

Tobermory

Saki

On a cold, rainy afternoon in late August, Lady Blemley held a house party. There was a full gathering of guests around her tea table, including all sorts of interesting people. But all of them were paying attention to one guest in particular. His name was Cornelius Appin. None of the other guests knew much about him. Someone had said he was “clever.” This was the main reason that Lady Blemley had invited him. Maybe he would use his cleverness to entertain the other guests.

But by teatime, Lady Blemley hadn't seen any sign of Mr. Appin's cleverness. He didn't have a quick wit, he wasn't a croquet champion, a hypnotist, or a theatrical performer. He wasn't especially good looking either.

At just about the time most guests had lost interest in him, Mr. Appin made an attention-getting statement. He claimed to have made a discovery that was more important than the invention of gun powder, the printing press, and the steam engine put together! In fact, this thing was more like a miracle than a scientific discovery.

Sir Wilfred spoke up for the unimpressed guests: “And do you really ask us to believe that you have discovered a means for instructing animals in the art of human speech, and that dear old Tobermory has proved your first successful pupil?”

Mr. Appin replied confidently: “It is a problem which I have been working on for the last 17 years. But only during the last eight or nine months have I been successful. Of course, I have experimented with thousands of animals, but lately only with cats. They are wonderful creatures which have become part of our civilization while keeping all their highly developed wild instincts. Sometimes you find a cat that is brainier than others. When I met Tobermory a week ago, I saw immediately that he was a ‘beyond-cat’ of extraordinary intelligence. I had gone far along the road to success in recent experiments; with Tobermory I have reached the goal.”

The people who heard all of this didn't believe a word of it. One of them silently moved his lips as if he was saying, "Rats!"

It was Miss Reskir who spoke up saying, "And do you mean to say that you have taught Tobermory to say and understand easy sentences of one syllable?"

Mr. Appin turned to her and smiled. He then patiently explained, "My dear Miss Resker, one teaches little children and savages and backward adults that way. When one has once solved the problem of making a beginning with an animal of highly developed intelligence, one has no need for those simple methods. Tobermory can speak our language with perfect correctness."

This was too much for Mr. Clovis, who now said out loud, "Beyond rats!"

Lady Blemley then chipped in: "Hadn't we better have the cat in and judge for ourselves?"

Sir Wilfred went in search of the animal. The rest of the people in the room sat back, expecting to see Mr. Appin perform some sort of ventriloquism with the cat.

After a minute, Sir Wilfred came back into the room. His face was white as a sheet and his eyes wide with excitement.

"By Gad, it's true!" he blurted out. Seeing how agitated he was, everyone sat forward with an increased level of interest.

Sir Wilfred collapsed into an armchair and excitedly told them what he'd just seen: "I found him dozing in the smoking room and called out to him to come for his tea. He blinked at me in his usual way, and I said, 'Come on, Toby; don't keep us waiting' and, by Gad! He drawled out in a most horribly natural voice that he'd come when he dashed well pleased! I nearly jumped out of my skin!"

The guests had no reason to believe Mr. Appin, but they all knew and respected Sir Wilfred. His words could be believed.

They all started talking excitedly. Meanwhile Mr. Appin sat in the middle of them without saying a word. He was enjoying the reaction that he was seeing to his great discovery.

Then Tobermory wandered into the room. As he did so, he looked at the group of people who were sitting around the tea table. They all became silent as they stared at the cat with amazement.

Then, feeling a little embarrassed to be talking to a cat as if it were an equal, Lady Blemley asked, "Will you have some milk, Tobermory?"

"I don't mind if I do," the cat replied.

This caused a shiver of excitement to go through the guests. Lady Blemley couldn't help spilling some of the milk that she poured into Tobermory's bowl.

"I'm afraid I've spilled a good deal of it," she said as if apologizing to the cat.

"After all, it's not my carpet," Tobermory replied.

Again the group was silent.

Finally, Miss Resker spoke. She asked Tobermory if it had been difficult to learn the human language.

Tobermory stared at her for a moment and then looked away. It was obvious that the question was too boring for him to bother answering.

"What do you think of human intelligence?" asked Mavis Pellington.

"Of whose intelligence in particular?" asked Tobermory coldly.

"Oh, well, mine for instance," said Mavis with a nervous laugh.

"You put me in an embarrassing position," said Tobermory, who didn't sound embarrassed at all. "When your being invited to this house party was suggested, Sir Wilfred protested that you were the most brainless woman he

knew. Lady Blemley replied that your lack of brain power was the very reason that she wanted to invite you. That's because you were the only person stupid enough to buy their old car."

A very embarrassed Lady Blemley tried to deny all of this. But she had told Mavis that very morning that her old car would be perfect for her.

Major Barfield now spoke up. He tried to embarrass Tobermory by asking, "How about your carryings-on with the tortoiseshell puss up at the stables, eh?"

As soon as he'd said it, everyone realized the mistake that he'd made.

"One does not usually discuss these matters in public," said Tobermory coldly. "From a slight observation of your ways since you've been in this house, I should imagine you'd find it inconvenient if I were to shift the conversation to your own little affairs."

Everyone now grew nervous, thinking about what secrets they had that the cat had been witness to.

Lady Blemley then spoke up. "Would you like to go and see if cook has got your dinner ready?" she said, ignoring the fact that it was at least two hours until Tobermory's dinner time.

"Thanks," said Tobermory, "not quite so soon after my tea. I don't want to die of indigestion."

"Cats have nine lives, you know," said Sir Wilfred jokingly.

"Possibly," answered Tobermory, "but only one liver."

"Adelaide!" said Mrs. Cornett, "Do you mean to encourage that cat to go out and gossip about us in the servants' hall?"

Now they all began to panic. Someone remembered that Tobermory used to spend long hours lying on a balcony that ran in front of most of the bedroom windows in the house. He liked to watch the pigeons from there... but who knows what else he had seen?

If Tobermory let out the secrets that he knew, it would be a disaster for them all. Mrs. Cornett, who was very careful to always look her best, looked just as uncomfortable as the Major. Miss Scrawen, who was known for leading a blameless life, seemed to be irritated. Bertie van Tahn, who had lived a terrible, depraved life, turned white with terror. But at least he didn't rush out of the room like Odo Finsberry. Odo was a young man who was about to become a priest.

Mr. Clovis tried to remain calm. He was thinking about how long it would take him to buy some mice that he could use to bribe Tobermory not to say anything.

Then Agnes Resker asked dramatically, "Why did I ever come down here?"

Tobermory answered the question. "Judging by what you said to Mrs. Cornett on the croquet-lawn yesterday, you were out of food," he said. "You described the Blemleys as the dullest people to stay with that you knew, but said they were clever enough to employ a first-rate cook; otherwise they'd find it difficult to get anyone to come down a second time."

At this Agnes said, "There's not a word of truth in it! I appeal to Mrs. Cornett—"

"Mrs. Cornett repeated your remark afterwards to Bertie van Tahn," continued Tobermory, "and said, 'That woman is a regular Hunger Marcher; she'd go anywhere for four square meals a day,' and Bertie van Tahn said—"

Tobermory suddenly stopped speaking. He had seen the big yellow tomcat from the Rectory going through the shrubbery towards the stables. In a flash he had disappeared through the open French window.

Now the guests turned on Mr. Appin. They complained about what he had done and what the talking cat might reveal about them. It was all his fault. Now they wanted him to do something to stop things from getting worse.

The first question Mr. Appin had to answer was whether or not Tobermory could teach his dangerous gift to other cats. "It was possible," he replied,

“that he might have started teaching his good friend the stable puss, but it was unlikely that any other cats had been instructed.”

“Then,” said Mrs. Cornett, “Tobermory may be a valuable cat and a great pet; but I’m sure you’ll agree, Adelaide, that both he and the stable cat must be done away with without delay.”

“You don’t suppose I’ve enjoyed the last quarter of an hour, do you?” said Lady Blemley angrily. “My husband and I are very fond of Tobermory—at least, we were before this horrible accomplishment was given to him; but now, of course, the only thing is to have him destroyed as soon as possible.”

“We can put some poison in the scraps he always gets at dinnertime,” said Sir Wilfred, “and I will go and drown the stable cat myself. The coachman will be very sore at losing his pet, but I’ll say they both caught a disease and we’re afraid of it spreading to the kennels.”

“But my great discovery!” complained Mr. Appin. “After all my years of research and experiment—”

“You can go and experiment on the cows at the farm, who are under proper control,” said Mrs. Cornett, “or the elephants at the Zoological Gardens. They’re said to be highly intelligent, and they don’t come creeping about our bedrooms and under chairs, and so forth.”

Mr. Appin was very disappointed at the thought that his prize pupil must be killed. But he had no choice. Everyone else was keen to kill the cat straight away. Some of them probably even wanted to kill Mr. Appin!

Because the trains weren’t running, the guests had to stay for dinner. They were all anxious to see the end of Tobermory and the tomcat. Sir Wilfred had struggled with the tomcat, and later with the coachman who owned it.

All that Agnes Resker ate for dinner was a piece of dry toast. Mavis Pellington was silent throughout the meal. Lady Blemley kept talking nonstop, but her attention was fixed on the doorway. A plateful of poisoned fish scraps were waiting for Tobermory.

But the cat never came.

After dinner they all went into the lounge. Odo Finsberry tried to entertain everyone with a song, but no one was in the mood for it. At 11 o'clock, the servants went to bed. One of them told the guests that the small window in the pantry had been left open as usual for Tobermory's private use. The guests passed the time by reading magazines, books, or whatever they could get their hands on.

Every few minutes, Lady Blemley went into the pantry to check if Tobermory had come in. Each time she returned with a frown on her face.

At two o'clock Mr. Clovis spoke up: "He won't turn up tonight. He's probably in the local newspaper office right now, dictating the first installment of his life story. Lady What's-her-name's book won't be in it. It will be the event of the day."

Mr. Clovis then went to bed. One by one the other guests did the same.

In the morning, the servants who brought around an early cup of tea to the guests told them Tobermory had not returned.

Breakfast was even more awkward than dinner had been. Before it was over though, Tobermory's body was brought in. It had been found by a gardener. It had bite marks on its throat and yellow fur in its claws. These made it obvious that Tobermory had been killed by the big tomcat from the Rectory.

By lunchtime, most of the guests had left. In the afternoon, Lady Blemley wrote a nasty letter to the Rectory complaining about the loss of her valuable pet.

Tobermory had been Appin's only successful pupil. There would be no other.

A few weeks later an elephant in the Dresden Zoological Garden, which had never shown any signs of being violent before, broke loose and killed an Englishman. It was said that the man had been teasing the elephant. The victim's name was reported in the paper as Oppin and Eppelin. But at least they got his first name right: Cornelius.

“If he was trying German irregular verbs on the poor beast,” said Mr. Clovis,
“he deserved all he got.”