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A MAN AND HIS DOG

Leon Wolff

SIMPLE DREAMS dreamed the little dog under the piano, plotless, counterplotless and without direction, wistful as shreds of quiet fog on a road at night, simple as a red rubber ball.

Dreams of parboiled beef unfettered by cereal dreamed the little dog under the piano, nervous dreams of a dour shaggy enemy, dreams of parboiled meat, of furiously running through soft grass in a certain park to the edge of strange waters, poignant not vague but crystal-clear image of steak-bone, eager dreams of feline, elemental dream of favored tree and of making water, chilling dream of a man, thrilling dream of parboiled beef.

The little dog twitched and groaned and savored deeply of his dreams, but with the sound of the key in the lock slid swiftly into wakefulness and lay waiting motionless on his chest, head between his paws, and blinked slowly into the darkness.

The man entering the apartment knew without thinking that the dog would not come to meet him. The dog was now awake, he knew. He also knew that he was under the piano far in the corner afraid of him and (if such a thing were possible in such a dog) hating him with a simple and inflexible hatred.

He walked into the living room and snapped on a light. "Hello, Deke," he said. The dog stirred slightly. "Come on out, boy—I won't bite you." He waited a moment, then turned impatiently and went into the kitchen. He mixed himself a drink. He came back, sat down, and looked at the dog lying motionless in the shadow of the piano.

The dog had been alone many hours, was hungry, and needed badly to go outside. The man knew all this. After three years, the man knew all things at all times about this dog. He had bought him from a fashionable kennel at the age of four months, a mad and irresponsible character with an unoriginal impulsion toward slippers and piano legs. The little dog had matured quickly since then.

The man looked at him and drank his drink and considered pas-

sively the phenomenon of a dog with negative reactions toward his master. He loved this little dog on occasion, especially when feeling his liquor, but mostly despised him; when he thought of the dog at all, he did so confusedly and usually with irritation. But now, at this moment, he loved the dog, the damn apprehensive dog, the little soft damn scared dog in the shadow of the piano, well out of reach (they both knew) of anything but a golf club or a broom. He poured another drink and sat there breathing rather heavily, loving the little dog, and looking into the eyes that shone watchfully under the grand piano.

"Come here," he said. "Come here, Deke." The dog moved uneasily, awaiting developments, no longer aware of his hunger or the desire to go outside. "Come on, boy. Come on. Come on." The man spoke softly and insistently and tried to coax the dog out with neutral phrases of blandishment, avoiding certain words which he knew would engender an artificial and unfair temptation in the dog's mind. Patiently but unsuccessfully, wanting only to touch him, he tried to convince the dog that all was well.

"Jesus, what a pooch," he said finally, and set his drink down sharply on the table. "A hell of a rugged pooch you are, I must say," he said sarcastically. The little dog, on edge from the coaxing and the sudden crack of glass against wood, watched the man out of large, luminous eyes.

"Want your dinner?" the man said. This was one of the irresistible words. Now that the legal contest was over, and he had lost as usual, he used another. "Want to go outside?" The dog twitched and squirmed in a torture of desire and indecision that could have only one ending. "Dinner? Dinner? Outside?" the man repeated.

The little dog got up. Slowly and agonizedly he advanced toward the man, body shaped like a U and head to one side, a picture of ingratiating and embarrassment. When he reached the man's feet he collapsed utterly, looking up at him and causing his tail to flutter wildly with hope and fear. The man reached out to pet his head; as he did so, the dog shrank back, blinking spasmodically.

"Want your dinner?" the man said. "How about some dinner?" The dog came to his feet and looked into the man's eyes with silent intensity. "How about some dinner?" the man teased. "Dinner, Deke, dinner." The dog whined softly and stared at his master, trying to force him into action by the sheer chemistry of vision.

"What do you say we go outside, first?" the man said. "How about it, boy? What do you want—dinner or outside?"

The little dog barked with excitement and desire. The man smiled. This was the way he liked the pooch—showing a little spirit, a little interest in life!

The dog rose on his hind legs and clawed the man's chest in a frenzy of anticipation. His rough pads scraped across the man's satin tie and produced dusty streaks on his white shirt.

"God *damn* it," the man breathed, and slapped the dog viciously across the muzzle. The dog spun once on the floor, and snarling in surprise and bitterness darted under the piano, into his shadowy corner. "You ignorant little jerk," the man said, getting up. "When will you learn to stop doing that?" He finished his drink. "Just for that you'll wait a while."

He thought for a moment, the dog now being forgotten, then snapped off the light and left the apartment. The door slammed.

The little dog, who had been trembling where he stood under the piano, now sank down on his stomach, head between his paws, and blinked slowly into the darkness. Soon he was dozing again and fitfully dreaming, fearfully of a man, yearningly of a tree and of making water, deliciously of meat, hopefully of a tree, quiveringly, desperately, half dream half not-dream of a certain tree in a certain park where many dogs passed the time of day in a very social and pleasant manner indeed.