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Flush

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Flush

Chapter 1

THREE MILE CROSS

IT IS UNIVERSALLY admitted that the family from which the subject of this memoir claims descent is one of the greatest antiquity. Therefore it is not strange that the origin of the name itself is lost in obscurity. Many million years ago the country which is now called Spain seethed uneasily in the ferment of creation. Ages passed, vegetation appeared; where there is vegetation the law of nature has decreed that there shall be rabbits; where there are rabbits, Providence has ordained there shall be dogs. There is nothing in this that calls for question or comment. But when we ask why the dog that caught the rabbit was called a spaniel, then doubts and difficulties begin. Some historians say that when the Carthaginians landed in Spain the common soldiers shouted with one accord, "Span! Span!", for rabbits darted from every scrub, from every bush. The land was alive with rabbits. And "*span*" in the Carthaginian tongue signifies "rabbit". Thus the land was called Hispania, or Rabbit-land, and the dogs, which were almost instantly perceived in full pursuit of the rabbits, were called spaniels, or rabbit dogs.

There many of us would be content to let the matter rest, but truth compels us to add that there is another school of thought which thinks differently. The word Hispania, these scholars say, has nothing whatever to do with the Carthaginian word *span*. Hispania derives from the Basque

word *españa*, signifying an edge or boundary. If that is so, rabbits, bushes, dogs, soldiers – the whole of that romantic and pleasant picture, must be dismissed from the mind, and we must simply suppose that the spaniel is called a spaniel because Spain is called España. As for the third school of antiquaries which maintains that just as a lover calls his mistress “monster” or “monkey”, so the Spaniards called their favourite dogs “crooked” or “cragged” (the word *españa* can be made to take these meanings), because a spaniel is notoriously the opposite – that is too fanciful a conjecture to be seriously entertained.

Passing over these theories, and many more which need not detain us here, we reach Wales in the middle of the tenth century. The spaniel is already there – brought, some say, by the Spanish clan of Ebor or Ivor many centuries previously, and certainly by the middle of the tenth century a dog of high repute and value. “The spaniel of the King is a pound in value,” Howel Dha laid it down in his book of laws.* And when we remember what the pound could buy in the year AD 948 – how many wives, slaves, horses, oxen, turkeys and geese – it is plain that the spaniel was already a dog of value and reputation. He had his place already by the King’s side. His family was held in honour before those of many famous monarchs. He was taking his ease in palaces when the Plantagenets and the Tudors and the Stuarts were following other people’s ploughs through other people’s mud. Long before the Howards, the Cavendishes or the Russells* had risen above the common ruck of Smiths, Joneses and Tomkins, the spaniel family was a family distinguished and apart. And as the centuries took their way, minor branches broke off from the parent stem. By degrees, as English history pursues its course, there came into existence at least

seven famous spaniel families – the Clumber, the Sussex, the Norfolk, the Black Field, the Cocker, the Irish Water and the English Water, all deriving from the original spaniel of pre-historic days but showing distinct characteristics, and therefore no doubt claiming privileges as distinct. That there was an aristocracy of dogs by the time Queen Elizabeth was on the throne, Sir Philip Sidney bears witness: "...Greyhounds, spaniels and hounds", he observes, "whereof the first might seem the lords, the second the gentlemen and the last the yeomen of dogs", he writes in the *Arcadia*.*

But if we are thus led to assume that the spaniels followed human example, and looked up to greyhounds as their superiors and considered hounds beneath them, we have to admit that their aristocracy was founded on better reasons than ours. Such at least must be the conclusion of anyone who studies the laws of the Spaniel Club.* By that august body it is plainly laid down what constitute the vices of a spaniel and what constitute its virtues. Light eyes, for example, are undesirable; curled ears are still worse; to be born with a light nose or a topknot is nothing less than fatal. The merits of the spaniel are equally clearly defined. His head must be smooth, rising without a too-decided stoop from the muzzle; the skull must be comparatively rounded and well developed, with plenty of room for brainpower; the eyes must be full but not gozzled; the general expression must be one of intelligence and gentleness. The spaniel that exhibits these points is encouraged and bred from; the spaniel who persists in perpetuating topknots and light noses is cut off from the privileges and emoluments of his kind. Thus the judges lay down the law and, laying down the law, impose penalties and privileges which ensure that the law shall be obeyed.

But, if we now turn to human society, what chaos and confusion meet the eye! No club has any such jurisdiction upon the breed of man. The Heralds' College is the nearest approach we have to the Spaniel Club. It at least makes some attempt to preserve the purity of the human family. But when we ask what constitutes noble birth – should our eyes be light or dark, our ears curled or straight, are topknots fatal – our judges merely refer us to our coats of arms. You have none, perhaps. Then you are nobody. But once make good your claim to sixteen quarterings, prove your right to a coronet, and then they say you are not only born, but nobly born into the bargain. Hence it is that not a muffineer in all Mayfair lacks its lion couchant or its mermaid rampant. Even our linen drapers mount the Royal Arms above their doors, as though that were proof that their sheets are safe to sleep in. Everywhere rank is claimed and its virtues are asserted. Yet when we come to survey the royal houses of Bourbon, Hapsburg and Hohenzollern, decorated with how many coronets and quarterings, couchant and rampant with how many lions and leopards, and find them now in exile, deposed from authority, judged unworthy of respect, we can but shake our heads and admit that the judges of the Spaniel Club judged better. Such is the lesson that is enforced directly we turn from these high matters to consider the early life of Flush in the family of the Mitfords.

About the end of the eighteenth century a family of the famous spaniel breed was living near Reading in the house of a certain Dr Midford, or Mitford. That gentleman, in conformity with the canons of the Heralds' College, chose to spell his name with a *t*, and thus claimed descent from the Northumberland family of the Mitfords of Bertram Castle. His wife was a Miss Russell, and sprang, if remotely, still

decidedly from the ducal house of Bedford. But the mating of Dr Mitford's ancestors had been carried on with such wanton disregard for principles that no bench of judges could have admitted his claim to be well bred or have allowed him to perpetuate his kind. His eyes were light, his ears were curled, his head exhibited the fatal topknot. In other words, he was utterly selfish, recklessly extravagant, worldly, insincere and addicted to gambling. He wasted his own fortune, his wife's fortune and his daughter's earnings. He deserted them in his prosperity and sponged upon them in his infirmity. Two points he had in his favour indeed: great personal beauty – he was like an Apollo until gluttony and intemperance changed Apollo into Bacchus – and he was genuinely devoted to dogs. But there can be no doubt that, had there been a Man Club corresponding to the Spaniel Club in existence, no spelling of Mitford with a *t* instead of with a *d*, no calling cousins with the Mitfords of Bertram Castle, would have availed to protect him from contumely and contempt, from all the penalties of outlawry and ostracism, from being branded as a mongrel man unfitted to carry on his kind. But he was a human being. Nothing, therefore, prevented him from marrying a lady of birth and breeding, from living for over eighty years, from having in his possession several generations of greyhounds and spaniels and from begetting a daughter.

All researches have failed to fix with any certainty the exact year of Flush's birth, let alone the month or the day, but it is likely that he was born some time early in the year 1842. It is also probable that he was directly descended from Tray (c.1816), whose points, preserved unfortunately only in the untrustworthy medium of poetry, prove him to have been a red cocker spaniel of merit. There is every reason to think that Flush was the son of that "real old cocking spaniel"

for whom Dr Mitford refused twenty guineas “on account of his excellence in the field”. It is to poetry, alas, that we have to trust for our most detailed description of Flush himself as a young dog. He was of that particular shade of dark brown which in sunshine flashes “all over into gold”. His eyes were “startled eyes of hazel bland”. His ears were “tasselled”, his “slender feet” were “canopied in fringes”, and his tail was broad. Making allowance for the exigencies of rhyme and the inaccuracies of poetic diction, there is nothing here but what would meet with the approval of the Spaniel Club. We cannot doubt that Flush was a pure-bred cocker of the red variety, marked by all the characteristic excellences of his kind.

The first months of his life were passed at Three Mile Cross, a working man’s cottage near Reading. Since the Mitfords had fallen on evil days – Kerenhappock was the only servant; the chair covers were made by Miss Mitford* herself and of the cheapest material; the most important article of furniture seems to have been a large table; the most important room a large greenhouse – it is unlikely that Flush was surrounded by any of those luxuries – rainproof kennels, cement walks, a maid or boy attached to his person – that would now be accorded a dog of his rank. But he thrived; he enjoyed with all the vivacity of his temperament most of the pleasures and some of the licences natural to his youth and sex. Miss Mitford, it is true, was much confined to the cottage. She had to read aloud to her father hour after hour, then to play cribbage, then, when at last he slumbered, to write and write and write at the table in the greenhouse in the attempt to pay their bills and settle their debts. But at last the longed-for moment would come. She thrust her papers aside, clapped a hat on her head, took her umbrella and set

off for a walk across the fields with her dogs. Spaniels are by nature sympathetic; Flush, as his story proves, had an even excessive appreciation of human emotions. The sight of his dear mistress snuffing the fresh air at last, letting it ruffle her white hair and redden the natural freshness of her face, while the lines on her huge brow smoothed themselves out, excited him to gambols whose wildness was half sympathy with her own delight. As she strode through the long grass, so he leapt hither and thither, parting its green curtain. The cool globes of dew or rain broke in showers of iridescent spray about his nose; the earth – here hard, here soft, here hot, here cold – stung, teased and tickled the soft pads of his feet. Then what a variety of smells interwoven in subtlest combination thrilled his nostrils! – strong smells of earth, sweet smells of flowers; nameless smells of leaf and bramble; sour smells as they crossed the road; pungent smells as they entered bean fields. But, suddenly, down the wind came, tearing a smell sharper, stronger, more lacerating than any – a smell that ripped across his brain, stirring a thousand instincts, releasing a million memories – the smell of hare, the smell of fox. Off he flashed like a fish drawn in a rush through water farther and farther. He forgot his mistress; he forgot all human kind. He heard dark men cry “Span! Span!” He heard whips crack. He raced; he rushed. At last he stopped, bewildered; the incantation faded; very slowly, wagging his tail sheepishly, he trotted back across the fields to where Miss Mitford stood shouting “Flush! Flush! Flush!” and waving her umbrella. And once at least the call was even more imperious; the hunting horn roused deeper instincts, summoned wilder and stronger emotions that transcended memory and obliterated grass, trees, hare, rabbit, fox in one wild shout of ecstasy. Love blazed her torch in his eyes; he

heard the hunting horn of Venus. Before he was well out of his puppyhood, Flush was a father.

Such conduct in a man, even, in the year 1842, would have called for some excuse from a biographer; in a woman no excuse could have availed – her name must have been blotted in ignominy from the page. But the moral code of dogs, whether better or worse, is certainly different from ours, and there was nothing in Flush's conduct in this respect that requires a veil now, or unfitted him for the society of the purest and the chastest in the land then. There is evidence, that is to say, that the elder brother of Dr Pusey was anxious to buy him. Deducing from the known character of Dr Pusey the probable character of his brother, there must have been something serious, solid, promising well for future excellence, whatever might be the levity of the present in Flush even as a puppy. But a much more significant testimony to the attractive nature of his gifts is that, even though Mr Pusey wished to buy him, Miss Mitford refused to sell him. As she was at her wits' end for money – scarcely knew indeed what tragedy to spin, what annual to edit, and was reduced to the repulsive expedient of asking her friends for help – it must have gone hard with her to refuse the sum offered by the elder brother of Dr Pusey. Twenty pounds had been offered for Flush's father. Miss Mitford might well have asked ten or fifteen for Flush. Ten or fifteen pounds was a princely sum, a magnificent sum to have at her disposal. With ten or fifteen pounds she might have recovered her chairs, she might have restocked her greenhouse, she might have bought herself an entire wardrobe, and "I have not bought a bonnet, a cloak, a gown, hardly a pair of gloves", she wrote in 1842, "for four years".

But to sell Flush was unthinkable. He was of the rare order of objects that cannot be associated with money. Was

he not of the still rarer kind that, because they typify what is spiritual, what is beyond price, become a fitting token of the disinterestedness of friendship, may be offered in that spirit to a friend, if one is lucky enough to have one, who is more like a daughter than a friend – to a friend who lies secluded all through the summer months in a back bedroom in Wimpole Street, to a friend who is no other than England's foremost poetess, the brilliant, the doomed, the adored Elizabeth Barrett herself? Such were the thoughts that came more and more frequently to Miss Mitford as she watched Flush rolling and scampering in the sunshine, as she sat by the couch of Miss Barrett in her dark, ivy-shaded London bedroom. Yes, Flush was worthy of Miss Barrett; Miss Barrett was worthy of Flush. The sacrifice was a great one, but the sacrifice must be made. Thus, one day, probably in the early summer of the year 1842, a remarkable couple might have been seen taking their way down Wimpole Street – a very short, stout, shabby, elderly lady, with a bright-red face and bright-white hair, who led by the chain a very spirited, very inquisitive, very well-bred golden cocker spaniel puppy. They walked almost the whole length of the street, until at last they paused at No. 50. Not without trepidation, Miss Mitford rang the bell.

Even now perhaps nobody rings the bell of a house in Wimpole Street without trepidation. It is the most august of London streets, the most impersonal. Indeed, when the world seems tumbling to ruin, and civilization rocks on its foundations, one has only to go to Wimpole Street – to pace that avenue, to survey those houses, to consider their uniformity, to marvel at the window curtains and their consistency, to admire the brass knockers and their regularity, to observe butchers tendering joints and cooks receiving them, to reckon

the incomes of the inhabitants and infer their consequent submission to the laws of God and man – one has only to go to Wimpole Street and drink deep of the peace breathed by authority in order to heave a sigh of thankfulness that, while Corinth has fallen and Messina has tumbled, while crowns have blown down the wind and old empires have gone up in flames, Wimpole Street has remained unmoved, and, turning from Wimpole Street into Oxford Street, a prayer rises in the heart and bursts from the lips that not a brick of Wimpole Street may be re-pointed, not a curtain washed, not a butcher fail to tender or a cook to receive the sirloin, the haunch, the breast, the ribs of mutton and beef for ever and ever, for as long as Wimpole Street remains, civilization is secure.

The butlers of Wimpole Street move ponderously even today; in the summer of 1842 they were more deliberate still. The laws of livery were then more stringent; the ritual of the green baize apron for cleaning silver, of the striped waistcoat and swallowtail black coat for opening the hall door, was more closely observed. It is likely then that Miss Mitford and Flush were kept waiting at least three minutes and a half on the doorstep. At last, however, the door of number fifty was flung wide; Miss Mitford and Flush were ushered in. Miss Mitford was a frequent visitor – there was nothing to surprise, though something to subdue her, in the sight of the Barrett family mansion. But the effect upon Flush must have been overwhelming in the extreme. Until this moment he had set foot in no house but the working man's cottage at Three Mile Cross. The boards there were bare, the mats were frayed, the chairs were cheap. Here there was nothing bare, nothing frayed, nothing cheap that Flush could see at a glance. Mr Barrett, the owner, was a rich merchant – he had a large family of grown-up sons and daughters, and a retinue,

proportionately large, of servants. His house was furnished in the fashion of the late Thirties, with some tincture, no doubt, of that Eastern fantasy which had led him, when he built a house in Shropshire, to adorn it with the domes and crescents of Moorish architecture. Here in Wimpole Street such extravagance would not be allowed, but we may suppose that the high dark rooms were full of ottomans and carved mahogany; tables were twisted; filigree ornaments stood upon them; daggers and swords hung upon wine-dark walls; curious objects brought from his East Indian property stood in recesses, and thick, rich carpets clothed the floors.

But as Flush trotted up behind Miss Mitford, who was behind the butler, he was more astonished by what he smelt than by what he saw. Up the funnel of the staircase came warm whiffs of joints roasting, of fowls basting, of soups simmering – ravishing almost as food itself to nostrils used to the meagre savour of Kerenhappock's penurious fries and hashes. Mixing with the smell of food were further smells – smells of cedar-wood and sandalwood and mahogany; scents of male bodies and female bodies; of menservants and maidservants; of coats and trousers; of crinolines and mantles; of curtains of tapestry, of curtains of plush; of coal dust and fog; of wine and cigars. Each room as he passed it – dining room, drawing room, library, bedroom – wafted out its own contribution to the general stew, while, as he set down first one paw and then another, each was caressed and retained by the sensuality of rich pile carpets closing amorously over it. At length they reached a closed door at the back of the house. A gentle tap was given; gently the door was opened.

Miss Barrett's bedroom – for such it was – must by all accounts have been dark. The light, normally obscured by

a curtain of green damask, was in summer further dimmed by the ivy, the scarlet runners, the convolvuluses and the nasturtiums which grew in the window box. At first Flush could distinguish nothing in the pale greenish gloom but five white globes glimmering mysteriously in mid-air. But again it was the smell of the room that overpowered him. Only a scholar who has descended step by step into a mausoleum and there finds himself in a crypt crusted with fungus, slimy with mould, exuding sour smells of decay and antiquity, while half-obliterated marble busts gleam in mid-air and all is dimly seen by the light of the small swinging lamp which he holds, and dips and turns, glancing now here, now there – only the sensations of such an explorer into the buried vaults of a ruined city can compare with the riot of emotions that flooded Flush's nerves as he stood for the first time in an invalid's bedroom, in Wimpole Street, and smelt eau de Cologne.

Very slowly, very dimly, with much sniffing and pawing, Flush by degrees distinguished the outlines of several articles of furniture. That huge object by the window was perhaps a wardrobe. Next to it stood, conceivably, a chest of drawers. In the middle of the room swam up to the surface what seemed to be a table with a ring round it, and then the vague amorphous shapes of armchair and table emerged. But everything was disguised. On top of the wardrobe stood three white busts; the chest of drawers was surmounted by a bookcase; the bookcase was pasted over with crimson merino; the washing table had a coronal of shelves upon it; on top of the shelves that were on top of the washing table stood two more busts. Nothing in the room was itself – everything was something else. Even the window blind was not a simple muslin blind: it was a painted fabric* with a design of castles and gateways and groves of trees, and there were several

peasants taking a walk. Looking glasses further distorted these already distorted objects, so that there seemed to be ten busts of ten poets instead of five; four tables instead of two. And suddenly there was a more terrifying confusion still. Suddenly Flush saw, staring back at him from a hole in the wall, another dog with bright eyes flashing and tongue lolling! He paused, amazed. He advanced in awe.

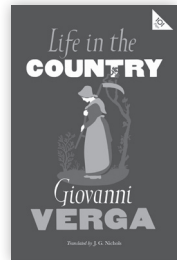
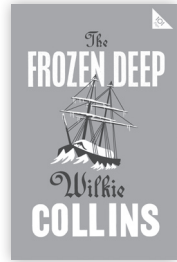
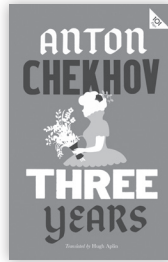
Thus advancing, thus withdrawing, Flush scarcely heard, save as the distant drone of wind among the treetops, the murmur and patter of voices talking. He pursued his investigations cautiously, nervously, as an explorer in a forest softly advances his foot, uncertain whether that shadow is a lion, or that root a cobra. At last, however, he was aware of huge objects in commotion over him, and, unstrung as he was by the experiences of the past hour, he hid himself, trembling, behind a screen. The voices ceased. A door shut. For one instant he paused, bewildered, unstrung. Then, with a pounce as of clawed tigers, memory fell upon him. He felt himself alone – deserted. He rushed to the door. It was shut. He pawed, he listened. He heard footsteps descending. He knew them for the familiar footsteps of his mistress. They stopped. But no – on they went, down they went. Miss Mitford was slowly, was heavily, was reluctantly descending the stairs. And as she went, as he heard her footsteps fade, panic seized upon him. Door after door shut in his face as Miss Mitford went downstairs: they shut on freedom, on fields, on hares, on grass, on his adored, his venerated mistress – on the dear old woman who had washed him and beaten him and fed him from her own plate when she had none too much to eat herself – on all he had known of happiness and love and human goodness! There! The front door slammed. He was alone. She had deserted him.

Then such a wave of despair and anguish overwhelmed him, the irrevocableness and implacability of fate so smote him, that he lifted up his head and howled aloud. A voice said, "Flush". He did not hear it. "Flush", it repeated a second time. He started. He had thought himself alone. He turned. Was there something alive in the room with him? Was there something on the sofa? In the wild hope that this being, whatever it was, might open the door, that he might still rush after Miss Mitford and find her – that this was some game of hide-and-seek such as they used to play in the greenhouse at home – Flush darted to the sofa.

"Oh, Flush!" said Miss Barrett. For the first time she looked him in the face. For the first time Flush looked at the lady lying on the sofa.

Each was surprised. Heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett's face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush's face; his eyes, too, were large and bright; his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them. As they gazed at each other, each felt: Here am I – and then each felt: But how different! Hers was the pale worn face of an invalid, cut off from air, light, freedom. His was the warm ruddy face of a young animal – instinct with health and energy. Broken asunder, yet made in the same mould, could it be that each completed what was dormant in the other? She might have been – all that; and he... But no. Between them lay the widest gulf that can separate one being from another. She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other. Then with one bound Flush sprang onto the sofa and laid himself where he was to lie for ever after – on the rug at Miss Barrett's feet.

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