

LOB'S GIRL

By: Joan Aiken

- (1) Some people choose their dogs, and some dogs choose their people. The Pengelly family had no say in the choosing of Lob; he came to them in the second way, and very decisively.
- (2) It began on the beach, the summer when Sandy was five, Don, her older brother, twelve, and the twins were three. Sandy was really Alexandra, because her grandmother had a beautiful picture of a queen in a diamond tiara and high collar of pearls. It hung by Granny Pearce's kitchen sink and was as familiar as the doormat. When Sandy was born everyone agreed that she was the living spit of the picture, and so she was called Alexandra and Sandy for short.
- (3) On this summer day she was lying peacefully reading a comic and not keeping an eye on the twins, who didn't need it because they were occupied in seeing which of them could wrap the most seaweed around the other one's legs. Father—Bert Pengelly—and Don were up on the Hard painting the bottom boards of the boat in which Father went fishing for pilchards. And Mother—Jean Pengelly—was getting ahead with making the Christmas puddings because she never felt easy in her mind if they weren't made and safely put away by the end of August. As usual, each member of the family was happily getting on with his or her own affairs. Little did they guess how soon this state of things would be changed by the large new member who was going to erupt into their midst.
- (4) Sandy rolled onto her back to make sure that the twins were not climbing on slippery rocks or getting cut off by the tide. At the same moment a large body struck her forcibly in the midriff and she was covered by flying sand. Instinctively she shut her eyes and felt the sand being wiped off her face by something that seemed like a warm, rough, damp flannel. She opened her eyes and looked. It was a tongue. Its owner was a large and bouncy young Alsatian, or German shepherd, with topaz eyes, black-tipped prick ears, a thick soft coat, and a bushy black-tipped tail.
- (5) "Lob!" shouted a man farther up the beach. "Lob, come here!"
- (6) But Lob, as if trying to atone for the surprise he had given her, went on licking the sand off Sandy's face, wagging his tail so hard while he kept on knocking up more clouds of sand. His owner, a gray-haired man with a limp, walked over as quickly as he could and seized him by the collar.
- (7) "I hope he didn't give you a fright?" the man said to Sandy. "He meant it in play—he's only young."

- (8) “Oh, no, I think he’s *beautiful*.” said Sandy truly. She picked up a bit of driftwood and threw it. Lob, whisking easily out of his master’s grip, was after it like a sand-colored bullet. He came back with the stick, beaming, and gave it to Sandy. At the same time he gave himself, though no one else was aware of this at the time. But with Sandy, too, it was love at first sight, and when, after a lot more stick-throwing, she and the twins joined Father and Don to go home for tea, they cast many a backward glance at Lob being led firmly away by his master.
- (9) “I wish we could play with him every day.” Tess sighed.
- (10) “Why can’t we?” said Tim.
- (11) Sandy explained. “Because Mr. Dodsworth, who owns him, is from Liverpool, and he is only staying at the Fisherman’s Arms till Saturday.”
- (12) “Is Liverpool a long way off?”
- (13) “Right at the other end of England from Cornwall, I’m afraid.”
- (14) It was a Cornish fishing village where the Pengelly family lived, with rocks and cliffs and a strip of beach and a little round harbor, and palm trees growing in the gardens of the little whitewashed stone houses. The village was approached by a narrow, steep, twisting hill-road, and guarded by a notice that said LOW GEAR FOR 1 ½ MILES, DANGEROUS TO CYCLISTS.
- (15) The Pengelly children went home to scones with Cornish cream and jam, thinking they had seen the last of Lob. But they were much mistaken. The whole family was playing cards by the fire in the front room after supper when there was a loud thump and a crash of china in the kitchen.
- (16) “My Christmas puddings!” exclaimed Jean, and ran out.
- (17) “Did you put TNT in them, then?” her husband said.
- (18) But it was Lob, who, finding the front door shut, had gone around to the back and bounced in through the open kitchen window, where the puddings were cooling on the sill. Luckily only the smallest was knocked down and broken.
- (19) Lob stood on his hind legs and plastered Sandy’s face with licks. Then he did the same for the twins, who shrieked with joy.
- (20) “Where does this friend of yours come from?” inquired Mr. Pengelly.
- (21) “He’s staying at the Fisherman’s Arms—I mean his owner is.”
- (22) “Then he must go back there. Find a bit of string, Sandy, to tie to his collar.”
- (23) “I wonder how he found his way here,” Mrs. Pengelly said, when the reluctant Lob had been led whining away and Sandy had explained about their afternoon’s game on the beach. “Fisherman’s Arms is right around the other side of the harbor.”

- (24) Lob's owner scolded him and thanked Mr. Pengelly for bringing him back. Jean Pengelly warned the children that they had better not encourage Lob any more if they met him on the beach, or it would only lead to more trouble. So they dutifully took no notice of him the next day until he soiled their good resolutions by dashing up to them with joyful barks, wagging his tail so hard that he winded Tess and knocked Tim's legs from under him.
- (25) They had a happy day, playing on the sand.
- (26) The next day was Saturday. Sandy had found out that Mr. Dodsworth was to catch the half-past-nine train. She went out secretly, down to the station, nodded to Mr. Hoskins, the station master, who wouldn't dream of charging any local for a platform ticket, and climbed up on the footbridge that led over the tracks. She didn't want to be seen, but she did want to see. She saw Mr. Dodsworth get on the train, accompanied by an unhappy-looking Lob with drooping ears and tail. Then she saw the train slide away out of sight around the next headland, with a melancholy wail that sounded like Lob's last good-bye.
- (27) Sandy wished she hadn't had the idea of coming to the station. She walked home miserably, with her shoulders hunched and her hands in her pockets. For the rest of the day she was so cross and unlike herself that Tess and Tim were quite surprised, and her mother gave her a dose of senna.
- (28) A week passed. Then, one evening, Mrs. Pengelly and the younger children were in the front room playing snakes and ladders. Mr. Pengelly and Don had gone fishing on the evening tide. If your father is a fisherman, he will never be home at the same time from one week to the next.
- (29) Suddenly, history repeating itself, there was a crash from the kitchen. Jean Pengelly leaped up, crying, "My blackberry jelly!" She and the children had spent the morning picking and the afternoon boiling fruit.
- (30) But Sandy was ahead of her mother. With flushed cheeks and eyes like stars she had darted into the kitchen, where she and Lob were hugging one another in a frenzy of joy. About a yard of his tongue was out, and he was licking every part of her that he could reach.
- (31) "Good heavens!" exclaimed Jean. "How in the world did *he* get here?"
- (32) "He must have walked," said Sandy. "Look at his feet."
- (33) They were worn, dusty, and tarry. One had a cut on the pad.
- (34) "They ought to be bathed," said Jean Pengelly. "Sandy, run a bowl of warm water while I get disinfectant."
- (35) "What'll we do about him, Mother?" said Sandy anxiously.
- (36) Mrs. Pengelly looked at her daughter's pleading eyes and sighed.

- (37) “He must go back to his owner, of course,” she said, making her voice firm. “Your dad can get the address from the Fisherman’s tomorrow, and phone him or send a telegram. In the meantime he’d better have a long drink and a good meal.”
- (38) Lob was very grateful for the drink and the meal, and made no objection to having his feet washed. Then he flopped down on the hearthrug and slept in front of the fire they had lit because it was a cold, wet evening, with his head on Sandy’s feet. He was a very tired dog. He had walked all the way from Liverpool to Cornwall, which is more than four hundred miles.
- (39) The next day Mr. Pengelly phoned Lob’s owner, and the following morning Mr. Dodsworth arrived off the night train, decidedly put out, to take his pet home. That parting was worse than the first. Lob whined, Don walked out of the house, the twins burst out crying, and Sandy crept up to her bedroom afterward and lay with her face pressed into the quilt, feeling as if she were bruised all over.
- (40) Jean Pengelly took them all into Plymouth to see the circus on the next day and the twins cheered up a little, but even the hour’s ride in the train each way and the Liberty horses and performing seals could not cure Sandy’s sore heart.
- (41) She need not have bothered, though. In ten days’ time Lob was back—limping this time, with a torn ear and a patch missing out of his furry coat, as if he had met and tangled with an enemy or two in the course of his four-hundred-mile walk.
- (42) Bert Pengelly rang up Liverpool again. Mr. Dodsworth, when he answered, sounded weary. He said, “That dog has already cost me two days that I can’t spare away from my work—plus endless time in police stations and drafting newspaper advertisements. I’m too old for these ups and downs. I think we’d better face the fact, Mr. Pengelly, that it’s your family he wants to stay with—that is, if you want to have him.”
- (43) Bert Pengelly gulped. He was not a rich man; and Lob was a pedigreed dog. He said cautiously, “How much would you be asking for him?”
- (44) “Good heavens, man, I’m not suggesting I’d sell him to you. You must have him as a gift. Think of the train fares I’ll be saving. You’ll be doing me a good turn.”
- (45) “Is he a big eater?” Bert asked doubtfully.
- (46) By this time the children, breathless in the background listening to one side of this conversation, had realized what was in the wind and were dancing up and down with their hands clasped beseechingly.

- (47) “Oh, not for his size,” Lob’s owner assured Bert. “Two or three pounds of meat a day and some vegetables and gravy and biscuits—he does very well on that.”
- (48) Alexandra’s father looked over the telephone at his daughter’s swimming eyes and trembling lips. He reached a decision. “Well, then, Mr. Dodsworth,” he said briskly, “we’ll accept your offer and thank you very much. The children will be overjoyed and you can be sure Lob has come to a good home. They’ll look after him and see he gets enough exercise. But I can tell you,” he ended firmly, “if he wants to settle in with us he’ll have to learn to eat a lot of fish.”
- (49) So that was how Lob came to live with the Pengelly family.
- (50) Everybody loved him and he loved them all. But there was never any question who came first with him. He was Sandy’s dog. He slept by her bed and followed her everywhere he was allowed.
- (51) Nine years went by, and each summer Mr. Dodsworth came back to stay at the Fisherman’s Arms and call on his erstwhile dog. Lob always met him with recognition and dignified pleasure, accompanied him for a walk or two—but showed no signs of wishing to return to Liverpool. His place, he intimated, was definitely with the Pengellys.
- (52) In the course of nine years Lob changed less than Sandy. As he went into her teens he became a little slower, a little stiffer, there was a touch of gray on his nose, but he was still a handsome dog. He and Sandy still loved one another devotedly.
- (53) One evening in October all the summer visitors had left, and the little fishing town looked empty and secretive. It was a wet, windy dusk. When the children came home from school—even the twins were at high school now, and Don was a full-fledged fisherman—Jean Pengelly said, “Sandy, your Aunt Rebecca says she’s lonesome because Uncle Will Hoskins has gone out trawling, and she wants one of you to go and spend the evening with her. You go, dear; you can take your homework with you.”
- (54) Sandy looked far from enthusiastic.
- (55) “Can I take Lob with me?”
- (56) “You know Aunt Becky doesn’t really like dogs—Oh, very well.”
- (57) Mrs. Pengelly sighed. “I suppose she’ll have to put up with him as well as you.”
- (58) Reluctantly Sandy tidied herself, took her schoolbag, put on the damp raincoat she had just taken off, fastened Lob’s lead to his collar, and set off to walk through the dusk to Aunt Becky’s cottage, which was five minutes’ climb up the steep hill.
- (59) The wind was howling through the shrouds of boats drawn up on the Hard.

(60) “Put some cheerful music on, do,” said Jean Pengelly to the nearest twin. “Anything to drown that wretched sound while I make your dad’s supper.” So Don, who had just come in, put on some rock music, loud. Which was why the Pengellys did not hear the truck hurtle down the hill and crash against the post office wall a few minutes later.

(61) Dr. Travers was driving through Cornwall with his wife, taking a late holiday before patients began coming down with winter colds and flu. He saw the sign that said STEEP HILL. LOW GEAR FOR 1 ½ MILES. Dutifully he changed into second gear.

(62) We must be nearly there,” said his wife, looking out of her window. “I noticed a sign on the coast road that said the Fisherman’s Arms was two miles. What a narrow, dangerous hill! But the cottages are very pretty—Oh, Frank, stop, *stop!* There’s a child, I’m sure it’s a child—by the wall over there!”

(63) Dr. Travers jammed on his brakes and brought the car to a stop. A little stream ran down by the road in a shallow stone culvert, and half in the water lay something that looked, in the dusk, like a pile of clothes—or was it the body of the child? Mrs. Travers was out of her car in a flash, but her husband was quicker.

(64) “Don’t touch her, Emily!” he said sharply. “She’s been hit. Can’t be more than a few minutes. Remember that truck that overtook us half a mile back, speeding like the devil? Here, quick, go into that cottage and phone for an ambulance. The girl’s in a bad way. I’ll stay here and do what I can to stop the bleeding. Don’t waste a minute.”

(65) Doctors are expert at stopping dangerous bleeding, for they know the right places to press. This Dr. Travers was able to do, but he didn’t dare do more; the girl was lying in a queerly crumpled heap, and he guessed she had a number of bones broken and that it would be highly dangerous to move her. He watched her with great concentration, wondering where the truck had got to and what other damage it had done.

(66) Mrs. Travers was very quick. She had seen plenty of accident cases and knew the importance of speed. The first cottage she tried had a phone; in four minutes she was back, and in six an ambulance was wailing down the hill.

(67) Its attendants lifted the child onto a stretcher as carefully as if she were made of fine thistledown. The ambulance sped off to Plymouth—for the local cottage hospital did not take serious accident cases—and Dr. Travers went down to the police station to report what he had done.

(68) He found that the police already knew about the speeding truck—which had suffered from loss of brakes and ended up with its radiator halfway through the post-office wall. The driver was

concussed and shocked, but the police thought he was the only person injured—until Dr. Travers told his tale.

(69) At half-past nine that night Aunt Rebecca Hoskins was sitting by her fire thinking aggrieved thoughts about the inconsiderateness of nieces who were asked to supper and never turned up, when she was startled by a neighbor, who burst in, exclaiming, “Have you heard about Sandy Pengelly, then, Mrs. Hoskins? Terrible thing, poor little soul, and they don’t know if she’s likely to live. Police have got the truck driver that hit her—ah, it didn’t ought to be allowed, speeding through the place like that at umpty miles an hour, they ought to jail him for life—not that that’d be any comfort for poor Bert and Jean.”

(70) Horrified Aunt Rebecca put on a coat and went down to her brother’s house. She found the family with white shocked faces; Bert and Jean were about to drive off to the hospital where Sandy had been taken, and the twins were crying bitterly. Lob was nowhere to be seen. But Aunt Rebecca was not interested in dogs; she did not inquire about him.

(71) “Thank the Lord you’ve come, Beck,” said her brother. “Will you stay the night with Don and the twins? Don’s out looking for Lob and heaven knows when we’ll be back; we may get a bed with Jean’s mother in Plymouth.”

(72) “Oh, if only I’d never invited the poor child,” wailed Mrs. Hoskins. But Bert and Jean hardly heard her.

(73) That night seemed to last forever. The twins cried themselves to sleep. Don came home very late and grim faced. Bert and Jean sat in a waiting room of the Western Counties Hospital, but Sandy was unconscious, they were told, and she remained so. All that could be done for her was done. She was given transfusions to replace all the blood she had lost. The broken bones were set and put in slings and cradles.

(74) “Is she a healthy girl? Has she a good constitution?” the emergency doctor asked.

(75) “Aye, doctor, she is that,” Bert said hoarsely. The lump in Jean’s throat prevented her from answering; she merely nodded.

(76) “Then she ought to have a chance. But I won’t conceal from you that her condition is very serious, unless she shows signs of coming out from this coma.”

(77) But as hour succeeded hour, Sandy showed no signs of recovering consciousness. Her parents sat in the waiting room with haggard faces; sometimes one of them would go to telephone the family at home, or to try to get a little sleep at the home of Granny Pearce, not far away.

- (78) At noon next day Dr. and Mrs. Travers went to the Pengelly cottage to inquire how Sandy was doing, but the report was gloomy: “Still in a very serious condition.” The twins were miserably unhappy. They forgot that they had sometimes called their elder sister bossy and only remembered how often she had shared her pocket money with them, how she read to them and took them for picnics and helped with their homework. Now there was no Sandy, no Mother and Dad, Don went around with a gray shuttered face, and worse still, there was no Lob.
- (79) The Western Counties Hospital is a large one, with dozens of different departments and five or six connected buildings, each with three or four entrances. By that afternoon it became noticeable that a dog seemed to have taken up position outside the hospital, with the fixed intention of getting in. Patiently he would try first one entrance and then another, all the way around, and then begin again. Sometimes he would get a little way inside, following a visitor, but animals were of course, forbidden, and he was always kindly but firmly turned out again. Sometimes the guard at the main entrance gave him a pat or offered him a bit of sandwich—he looked so wet and beseeching and desperate. But he never ate the sandwich. No one seemed to own him or to know where he came from; Plymouth is a large city and he might have belonged to anybody.
- (80) At tea time Granny Pearce came through the pouring rain to bring a flask of hot tea with brandy in it to her daughter and son-in-law. Just as she reached the main entrance the guard was gently but forcibly shoving out a large, agitated, soaking-wet Alsatian dog.
- (81) “No, old fellow, you can *not* come in. Hospitals are for people, not for dogs.”
- (82) “Why, bless me,” exclaimed old Mrs. Pearce. “That’s Lob! Here, Lob, Lobby boy!”
- (83) Lob ran to her, whining. Mrs. Pearce walked up to the desk.
- (84) “I’m sorry, madam, you can’t bring that dog in here,” the guard said.
- (85) Mrs. Pearce was a very determined old lady. She looked the porter in the eye.
- (86) “Now, see here, young man. That dog has walked twenty miles from St. Killan to get to my granddaughter. Heaven knows how he knew she was here, but it’s plain he knows. And he ought to have his rights! He ought to get to see her! Do you know,” she went on, bristling, “that dog has walked the length of England—twice—to be with that girl? And you think you can keep him out with your fiddling rules and regulations?”
- (87) “I’ll have to ask the medical officer,” the guard said weakly.
- (88) “You do that, young man.” Granny Pearce sat down in a determined manner, shutting her umbrella, and Lob sat patiently dripping at her feet. Every now and then he shook his head, as if to dislodge something heavy that was tied around his neck.

- (89) Presently a tired, thin, intelligent-looking man in a white coat came downstairs, with an impressive, silver-haired man in a dark suit, and there was a low-voiced discussion. Granny Pearce eyed them, biding her time.
- (90) “Frankly... not much to lose,” said the older man. The man in the white coat approached Granny Pearce.
- (91) “It’s strictly against every rule, but as it’s such a serious case we are making an exception,” he said to her quietly. “But only *outside* her bedroom door—and only for a moment or two.”
- (92) Without a word, Granny Pearce rose and stumped upstairs. Lob followed close to her skirts, as if he knew his hope lay with her.
- (93) They waited in the green-floored corridor outside Sandy’s room. The door was half shut. Bert and Jean were inside. Everything was terribly quiet. A nurse came out. The white-coated man asked her something and she shook her head. She had left the door ajar and through it could now be seen a high, narrow bed with a lot of gadgets around it. Sandy lay there, very flat under the covers, very still. Her head was turned away. All Lob’s attention was riveted on the bed. He strained toward it, but Granny Pearce clasped his collar firmly.
- (94) “I’ve done a lot for you, my boy, now you behave yourself,” she whispered grimly. Lob let out a faint whine, anxious and pleading.
- (95) At the sound of that whine Sandy stirred just a little. She sighed and moved her head the least fraction. Lob whined again. And then Sandy turned her head right over. Her eyes opened, looking at the door.
- (96) “Lob?” she murmured—no more than a breath of sound.
- (97) “Lobby, boy?”
- (98) The doctor by Granny Pearce drew a quick, sharp breath. Sandy moved her left arm—the one that was not broken—from below the covers and let her hand dangle down, feeling, as she always did in the mornings, for Lob’s furry head. The doctor nodded slowly.
- (99) “All right,” he whispered. “Let him go to the bedside. But keep a hold of him.”
- (100) Granny Pearce and Lob moved to the bedside. Now she could see Bert and Jean, white-faced and shocked, on the far side of the bed. But she didn’t look at them. She looked at the smile on her granddaughter’s face as the groping fingers found Lob’s wet ears and gently pulled them. “Good boy,” whispered Sandy, and fell asleep again.

- (101) Granny Pearce led Lob out into the passage again. There she let go of him and he ran off swiftly down the stairs. She would have followed him, but Bert and Jean had come into the passage and she spoke to Bert fiercely.
- (102) “I don’t know why you were so foolish as not to bring the dog before! Leaving him to find the way here himself—“
- (103) “But, Mother!” said Jean Pengelly. “That can’t have been Lob. What a chance to take! Suppose Sandy hadn’t—” She stopped, with her handkerchief pressed to her mouth.
- (104) “Not Lob? I’ve known that dog nine years! I suppose I ought to know my own granddaughter’s dog?”
- (105) “Listen, Mother,” said Bert. “Lob was killed by the same truck that hit Sandy. Don found him—when he went to look for Sandy’s schoolbag. He was—he was dead. Ribs all smashed. No question of that. Don told me on the phone—he and Will Hoskins rowed a half mile out to sea and sank the dog with a lump of concrete tied to his collar. Poor old boy. Still—he was getting on. Couldn’t have lasted forever.”
- (106) “Sank him at sea? Then what—?”
- (107) Slowly old Mrs. Pearce, and then the other two, turned to look at the trail of dripping wet footsteps that led down the hospital stairs.
- (108) In the Pengelly’s garden they have a stone, under the palm tree. It says: “Lob. Sandy’s dog. Buried at sea.”