
Two Light-Hearted Fables

I. DOG DAY

Though it is probably true that you can't teach an old dog new tricks, it doesn't mean that they never change. This old dog suddenly had had enough of pleasing people. She was of an amiable disposition to begin with and all her ancestors as far back as there was any record, and the record went back quite far, were known for their desire to please. Though she had a ravenous appetite, she never walked between people's legs when they didn't notice that it was time for her to be fed but sat with her front paws crossed and her head cocked to one side, reminding them. She waited outside the screen door without barking to be let in, and when other dogs howled in the middle of the night she didn't join in, lest her howling disturb the family's sleep. When she was taken for a walk and came upon a particularly interesting scent, she didn't allow herself to follow it to its logical conclusion if it meant leaving her people to look after themselves, and neither did she join cocktail parties on the terrace that looked very jolly but that her people hadn't been invited to and so ignored on their way past. She didn't tip garbage cans over so that the lid would fall off and she could get into the garbage, and it was perfectly safe to leave an uncooked sirloin steak on the kitchen table while you went to answer the telephone.

All this was true until old age set in—by which time she was eighty-four years old, by human count, and twelve by dog, and it is hard to be the soul of amiability if it hurts your hind quarters every time you get up off the rug to go into the kitchen and see what, if anything, some thoughtful person has left in your bowl. If they had worried as much about her feelings as they did about her figure, there would have been something in her bowl oftener. Not a full meal, necessarily, but at least some interesting scraps from the table or the fridge. Or half a Milk-Bone or a handful of Kibbles. *Anything*. But time after time when she went there, the bowl was licked clean and shining, just as she had left it, and she even heard them telling the little girl not to feed her because she was too fat. Then they would go to the cupboard and take out the Ritz crackers and open a can of liver pâté or a jar of pistachios and gorge themselves before dinner.

The little boy invited her up on his bed but nobody else ever did, and they were shocked the one time they caught her on the sofa—where *they* sat all the time. The double standard, what else? They put a nice soft pad down where they lay on the floor with their legs in the air pretending they were riding a bicycle, but did they think of leaving the pad for her afterward? Knowing that she had arthritis and shouldn't lie on thin rugs or the bare floor?

Their own food they heated on the stove, so that it was nice and tasty, but they gave her her Geriodiet straight out of the icebox if the can had been opened the day

before. With sometimes dry Kibbles added to it, spoiling the taste of both the Kibbles and the ground corn, cracked wheat, barley grits, whole egg, non-fat dry-milk, Brewer's yeast, sodium nitrate, salt, sufficient water to taste, and other things that, because the children of the family were vegetarians, I think I won't mention. *He* did this. *She* gave the dog vegetables—beans or squash, to vary her diet—and an egg for her coat, and scraps of meat that had got too high for their taste. Anything will do for the dog.

Ever since she was a puppy she had had to sleep shut up in the study with the door closed, far away from everybody. And when she had a nightmare there was nobody to say, "Wake up! You're having a bad dream," so she went right on being chased by a German shepherd bitch with a horrible disposition, and getting lost, and what not.

All this she could have stood (because, after all, things are expected of dogs that are not expected of people) if they had ever taken the trouble to address more than a passing remark to her. Old as she was, she was often stopped on the street by children who wanted to pet her and also by ladies who exclaimed "What a beautiful dog!" And what did they have to say to her? "*Must* you lie in front of the stove?" and "How you smell!"—when there was no better place to lie in front of, if you are interested in what's for dinner, than the stove, and everybody knows that dogs smell on damp days. So do oriental rugs and camel's hair coats, and nobody complains about *them*.

And to add insult to injury, they took in a stray cat, knowing how she felt about the nasty creatures. It would have been easy enough to dispose of the cat with one crunch, but they would have held it against her. So she let the kitten curl up inside her front paws and go to sleep, and even, since they seemed to find it so diverting, pretended to play with the kitten. And what thanks did she get for all this? The kitten was allowed to sleep all day on their *bed*, and to play water games in the washbasin and the bathtub, and given food every time it went into the kitchen and made that terrible whining sound that they make.

It was too much. It would have tried the patience of a saint, and even though that's what she was, she had enough of it, and one day she made a puddle on the white rug, in front of the fireplace. When she saw how upset it made them she did it again, two days later. They decided that she had something the matter with her—never thinking that there might be something the matter with them—and took her to the vet, who said it was a kidney infection and gave her antibiotics, which as everybody knows are very lowering. If they treat me like a lump I will be a lump, she said to herself, and that's what she was. And all that happened was that they went on laughing at the cat's antics and worrying when the cat stayed out all night.

If *she* had been careless about crossing the road, they would have buried her somewhere on the property, no doubt, with other pets she had never made the acquaintance of, but would they have wept and put flowers on her grave? Would the little girl have gone there when nobody knew about it? Would they have continued to grieve for her?

With the cat buried in the back yard, there was no reason to go on acting like a lump, so she fell back into her old habits of pleasing, and they all remarked on the fact that she was herself again. The trouble was, she wasn't herself; she was a very old dog, and half blind and a little hard of hearing. And no sooner did she settle down

near *him* than he would get up and leave the room, with no consideration for her comfort or her feelings, and then she would have to get up, even though it pained her hind quarters, and go look for him. People think it is funny when old dogs take to following them around every step they take. They think it is from over-attachment. How would they like not to know where the dog is?

One day, when she had been sitting in front of the screen door a long time waiting for somebody to come into the room and notice her, she barked. She didn't even know she was going to do it. It just happened. And naturally they came running, and said "Dear dog, did you want in?" and opened the screen door for her. So why, after that, should she sit waiting patiently when who knows what was in her dish by the kitchen cupboard. And even when they changed their tune and said, "*Must* you bark like that?" and "What a *boring* dog!" she went right on barking to be let in. Or out. And if nobody came, she went on barking till they did come. It is quite possible that her barking was louder than she intended, and may at times have disturbed the neighbors. But if they didn't want to disturb the neighbors, all they had to do was leave the study door open at night and not be so concerned about hairs on the sofa. And if barking was boring, then she knew what to do that would make them sit up and take an interest in her. Instead of going to an out-of-the-way corner of the property, she stopped on the flagstone path to the front door and arched her back and pressed down, and my, were they upset when they saw it!

So after that she didn't bother to go to out-of-the-way places, and once when it was raining and she didn't want to get wet, she did it on the front porch. Thinking it would be the end, that they would disown her, that she'd have to go live in the woods or with the wild dogs or anybody who'd have her. And not caring anymore what happened to her, because she had tried for twelve years to please them every way she knew how and they weren't pleased with her and what was the use of trying anymore?

Before they could disown her, and before she could go live in the woods with the wild dogs or with anybody who would have her, something happened that was the last thing in the world that she was expecting. She heard distant band music, and when it seemed to be coming closer she perked up her ears. Band music and auto horns. Somebody is getting married, she thought. Or maybe it is Election Day.

It wasn't Election Day, but it was her birthday, and she had forgotten all about it, and so had the family she lived with, but not everybody is unappreciative and takes noble dogs for granted. The band was marching, and behind the band there were decorated floats, with "Happy Birthday, Dear dog!" printed in huge letters, and the front end of the parade was turning into the driveway before the last of it had turned into the Baptist Church Road from Baldwin Road, which lay beyond it. It was a celebration the likes of which had never been seen before—at least, not in honor of a dog. It was everything she had ever expected or hoped for in the way of appreciation and admiration, and it wasn't just admiration and appreciation; the decorated floats had boxes and boxes of Atlas Geriodiet; and Purina Dog Chow, and large Milk Bones, and Flavorsnacks of all sizes and colors, and when they were all unloaded on the front lawn she realized that she need never again have that gnawing sensation in her stomach. They also put a wreath of flowers around her neck, and made speeches, and said

she was the best dog that ever lived—which was only the truth, after all—and the mother of six fine puppies and Dog of the Year. And would she mind stepping up to the microphone and saying a few words. And then they gave her a much larger dish for her food, and a thick, thick mattress with her name on it for when she lay before the fire in the fireplace, and a variety of leashes in different colors, and her portrait done in oil. And they asked her to give a seminar in how to please people, and they also made a recording of the sound of her bark. And instead of her being given the part of their ice cream cone people didn't want, she had a whole ice cream cone to herself, and a cake with thirteen candles on it, and her name in colored icing.

As for her people, what with the band, and the banners, and the decorated floats, and several hundred neighbors standing around on the front lawn, and the pile of Atlas Geriodiet, Purina Dog Chow, Kibbles, Milk Bones, and Flavorsnacks, there was no way they could not get the point. And after that, things were different around that house, let me tell you.

2. THE RAGGLE TAGGLE ONLY CHILD

She was the only child of an over-loving, well-to-do couple and given everything they could think of that might contribute to her development. The mobile that hung over her cradle—Japanese folded-paper yellow-and-grey storks—moved with the slightest current of air, attracting the light and her wandering attention. It had been carefully chosen so that the first thing her eyes distinguished about the outer world would be beautiful. It was also the forerunner of everything else—her toys, her picture books, her clothes, which she was at an early age able to put on herself, for she was cleverer than most infants. When she was teething and cried in the night, they took turns rocking her, and they didn't just sing "Three Blind Mice" over and over again till she went to sleep but such beautiful old songs as "Over the Mountain" and "Blow the Wind Southerly" and "Cockles and Mussels" and "The Raggle Taggle Gypsies, O"—with the result that when the time came when it was possible to determine whether or not she was musical, it turned out she was. So she took piano lessons, and played the cello in the school orchestra, and, when she was older, the bassoon. When she was older still, she took ballet lessons, because her father had discovered that she had natural levitation and hardly weighed anything when you picked her up. Which should have been a warning to them. She also developed a passion for opera, and that too they failed to see the meaning of. Because she appeared to have a gift for languages, they took her to several performances of the Moscow Art Theater when it came to New York. The plays were, of course, in Russian, and very interesting, as plays always are that you can't understand a word of. And when they went to Paris they had a box at the Comédie Francaise, and this time she understood every word, being well grounded in French, and German also, though there was no need for it on that occasion. Her parents hoped that she would do something with it, her gift for languages, and encouraged her to think about a year at the Sorbonne, possibly, or translating, or even graduate work in Medieval Literature.

Being such loving parents they of course enquired into her preferences, and made it clear, though not in so many words, that they were in a position to offer her a wide choice of things to do by way of preparation for a career. The one thing they couldn't offer her, because it wasn't in their natures to do this, was an indifference to what she did with her life. And since she knew how much they cared, she couldn't bring herself to tell them that what she really wanted was to go with the raggle-taggle Gypsies and live in an old song.

Year after year she waited for the Gypsies to show up, and eventually they did. She woke, out of a sound sleep, and there they were, singing and dancing and rattling their tambourines, outside her bedroom window. They also rattled the front and back doors, which, fortunately, were locked; otherwise they would have got into the house and made off with the silver. But the girl emptied her purse out the window and away they went, leaving her sadder than before. From that time on, when her father and mother said, "Would you like to do this, or perhaps you'd rather do that," her face crumpled and large wet tears slid down her cheeks, because the Gypsies had gone off without asking her to come with them, and her parents couldn't bring them back, and wouldn't, if they could.

What was to become of her? Well, she did what she could: On commencement day, when the prizes were given out—books wrapped in white tissue paper and tied with a white ribbon—none of them were for her. To her parents' astonishment, for they knew how clever she was and that if she had only wanted to she could have won *all* the prizes. They concluded, correctly, that she must, in fact, have been at some pains not to. But they didn't say anything, because the distinction they had in mind for her was beyond anything that could be wrapped in white tissue paper and tied with a white ribbon.

As everybody knows, Gypsies travel in a wide circle which takes them eventually back to the place where somebody has given them money or invited them in and served them tea and homemade jam and scones, using the best china and linen napkins. At first when the girl heard the faint stirring on the lawn outside her window she thought she had dreamed that the Gypsies had come back, but then she heard the tambourines and threw her covers aside and softly (so as not to wake her parents, whose bedroom was on the other side of the house) called "I'm coming." At which the Gypsies looked at one another—for no one had suggested that she come with them. When she burst out the front door she was fully dressed, in a Gypsy costume she had worn at a Halloween party, and, much to their regret, no purse with money in it. But by the time they found this out they were several miles away and anxious to put a certain distance between them and the local police. So they let her stay with them, and she minded the babies while the women were telling fortunes, and soon her hair was as tangled as theirs, and when her own godmother passed her on the street she didn't recognize her.

Her poor parents were heartsick, even though they knew she had run off with the Gypsies of her own free will: she had left a note for them on the front hall table. Sometimes the private detectives they hired to keep an eye on her would catch up

with the Gypsy band and be able to report back that she was not being mistreated, and that when they had offered to deliver her from the hands of the Gypsies she had said no, she was happier than she had ever been, and all she wanted was to be left alone.

It was, of course, quite beyond her parents' power to do this. They kept right on sending her presents on her birthday, and vitamins, and pretty clothes, all of which she gave away instantly. But there was something about her that made people turn and look at her a second time, and this made the Gypsies uneasy, for the one thing they didn't want was to attract undue attention, since this could lead to their ending up in jail for forgery, petty larceny, and what not.

Because she was never alone but always part of a group of dark-skinned people who were cooking over a camp fire or dancing or telling fortunes or stealing chickens or stealing something, she really was happy. And among the Gypsies there is no such thing as an only child, let alone the only child of over-loving well-to-do parents, because the Gypsy children didn't always know and didn't care who their parents might be. She had never liked the person she was and now she could be a different person. She even found out that she had a talent for fortune telling—only unfortunately it was a true talent: after she had spread the cards out she knew, without knowing how she knew, what was going to happen. As soon as the Gypsies realized this they forbade her to tell fortunes any more, and this time they were more than just uneasy, they were afraid. One morning when she woke beside a murmuring stream, she found that she was all alone. They had packed up and departed without waking her. And by now were far away.

As it happened, there was a private detective hiding in the bushes who happened to have two bus tickets in his inside coat pocket, and after a three-hour ride he delivered her on the front steps of her parents' house.

They were overjoyed to see her, but by this time they had learned their lesson and did not offer her any choices or buy her expensive clothes that she could give away. After several years of graduate study and a certain amount of travel in the continent she became *the* authority on the language of the Gypsies. Often, when the Gypsies were in some doubt about a word in their language or needed to know what the future held in store for them, they came to her for help. They also named their children after her, and only now and then went off with the Georgian silver spoons that she had put out for them to steal. Her parents were very pleased with her fame, and said modestly, "She's done it all herself," which was not exactly the truth. The truth is that they had had a large hand in it, as parents always do have in the lives of their children.