

Dog Chronicles

Darling

Mercy Dog of World War I



Alison Hart

Illustrated by Michael G. Montgomery



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To all the brave and dedicated working dogs
—A.H.







Chapter One

February 1917

Darling is going to be a nurse,” Mistress Katherine said. I felt a tug on my collar as she pulled me toward her.

“Darling is going to be a soldier!” Master Robert declared. A harder tug yanked me toward him.

Katherine set a pretend nurse’s cap on my shaggy head. “The British soldiers need Darling to care for their wounds,” she insisted.

“No, silly goose.” Robert whisked away the cap and replaced it with a heavy helmet. “She will be in the trenches on the Front, fighting.”



The three of us were in the fenced yard behind “home,” a small brick house in the village of Cosham in England. A pigeon flew from the eaves and flapped over my head. I leaped up, trying to catch it, and the helmet toppled to the ground.

Katherine grinned. “See? Darling doesn’t want to be a soldier.” She reached for the nurse’s cap, still in Robert’s hand. “Give it to me, please.”



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“Never.” Robert tossed the cap into the rosebush. “She will be a sergeant, like Father.”

“Oh, you brute! Mummy!” Katherine hollered as she ran for the back door.

Another pigeon fluttered from the eaves. I jumped, and it soared upward. Ears pricked, I raced after the bird as it glided over the picket fence. I dove beneath the rosebush. The thorns snagged my fur but couldn't get through the thick rough of my coat. Working furiously, I widened the hole I had been digging for days.

“No, Darling.” Robert grabbed my collar. “You mustn't run off. Father is leaving for France this morning. We have to say goodbye.”

Dirt flew from beneath my paws. Tugging free from Robert's grasp, I crawled under the fence. Rags met me on the other side, his terrier whiskers bristling with excitement. We raced down the dirt lane. Pigeons burst from sidewalks and stoops, taunting us.

No pigeon could escape us! Rags and I darted right and left. Turning the corner, Rags led the way up High Street.



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“Get outter the way, you mutts!” Cart wheels barely missed my paw. A burlap sack of last year’s potatoes fell onto the walk in front of me. Thomas, the fruit seller’s cob, whinnied. His hooves danced and his harness jingled as if he wanted to gallop away with us.

In the distance, I heard Robert and Katherine calling. But I was tired of playing soldier and nurse. Running free was too fun.

A horn honked as we crossed the cobbled road. Tires screeched. A cane whacked at my head. The baker’s boy yelped as we wound around his legs. Rags zipped past the post office.

Sparky the postmaster’s dog used to bark from the doorway when we went past. Sweet from the dress shop would chime in with her yips. *Where were they now?* Lately, Rags’s and my barks were the only ones to be heard.

I lifted my muzzle in the air. The smell of meat and marrow teased my nose.

The butcher’s boiling bones! We both knew what



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that meant. Bones to steal. Bones to gnaw. Bones to bury.

Rags tossed a “hurry up” bark over his shoulders. Panting, we careened down Wayte Street and stopped at the back corner of the shop. A huge cast-iron kettle steamed over a wood fire. There was no sign of the apron-clad butcher and his cleaver.

Rags crouched in the shadows around the corner. I waited politely by the back door. My ears pricked when it creaked open.

“Aye, Darling, you artful beggar. Are you looking for a bit of a treat?” the butcher asked.

I sat back on my haunches and lifted my paws prettily.

Plucking two bones from the pot with bare fingers, he tossed them to me. “Don’t be wasting them now. Times are hard since food’s been rationed, and the winter’s been so cold.” He sighed. “I wish this bloody war would end.”

Rags darted out, snatched a hot bone, and ran off. I barked a thank-you. Delicately, I picked up my bone



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between my teeth so as not to get burned and trotted after him. He was hiding behind a barrel, gnawing greedily. Rags had grown wary of the police, who shot strays. Since he had no family, he was always hungry. I dropped my bone by his front paws. I knew he would bury it for later.

Leaving Rags to his treat, I made my way back to High Street. I *did* have a family. I thought of Robert and Katherine, calling after me. My heart tugged in the direction of home. But my nose pointed north to the sheep pasture just beyond the village.

Excitement made me trot briskly. Sheep were in my blood. My mum herded on a farm on the outskirts of Cosham. Before my new family had taken me home to live with them, I herded too.

Past the Railway Hotel, I broke into a run. Ports-down Hill rose in the distance. Sheep dotted the brown foothills like specks of snow. I dashed up the tram line. I heard clattering and clanking and looked over my shoulder to see the emerald green streetcar. It barreled toward me on its way over The Hill. I scooted off the



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tracks to let it pass. Sheep flowed away from the racket in a wave of white.

“Darling!”

“Oh, do be careful!”

Robert and Katherine stood on the other side of the tracks, waving and shouting. They had put on mittens and caps against the cold.

Caught! I trotted over the tracks toward my children. My tail was tucked. My ears drooped as I tried to look sorry for running off. Katherine and Robert hurried toward me.

“Naughty girl!” Robert tied a rope to my collar. “It’s a wonder Farmer James hasn’t shot you. We must hurry now and get to the train station. Father is shipping off for France.”

“Even though he shouldn’t go to war.” Katherine sounded like Mum. She pulled me close and made sure the knot in the rope was tight. “Father is simply too old. Come along, Darling. Mummy’s waiting at the train station with Baby. She’s been weeping ever since Father volunteered.”





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I cast a wistful glance at the sheep. I didn't care about Father shipping off. I didn't care that Mum was weeping. I didn't care about war and hard times. But I followed Katherine and Robert, wagging my tail and pretending that I did.

Until I could run away again.

