

AILEAN...



Ailean, Harp
and Siobhan

the devil's dearest

She closed her eyes forever many years ago, but old pictures bring her wide-eyed adventures back to life. Sitting near burning oaks in the fireplace I glimpse Ailean, the Irish Setter made for mischief in Dutch autumn tales. Rich shades of sunset on old soil bring the best times to relive memories of an unforgettable redcoat. She had that typically Irish, two-sided charm: half devil, half angel. This will be a story of colour told in the bare autumn evenings November brings to Europe.

Flickering firelight on worn out photos takes me back to 1968. I am a thirteen year old boy on my way to the famous Dutch O'Cuchulain kennel in Tongeren near Epe. A young Irish Setter, Ailean the "poppet", catches my eye. She looks back at me, an all-day adventure girl making constant mischief in the dog pens. Older kennel mates doze peacefully in the sun but poppetAilean has some sort of magic fuel in her life, she never stops playing.

"She's an Irish-Irish Setter", breeder Jan Hesterman proudly notes, pointing to Ailean's dam Derrycarne Harp, the first Red imported from Ireland after the war. Another collection of pictures comes out as Jan remembers the Derrycarnes of Maureen McKeever's celebrated kennel in County Westmeath at the heart of the Emerald Isle. He's naming the Irish Reds one by one while my eyes drift back to Ailean. There's a telltale poppet-look in her face. Could she be planning an adventure in the woods around the old brick house, *Ouide Huis Tongeren*? But for now how about something different. She stretches out on her back and I boombang her tummy.

PUPPIES ON THE BED

A lucky break comes my way. Jan's sister Marian asks me to help on the weekends, a chance to spend time with the dear devil and her kennelmates. Marian wants to know if I like exercising dogs. Hey, I don't have to think about that one for long! I am slightly wasted on my single Irish Setter at home, but now it seems my true destiny awaits: mobbed by Reds all day long! Where will I sleep? Oh in the puppy

room, that's even better! Who with? Right ~ Ailean's mother, Harp. But morningtime brought a rude awakening. Attacked by furballs, pups chewing my ears, pups in my hair, no mercy. Harp had dumped her band of devils on my bed and was sleeping a heavenly sleep undisturbed on hers.

DRAMA

I am asked to fix the dog pens urgently because poppetAilean is busting her bloomers to escape. Okay poppet, let's have a real outing. How Dutch, buddies on a bike in the woods: me, poppet, Siobhan, and Harp. What speed the three of them make! PoppetAilean accelerates the team with her blinding setter fuel, suddenly blinding mud. In full flight we hit a rainyday pond and catapult to oblivion. Racy enough?

Another week drags by then I'm back at O'Cuchulain for my second weekend of adventure. Uh-oh, Marian looks worried. She tries to explain what has happened. Ailean has escaped and taken Siobhan with her. They have been gone for two days. I look for the signs of mega-mischief in the kennels and see a huge hole in the dirt leading under the wire: wire that is buried half a metre deep into the ground! That would surely stop most dogs, but not Ailean. Here was the devil's escape hatch to heaven.

Yes I am worried too, but I can't help smiling because I love the nature of poppet. Even though she is gone I can still see the look in her eyes: life is made for adventure.

Later in the day Siobhan comes back. She is skinny and ragged, she hasn't eaten for days. But there's still no sign of poppetAilean.

FOX OR SETTER

Quickly we organise help for the search through the woods. With maps in hand, friends are searching for Ailean everywhere. "No," say the farmers, "we haven't seen a red setter at all. Our biggest concern right now is the fox we've got raiding chicken pens right across the woods." Oops, now that starts me thinking.

We search and search, so many of us for so long, but without result. Marian and friends fear the worst but somehow I can't help thinking poppet is out there in adventureland. By nightfall she still isn't home. We recount the dangers of traffic on the busy road through the woods and the many animal carcasses that have already met their fate.

Yet another misty Dutch morning and poppet has been gone for more than a week. From the puppy room I peer through a small window. Sunlight barely penetrates the fog hanging in autumn trees. I look again. Something is romping in and out of the haze, I can't quite see it. Almost here, then vanishing with my hopes. I am distracted for a moment by the puppy circus at my feet. One with poppetty adventure eyes pounces on her brother and like a little elephant pins him down. "Maybe you will become a new Poppet" I suggest sadly.

One last try. I trudge into the field and shout her name. Both her names, again and again, but my calls die away in the neverness of this naked Dutch autumn. I give up and turn back to the kennels, where poppet-proofing without poppet must be finished. Then something hits me on the shoulders and almost knocks me down. Ugh an iccodd nose, muddy feet, a sloppy tongue in my face. Ailean! How come you didn't miss me? And may I ask WHY you are so FAT??!! I scruff her cheeks and look in her eyes. Yes, there's the confession of mischief ~ do I wanna know where there's chooks going free?!

HENK TEN KLOOSTER