

Evelyn Waugh On Guard

Evelyn Waugh, the son of a publisher and literary critic, was born in London in 1903. After studying modern history at Oxford University Waugh studied art in London, and then spent a short time teaching in a private school. In 1928 his first novel, Decline and Fall, was published. During the 1930s he travelled widely and wrote several books based on his experiences. He became a war correspondent and served as an army officer in the Middle East and Yugoslavia during the Second World War. From that time until his death in 1966 he lived in the west of England. He is best known for his novels of social satire and entertainment like Vile Bodies (1930); A Handful of Dust (1934); Put Out More Flags (1942); Brideshead Revisited (1945) and The Loved One (1952). These and his travel books and short stories have made Waugh one of the most widely read of twentieth century English writers.

'On Guard' is a typically amusing study of social satire, mainly seen through the eyes of the dog Hector, and it has a particularly surprising ending.

I

Millicent Blade had a notable head of naturally fair hair; she had a docile and affectionate disposition, and an

expression of face which changed with lightning rapidity from amiability to laughter and from laughter to respectful interest. But the feature which, more than any other, endeared her to sentimental Anglo-Saxon manhood* was her nose.

It was not everybody's nose; many prefer one with greater body; it was not a nose to appeal to painters, for it was far too small and quite without shape, a mere dab* of putty without apparent bone structure; a nose which made it impossible for its wearer to be haughty or imposing or astute. It would not have done for a governess or a 'cellist or even for a post office clerk, but it suited Miss Blade's book* perfectly, for it was a nose that pierced the thin surface crest of the English heart to its warm and pulpy core; a nose to take the thoughts of English manhood back to its schooldays, to the doughy-faced urchins on whom it had squandered its first affection, to memories of changing room and chapel and battered straw boaters.* Three Englishmen in five, it is true, grow snobbish about these things in later life and prefer a nose that makes more show in public – but two in five is an average with which any girl of modest fortune may be reasonably content.

Hector kissed her reverently on the tip of this nose. As he did so, his senses reeled and in momentary delirium he saw the fading light of the November afternoon, the raw mist spreading over the playing-fields; overheated youth in the scrum;* frigid youth at the touchline, shuffling on the duckboards, chafing their fingers and, when their mouths were emptied of biscuit crumbs, cheering their house team to further exertion.

'You will wait for me, won't you?' he said.

'Yes, darling.'

'And you will write?'

'Yes, darling,' she replied more doubtfully, 'sometimes . . . at least I'll try. Writing is not my best thing, you know.'

'I shall think of you all the time *Out There*,' said Hector. 'It's going to be terrible – miles of impassable waggon track between me and the nearest white man, blinding sun, lions, mosquitoes, hostile natives, work from dawn until sunset single handed against the forces of nature, fever, cholera . . . But soon I shall be able to send for you to join me.'

'Yes, darling.'

'It's bound to be* a success. I've discussed it all with Beckthorpe – that's the chap who's selling me the farm. You see, the crop has failed every year so far – first coffee, then sisal, then tobacco, that's all you can grow there, and the year Beckthorpe grew sisal everyone else was making a packet* in tobacco, but sisal was no good; then he grew tobacco, but by then it was coffee he ought to have grown, and so on. He stuck it nine years. Well if you work it out mathematically, Beckthorpe says, in three years one's bound to strike the right crop. I can't quite explain why, but it is like roulette and all that sort of thing, you see.'

'Yes, darling.'

Hector gazed at her little, shapeless, mobile button of a nose and was lost again . . . 'Play up, play up,' and after the match the smell of crumpets* being toasted over a gas-ring in his study . . .

2

Later that evening he dined with Beckthorpe, and, as he dined, he grew more despondent.

'Tomorrow this time I shall be at sea,' he said, twiddling his empty port glass.

'Cheer up, old boy,' said Beckthorpe.

Hector filled his glass and gazed with growing distaste round the reeking dining-room of Beckthorpe's club. The last awful member had left the room and they were alone with the cold buffet.

'I say, you know, I've been trying to work it out. It *was* in three years you said the crop was bound to be right, wasn't it?'

'That's right, old boy.'

'Well, I've been through* the sum and it seems to me that it might be eighty-one years before it comes right.'

'No, no, old boy, three or nine, or at the most twenty-seven.'

'Are you sure?'

'Quite.'

'Good . . . you know it's awful leaving Milly behind. Suppose it *is* eighty-one years before the crop succeeds. It's the devil of a time to expect a girl to wait. Some other blighter* might turn up, if you see what I mean.'

'In the Middle Ages they used to use girdles of chastity.'

'Yes, I know. I've been thinking of them. But they sound damned uncomfortable. I doubt if Milly would wear one even if I knew where to find it.'

'Tell you what, old boy. You ought to give her something.'

'Hell, I'm always giving her things. She either breaks them or loses them or forgets where she got them.'

'You must give her something she will always have by* her, something that will last.'

'Eighty-one years?'

'Well, say twenty-seven. Something to remind her of you.'

'I could give her a photograph – but I might change a bit in twenty-seven years.'

'No, no, that would be most unsuitable. A photograph wouldn't do at all. I know what I'd give her. I'd give her a dog.'

'Dog?'

'A healthy puppy that was over distemper and looked like living a long time. She might even call it Hector.'

'Would that be a good thing, Beckthorpe?'

'Best possible, old boy.'

So next morning, before catching the boat train, Hector hurried to one of the mammoth stores of London and was shown the livestock department. 'I want a puppy.'

'Yes, sir. Any particular sort?'

'One that will live a long time. Eighty-one years, or twenty-seven at the least.'

The man looked doubtful. 'We have some fine healthy puppies, of course,' he admitted, 'but none of them carry a guarantee. Now if it was longevity you wanted, might I recommend a tortoise? They live to an extraordinary age and are very safe in traffic.'

'No, it must be a pup.'

'Or a parrot?'

'No, no, a pup. I would prefer one named Hector.'

They walked together past monkeys and kittens and

cockatoos to the dog department, which, even at this early hour, had attracted a small congregation of rapt worshippers. There were puppies of all varieties in wire-fronted kennels, ears cocked, tails wagging, noisily soliciting attention. Rather wildly, Hector selected a poodle and, as the salesman disappeared to fetch him his change, he leant down for a moment's intense communion with the beast of his choice. He gazed deep into the sharp little face, avoided a sudden snap and said with profound solemnity:

'You are to look after Milly, Hector. See that she doesn't marry anyone until I get back.'

And the pup Hector waved his plume of tail.

3

Millicent came to see him off, but, negligently, went to the wrong station; it could not have mattered, however, for she was twenty minutes late. Hector and the poodle hung about* the barrier looking for her, and not until the train was already moving did he bundle the animal into Beckthorpe's arms with instructions to deliver him at Millicent's address. Luggage labelled for Mombassa* 'Wanted on the voyage' lay in the rack above him. He felt very much neglected.

That evening as the ship pitched and rolled past the Channel lighthouses, he received a radiogram: MISERABLE TO MISS YOU WENT PADDINGTON LIKE IDIOT, THANK YOU THANK YOU FOR SWEET DOG I LOVE HIM FATHER MIND'S DREADFULLY LONGING TO HEAR ABOUT FARM DON'T FALL FOR* SHIP SIREN* ALL LOVE MILLY.

In the Red Sea he received another: BEWARE SIRENS PUPPY BIT MAN CALLED MIKE.

After that Hector heard nothing of Millicent except for a Christmas card which arrived in the last days of February.

4

Generally speaking, Millicent's fancy* for any particular young man was likely to last four months. It depended on how far he had got in that time whether the process of extinction was sudden or protracted. In the case of Hector, her affection had been due to diminish at about the time that she became engaged to him; it had been artificially prolonged during the succeeding three weeks, during which he made strenuous, infectiously earnest efforts to find employment in England; it came to an abrupt end with his departure for Kenya. Accordingly the duties of the puppy Hector began with his first days at home. He was young for the job and wholly inexperienced; it is impossible to blame him for his mistake in the matter of Mike Boswell.

This was a young man who had enjoyed a wholly unromantic friendship with Millicent since she first came out.* He had seen her fair hair in all kinds of light, in and out of doors, crowned in hats in succeeding fashions, bound with ribbon, decorated with combs, jauntily stuck with flowers; he had seen her nose uplifted in all kinds of weather, had even, on occasions, playfully tweaked it with his finger and thumb, and had never for one moment felt remotely attracted by her.

But the puppy Hector could hardly be expected to know this. All he knew was that two days after receiving his commission, he observed a tall and personable man of marriageable age who treated his hostess with the sort of

familiarity which, among the kennel maids with whom he had been brought up meant only one thing.

The two young people were having tea together. Hector watched for some time from his place on the sofa, barely stifling his growls. A climax was reached when, in the course of some barely intelligible back-chat, Mike leant forward and patted Millicent on the knee.

It was not a serious bite, a mere snap, in fact; but Hector had small teeth as sharp as pins. It was the sudden, nervous speed with which Mike withdrew his hand which caused the damage; he swore, wrapped his hand in a handkerchief, and at Millicent's entreaty revealed three or four minute wounds. Millicent spoke harshly to Hector and tenderly to Mike, and hurried to her mother's medicine cupboard for a bottle of iodine.

Now no Englishman, however phlegmatic, can have his hand dabbed with iodine without, momentarily at any rate, falling in love.

Mike had seen the nose countless times before, but that afternoon, as it was bowed over his scratched thumb, and as Millicent said, 'Am I hurting terribly?', as it was raised towards him, and as Millicent said, 'There. Now it will be all right,' Mike suddenly saw it transfigured as its devotees saw it and from that moment, until long after the three months of attention which she accorded him, he was Millicent's besotted* suitor.

The pup Hector saw all this and realized his mistake. Never again, he decided, would he give Millicent the excuse to run for the iodine bottle.

5

He had on the whole an easy task, for Millicent's naturally capricious nature could, as a rule, be relied upon, unaided, to drive her lovers into extremes of irritation. Moreover, she had come to love the dog. She received very regular letters from Hector, written weekly and arriving in batches of three or four according to the mails. She always opened them; often she read them to the end, but their contents made little impression upon her mind and gradually their writer drifted into oblivion so that when people said to her, 'How is darling Hector?' it came naturally to her to reply, 'He doesn't like the hot weather much, I'm afraid, and his coat is in a very poor state. I'm thinking of having him plucked,' instead of, 'He had a go of malaria and there is black worm in his tobacco crop.'

Playing upon this affection which had grown up for him, Hector achieved a technique for dealing with Millicent's young men. He no longer growled at them or soiled their trousers; that merely resulted in his being turned from the room; instead, he found it increasingly easy to usurp the conversation.

Tea was the most dangerous time of day, for then Millicent was permitted to entertain friends in her sitting-room; accordingly, though he had a constitutional preference for pungent, meaty dishes, Hector heroically simulated a love of lump sugar. Having made this apparent, at whatever cost to his digestion, it was easy to lead Millicent on to an interest in tricks; he would beg and 'trust', lie down as though dead, stand in the corner and raise a fore paw to his ear.

'What does SUGAR spell?' Millicent would ask, and

Hector would walk round the tea table to the sugar-bowl and lay his nose against it, gazing earnestly and clouding the silver with his moist breath.

'He understands everything,' Millicent would say in triumph.

When tricks failed Hector would demand to be let out of the door. The young man would be obliged to interrupt himself to open it. Once on the other side Hector would scratch and whine for re-admission.

In moments of extreme anxiety Hector would affect to be sick – no difficult feat after the unwelcome diet of lump sugar; he would stretch out his neck, retching noisily, till Millicent snatched him up and carried him to the hall, where the floor, paved in marble was less vulnerable – but by that time a tender atmosphere had been shattered and one wholly prejudicial to romance created to take its place.

This series of devices spaced out through the afternoon and tactfully obtruded whenever the guest showed signs of leading the conversation to a more intimate phase, distracted young man after young man and sent them finally away, baffled and despairing.

Every morning Hector lay on Millicent's bed while she took her breakfast and read the daily paper. This hour from ten to eleven was sacred to the telephone and it was then that the young men with whom she had danced overnight attempted to renew their friendship and make plans for the day. At first Hector sought, not unsuccessfully, to prevent these assignations by entangling himself in the wire, but soon a subtler and more insulting technique suggested itself. He pretended to telephone too. Thus, as soon as the bell rang, he would wag his tail and cock his head on one side in a way that he had learned was engaging. Millicent would begin her conversation

and Hector would wriggle up under her arm and nuzzle against the receiver.

'Listen,' she would say, '*someone* wants to talk to you. Isn't he an angel?' Then she would hold the receiver down to him and the young man at the other end would be dazed by a shattering series of yelps. This accomplishment appealed so much to Millicent that often she would not even bother to find out the name of the caller but, instead, would take off the receiver and hold it directly to the black snout,* so that some wretched young man half a mile away, feeling, perhaps, none too well in the early morning, found himself barked to silence before he had spoken a word.

At other times young men badly taken with* the nose would attempt to waylay Millicent in Hyde Park when she was taking Hector for exercise. There, at first, Hector would get lost, fight other dogs and bite small children to keep himself constantly in her attention, but soon he adopted a gentler course. He insisted upon carrying Millicent's bag for her. He would trot in front of the couple and whenever he thought an interruption desirable he would drop the bag; the young man was obliged to pick it up and restore it first to Millicent and then, at her request, to the dog. Few young men were sufficiently servile to submit to more than one walk in these degrading conditions.

In this way two years passed. Letters arrived constantly from Kenya, full of devotion, full of minor disasters – blight in the sisal, locusts in the coffee, labour troubles, drought, flood, the local government, the world market. Occasionally Millicent read the letters aloud to the dog, usually she left them unread on her breakfast tray. She and Hector moved together through the leisurely routine of English social life. Wherever she carried her nose, two

in five marriageable men fell temporarily in love; wherever Hector followed their ardour changed to irritation, shame and disgust. Mothers began to remark complacently that it was curious how that fascinating Blade girl never got married.

6

At last in the third year of this régime a new problem presented itself in the person of Major Sir Alexander Dreadnought, Bart,* M.P.,* and Hector immediately realized that he was up against* something altogether more formidable than he had hitherto tackled.*

Sir Alexander was not a young man; he was forty-five and a widower. He was wealthy, popular and preternaturally patient; he was also mildly distinguished, being joint-master of a Midland pack of hounds* and a junior Minister; he bore a war record of conspicuous gallantry. Millie's father and mother were delighted when they saw that her nose was having its effect on him. Hector took against* him from the first, exerted every art which his two and a half years' practice had perfected, and achieved nothing. Devices that had driven a dozen young men to frenzies of chagrin seemed only to accentuate Sir Alexander's tender solicitude. When he came to the house to fetch Millicent for the evening he was found to have filled the pockets of his evening clothes with lump sugar for Hector; when Hector was sick Sir Alexander was there first, on his knees with a page of *The Times*; Hector resorted to his early, violent manner and bit him frequently and hard, but Sir Alexander merely remarked, 'I believe I am making the little fellow jealous. A delightful trait.'

For the truth was that Sir Alexander had been persecuted long and bitterly from his earliest days – his parents, his sisters, his schoolfellows, his company-sergeant and his colonel, his colleagues in politics, his wife, his joint-master, huntsman and hunt secretary, his election agent, his constituents* and even his parliamentary private secretary had one and all pitched into* Sir Alexander, and he accepted this treatment as a matter of course.* For him it was the most natural thing in the world to have his ear-drums outraged by barks when he rang up the young woman of his affections; it was a high privilege to retrieve her handbag when Hector dropped it in the Park; the small wounds that Hector was able to inflict on his ankles and wrists were to him knightly scars. In his more ambitious moments he referred to Hector in Millicent's hearing as 'my little rival'. There could be no doubt whatever of his intentions, and when he asked Millicent and her mamma to visit him in the country, he added at the foot of the letter, 'Of course the invitation includes Hector.'

The Saturday to Monday visit to Sir Alexander was a nightmare to the poodle. He worked as he had never worked before; every artifice by which he could render his presence odious was attempted and attempted in vain. As far as his host was concerned, that is to say. The rest of the household responded well enough, and he received a vicious kick when, through his own bad management, he found himself alone with the second footman,* whom he had succeeded in upsetting with a tray of cups at tea-time.

Conduct that had driven Millicent in shame from half the stately homes of England was meekly accepted here. There were other dogs in the house – elderly, sober, well-behaved animals at whom Hector flew; they turned their

heads sadly away from his yaps of defiance, he snapped at their ears. They lolloped* sombrely out of reach and Sir Alexander had them shut away for the rest of the visit.

There was an exciting Aubusson carpet* in the dining-room to which Hector was able to do irreparable damage; Sir Alexander seemed not to notice.

Hector found a carrion* in the park and conscientiously rolled in it – although such a thing was obnoxious to his nature – and, returning, fouled every chair in the drawing-room; Sir Alexander himself helped Millicent wash him and brought some bath salts from his own bathroom for the operation.

Hector howled all night; he hid and had half the household searching for him with lanterns; he killed some young pheasants and made a sporting attempt on a peacock. All to no purpose. He staved off* an actual proposal, it is true – once in the Dutch garden, once on the way to the stables, and once while he was being bathed – but when Monday morning arrived and he heard Sir Alexander say, ‘I hope Hector enjoyed his visit a little. I hope I shall see him here *very, very* often,’ he knew that he was defeated.

It was now only a matter of waiting. The evenings in London were a time when it was impossible for him to keep Millicent under observation. One of these days he would wake up to hear Millicent telephoning to her girl friends, breaking the good news of her engagement.

Thus it was that after a long conflict of loyalties he came to a desperate resolve. He had grown fond of his young mistress; often and often when her face had been pressed down to his he had felt sympathy with that long line of young men whom it was his duty to persecute. But Hector was no kitchen-haunting mongrel. By the code of all well-

born dogs it is money that counts. It is the purchaser, not the mere feeder and fondler, to whom ultimate loyalty is due. The hand which had once fumbled with the fivers* in the livestock-department of the mammoth store, now tilled the unfertile soil of equatorial Africa, but the sacred words of commission still rang in Hector’s memory. All through the Sunday night and the journey of Monday morning, Hector wrestled with his problem; then he came to the decision. *The nose must go.*

7

It was an easy business; one firm snap as she bent over his basket and the work was accomplished. She went to a plastic surgeon and emerged some weeks later without scar or stitch. But it was a different nose; the surgeon in his way was an artist and, as I have said above, Millicent’s nose had no sculptural qualities. Now she has a fine aristocratic beak – worthy of the spinster she is about to become. Like all spinsters she watches eagerly for the foreign mails and keeps carefully under lock and key a casket full of depressing agricultural intelligence; like all spinsters she is accompanied everywhere by an ageing lap-dog.*

Glossary

page 80

anglo-Saxon manhood: Englishmen

dab: tiny bit

suited Miss Blade’s book: was exactly what she wanted

boaters: summer hats made of straw

scrum: a formation of players in the game of rugby football

page 81

bound to be: certain to be
making a packet: making huge profits
crumpets: thin unsweetened cakes

page 82

been through: checked, verified
blighter: dreadful fellow, awful person

page 83

by: close to

page 84

hung about: waited
Mombassa: the main port in Kenya in East Africa
fall for: fall in love with
siren: sea nymph whose song lures sailors to destruction, hence used for any kind of dangerously attractive woman

page 85

fancy: interest, attraction for
came out: made her first appearance in high society

page 86

besotted: intoxicated with love for her

page 89

snout: nose
taken with: attracted by

page 90

Bart: abbreviation for the English title Baronet
M.P.: Member of Parliament
up against: had as an adversary
tackled: dealt with, come into contact with
pack of hounds: dogs that are trained to hunt foxes and other animals as a sport
took against: disliked

page 91

constituents: the people whom he represented in Parliament
pitched into: criticized strongly
matter of course: something he regarded as quite normal
footman: manservant

page 92

lolloped: moved heavily and awkwardly
Aubusson carpet: a carpet from the famous carpet manufacturing town of Aubusson in France
carrion: pile of dead, rotting flesh
staved off: prevented from happening

page 93

five-pounds: five-pound notes
lap-dog: small, pet dog, usually very faithful to its owner

Questions

- 1 What was it about Millicent Blade's nose that was so attractive to many Englishmen?
- 2 Why did Hector (the man) leave Millicent and go abroad?
- 3 Why did Hector (the dog) bite Mike Boswell? What was the result?
- 4 What tactics did Hector (the dog) employ after his first attempt with Mike Boswell didn't work out as he had intended?
- 5 In what ways was Major Sir Alexander Dreadnought different from Millicent's previous admirers?
- 6 Why did he present a much more difficult challenge to the dog?
- 7 What made Hector (the dog) decide that '*The nose must go*' (page 93)?
- 8 What was the result of this decision?