

At Home In Mitford-1st Chapter

Barnabas

He left the coffee-scented warmth of the Main Street Grill and stood for a moment under the green awning.

The honest cold of an early mountain spring stung him sharply.

He often noted the minor miracle of passing through a door into a completely different world, with different smells and attractions. It helped to be aware of the little things in life, he told himself, and he often exhorted his congregation to do the same.

As he headed toward the church office two blocks away, he was delighted to discover that he wasn't walking, at all. He was ambling.

It was a pleasure he seldom allowed himself. After all, it might appear that he had nothing else to do, when in truth he always had something to do.

He decided to surrender himself to the stolen joy of it, as some might eat half a box of chocolates at one sitting, without remorse.

He arrived at the office, uttering the prayer he had offered at its door every morning for twelve years: "Father, make me a blessing to someone today, through Christ our Lord. Amen."

As he took the key from his pocket, he felt something warm and disgustingly wet on his hand.

He looked down into the face of a large, black, mud-caked dog, whose tail began to beat wildly against his pant leg.

"Good grief!" he said, wiping his hand on his windbreaker.

At that, the dog leaped up and licked his face, sending a shower of saliva into his right ear.

"Get away! Be gone!" he shouted. He tried to protect the notebook he was carrying, but the dog gave it a proper licking before he could stuff it in his jacket, then tried to snatch it from him.

He thought of running, but if anyone saw him fleeing before a shaggy, mud-caked dog, everybody in town would know it within the half hour.

"Down!" he commanded sharply, at which the dog leaped up and gave his chin a bath.

He tried to fend the animal off with his elbow, while inserting the key in the office door. If he were a cussing man, he reasoned, this would offer a premier opportunity to indulge himself.

" 'Let no corrupt communication proceed out of your mouth,' " he quoted in a loud voice from Ephesians, " 'but that which is good to the use of edifying . . . ' " Suddenly, the dog sat down and looked at his prey with fond admiration.

"Well, now," he said irritably, wiping the notebook on his sleeve. "I hope you've got that nonsense out of your system." At this, the dog leaped up, stood on its hind legs, and put its vast paws on the rector's shoulders.

"Father Tim! Father Tim!" It was his part-time secretary, Emma Garrett.

He stood helpless, his glasses fogged with a typhoon of moist exhalations.

Whop! Emma laid a blow to the dog's head with her pocketbook. Then, blam, she hit him again on the rear flank.

"And don't come back!" she shouted, as the yelping dog fled into a hedge of rhododendron and disappeared.

Emma gave him her handkerchief, which was heavily scented with My Sin. "That wasn't a dog," she said with disgust, "that was a Buick!"

In the office, he went directly to the minuscule bathroom and washed his face and hands.

Emma called through the door. "I'll have your coffee ready in a jiffy!"

"Blast! Make it a double!" he replied, combing the hairs that remained on the top of his head. As he walked out of the bathroom, he looked at his secretary for the first time that morning. That he recognized her at all was remarkable. For Emma Garrett, full of the promise of spring, had dyed her gray hair red.

"Emma!" he said, astounded. "Is that you?"

"This," she said with feeling, "is the most me you've seen in years. That ol' gray-headed stuff is not me at all!" She turned her head both ways, so he could get the full effect.

He sighed with a mixture of delight and despair. He had hoped this might be an ordinary morning.

U

Harold Newland had brought the mail earlier than usual and, since Emma had gone to the bank, put it in a neat pile on the rector's desk. At the bottom of the pile, in reverse order of its importance, was the letter from the bishop.

He had asked the bishop to take his time, not to hurry his reply, and he had not. In fact, it had been a full two months since his own letter had been so thoughtfully written and posted.

He stared at the ivory envelope. There was no return address; this was not official stationery. If one did not know that distinctive, looping handwriting so well, one would never guess the sender.

He dared not open it here. No, he wanted complete privacy in which to read it. Would it be in the bishop's own hand? If so, he would then have a precise sense of how seriously his remarks had been taken.

Years ago, his seminary friend had been moved by the Apostle Paul's comment that the letter he wrote to the Galatians was "by my own hand," as if it were an act of great personal sacrifice. As a young seminarian, Stuart Cullen had taken that to heart. Since his installation as bishop, he was known to personally pen all the letters of real importance to his diocese. How did he have the time, people inevitably wondered. Well, that was the whole point. He didn't. Which, of course, made his handwritten and reflective letters a treasure to anyone who received an example.

No, he would not open it, if only to see whether a secretary had typed it. He would wait until evening and the solitude of the rectory, and the peace of his newly dug garden.

U

After an early supper, he sat on the stone bench that was half-covered with a fine moss, under the overhanging branches of the rhododendron.

He read the letter, which was, indeed, handwritten in the large, exuberant style that demanded space to gallop across the page.

Dearest Timothy:

It is a good evening to sit in this pleasant room and write a letter. Correspondence is, for me, a luxury which stirs my sensibilities, especially if it be with an old friend.

I believe you'd enjoy the way Martha refurbished my disorderly bookshelves, and put this study into working condition. She has even had your favorite rug repaired, so that when you come again, you won't stumble over the torn patch and go reeling headfirst into the armchair! You ask if I have ever faced such a thing as you are currently facing. My friend, exhaustion and fatigue are a committed priest's steady companions, and there is no way around it. It is a problem of epidemic proportions, and I ask you to trust that you aren't alone. Sometimes, hidden away in a small parish as you are now-and as I certainly have been-one feels that the things which press in are pointed directly at one's self.

I can assure you this is not the case.

An old friend who was a pastor in Atlanta said this: "I did not have a crisis of faith, but of emotion and energy. It's almost impossible for leaders of a congregation to accept that their pastor needs pastoring. I became beat up, burned out, angry and depressed."

The tone of your letter-and I presume you have been forthright with me, as always-does not indicate depression or anger, thanks be to God. But I'm concerned with you for what might follow if this goes unattended.

A few things to think on: Keep a journal and let off some steam. If that doesn't fit with your affinities, find yourself a godly counselor and let me know the cost, for the diocese will willingly cover it.

Your mother, I believe, left a considerable sum, and perhaps you need to use a bit of it for yourself, for something other than the children's hospital you've been so faithful to all these years. I know you well enough to believe I don't have to exhort you to prayer. You always had enormous stamina in this area, and if that has changed, well, then, Timothy, make it right again.

You may not know that you are one of the strongest, most durable links in this diocesan chain. You are important to me, and firsthand inquiry informs me that you are vitally important to your flock. Do not doubt it.

Martha has come in to tell me it is bedtime. I cannot express how wonderful it is to be sometimes told, rather than always doing the telling!

I really never dreamed I would marry, and no one was more surprised than myself when, at the age of 49, I was ready and willing to take yet another lifetime vow. Others found this extraordinary, but I found it the most natural thing on earth.

I cannot exhort you to go out and marry, Timothy, but I will say that these ten years with Martha have brought an ease to the stress which was plundering my own soul. I can't say that the pace is easier-if anything, it has accelerated-but I find the ability to bear it greatly increased.

As I recall from our days in seminary, you and I were much alike when it came to women. You were fairly smitten with Peggy Cramer, but when your feelings for her began to interfere with your calling, you broke the engagement. Even today, I feel confident in having advised you to do it. Yet I wonder-have you ever entirely reconciled this with your heart?

There she is again, my friend. And believe me, my wife does not enjoy reminding me twice. That she monitors my energy is a good thing. Otherwise, I would spill it all for Him and have nothing left with which to get out of bed in the mornings.

I exhort you to do the monitoring you so sorely need, and hang in there. Give it a year! Or, at most, give it two. If you simply cannot go the distance, Father DeWilde will be coming available in the fall and would be my choice for Lord's Chapel.

Timothy, if you have problems with this one-sided conversation, you know how to ring me up. Please know that you are daily in my prayers.

Ever in His peace,

Stuart

As the light faded, the chill of the stone bench began to creep into his bones.

He stood up and looked around the greening yard, as if seeing it for the first time. There was a certain poignancy in the shadows moving across the rose bed he had double-dug twice, and the borders he'd planted, and the dogwood he had put in himself. He felt at home in Mitford, completely and absolutely. The last thing he wanted to do was leave. Yet, the first thing he wanted to do was make a difference, be productive-and there was the rub.

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Nearly every weekday at 6:45 a.m., he made calls at the hospital, then had breakfast at the Grill and walked to the church office. For the rest of the morning, he studied, wrote letters, made telephone calls, and administrated his parish of nearly two hundred.

At noon, he walked to the Grill for lunch or, if it was raining, snowing or sleeting, ate half of Emma's usual egg salad sandwich and shared her Little Debbies.

In the afternoon until four he worked on his sermon, counseled, and generally tidied up the affairs of his calling. "A place for everything and everything in its place," he was known to quote from Mrs. Beeton.

At times, he was saddened by never having married and raised a family of his own. But, he had to admit, being a bachelor left him far more time for his parish family.

On Thursday afternoon, he was going home with a basket that a member of the Altar Guild had delivered, containing home-canned green beans, a jar of pickle relish, and a loaf of banana bread. He put his notebook on top, and covered the whole lot with a draft of Sunday's church bulletin.

"Red Riding Hood," he mused, as he took the key from the peg.

He stepped out and locked the door behind him, dropping the heavy key into his pocket.

Then he turned around and stared in disbelief.

Coming toward him at an alarming rate of speed was something he hoped he'd never lay eyes on again.

It was the great leaping, licking, mud-caked dog.

For several days, the dog seemed to appear out of nowhere. Once, when he was walking down Old Church Lane to meet the plumber at Lord's Chapel. Again, when he was planting a border of lavender along the walkway to the rectory. Yet again, when he went to The Local to get milk and sweet potatoes. And on two occasions, as he was leaving the Grill.

The meeting in the church lane had been fairly uneventful. After an enthusiastic hand licking and a vigorous leap that had nearly knocked him to the ground, he'd been able to repulse his attacker with a loud recitation of his laundry list. By the time he got to socks-three pairs white, four pairs black, one pair blue-the dog had wandered into the cemetery at the rear of the churchyard, and disappeared.

The meeting at the lavender bed, however, had been another matter.

He was kneeling in sober concentration on a flagstone, when suddenly he felt two large paws on his shoulders. Instantly, such a drenching bath was administered to his left ear that he nearly fainted with surprise.

"Good Lord!" shouted the rector, who had gone crashing into a flat of seedlings. He had not, however, been thrown clear of his trowel.

He turned around and raised it, as if to strike a fearsome blow, and was surprised to see the dog stand on its hind legs with a look of happy expectation.

Spurred by some odd impulse, he threw the trowel as far as he could. The excited creature bounded after it, giving forth a joyful chorus of barks, and returned to drop the trowel at the rector's feet.

Feeling speechless over the whole incident, he threw the trowel again, and watched the dog fetch it back. He was amazed that he was able to stand there and continue such a foolish thing for twenty minutes. Actually, he realized, he hadn't known what else to do.

At the Grill one morning, he asked around. "Has anybody ever seen that big, black dog before?"

"You mean th' one that's taken a likin' to you?" asked Percy Mosely. "We never laid eyes on 'im 'til a week or two ago. A couple of times, he come by here like a freight train. But anybody tries to catch 'im, he's gone, slick as grease."

"We tried to feed 'im," said Percy's wife, Velma, "but he won't eat Percy's cookin'."

"Ha, ha," said Percy, who was working six orders of hash browns.

"You ought to lay hold of 'im sometime when he's chasin' you, and call th' animal shelter," suggested Velma.

"In the first place," said Father Tim, "it is impossible to lay hold of that particular dog. And in the second place, I have no intention of sending him to what could be his final doom." In the third place, he thought, that dog never chased me. I always stood my ground!

"Well, he's sitting out there waiting for you, right now," observed HESSIE MAYHEW, who had stopped in on her way to the library, with an armful of overdue books.

The rector raised up from his seat in the booth and looked through the front window. Yes, indeed. He saw the creature, staring soulfully into the Grill.

He couldn't help thinking that it was oddly flattering to have someone waiting for him, even if it was a dog. Emma had said for years that he needed a dog or a cat, or even a bird. But no, not once had he ever considered such a thing.

"We ought to call th' shelter," insisted Percy, who thought that a little action would brighten the morning. "They'll be on 'im before you get down t' your office."

The rector discreetly put a piece of buttered toast in a napkin and slipped it into his pocket.

"Let's wait on that, Percy," he said, walking to the door.

He stood there for a moment, composing himself. Then he opened the door and stepped out to the sidewalk.

U

The village of Mitford was set snugly into what would be called, in the west, a hanging valley. That is, the mountains rose steeply on either side, and then sloped into a hollow between the ridges, rather like a cake that falls in the middle from too much opening of the oven door.

According to a walking parishioner of Lord's Chapel, Mitford's business district was precisely 342 paces from one end to the other.

At the north end, Main Street climbed a slight incline, and circled a town green that was bordered by a hedge of hemlocks and anchored in the center by a World War II memorial.

The green also contained four benches facing the memorial and, in the spring, a showy bed of pansies, which one faction claimed was the official town flower.

Directly to the left of the green was the town hall, and next to that, the First Baptist Church. Set into the center of its own display of shrubs and flowers on the front bank was a wayside pulpit permanently bearing the Scripture verse John 3:16, which the members long ago had agreed was the pivotal message of their faith.

To the right of the green, facing Lilac Road, was the once-imposing home of Miss Rose and Uncle Billy Watson, whose overgrown yard currently contained two chrome dinette chairs which they used while watching traffic circle the monument.

Visitors who walked the two-block stretch of the main business district were always surprised to find the shops spaced so far apart, owing to garden plots that flourished between the buildings. In the loamy, neatly edged beds were wooden signs:

Garden Courtesy of Joe's Barber Shop, Upstairs to Right

Take Time to Smell the Roses, Courtesy Oxford Antiques

A Reader's Garden, Courtesy Happy Endings Bookstore

"Mitford," observed a travel feature by a prominent newspaper, "is a village delightfully out of step with contemporary America. Here, where streets are named for flowers, and villagers can seek the shade of a dozen fragrant rose arbors, spring finds most of the citizenry, including merchants, making gardens.

“ . . . and while Mitford's turn-of-the-century charm and beauty attract visitors like bees to honeysuckle, the town makes a conscious effort to discourage serious tourism.

“ 'We want people to come and visit,' says Mayor Esther Cunningham, 'but we're not real interested in having them stick around. The college town of Wesley, just fifteen miles away, is perfect for that. They've got the inns and guest houses and all. Mitford would simply like to be the pause that refreshes.' ”

Going south on Main Street to Wisteria Lane were the post office, the library, a bank, the bookstore, Winnie Ivey's Sweet Stuff Bakery, and a new shop for men's furnishings.

There was also a grocery store, so well-known for its fresh poultry and produce from local sources that most people simply called it The Local. For thirty-six years, The Local had provided chickens, rabbits, sausage, hams, butter, cakes, pies, free-range eggs, jams, and jellies from a farming community in the valley, along with vegetables and berries in season. In summer, produce bins on the sidewalk under the green awnings were filled each day with Silver Queen corn in the shuck. And in July, pails of fat blackberries were displayed in the cooler case.

To the left of Main Street, Wisteria Lane meandered past the Episcopal rectory, whose back door looked upon the green seclusion of Baxter Park, and then climbed the hill to the Presbyterians.

To the right of Main, Wisteria led only to Wesley Chapel, a tiny Methodist church that stood along the creek bank in a grove of pink laurel and was known for the sweetness of its pealing bells.

The second and only other business block of Main Street was lined with a hardware store, a tea shop, a florist, an Irish woolen shop, and an antique shop, with gardens in between.

Next, Main was crossed by Old Church Lane, rising steeply on the left to Church Hill Drive, where the ruined foundation of Mitford's first Episcopal church stood in the tall grass of the upland meadow near Miss Sadie Baxter's Fernbank.

At the opposite end of the lane was Lord's Chapel, which stood between two vacant lots.

After passing the church, which was noted for its fine Norman tower and showy gardens, the lane narrowed to a few comfortable houses on the bank of a rushing stream, where Indian Pipes were said to grow in profusion.

As the streets and lanes gave way to countryside and sloped toward the deeper valley, the rolling farmland began. Here, pastures were stocked with Herefords and Guernseys; lakes were filled with trout and brim; barnyards succored chattering guineas. And everywhere, in town or out, was the rich, black loam that made the earthworm's toil one of unending satisfaction.

U

On rare occasions, and for no special reason he could think of, he imagined he was sitting by the fire in the study, in the company of a companionable wife.

He would be reading, and she would be sitting across from him in a wing chair.

In this idyll, he could not see her face, but he knew it had a girlish sweetness, and she was always knitting. Knitting, he thought, was a comfort to the soul. It was regular. It was repetitious. And, in the end, it amounted to something.

In this dream, there was always a delectable surprise on the table next to his chair, and nearly always it was a piece of pie. In his bachelor's heart of hearts, he loved pie with an intensity that alarmed him. Yet, when he was offered seconds, he usually refused. “Wouldn't you like another piece of this nice coconut pie, Father?” he might be asked. “No, I don't believe I'd care for any more,” he'd say. An outright lie!

In this imaginary fireside setting, he would not talk much, he thought. But now and then, he might speak of church matters, read Blake or Wordsworth aloud, and try a sermon outline on his companion.

That would be a luxury far greater than any homemade sweet-to have someone listen to his outline and nod encouragement or, even, for heaven's sake, disagree.

Sometimes he shared an outline or argument with his close friend Hal Owen, the country vet. But in the main, he found that a man must hammer out his theology alone.

He was musing on this one evening, shortly after he'd been to the garage to give the black dog its supper, when he was surprised by a loud, groaning yawn from the vicinity of his own stockinged feet.

He was astounded to see the maverick dog lying next to his chair, gazing up at him.

"Blast!" he exclaimed. "I must have left the garage door open."

The usually gregarious dog not only appeared thoughtfully serene, but looked at him with an air of earnest understanding. How odd that the brown eyes of his companion were not unlike those of an old church warden he'd known as a young priest.

Feeling encouraged, he picked up a volume of Wordsworth from the table by his elbow.

" 'It is a beautiful evening, calm and free,' " he read aloud.

The holy time is quiet as a nun

Breathless with adoration; the broad sun

Is sinking down in its tranquillity;

The gentleness of heaven broods o'er the sea:

Listen! the mighty Being is awake,

And doth with his eternal motion make

A sound like thunder, everlastingly.

The dog appeared to listen with deep interest. And when the rector finished reading the poem Wordsworth wrote for his young daughter, he moved happily along to an essay.

" 'Life and the world,' " it began without pretension, " 'are astonishing things.' "

"No doubt about it," he muttered, as the dog moved closer to his feet.

Barnabas! he thought. That had been the old warden's name. "Barnabas," he said aloud in the still, lamp-lit room.

His companion raised his head, alert and expectant.

"Barnabas?" The dog seemed to blink in agreement, as the rector reached down and patted his head.

"Barnabas, then!" he said, with all the authority of the pulpit. The matter was settled, once and for all.

As he rose to put out the lights in the study, Barnabas got up also, revealing a sight which caused the rector to groan. There, on the worn Aubusson carpet, lay his favorite leather slippers of twenty years, chewed through to the sole.

U

"A puppy," pronounced Hal Owen, lighting his pipe. "Not fully grown."

"How much bigger, do you think? This much?" Father Tim extended his hands and indicated a small distance between them.

Hal Owen grinned and shook his head.

"This much?" He held his hands even farther apart.

"Umhmm. About that much," said Hal.

Barnabas had settled in the corner by the rector's desk and was happily banging his tail against the floor.

Hal studied him with sober concentration as he puffed on his pipe. "A trace of sheep dog, looks like. A wide streak of Irish wolfhound. But mostly Bouvier, I'd say."

The rector sighed heavily.

"He'll be good for you, Tim. A man needs someone to talk to, someone to entertain his complaints and approve his foolishness. As far as background goes, I like what E. B. White said: 'A really companionable and indispensable dog is an accident of nature. You can't get it by breeding for it and you can't buy it with money. It just happens along.'"

"Well, he does like eighteenth-century poetry."

"See there?" Hal put on his tweed cap. "You bring Barnabas out to Meadowgate, and we'll give him a good run through the fields. Oh, and Marge will bake you a chicken pie. How would that suit you?"

It suited him more than he could express.

"I'm out of here. Have to check the teeth on Tommy McGee's horses and look up the rear of Harold Newland's heifer."

"I wouldn't want to trade callings with you, my friend."

"Nor I with you," said the vet, amiably.

"Ah . . . what exactly shall I feed him?"

"Money," said Hal, without any hesitation. "Just toss it in there twice a day, and he'll burn it like a stove."

"That's what I was afraid of."

"Tell you what. I'll let you have his food in bulk, good stuff. It'll hardly cost you a thing. About like keeping a house cat."

"May the Lord bless you."

"Thank you, Tim, I can use it."

"May he cause his face to shine upon you!" he added with fervor.

"That would be appreciated," said Hal, pulling on his gloves. "I'll even see to his shots in a day or two."

Just then, they heard the sound of Emma Garrett's sensible shoes approaching the office door. And so did Barnabas.

With astonishing agility, he leapt over the rector's desk chair, skidded to the door on the Persian prayer rug, and stood on his hind legs, preparing to greet Emma.

U

"The Altar Guild is helpin' plant pansies on the town medium today," said Emma, as he came in with Barnabas on a new red leash.

"Median, Emma, median."

"Medium," she said, brightly, "and they wondered if you could come out there after while and direct the colors." It certainly wasn't that the Altar Guild couldn't direct the colors themselves, she thought. But he had gone so far as to win some prizes for his gardening skills and had been written up in a magazine put out by the electric co-op.

He noticed Emma was clearly pretending that Barnabas did not exist, which was hard to do in an office with room for only two desks, two chairs, a visitor's bench, four coat pegs, and a communal wastebasket.

"What do you mean, direct the colors?" he asked, sorting through his phone messages.

"Well, you know. Do the yellow ones go in the middle or around the edges or what? And where do you put the blue? Not next to the purple!" she said with conviction.

"I'll take care of it."

She peered at him over her glasses. "You look handsome with that tan, I must say."

"And thank you for saying it. Compared to a golfer's tan, a gardener's tan is not quite so distinguished, but it has its merits. For example, you do not have to wear chartreuse golf pants in order to get it."

Emma howled with laughter. If there was anything she liked, it was a laugh. And frankly, while he was good for a great many things, her rector was not always good for a laugh.

"You don't look as fagged out as you looked there for a while. I thought we'd have to scrape you off the floor a time or two."

"Spring, Emma. It medicates the bones and revives the spirit."

"Well, let's just hope it lasts," she said, eyeing him as if he were a boiled potato.

She went back to posting Sunday's checks. "It rags me good that Petrey Bostic never catches up his pledge," she grumbled.

"You know I don't want to hear that. I don't want to look out in the congregation and see dollar signs instead of souls."

"You know what I think?"

He didn't know.

"I think you live in an ivory tower. It seems to me you'd want to know the nitty gritty of what goes on. You take the Baptists; they keep up with everything."

Emma liked to talk about the Baptists, having previously been one. "Is that so?" he said mildly.

"What comes in, what goes out, who shot Lizzie. You name it, they like to know it."

"Aha," he said. Ever since she got red hair, she had been living up to it.

He turned to his old Royal manual and typed with his forefingers:

Dear Walter, thnx yr letter dated march 12. garden going in, through still cold and much rain. preparations for holy week in full swing.

hope yr spirits improved. know that He will lead you to right decision. ps. 32:8 promises: i will instruct you and teach you in the way which you shall go: i will guide you with my eye. never doubt it!

ever yr fond cousin.

p.s. hope to see you this summer. lv to katherine. i keep you always in my prayers.

As he looked up from the cryptic message to his first cousin and boyhood friend, he saw it had started to rain. All morning, the fog had hung about the village as thick as soup in a bowl, causing him once again to consider buying one of those orange slickers so he could be seen walking in the fog.

"You don't drive a car?" his former bishop once asked, incredulous. Well, and why should he, after all? The rectory was two minutes from the office and less than three from the church. The hospital was only a few blocks away, and one of the finest grocery stores in existence was right across the street.

The old gospel preacher Vance Havner had written about that very thing: "This is the day of the motorist, and anyone who walks is viewed with suspicion. You see a man coming down the road now, just meditating, and you figure he's either out of his head or out of gas. It's such a rarity that dogs bark as though they'd seen a ghost."

Making his rounds on foot kept him fit and positive, if not altogether trim. And, if push came to shove, he could always get the battery charged on his Buick Riviera, back it out of the garage, and go.

Actually, he'd been thinking seriously of getting a bicycle. Only now, there was Barnabas. And a rector in a clerical collar on a bicycle, leading a great, black dog on a red leash? Well, there was no way to bring it off that he could see.

"Peedaddle!" said Emma, as she made an error in her bookkeeping.

Barnabas leaped up and bounded to her desk, where he put his paws on the ledger, leaned over, and fogged her glasses.

"My God!" she exclaimed.

Why was she always saying My God! in a way that had nothing whatever to do with her God? He caught Barnabas by the collar and dragged him into the corner next to his chair.

"I'm tellin' you the truth," Emma said, squinting as she wiped her glasses, "it's goin' to be either him or me." She grabbed her sandwich bag and put it in her desk, slamming the drawer shut.

"Lie down!" he commanded. Barnabas stood and wagged his tail.

"Stay!" he said, as Barnabas ambled to the door and sniffed it.

"Then, sit!" Barnabas went to his water dish and took a long drink.

"Whatever," he muttered, unable to look at Emma.

He sat down and turned to the Gospel reading for Sunday. As he prepared to practice reading it aloud, which was his custom, he cleared his throat.

Barnabas appeared to take that as a signal to stand by his master's chair and place his front paws on his shoulder, giving a generous lick to the Bible for good measure.

He had just read that ignoring negative behavior and praising the positive could be a fruitful strategy. "Whatever you do," the article had implored, "do not look your dog in the eye if you want to discourage his attentions."

" 'And as Jesus passed by,' " intoned the rector, avoiding the doleful stare, " 'he saw a man which was blind from his birth. And his disciples asked him, saying, "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" ' "

Barnabas sighed and lay down.

He continued, without glancing into the corner: " 'Jesus answered, "Neither hath this man sinned, nor his parents: but that the works of his God should be made manifest in him." ' "

He read aloud through verse five. Then, he stopped and studied Barnabas with some concentration.

"Well, now," he said at last, "this is extraordinary."

"What's that?" asked Emma.

"This dog appears to be . . .," he cleared his throat, ". . . ah, controlled by Scripture."

"No way!" she said with disgust. "That dog is not controlled by anything!"

Just then, the door opened, and Miss Sadie Baxter helped prove the odd suspicion.

Before she could speak, Barnabas had bounded across the room to extend his finest greeting, whereupon the rector shouted what came immediately to mind, and what Peter had told the multitude:

" 'Repent and be baptized, every one of you!' "

Barnabas sprawled on the floor and sighed with contentment.

"I was baptized, thank you," said Miss Sadie, removing her rain hat.