

The
HUNDRED
AND **ONE**
DALMATIANS
&
The **STARLIGHT**
BARKING

Dodie Smith

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY *Alex T. Smith*

Dodie Smith
The Hundred and One
Dalmatians Modern Classic

Аннотация

A hundred and one dalmatians and more! This bumper Modern Classic edition includes the original Hundred and One Dalmatians and Dodie Smith's sequel, Starlight Barking. Cruella de Vil is enough to frighten the spots off a Dalmatian puppy. So when she steals a whole family of them, the puppies' parents, Pongo and Missus, lose no time in mounting a daring rescue mission. Will they be in time to thwart Cruella's evil scheme, or have they bitten off more than they can chew? Perfect for fans of the classic Disney film.

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NOT LONG AGO, there lived in London a young married couple of Dalmatian dogs named Pongo and Missis Pongo. (Missis had added Pongo's name to her own on their marriage, but was still called Missis by most people.) They were lucky enough to own a young married couple of humans named Mr and Mrs Dearly, who were gentle, obedient and unusually intelligent – almost canine at times. They understood quite a number of barks: the barks for 'Out, please!', 'In, please!', 'Hurry up with my dinner!' and 'What about a walk?' And even when they could not understand, they could often guess – if looked at soulfully or scratched by an eager paw. Like many other much-loved humans, they believed that they owned their dogs, instead of realising that their dogs owned them. Pongo and Missis found this touching and amusing, and let their pets think it was true.

Mr Dearly, who had an office in the City, was particularly good at arithmetic. Many people called him a wizard of finance – which is not the same thing as a wizard of magic, though sometimes fairly similar. At the time when this story starts he was rather unusually rich for a rather unusual reason. He had done the Government a great service (something to do with getting rid of the National Debt) and, as a reward, had been let off his Income Tax for life. Also the Government had lent him a small house on the Outer Circle of Regent's Park – just the right house for a man with a wife and dogs.

Before their marriages, Mr Dearly and Pongo had lived in a bachelor flat, where they were looked after by Mr Dearly's

old nurse, Nanny Butler. Mrs Dearly and Missis had also lived in a bachelor flat (there are no such things as spinster flats) where they were looked after by Mrs Dearly's old nurse, Nanny Cook. The dogs and their pets met at the same time and shared a wonderfully happy double engagement, but they were all a little worried about what was to happen to Nanny Cook and Nanny Butler. It would be all right when the Dearlys started a family, particularly if it could be twins, with one twin for each Nanny, but, until then, what were the Nannies going to do? For though they could cook breakfast and provide meals on trays (meals called 'A nice egg by the fire') neither of them was capable of running a smart little house in Regent's Park, where the Dearlys hoped to invite their friends to dinner.

And then something happened. Nanny Cook and Nanny Butler met and, after a few minutes of deep suspicion, took a great liking to each other. And they had a good laugh about their names.

'What a pity we're not a real cook and butler,' said Nanny Cook.

'Yes, that's what's needed now,' said Nanny Butler.

And then they both together had the Great Idea: Nanny Cook would train to be a real cook and Nanny Butler would train to be a real butler. They would start the very next day and be fully trained by the wedding.

'But you'll have to be a parlour maid, really,' said Nanny Cook.

'Certainly not,' said Nanny Butler. 'I haven't the figure for it.'

I shall be a real butler – and I shall valet Mr Dearly, which will need no training as I’ve done it since the day he was born.’

And so when the Dearlys and the Pongos got back from their joint honeymoon, there were Nanny Cook and Nanny Butler, fully trained, ready to welcome them into the little house facing Regent’s Park.

It came as something of a shock that Nanny Butler was wearing trousers.

‘Wouldn’t a black dress, with a nice, frilly apron be better?’ suggested Mrs Dearly – rather nervously, because Nanny Butler had never been her Nanny.

‘You can’t be a butler without trousers,’ said Nanny Butler, firmly. ‘But I’ll get a frilly apron tomorrow. It will add a note of originality.’ It did.

The Nannies said they no longer expected to be called Nanny, and were now prepared to be called by their surnames, in the correct way. But though you can call a cook ‘Cook’, the one thing you cannot call a butler is ‘Butler’, so in the end both Nannies were just called ‘Nanny, darling’, as they always had been.

After the dogs and the Dearlys had been back from their honeymoons for several happy weeks, something even happier happened. Mrs Dearly took Pongo and Missis across the park to St John’s Wood, where they called on their good friend, the Splendid Veterinary Surgeon. She came back with the wonderful news that the Pongos were shortly to become parents. Puppies were due in a month.

The Nannies gave Missis a big lunch to keep her strength up, and Pongo a big lunch in case he should feel neglected (as the fathers of expected puppies sometimes do), and then both dogs had a long afternoon nap on the best sofa. By the time Mr Dearly came home from business they were wide awake and asking for a walk.

‘Let us all go for a walk, to celebrate,’ said Mr Dearly, after hearing the good news. Nanny Cook said the dinner was well ahead and Nanny Butler said she could do with a bit of exercise, so off they all set along the Outer Circle.

The Dearlys led the way, Mrs Dearly very pretty in the green going-away suit from her trousseau and Mr Dearly in his old tweed jacket which was known as his dog-walker. (Mr Dearly wasn’t exactly handsome but he had the kind of face you don’t get tired of.) Then came the Pongos, looking noble; they could both have become Champions if Mr Dearly had not felt that dog-shows would bore them – and him. They had splendid heads, fine shoulders, strong legs and straight tails. The spots on their bodies were jet black and mostly the size of a two-shilling piece; they had smaller spots on their heads, legs and tails. Their noses and eye-rims were black. Missis had a most winning expression. Pongo, though a dog born to command, had a twinkle in his eye. They walked side by side with great dignity, only putting the Dearlys on the leash to lead them over crossings. Nanny Cook (plump) in her white overall, and Nanny Butler (plumper) in a well-cut tail coat and trousers, plus dainty apron, completed the

procession.

It was a beautiful September evening, windless, very peaceful. The park and the old, cream-painted houses facing it basked in the golden light of sunset. There were many sounds but no noises. The cries of playing children and the whirr of London's traffic seemed quieter than usual, as if softened by the evening's gentleness. Birds were singing their last song of the day, and further along the Circle, at the house where a great composer lived, someone was playing the piano.

'I shall always remember this happy walk,' said Mr Dearly.

At that moment, the peace was shattered by an extremely strident motor horn. A large car was coming towards them. It drew up at a big house just ahead of them and a tall woman came out on to the front-door steps. She was wearing a tight-fitting emerald satin dress, several ropes of rubies and an absolutely simple white mink cloak, which reached to the high heels of her ruby-red shoes. She had dark skin, black eyes with a tinge of red in them, and a very pointed nose. Her hair was parted severely down the middle and one half of it was black and the other white – rather unusual.

'Why, that's Cruella de Vil,' said Mrs Dearly. 'We were at school together. She was expelled for drinking ink.'

'Isn't she a bit showy?' said Mr Dearly, and would have turned back. But the tall woman had seen Mrs Dearly and come down the steps to meet her. So Mrs Dearly had to introduce Mr Dearly.

'Come in and meet my husband,' said the tall woman.

‘But you were going out,’ said Mrs Dearly, looking at the chauffeur who was waiting at the open door of the large car. It was painted black and white, in stripes – rather noticeable.

‘No hurry at all. I insist on your coming.’

The Nannies said they would get back and see about dinner, and take the dogs with them, but the tall woman said the dogs must come in, too. ‘They are so beautiful. I want my husband to see them,’ she said.

‘What is your married name, Cruella?’ asked Mrs Dearly, as they walked through a green marble hall into a red marble drawing-room.

‘My name is still de Vil,’ said Cruella. ‘I am the last of my family so I made my husband change his name to mine.’

Just then the absolutely simple white mink cloak slipped from her shoulders to the floor. Mr Dearly picked it up.

‘What a beautiful cloak,’ he said. ‘But you’ll find it too warm for this evening.’

‘I never find anything too warm,’ said Cruella. ‘I wear furs all the year round. I sleep between ermine sheets.’

‘How nice,’ said Mrs Dearly, politely. ‘Do they wash well?’

Cruella did not seem to hear this. She went on: ‘I worship furs, I live for furs! That’s why I married a furrier.’

Then Mr de Vil came in. He was a small, worried-looking man who didn’t seem to be anything besides a furrier. Cruella introduced him and then said: ‘Where are those two delightful dogs?’

Pongo and Missis were sitting under the grand piano feeling hungry. The red marble walls had made them think of slabs of raw meat.

‘They’re expecting puppies,’ said Mrs Dearly, happily.

‘Oh, are they? Good!’ said Cruella. ‘Come here, dogs!’

Pongo and Missis came forward politely.

‘Wouldn’t they make enchanting fur coats?’ said Cruella to her husband. ‘For spring wear, over a black suit. We’ve never thought of making coats out of dogs’ skins.’

Pongo gave a sharp, menacing bark.

‘It was only a joke, dear Pongo,’ said Mrs Dearly, patting him. Then she said to Cruella: ‘I sometimes think they understand every word we say.’

But she did not really think it. And it was true.

That is, it was true of Pongo. Missis did not understand quite so many human words as he did. But she understood Cruella’s joke and thought it a very bad one. As for Pongo, he was furious. What a thing to say in front of his wife when she was expecting her first puppies! He was glad to see Missis was not upset.



‘You must dine with us – next Saturday,’ said Cruella to Mrs Dearly.

And as Mrs Dearly could not think of a good excuse (she was very truthful) she accepted. Then she said they must not keep the de Vils any longer.

As they went through the hall, a most beautiful white Persian cat dashed past them and ran upstairs. Mrs Dearly admired it.

‘I don’t like her much,’ said Cruella. ‘I’d drown her if she wasn’t so valuable.’

The cat turned on the stairs and made an angry, spitting noise. It might have been at Pongo and Missis – but, then again, it might not.

‘I want you to hear my new motor horn,’ said Cruella, as they all went down the front-door steps. ‘It’s the loudest horn in England.’

She pushed past the chauffeur and sounded the horn herself, making it last a long time. Pongo and Missis were nearly deafened.

‘Lovely, lovely dogs,’ Cruella said to them, as she got into the striped black-and-white car. ‘You’d go so well with my car – and my black-and-white hair.’

Then the chauffeur spread a sable rug over the de Vils’ knees and drove the striped car away.

‘That car looks like a moving Zebra Crossing,’ said Mr Dearly. ‘Was your friend’s hair black and white when she was at school?’

‘She was no friend of mine; I was scared of her,’ said Mrs Dearly. ‘Yes, her hair was just the same. She had one white plait and one black.’

Mr Dearly thought how lucky he was to be married to Mrs Dearly and not to Cruella de Vil. He felt sorry for her husband. Pongo and Missis felt sorry for her white cat.

The golden sunset had gone now and the blue twilight had come. The park was nearly empty and a park-keeper was calling, ‘All out, all out!’ in a far-away voice. There was a faint scent of hay from the sun-scorched lawns, and a weedy, watery smell from the lake. All the houses on the Outer Circle that had been turned into Government Offices were now closed for the night. No light shone in their windows. But the Dearlys could see welcoming lights in their own windows. And soon Pongo and Missis sniffed an exquisite smell of dinner. The Dearlys liked it, too.

They all paused to look down through the iron railings at the kitchen. Although it was in the basement, this was not at all a dark kitchen. It had a door and two large windows opening on to one of the narrow paved yards which are so often found in front of old London houses. The correct name for these little basement yards is ‘the area’. A narrow flight of steps led up from the area to the street.

The Dearlys and the dogs thought how very nice their brightly lit kitchen looked. It had white walls, red linoleum, and a dresser on which was blue-spotted china. There was a new-fashioned electric stove for the cooking, and an old-fashioned

kitchen fire to keep the Nannies happy. Nanny Cook was basting something in the oven, while Nanny Butler stacked plates on the lift which would take them up through the dining-room floor as if delivering the Demon King in a pantomime. Near the fire were two cushioned dog-baskets. And already two superb dinners, in shining bowls, were waiting for Pongo and Missis.

‘I hope we haven’t tired Missis,’ said Mr Dearly, as he opened the front door with his latch-key.

Missis would have liked to say she had never felt better in her life. As she could not speak, she tried to show how well she felt, and rushed down to the kitchen lashing her tail. So did Pongo, looking forward to his dinner and a long, fire-lit snooze beside his dear Missis.

‘I wish we had tails to wag,’ said Mr Dearly.



CRUELLA DE VIL'S dinner party took place in a room with black marble walls, on a white marble table. The food was rather unusual.

The soup was dark purple. And what did it taste of ? Pepper!
The fish was bright green. And what did it taste of ? Pepper!
The meat was pale blue. And what did that taste of ? Pepper!
Everything tasted of pepper, even the ice-cream – which was black.

There were no other guests. After dinner, Mr and Mrs Dearly sat panting in the red marble drawing-room, where an enormous fire was now burning. Mr de Vil panted quite a bit, too. Cruella, who was wearing a ruby satin dress with ropes of emeralds, got as close to the fire as she could.

‘Make it blaze for me,’ she said to Mr de Vil.

Mr de Vil made such a blaze that the Dearlys thought the chimney would catch fire.

‘Lovely, lovely!’ said Cruella, clapping her hands with delight. ‘Ah, but the flames never last long enough!’ The minute they died down a little, she shivered and huddled herself in her absolutely simple white mink cloak.

Mr and Mrs Dearly left as early as they felt was polite, and walked along the Outer Circle trying to get cool.

‘What a strange name “de Vil” is,’ said Mr Dearly. ‘If you put the two words together, they make “devil”. Perhaps Cruella’s a lady-devil! Perhaps that’s why she likes things so hot!’

Mrs Dearly smiled, for she knew he was only joking. Then

she said: 'Oh, dear! As we've dined with them, we must ask them to dine with us. And there are some other people we ought to ask. We'd better get it over before Missis has her puppies. Good gracious, what's that?'

Something soft was rubbing against her ankles.

'It's Cruella's cat,' said Mr Dearly. 'Go home, cat. You'll get lost.'

But the cat followed them all the way to their house.

'Perhaps she's hungry,' said Mrs Dearly.

'Very probably, unless she likes pepper,' said Mr Dearly. He was still gulping the night air to cool his throat.

'You stroke her while I get her some food,' said Mrs Dearly. And she went down the area steps and into the kitchen on tiptoe, so as not to wake Pongo and Missis who were asleep in their baskets. Soon she came up with some milk and half a tin of sardines. The white cat accepted both, then began to walk down the area steps.

'Does she want to live with us?' said Mrs Dearly.

It seemed as if the white cat did. But just then Pongo woke up and barked loudly. The white cat turned and walked away into the night.

'Just as well,' said Mr Dearly. 'Cruella would have the law on us if we took her valuable cat.'

Then they went down into the kitchen to receive the full force of Pongo's welcome. Missis, though sleepy, was fairly formidable, too. There was a whirling mass of humans and dogs

on the kitchen hearthrug – until Mrs Dearly remembered, far too late, that Mr Dearly’s dress suit would be covered with white hairs.

It must have been about three weeks later that Missis began to behave in a very peculiar manner. She explored every inch of the house, paying particular attention to cupboards and boxes. And the place that interested her most was a large cupboard just outside the Dearlys’ bedroom. The Nannies kept various buckets and brooms in this cupboard and there wasn’t a spare inch of space. Every time Missis managed to get in, she knocked something over with a clatter and then looked very ill-treated.

‘Bless me, she wants to have her puppies there,’ said Nanny Cook.

‘Not in that dark, stuffy cupboard, Missis, love,’ said Nanny Butler. ‘You need light and air.’

But when Mrs Dearly consulted the Splendid Veterinary Surgeon, he said what Missis needed most was a small, enclosed place where she would feel safe, and if she fancied the broom cupboard, the broom cupboard she’d better have. And she’d better have it at once and get used to it – even though the puppies were not expected for some days.

So out came the brooms and buckets and in went Missis, to her great satisfaction. Pongo was a little hurt that he was not allowed to go with her, but Missis explained to him that mother dogs like to be by themselves when puppies are expected, so he licked his wife’s ear tenderly, and said he quite understood.

‘I hope the dinner party won’t upset Missis,’ said Mr Dearly, when he came home and found Missis settled in the cupboard. ‘I shall be glad when it’s over.’

It was to be that very night. As there were quite a lot of guests the food had to be normal, but Mrs Dearly kindly put tall pepper grinders in front of the de Vils. Cruella ground so much pepper that most of the guests were sneezing, but Mr de Vil used no pepper at all. And he ate much more than in his own house.

Cruella was busy peppering her fruit salad when Nanny Butler came in and whispered to Mrs Dearly. Mrs Dearly looked startled, asked the guests to excuse her, and hurried out. A few minutes later, Nanny Butler came in again and whispered to Mr Dearly. He looked startled, excused himself and hurried out. Those guests who were not sneezing made polite conversation. Then Nanny Butler came in again.

‘Ladies and gentlemen,’ she said, dramatically, ‘puppies are arriving earlier than expected. Mr and Mrs Dearly ask you to remember that Missis has never before been a mother. She needs absolute quiet.’

There was an instant silence, broken only by a stifled sneeze. Then the guests rose, drank a whispered toast to the young mother and tiptoed from the house.

All except Cruella de Vil. When she reached the hall she went straight to Nanny Butler, who was seeing the guests out, and demanded: ‘Where are those puppies?’

Nanny Butler had no intention of telling, but Cruella heard

the Dearlys' voices and ran upstairs. This time she was wearing a black satin dress with ropes of pearls, but the same absolutely simple white mink cloak. She had kept it round her all through dinner, although the room was very warm (and the pepper very hot).

'I must, I must see the darling puppies,' she cried.

The cupboard door was a little open. The Dearlys were inside, soothing Missis. Three puppies had been born before Nanny Butler, on bringing Missis a nourishing chicken dinner, had discovered what was happening.

Cruella flung open the door and stared down at the three puppies.

'But they're mongrels – all white, no spots at all!' she cried. 'You must drown them at once.'

'Dalmatians are always born white,' said Mr Dearly, glaring at Cruella. 'The spots come later.'

'And we wouldn't drown them even if they were mongrels,' said Mrs Dearly, indignantly.

'It'd be quite easy,' said Cruella. 'I've drowned dozens and dozens of my cat's kittens. She always chooses some wretched alley-cat for their father so they're never worth keeping.'

'Surely you leave her one kitten?' said Mrs Dearly.

'If I'd done that, I'd be overrun with cats,' said Cruella. 'Are you sure those horrid little white rats are pure Dalmatian puppies?'

'Quite sure,' snapped Mr Dearly. 'Now please go away. You're

upsetting Missis.’

And indeed Missis was upset. Even with the Dearlys there to protect her and her puppies, she was a little afraid of this tall woman with black-and-white hair who stared so hard. And that poor cat who had lost all those kittens! Never, never, would Missis forget that! (And one day she was to be glad that she remembered it.)

‘How long will it be before the puppies are old enough to leave their mother?’ asked Cruella. ‘In case I want to buy some.’

‘Seven or eight weeks,’ said Mr Dearly. ‘But there won’t be any for sale.’ Then he shut the cupboard door in Cruella’s face and Nanny Butler firmly showed her out of the house.

Nanny Cook was busy telephoning the Splendid Vet but he was out on another case. His wife said she would tell him as soon as he came home and there was no need to worry – it sounded as if Missis was getting on very well.

She certainly was. There was now a fourth puppy. Missis washed it and then Mr Dearly dried it, while Mrs Dearly gave Missis a drink of warm milk. Then the pup was put with the other three, in a basket placed where Missis could see it. Soon she had a fifth puppy. Then a sixth – and a seventh.

The night wore on. Eight puppies, nine puppies! Surely that would be all? Dalmatians do not often have more in their first family. Ten puppies! Eleven puppies!

Then the twelfth arrived and it did not look like its brothers and sisters. The flesh showing through its white hair was not a

healthy pink but a sickly yellow. And instead of kicking its little legs, it lay quite still. The Nannies, who were sitting just outside the cupboard, told Mr and Mrs Dearly that it had been born dead.

‘But, with so many, its mother will never miss it,’ said Nanny Cook, comfortingly.

Mr Dearly held the tiny creature in the palm of his hand and looked at it sorrowfully.

‘It isn’t fair it should have no life at all,’ said Mrs Dearly, with tears in her eyes.

Something he had once read came back to Mr Dearly. He began to massage the puppy; then he tousled it gently in a towel. And suddenly there was a faint hint of pink around its nose – and then its whole little body was flushed with pink, beneath its snowy hair. Its legs moved! Its mouth opened! It was alive!



Mr Dearly quickly put it close to Missis so that she could give it some milk at once, and it stayed there, feeding, until the next puppy arrived – for arrive it did. That made thirteen!

Shortly before dawn, the front door-bell rang. It was the Splendid Vet, who had been up all night saving the life of a dog that had been run over. By then, all the puppies had been born and Missis was giving breakfast to eight of them – all she could manage at one time.

‘Excellent!’ said the Splendid Vet. ‘A really magnificent

family. And how is the father bearing up?'

The Dearlys felt guilty. They had not given Pongo a thought since the puppies had begun to arrive. He had been shut up in the kitchen. All night long he had paced backwards and forwards and only once had he heard any news – when Nanny Cook had come down to make coffee and sandwiches. She had told him that Missis was doing well – but only as a joke, for she had no idea he would understand.

'Poor Pongo, we must have him up,' said Mrs Dearly. But the Splendid Vet said mother dogs did not usually like to have father dogs around when puppies had just been born. At that moment there was a clatter of toenails on the polished floor of the hall – and upstairs, four at a time, came Pongo. Nanny Cook had just gone down to make some tea for the Splendid Vet, and the anxious father had streaked past her the minute she opened the kitchen door.

'Careful, Pongo!' said the Splendid Vet. 'She may not want you.'

But Missis was weakly thumping her tail. 'Go down and have your breakfast and a good sleep,' she said – but nobody except Pongo heard a sound. His eyes and his wildly wagging tail told her all he was feeling, his love for her and those eight fine pups enjoying their first breakfast. And those others, in the basket, waiting their turn – how many were there?

'It's a pity dogs can't count,' said Mrs Dearly.

But Pongo could count, perfectly. He went downstairs with

his head high and a new light in his fine, dark eyes. For he knew himself to be the proud father of fifteen.



‘AND NOW,’ said the Splendid Vet to the Dearlys, ‘you must get a foster mother.’

He explained that though Missis would do her best to feed fifteen puppies, doing so would make her terribly thin and tired. And the strong puppies would get more milk than the weak ones. The puppy Mr Dearly had brought to life was very small and would need special care.

The largest pup of all had a black patch all over its ear and one side of its face. This is a bad fault in a Dalmatian – which should be born pure white, as Mr Dearly had told Cruella de Vil. Some people would have drowned this patched pup, because it would never be valuable. But the Dearlys felt particularly fond of it because it had started life with a bit of bad luck. (And they liked being able to recognise it. Until the spots started to come through, some weeks later, the big puppy with the patch and the small, delicate puppy were the only ones who could be told apart from the others.)

The Splendid Vet said the foster mother would have to be some poor dog who had lost her own puppies but still had milk to give. He thought he could get such a dog. But as he wasn’t sure, the Dearlys had better telephone all the Lost Dogs’ Homes. And until the foster mother was found, they could help Missis by feeding the pups with a doll’s feeding bottle or an old-fashioned fountain-pen filler.

Then the Splendid Vet went home for an hour’s sleep before starting his day’s work.

Nanny Cook got breakfast and Nanny Butler took Pongo for a run. And Missis was persuaded to leave her family for a few minutes' walk. When she came back, Mrs Dearly had tidied the cupboard. Missis gave the second lot of pups a meal and then she and her family of fifteen had a glorious sleep. And Pongo, down in the kitchen, had a glorious sleep, too, knowing that all was well.

As soon as the shops opened, Mrs Dearly went out and bought a doll's feeding bottle and a fountain-pen filler. And then Mr Dearly and the Nannies took turns at feeding puppies. Mrs Dearly fancied this job herself but was busy telephoning, trying to find a foster mother. The Nannies were too fat to be comfortable in the cupboard, so soon Mr Dearly got the feeding job all to himself and became very good at it and just a bit bossy. Of course he couldn't go to business, which was awkward as he had an important business deal on.

Luckily there was a telephone in the Dearlys' bedroom and it had a long cord to it. So Mr Dearly was able to telephone while he was feeding the pups. There he was, in a dark cupboard with Missis, fifteen puppies and the telephone. He nearly upset his important business deal by holding a pup to his ear and giving the telephone a drink of milk.

No sooner had Mr Dearly put the telephone down than the Splendid Vet rang up to say he had not been able to find a foster mother. Neither had Mrs Dearly, anywhere in London. She now started to ring up Lost Dogs' Homes outside London. It was late

afternoon before she heard of a mother dog with some milk to give, nearly thirty miles from London. And this dog had only just been brought in and would have to be kept some days in case she was claimed.

Mr Dearly put his head out of the cupboard. After being up all night and feeding pups all day he was beginning to feel pretty tired, but he was determined to go on helping Missis until the foster mother arrived. ‘Why not go and see if you can borrow that dog?’ he said. ‘Say we’ll give it back if its owner turns up.’

So Mrs Dearly got the car from the old stable at the back of the house and drove off hopefully. But when she got to the Dogs’ Home she found that the mother dog had already been claimed. She was glad for the dog’s sake, but terribly disappointed. She thought of poor Missis getting exhausted by too many puppies, and of Mr Dearly, who might easily refuse to come out of the cupboard for a good night’s sleep, and she began to think she never would find a foster mother.

It was now almost dark, a gloomy, wet October evening. It had been raining all afternoon, but Mrs Dearly hadn’t minded when she was feeling hopeful. Now, as she started back for London, the weather made her feel more and more depressed. And the rain got so heavy that the windscreen wiper could hardly keep pace with it.

She was driving across a lonely stretch of common when she saw what looked like a bundle lying in the road ahead of her. She slowed down and as she drew closer she saw that it was not

a bundle but a dog. Instantly, she thought it must have been run over. Dreading what she might find, she stopped the car and got out.

At first she thought the dog was dead, but as she bent down it struggled to its feet showing no signs of injury. It was so plastered with mud that she could not see what kind of dog it was. What she could see, by the light from the car's headlights, was the poor creature's pitiful thinness. She spoke to it gently. Its drooping tail gave a feeble flick, then dropped again.



‘I can’t leave it here,’ thought Mrs Dearly. ‘Even if it hasn’t been run over, it must be near starvation. Oh, dear!’ With seventeen dogs at home already she had no wish to take back a stray, but she knew she would never bring herself just to hand this poor thing in at a police station.

She patted it and tried to get it to follow her. It was willing to, but its legs were so wobbly that she picked it up and carried it. It felt like a sack of bones. And, as she noticed this, she also noticed something else. Hurriedly, she laid the dog on the seat of the car, on a rug, and turned on the light. Then she saw that this was a mother dog and that in spite of its starving condition it still had some milk to give.

She sprang into the car and drove as fast as she safely could. Quite soon she was in the London suburbs. She knew it would still take her some time to get home, because of the traffic, so she stopped at a little restaurant. Here the owner let her buy some milk and some cold meat and lent her his own dog’s dishes. The starving dog ate and drank ravenously, then at once settled to sleep. The nice owner of the restaurant took back his dishes and wished Mrs Dearly luck as she drove away.

She got home just as the Splendid Vet was arriving to see Missis and the puppies. He carried the stray dog in and down to the warm kitchen. After a careful examination he said he thought her thinness was due more to having had puppies than to long starvation and that, if she was fed well, the milk intended for her

own puppies might continue. He guessed they had been taken away from her and she had got lost looking for them.

‘She ought to have a bath,’ said Nanny Cook, ‘or she’ll give our puppies fleas.’

The Splendid Vet said a bath was a good idea, so the dog was carried into a little room which had been fitted up as a laundry. Nanny Cook got on with the bath as fast as she could because she was afraid Mr Dearly might want to do the job himself. Mrs Dearly had gone upstairs to tell him what was happening.

The stray seemed delighted with the warm water. She had just been covered with soap when Pongo came back from a walk with Nanny Butler and ran through the open door of the laundry.

‘He won’t hurt a lady,’ said the Splendid Vet.

‘I should hope not, when she’s going to help nurse his puppies,’ said Nanny Cook.

Pongo stood on his hind legs and kissed the wet dog on the nose, telling her how glad he was to see her and how grateful his wife would be. (But no human heard him.) The stray said: ‘Well, I’ll do my best, but I can’t promise anything.’ (No human heard that, either.)

Just then Mr Dearly came hurrying in, to see the new arrival. ‘What kind of a dog is she?’ he asked.

At that moment, Nanny Cook began to rinse off the soap – and everyone gave a gasp. This dog was a Dalmatian, too! But her spots, instead of being black, were brown – which in Dalmatians is called not ‘brown’ but ‘liver’.

‘Eighteen Dalmatians under one roof,’ said Mr Dearly, gloatingly. ‘Couldn’t be better.’ (But it could, as he was one day to learn.)

Wet, the poor liver-spotted dog looked thinner than ever.

‘We’ll call her Perdita,’ said Mrs Dearly, and explained to the Nannies that this was after a character in Shakespeare. ‘She was lost. And the Latin word for lost is “perditus”.’ Then she patted Pongo, who was looking particularly intelligent, and said anyone would think he understood. And indeed he did. For though he had very little Latin beyond ‘Cave canem’, he had, as a young dog, devoured Shakespeare (in a tasty leather binding).

Perdita was dried in front of the kitchen fire and given another meal. The Splendid Vet said she ought to start mothering puppies as soon as possible to encourage her to provide more milk, so after she was quite dry and had taken a nap, two puppies were removed from the cupboard while Missis went out for a little air. The Splendid Vet said she would not know they had gone – which is possible, as she could not count as well as Pongo could. But she knew all about those puppies going because Pongo had told her and she had sent polite messages to Perdita. Missis felt a bit unhappy about giving any puppies up but she knew it was for their good.

Before leaving, the Splendid Vet warned the Dearlys that if Perdita could not feed the puppies they must not be returned to Missis, for her sense of smell would tell her that they had been with some other dog and she might turn against them. And this

does happen with some dogs. It would never have happened with Missis, but it will already have been seen that she and Pongo were rather unusual dogs. And so was Perdita. And so, if people only realised it, are many dogs. In fact, usual dogs are really more unusual than unusual dogs.

Anyway, Perdita was able to feed the two puppies. Pongo went upstairs and told Missis so (though to the Dearlys it only sounded like the thumping of his tail). Then he said goodnight and went back to the kitchen, where his basket was ready for him. Perdita had the basket Missis usually slept in. She had fed and washed the two puppies and was now having a light supper. (The Splendid Vet had said she must eat all she possibly could, to get her strength back.) Pongo had a snack himself, to encourage her. Then the Nannies went to bed and the kitchen was left in darkness except for the glow from the fire. And, when the two puppies were asleep, Perdita told Pongo her story.

She had been born in a large country house, not far from the common where Mrs Dearly had found her. Although very pretty, she had been less valuable than her brothers and sisters; her spots were rather small and her tail inclined to curl (it had straightened as she grew older). As no one rich or important wanted to be her pet, she was given to a farmer, who, though not cruel to her, never gave her the love all Dalmatians need. And he let her run wild, which is not good for any kind of dog.

A time came when she felt a great desire to marry. But no marriage was arranged for her and, as the farm was over a mile

from any village, no dog had come courting her. So, one day, she set out to find a husband for herself.

Her way to the village lay across the common, where she saw a large, handsome car, which had been driven on to the grass. A group of people were having a picnic – and with them was a superb liver-spotted Dalmatian. Now, liver-spotted Dalmatians are unusual. Perdita had been the only one in her family, and always thought herself a freak. She instantly knew that the dog on the common was no freak but a most valuable animal, for he wore a magnificent collar and was being offered a piece of chicken by a richly dressed lady. At that moment, he saw Perdita.

It was love at first sight. Without even bothering to eat the chicken, he came bounding to her and they were away into a wood together before anyone could stop them. Here they made swift arrangements for their marriage, promising to love each other always. Then the happy husband told his wife she must, of course, come and live with him, and led her back to the common. But, as they reached it, along came the farmer Perdita lived with, in his rattling old car. He dragged her into it – and the picnic party bundled her husband into their car. Both dogs struggled and howled but it was useless. The cars drove off in opposite directions.

Nine weeks after her marriage, Perdita had eight puppies. The farmer did not give her extra food, or help to feed the puppies himself so she got thinner and thinner; by the time her family was a month old, she was just skin and bone. Then the farmer put

down some food for the puppies to eat and they quickly learnt how to, but they still went on taking all the milk Perdita could give them, so she never had a chance to regain her weight. She was such a very young mother, barely full-grown herself, but she loved her babies dearly and did all she could for them. And as she got thinner they got fatter.

The spots on Dalmatians begin to come through after two weeks. By the time Perdita's family were six weeks old it was obvious that they were going to be beautifully marked and very valuable – Perdita heard the farmer say so, to a stranger who came to the farm one morning. She was still helping to feed them; they would eat all the farmer offered and then come to her for milk. Then she and they would all have a happy sleep in the old box she had been given for a bed.

One afternoon, she woke to find not one puppy in bed with her. She searched the farmhouse, she searched the farmyard. No puppies anywhere. She ran on to the road, fearing they might have been run over. On and on she went, pausing every few minutes to bark. No answering puppy-bark came to her. Soon it began to rain. She thought of the puppies all getting wet, and barked more and more desperately. A car nearly ran over her; she only saved herself by jumping into a muddy ditch, where the mud even got into her eyes and ears. By the time she reached the common where she had met her husband, she was shivering and weak on her legs. The thought of her lost husband added to her misery at the loss of the puppies. She had eaten nothing since the

previous afternoon – the farmer only gave her one meal a day. At last, faint with hunger and utterly broken-spirited, she collapsed. And there, not long after, Mrs Dearly found her.

That was Perdita's whole story; except that she never told Pongo that the farmer had named her 'Spotty' – because she liked 'Perdita' so much better.

Pongo sympathised with all his heart and did his best to comfort her. He said he did not think the puppies were lost. It was more likely that they had been sold – perhaps to the stranger who came to see them. And this might be the best thing that could have happened to them – for if they were valuable they were sure to be well taken care of. There would never have been enough food at the farm for them when they got really big. Perdita knew all this was true. And the two tiny puppies in the basket with her were wonderfully comforting – so were the kind things Pongo said about being grateful to her for feeding them. Soon she felt much happier and slid into a warm, well-fed sleep.

Pongo lay awake for a long time, wishing Missis and all the puppies could have been with him in the firelit kitchen. He strolled over and looked at the two puppies asleep with Perdita, and felt proud and protective – and extremely sorry for Perdita. Really, she was a very pretty girl – if not a patch on his Missis.

Then he went back to his basket, had a last wash, and settled down. The fire sank lower; soon the kitchen was lit only by a faint light from a street lamp on the Outer Circle. Pongo slept. Perdita slept. And the two puppies, who had come successfully

through their first day in the world, slept as peacefully as if they had been with their own mother.

Up in the cupboard, Missis had just served supper for eight and was a trifle tired. Mr Dearly had just served supper for five and was so exhausted by his day of puppy-feeding that he had to crawl out of the cupboard on his hands and knees. Mrs Dearly got him to bed and fed him with hot milk from a Thermos. They slept with their door open, in case Missis needed anything, but she was very peaceful – though just before she fell asleep she did wonder a little about the strange female down in the kitchen with Pongo. She didn't worry, exactly; she just wondered.

On the top floor, Nanny Cook slept dreaming of Dalmatian puppies dressed as babies, and Nanny Butler slept dreaming of babies dressed as Dalmatian puppies.

What with four humans, three dogs and fifteen puppies, it really was a very sleep-full house.



THE NEXT DAY, five more puppies were brought down to Perdita and she fed them splendidly. So Mr Dearly went to his business. He hurried back early to do some pup-feeding and found that Mrs Dearly was feeding the upstairs puppies and the Nannies were taking it in turns to feed the kitchen puppies. He was a little jealous but soon got over it – for he knew that what really mattered was that pups should get plenty of milk without exhausting Missis and poor, thin Perdita too much.

Perdita now had her bed in the dresser cupboard where there would not be too much light for the puppies' eyes. These began to open in eight days. And a week after that the puppies' spots began to show.

What a day it was when Mr Dearly sighted the first spot! After that, spots came thick and fast, though they would not all be through for some months. In a very few days it was possible to recognise every pup by its spots. There were seven girls and eight boys. The prettiest of all the girls was the tiny pup whose life Mr Dearly had saved at birth, but she was very small and delicate. When pigs have families, the smallest, weakest piglet is often called the cadpig. Mr Dearly always called the tiny puppy 'Cadpig', which can be a nice little name when spoken with love.

Patch, the pup born with a black ear, was still the biggest and strongest puppy. He always seemed to be next to the Cadpig, as if these two already knew they were going to be special friends. There was a fat, funny, boy-puppy called Roly Poly, who was always getting into mischief. And the most striking pup of all

was one who had a perfect horse-shoe of spots on his back – and had therefore been named ‘Lucky’. He was terrifically energetic and showed from the beginning that he was going to be the ring-leader of all his brothers and sisters.

A few days after the first spots came through, something very upsetting happened: Perdita’s milk supply failed. She was miserable about it because she loved the seven pups she had been feeding as much as if they were her own. And she was very, very frightened. Now that she was no longer useful, why should the Dearlys keep her in this warm, comfortable house where – for the first time in her life – she had been given enough to eat? But it was not the food and warmth that mattered most to her. It was the love. She had been treated as one of the family. The thought of leaving it all was more than she could bear.

And what happened to dogs nobody wanted? All sorts of fears awoke in her heart.

The morning she found she had no milk to offer at all, she crept unhappily out of the dresser cupboard and saw Mrs Dearly having a midmorning cup of tea with the Nannies. Mrs Dearly held out a biscuit. Perdita did not take it. She just laid her head against Mrs Dearly’s knee and gave a little moan.

Mrs Dearly stroked her and said: ‘Poor Perdita! I wish we could explain to her that we are helping to feed her seven puppies, so she doesn’t need to worry. Darling Perdita, you are washing them beautifully and keeping them warm at night. We couldn’t possibly do without you.’

She had no hope of being understood; she just thought her soothing tone would be comforting. But Perdita was picking up more and more human words every day and understood perfectly. She was wild with relief. For the first time, she showed really high spirits, jumping up and kissing Mrs Dearly, then dashing back to wash the puppies all over again.

Not many days after this, all pups began learning to lap milk for themselves and could soon eat milk puddings and bread soaked in gravy. They were now much too big to go on living in cupboards. Missis and her eight were moved down to the laundry, while Perdita's seven had the run of the kitchen – where they got terribly under the Nannies' feet.

'What a pity they can't be in the laundry with their brothers and sisters,' said Nanny Cook, one morning.

'Missis might hurt them – she wouldn't know them for her own now,' said Nanny Butler. 'And she and Perdita would fight.'

Pongo heard this and decided something must be done. For he knew that, whatever usual dogs would do, Missis would know her own puppies and she and Perdita would not fight. So he had a word with Missis, under the laundry door, and that afternoon, when the Nannies were upstairs, he took a flying leap at the door and managed to burst it open. Out hurtled Missis and eight puppies and when the Nannies came downstairs they found Pongo, Missis and Perdita all playing happily with fifteen puppies – who were now so mixed up that it took the Nannies all their time to decide which pups had been brought up by which mother.

After that, all pups lived in the laundry. The door was kept open and a piece of wood was put across it high enough to keep all puppies in – but low enough to be jumped by Missis and Perdita when they wanted to come into the kitchen.

By now it was December but the days were fine and surprisingly warm so the puppies were able to play in the area several times a day. They were quite safe there for the gate at the top of the steps which led to the street now had a strong spring to keep it closed. One morning, when the three dogs and the fifteen puppies were taking the air, Pongo saw a tall woman looking down over the area railings.

He recognised her at once. It was Cruella de Vil.

As usual, she was wearing her absolutely simple white mink cloak, but she now had a brown mink coat under it. Her hat was made of fur, her boots were lined with fur, and she wore big fur gloves.

‘What will she wear when it’s really cold?’ thought Nanny Butler, coming out into the area.

Cruella opened the gate and walked down the steps, saying how pretty the puppies were. Lucky, always the ring-leader, came running towards her and nibbled at the fur round the tops of her boots. She picked him up and placed him against her cloak, as if he were something to be worn.

‘Such a pretty horse-shoe,’ she said, looking at the spots on his back. ‘But they all have pretty markings. Are they old enough to leave their mother yet?’

‘Very nearly,’ said Nanny Butler. ‘But they won’t have to. Mr and Mrs Dearly are going to keep them all.’ (Sometimes the Nannies wondered just how this was going to be managed.)

‘How nice!’ said Cruella, and began going up the steps still holding Lucky against her cloak. Pongo, Missis and Perdita all barked sharply and Lucky reached up and nipped Cruella’s ear. She gave a scream and dropped him. Nanny Butler was quick enough to catch him in her apron.

‘That woman!’ said Nanny Cook, who had just come out into the area. ‘She’s enough to frighten the spots off a pup. What’s the matter, Lucky?’

For Lucky had dashed into the laundry and was gulping down water. Cruella’s ear had tasted of pepper.

Every day now, the puppies grew stronger and more independent. They now fed themselves entirely, eating shredded meat as well as soaked bread and milk puddings. Missis and Perdita were quite happy to leave them now for an hour or more at a time, so the three grown-up dogs took Mrs Dearly and Nanny Butler for a good walk in the park every morning, while Nanny Cook got the lunch and kept an eye on the puppies. One morning, when she had just let them out into the area, the front door-bell rang.

It was Cruella de Vil and when she heard Mrs Dearly was out she said she would come in and wait. She asked many questions about the Dearlys and the puppies and went on talking so long that at last Nanny Cook said she really must go down and let the

puppies in, as a cold wind was blowing. Cruella then said she would walk in the park and hope to meet Mrs Dearly. 'Perhaps I can see her from here,' she said, strolling to the window.

Nanny Cook also went to the window, intending to point out the nearest way into the park. As she did so, she noticed a small black van standing in front of the house. At that very moment, it drove off at a great pace.

Cruella suddenly seemed in a hurry. She almost ran out of the house and down the frontdoor steps.

'Can't think how she can move so fast, huddled in all those furs,' thought Nanny Cook, closing the front door. 'And those poor pups, in only their own thin little skins, catching their death of cold!'

She hurried down to the kitchen and opened the door to the area.

Not a pup was in sight.

'They're playing me a trick. They're hiding,' Nanny Cook told herself. But she knew there was nowhere for fifteen puppies to hide. All the same, she looked behind every tub of shrubs – where not even a mouse could have hidden. The gate at the top of the steps was firmly closed – and no pup could possibly have opened it. Still, she ran up to the street and searched wildly.



'They've been stolen, I know they have!' she moaned, bursting

into tears. ‘They must have been in that black van I saw driving away.’

Cruella de Vil seemed to have changed her mind about going into the park. She was already halfway back to her own house, walking very fast indeed.



THROUGH HER TEARS, Nanny Cook stared towards the park. She could now see Mrs Dearly, Nanny Butler and the three dogs, who had just turned for home. It seemed a strange and terrible thing that they could be strolling along so happily, when every step brought them nearer to such dreadful news.

As they came across the Outer Circle, Nanny Cook ran to meet them – crying so much that Mrs Dearly found it hard to understand what had happened. The dogs heard the words ‘puppies’, saw Nanny Cook’s tears, and rushed down to the area. Then they went dashing over the whole house, searching, searching. Every few minutes, Missis and Perdita howled, and Pongo barked furiously.

While the dogs searched and the Nannies cried on each other’s shoulder, Mrs Dearly telephoned Mr Dearly. He came home at once, bringing with him one of the Top Men from Scotland Yard. The Top Man found a bit of sacking on the area railings and said the puppies must have been dropped into sacks and driven away in the black van. He promised to Comb the Underworld, but warned the Dearlys that stolen dogs were seldom recovered unless a reward was offered. A reward seemed an unreasonable thing to offer a thief, but Mr Dearly was willing to offer it.

He rushed to Fleet Street and had large advertisements put on the front pages of the evening papers (this was rather expensive) and arranged for even larger advertisements to be on the front pages of the next day’s morning papers (this was even more expensive). Beyond this, there seemed nothing he or Mrs Dearly

could do except try to comfort each other and comfort the Nannies and the dogs. Soon the Nannies stopped crying and joined in the comforting, and prepared beautiful meals which nobody felt like eating. And, at last, night fell on the stricken household.

Worn out, the three dogs lay in their baskets in front of the kitchen fire.

‘Think of my baby Cadpig in a sack,’ said Missis, with a sob.

‘Her big brother Patch will take care of her,’ said Pongo, soothingly – though he felt most unsoothed himself.

‘Lucky is so brave he will bite the thieves,’ wailed Perdita. ‘And then they will kill him.’

‘No, they won’t,’ said Pongo. ‘The pups were stolen because they are valuable. No one will kill them. They are only valuable while they are alive.’

But even as he said this a terrible suspicion was forming in his mind. And it grew and grew as the night wore on. Long after Missis and Perdita, utterly exhausted, had fallen asleep, he lay awake staring at the fire, chewing the wicker of his basket as a man might have smoked a pipe.

Anyone who did not know Pongo well would have thought him handsome, amusing and charming, but not particularly clever. Even the Dearlys did not quite realise the depths of his mind. He was often still so puppyish. He would run after balls and sticks, climb into laps far too small to hold him, roll over on his back to have his stomach scratched. How was anyone to guess that this

playful creature owned one of the keenest brains in Dogdom?

It was at work now. All through the long December night he put two and two together and made four. Once or twice he almost made five.

He had no intention of alarming Missis and Perdita with his suspicions. Poor Pongo! He not only suffered on his own account, as a father; he also suffered on the account of two mothers. (For he had come to feel the puppies had two mothers, though he never felt he had two wives – he looked on Perdita as a much-loved young sister.) He would say nothing about his worst fears until he was quite sure. Meanwhile, there was an important task ahead of him. He was still planning it when the Nannies came down to start another day.

As a rule, this was a splendid time – with the fire freshly made, plenty of food around and the puppies at their most playful. This morning – well, as Nanny Butler said, it just didn't bear thinking about. But she thought about it, and so did everybody else in that pupless house.

No good news came during the day, but the Dearlys were surprised and relieved to find that the dogs ate well. (Pongo had been firm: 'You girls have got to keep your strength up.') And there was an even greater surprise in the afternoon. Pongo and Missis showed very plainly that they wanted to take the Dearlys for a walk. Perdita did not. She was determined to stay at home in case any pup returned and was in need of a wash.

Cold weather had come at last – Christmas was only a week

away.

‘Missis must wear her coat,’ said Mrs Dearly.

It was a beautiful blue coat with a white binding; Missis was very proud of it. Coats had been bought for Pongo and Perdita, too. But Pongo had made it clear he disliked wearing his.

So the coat was put on Missis, and both dogs were dressed in their handsome chain collars. And then they put the Dearlys on their leashes and led them into the park.

From the first, it was quite clear the dogs knew just where they wanted to go. Very firmly, they led the way right across the park, across the road, and to the open space which is called Primrose Hill. This did not surprise the Dearlys as it had always been a favourite walk. What did surprise them was the way Pongo and Missis behaved when they got to the top of the hill. They stood side by side and they barked.

They barked to the north, they barked to the south, they barked to the east and west. And each time they changed their positions, they began the barking with three very strange, short, sharp barks.

‘Anyone would think they were signalling,’ said Mr Dearly.

But he did not really mean it. And they were signalling.

Many people must have noticed how dogs like to bark in the early evening. Indeed, twilight has sometimes been called ‘Dogs’ Barking Time’. Busy town dogs bark less than country dogs, but all dogs know all about the Twilight Barking. It is their way of keeping in touch with distant friends, passing on important

news, enjoying a good gossip. But none of the dogs who answered Pongo and Missis expected to enjoy a gossip, for the three short, sharp barks meant: 'Help! Help! Help!'



No dog sends that signal unless the need is desperate. And no dog who hears it ever fails to respond.

Within a few minutes, the news of the stolen puppies was travelling across England, and every dog who heard at once turned detective. Dogs living in London's Underworld (hard-bitten characters; also hard-biting) set out to explore sinister

alleys where dog thieves lurk. Dogs in Pet Shops hastened to make quite sure all puppies offered for sale were not Dalmatians in disguise. And dogs who could do nothing else swiftly handed on the news, spreading it through London and on through the suburbs, and on, on to the open country: ‘Help! Help! Help! Fifteen Dalmatian puppies stolen. Send news to Pongo and Missis Pongo, of Regent’s Park, London. End of Message.’

Pongo and Missis hoped all this would be happening. But all they really knew was that they had made contact with the dogs near enough to answer them, and that those dogs would be standing by, at twilight the next evening, to relay any news that had come along.

One Great Dane, over towards Hampstead, was particularly encouraging.

‘I have a chain of friends all over England,’ he said, in his great, booming bark. ‘And I will be on duty day and night. Courage, courage, O Dogs of Regent’s Park!’

It was almost dark now. And the Dearlys were suggesting – very gently – that they should be taken home. So, after a few last words with the Great Dane, Pongo and Missis led the way down Primrose Hill. The dogs who had answered them were silent now, but the Twilight Barking was spreading in an ever-widening circle. And tonight it would not end with twilight. It would go on and on as the moon rose high over England.

The next day, a great many people who had read Mr Dearly’s advertisements rang up to sympathise. (Cruella de Vil did, and

seemed most upset when she was told the puppies had been stolen while she was talking to Nanny Cook.) But no one had anything helpful to say. And Scotland Yard was Frankly Baffled. So it was another sad, sad day for the Dearlys, the Nannies and the dogs.

Just before dusk, Pongo and Missis again showed that they wished to take the Dearlys for a walk. So off they started and again the dogs led the way to the top of Primrose Hill. And again they stood side by side and gave three sharp barks. But this time, though no human ear could have detected it, they were slightly different barks. And they meant, not 'Help! Help! Help!' but 'Ready! Ready! Ready!'

The dogs who had collected news from all over London replied first. Reports had come in from the West End and the East End and South of the Thames. And all these reports were the same:

'Calling Pongo and Missis Pongo of Regent's Park. No news of your puppies. Deepest regrets. End of Message.'

Poor Missis! She had hoped so much that her pups were still in London. Pongo's secret suspicion had led him to pin his hopes to news from the country. And soon it was pouring in – some of it relayed across London. But it was always the same:

'Calling Pongo and Missis Pongo of Regent's Park. No news of your puppies. Deepest regrets. End of Message.'

Again and again Pongo and Missis barked the 'Ready!' signal, each time with fresh hope. Again and again came bitter disappointment. At last only the Great Dane over towards Hampstead remained to be heard from. They signalled to him –

their last hope!

Back came his booming bark:

‘Calling Pongo and Missis Pongo of Regent’s Park. No news of your puppies. Deepest regrets. End of –’

The Great Dane stopped in mid-bark. A second later he barked again: ‘Wait! Wait! Wait!’

Dead still, their hearts thumping, Pongo and Missis waited. They waited so long that Mr Dearly put his hand on Pongo’s head and said: ‘What about coming home, boy?’ For the first time in his life, Pongo jerked his head from Mr Dearly’s hand, then went on standing stock still. And at last the Great Dane spoke again, booming triumphantly through the gathering dusk.

‘Calling Pongo and Missis Pongo. News! News at last! Stand by to receive details.’

A most wonderful thing had happened. Just as the Great Dane had been about to sign off, a Pomeranian with a piercing yap had got a message through to him. She had heard it from a Poodle who had heard it from a Boxer who had heard it from a Pekinese. Dogs of almost every known breed had helped to carry the news – and a great many dogs of unknown breed (none the worse for that and all of them bright as buttons). In all, four hundred and eighty dogs had relayed the message, which had travelled over sixty miles as the dog barks. Each dog had given the ‘Urgent’ signal, which had silenced all gossiping dogs. Not that many dogs were merely gossiping that night; almost all the Twilight Barking had been about the missing puppies.

This was the strange story that now came through to Pongo and Missis: some hours earlier, an elderly English Sheepdog, living on a farm in a remote Suffolk village, had gone for an afternoon amble. He knew all about the missing puppies and had just been discussing them with the tabby cat at the farm. She was a great friend of his.

Some little way from the village, on a lonely heath, was an old house completely surrounded by an unusually high wall. Two brothers, named Saul and Jasper Baddun lived there, but were merely caretakers for the real owner. The place had an evil reputation – no local dog would have dreamed of putting its nose inside the tall iron gates. In any case, these gates were always kept locked.

It so happened that the Sheepdog's walk took him past this house. He quickened his pace, having no wish to meet either of the Badduns. And at that moment, something came sailing out over the high wall.

It was a bone, the Sheepdog saw with pleasure; but not a bone with meat on it, he noted with disgust. It was an old, dry bone, and on it were some peculiar scratches. The scratches formed letters. And the letters were SOS.

Someone was asking for help! Someone behind the tall wall and the high, chained gates! The Sheepdog barked a low, cautious bark. He was answered by a high, shrill bark. Then he heard a yelp, as if some dog had been cuffed. The Sheepdog barked again, saying: 'I'll do all I can.' Then he picked up the

bone in his teeth and raced back to the farm.

Once home, he showed the bone to the tabby cat and asked her help. Then, together, they hurried to the lonely house. At the back, they found a tree whose branches reached over the wall. The cat climbed the tree, went along its branches, and then leapt to a tree the other side of the wall.

‘Take care of yourself,’ barked the Sheepdog. ‘Remember those Baddun brothers are villains.’

The cat clawed her way down, backwards, to the ground, then hurried through the overgrown shrubbery. Soon she came to an old brick wall which enclosed a stable yard. From behind the wall came whimperings and snufflings. She leapt to the top of the wall and looked down.

The next second, one of the Baddun brothers saw her and threw a stone at her. She dodged it, jumped from the wall and ran for her life. In two minutes she was safely back with the Sheepdog.

‘They’re there!’ she said, triumphantly. ‘The place is seething with Dalmatian puppies!’

The Sheepdog was a formidable Twilight Barker. Tonight, with the most important news in Dogdom to send out, he surpassed himself. And so the message travelled, by way of farm dogs and house dogs, great dogs and small dogs. Sometimes a bark would carry half a mile or more, sometimes it would only need to carry a few yards. One sharp-eared Cairn saved the chain from breaking by picking up a bark from nearly a mile away, and

then almost bursting herself getting it on to the dog next door. Across miles and miles of country, across miles and miles of suburbs, across a network of London streets the chain held firm, from the depths of Suffolk to the top of Primrose Hill – where Pongo and Missis, still as statues, stood listening, listening.

‘Puppies found in lonely house. SOS on old bone –’ Missis could not take it all in. But Pongo missed nothing. There were instructions for reaching the village, suggestions for the journey, offers of hospitality on the way. And the dog chain was standing by to take a message back to the pups – the Sheepdog would bark it over the wall in the dead of night.

At first Missis was too excited to think of anything to say, but Pongo barked clearly: ‘Tell them we’re coming! Tell them we start tonight! Tell them to be brave!’

Then Missis found her voice: ‘Give them all our love! Tell Patch to take care of the Cadpig! Tell Lucky not to be too daring! Tell Roly Poly to keep out of mischief!’ She would have sent a message to every one of the fifteen pups if Pongo had not whispered: ‘That’s enough, dear. We mustn’t make it too complicated. Let the Great Dane start work now.’

So they signed off and there was a sudden silence. And then, though not quite so loudly, they heard the Great Dane again. But this time he was not barking towards them. What they heard was their message, starting on its way to Suffolk.



AS THEY WALKED the Dearlys home, Pongo said to Missis: 'Did you hear who owns the house where the puppies are imprisoned?'

Missis said: 'No, Pongo. I'm afraid I missed many things the Great Dane barked.'

'I will tell you everything later,' said Pongo.

He was faced with a problem. He now knew that his terrible suspicions were justified and it was time Missis learned the truth. But if he told her before dinner she might lose her appetite, and if he told her afterwards she might lose her dinner. So still he said nothing. And he made her eat every crumb of dinner and then join him in asking for more – which the Nannies gave with delight.

'It may be a long time before we get another meal,' he explained.

While the Nannies fed the Dearlys, the dogs made their plans. Perdita at once offered to come to Suffolk with them.

'But you are still much too delicate for the journey, dear Perdita,' said Missis. 'Besides, what could you do?'

'I could wash the puppies,' said Perdita.

Both Pongo and Missis then said they knew Perdita was a beautiful puppy-washer but her job must be to comfort the Dearlys. And she felt that herself.

'If only we could make them understand why we are leaving them!' said Missis, sadly.

'If we could do that, we shouldn't have to leave them,' said

Pongo. ‘They would drive us to Suffolk in the car. And send the police.’

‘Oh, let us have one more try to speak their language,’ said Missis.

The Dearlys were sitting by the fire in the big white drawing-room. They welcomed the two dogs and offered them the sofa. But Pongo and Missis had no wish for a comfortable nap. They stood together, looking imploringly at the Dearlys.

Then Pongo barked gently: ‘Wuff, wuff, wuffolk!’

Mr Dearly patted him but understood nothing.

Then Missis tried: ‘Wuff, wuff, wuffolk!’

‘Are you telling us the puppies are in Suffolk?’ said Mrs Dearly.

The dogs wagged their tails wildly. But Mrs Dearly was only joking. It was hopeless and the dogs knew it always would be.

Dogs can never speak the language of humans and humans can never speak the language of dogs. But many dogs can understand almost every word humans say, while humans seldom learn to recognise more than half a dozen barks, if that. And barks are only a small part of the dog language. A wagging tail can mean so many things. Humans know that it means a dog is pleased, but not what a dog is saying about his pleasedness. (Really, it is very clever of humans to understand a wagging tail at all, as they have no tails of their own.) Then there are the snufflings and sniffings, the pricking of ears – all meaning different things. And many, many words are expressed by a dog’s eyes.

It was with their eyes that Pongo and Missis spoke most that evening, for they knew the Dearlys could at least understand one eye-word. That word was 'love' and the dogs said it again and again, leaning their heads against the Dearlys' knees. And the Dearlys said 'Dear Pongo', 'Dear Missis', again and again.

'They're asking us to find their puppies, I know they are,' said Mrs Dearly, never guessing that, as well as declaring their love, the dogs were saying: 'We are going to find the puppies. Please forgive us for leaving you. Please have faith in our safe return.'

At eleven o'clock the dogs gave Mrs Dearly's hand one last kiss and took Mr Dearly out for his last run. Perdita joined them for this. She had spent the evening with the Nannies, feeling that Pongo and Missis might wish to be alone with their pets. Then all three dogs went to their baskets in the warm kitchen and the house settled for the night.

But it did not settle for long. Shortly before midnight, Pongo and Missis got up, ate some biscuits they had hidden, and took long drinks of water. Then they said a loving goodbye to Perdita, who was in tears, nosed open a window at the back of the house, and got out into the mews. (They knew they could not open the gate at the top of the area steps.) Carefully, they nosed the window shut, so that Perdita would not get a chill, and then went round to the area railings to give her one last smile. (Dogs smile in various ways; Pongo and Missis smiled by wrinkling their noses.) She was there at the kitchen window, bravely trying to wag her tail.

Beyond Perdita, Missis could see the three cushioned baskets in the rosy glow from the fire. She thought of the many peaceful nights she had spent in hers, in the happy days when a dog could fall asleep looking forward to breakfast. Poor Missis! Of course she loved Pongo, the puppies, the Dearlys and the Nannies – and dear, kind Perdita – best of everything in the world. But she also loved her creature comforts. Never had her home seemed so dear to her as now when she was leaving it for a dangerous, unknown world.

And it was such a cold world. The night was fine, the stars were brilliant, but the wind was keen. If only she could have brought her beautiful blue coat, now hanging on a peg in the warm kitchen!

Pongo saw her shiver. It is a hard thing for a loving husband to see his wife shiver.

‘Are you cold, Missis?’ he asked, anxiously.

‘No, Pongo,’ said Missis, still shivering.

‘I am,’ said Pongo, untruthfully. ‘But I shall soon warm up.’

He tail-wagged goodbye to Perdita, then started off briskly along the Outer Circle, looking very spirited. Missis kept pace with him; but after its last wag to Perdita her tail went down.

After a few minutes, Pongo said: ‘Are you warmer now, Missis?’

‘Yes, Pongo,’ said Missis, still shivering. And still her tail was down.

Pongo knew that if he could not cheer her up she would never

be able to face the hardships that lay ahead. And he thought he could do with some cheering up himself. So he began a little speech, intended to give them both courage.

‘I sometimes think,’ he said, ‘that you and I have become a bit pampered. Well, pampering does good dogs no harm, provided they don’t come to depend on it. If they do, they become old before their time. We should never lose our liking for adventure, never forget our wild ancestry.’ (They were then passing the Zoo.) ‘Oh, I know we are worried about the puppies but the more we worry, the less we shall be able to help them. We must be brave, we must even be gay, we must know we cannot fail. Are you warmer now, Missis?’

‘Yes, Pongo,’ said Missis. But still she shivered and still her tail drooped.

They were now nearly at the bridge which leads from the Outer Circle towards Camden Town.

‘Stop for a moment,’ said Pongo. And he turned and looked back along the curve of the Circle. No car was in sight, no light was in any window. The lamp-posts were like sentinels guarding the sleeping park.

‘Think of the day when we come back with fifteen puppies running behind us,’ said Pongo.

‘Oh, Pongo, are you sure?’

‘Absolutely sure,’ said Pongo. ‘Are you a little warmer now, dear Missis?’

‘Yes, Pongo,’ said Missis. ‘And this time it is true.’

‘Then onwards to Suffolk!’ said Pongo.

And as they ran towards the bridge Missis carried her tail as high as his.

‘Not too high, Missis dear,’ said Pongo. ‘Let our hearts be gay, but not our tails.’ For when a Dalmatian’s tail is curled high over the back it is called a ‘gay’ tail and is a bad fault.



Missis was still laughing at this little joke when her heart gave a wild flutter. Coming towards them was a policeman.

Instantly, Pongo led the way into a back street, and they were soon safely out of the policeman’s sight. But seeing him had reminded Missis of something.

‘Oh, Pongo!’ she wailed. ‘We are illegal. We are out without our collars.’

‘And a good thing, too,’ said Pongo, ‘for a dog can be grabbed by the collar. But I do wish we could have brought your coat.’ He had noticed that she was shivering again – though this time it

was because she had been scared by the policeman.

‘I don’t,’ said Missis, bravely. ‘For if I wore a coat, how should I know how cold the puppies were? They have no coats. Oh, Pongo, how can they make the journey from Suffolk in such wintry weather? Suppose it snows?’

‘They may not have to make the journey yet,’ said Pongo.

Missis stared in astonishment. ‘But we must get them back quickly or the dog thieves will sell them.’

‘Nothing will happen to them yet,’ said Pongo. And now he knew it was time to tell his wife the truth. ‘Let’s rest a moment,’ he said, and led Missis into the shelter of a doorway. Then he went on gently: ‘Dear Missis, our puppies were not stolen by ordinary dog thieves. Try not to be too frightened. Remember we are going to rescue them. Our puppies were stolen by Cruella de Vil’s orders – so that she can have their skins made into a fur coat. Oh, Missis, be brave!’

Missis had collapsed. She lay on the doorstep, panting, her eyes full of horror.

‘But it will be all right, dear Missis! They will be safe for months yet. They are much too small to be – to be used for a fur coat yet.’

Missis shuddered. Then she struggled to her feet.

‘I will go back!’ she cried. ‘I will go back and tear Cruella de Vil to pieces.’

‘That would do no good at all,’ said Pongo, firmly. ‘We must rescue the puppies first and think of our revenge later. On to

Suffolk!

‘On to Suffolk, then!’ said Missis, staggering along on shaky legs. ‘But we shall come back, Cruella de Vil!’

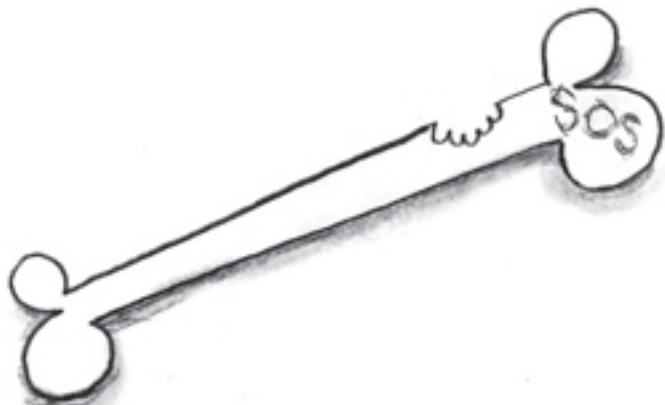
Soon Missis began to feel better, for Pongo made her see that puppies whose skins were wanted for a fur coat would be well fed and well taken care of, and kept together. Ordinary dog thieves might have sold them already, and to different people. She asked many questions and he told of his early suspicions – how he had suddenly recalled the evening they had first seen Cruella and sat under the piano in the red drawing-room.

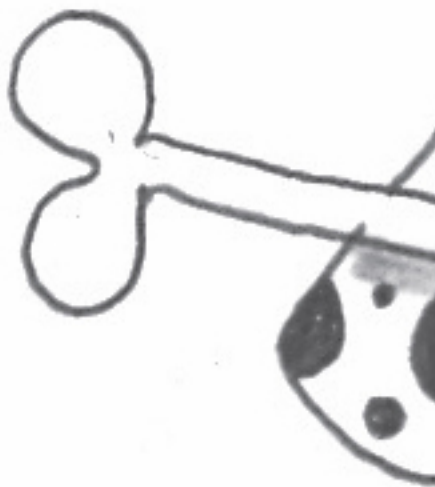
‘She said we would make enchanting fur coats, Missis.’

‘For spring wear, over a black suit,’ said Missis, remembering. ‘And she did take a lot of interest in the puppies.’

‘And she kept Nanny Cook talking while they were stolen,’ said Pongo. ‘But I wasn’t quite sure until this evening, at the Twilight Barking. You didn’t hear as much as I did, Missis. Our puppies are at Hell Hall, the ancestral home of the de Vils.’

And he knew, though he kept this from Missis, that the SOS on the old bone meant ‘Save Our Skins’.





PONGO HAD no difficulty in taking the right road out of London, for he and Mr Dearly had done much motoring in their bachelor days and often driven to Suffolk. Mile after mile the two dogs ran through the deserted streets, as the December night grew colder. At last London was left behind and, just before dawn, they reached a village in Epping Forest where they hoped to spend the day.

They had decided they must always travel by night and rest during daylight. For they felt sure Mr Dearly would advertise their loss and the police would be on the look out for them. There was far less chance of their being seen and caught by night.

They had barely entered the sleeping village when they heard a quiet bark. The next moment, a burly Golden Retriever was greeting them.

‘Pongo and Missis Pongo, I presume? All arrangements were made for you by Late Twilight Barking. Please follow me.’

He led them to an old, gabled inn and then under an archway to a cobbled yard.

‘Please drink here, at my own bowl,’ he said. ‘Food awaits you in your sleeping quarters but water could not be arranged.’

(For no dog can carry a full water-bowl.)

Pongo and Missis had only had one drink since they left home, at an old drinking trough for horses, which had a lower trough for dogs. They now gulped thirstily and gratefully.

‘My pride as an innkeeper tempts me to offer you one of our best bedrooms,’ said the Golden Retriever. ‘They combine old

world charm with all modern conveniences – and no charge for breakfast in bed. But it wouldn't be wise.'

'No, indeed,' said Pongo. 'We might be discovered.'

'Exactly. We are putting you in the safest place any of us could think of. Naturally every dog in the village came to the meeting after the Late Barking – when we heard this village was to have the honour of receiving you. Step this way.'

At the far end of the yard were some old stables, and in the last stable of all was a broken-down stage coach.

'Just the right place for Dalmatians,' said Pongo, smiling, 'for our ancestors were trained to run behind coaches and carriages. Some people still call us Coach Dogs or Carriage Dogs.'

'And your run from London has shown you are worthy of your ancestors,' said the Golden Retriever. 'When I was a pup we sometimes took this old coach out for the school picnic, but no one has bothered with it for years now. You should be quite safe, and some dogs will always be on guard. In case of sudden alarm, you can go out by the back door of the stable and escape across the fields.'

There was a deep bed of straw on the floor of the coach and neatly laid out on the seat were two magnificent chops, half a dozen iced cakes and a box of peppermint creams.

'From the butcher's dog, the baker's dog and the dog at the sweet-shop,' said the Retriever. 'I shall arrange your dinner. Will steak be satisfactory?'

Pongo and Missis said it would indeed, and tried to thank him

for everything, but he waved their thanks away, saying: 'It's a very great honour. We are planning a small plaque – to be concealed from human eyes, of course – saying: PONGO AND MISSIS SLEPT HERE.'

Then he took them to the cobwebbed window and pointed out a smaller edition of himself, who was patrolling the inn courtyard.

'My youngest lad, already on guard. He's hoping to see you for a moment, when you're rested, and ask for your paw-marks – to start his collection. A small guard of honour will see you out of the village, but I shan't let them waste too much of your time. Goodnight – though it's really good morning. Pleasant dreams.'

As soon as he had gone, Pongo and Missis ate ravenously.

'Though perhaps we should not eat too heavily before sleeping,' said Pongo, so they left a couple of peppermint creams. (Missis, later, ate them in her sleep.) Then they settled down in the straw, close together, and got warmer and warmer.

Missis said: 'Do you feel sure our puppies will be well fed and well taken care of?'

'Quite sure. And they will be safe for a long time, because their spots are nowhere near big enough for a striking fur coat yet. Oh, Missis, how pleasant it is to be on our own like this!'

Missis thumped her tail with joy – and with relief. For there had been moments when she had felt – not jealous, exactly, but just a bit wistful about Pongo's affection for Perdita. She loved Perdita, was grateful to her and sorry for her; still – well, it was

nice to have her own husband to herself, thought Missis. But she made herself say:

‘Poor Perdita! No husband, no puppies! We must never let her feel we want to be on our own.’

‘I do hope she can comfort the Dearlys,’ said Pongo.

‘She will wash them,’ said Missis – and fell asleep.



How gloriously they slept! It was their first really deep sleep since the loss of the puppies. Even the Twilight Barking did not disturb them. It brought good news, which the Retriever told them when he woke them, as soon as it was dark. All was well with the pups, and Lucky sent a message that they were getting

more food than they could eat. This gave Pongo and Missis a wonderful appetite for the steaks that were waiting for them.

While they ate, they chatted to the Retriever and his wife and their family, who lived at various houses in the village. And the Retriever told Pongo how to reach the village where the next day was to be spent – this had been arranged by the Twilight Barking. The steaks were finished and a nice piece of cheese was going down well when the Corgi from the Post Office arrived with an evening paper in her mouth. Mr Dearly had put in his largest advertisement yet – with a photograph of Pongo and Missis (taken during the joint honeymoon).

Pongo's heart sank for he felt the route planned for them was no longer safe. It led through many villages, where even by night they might be noticed – unless they waited till all humans had gone to bed, which would waste too much time. He said: 'We must travel across country.'

'But you'll get lost,' said the Retriever's wife.

'Pongo never loses his way,' said Missis, proudly.

'And the moon will be nearly full,' said the Retriever. 'You should manage. But it will be hard to pick up food. I had arranged for it to await you in several villages.'

Pongo said they had eaten so much that they could do without food until the morning, but he hated to think dogs might be waiting up for them during the night.

'I will cancel it by the Nine o'clock Barking,' said the Retriever.

There was a snuffling at the back door of the stable. All the dogs of the village had arrived to see Pongo and Missis off.

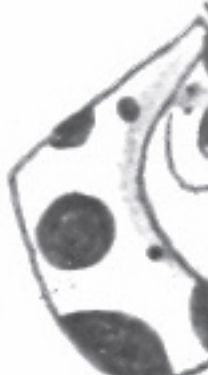
‘We should start at once,’ said Pongo. ‘Where’s our young friend who wants paw-marks?’

The Retriever’s youngest lad stepped forward shyly, carrying an old menu. Pongo and Missis put their pawtographs on the back of it for him, then thanked the Retriever and his family for all they had done.

Outside, two rows of dogs were waiting to cheer. But no human ear could have heard the cheers, for every dog had now seen the photograph in the evening paper and knew an escape must be made in absolute silence.

Pongo and Missis bowed right and left, gratefully sniffing their thanks to all. Then, after a last goodbye to the Retriever, they were off across the moonlit fields.

‘On to Suffolk!’ said Pongo.



THEY WERE well rested and well fed and they soon reached a pond where they could drink – the Retriever had told them to be on the look out for it. (It would not have been safe for them to drink from his bowl again; too many humans were now about.) And their spirits were far higher than when they had left the house in Regent's Park. How far away it already seemed, although it was less than twenty-four hours since they had been in their baskets by the kitchen fire. Of course they were still anxious about their puppies, and sorry for the poor Dearlys. But Lucky's message had been cheering, and they hoped to make it all up to the Dearlys one day. And anyway, as Pongo said, worrying would help nobody, while enjoying their freedom to race across the fields would do them a power of good.

He was relieved to see how well Missis ran and what good condition she was in. So much food had been given to her while she was feeding the puppies that she had never got pitifully thin – as Perdita had, when she had fed her own puppies without being given extra food.

'You are a beautiful dog, Missis,' said Pongo. 'I am very proud of you.'

At this, Missis looked even more beautiful and Pongo felt even prouder of her. After a minute or so, he said: 'Do you think I'm looking pretty fit?'

Missis told him he looked magnificent, and wished she had said so without being asked. He was not a vain dog, but every husband likes to know that his wife admires him.

They ran on, shoulder to shoulder, a perfectly matched couple. The night was windless and therefore seemed warmer than the night before, but Pongo knew there was a heavy frost; and when, after a couple of hours across the fields, they came to another pond, there was a film of ice over it. They broke this easily and drank, but Pongo began to be a little anxious about where they would be by daybreak, for they would need good shelter in such cold weather. As they were now travelling across country, he thought it unlikely they would find the village that had been expecting them, but he felt sure most dogs would by now have heard of them and would be willing to help. 'Only we must be near some village by dawn, or we shall meet no dogs,' he thought.

Soon after that a lane crossed the fields and, as they had just heard a church clock strike midnight, Pongo felt there was now little chance of their meeting any humans on the road. He wanted to find a signpost and make sure they were travelling in the right direction. So they went along the lane for a mile until they came to a sleeping village. There was a signpost on the green, which Pongo read by the light of the moon. (He was very good at reading – as a pup he had played with alphabet blocks.) All was well. Their journey across the fields had saved them many miles and they were now deep in Essex. (The village where they might have stayed was already behind them.) By going north, they would reach Suffolk.

The only depressing thing was that the wonderful steak dinner seemed such a long time ago. And there was no hope of getting

food as late as this. They just had to go on and on through the night, getting hungrier and hungrier.

And by the time it began to get light, they were also extremely chilly – partly because they were hungry and tired, and partly because it was getting colder and colder. The ice on the ponds they passed was thicker and thicker – at last they came to a pond where they could not break through to drink.

And now Pongo was really anxious, for they had reached a part of the country where there seemed to be very few villages. Where could they get food and shelter? Where could they hide and sleep during the bitterly cold day ahead of them?

He did not tell Missis of his fears and she would not even admit that she was hungry. But her tail drooped and her pace got slower and slower. He felt terrible: tired, hungry, anxious, and deeply ashamed that he was letting his beautiful wife suffer hardship. Surely there would be a village soon, or a fair-sized farm?

‘Should we rest a little, Pongo?’ said Missis, at last.

‘Not until we’ve found some dogs to help us, Missis,’ said Pongo. Then his heart gave a glad leap. Ahead of them were some thatched cottages! It was full daylight now and he could see smoke twisting up from several chimneys. Surely some dog would be about?

‘If anyone tries to catch us, we must take to the fields and run,’ said Pongo.

‘Yes, Pongo,’ said Missis, though she did not now feel she could run very far.



They reached the first cottage. Pongo gave a low bark. No dog answered it.

They went on and soon saw that this was not a real village but just a short row of cottages, some of them empty and almost in ruins. Except for smoke rising from a few chimneys there was no sign of life until they came to the very last cottage. As they reached it, a little boy looked out of a window.

He saw them and quickly opened the cottage door. In his hand was a thick slab of bread and butter. He appeared to be holding it out to them.

‘Gently, Pongo,’ said Missis, ‘or we shall frighten him.’

They went through the open gate and up the cobbled path, wagging their tails and looking with love at the little boy – and the bread and butter. The child smiled at them fearlessly and waved

the bread and butter. And then, when they were only three or four yards away, he stooped, picked up a stone and slung it with all his force. He gave a squeal of laughter when he saw the stone strike Pongo, then went in and slammed the door.

At that moment, the dogs heard a man's voice inside the cottage. They turned and ran as fast as they could, along the road and then into a field.

'Are you hurt, Pongo?' cried Missis, as they ran. Then she saw that he was limping. They stopped behind a haystack. Pongo's leg was bleeding – the stone must have had a very sharp edge. But what hurt him most was the bruise on the bone. He was trembling with pain and rage.

Missis was terrified, but she did not let him see this. She licked his wound and said there was nothing a good rest would not cure.

'Rest? Where?' said Pongo.

Missis saw that the haystack was very loosely made. She scabbled at it fiercely, saying: 'Look, Pongo, you can creep in and get warm. Then sleep for a while. I will find us some food – I will, I will! The first dog I meet will help me.'

By now she had made a large hole in the haystack. Pongo looked at it longingly. But no! He could not let her go alone. He struggled to his feet, wincing with pain, and said: 'I must come with you to find food. And I will bite that child.'

'No, Pongo, no!' cried Missis, horrified. 'Remember he is only a very young human. All very young creatures are ignorantly cruel – often our dear puppies hurt me badly, not knowing they

were doing so. To bite a human is the greatest crime a dog can commit. You shall not let that cruel, thoughtless child put such a sin on your conscience. Your pain and anger will pass, but the guilt would remain with you for always.'

Pongo knew she was right and already the desire to bite the child was passing. 'But I won't let you go alone,' he said.

'Then let us both rest a while first,' said crafty Missis. 'Come on, there's room for two.' And she crept into the haystack.

'We should find food first, or we shall be too weak to find it when we wake up,' said Pongo. But he followed her into the haystack.

'Just sleep for a few minutes, Pongo – while I keep guard,' said Missis, coaxingly.

Pongo could fight on no longer. Sleep came to him while he thought he was still arguing.

Missis waited a few minutes, then crept out and pulled hay round Pongo to hide him. She no longer felt sleepy; she was far too anxious. Even her appetite had gone for the moment. Still, she knew she must find food for them both – and she had no idea how to, for she was almost sure there was no dog anywhere near to help her. But pretending to Pongo that she felt brave had made her really feel a little braver and her tail was no longer down.

She could still see the thatched cottages and she noticed some hens at the back of them. Perhaps the hens would have some stale crusts that she could – well, borrow. She went back.

The first cottage she reached was the one where the little boy

lived. And now he was at the back, staring at her! This time, he had an even larger slab of bread and butter, with some jam on it. He ran towards her, holding it out.

‘Perhaps he really means it now,’ thought Missis. ‘Perhaps he’s sorry he hurt Pongo.’ And she went forward hopefully – though well prepared to dodge stones.

The child waited until she was quite close. Then again he stooped for a stone. But he was on a patch of grass, with no stones handy. So, instead, he threw the slab of bread and butter. He threw it with rage, not love, but that made it no less valuable. Missis caught it neatly and bolted.

‘Bless me,’ she thought, ‘he’s just a small human who likes throwing things. His parents should buy him a ball.’

She took the bread and butter back to the haystack and laid it down by her sleeping husband’s nose. So far, she had not even licked it, but now she let herself nibble off one very small corner. It tasted so glorious that her appetite came back with a rush, but she left all the rest for Pongo to find when he woke. Again she pulled the hay round him, and then ran to the road. But she saw a man outside the cottage where the little boy lived so she did not dare to go back to visit the hens. She ran in the opposite direction.

It was now a very beautiful winter morning. Every blade of grass was silvered with hoar frost and glittering in the newly risen sun. But Missis was far too worried to enjoy the beauty. The triumph of getting the bread was wearing off and all sorts of fears were rushing at her.

Suppose Pongo was seriously injured? Suppose he was too lame to go on? Suppose she could find no food close at hand? If she had to go far, she knew she would get lost. She even got lost in Regent's Park, almost every time the Dearlys were off the leash. They often laughed at the way she would stand still, wildly staring around for them. Suppose she never found her way back to Pongo and he searched and searched and never found her? Lost dog! The very words were terrible!

And was she, even now, quite sure of her way back to the haystack?

'It isn't fair,' thought Missis. 'No one as worried as I am ought to feel hungry, too.' For she was ravenous – and thirsty. She tried licking the ice in a ditch but it hurt her tongue without quenching her thirst.

She was beginning to think she must go back and make sure where the haystack was, when she came to an old redbrick archway leading to a long gravel drive. Her spirits rose. Surely this must be the entrance to some big country house, such as she had stayed at several times when she and Mrs Dearly were both bachelors? Such houses had many dogs, large kitchens, plenty of food. Joyfully she ran through the archway.

She could see no house ahead of her because the drive twisted. It was overgrown with weeds, and it went on so long that she began to wonder if it really did lead to a house. Indeed, it was now so wild and neglected that it seemed more like a path through a wood than the approach to a house. And it was so strangely

silent; never in her life had Missis felt quite so alone.

More and more frightened, she ran round one more bend – and suddenly she was out in the open, with the house in front of her.

It was very old, built of mellow red brick like the archway, with many little diamond-paned windows and one great window that reached almost to the roof. The windows twinkling in the early morning sunshine looked cheerful and welcoming, but there was no sign of life anywhere. And there was grass growing in the cracks of the wide stone steps which led to the massive oak door.



‘It’s empty!’ thought Missis, in despair.

But it was not empty. Looking out of an open window was a Spaniel, black except for his muzzle, which was grey with age.

‘Good morning,’ he said, most courteously. ‘Can I be of any help to you, my dear?’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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