
VIRGINIA
WOOLF
FLUSH

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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 Ebhor 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 Dda laid down in his Book of Laws. And when we remember what the pound could buy in the year A.D. 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 prehistoric 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 brain power; 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 you are not only born they say, 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 linendrapers 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 claim to kinship 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 throve; 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 further and further. He forgot his mistress; he forgot all humankind. He heard dark men cry “Span! Span!” He heard