LIFE | FIRST PERSON

Oh no, George Clooney, why? Not everyone wants a puppy (I didn't)

The Hollywood actor has bought his wife Amal a St Bernard puppy for her birthday. That might be a mistake, says reluctant dog owner Tony Turnbull

Amal and George Clooney with their St Bernard puppy, Nelson; Tony Turnball with Daisy

THE MEGA AGENCY; JON ENOCH FOR THE TIMES

Tony Turnbull | Tuesday February 13 2024, 12.03am, The Times

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Is there no end to the ways in which you make the lives of your fellow men more difficult, George? Not content with being ridiculously suave and handsome, and in possession not just of a good sense of humour but also several houses in key European holiday destinations, you go and give your wife, Amal, a puppy. And not just any old puppy, but an impossibly cute, cuddly one called Nelson. As a surprise 46th birthday present! Jeez, you really know how to hit us where it hurts.

All I can say is I hope you properly thought this through. Nelson is a St Bernard, and you know how big they can grow, right? You may be all smiles, strolling around the south of France in the sunshine, Amal carrying an ickle ball of fluff in her arms (damn, if only you'd thought to get one with legs). But Nelson's going to grow — and grow fast — so wait until you're back in England's drizzle, poo bag in hand, waiting for 13 stone of muscle to do its business. And my, what big

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business it will be, because that's just physics. Energy in, energy out.

To be fair, Clooney is an old hand at the dog ownership game. He already has a St Bernard called Rosie, a rescue basset hound called Millie and a spaniel called Louie, so he's better prepared than I was when I was ambushed by my wife and three children 12 years ago.

• **Crawl on all fours and never say no: has dog training gone soft?**

I'm not from dog-owning stock, but we did have a tortoise growing up, so I already knew how time-consuming pets could be. We had to move that tortoise out of its hibernation box and back into it every damn year, and I suspected a dog would be even more demanding of our attention.

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And when I say our, I knew I really meant my. Yes, the children (and to an extent my wife) made the usual promises that of course they'd walk the dog every day, they'dalways clear up after it, and no, they'd never encourage it to climb up on the sofa or go upstairs,especially not when it had muddy paws, but I knew it was all lies, that I would be chief care-giver (especially on cold/rainy/busy days or any others with a "y" in them). I tried all the usual counterarguments (what if it starts humming — you know how you hate humming) but resistance was futile and a few months later we took possession of a beautiful golden-haired cockapoo puppy called Daisy.

This is the point in the story where I say that in spite of myself I was instantly smitten, that Daisy and I bonded over long solo walks, one man and his dog, but in truth it's been more of a slow burn. I could instantly see the benefits — the children adored her and the kitchen floor was never so clean — but if I'm honest I wouldn't have minded if she wasn't around. I just didn't feel Daisy and I had much in common. She loved fetching balls, but I hated throwing them; she loved barking at foxes in the garden while I liked to sit quietly on a bench and read. Mainly the emotion she evoked in me was guilt.

• **Puppy love? More like my cockapoo nightmare!**

Some dog owners are obsessed, and I could never join them in conversation about their "fur babies" or discuss how I wanted to delay giving Daisy the snip so she, too, "could enjoy the miracle of being a mummy". For years I felt I fell short.

For the record, Daisy and I are in a better place now. Twelve years in, we've worked on our relationship and reached a stage of mutual appreciation and companionship. There's no need to put a label on such feelings — we're British, after all — but I suspect George will have no such qualms. I bet he's the kind of guy who has no problem expressing his love. He'll happily join in the park banter, telling anyone and everyone just how soppy he gets when he's hanging out with his girls and boys.

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Which, I have to accept, is yet another thing that George Clooney and I do not share in common.

Why I had to give up on Merlin the menace

by Emma Reed

I remember it as if it were yesterday. I am standing in my kitchen, feeling uncomfortable, a pair of glittering black eyes staring at me, tension through the body, possibly ready to pounce or kick off. “What on earth is the matter?” I ask, exasperated, not expecting a reply. I’m not facing an intruder: it’s Merlin the miniature schnauzer — my first dog.

True to his namesake, Merlin did cast a spell of sorts. It was one of chaos. Looking at a photograph of Amal Clooney carrying her new St Bernard puppy, I’m anticipating a surge in demand for the breed, regardless of its suitability for home life. Dog owning is hard work unless you’ve got a celebrity-style retinue of staff. Like the well-meaning parent whose kid goes completely off the rails, sometimes it just doesn’t work out.

It’s not as if we hadn’t done our research. Merlin arrived in our lives after endless trips to dog shows, where we quizzed owners and breeders and conducted a level of due diligence that could have led to a professional qualification. Later on I would wonder if I should just have re-read *How to Train Your Dragon* instead.

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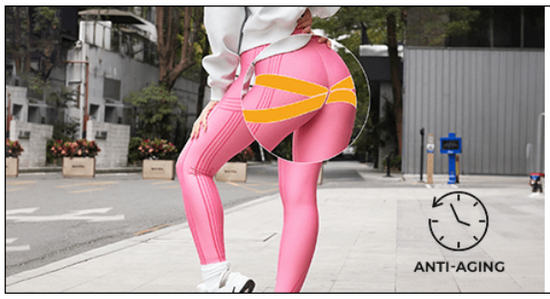

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I had prepared the family for the puppy nipping stage, but Merlin’s fixation with our ankles was prolonged and made school mornings hazardous. There could be no casual donning of slippers; armoured protection was required in the form of multiple layers of socks and Crocs. “It’s a phase,” I found myself chanting on repeat.

• **How to make your cat and dog the best of furry friends**

Bucolic dreams of the family playing fetch in the garden were swiftly punctured — like the balls he guarded possessively. We made peace with the fact that being of terrier stock, rather than retriever, returning a ball wasn’t in his wheelhouse. The one thing he did catch and bring to us was a pigeon, my son disposing of the corpse in what has since been called “the pigeon bin”.

We could adjust to all of that. What we found harder to accommodate was the fact that he hated people and other dogs. He had a particular aversion to the elderly. “Dogs can smell death,” one of my kids proffered. And like Begbie from *Trainspotting*, Merlin was always up for the ruck. Most of the day he would be standing on alert, back legs planted defiantly, the tip of his tail quivering as though receiving signals. No matter how many walks, training games or calming sprays were administered, he refused to chill out. I knew schnauzers were a

“vocal” breed, but every time the doorbell rang, it was like a blast of death metal.

On dog walks I was like a ninja. I needed to operate with stealth, scanning the landscape for triggers, zigzagging across roads and hiding behind trees to let others pass. I used to gaze longingly at groups of dog walkers enjoying a coffee, their dogs lolling placidly by their feet. I felt like that mother in the playground with the problematic child. We stopped having people round, tired of crisis management.

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After a couple of years of the phase that never ended, the final straw came when Merlin nipped the decorator. Giving up on a dog is the ultimate taboo, but I returned to the breeder in tears, admitting that I couldn’t cope any longer. They kindly found him a new, very different, home.

My husband took Merlin out on his last walk, wondering whether we had done the right thing. Another other dog approached and a spat ensued. Any doubt evaporated.

A couple of years later we got another dog, a cockapoo who’s now almost six. He’s Captain Cautious to Merlin’s Begbie. If she’s lucky, Amal Clooney’s issues might be limited to St Bernard drool on designer clothes, but sometimes it’s a little more complicated.

Can you relate to Tony and Emma? Let us know in the comments below

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Emma Reed

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P Loughlan
13 FEBRUARY, 2024
I have had many dogs in my life. I have loved every one of them. I miss every one of them.
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Graham Gibson
13 FEBRUARY, 2024
Me too - more so than many humans.

I was reading the article thinking Clooney hasn't got a clue until you realise he already has dogs and knows precisely what he's doing.

Which makes the article confected tosh.
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Victoria Dennis
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Oh lord, mine too. Yes, however much you love them they are adult animals, not any kind of babies!
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Graham smith
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Replying to Victoria Dennis
They are to some people
MrsS
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Amelia Tulloch
13 FEBRUARY, 2024
Thank you for being so honest! My family (3 daughters) has a dog (cocker spaniel) and three cats. Unfortunately, whilst the rest of my family adore all four animals, I have been utterly unable to bond with the dog whose main drive in life is to EAT (ANY & ALL food - fresh, waste, rotting, rubbish, ...
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Margaret Scott
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And the financial commitment!
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J Allwood
13 FEBRUARY, 2024
A Toy Poodle would have been far better. No shedding, no drool, intelligent and affectionate. We have a rescue Toy Poodle and she's perfect: small size => small meals => small p o o s. She doesn't need much exercise but happily keeps up on longer walks. We adore her.
Mrs A.
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S White
13 FEBRUARY, 2024
Lovely and underrated dogs! You're right!

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E Spender
13 FEBRUARY, 2024

Why not a rescue dog? Then the many people who will now follow suit will get a rescue instead of the many St Bernard puppies who will be bought and abandoned in a few months. Not so clever George.
Mrs S

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Diane Smith
13 FEBRUARY, 2024

It's a good idea to read the article before commenting !

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Mr John Bloor
13 FEBRUARY, 2024

Mrs B. We have a dog, also Daisy, who is very special to us. My only comment would be on his choice of dog. Mrs Clooney always dresses beautifully and St Bernard's are lovely, affectionate slobber producers. Not sure the it's the most suitable choice.

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Jackie Rose
13 FEBRUARY, 2024

He already has a St B. so knows the pitfalls, but the slobber, the smell, the sheer size, the vulnerable legs (that can't jump into a car), the food....rather him than me.

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John Smith
13 FEBRUARY, 2024

They will have "staff " to look after the dog which will be brought out for photos and promotion of their brand.

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S White
13 FEBRUARY, 2024

I love dogs and could never be without one. They are a huge amount of work but incredibly rewarding and bring joy and humour to every day. And poo bags!

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Y Thomson
13 FEBRUARY, 2024

Best comment of the day.

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A Riley
13 FEBRUARY, 2024

Classic tactic - he wants a dog, she not so much, so it's manipulated in as a surprise 'present'. At least they have the resources to to make it easier.
(Edited)

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Jillian M-Duff
13 FEBRUARY, 2024

A St Bernard puppy; aka a walking stomach! A friend reckons hers costs more to feed than her

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