

The Letters

LETTER 01

SHE DOESN'T ANSWER THE PHONE

E.B. White to the ASPCA

12 April 1951

American writer E.B. White was born in Mount Vernon, New York, in 1899, and by the time of his death, aged eighty-six, he had truly mastered the art of storytelling. His children's novels include such classics as Stuart Little, Charlotte's Web and The Trumpet of the Swan. White adored animals. According to his granddaughter Martha, he owned, at various points in his life, more than a dozen dogs that she knew of – many different breeds, numbering collies, setters, Labrador retrievers, Scotties, terriers and dachshunds among them. His letters, too, are littered with references to his four-legged friends, but none so charming as this one, written in response to an accusation by the ASPCA that he had failed to pay his dog tax and, as a result, was 'harbouring' an unlicensed dog.

THE LETTER

12 April 1951

The American Society for the
Prevention of Cruelty to Animals
York Avenue and East 92nd Street
New York, 28, NY

Dear Sirs:

I have your letter, undated, saying that I am harboring an unlicensed dog in violation of the law. If by “harboring” you mean getting up two or three times every night to pull Minnie’s blanket up over her, I am harboring a dog all right. The blanket keeps slipping off. I suppose you are wondering by now why I don’t get her a sweater instead. That’s a joke on you. She has a knitted sweater, but she doesn’t like to wear it for sleeping; her legs are so short they work out of a sweater and her toenails get caught in the mesh, and this disturbs her rest. If Minnie doesn’t get her rest, she feels it right away. I do myself, and of course with this night duty of mine, the way the blanket slips and all, I haven’t had any real rest in years. Minnie is twelve.

In spite of what your inspector reported, she has

a license. She is licensed in the State of Maine as an unspayed bitch, or what is more commonly called an “unspaded” bitch. She wears her metal license tag but I must say I don’t particularly care for it, as it is in the shape of a hydrant, which seems to me a feeble gag, besides being pointless in the case of a female. It is hard to believe that any state in the Union would circulate a gag like that and make people pay money for it, but Maine is always thinking of something. Maine puts up roadside crosses along the highways to mark the spots where people have lost their lives in motor accidents, so the highways are beginning to take on the appearance of a cemetery, and motoring in Maine has become a solemn experience, when one thinks mostly about death. I was driving along a road near Kittery the other day thinking about death and all of a sudden I heard the spring peepers. That changed me right away and I suddenly thought about life. It was the nicest feeling.

You asked about Minnie’s name, sex, breed, and phone number. She doesn’t answer the phone. She is a dachshund and can’t reach it, but she wouldn’t answer it even if she could, as she has no interest in outside calls. I did have a dachshund once, a male, who was interested in the telephone, and who got a great many calls, but Fred was an exceptional dog

(his name was Fred) and I can't think of anything offhand that he wasn't interested in. The telephone was only one of a thousand things. He loved life — that is, he loved life if by "life" you mean "trouble," and of course the phone is almost synonymous with trouble. Minnie loves life, too, but her idea of life is a warm bed, preferably with an electric pad, and a friend in bed with her, and plenty of shut-eye, night and days. She's almost twelve. I guess I've already mentioned that. I got her from Dr. Clarence Little in 1939. He was using dachshunds in his cancer-research experiments (that was before Alexander Winchell was running the thing) and he had a couple of extra puppies, so I wheedled Minnie out of him. She later had puppies by her own father, at Dr. Little's request. What do you think about that for a scandal? I know what Fred thought about it. He was some put out.

Sincerely yours,

E.B. White

LETTER 02
MY FAITHFUL DOG MIGHT BEAR ME
COMPANY

Frances Power Cobbe to *The Spectator*

18 November 1871

*Frances Power Cobbe was an Irish journalist, feminist and dog lover who spent much of her life successfully campaigning for the rights of both women and animals. In 1892, deeply affected by gruesome stories of experiments being carried out on animals, she founded the world's first anti-vivisection organisation. Cobbe wrote numerous essays about the canine population, and in 1867 published *The Confessions of a Lost Dog*, an autobiography 'written' by her beloved Pomeranian, Hajjin. In 1871, she wrote this letter to *The Spectator* in response to a recent piece in the magazine on Greyfriars Bobby, a famous Skye Terrier who for fourteen years, according to legend, stood guard at the grave of his owner in Edinburgh, awaiting his return.*

THE LETTER

Sir,

You ask in your last number whether “anyone can seriously doubt that Greyfriars Bobby has rejoined the master he loved so faithfully?” Pray allow me to state a reason which appears scarcely to have received the attention it deserves, for hoping that so it may be.

Admitting that many of the arguments in favour of the immortality of “the spirit of a man which goeth upward” do not apply directly to the spirit of a beast, it still holds, I apprehend, that if man’s immortality be accepted as proven, a strong presumption may be thence derived in favour of the immortality of those creatures who attain that *moral stage whereat man becomes an immortal being*. What that stage may be we do not presume to guess, but we cannot suppose the tremendous alternative of extinction or immortality to be decided by arrival at any arbitrary or merely *physical* turning-point such as may occur at various epochs either before birth or at the moment of birth. We must believe it to be determined by entrance on some moral or mental stage such as may be represented by the terms Consciousness, Self-Consciousness, Intelligence, Power of Love, or the like; by the

development, in short, of the mysterious Somewhat above the purely vegetative or animated life for which such life is the scaffolding. If, then (as we are wont to take for granted), a child of some six or eighteen months old be certainly an immortal being, it follows that the stage of development which involves immortality must be an early one. And if such be the case, that stage was unquestionably attained by the dog to whose honour Miss Coutts builds her fountain. To wait till the human mind and heart have displayed the intelligence and self-sacrifice of Greyfriars Bobby, before we treat children as immortal beings, would be, I fear, to postpone that promotion rather late in life for a good many of our little darlings.

I beg that it may be remarked that this argument expressly restricts itself to the case of the *higher* animals, and thus escapes the objection which has always been raised to the hypothesis of the immortality of the humbler creatures, namely, that if we proceed a step below the human race we have no right to stop short of the oyster. I merely contend that where any animal manifestly surpasses an average human infant in those steps of development which can be assumed to involve existence after death, then we are logically and religiously justified in expecting that the Creator of both child and

brute will show no favouritism for the smooth white skin over the rough hairy coat.

Various authorities, theological and poetical, promise us in heaven harps, jewels, palms, and flowers, all sorts of good things from the vegetable and mineral world,—only, so far as I can learn, no animals except four monstrous creatures which few of us would desire to behold. For my own part, even if it betray a completely “untutored mind,” I must confess that a world devoid of loving brutes and singing birds would seem to me wanting in a very large element of earth’s beauty and happiness; and that instead of a crown and a harp, for whose possession I have no ambition whatever, I should be very thankful to find that

“United in that equal sky,
My faithful dog might bear me company.”

I am, Sir, &c.,

PHILOZOOIST