow revealed unseemly mounds of fresh mole-hills on her lawn. There was a sudden clanging as fragments of metal rained down on the path, an unpleasant pattering on the roof above. She found herself longing for the comfortable haven of her armchair in the shelter of the cellar stairs of the house, three comforting floors and the concrete stairs overhead.

Then her world was filled with a rushing screaming noise like an express train coming straight at her. Arthritis and all, Mrs. Tremorne dropped to the floor and lay flat, her head buried in her arms. The stone

floor rocked, she felt as though all air were being sucked out of her body, her head exploding, then her body became strangely weightless. Without in any way feeling conscious of her passage across the garage, she had been neatly picked up and as neatly deposited on the straw on top of her own bottles at the bottom of the pit. At the same time, almost as though she had activated some lever, the roof collapsed, the first beams to fall straddling the pit, and so supporting the remainder that fell in crazy order on top. Terribly shaken, her head spinning, her eardrums thudding, Mrs. Tremorne lay on her straw mattress and wondered if this was the end. Before she could find out, she dropped off into unconsciousness.

When she came to some hours later, lying there with her arms by her sides, in thick black silence, she thought that she was in her coffin, additional proof being that when she spoke up indignantly to say that there had been some mistake, she heard no words. She resigned herself, with black fury, to eternal rest.

After a while, she became conscious of sharp things boring through the straw, like fakirs' nails into her back, and memory returned: the tops of her wine bottles. She lifted her arms then each leg cautiously in turn; everything worked. She felt herself carefully, but could not find even a scratch; her shoes had been blown off, but she still clutched the torch in one hand, the string bag was still over her arm, the medicine bottles were intact inside. After much painful effort, she managed to get to her feet, resting her elbows on a cleared space at floor level. She saw now that there were occasional chinks of red light in the otherwise impenetrable mass over her. She swept the beam of the light around the roof of her prison and saw that even if she had had the strength to remove some of the obstruction, the balance was so delicately conserved that she might well loosen a key support and bring the whole jumble crashing down. She would have to resign herself to waiting. Conserving her light, her strength. Thank goodness, even although the night was not cold, she had put on her cape. It irritated her very much that she had no one except herself to blame for her predicament, this unnerving silence – only those dreadful Germans, and she concentrated all her hate on them.

She did not know when the All Clear sounded at last in the early morning; she did not even know if it was day or night, only that she was now very cold and ached in every bone. She shouted and shouted not knowing that her voice had become a whisper, and tears of fury and weakness furrowed down her dusty cheeks. Falling silent at last from sheer exhaustion, she realised that the A.R.P. post at the corner of the street where the listed occupants of all the houses around were kept, would probably check the house only. Knowing that Miss Carpenter was away – one of the wardens was her cousin – and finding no evidence of Mrs. Tremorne (if only she had not been so altruistic with that supper tray . . .) they would assume that she had gone out for the evening. They would never think of looking in the garage, for everyone knew that she

was unable to get around without assistance. But the daily would come at 9 o'clock, Mrs. Tremorne reassured herself, she would know, she would come searching. . . .

But no one came. She had no idea of the passage of time for her watch had stopped. She moved some bottles to form a straw nest. Sometimes she fell into an exhausted sleep, sometimes she forced herself to move her arms and legs and stand leaning on the edge of the pit, shouting. Sometimes, lightheaded, she sang, her fingers pressed over her vocal chords to assure herself that sound was indeed coming forth. Thirsty, she remembered the sloe gin; transferring some to a small bottle in total darkness occupied her for a long time. She spilled a lot before she learned the art, but the result – taken strictly medicinally – was very comforting. And the more sips she took, the more it seemed that her hearing was returning; she could even hear occasional sounds of traffic from the road beyond the garden. But they only increased her feeling of a terrible loneliness and desertion – the rest of the world going about its business, uncaring of Alice Tremorne.

It was in one of these more lonely moments, during the second night if she had known it, that as she learned against the pit edge, and clenched and unclenched her fingers against their growing stiffness, she suddenly heard an unfamiliar creaking in the immediate timbers. She shone the weak beam of the light in this direction, calling for help in a husky whisper, then suddenly, out of nowhere came the warm wet touch of a tongue on her finger. Instinctively repelled she jerked her arm back; then as though to reassure her, she heard a soft whining, and knew that this was not the repulsive questing of a hopeful rat. Her fingers moved again to touch a muzzle, ears, to be covered again by an eager tongue – it was a dog that had come out of the blackness to her, the only living thing that knew or cared, apparently, that she still existed.

Unfamiliar tears of gratitude welled up in Mrs. Tremorne's eyes. When the pile shifted, and high agonised yelps followed she forgot her own splitting head and aching bones; she longed only to comfort this warm miraculous link with life, to show it by the soft stroking of her fingers how much she cared. From that moment, Mrs. Tremorne determined that if she had to spend another month here, living on gin in total darkness, she would somehow come out of it and see the reality of this small creature that had risked its life to come to her need out of the terrible night.

It was undoubtedly the same sloe gin that put her there in the first place that brought her out alive again, for it was to be another two days before she was found by the conscientious Janet Carpenter who had cut short her holiday to come back when she could receive no satisfaction on the telephone, the lines being down. She had arrived only that morning, after travelling for two nightmarishly slow days. She had been unable to find the daily help who had promised so faithfully to look after Mrs.

Tremorne. She had vanished without a trace, padlocking her cottage behind her, and for a while Miss Carpenter thought Mrs. Tremorne might have vanished with her, to some safer hideout in the country. She knew that her mistress would not have gone out with friends that evening, as the warden suggested, for the simple reason that she had no friends. No one even liked her sufficiently to ask her out and put up with her overbearing bitterness for an evening. But it never occurred to her to think beyond the house at first; Mrs. Tremorne elsewhere, solo, was unthinkable.

It was not until after her fruitless investigations that she came out into the garden to survey the wreckage and heard a faint muffled barking. Puzzled, she traced it to the garage. Plainly there was a dog trapped somewhere in that pile; but how to set about getting it out was another matter, for the whole structure above it looked perilous in the extreme. She sniffed the air; it smelled as though some Bacchanalian orgy had recently taken place. The cupboard under the stairs hung drunkenly, one hinge on the shelves buckled and a pile of broken bottles covered in white dust lying below. On top was a curiously familiar shape under its coating of dust. Picking her way carefully over she picked it up: she held Alice Tremorne's ivory-headed cane, as much a part of her normally as though it were an extension of her left arm. Janet Carpenter turned and ran for the A.R.P. post.

They uncovered, piece by precarious piece, first the dog, a small white shadow of a dog who gazed blindly up at them from thickly encrusted eyes behind a matted fringe of hair, dusty white save for the contrasting red of a clean licked, mangled fore-paw, so light that as it was lifted out it seemed there could be nothing but dry bones within the enveloping whiteness. The man who held it was conscious of the sweet sickly smell of infection, the dry hot skin below the coat. Nevertheless, it acknowledged man's presence by a brief quivering of the end of its tail. He laid it on the floor and they set to again for the urgent, yet frustratingly slow uncovering of Mrs. Tremorne's body.

It was unveiled at last. Stretched out neatly on a bed of straw, her head pillowed on a flat square of empty bottles, hands folded tidily on her chest under the sable cape, her stockinged feet together, Mrs. Tremorne lay. The string of pearls on the massive shelf of her bosom moved up and down with peaceful regularity. Even as they gazed upon her, the slack lower jaw dropped another fraction, she hiccupped gently, and then a loud imperious snore fell upon their astonished ears.

She was taken to hospital, where – almost incredibly for a seventy-six-year-old semi-invalid – no damage other than a bruising which discoloured almost her entire body had been found, and now it was a matter of time and rest only.

The overworked nursing staff hoped fervently that the time with them would be brief, for she was a despotic bell-ringer of a patient. The first

thing she had asked for when she recovered from her monumental but merciful hangover was the dog, her rescuer, in whom, as she declared, had lain her salvation. Miss Carpenter, hovering dutifully by the bed, was bidden to find out about this canine hero forthwith. What did it look like? It was just a dog, a small dog, Miss Carpenter said, remembering with aversion the limp, dirty, blood-stained bundle, but adding only that it appeared to have a shortish tail and longish ears. Mrs. Tremorne regarded her with scorn.

‘It was a miracle,’ she said, her words still somewhat slurred, ‘I held ish paw and strength flowed out, poshively *flowed* out . . .’ Her glazed eyes glared from the pillow, challenging anyone to dispute the source of the miracle working flow, and Miss Carpenter left to track it down.

She was able to report next day that one of the rescue team had taken the dog home with him, and his wife was looking after it; its eyes were open, the wound on the paw was clean, but possibly there were internal injuries or severe shock for the animal seemed to have lost the will to live – it simply lay in a box without stirring, and was kept going only by the efforts of the woman with spoonfuls of warm milk laced with precious whisky.

She must be suitably rewarded, and a vet must be called immediately, commanded Mrs. Tremorne – two, three vets if necessary. A taxi must be summoned so that dog could be installed at The Cedars straightaway. Carpenter must go forth and – here was her alligator bag – set the machinery in motion; a dog basket, the best, to be bought; leads, brushes, bones and tempting dog delicacies – dogs liked liver, she knew: fetch then, quantities of liver . . .

Liver was very hard to get nowadays, offered Miss Carpenter apologetically. ‘Tell Hobbs the Butcher I wish liver,’ said Mrs. Tremorne, weakly but majestically. The butcher’s had received a direct hit, Carpenter had heard. ‘What has that to do with Hobbs obtaining liver?’ enquired Mrs. Tremorne in genuine surprise.

It was useless explaining; no one tried. The war to Alice Tremorne was simply an interlude of personal inconvenience. Miss Carpenter departed dispiritedly into the ruins of the shopping centre.

‘Good dog, good little doggie,’ mumbled Alice Tremorne, drifting off again. ‘Did it hurt then? Poor little doggie . . . never mind . . . Alice is here . . .’

If miraculous strength had flowed out of the dog’s paw to Alice Tremorne, now the procedure was reversed and strength flowed back through every means that the hand dipping into its alligator bag could provide. The little dog entered a new stage of his life that held everything a solicitous parent might give its child, a life of extreme contrast to all he had ever known, in its quiet stability and ordained pattern of day following upon day. By the time Mrs. Tremorne was allowed home to

her well-aired bed, still stiff and sore, he was installed in a basket (the best) in her bedroom, his coat brushed to gleaming point, his hair tied back from his eyes with a red ribbon, and combed to a silken length that would have sent MacLean rushing in shame for scissors. The hair around his delicate hocks had been shaved to match the area around the injured paw over which a baby's blue bootie was drawn to hold the dressing in place. He hopped on three legs, and several times a day Miss Carpenter, mouth buttoned into a thin line, clipped a leash on to the lightest and finest of red collars and took her charge for an airing in the garden. After the first day of Mrs. Tremorne's homecoming she no longer returned him to the basket, but lifted him – her lips by now almost invisible – into the fastness of Mrs. Tremorne's bed, who then drew her pink silk eiderdown tenderly over.

At first he had hardly stirred, lying with dull apathetic eyes that were wide open yet seemed to focus on nothing. When they closed and he slept briefly, his body twitched convulsively, and then Mrs. Tremorne would reach out to pat and talk the reassuring baby talk that she had never used in her life but which seemed to come naturally to her now, until he lay quiet again. As the days passed, his tail gradually stirred more and more, his eyes cleared and focused, his ears rose fractionally – until one day she woke from a light sleep to find him lightly brushing her arm with one paw, his eyes beaming with interest. Yet another indomitable little dog had risen from the ashes.

Now to find a name for him. It seemed to Alice Tremorne that if she tried enough words she might run into a chance combination of vowels that would sound near enough to the dog's ears. Propped up against her pillows, her anonymous audience's eyes fixed upon her with unwavering attention, she started off by running through all the fictional or traditional canine names that she could remember: Rover, Fido, Blackie, Spot, Kim . . . She sent Carpenter down to the library: Garm, Argus, Owd Bob, Beautiful Joe, Luath, Beowulf, Greyfriars Bobby . . . She ran through name after name but none met with any recognition. Matthew, Mark, Luke, John . . . she persevered: Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor . . . She was about to dip into the telephone book when she remembered John Peel and his hounds.

'Yes, I ken John Peel, and Ruby too! And Ranter and Rover/ . . .' She trailed off; no, it wasn't Rover, it was . . . *Raver? Ringworm?* She started off at the beginning again, hoping to get carried along unconsciously: *'Do ye ken John Peel,/Wi' his coat so gay,'* she sang determinedly, only to get stuck again at Ranter. It was very irritating to one who prided herself on her memory.

She was still at it when Miss Carpenter arrived to take the dog out, and when commanded to make a duet she outran Mrs. Tremorne convincingly: *'Ranter and Ringwood,/Bellman and True!'* She continued in a surprisingly sweet soprano.

It was irritating to be bested; but as Mrs. Tremorne repeated the new names, suddenly the ears before her rose and flickered and the round eyes lit up in seeming recognition. She repeated the names, and this time the dog jumped off the bed and sat quivering expectantly, his eyes never leaving her face. It was Bellman that excited him, but she soon found that the first half of the word had the same effect: 'Bell!' she said, '*Bel* – good Bell!' and each time she spoke, the dog's tail wagged more furiously.

'You see,' she said triumphantly, 'that's his name – Bell! Time for walkies then, my darling Bell—' She gazed down dotingly.

In glum silence, Carpenter clipped on the lead. Then, almost unheard of, she produced an opinion of her own. 'I think Bell's a silly name for a dog,' she said. 'It sounds like a girl one way or a chime the other.' she sniffed.

Mrs. Tremorne was not used to mutiny, but she quelled it now with cunning ease: 'Neither the feminine nor the ding dong,' she said with lofty dismissal, 'but *Bel*, who – as I am sure you will remember – was the god of heaven and earth in Babylonian mythology.'

Many years addiction to *The Times* crossword had paid off. Bel he became, despite Carpenter sniffs, the sound of the name near enough to the one to which he must have responded for so many years before he became Ria.

Measure for measure, he returned the love and care lavished on him, and all his uninhibited affection and natural gaiety, so long denied, returned. He filled out to an attractive alert healthiness, becoming in the process the closest thing to a poodle to which the united efforts of his mistress and a kennel maid skilled in the art could clip and comb him, the dark curls of the outer coat stripping down to a pale, almost lavender, grey. The mutilation of his toes left him with a permanent slight limp but did not seem to inconvenience him at all.

The gardener, the milkman, the postman, every tradesman who came to the door – in fact, any human who entered the house or garden – was greeted with enthusiastic interest, and if it were not immediately returned he would stand on his hindlegs to draw attention to the oversight.

Soon, even the reluctant Miss Carpenter, who had lived only for retirement one day with an undemanding canary, fell under his spell. She no longer looked so haunted, for now that Mrs. Tremorne had an all-engrossing interest, the spotlight of attention had shifted, and an atmosphere of almost cosy warmth gradually permeated the normally gloomy house with their mutual absorption. Suddenly one day she became Janet. Bel loved her, and more and more she enjoyed his company and the interest he brought to her formerly solitary walks. But undoubtedly the one who received his full devotion was the one whom he had found himself, his own human bounty, Mrs. Tremorne.

He seemed to be completely content in his role of the perfect companion