

## A FEW KINDRED SPIRITS

by John Christopher

### Nebula 1965 Nominee Short Story

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Dog lovers may or may not be happy to know that a canine plays a substantial part in the delightful tale below, in which England's John Christopher lifts the veil to give us a glimpse into the world of the homosexual dog. (And you *still* wonder why they're not naming 'em Rover anymore?)

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In the animal creation, as in the human, there are spheres whose existence remain unsuspected until chance lifts a corner of the veil. One of these, as far as I was concerned, was the world of the homo-sexual dog. I only became aware of it when Shlobber came into my life.

Shlobber, of course, was a classic text-book case for deviation. Absentee father (admittedly a norm amongst dogs) and most decidedly possessive and domineering mother. She was black-and-white, terrier-type, with admixture of collie and spaniel and more elusive extras, and Shlobber was a child of her one and only litter. The intention was to get rid of all the pups to suitable homes, and this was, in fact, achieved. Shlobber, however, having proved over-boisterous for one of the children in the billet we found him, was brought back with apologies. Only as a transient, we thought, but somehow he stayed. Mother went away to be spayed, returned with joy to find her golden-haired son still on the scene, and launched into that career of aggressive, chivvying affection which determined and character-ized their relationship. Hour after hour, day after day, she snapped and barked at him, and roughly bowled him over. And he, for his part, was, somewhat resentfully, devoted to her.

His perversity emerged later, and was first apparent when the bitch further up the lane came in season. She was, to human view, an ugly mustard-coloured ill-kempt creature, but as far as dogs were concerned clearly of surpassing attraction. They came, it seemed, from the remotest corners of the island, stampeding through our garden on the way. Shlobber, larger at eighteen months than his mother, romped with her on the lawn, indifferent to all this. So I was not particularly surprised, a few weeks later, when I found him out on his own and making overtures to a male boxer.

After that the pattern set in firmly, but I still thought of him as exceptional. This remained the case until one day on the beach when he fell in with a roving pack of other dogs. There was a nervous-looking Labrador-cross, a thin white creature with a funny head and popping eyes, a paunchy spaniel, and a shaggy grey-brown beast at whose origins I could not begin to guess. Shlobber recog-nized these as soul-mates right away, and bounded off with them along the sands. I whistled him back, and he came slowly and re-luctantly. In the afternoon he disappeared, and did not return until late at night.

He remained devoted to Mother when he was at home, but from that point, increasingly, he took to making excursions on his own. A couple of times I saw him on the beach with the same gang. They were at a distance, and I preferred to leave it that way. I did not care to know him when he was in that particular company, and I had the idea he felt the same way. There was no doubt that they were, in the specifically pejorative sense, a queer lot.

The further, and disturbing, insight came one day in early sum-mer, when I had gone to the beach to think out an awkward problem in a story I was writing. My mind often works better on the horizon-tal, and so I lay on the sand and bent my mental energies to the task. But the characters who were giving trouble were both impos-sible and dull and, lulled by the sun and the sporific surf of transistor radios, I fell

asleep. When I awoke, it was to the familiar bark of a dog-of Shlobber, in fact. Opening my eyes, I saw that he and the gang were not more than twenty yards away. I was about to close them again, in distaste, when something about the waddle of the paunchy spaniel caught my attention. I looked at him more closely, and thought of Birkinshaw.

As often happens, the *donnée* of the recognition sparked off others. The thin white one-surely Andrew Stenner? The eyes, I saw now, were unmistakable. And the shaggy grey-brown thing with legs too short for his body. Peter Parsons! The Labrador-cross had the massive yet effeminate build that I remembered in James de Percy. Then who, I wondered, was Shlobber? And, for that matter, where?

Still half asleep, I glanced along the beach. He was there, all right, and so was a dog I had never seen before. A sort of whippet, spotted brown and white. He was smaller and frailer than Shlobber, but he was snapping at his heels with vicious and righteous anger. The anger of the betrayed, not only in friendship but in art. Jonathan Blumstein, to the life, or rather, I thought hazily, to the death.

My mind went back to the old days, to Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, to Munich, to Hutton's triple century at the Oval, to a girl called Gwen. Above all, to the gold and marble decor of the Buckingham. I knew who Shlobber was.

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In 1938 I had an indulgent father, a habit of getting my own way, and high ambitions, particularly in relation to the arts. I was a day-boy at a well-known school in London and had decided that, instead of going up to Oxford in the autumn, I would become a writer. At an earlier stage I had written a few things for the school magazine, but all that trivia had now been abandoned. I proposed to write the definitive contemporary novel, which would be scathing and witty, yet profound and all-embracing. I felt that my experience and intuitive understanding went about ninety per cent of the way towards fitting me for this. The remaining ten per cent needed to be acquired. The Buckingham, I thought, famed through-out the world as a Mecca for literary men, was the best place to go to get started on it.

I looked old for my years, and had been brought up in an atmosphere where drinks and restaurants were taken for granted. It took some nerve, all the same, to walk through those wreaths of cigar smoke, to take my place at one of the marble-topped tables on which Whistler had been wont to sketch, to order a Pernod from a gnarled and ancient waiter who had very likely brought champagne to Oscar Wilde. Having got so far, my reserves were exhausted. I sat and clutched my glass and stared frozenly about me. Everyone seemed old and rich and distinguished. And accompanied; only I sat alone.

Aware of my social failings, I took refuge in my art. I carried a small leather-bound notebook in which to jot down observations, descriptions, phrases which might otherwise be lost; and I brought this out and began, defensively, to write in it. My self-importance was restored. I sipped my Pernod and launched into a brief but scandalous imaginary biography of the fat woman with diamonds all over her on the other side of the room. Engrossed in this, I only looked up when a figure came between me and the light. I saw a thin man, pop-eyed, with a pale face but a warm smile. He nodded benignly.

"A chiel amang us, takin' notes."

I recognized him, not from his face but from the lilting accent of the Highlands. Andrew Stenner was a public personality in those pre-television days, a giant of radio. Additionally, a bon vivant and skilled water-colourist.

"Ye're a writer, I guess," he said. "Come over and meet Birkinshaw. He needs to be reminded of things-death and the younger generation."

He was a man who had many impulses and frequently acted on them. In this case the motivation was partly amiable, partly malicious. He was perceptive, and had seen, I think, my isolation and shyness, and pitied it. In addition, Birkinshaw, then at the height of his fame as a novelist, had a deeply rooted fear and envy of young writers, which it amused Stenner to exploit. He waved my mild demurrant aside, took my arm firmly, and led me to join the others.

They were all there, that first night. Birkinshaw, Parsons, de Percy, Blumstein and Redehead. Peter Parsons looking unkempt, his hair long and wild, his gaze curiously focussed on nothing, or on the memory of one of those cinema screens at which he spent so much time gazing, preparing his authoritative work on the Film. James de Percy, a stone engraver to be spoken of with Gill, his body huge, hands surprisingly delicate. Jonathan Blumstein, small and nervous, scrawny-necked behind his bow tie, talking, talking, talking. And David Redehead, who had been blonde and handsome and now had thinning hair and a look of failure, listening to all that Jonathan said.

Tongue-tied, I sat even quieter than he did. Under Birkinshaw's frowning stare I drank his champagne-his latest novel was both Literary Guild and Book Society Choice, and we were celebrating the fact-and to myself revelled in the consciousness of being in the company of artistic and distinguished men. In the morning there would be Latin Verse, which I had not prepared. But one lived for the moment, and in this moment one savoured Life.

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More than twenty years later, sitting looking out to sea from an island in the Channel, I thought of those days. By the end of the evening, Birkinshaw had gleaned that I was raw and respectful, un-published and unlikely to be published for some time to come. He thawed towards me and when, a few days later, I ventured back to the Buckingham, it was he who called me over. In the months that followed I became, if not an accepted member of the group, at least a kind of mascot, tolerated, encouraged, occasionally allowed to buy a drink. Meeting Peter Parsons at Birkinshaw's funeral, one dripping February day towards the end of the war, I made some remark about this, and he took his mind off composing artistic cinematic frames of the ceremony long enough to toss me an explanation.

"The same-as always." He spoke in clipped, oblique phrases. "You might have been-something-some day. To write about them. Boswell." He gurgled with bitter laughter. "To five moth-eaten Johnsons."

Presumably he excluded the sixth. The great work had never been completed, and the last time I had seen his name it had been on the cover of a badly printed booklet with a lot of fuzzy stills, many of them dealing with the female nude. A sad declension.

So much for my being accepted. The reverse of the coin puzzled me a little, too. Their conversation, apart from being intelligent, was untrammelled, and it did not take many evenings for me to realize that what I had heard rumoured of Birkinshaw and Blumstein was true of them all: they belonged to that freemasonry which comes after the Roman Catholics and neck and neck with Standard Oil. Expecting to be wooed, I had my maidenly refusals ready. But nothing of the sort happened. At the time I gave credit to my own inner purity. Later, though, I guessed the real reason. The qualities which, in their own sex, attracted them were beauty and intelligence. Looking back I sadly understood that I had failed to qualify in either respect.

Whatever had been the case in the past, there was, in fact, only one sexual link operating within the group. Blumstein and Redehead had been living together for a decade and a half in Blumstein's house in Cheyne Walk and their relationship had settled into something resembling a long established and moderately successful marriage. Blumstein had wealth and some talent; he had published three volumes of poetry which, although commercially unsuccessful, had gained him a reputation. Redehead came from

a poor family and all he had to his credit were a score or so of little pieces published in little magazines. Belles lettres at their most precious. There had been one slim volume of them published, plainly at Blumstein's expense.

But fifteen years earlier, when they met, Redehead had had something else: physical beauty. It was this quality in him to which Blumstein, an ugly little man, had been devoted. And it did not last-by his early thirties, Redehead was growing coarse and fat, and beginning to lose his curly golden hair. The end, according to the cynics, was in sight. Blumstein would ease him out and install a younger, handsomer companion. It did not happen. Blumstein, perhaps, was less deferential, more condescending, than he had been; but he stayed true to his dilapidated sweetheart, and to the memory of his radiance. And Redehead, for his part, was both grateful and devoted. In public, no-one could remember seeing them apart.

As if the past were not rampant enough already, the nearest transistor radio began playing "The Night is Young"; with electrified strings and a coal-heaver's voice, but recognizable. The dogs were in full pelt northwards along the beach, with the pudgy spaniel, Birkinshaw, waddling ten yards behind the rest. The song was Alice, who came after Gwen and more effectively. And Birkinshaw . . . That evening when I had gone late to the Buckingham, after an hour and a half of waiting for Alice to turn up for a date, and had found him deep in one of his more pompous perorations. Hurt and angry and cynical, I had taken my seat, and Blumstein had waved for the waiter, and Birkinshaw had gone on, and on, and on. He was talking about Time, which he gave the impression of having discovered even before Jack Priestley. It was at once the greatest illusion and the final reality. What had been, would be. All that we might be and love and suffer, we had been and loved and suffered in the past. We had walked the earth, and would walk it again.

"Kindred spirits find each other," he said. "We have sat at wine together under blue Attic skies, celebrating the news from Marathon. One day, perhaps, we shall sit on the moon, bathed in silver earth-light, drinking Martian champagne."

My gorge, disturbed already by the cruelty of Alice, rose. Not this spirit, I thought, and got up rudely while Birkinshaw was still rolling on, and left.

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It was a temporary revulsion, provoked by my own heterosexual smart, and but for a couple of things I would probably have gone back the next week. The things were my sense of embarrassment over my abrupt and discourteous departure and, more important, a softening on the part of Alice. The whole of that winter I was her joyful and unhappy slave, with no time or energy to devote either to the Buckingham or literature. My reading was confined, feverishly, to scanning the lists for social events that would suit her voracious but fickle taste. I missed the announcement of Blumstein's death. I only accidentally saw the notice of his will when my eye, intent on the theatre advertisements in *The Star*, somehow slipped to the facing page. He had left a very tidy estate-upwards of fifty thousand after duty. There were some minor bequests, to servants and so on. These apart, everything was left to his old friend and companion, David Redehead. With youthful callousness, I mentally wished him well in his widowhood, and returned to the more important matter of finding a show to which I could persuade Alice to let me take her.

Alice's fancy turned with the spring, and this time decisively. She met a Commander R.N. and married him within a month. I think the speed of this, after her prolonged dabbling with me, was the biggest blow to my vanity. Certainly I took it badly. In my misery I went back to the Buckingham, and found them, except for the dead Blumstein, in their accustomed places. They received me with courtesy and amiability but I felt there was constraint-the constraint, perhaps, with which Shlobber's pack might have greeted a dog who had left them to follow a bitch on heat. I had made my difference, my exclusion from the

company of kindred spirits, in-delicately plain. I noted that Birkinshaw was wheezing more, that Parsons was developing a nervous twitch, and that Redehead, in the flush of wealth and bereavement, was looking ten times better and happier and more confident. I have seen the change in many widows since, but that was the first time. I thought of Alice as a widow, her Commander having gone down with his ship, of her delicate skin and fair silky hair against black satin, and was undone. Bored, and stinging with jealousy and desire, I made brief apologies and left.

It was over a year before I made my next visit, and then in uni-form. I had been commissioned in the Royal Artillery in April, and in June was posted to the command of an anti-aircraft battery in, of all places, Hyde Park. I did not care much for what seemed to me the hysteric and self-consciously heroic attitude of London in the summer of Dunkirk, and I headed for the Buckingham as a repository of more permanent values. I found them all there and, as on that very first occasion, celebrating the success of a book. Not Birkinshaw's, though, but Redehead's.

It had been published two days earlier, on a Monday, and, it seemed, ecstatically reviewed the previous day in the two quality Sundays. (I had missed them, sleeping through the day in the after-math of two night exercises and a Ministerial inspection in between.) And these reviews had been effective as well as laudatory. Redehead had lunched with his publisher that day at the Ivy and been told that sales were, for a book of this kind, superb. Belles lettres again, but successful belles lettres, belles lettres to which the cognoscenti took off their collective hat. Redehead was flushed with his triumph, but making an endearing effort to be modest about it. We drank '33 Krug, toasting his success with bibulous and, in my case at least, genuinely delighted good will. Even at that early age I had sufficient premonition of the future to find the Cinderella story of success after long years of failure one of my very favorite themes.

A couple of days later I bought the book, and on our next quiet night read it. It was, one might say, a forerunner of Cyril Connolly's "The Unquiet Grave", a series of loosely linked but roughly continuous pieces on Life, on the Human Condition, studded with maxims and epigrams and snatches of poetry. Like Connolly's bored and greedy despair at the war's end, this book, restless for change, optimistic in the face of the threatening gods, gallantly bogus, matched and re-echoed its time. Redehead, I saw, really had done it. He was, at long last, a lion.

I saw them occasionally thereafter, but time and mortality were breaking up the charmed circle. Stenner died of a coronary, a few minutes after ending an uplifting Post-Script to the nine o'clock News. In Italy, three years later, I heard of the death of Redehead, killed when a bomb destroyed the elegant Hampstead flat to which, after selling the Chelsea house, he had removed. Finally, back in London for the last ghastly winter of the war, there was Birkinshaw's death. I asked Parsons about de Percy, the only one of the group not accounted for. Multiple sclerosis, he told me, and not long to go. He went himself two years later, I think of frustration.

I have never been in the Buckingham since.

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I thought of all this on my way back from the beach, and as I did so the initial fantasy seemed more and more ridiculous. By the time Shlobber returned, an hour later, I had it all disposed of as hallu-cination, an effect of sleep and sun. But I noticed that he was back earlier than usual and that, instead of belting ravenously into his supper as was his wont following an afternoon with the boys, he turned away from it. He had a nervous and harassed look, as though he expected the whippet to come yapping up behind him at any moment. When I went to read, he followed me. Seeking protection?

Putting down the book, I said:

"Redehead." His ears pricked, and slowly went down again. He stared miserably at my shoe. "I know it all," I told him. "Not only who you are, but what happened. We should have guessed, of course, but it was the belles lettres thing that fooled us. Blumstein taking over even the field of your own pitiful activity. Did you find out about it before he died? Or did you discover the manuscript among his effects? How did he die, Redehead?"

The head came up briefly, brown eyes looked into my face from above the long muzzle, and then dropped. A very ordinary doggy action, one might say. Fortunately I had the house to myself.

"The point is that you found it and published it under your own name. That would have counted to Blumstein far more than a small thing like being murdered. You stole his great work, Redehead. And now that he's found you again, he is going to make you pay for it."

Shlobber got up and started to leave the room. He was a restless beast, not long happy in one spot, and normally I would have thought this characteristic. But I followed him to the kitchen, and stood over him.

"The biggest joke," I said, "is that it wasn't a good book after all. It was a silly pretentious footling book, and when people had got the we-stood-alone stars out of their eyes, they saw it for what it was. The most it can hope to achieve is a footnote in literary history, and a derisive one at that. Blumstein is still remembered as a good minor poet. Redehead goes down to posterity as the man who wrote the highbrow equivalent to "We're Going to Hang Out our Wash-ing on the Siegfried Line."

Shlobber went out-miserably, I thought, but he often looked miserable. He was missing for a day and then I was telephoned by the Animal Shelter. He had been brought in dead, after being run over by a car that failed to stop. I asked them if they would bury him, and they agreed.

Had he run under the wheels of the car deliberately, I wondered, in despair? Or been chivvied under them by the vengeful whippet-Blumstein? Suicide, or murder? Or accident? He had, after all, about as much road sense as a rhinoceros.

The years went by, a little faster all the time, and Shlobber and my theories about him were pushed back into the unvisited departments of my mind and there collected dust. I have children growing up, and the past is less interesting just now than the present. But recently one of my daughters decided she wanted another budgerigar, and I went with her to the Bird Farm to buy it.

There were several gigantic outdoor aviaries, and the proprietor had a net on the end of a long stick, to catch the bird she chose. He knew his budgerigars well, and was generous and helpful with advice. When she settled on a mauve bird, he said:

"Just as you like, young lady. But that's a cock."

She nodded. "I know-from the wattle."

"A hen's best, for a bird by itself."

"But it's not to be by itself. I've already got a hen. I want to breed from them."

"Well," he said, "I wouldn't pick that one. You go up along to the next cage. There's some good 'uns there."

When she had left he said:

"You know, it's a funny thing, you get some cocks that are useless for breeding. Not interested in hens at all. Spend their time with other cock birds." He grinned, shaking his head. "Queer, you might say."

I looked at the mauve bird. A kind of bulkiness to the set of the shoulders. De Percy? There were a group of them together up there in the corner of the aviary, amicably perched on a far-out twig of a barkless tree. A thin white one. Stenner? An emerald bird with a tatty ungroomed look, and a fat portentous creature in sage-green. Parsons? And Birkinshaw?

I looked for the two that were missing, but could not see them. Then there was a flash of colour across the aviary, a screeching of flight and pursuit—a small grey-blue pelting after a yellow with a bald patch on top.

"That's another thing," the proprietor said. "The way one bird can take against another, for no reason you can see. Those two, for instance. That blue one leads the yellow bird a dog's life."

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At least they look prettier than they did.