

A Spectral Collie

By Elia W. Peattie

William Percy Cecil happened to be a younger son, so he left home -- which was England -- and went to Kansas to ranch it. Thousands of younger sons do the same, only their destination is not invariably Kansas.

An agent at Wichita picked out Cecil's farm for him and sent the deeds over to England before Cecil left. He said there was a house on the place. So Cecil's mother fitted him out for America just as she had fitted out another superfluous boy for Africa, and parted from him with an heroic front and big agonies of mother-ache which she kept to herself.

The boy bore up the way a man of his blood ought, but when he went out to the kennel to see Nita, his collie, he went to pieces somehow, and rolled on the grass with her in his arms and wept like a booby. But the remarkable part of it was that Nita wept too, big, hot dog tears which her master wiped away. When he went off she howled like a hungry baby, and had to be switched before she would give any one a night's sleep.

When Cecil got over on his Kansas place he fitted up the shack as cosily as he could, and learned how to fry bacon and make soda biscuits. Incidentally, he did farming, and sunk a heap of money, finding out how not to do things. Meantime, the Americans laughed at him, and were inclined to turn the cold shoulder, and his compatriots, of whom there were a number in the county, did not prove to his liking. They consoled themselves for their exiled state in fashions not in keeping with Cecil's traditions. His homesickness went deeper than theirs, perhaps, and American whiskey could not make up for the loss of his English home, nor flirtations with the gay American village girls quite compensate him for the loss of his English mother. So he kept to himself and had nostalgia as some men have consumption.

At length the loneliness got so bad that he had to see some living thing from home, or make a flunk of it and go back like a cry baby. He had a stiff pride still, though he sobbed himself to sleep more than one night, as many a pioneer has done before him. So he wrote home for Nita, the collie, and got word that she would be sent. Arrangements were made for her care all along the line, and she was properly boxed and shipped.

As the time drew near for her arrival, Cecil could hardly eat. He was too excited to apply himself to anything. The day of her expected arrival he actually got up at five o'clock to clean the house and make it look as fine as possible for her inspection. Then he hitched up and drove fifteen miles to get her. The train pulled out just before he reached the station, so Nita in her box was waiting for him on the platform. He could see her in a queer way, as one sees the purple centre of a revolving circle of light; for, to tell the truth, with the long ride in the morning sun, and the beating of his heart, Cecil was only about half-conscious of anything. He wanted to yell, but he didn't. He kept himself in hand and lifted up the sliding side of the box and called to Nita, and she came out.

But it wasn't the man who fainted, though he might have done so, being crazy homesick as he was, and half-fed and overworked while he was yet soft from an easy life. No, it was the dog! She looked at her master's face, gave one cry of inexpressible joy, and fell over in a real feminine sort of a faint, and had to be brought to like any other lady, with camphor and water and a few drops of spirit down her throat. Then Cecil got up on the wagon seat, and she sat beside him with her head on his arm, and they rode home in absolute silence, each feeling too

much for speech. After they reached home, however, Cecil showed her all over the place, and she barked out her ideas in glad sociability.

After that Cecil and Nita were inseparable. She walked beside him all day when he was out with the cultivator, or when he was mowing or reaping. She ate beside him at table and slept across his feet at night. Evenings when he looked over the Graphic from home, or read the books his mother sent him, that he might keep in touch with the world, Nita was beside him, patient, but jealous. Then, when he threw his book or paper down and took her on his knee and looked into her pretty eyes, or frolicked with her, she fairly laughed with delight.

In short, she was faithful with that faith of which only a dog is capable -- that unquestioning faith to which even the most loving women never quite attain.

However, Fate was annoyed at this perfect friendship. It didn't give her enough to do, and Fate is a restless thing with a horrible appetite for variety. So poor Nita died one day mysteriously, and gave her last look to Cecil as a matter of course; and he held her paws till the last moment, as a stanch friend should, and laid her away decently in a pine box in the cornfield, where he could be shielded from public view if he chose to go there now and then and sit beside her grave.

He went to bed very lonely, indeed, the first night. The shack seemed to him to be removed endless miles from the other habitations of men. He seemed cut off from the world, and ached to hear the cheerful little barks which Nita had been in the habit of giving him by way of good night. Her amiable eye with its friendly light was missing, the gay wag of her tail was gone; all her ridiculous ways, at which he was never tired of laughing, were things of the past.

He lay down, busy with these thoughts, yet so habituated to Nita's presence, that when her weight rested upon his feet, as usual, he felt no surprise. But after a moment it came to him that as she was dead the weight he felt upon his feet could not be hers. And yet, there it was, warm and comfortable, cuddling down in the familiar way. He actually sat up and put his hand down to the foot of the bed to discover what was there. But there was nothing there, save the weight. And that stayed with him that night and many nights after.

It happened that Cecil was a fool, as men will be when they are young, and he worked too hard, and didn't take proper care of himself; and so it came about that he fell sick with a low fever. He struggled around for a few days, trying to work it off, but one morning he awoke only to the consciousness of absurd dreams. He seemed to be on the sea, sailing for home, and the boat was tossing and pitching in a weary circle, and could make no headway. His heart was burning with impatience, but the boat went round and round in that endless circle till he shrieked out with agony.

The next neighbors were the Taylors, who lived two miles and a half away. They were awakened that morning by the howling of a dog before their door. It was a hideous sound and would give them no peace. So Charlie Taylor got up and opened the door, discovering there an excited little collie.

"Why, Tom," he called, "I thought Cecil's collie was dead!"

"She is," called back Tom.

"No, she ain't neither, for here she is, shakin' like an aspin, and a beggin' me to go with her. Come out, Tom, and see."

It was Nita, no denying, and the men, perplexed, followed her to Cecil's shack, where they found him babbling.

But that was the last of her. Cecil said he never felt her on his feet again. She had performed her final service for him, he said. The neighbors tried to laugh at the story at first, but they knew

the Taylors wouldn't take the trouble to lie, and as for Cecil, no one would have ventured to chaff him.