The Verdict

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Abstract

THEY WERE OUT in the fields again; the same boy, the same battered old 12-gauge shotgun and the same dog. It was all just as it used to be, but still different. And one of the different things was that Mom was not sitting in the car watching them hunt. Mom never really had approved of his hunting...
Shadar's voice speaking softly, telling the story of his god.

"He taught kindness . . . That man should love his brother . . . Do unto others as you want them to do unto you . . . And the people lived in peace and happiness over the face of the land."

Then he remembered the old man's face just before he died, the curious expression not of fear, but love, almost as if he were really happy.

He rose, brushing the leaves and moss from his tattered robe. He looked back toward the Lost City. The fire still burned making the ruins glow red. Araki looked for a long time, and then he turned his back to it. His shoulders were thrown back and his head high as he walked down the path toward the village. To home and his people.

—Barbara Hands, H. Ec. Sr.

**The Verdict**

THEY WERE OUT in the fields again; the same boy, the same battered old 12-gauge shotgun and the same dog. It was all just as it used to be, but still different. And one of the different things was that Mom was not sitting in the car watching them hunt. Mom never really had approved of his hunting. Not that she minded the idea of killing animals—some people do, you know, it was just that hunting was a little too dangerous.

The dog perked up his ears and listened for the boy. When he located the boy's sound movements he went back to snuffling through the brush. The boy looked at the small dog—delightfully, primitively happy to be hunting again. And the boy saw how eagerly the tail wagged as the dog's nose searched for bird scent. That tail always seemed to wag with the perpetual motion of life, especially when the dog was happy.

The boy looked at the dog, the wagging tail and tried to feel some of the happiness that the dog felt. But it was no good. The boy remembered the last time that he'd seen the dog with Mom. The dog had been happy then, just as he was
now. And the tail had wagged energetically, and the sharp little ears had pointed upward to give his mutt-face that "cute" look. Yes, the dog had been happy then, and the boy had been glad. But then Mom had come up the steps. And she'd walked so slowly. And she had looked so different. So confused. So hurt. And all that Mom could say was, "He tripped me. I fell." She said it over and over and over. "He tripped me. I fell."

The boy looked out at the dog now and the tail wagging and snuffling made him forget the words for a while. But then they were back again. He wondered how long he would hear Mom's voice saying, "He tripped me. I fell."

She'd said them even after Dad had come down stairs to help her. She'd said them all that night. At first she spoke slowly and unbelievingly. Then her voice became pathetic with the physical pain that she felt. And by early morning she was hysterical. She screamed. And the boy would never forget that the dog had tripped her and that she had fallen.

From the bush ahead of the boy came an eager expectant bark, and instinctively he raised the gun toward his shoulder and thumbed the safety off. "Hell, it was out of season anyway. Couldn't shoot any birds now," he thought. More barks exploded from behind the bush, as the dog floundered noisily after a pheasant. An indignant cackling and beating of wings told the boy that the bird had given up trying to outrun the dog, and was flying away. The bush was in the way and he couldn't see the bird. "Just as well," he thought "Might have been tempted to shoot anyway."

The dog returned to the boy with its tongue lolling, the saliva muddy with dirt. The dog seemed to question why the boy hadn't shot. It was peculiar about a dog's eyes. They could look so human sometimes, particularly when they were questioning something.

As the boy looked into the dog's eyes, he heard, "He tripped me." The dog started off to hunt again. "I fell." The boy could feel the tears stinging in his eyes and his jaws clamped together painfully. "Oh, Mom, Mom." He began to sob, and the acid tears burned his eyes. It was the first time that he'd cried since they'd taken her to the hospital. And the crying brought him a great relief, and he lay on the ground for a long time and cried.
The dog came back to the boy, and whined because the boy acted so strangely. Peculiar how a dog could be so human. And finally the boy gave up his crying. He sat on the ground and felt the coolness of the earth refreshing his legs. The dog came next to him, and the boy scratched the pointed, pert ears that gave his mutt face the “cute” look.

Finally the dog tired of this and became anxious to hunt again. He whined impatiently and trotted into the brush. The boy picked up his gun and followed.

They walked for a few hundred yards. The dog kept interrupting his hunting to look back at the boy. It was probably instinctive for the dog to be certain not to range out of gun shot.

The boy watched the dog work and another pheasant was flushed. Once more there was no shot gun noise, and the dog in his animal mind was trying to figure out why the boy did not shoot at the game.

There was no shotgun noise for the dog to thrill to because the boy was lost in thought. For a month now he’d been thinking it over. He’d been thinking of himself as a judge and of the dog as a prisoner, and the judge had decided that the prisoner was guilty.

He could still hear her hysterical voice when the ambulance came to take her to the hospital. “He tripped me. I fell.” The boy guessed that his mother had probably become even more hysterical after the baby had died. “A pregnant woman should never take a dog for a walk,” he’d heard one of the nurses tell another. “She should have had more sense.”

The dog worked up ahead and perked his ears to locate the boy. The boy thumbed the safety off and whistled sharply. The dog froze with his head turned toward the boy. And the animal mind reasoned that game was near, even though he hadn’t smelled it. The boy always whistled like that when game was near. The dog waited expectantly.

He raised the gun to his shoulder and told himself again that the dog was guilty. He was the judge, and the dog was guilty.

Just after the shotgun blast, the dog had a second of trembling excitement. Game! The nose could only mean one thing. Game! The gun never sounded unless there was
game. And then did the animal mind have a few convulsive seconds to reason why the blast had hit him instead?

Several minutes later the boy got to his feet again. He had done the right thing. As a judge he had brought a just verdict.

He walked back to the car alone and decided that he would take some flowers out to his mother's grave that afternoon.

—Jerry Borum, Sci. Sr.

Seven Iron Railings

SEVEN BARS . . . just seven iron railings away from the outside . . . the outside of here—of life . . . freedom itself.

"O.K. Mac, gotta eat yer chow. . . ." The slightly uncomfortable two hundred and twenty-seven pounds confined to the faded brown trousers made the not too tiresome work of jail flunky interesting, if not entertaining—and, profitable, at times. At least, he was paid to watch the occasional "visitor."

I turned, not wanting to—but, I was afraid . . . afraid to stay and look outside . . . I wanted to be out there . . . I turned to the still locked cell door, to the outstretched hand with the tin plate. The very being of the seldom-used county jail swept from the musty straw filled mattress on the sagging bed, to the warm food—the first meal, in the town, that was warm . . . the rest were just sandwiches, oranges, and insults. This meal . . . I wanted this meal to be warm.

The outstretched hand holding the tin plate was on the other side of the grilled gate.

"Could I have some light tonight? So's I can write some letters. I need some paper, too." Did I really expect to get a light . . . and paper? Sonny Boy, this is the grand tradition of the lonely town—the towns of one man . . . mayor, sheriff, judge and jury . . . the man who says 'Do' or 'DON'T' and you'd better do it Yeah, you'd better do it, or here you stay—you stay in this filthy, stinking rat-trap they call a jail. But, maybe this guy isn't so bad . . . maybe . . .