

DOGWATCH

ONE

Hey-ho. Another day, another loopy dog. I pulled into Mrs. Draper's drive, ready to do battle with Simon, the demented Dalmatian. Did I know how to live, or what?

My lot, all fourteen of them, sat quiet in the back of the van, well-used to my work-routine, and happy to wait in comfort until I'd addressed the latest canine problem....it's what I do, fix dogs, or, more to the point, their owners.

Today's visit was an initial assessment, and money, as Mrs. Draper had already informed me, wasn't a problem: whatever it took to sort out her lovely, wilful boy!

If only....most of my clients are like dieting women, desperate for a quick-fix instead of a hard slog. Forget about patience, commitment and consistency: a scattering of fairy-dust will do just fine. I've had many a ZEO: (zero-effort owner) beg me to foster their dog, re-train it and deliver it, problem-free, to live happily ever after! As if. Still, in a world of perfect owners, I'd be out of a job.

I climbed out, gathering notebook and camera, crunched across the gravel and rang the doorbell, glancing round as I waited. Up-market village, nice bungalow, decent-sized garden bordered by lots of picture-book countryside.....well, lucky old Simon.

Or so I thought, until I met Mrs. Draper, who immediately set my teeth on edge. She was frilly and fussy and flappy and I wouldn't have trusted her with a stick-insect, let alone anything as spirited as a Dalmatian. What is it makes people take on totally unsuitable dogs and then wonder why it all goes horribly wrong?

"Ooh, ah, it's, mm, Mrs. Crane is it....?" She peered at me in absolute amazement: perhaps my on-the-dot arrival had taken her by surprise.

“Georgie, please. You rang me.” I gave her my professional, dog-friendly smile. “Is Simon in?”

“Ah, mmm. Possibly. Won’t you, er....”

“Thank you.” I stepped in before she forgot who I was and what I’d come for, following her through a gloomy wood-panelled hall into a poky kitchen absolutely overflowing with wool, balls and balls of that itchy nylon stuff that looks like fibre-glass, along with piles of knitting, most of it stripey and all of it in rancid wouldn’t-be-seen-dead-colours like lilac, mushroom and khaki.

“A.I.D.S orphans,” she remarked. “One knits where the need is.” I did my worthy, feed-the-world face as she held up a saggy, sludge-coloured garment and sighed. “Vests. Poor things never have enough.”

I gave her a sad, sympathetic smile. “I’m sure. Anyway....Simon?”

She snapped out of her charitable reverie. “Of course. He’s been such a trial, you know, pulls for England on the lead, had me over yesterday and....”

“MRS. DRAPER!” Had I been charging by the minute, I’d have been happy to let her witter on. “If I could please just see him?”

“Ah. Yes. I’ll go and, er...” and off she wandered, bleating like a ewe calling for its lost lamb and leaving me to pity those unfortunate orphans, as if they hadn’t enough misery without Mrs. Draper’s misplaced attentions....

Five minutes went by, with no sign of either her or the dog, although I could hear occasional faint cries of “Si-mon! Come and meet the nice lady!”

Eventually she returned, dog-less, and even more flustered than before. “I do apologise, but he’s not....can’t think *where* he could have....*never* known him to....”

This wasn’t turning into one of my best-ever consultations, on the basis of no dog, no fee....someone had to take charge, and it wasn’t going to be dithery Mrs. Draper.

“Let’s go and look for him together. Where did you last see him?”

That was obviously a tough one. “Back garden? Digging up plants? Such a naughty boy....”

“Then that’s where we’ll start.” I strode out of the back door, blowing the whistle I always carried and shouting ‘BISCUIT!’ a lot, a professional ploy that usually works when all else fails.

The garden wasn’t that big: we searched all the sorts of places a dog might hide or get trapped, including the shed and the pond, and I found no signs of the tunnelling which would have been my choice of escape-route had been forced into living with Mrs. Draper....which left only the back gate, swinging open to the lane beyond....

“But I didn’t, I mean, I swear it *was* bolted....”the old bat did seem genuinely upset and, flaky as she was, I didn’t believe she’d left the gate open or unlocked, and I went cold inside as I realised what must have happened. Trying to sound positive, I suggested we go in different directions, hoping against hope that I was wrong and Simon hadn’t gone far.

The old man was ambling along the lane with his back to us, dragging a sackful of something heavy. “Hello?” I called, “Don’t suppose you’ve seen a”if he heard me, he hadn’t time to reply, because the white van came out of nowhere, churning up mud as it accelerated towards us at a terrifying speed.

There was just time to pull Mrs. Draper into the hedge before it skidded past with inches to spare....we clung together, shaking but unscathed. I tried to yell, tried to warn him, but nothing came out and I could only watch in silent horror as the old man was hurled across the lane and left bloodied and broken as the van roared off into the distance.

