*WHY BOTHER?*

*Two old friends are challenged by a man from Mars.*

*by Veronica Heley*

The sun was shining, so Leo and Bruce took seats at one of the tables outside a popular cafe.

A bulky woman riding a mobility scooter drove up to the next table and parked. A West Highland terrier sat in her shopping basket, barking his appreciation of the world and of this bright day in particular.

Bruce, the semi-retired accountant, bald and brown, was amused. ‘I wonder how fast those scooters go. I wouldn’t mind one, when I get to her age.’

Leo grunted. ‘That dog will get fat, if it’s carried everywhere.’

The woman lifted the dog out of the basket, clipped on a lead, and deposited it onto the floor. The leash unreeled . . .

. . . and the dog shot off under the table in pursuit of . . . a honey-coloured cocker spaniel, double its size, who’d been snoozing on a chair beside its owner three tables away.

‘Oh, no!’ The spaniel’s owner snatched the bitch into her arms.

‘Hector! Come back, Hector!’ The terrier’s owner was unable to chase him.

‘Yap, yap!’ went Hector the terrier, desperate to make the spaniel’s acquaintance. He dived between the legs of the nearest table, was baulked by a large shopping basket and tried to climb over it. The spaniel’s owner screamed. Chairs scraped back, voices were raised!

The spaniel, whimpering, took a leap out of its mistress’s arms and landed on the table in front of her which rocked over, slowly . . . depositing her and the coffee cups on the ground . . . from which she fled for her life.

The terrier scrambled around the shopping basket and set off in pursuit. Its lead caught round the leg of the table, tugging at it over as the dog dived off through the legs of another chair . . . which pulled its leash tight . . .

The chair twisted and began to fall.

‘Hector! Come back here, this instant!’ The terrier’s owner was frantic.

‘Minnie!’ The spaniel’s owner screamed, ‘Catch her someone!’ Coffee cups smashed to the ground . . .

The waitress emerged from the cafe carrying a tray with pots of tea on it. Seeing tables and chairs flying in different directions, she also screamed for help.

Customers jumped to their feet to see what was happening, bringing out smartphones to capture the event, shouting encouragement or voicing their horror!

Leo, laughing, called out, ‘I’ll take the runaway!’

‘Hector’s mine!’ Bruce dived into the melee. He traced the leash and followed it through the scene of carnage. The terrier, still yapping furiously, had got itself so wound around the table legs that it could no longer move. Bruce located the dog and unclipped the leash from its harness so that he could be picked up.

Its owner was hysterical. ‘Hector! Oh, Hector! How could you!’

‘Yap, yap! Yap, yap!’ The terrier struggled to get away. He still had the scent of the spaniel in his head.

Leo set off after Minnie, the spaniel, who had hared off down the pavement, dodging pedestrians, circumventing women pushing baby buggies and elderly people with shopping bags.

A teenage girl flipped her hair back over her shoulders and stooped with outstretched arms to capture the runaway, who slipped past her to take refuge in a chocolate shop.

‘Gotcha!’ Leo followed the spaniel past squeaking customers to find Minnie, shivering, pressed up against the counter. ‘Sorry,’ he said to the customers. ‘She was frightened by another dog and ran away. I’ll return her to her owner.’ He picked up the spaniel, which tried to squirm out from under his arm. ‘You,’ Leo addressed his captive, ‘Oughtn’t to be allowed out at the moment.’ Definitely a female.

By the time Leo returned, Bruce had disentangled the terrier and its lead, and returned both to its weeping owner, saying, ‘Fortunately he didn’t catch up with his lady friend.’

The spaniel’s owner, was still shrieking. ‘Minnie! Oh, my baby! Where are you!’

‘What I want to know,’ said the waitress, ‘is who’s paying for the broken crockery.’

‘It wasn’t Hector’s fault,’ said the terrier’s owner, stowing her dog back in its basket on her scooter. ‘That woman ought to be prosecuted for bringing a bitch in heat into a public place.’

To which the spaniel’s owner replied, ‘You should have kept your dog under better control!’

Leo restored Minnie to her owner, and followed Bruce into the cafe. They found a couple of chairs by the window, from which to watch the final act of the play. Voices and arms were raised, tempers were let loose. The manager arrived to spread his hands, and try to calm the situation.

Bruce rubbed his shin where he’d been caught by a metal chair in his lunge to recapture Hector. ‘We’ve earned our coffee today.’

Leo was out of puff. ‘Phew! The ladies might have treated us, since we recovered their pets.’

They’d chosen to sit in a group of four chairs. One of the other chairs was occupied by a man behind a newspaper, who now lowered it to enquire, ‘You put yourselves out for two strangers, and got no thanks for your pains. So, why did you bother?’

The speaker was a man of a certain age with a round face under a thatch of straw-coloured hair, casually but expensively dressed.

‘Perhaps you didn’t see what happened,’ said Bruce, ‘If the dog had caught up with the bitch, the consequences would have been – unwelcome.’

‘So?’ said the stranger. ‘What was that to you? It wasn’t your responsibility to interfere.’

Leo couldn’t believe the man was serious. ‘Ah well, we needed the exercise.’

The stranger tapped his spoon against his cup. ‘I think my question was a reasonable one. I assume the women concerned were not known to you in any way. They were at fault in failing to control their dogs and would have been responsible for anything untoward that might have occurred. They will certainly have to pay for the broken crockery. So what made you two interfere?’

Bruce leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers, studying the stranger.

Leo didn’t take the man seriously. ‘We did it because we could. End of.’ He signalled to a waitress. ‘One espresso, one cappuccino, please.’

Bruce shook his head at the stranger. ‘You wouldn’t have interfered?’

‘Certainly not. If you’d completed a risk assessment, neither would you have done. There was every likelihood of your getting injured, or of the dog darting into the traffic and causing an accident. In which case, you’d have been involved in a court case, damages, and so on.’

Leo frowned. ‘What we did averted any unpleasant consequences.’

The stranger said, ‘Your interference might have brought about a far worse scenario. So, why did you bother?’

Bruce said, slowly, ‘A man is not an island. We are all part of one another. We saw that someone was in distress, and we did our best to help. We didn’t do it in expectation of a reward . . . but you knew that already. Perhaps you think we should only help people we know? Or, perhaps you have tried to help someone and been rebuffed? Ah, forgive me. That was a personal question.’

The stranger’s smile had morphed into a death’s head grin. A rictus of pain.

Bruce nodded to himself. ‘Change of subject. My name’s Bruce and I was . . . I am . . . an accountant. This is my good friend Leo, who is a jack of all trades. We keep ourselves busy in retirement, doing this and that. Sometimes those we help do kick us in the teeth, but usually, not.’

‘I’m Corin,’ said the stranger. ‘I took early retirement from school-mastering, and find there’s not enough hours in the day for everything I want to do. You two look like settled, family men, right? Out to do the Saturday shop for the little woman back home, who will only complain that you didn’t get the right sort of chocolate and have forgotten the dry cleaning?’ He was being sarcastic.

Faced with such rudeness, Leo was at a loss. ‘You don’t have any family?’

Corin produced his painful grin again, quoting, ‘“I care for nobody, No, not I . . . and nobody cares for me.” I’m as free as air. No ties, no debts, no worries.’

Bruce and Leo were silent. Both pitied Corin, but neither wished to say so.

Eventually Bruce said, ‘I think we are speaking a foreign language.’

‘French, German, Spanish; I speak all three.’

This was too much for Leo, who reddened, and said, ‘How about Hebrew?’

Corin gave a bark of laughter. ‘Don’t tell me you’re a Christian! How . . . unusual!’

Bruce put out a hand to prevent Leo from rushing into speech, as he seemed all too likely to do.

‘Yes,’ said Bruce. ‘We speak a different language from you. I don’t think we can translate because you are not prepared to listen.’

The waitress placed their coffees on the table, saying ‘The ladies with the dogs said these are on them, like.’

Bruce and Leo avoided the eye of their companion, who retreated behind his newspaper once more. Soon, the stranger paid and left.

‘Thank goodness he’s gone,’ said Leo, settling himself more comfortably.

‘Poor man,’ said Bruce. ‘How dreary life must be to someone without faith.’

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Leo went home to tell Dora all about it. ‘Then we rescued the dogs and restored them to their owners, but when we went to sit down and have our coffee, there was a man there who asked why we’d bothered! He made me so mad! As soon as he’d gone, I kept thinking of things I should have said. He thought it was really funny that we are Christians. He’s nothing but a self-centred, selfish layabout, taking early retirement and gloating over the fact that he’s no ties and can do whatever he likes in the world. I’d like to sit him down and . . .’

He frowned. ‘I don’t suppose I’d say the right thing, even then. He’s such a clever clogs!’ He laughed at himself. ‘All right, I know. I’m not the brightest brain in the world. I wish you’d been with us. What was that phrase you used when one of the grandkids got out of hand? “I’ll wash her head for her?” I’d loved to have seen you telling him what’s what!’

Dora set a salad before him. ‘I don’t know that I’d have done any better than you. Eat up. We’re taking the grandkids out this afternoon, remember. As for your awkward customer, Bruce isn’t usually lost for words. What did he say to the man?’

Leo frowned. ‘I’m not sure he was all that keen to have words with him. Perhaps he didn’t think it was a good idea to start a fight in public. Now, if we’d been able to talk to him quietly, not in a public place . . . Oh, I don’t know, do I? All I know is that that man has put me out of sorts. He attacked me for being a Christian, and I said . . . nothing! It makes me feel as if I’ve failed some sort of test, that I’ve let Him down.’

‘Why don’t you work out what you ought to have said to him and write it down, ready to sock it to him when next you meet?’

‘We decided not to go to that cafe again. It’s a bit noisy. We thought we might try the new one that’s started up opposite the church. So, what time are the kids coming over?’

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Bruce found his Sally in their greenhouse, pinching out the side shoots on her tomato plants. He kissed her ear and said, ‘I do appreciate coming home to a loving wife, who will, I hope, eventually tear herself away from the garden to join me for lunch. I brought home a nice quiche, and some yoghurt and fruit for afters.’

‘As ever,’ she said, ‘you are the perfect hunter-gatherer.’ She gave him a sharp look. ‘What’s the matter?’

‘You know me so well. There was an amusing little incident in the Broadway but the aftermath left a sour taste.’ He explained what happened, and that they’d struck up a conversation with a bystander afterwards. ‘He thought us mad for getting involved.’

‘You couldn’t have stood by and done nothing,’ said Sally.

‘No, of course not. But I can’t stop thinking about him. I think Leo wanted to whack him over the head —’

‘Leo would.’

‘But in spite of his declaration of being such a happy man, I thought Corin a sad creature, perhaps hiding rejection . . . oh, I don’t know. He laughed at us for being Christians, and I said . . . not enough, perhaps. I could see he wasn’t prepared to listen to anything we might say but afterwards I wondered if he’d started up a conversation with us just because we had something that he didn’t. Does that make sense?’

‘You’re a good judge of character, Bruce. What did you make of him?’

‘He said he’d taken early retirement. I wondered if he’d jumped, or been pushed. He said there weren’t enough hours in the day to do all he wanted to do, but he was sitting alone in a cafe, reading a newspaper. He wasn’t busy as you or I understand the term. He was overemphatic about not having any ties and not wanting any . . . and then he tried to make fun of us because we had a family to go home to.’

‘A man from Mars,’ said Sally. ‘He has nothing, so has to gripe at those who have everything that he wants but can’t get. Did you try to put him straight about God?’

‘No.’ A slight frown. ‘I’m not sure why. The words were on the tip of my tongue, but I kept wondering what my old friend Kerry would have said and I began to pray and, well, it came to me that the man was in pain, although he was smiling and . . .I don’t know. Maybe I did miss an opportunity.’

‘If you were praying, you can’t have gone wrong in keeping quiet.’

‘That’s what I keep telling myself, but I know that if I’d had Kerry’s wisdom, I’d have been able to help the man, somehow. And I didn’t.’

‘You don’t know that. Perhaps he’ll think over what you two did, and it will open a window in his mind. Or, perhaps you’ll run into him again some time.’

‘Yes, perhaps. Although we’re trying a different place next week. Now, how about lunch? And then, we’re making yet another trip to the garden centre this afternoon, aren’t we?’

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The following week Bruce and Leo did their weekend shopping before they met for a coffee. The new place they tried had bare brick walls which they found rather stark, but the coffee was good. Afterwards, as Leo’s car was in for a service, Bruce offered him a lift home. ‘I’m in the multi-storey car park nearby.’

Leo accepted, with gratitude.

‘Top floor,’ said Bruce, leading the way up the final ramp. ‘Plenty of room up there.’

‘What’s that rumbling sound?’

‘Lads, skateboarding? It’s forbidden, of course, but . . .’ Bruce shrugged.

Leo stopped short. ‘What . . .!’

There weren’t many cars on the top floor. The place was almost deserted, except for five hulking lads, who’d taken their skateboards up there to twist and turn, and practice their jumps. But it seemed these lads had abandoned their usual pastime for fun and games of a different sort. They had surrounded a man, backing him up against his car. As Bruce and Leo came into sight, one of the lads snatched their victim’s smartphone out of his hand, and held it up high.

‘Gotcha!’

Another pushed their victim’s shoulder. ‘Got some fags on you, mister?’

‘Got the price of a beer?’

‘See what’s in his pockets!’

Leo exclaimed, ‘That’s Corin!’

Bruce looked grim. ‘This could get nasty. If we phone for the police . . .!’

Leo shook his head. ‘They wouldn’t get here in time.’

Corin lunged at the nearest lad, but was thrown back against his car, and slid to the ground. Helpless.

Bruce weighed his heavy shopping bag. ‘We shouldn’t interfere, should we?’

Leo did the same. ‘Corin would be the first to tell us not to.’ He grinned. ‘Let’s shout and then charge.’

‘Cavalry to the rescue. Hola!’

‘You, there!’

Startled, the lads broke away from Corin, turning towards the newcomers. ‘What!’

‘Police!’ cried Leo, as loudly as he could.

‘On their way!’ cried Bruce, advancing, swinging his heavy shopping.

‘Scarper!’ The lads mounted their skateboards and darted away, dropping Corin’s wallet and mobile phone as they did so.

The rumble of the skateboards died away.

Silence.

‘You all right, mate?’ Leo helped Corin to his feet. ‘Do you need an ambulance?’

‘No. I’m all . . . right.’ Breathing heavily. ‘Just winded.’

‘Shock,’ said Bruce, retrieving Corin’s phone and wallet. ‘You’d better sit down for a bit. We’ll report it to the police.’

‘No, no. No damage done.’

The two friends looked Corin over. His colour was poor, but indeed no great damage appeared to have been done.

‘We must report this to the police. The car park people will have to tighten up their security,’ said Bruce. ‘And, if I may say so, you’re in shock and not fit to drive. Is there anyone we can call to be with you?’

‘I don’t need anyone. I’m perfectly all right.’ Getting angry. ‘I could have dealt with it.’

‘Of course,’ said Leo, soothing him. ‘We know that. We said to one another, “He doesn’t need our help.” And, “Why bother?”’

Corin shut his eyes and withdrew from the conversation.

Bruce got out his phone and rang the police, who told them to wait where they were.

Corin said, without opening his eyes, ‘You needn’t wait. I can manage.’

‘Nonsense,’ said Bruce. ‘You’re in no fit state and I expect we can describe the youths better than you.’

Leo looked at his watch. ‘This is going to make me late for lunch. Dora won’t be pleased.’

‘You can ring her,’ said Bruce. ‘And I’ll ring Sally. They’ll understand that we can’t leave Corin. It has to be done.’

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After the police had taken a report of the incident and left, Corin drove off with a perfunctory ‘Thanks’ and a wave of his hand.

Bruce and Leo got into Bruce’s car and followed Corin down the ramps.

Turning a corner, Corin narrowly avoided a pillar.

Leo said, ‘You’re right. He’s not fit to drive, but he won’t listen.’ And then, ‘You were thinking of the Good Samaritan when we went to Corin’s rescue?’

Bruce sighed. ‘I’ve often wondered if the man assaulted by thieves in the bible story was grateful to his rescuer, or if all he could think about was that he’d lost his goods and been laid up for a while?’

Leo set him straight. ‘That story was about being a good neighbour, not about the victim’s feelings. I do think Corin might have said “thank you” as if he meant it, but I suppose we shouldn’t expect it of him. I hope we never meet again. I don’t suppose we will.’

Bruce nodded, but he wondered if his friend were right. Bruce thought that one of these days there would be another opportunity to talk to Corin. The first meeting had introduced them to one another, and the second had, perhaps, shaken Corin’s dislike of do-gooders. They lived in a sizeable town, and their paths might never cross again . . .

. . . unless, of course, it was God’s plan that they should do so.