

Tobermory: a short story by "Saki" (H H Munro, 1870-1916) dramatized by Andrew Stafford

Characters: Tobermory: a cat, belonging to Sir Wilfred and Lady Blemley

Sir Wilfred Blemley

Lady Adelaide Blemley: hostess of an August house party

Guests:

Cornelius Appin, a "clever" scientific man

Clovis Sangrail: a young, mocking, laconic young man of society

Miss Agnes Resker: out for food

Miss Mavis Pellington: rather brainless

Major Barfield: something of a womaniser : (Terry-Thomas type)

Mrs Cornett: a lady of a certain age.

Miss Scrawen: a writer of sensuous poetry and blameless life

Bertie Van Than: a dissolute man about town

Odo Finsberry: reading for the Church

Scene: tea-time in the drawing room of Sir Wilfred Blemley's country house, one wet August afternoon.

Miss Resker, Miss Pellington and Miss Scawen are gathered at a window.

Miss Resker: My dear Miss Pellington , I am yet to discover why Lady Bramley has invited that extraordinarily dull man, Mr Cornelius Appin to this house party

Miss Pellington: I understood, Miss Resker, from Adelaide Blemley, that he is supposed to be "clever", although I have yet to discern in what way. He has shown no talent for croquet, although one could hardly play on such a wet afternoon: what do you think, Miss Scawen?

Miss Scawen: He showed little interest in the amateur theatricals which Clovis got up for us yesterday evening, and none of the wit which one might expect to compensate for a distinct lack of elegance

Miss Resker: Indeed, one could pardon a degree of mental deficiency in any man whose external appearance attracts admiring glances.

Miss Pellington: -as , for example, Bertie van Than, who, we all know, leads a dissolute, if rather expensive life: he has nothing, but looks everything.

Miss Scawen: Ah, Mavis, men whose personal habits are too shocking to mention are always the subject of detailed discussion: I suppose that is why one has nothing to say of Mr Odo Finsberry:

Miss Resker: Oh.. Mr Finsberry.... a most upright youth who is reading for the Church: of course one who seeks preferment in that direction can have nothing scandalous about him: that always invites speculation. But perhaps Clovis knows more than we do. Clovis! Please can you come here?

Clovis: Did I hear my name called, Miss Resker? Ah, Miss Pellington and Miss Scawen : in what way can I add effervescence to the seltzer of tea on a wet afternoon?

Miss Resker: Perhaps you know how Mr Cornelius Appin has acquired the reputation of being “clever” ? So far we can detect nothing which would allow him to make that claim.

Clovis: Certainly the name “Cornelius” raised expectations: perhaps of some mesmeric force: but I fear that the name was some form of baptismal bluff: he has until this afternoon become merely Appin: but since tea time he has been fascinating Lady Blemley with the prospect of some discovery to which those of gunpowder , the printing press and steam locomotion are inconsiderable trifles...indeed he seems to be holding the rest of the company in open-mouthed astonishment. What is he saying now?

Cornelius Appin: I have been refining this most far-reaching and ambitious experiment throughout most of my adult life, Sir Wilfred. It struck me that , if successful, my discovery would put most of the scientific advancements of the nineteenth century into the shade.

Sir Wilfred: And do you really ask us to believe, Mr Appin, that you have discovered a means of instructing animals in the art of human speech and that dear old Tobermory has proved your first successful pupil?

Appin: It is a problem at which I have worked for the last seventeen years, but only during the last eight or nine months have I been rewarded with glimmerings of success. Of course, I have experimented with thousands of animals, but latterly only with cats, those wonderful creatures that have assimilated themselves so marvellously with our civilization while retaining all their highly developed feral instincts . Here and there among cats one comes across an outstanding superior intellect, just as one does among the ruck of human beings, and when I made the acquaintance of Tobermory more than a week ago I saw at once I was in contact with a “Beyond-cat” of extraordinary intelligence. I had gone far along the road to success in recent experiments: with Tobermory, as you call him, I have reached the goal.

Mrs Cornett: It sounds most unlikely to me: what do you think Mr Van Than?

Van Than: Seen a lot of things in Paris cabaret Mrs Cornett-- I mean in circuses and that sort of thing- horses that count, dogs that sing y’know. ‘Spect it’s one of those entertainments they bring on after the dancing girls..what do you think Major?

Major Barfield: Saw no end of clever chaps out in India. Poona- that was the place for them- rope-trick wallahs, that sort of thing. Few neat little girls out there, too, I c’n tellyah.. and the bellydancers in Alexandria -whew! Oh! Sorry, Mrs Cornett, forgetting the memsahibs! (quietly) I say Bertie, did you ever see....

Mrs Cornett: I wonder what you think, Clovis? You seem to have a rather quizzical expression..

Clovis: The effect, possibly, of over exertion when playing bridge last evening, Mrs Cornett. But I have no experience of the places or the entertainment to which the Major and Bertie Van Than confess an intimate acquaintance. “Rats!” comes to mind...But Miss Resker seems determined to question the wonder-worker more closely.....

Miss Resker: And do you mean to say, Mr Appin, that you have taught Tobermory to say and understand easy sentences of one syllable?

Appin: My dear Miss Resker, one teaches little children and savages and backward adults in that piecemeal fashion: when one has once solved the problem of making a beginning with an animal of highly developed intelligence one has no need for those halting methods. Tobermory can speak our language with perfect correctness.

Clovis: Beyond- rats!

Appin: I beg your pardon?

Sir Wilfred: Well, Appin, I must say it does rather strain the credulity. Tobermory is undoubtedly a decent enough cat, and certainly comes for his supper when called, but I don't see....what do you think, Adelaide?

Lady Blemley: Hadn't we better have the cat in and judge for ourselves, Wilfred? Perhaps you could find him and bring him back here?

Sir Wilfred: Jolly good, old girl, I'll make off to the shrubbery: there's a yellow tom from the Rectory next door he seems to have been keeping his eye on..spoiling for a fight there... (*exits*)

Mrs Cornett: What do you think of Mr Appin's claims, Miss Scrawen?

Miss Scrawen: My poetry deals with human affairs, Mrs Cornett: the felines I leave to Christopher Smart and Mr Eliot. Do you possess a cat, Miss Pellington? Do you converse intelligibly? Does it call you "Mavis"

Miss Pellington: Only my closest friends refer to me as "Mavis" Miss Scrawen. But Mr Appin's beliefs seem to me to contradict all that one has read of the Garden of Eden- I imagine Mr Finsberry might use his theological studies to enlighten us.

Odo Finsberry: Oh yes, indeed, Miss Pellington, there are talking beasts in the visionary books of Revelations: and of course the Serpent was really the Evil One in disguise. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries in England, discourse emerged to challenge the traditional understanding of animals as unthinking brutes – that is, as unable to speak and therefore far removed from humans in the Divine Order, or Great Chain of Being. In that context the two conversations between humans and animals in the Bible – Eve with the Serpent and Balaam with his ass- attracted much attention...But St Paul enjoins us all to avoid superstitious beliefs and magic, to which the claims of Mr Appin seem rather to tend. One must be certain of avoiding the temptations of the unorthodox.

(Sir Wilfred returns)

Miss Pellington: (*uninterested*) Most interesting, no doubt, Mr Finsberry; but what on earth is the matter with Sir Wilfred? He looks remarkably excited.

Lady Blemley: Wilfred! What on earth has happened- you look quite pale!

Sir Wilfred: By Gad! It's true!

Major Barfield: Look here, old man, perhaps you'd better sit down—here's a chair.

Mrs Cornett, Miss Resker, Bertie Van Than and Clovis: (*severally*) No! By Jove! What? Surely not! What does he mean? Quite a surprise! (Clovis: A joke, no doubt, to keep us amused...) . etc..

Sir Wilfred: (breathless) I found him dozing in the smoking-room, and called out to him to come for his tea. He blinked at me in his usual way, and I said, "Come on Toby: don't keep us waiting": and, by gad! He drawled out in a most horribly natural voice that he'd come when he dashed well pleased! I nearly jumped out of my skin!

Major Barfield: Well I'm dashed! I would have said it was some sort of mesmerising or hypnosis, like we saw these fakir johnnies do in the native markets. They used to float or levitate, y'know, and it was all a trick.

Clovis: Perhaps Mr Appin has a talent for ventriloquism?

Sir Wilfred : Ventriloquism? I'm jiggered if I can see how Appin here could have thrown his voice all the way to the Library. Besides, he couldn't have known where Tobermory was.

Mrs Cornett: (with a little scream) Here he is now!

(Tobermory enters)

Lady Blemley: (awkwardly) : Will you have some milk, Tobermory?

Tobermory: I don't mind if I do.

(Others gasp..)

Lady Blemley: Oh dear.. here it is in a saucer, but I'm afraid I've spilt a good deal of it.

Tobermory: After all, it's not my Axminster.

(further gasps and throat clearings)

Miss Resker: (like a schoolmistress) : Was the human language difficult to learn?

Tobermory yawns dismissively as if finding this a very tedious question.

Miss Pellington: (lamely) What do you think of human intelligence?

Tobermory: (coldly) Of whose intelligence in particular?

Miss Pellington: Oh, well,— heh, heh- mine for instance.

Tobermory: You put me in an embarrassing position. When your inclusion in this house party was suggested, Sir Wilfred protested you were the most brainless woman of his acquaintance, and that there was a wide distinction between hospitality and the care of the feeble-minded. Lady Blemley replied that your lack of brain-power was the precise quality which had earned you your invitation, as you were the only person she could think of who might be idiotic enough to buy their old car. You know, the one they call "the Envy of Sisyphus" because it goes quite nicely uphill if you push it.

Lady Blemley: (protestingly) Mavis, I really...

Miss Pellington (coldly) Only this morning, Adelaide, when we were comparing the weather in our different neighbourhoods, you suggested the car might be just the thing for my outings at home in Devon.

Major Barfield: (trying to divert the conversation) How about your carryings-on with the tortoiseshell puss up at the stables, eh?

(a gasp of horror from all the others)-

Clovis : You shouldn't have said that, you know, Major..

Tobermory: (frigidly) One does not usually discuss these matters in public. From a slight observation of your ways since you've been in this house I should imagine you'd find it inconvenient if I were to shift the conversation on to your own little affairs. One or two of the housemaids might have much to say.

Lady Blemley (hurriedly) Would you like to go and see if Cook has got your dinner ready?

Tobermory: Thanks. Not so soon after my tea. I don't want to die of indigestion

Sir Wilfred: (heartily) Cats have nine lives, you know

Tobermory: Possibly. But only one liver.

Mrs Cornett: Adelaide! Do you mean to encourage that cat to go out and gossip about us in the servants' hall?

Clovis: There is , I believe, a narrow balustrade running along the South front where most of our bedrooms are located: a favourite haunt, I have observed, of pigeons, and the promenade of Tobermory who watches them. I must say, Bertie, your face has turned the colour of the gardenia I wear whenever attending a gala night at the Opera.

Tobermory: Mr Van Than's complexion certainly has changed, but not with the predictability or punctuality of that of Mrs Cornett. Her colour comes and goes like a nomad, but is readily to be found in attendance at her toilet table, like a servant from the Empire.

Odo Finsberry: Excuse me: I feel I must have some fresh air! (*he rushes from the room*)

Miss Scrawen: What can have caused our soon- to -be -ordained Mr Finsberry, a gentleman of the most blameless reputation, to leave the room so hurriedly?

Clovis: Possibly he is disturbed by the thought of hearing scandalous stories about the other guests. You appear to be unperturbed, Miss Scrawen..

Miss Scrawen: I live a blameless private life, Clovis. But ,for the sake of my readers, I do not necessarily wish that to be well known. I must find a strategy for encouraging that cat not to make it a subject of conversation:

Van Than: Lucky you! Clovis: You seem to be somewhat abstracted: have you any idea what is to be done?

Clovis: I am wondering how long it will take to procure a box of fancy mice from *Exchange and Mart* as a species of hush-money

Miss Resker: (dramatically) Why did I come here?

Tobermory: Judging by what you said to Mrs Cornett on the croquet lawn yesterday, you were out for food. You described the Blemleys as the dullest people to stay with that you knew, but said that they were clever enough to employ a first-rate cook, otherwise they'd find it difficult to get anyone to come down a second time.

Miss Resker: There's not a word of truth in it! I appeal to Mrs Cornett-

Tobermory: Mrs Cornett repeated your remark afterwards to Bertie Van Than and said "that woman is a regular Hunger-marcher: she'd go anywhere for four square meals a day" and Bertie Van Than said- (*hisses and jumps out of the French windows*)

Miss Scrawen: Where's he gone in such a rush?

Clovis He left the room as precipitately as Mr Odo Finsberry, although I think the motives were rather different: I have just seen the big yellow tom from the Rectory next door working his way stealthily through the shrubbery towards the stable wing... they do not get on well, I believe, and Tobermory is somewhat proprietorial.

Lady Blemley: Mr Appin, your unwonted interference with my domestic arrangements has ruined the party!

Sir Wilfred: What are you going to do about it, eh Appin? Adelaide spent no end of time arranging the party and now your idiotic experiment has quite upset everything.

Miss Pellington; This is really a terrible situation. Mr Appin, do you think the cat will remember what you have taught him for long? Will he repeat what he knows to the servants?

Bertie van Than: D'you think he will talk to the servants? It cannot be long before they find out. It's too disgraceful.

Sir Wilfred: Do you think he could go along and teach other cats?

Appin: It is possible, I suppose; Tobermory is a cat with brilliant gifts. Possibly he might have imparted some of his knowledge to the stable cat, his intimate friend, and initiated it into his new accomplishment, but it is unlikely that his teaching could have been imparted wider, for the moment.

Mrs Cornett: Then Tobermory may be a valuable cat and a great pet; but I'm sure you'll agree, Adelaide, that both he and the stable cat must be done away with without delay.

Lady Blemley: You don't suppose I've exactly enjoyed the last quarter of an hour, do you? My husband and I are very fond of Tobermory- at least, we were before this horrible accomplishment was infused into him: but now, of course, the only thing is to have him destroyed as soon as possible.

Sir Wilfred: We can put some strychnine in the scraps he always gets at dinner-time and I will go and drown the stable cat myself. The coachman will be very sore at losing his pet, but I'll say that a very catching form of mange has broken out in both cats and we're afraid of it spreading to the kennels.

Appin: But my great discovery! After all my years of research and experiment.

Mrs Cornett: You can go and experiment on the short-horns at the farm, which are under proper control- or the elephants at the Zoological Gardens. They're said to be highly intelligent, and they have this recommendation: that they don't come creeping about our bedrooms and under chairs and so forth.

Appin: But my wonderful achievement-

Miss Scrawen: ..has achieved such turbulent results in this household in a way that nether the defenestration of Prague or the Pig War of San Juan were able to manage.

Miss Pellington: It was a great pity, Miss Scrawen, that Mr Appin was invited here.

Bertie Van Than: I should clear out of here, Appin. There's no stopping the ladies when they are roused. You might find the strychnine added to your food at dinner.

Sir Wilfred : Undortunately, there are no trains until midday tomorrow.

Lady Blemley: Cook ,of course, has prepared dinner for eight o'clock.

Miss Resker: I shall hardly eat

Miss Pellington: And if there is any bridge afterwards I shall certainly be far too anxious to play.

(the dinner gong is heard, then a clock chiming 11.)

Lady Blemley: Wilfred, is there no news of Tobermory? Everyone is on tenterhooks, and watching for his return. Dinner was not a success: Mavis Pellington will not speak to me, Agnes Resker would eat only dry toast, which she bit into as if it were a personal enemy, and the embarrassment afterwards was only added to by Odo Finsberry's singing of *Melisande in the Wood* - lugubrious in the extreme

Clovis: But perhaps suited to the prevailing mood, Lady Blemley:

"Drink deep, drink deep of the water, Mélisande,
From the shadowed pool drink deep.
Your soul shall long for the water, Mélisande,
As your eyes shall long for sleep."

It is a pity that the carefully dosed fish scraps standing in readiness on the sideboard all evening have not been of any use. Sweets, savoury and dessert have all gone their way but no Tobermory has appeared in either dining room or kitchen.

Sir Wilfred: Well the servants have gone to bed. They've left the small pantry window open as usual for Tobermory's return. All we can do is wait: there are magazines and past copies of Punch to fall back on.

Lady Blemley: I shall go to the pantry every half an hour until we know he has turned up.

(Clock chimes 12,)

Mrs Cornett: Midnight and no sign of him: where can he be?

Odo Finsberry: Cats are nocturnal creatures, I believe, in the normally ordained rule of creation. But when people interfere with the settled and stable relationship between animals and Man, as defined in Genesis Book 1, you do not know what new and perverse behaviour they may exhibit.

Bertie Van Than: 'Nuff said: is there another copy of Punch?

(Clock chimes 2)

Clovis: He won't turn up tonight. He's probably in the local newspaper office at this moment, dictating the first instalment of his reminiscences. Lady What-her-name's book about the

Marquis of Queensberry and the Duchess of Marlborough won't be in it. It'll be the event of the day.

Major Barfield: Thank you, Clovis, for that cheering thought. I, for one intend to remain on watch until the blighter returns to camp. Quite used to all night vigils when in the foothills of the Kush. One could sit by the fire waiting for a peep from those native wallahs and not hear them padding up to yeh before they were there and a kukri at your throat.

(Owl hoot: then dawn chorus) (rattling of tea cups)

Lady Blemley: Well, here we are at breakfast and still no sign of Tobermory.

Mrs Cornett: None of the servants has seen him. I asked when the maid brought my tea.

Miss Resker: And I, too had a similar response when my tea was brought.

Sir Wilfred *(entering)* Relief all round. I've just been informed that the gardener has discovered Tobermory's corpse underneath a euonymus bush in the shrubbery. From the bites on his throat and the yellow fur which fills his claws, it is clear that he has fallen in unequal combat with the big Tom from the Rectory.

Miss Resker: I shall leave by the midday train.

Miss Pellington: I too. How fortunate that there are trains: one might otherwise have had the misfortune to rely on an car which one might have trustingly, if unwisely, purchased at the suggestion of one's hosts.

Mrs Cornett: My bags have, I assume, been packed by a maid while I have been here at the breakfast table, and I would be grateful, Sir Wilfred, if a conveyance might take me to the station.

Lady Blemley. I hope you have a pleasant journey. Now, if you will excuse me, I shall go to the morning room. I am about to write an extremely unpleasant letter to the Rectory about the loss of our valuable pet.

The End