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HOUND-DOG

M. J. Michaux

THEY MET late one afternoon when the sun was half submerged among the tree tops. The man even then had come to—not love but—attune himself to the long shadows, the gold in the air, the decayed soft quality of evening. There was a longing in his breast for this hour of the day, one that it alone could appease, that night or the bright glare of day only increased. It was then that the neighbors went home, the store was empty, that Lyle was busy with the oil stove and not bent upon nagging him. He could sit in his sagging chair and follow the glint of the rails away from Paradise in both directions, hear or not hear the evening songs as he chose, see or not see the sun and its colors, turn over or not turn over the bundles of troubles that he carried with him constantly throughout the day, bundles that had long since lost their identification and had become vague shapes, one much like another, in the vague half light of the place they were stored.

Out of nowhere definitely—out of the evening itself, it seemed—this young hound walked. He had a seed of courage in him that all his breed did not have, either that or the caprice of fortune put the idea in its head to walk up boldly to the silent man and lick his hand impudently, a little sadly, for no other hound would have, not if it starved two feet from the place.

He contemplated the origin of the dampness without hurry, the wheels of his brain creaking slowly into motion. A pause, then he pulled up the limp arm and brushed the back of the hand with his other palm, and let them both fall back as they had been.

The hound repeated its greeting, adding the wag of a tail.

Again that unhurried speculation, that labored motion of the wheels of thinking. Again that idle motion up to wipe away the memory of the nameless stimulation, and the limpness which followed.

The hound, reassured, raised on its hind legs and put its feet on the arm of the chair, pawing the inert arm once.

The man responded without an instant's delay this time. His whole limp body sprang taut in a flash. The arm beneath the dog swung out viciously. There was a scratching sound of claws grappling for a hold, a rolling bumping travelling sound, and then a soft dull thump as the body fell from the porch onto the ground. Then the man sank back into his chair again inert, exactly as he had been before, the bodiless spirit of him flowing out again into the evening.

Then one of those inexplicable happenings of nature occurred. One out of all reason, without any precedent, certainly not following the course of nature, or deducible from the characters given such creatures.

The hound returned. That was unusual, but still possible. But that this man should know it was the hound and not send it sprawling again, that he should repeat the same performance of wonder and speculation, this was the baffling, the astonishing, the unreasonable thing.

But then who can know the mind of such a man, one who could sit the evenings away like this and become like the trees themselves which were beautiful with the sun upon them but still themselves, still bark-covered, hard, unyielding, inanimate, for all that, peaceful-looking, quiet, steady and firm on rooted feet?

Three times the hound licked that hand. The fourth time—surely the hound's heart leaped within it for fright—the fourth time that hand moved and caught the hound's ear. But there was no violence to follow. No, the improbable happened. The hand twisted the ear idly and let it drop unhurt. The feel of the caress, for in a crude way it was a caress, was good to the beaten creature. Instead of bounding up joyously, which would have ruined everything, the hound remained perfectly still for a long while, waiting. Some subtle inspiration must have possessed it to act so wisely. In a few minutes the improbable happened again: that inert hand reached out and twisted the ear a second time idly.

By this motion the man and the hound became united.

In the days that followed, mongrel became monarch. It grew contemptuous of all humanity—except one, and him it obeyed uncannily, anticipating his command without a word spoken. It grew stout and bold and strong, fearing nothing that walked or breathed and could be intimidated by force. It quarrelled with other dogs in order to fight them and send them yelping off with fear in their hearts.

Throughout the day it lay at the man's feet, moved when he moved, went where he went, and when he returned, took up the same prone contented position on the porch so that its big sorrowful eyes with the incongruous fire of a hunter wolf burning in repose in them, could look up and watch the man's unvarying countenance for change. It did this throughout the day, but at night it roamed the country, and its virility became hearsay, its brutality anathema. Only among its kind, however, the virility for the females, the brutality for the males. The miles it travelled between darkness and dawn none knew or could guess. When morning came it was at its usual stand, perhaps licking a wound, or nursing a torn nose, or with its coat wet and shaggy with burrs, panting and weary as if it had run many miles to be at its place to greet the day and its master.

The man, if he knew of its depredations, its brutality, said nothing. He did not evince surprise or annoyance. He did not pet the hound, or call it by name even. He did not show affection for it. His only gesture of proprietorship and concern was the regularity with which he fed the creature. And he fed it well.

Before when men talked, he seldom showed interest, often getting up in the midst of a tale and walking away and back again as if the person was not addressing him, though there would be only the two of them there. But since the advent of the hound he seemed to listen to every tale of its wanderings, its fights, its wild coarse relentless irresistible courtings, its savage scourings and rescourings of the countryside for fight or feat, and to listen to them with relish, with deep absorption, as if he were experiencing some ripe savage vicarious satisfaction from them, as if that wild suppressed beast in his own breast had taken actual form and he were listening to its odyssey, understanding, nodding to himself, agreeing that yes-yes, truly, it was so, truly it was himself that did these things. And his glance in the evenings would be with fire they had not had for a long time, and wrinkles of contemplation reappeared around his eyes, and he stayed a little longer in the evenings now, perhaps to show his command of that beast straining to be off, now that dark had come.

Around the store the hound would always be prowling near when the man moved inside. When he came back, it managed to lie between him and those who had come to sit. And it would growl savagely if this enchanted circle were invaded. If someone were senseless enough

to go further than that growl, they would get a nip in the leg which would remind them for a long time, for the beast did not snap gently.

At first they said, "Frank, you ought to get rid of that hound. He's dangerous. The danged scoundrel took a bite at me the other day." But he replied, when at all, for them not to put foot in its mouth and they wouldn't get nipped. They gave it up and took to staying away.

Lyle protested. "Frank, you old fool! Can't you see that hound dog is driving people out of the store? You going to keep on until we won't have a soul come buy. Then what you intend doing? You got to eat."

He ignored her, too. He continued to feed the dog well. That was all. If it got kicked, or threatened, or beat when he didn't know about it, he said nothing. He let it take care of itself.

It seemed again as if he relished the circle which the propinquity of the animal had drawn about him, as if he had always wanted this stark area to surround him but had not had the barbarous, the savage nature to realize it. There were times now when he smoked his pipe, a thing he had not done for a long while, the dull ache at the center of him being too much with him to command such futile action. Lyle noticed the change. She came some nights to sit on the porch, always a safe distance from the hound, to watch the change in his face and to see the smoke curl up from his pipe as it had in the old days.

There was a drummer who came to Paradise one day not long after the man and the hound became an established, an irrefutable fact. He was a seller of some cheap goods. He himself was a cheap person, dressed in fancy clothes, stuck here and there with gaudy pins, smoking a rank brand of cigar, and talking interminably of any and everything with utmost authority.

The hound took an instant and particular dislike to him. The first day he walked into the store, the hound sprang at him snarling. There was a big tussle to bring it to its senses before it tore the drummer to shreds. Even when collared, it continued to raise an unchristian rumpus, straining like a hound of Hell to leap at the offensive person who had walked in with the loud, displeasing smells. Whether because of these smells, the appearance of the man, or some instinctive nose for his inherent evil, left to his own devices it would have surely crippled him in a moment after his appearance.

"Be blamed if that dog ain't plumb mad!" exclaimed the drummer,

recovering his arrogant pose and his breath with the same quick gesture as he straightened up after retrieving the new straw hat from the floor. "I'd kill him if he was mine. Damned if I wouldn't! Got a good notion to kick his teeth out anyhow." Which was a hollow boast, as they could see, what with him backing up to a safe distance all the time he said it.

In spite of the hound, the drummer, instead of the one day he intended staying, stayed three.

The people knew why. Their displeasure was thick but ineffectual against the witless arrogance of the fellow. If he saw their united rage, their silent, implacable, suppressed indignation, he put it down to meddlesomeness and went about his nefarious business with such boldness as put fear to rout in his own mind.

The people had seen it happen before. Other drummers had come for a call, seen that red hair flash through the gloomy store like flame of life and disappear with the easy promise in those eyes, and had overstayed their intentions. That it often happened did not lessen the people's concern, their rage, their frantic inquisitiveness, their stout resistance to it with all that will, though not hands, can move. But the man himself, father of her in name only, troubled himself little over it, then, or any time. No, he paid more attention to the feeding of the hound.

How the hound overlooked the drummer those first two nights was inexplicable. Perhaps it, too, had seen new eyes with a promise and had gone early to find them. But the third night it lay on the porch as if waiting, as if forewarned that something had been happening in its absence and would happen again tonight, something that concerned it personally. Its large jaws, heavy from much chewing and fight, lay along its paws, the ears up, listening to, and interpreting, the story the night sounds told. Occasionally its head would snap erect at some sound almost imperceptible to human ears, and it would listen and study the voice long and intently until satisfied, then it lay that heavy jaw down again slowly upon its outstretched feet.

It lay in this manner when the carriage drew up some distance from the store in the thin light from a new moon. Then that head snapped up again, the body grew taut, but there was no sudden bark, no incandescent anger, no leap to the ground running to attack. No. Behind those yellow eyes a cunning brain worked swiftly, and it lay still, waiting.

The drummer, oblivious to all but himself, flicked the reins once around the fence post to hold the horses and then pranced up on the path to the back of the store, stopping once to cock his straw at a more rakish angle and twice to throw his shoulders back in a devilish manner, thinking heaven knows what flattering thoughts.

He was three trees from the end of the path, when—Zzzzzt!—a black shadow catapulted upon him from out of the night, and straw hat, pins, gay thoughts, the stars themselves, went flying in crazy directions.

And that without preparation! Without a single warning sound! Gawd Awmighty damn!

The drummer was not a tree climber by inclination or profession, but fear taught him enough in one easy lesson to gain the top of the nearest tree with the least motion lost that was possible. And once he was safe from the lash of those jaws, that shadow, and could see what it was that had split his pleasant world wide open without warning, he began to curse and roar his indignation. The air about Paradise had never reverberated with such language before. He yelled for help. He swore vengeance. He broke off limbs and hurled them at the hound. He continued to yell and swear at the top of his lungs.

The hound, with only four good mouthfuls of those loud-smelling clothes to its credit, roared back at him, swelling its indignation with his until the whole night echoed with the ruckus.

Many a person within earshot jerked up from a sound sleep in alarm and listened. Hey? What's that? You hear it, Maria? What the devil could that mean this time of night? Never heard the beat of that afore in my life. Listen, Maria. Sounds a little like that mad hound of Frank Fortune's, don't it? You guess—? Aye, and they put two and two together in their sleep-dim minds and lay back with a smile. Seems as if the drummer and him's having a little heart to heart talk, don't it, Maria? Maybe that old hound of Frank's serves some good after all. Hope that blamed drummer don't get down till morning. Serve him right, it would.

Nor did he get down until morning. The morning of his third and last day in Paradise.

The hound could not be drawn off with meat or promise. The sound of only one voice could move him, and it did not speak until its usual time that morning. Even then the hound drew off reluctantly, aggrievedly, casting many a doubtful glance at the man to see if he

really meant that he should let this intruder with the loud smells and clothes leave impunitively.

The drummer got down at last beneath the humorous stares of several, and this was the hardest indignity of all to endure. He backed away down the path shaking his fist and cursing mightily that he would get vengeance, no man on earth could treat him this way and get off scot free, he'd show him, he'd make them remember what they'd done if it was the last thing he did, and he wasn't going to be s' goddam long about it, either! They'd see! Laugh, laugh! You cheap country bastards! I'll get even with you!

Aye, and he did. In the way such men know.

They sat as usual that night, the man on the porch smoking, a faint shadow of peace creeping into his passion-weary, pain-weary features, and the woman a safe distance away, watching him, hoping for the return of the man she had known, and the hound between them, outstretched with its head lying on its feet and staring into the night, protecting the man from the world, his wife, closing him in in a safe orbit of savage affection where none could intrude and where, released from defense, the old life was struggling to rise with some of its former strength and courage and hope, the things men live by.

Over the trees there was a rind of moon, around these three on the porch were the lives of night and the fragrances from a wood from which the oppressive heat of the day was rising. A restless chicken fell from its perch with a squawking flutter and was quiet. A mocker trilled a few notes and decided to wait until another night, a brighter night. The crickets filled up the pause with improvisations. But the night was quiet. Quiet. Soft with a wooded quiet the people who know it love.

They did not see the carriage come up the road. Even the hound must have been dozing. The man got down quietly under the deep shadows of a tree, clutching the gun tightly across his chest. He stood there for a long while, knowing they sat on the porch, knowing the hound was nearby, knowing that he would soon have his revenge and probably turning over the sweet taste of his victory before consummating it.

Then slowly, as if relishing every movement, he raised two fingers to his lips and whistled.

Aye, but that sound cut through the stillness like the sharp hard edge of a knife!

The hound leaped towards it as if upon springs, without a sound, without preparation, instinctively knowing who had whistled, and only when half way to him opening its mouth to shout angrily, defiantly, bitterly.

They could not tell from the porch what happened, but they guessed that the drummer waited and aimed well and closely, the short sound of the gun like a slap across the hound's face, silencing it instantly.

There was a pregnant pause, the barest fragment of time when the smell of the powder seemed to rise and fill the nose, then a faint and indistinct flutter of sound, the slap of reins across a horse's back, and a few minutes later the sight of two silver wisps of smoke disappearing down the road.

His wife had risen when the dog leaped from the porch. She labored the dog's back with her shouts to come back, knowing the futility of it, but anticipating with dread what must follow. And as a drowning person will clutch the slippery edge of a plank frantically and clumsily, realizing hope is lost, so she rose and beseeched the mad hound to return at any cost.

The shot silenced her as quickly as the hound. She stood one moment with keener anguish than she had known at childbirth, the hope torn from her with the heart roots. She turned and saw him lay the pipe aside, not having risen at all, and she saw the last of the smoke drain from his nostrils and melt into the dark about his head.

Aye, and he heard it as well. Knew with the whistle what must be. Could feel that orbit of peace he had known, could feel it contract, almost like a hand upon his heart. He saw it, felt it, closing about him in the dark, bringing the world he hated closer again, pressing upon his life with more weight than he had strength for bearing. That was why he laid aside his pipe and could not smoke, and why the smoke ran out of his nostrils without pleasure to him, melting into the dark about his head.