

Jenny and the Curmudgeon: *Far from the Madding Crowd*

A Short Story by B. Cat Stone



“Good morning, Madam. It’s time for you to rise and prepare our morning repast. I’m afraid you’ve overslept once again!”

Jenny’s eyes flew open. “Hello? Is someone here?” she asked in a shaky voice tinged with fear. Sitting up quickly, she swung her legs over the side of the bed. Startled and disoriented, she wondered if she’d left the TV on all night. “Willie, where are you!” Reaching out and flailing her arms, Jenny searched frantically until she felt fur. She was relieved to find the German Shepherd lying on the floor by her feet.

“There’s no need for alarm, Madam. T’is I, your faithful, and famished, old guide dog,” the canine said. He stood up and placed one of his front paws on her lap.

“Who is *talking*?” Jenny asked loudly, fighting panic. Suddenly she realized the voice seemed to be coming from the dog. She explored his face with her fingers, moving from his forehead to his mouth.

“Maa-ddd-mmm plzz gt yr fngrrrs out uf myy moufff!” the dog sputtered.

Miraculously, the animal’s lips were moving in sync with the words being spoken. Jenny’s voice played a crescendo of disbelief as she exclaimed, “This is crazy, Willie. You’re actually talking, so I must be dreaming!”

“Madam, don’t act as if I’m some raving reject from Plum Island!” the dog snapped. “And by the way, my name is *not* Willie; it is Baron Ludwig Von Richtenstein III. However, you may call me Baron.”

Stunned, Jenny paused then hesitantly placed a hand on the dog's back. "How can you possibly talk, Willie...er, I mean, Baron?" she asked.

"I've had the gift of oral articulation since I was weaned as a puppy," he replied. "My brethren tell me this capability is extremely rare, perhaps one or two in many canine generations. We're known as 'Dog Talkers'; a perturbation in the evolutionary model I suppose."

Jenny's face was a showcase of shock. "This is like, totally incredible! Does anyone else know you can talk?"

"Not anymore," said Baron, a touch of regret in his voice. "I'm sure you recall that I was raised and trained as a service dog by a couple in Ottawa. What you *don't* know are the details of the story. The Canadians were a decent enough pair—occasionally quite sober. I learned French by listening to their conversations. I acquired the skills to communicate with their parrot in her native language, and we became fast friends. However their cat's *raison d'être* was to torment me. That loathsome creature taught me how to curse in feline.

"After tipping a few too many brews, the Canucks often found it amusing to converse with me, eh? But they never seemed to remember our little chats the morning after. Sadly, but predictably, the twosome went barhopping by snowmobile one night and, tanked up on ale, ran headlong into a rather large tree.

"*Mon Dieu!* I was quite upset about losing them and felt anxious, wondering what would become of me. After the funeral, their pets went to live with relatives. I was auctioned off by the Canadian Assistance Animal Center via the Internet—a digital Kunta Kinte. Of course you know the rest: I was sent to the US Eye Dog Foundation where, *voilà*, their matchmakers placed me with you."

"Baron, you've been my guide dog for years. Why have you waited until now to start talking?" she questioned him.

"Because, Madam, I learned English only recently," he responded. "I'm fluent in eight human and animal languages, including French, African Grey Parrot, Domestic Feline and German. Do you think I only lie around chewing bones and barking at strange noises while you sleep?"

"The speech software on your computer also comes in handy for those of us without opposable thumbs. I learned several tongues by surfing the internet. I also purchased an online course, *Learn English in Only 90 Days!* Having a facile mind, I mastered English in only eight weeks using the audio tutorials."

"How were you able to pay for the class, Baron?" Jenny questioned him.

"I must confess to availing myself of your electronic bank account," he answered, chagrined. "When you used the financial service I took note of your access information as you spoke. In addition to the training, I made a few other purchases."

"I did notice some recent charges that seemed odd," Jenny admitted. "Barkingbitches.com? Savethepuppies.org?"

"Oh grow up, Madam," Baron retorted defensively. "Don't you realize canines, just like humans, have fantasies and philanthropic urges to fulfill?"

Suddenly Baron's ears rotated, and his head spun around to face the front door. "Madam, be alert," he cautioned her. "There's someone approaching!"

Jenny quickly stood, shrugged into her robe, and began to walk from the bedroom through the apartment as Baron strode in a protective stance alongside her. "Is this our usual pizza delivery day?" he asked hopefully.

The dog sniffed in the direction of the door. "No, it's only that woman, Theresa," he reported dejectedly

"How can you tell it's her?" Jenny asked.

"Because I can smell her perfume, *L'Eau de Loser*, from here," he replied snarkily.

"Baron, be nice!" she chided him.

There was a knock at the front door. Baron growled and barked his most ferocious warning as a woman's voice called out. "Hey, Jenny. It's me, Theresa."

"See?" Baron whispered in a self-satisfied tone. He sneezed. "Ehhh-choo! Must you allow her in, Madam? I'm allergic to that scent she apparently bathes in."

"Of course I'm letting her in," Jenny whispered back to him. "I can't *wait* to see what she thinks of you talking!" Walking around Baron, she opened the door and hurriedly ushered her friend into the apartment.

Confused, Theresa glanced around. "Is there anyone else here, Jen? I thought I heard another voice."

Baron sat silently by her side as Jenny stumbled excitedly over her words. "Theresa, I've got something unbelievable to tell you. Willie...I mean, his real name is Baron, can *speak!*"

"I know that, and he sits and stays, too," Theresa replied nonchalantly. "Why are you so worked up about that today, Jen?"

"I mean he can talk...*English*, Theresa! Listen. Baron, speak," Jenny coached the dog.

"Bark...Ehhh-choo!" Baron sneezed again.

"Come on, Baron. Talk to us!" Jenny urged him.

"Woof. *Arf!*"

Theresa laughed as Jenny regarded Baron, frowning with disappointment.

"So, Jen, how are those new meds workin' for ya'?" Theresa asked her playfully.

"I'm serious, Theresa. He was talking to me just before you stopped by."

"OK, Jenny, that's very droll," Theresa responded. "But I have to run. I just stopped by to drop off this Braille book you wanted. I'll call you later. Have Baron answer the phone. Ha!" She placed the book on a table then turned and walked toward the door.

"Insidious twit!" Baron quipped disgustedly.

Theresa turned. “Jenny, did you say something?” she asked.

Jenny thought quickly. “No, I...I was just telling Baron to sit,” she replied.

“OK, whatever. Take care, talk to you soon,” Theresa answered airily as she passed through the portal.

After the door closed, Jenny and Baron sat face to face listening to the sound of Theresa’s diminishing footsteps. They contemplated one another for several minutes elongated by silence.

Finally, Jenny broke the muted barrier between them. “Baron, how could you be so rude and condescending, calling Theresa a ‘twit’,” she demanded.

“Because, Madam, she *is* one,” Baron asserted haughtily. “I’ve never liked that woman but was never able to convey my opinion to you before now. I realize she does favors for you, but frankly, in my humble opinion, she’s beneath you and definitely several rungs below me. Of course she’s *your* friend. But remember I, too, must tolerate her when she visits.”

“I think you’re jealous of Theresa because she helps me in ways you can’t,” Jenny teased her companion.

Baron stood up and chuffed. “Rubbish!”

“Why wouldn’t you talk to Theresa when I asked you to?” she queried him quietly.

“I could never speak to anyone but you, Madam,” he explained. “Firstly, the Dog Talker Code allows me to communicate only with the most trusted human companions who will guard the secret. From now on you must never discuss this with anyone.

“Secondly, if I did begin prattling on to everyone, I’d surely be the story du jour for the tabloid media. The Powers That Be would most certainly take me away from you. Picture me languishing for the rest of my days: a lab rat studied by scientists that are my intellectual inferior. And of course I’d be forced to leave a perfectly good position here with you. At my age, in dog years, those are extremely difficult to find.”

A tremor added heart to the determination in Jenny’s voice as she replied. “Baron, I could *never* let that happen. You’re my guide, my guardian. You’re my best friend.” Lowering her head, she covered her face with her hands, overwhelmed by an explosion of emotions. “My life would be dark and empty without you!” she cried.

Baron sidled up to her and sat down obediently. “It would indeed,” he concurred. He lifted a paw and rested it on her knee reassuringly. “Madam, don’t despair. I am eternally your servant—at least as long as room and board and your online services are available.”

“Baron!” Jenny admonished him as she lifted her head and sniffed.

Baron studied her face. Though her expression was stern, the dog detected the scent of an underlying smile.

Jenny shook her head slowly, bewildered. “I’ve learned so many extraordinary things about you today, Baron, it’s surreal,” she observed. “And I realize you also have a few *ordinary* traits I could live without. I think you’re the ‘cur’ in curmudgeon, you know that?” She giggled as she wiped her tears on the sleeve of her robe.

“Well put, Madam. I am, aren’t I?” agreed Baron. He gazed up at her, his brown eyes sparkling with amusement.

The dog gently laid his head upon his mistress’s lap. As she stroked his face, humming softly, Baron closed his eyes and exhaled a contented sigh. Jenny felt the velvet texture of his muzzle, oblivious to the powdering of white fur that revealed his age. They remained that way for a sweet moment, until Baron perked up.

“Madam, after our breakfast, if you dress and fetch my service vest, I’ll take you for a stroll,” he offered brightly. “We’ll pick a route far from the Madding Crowd, like the book’s title, so I can describe the spectacular fall scenery to you as we walk.”

“That would be awesome!” Jenny replied excitedly. She jumped up then suddenly halted, a look of amazement flashing across her face. “Wait, Baron. No way! You’ve read Thomas Hardy’s novel?” she asked incredulously.

“But of course, Madam,” he countered smugly. “Hasn’t everyone?”



About the Author



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