Dog Fight

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Abstract

Sam climbed to the top of one of the boulders, facing west, and looked back toward the town he had left almost four hours before...
lowered his head in the last instant, and rammed it against the tree trunk. He bounced off and fell to his knees.

"Gawd!" yelled Red. "I ain't never seen nothin' like that before. Tell him to do it again."

"That was pretty good Rock, but let's see you do it real hard, like the time you knocked the bark off that hickory tree," said Windy.

The Rock took a longer run and smashed into the tree with doubled force. Again he fell to his knees.

"Cheeerist, ain't that somethin'? You ought to charge admission for this," said Red.

"Do it again," Windy said, "and show Red your bank shot."

The small boy again charged the tree, caromed off, ran at another tree, and rammed it. He staggered back to the older boys and, somehow, managed a lopsided grin as he looked up into Windy's face.

"That was real fine Rock. 'Bout the best you ever done. I guess Red sure knows you ain't no chicken." Windy laid his arm across the Rock's thin shoulders.

"You see now, Red, why we call him the Rock?" Virgil said triumphantly.

— Tom Vernon, Sci. Sr.

Dog Fight

SAM CLIMBED to the top of one of the boulders, facing west, and looked back toward the town he had left almost four hours before. It looked so small. He could see everything and no one could see him. The clear air made it possible for him to see the different colors of cattle in green pastures, and the paths they would travel in a single file column at dusk. He could even identify a Greyhound bus rolling straightly and smoothly down a white ribbon
of highway. He could see all this and no one could know he was watching.

A distant barking attracted his attention, and he tried to localize the sound. He saw a man leading a dog through a clearing in the woods a quarter of a mile distant. He watched the man tie his dog to a tree and recross the clearing to a car. About ten more cars were scattered on the opposite side of the clearing, and men were walking from them toward the open area. Some of the men started toward a truck that was backing to the edge of the clearing as the second dog was fastened to a tree about sixty feet from the first. The men carried long rectangular objects from the truck and placed them in the center of the brush-free spot.

Sam watched the assembling of a square platform which was covered with a large canvas before four more wooden sections formed a closed wall around it.

His curiosity was aroused to such an extent that he clambered down a sloping side of his rocky vantage point and ran toward the gathering of men. His labored breathing forced him to walk when he had covered half the intended distance, but he walked rapidly.

Some of the men standing around eyed him suspiciously as he stepped into the clearing. One of them asked, "Did you see anyone else up on the hill, kid?"

"No," Sam assured them, "I could see clear back to town, and nobody was on the other side of the hill."

"You'd better go up and check, Jim," another man ordered, "You can never tell. I'll get the water, and we'll start when you get back."

"Okay, Doc," a man replied, and started up the hill through the restraining brush.

Sam watched his slight overalled figure until the foliage enveloped him, and wondered why the presence of anyone on the hill should concern the gathering of men. He could see nothing about him that should be hidden from public view.

The first dog that had been tied to a tree was still barking and straining on his chain. He was a powerful red dog, and his muscles bulged under his shining coat every time he lunged against his collar. One of the admiring men
clustered about him described the red dog in a knowing way. “Old Red has that alligator mouth, hippo head, hog jaw, roach back and rat tail. His ears aren’t exactly pretty, but you can’t have everything. They just don’t hang right.”

“Maybe so,” Red’s owner boasted, “but I’ll put that dog up against anything up to forty-nine pounds. He won for me in Mississippi, and he got such a reputation that I can’t match him anymore. Doc Cartwright was fool enough to put five hundred on the line with a dog that’s never had to fight an hour to win. Red can take it, and he’ll chew the nose right off that black pup when he goes for his stifle. Doc got that pup from a kid’s folks after he killed a Cocker, and just because he’s won a couple of fights up north, he thinks he’s got a world beater. The pup’s only two years old, and he’s been fought twice in the past six months. Red’s five and he’s plenty pit-savvy.”

Sam tired of peering around the talking men to get a glimpse of the stocky red dog, and crossed the clearing to join three men who were appraising the black. The gray suited man called Doctor Cartwright stood in front of his dog with a bucket in his hand. Sam noticed that the bucket held a sponge and was filled with clear water.

“Geeminy,” Sam murmured when he saw the black dog before him. Never before had he seen such a completely black and shiny dog. His hair was shorter than Red’s, he was thinner, and he showed better physical qualities. His hip joints protruded almost as sharply as his stubby scar-tissue ears. Gray scars showed clearly on his flat black head. Sam thought the dog was smiling at him, so he returned the gesture. He would love to have a dog like that. Those muscles would make him the envy of every boy in town. Of course, his mother wouldn’t ever let him have a dog, so it wouldn’t do any good to wish.

His reverie was interrupted when the man returned from the hill to stand beside Dr. Cartwright. Sam was too engrossed with Jim’s unchaining the black dog to pay attention to the conversation of the men. He moved back quickly as Jim led the dog through the small circle. He followed him to the structure that had been set up on the center of the clearing.
March, 1951

The scattered men were already gathering around the wall of what Sam heard someone call "the pit." He saw one man alternately taking money from most of the other men and writing in a small blue notebook. Jim stopped at one corner of the pit, and began to rub the black dog with a gunny sack. Sam stood as near as he dared, and touched the hip of the dog with his fingers.

"Like him, kid?" Jim asked.
"Oh boy! What's his name?"
"Tar Baby. Think it fits?"
"Yeah, but he's awful skinny."
"I know," came the answer. "He goes in at fifty pounds, but Doc said to pull him down to forty-seven, and he's paying the bills. Three pounds is a lot on a dog this size. He's weak now and might not win a long go."

"You ready, Jim?" a man in the pit called.
"Yeah, anytime."
"Okay, put 'em in."

Jim lifted Tar Baby into the pit and removed his collar. He held the dog easily and dropped the leather leash and collar outside the wall. Tar Baby wagged his tail and grinned at the spectators.

The men at the opposite corner of the pit parted as the screaming, snarling red dog was lifted over the pit wall. Two men held the dog while his collar was unfastened, and then stepped out of the pit. Red's handler had just settled the dog between his knees when the referee called, "Let go."

The dogs came together with a penetrating smush sound of colliding bone and flesh. Red got the first hold deep on the side of Tar Baby's neck. He twisted and tried to shake the larger dog, but was unable to throw him. Tar Baby's huge jaws closed on Red's ear and worked in like a snake eating a frog that was too large. The straining, scraping feet of the dogs, and their wheezing efforts at breathing through clamped jaws were the only audible sounds in the serene countryside. A pitiable fear tugged at Sam as he realized that an example of ripping, tearing death was about to become a reality. He watched Tar Baby heave on the ear of the red dog, and saw that the ear was half torn away. This swiftness of destruction was something that he had
never know before, He began to shake uncontrollably.

The red dog lost his neck hold when he screamed with pain. Tar Baby tore the ear off with a lightning wrench and dropped it on the canvas. The heads of both dogs were covered with blood, and the dirty canvas was growing red around them. Red tried for another neck hold, but was thrown to the canvas when Tar Baby grabbed a front leg and twisted.

Jim nudged Sam, “Old Tar Baby’s going to work now; watch him get that stifle. It’s taken him forty minutes to get started, but he’s really going now. Look!”

Sam did look, and saw that the black dog had released a front leg and fastened his destroying jaws to a rear leg of the red dog. Red screamed again and made a hopeless effort to escape. Tar Baby shut his eyes and held on while Red grunted and struggled.

“Looks like Old Red is done,” Doc Cartwright boasted.
“Don’t be too Goddam sure of that,” Red’s owner retorted. “What’s the time?”
“Fifty-six minutes.”
“That’s longer’n your dog has ever gone: what’ve you been feeding him?”

The red dog broke free and got a fresh hold behind Tar Baby’s ear. Both were making sounds like hoarse bellows, and were swaying drunkenly as each sought to end the life of his antagonist. Suddenly Tar Baby seemed to come alive with new strength. He seized the red dog by a foreleg and threw him to the canvas. Red struggled feebly for a few seconds and lay still. His head was thrown back as he drew deep draughts of air. Tar Baby released the foreleg and pushed his big head slowly but deliberately toward the exposed underside of Red’s neck. He was about to close on the windpipe of the fallen dog, when he vomited on the head and neck of his prey. His rear legs shook violently as he stared into the canvas. After looking at nothing for ten seconds, he turned and walked a few steps away from his foe.

“Turn!” yelled Red’s owner.
“Okay, pick ’em up,” the referee ordered.

Jim stepped into the pit and hustled Tar Baby back to
his corner. He swabbed the exhausted dog's mouth and
head with the sponge that Doc offered, and began to mas­
sage his heaving body with a clean towel.

"Bring that water over here," someone called from the
opposite corner of the pit. "Time's going to be up while
you're horsin' around over there." The bucket was carried
to the corner where Red was being held on his feet. The
process of sponging and drying was repeated while an
official timekeeper outside the pit called the twenty and
twenty-five second marks. "Thirty," he called to the referee.
The referee pointed to Tar Baby and directed, "Scratch
him." Doc took the towel from Jim as Tar Baby was re-
leased.

The black bull terrier that was too thin moved quietly
toward his red adversary, but did not go beyond the center
of the pit. The referee raised and lowered his arm as he
counted.

"Get that sonofabitch," Doc yelled at the dog.
The referee finished his chant, "Five. You lose, Doc."

"How about a courtesy scratch, Doc?" Red's owner de­
manded. "Red's never failed to cross yet, and I don't want
him getting ideas like your cur."

"Go ahead, I don't give a rat's ass what happens to that
quitter. He had it won and curred out on me. I'm going to
kill him anyhow, and then he won't cost me any more bets.
I wouldn't even feed him. Go ahead."

Red's owner pushed him from his corner and the one­
eared dog left a trail of blood as he continued toward Tar
Baby. Tar Baby uttered a gutteral growl and stepped to
meet the oncoming dog. Again he seized his opponent and
dashed him to the canvas. Red's legs stiffened in one final
convulsion.

"Take that sonofabitching cur out and shoot him," Doc
yelled in Jim's face. "He had that Goddam dog killed, and
didn't have guts to stay long enough to see him die. Five
hundred bucks on a Goddam cur, I don't want to see that
dog again. Shoot him, do you hear?" He continued to
sputter as he strode angrily to his car and drove away.

Jim replaced Tar Baby's collar and lifted him from the
pit. Red's carcass was thrown into the trunk of one of the
cars while most of the satisfied spectators filed to their automobiles. The remainder dismantled the pit and put the sections back on the waiting truck.

Sam stood alone in the clearing and watched Jim leading Tar Baby into the woods. He couldn't believe what he had seen. The quiet added to his feeling of emptiness and made him more aware of being tired. Every nerve had gone into the hope that neither of those dogs would be hurt. Now one was dead and the other was going to be killed.

He ran into the brush after the slight man they called Jim and the limping dog. The man turned his head quickly when he heard the sound, but relaxed when he saw Sam. "What's the matter, kid? Is someone coming?"

"You're not really going to shoot him, are you?" Sam was out of breath. His voice wavered. "Don't shoot him, mister."

"I've got to do it. Doc pays fifty bucks for every one I condition. I need all I can get. You'd better go away, kid."

Sam tugged at the sleeve of the flannel shirt and looked up onto an expressionless face. "Please don't kill him, mister. Give him to me. Nobody will know, and I'll be good to him. Please, mister; let me have him. I want a dog bad, and he's the nicest one I ever saw." Sam's mother would have told him to quit whining at this point. His eyes seemed full, and he needed to blow his nose.

"I can't, kid; Doc told me what to do. He means business and people don't cross him."

"He won't know," Sam pleaded. "I won't tell anybody where I got Tar Baby. Please, mister."

Jim spoke softly, "I'd like to give him to you, kid, but I can't take a chance on Doc finding out about it. Where do you live, anyhow?"

"Right on the city limits of Wahlburg," he answered eagerly. He'll have lots of room to run around, and I sure would be good to him. Can I have him?"

"How big a place you got?"

"We've got a big yard and there's a patch of woods and a creek out back of the house."

"You couldn't let this dog run loose in town, kid."

"We've got room enough to build a pen if I need to."
“Okay, kid. I should know better, but Wahlburg is fifty miles from Hamilton City, and maybe Doc won’t find out. All right, you can have him. You’ve got to be careful though. Don’t ever let another dog start anything with him. He’ll be all right if he isn’t crossed. Just say you found him in the woods, and I’ll try to square it with Doc if he hears anything. Here, you can have this chain. Keep him away from other dogs for a few weeks. He’ll be all right. Here’s his papers if you want ’em.”

Within seconds Sam was alone. He wiped his nose on his sleeve. He felt the life of Tar Baby through the chain he held in his hand, and felt a sudden jealousy when Tar Baby tried to follow Jim. “C’mere, boy,” Sam said, and the dog turned his head toward him, explored Sam’s hand with his nose, and then caressed his fingers with a more intimate pink tongue. Unnoticed hairs from the defeated red dog stuck to the back of Sam’s hand. Dried saliva made the dog’s neck coarse, and Sam tried to rub softness into it. The cuts were still bleeding slightly and Sam could see the thickness of the skin at the moist openings. “Don’t worry, boy. You won’t be hurt any more. You’re my dog now, and I’ll take good care of you. That old Dr. Cartwright was mean to you, but you won’t have to fight any more.”

The dog responded by pressing his shoulder harder under Sam’s arm. Sam had to shift his weight in order to keep his balance. He laughed and stood erect when the dog tried to renew the exchange of affection.

“C’mon, boy,” he urged, and started the erratic journey to his makeshift home on the hilltop. Tar Baby followed obediently and bumped the knees of his new friend when he walked too far forward. Sam wanted the dog to touch him; it confirmed his possession.

When the pair reached the huge rock with a tree growing through it, Sam fastened an end of the chain at the bottom of the trunk. Then he followed a small animal trail to a spring he had found on one of his previous visits. After getting a large can which he had left on the branch of a bush, and dipping carefully to avoid disturbing the clearness of the water, he returned to the waiting dog. He poured the contents of his can into a hollow in the split rock and
watched Tar Baby lap the water in great gulps. He refilled
the can and poured more, reserving a third canful for him­
self. He started a cooking fire just beyond the length of the
curious dog’s chain.

He laid his food out near the fire and supported a coffee
can of water over the fire with two rocks. Some salt and
halves of potatoes were dropped into the water when it
began to simmer. Tar Baby licked his chops noisily when
Sam put strips of bacon on a sharpened green branch.

A few minutes later, Sam fished his boiled potatoes from
the coffee can and placed them on the paper that had
held the bacon. He was hungry, and crisp bacon and boiled
potatoes would taste mighty good.

The evening star was plainly visible when he took half
of the food he had cooked to the big dog that danced ex­
pectantly on the end of his chain. “Don’t bite me now,”
Sam cautioned while he proffered the food on his hand.
One piece of bacon fell on the rock under the pressure of
Tar Baby’s greed, but he found it in an instant. “You eat
faster than anybody I ever saw; you really must be hungry.
I’ll get some more for you.” He brought half of his portion
back to the eager dog. “We just don’t have enough to fill
you up,” he laughed, as the dog licked his hands in search of
more food. “I’ve gotta eat, too,” he explained. “We don’t
have anything for breakfast now, either.”

The natural walls of the boulders formed a trap for an
accumulation of last year’s leaves. The dog snuffed noisily
and pawed a few leaves in exploration before he sat down
beside Sam. Sam fell asleep while the dog sniffed the evening
air and turned his head in the direction of the slightest
sound.

Sam was awakened during the night by muffled yips, felt
the quick spasms of exhalation in the dog’s body, and won­
dered what the dog was dreaming. He snuggled closer and
soon fell asleep again.

—Dwyer Duncan, Sci. Sr.