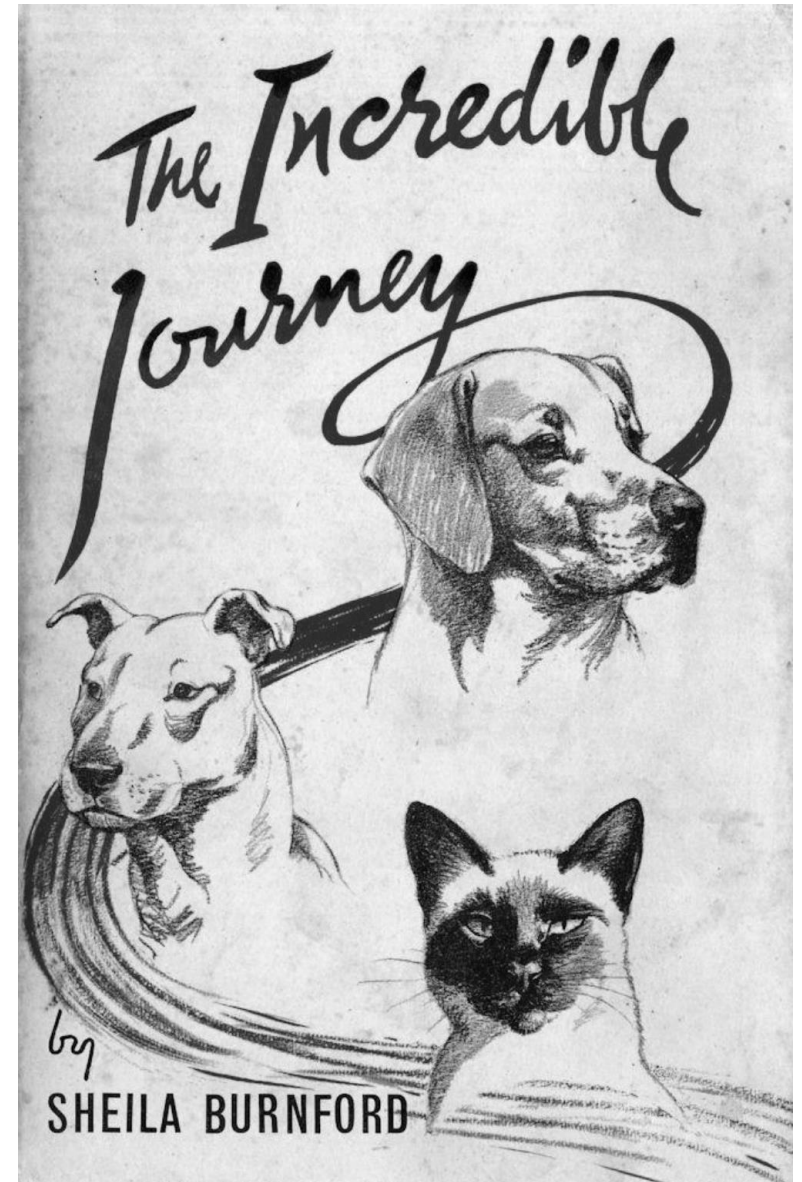


The Incredible Journey

By Sheila Burnford © 1960

Part 3



Nine

OVER TWO hundred miles now lay behind them, and as a group they were whole and intact, but of the three only the cat remained unscathed. The old dog, however, still plodded cheerfully and uncomplainingly along. It was the Labrador who was in really poor condition: his once beautiful gleaming coat was harsh and staring now, his grotesquely swollen face in horrible contrast to his gaunt frame, and the pain in his infected jaw made it almost impossible for him to open his mouth, so that he was virtually starving. The other two now allowed him first access to any newly killed and bleeding animal provided by the cat, and he lived solely on the fresh blood that could be licked from the carcass.

They had slipped into a steady routine during the day; the two dogs trotting along side by side, unconcerned and purposeful, might have seemed two family pets out for a neighbourhood ramble.

They were seen like this one morning by a timber-cruising forester returning to his jeep along an old tote road deep in the Ironmouth Range. They disappeared

round a bend in the distance, and, preoccupied with tree problems, he did not give them a second thought. It was with a considerable shock that he remembered them later on in the day, his mind now registering the fact that there was no human habitation within thirty miles. He told the senior forester, who roared with laughter, then asked him if he had seen any elves skipping around toadstools too?

But inevitably the time was drawing nearer when the disappearance of the animals must be uncovered, the hue and cry begin, and every glimpse or smallest piece of evidence be of value. The forester was able to turn the laugh a week later when his chance encounter was proved to be no dream.

At Heron Lake John Longridge and his brother were making plans for the last trip of the season. In England the excited Hunter family were packed in readiness for the voyage home. Mrs. Oakes was busy in the old stone house, cleaning and polishing, while her husband stacked the wood cellar.

Soon all concerned would be back where they belonged, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle being fitted together; and soon it must be discovered that three of the pieces were missing . . .

Sublimely unaware of the commotion and worry, tears and heartbreak that their absence would cause, the three continued on their way.

The countryside was less wild now, and once or twice they saw small lonely hamlets in the distance. The young dog resolutely avoided these, keeping always to the woods and dense bush wherever possible—much to the disgust of the old dog, who had implicit faith in the helpfulness and lovingkindness of human beings. But the young dog was the leader: however longingly the bull terrier looked towards a distant curl of smoke from a chimney he must turn away.

Late one afternoon they were followed for several miles by a single timber wolf who was probably curious about the cat and was no real menace: however hungry, it would never have risked an encounter with two dogs.

Like all his kind, however, the young dog hated and feared the wolf with some deep primeval instinct which must have had its origin in those mists of time when they shared a common ancestor. He was uneasy and disturbed by the slinking grey shape that merged into the undergrowth every time he looked back to snarl at it.

Unable to shake off the hateful shadow, and aware that the sun was sinking, irritable and exhausted with pain, he chose the lesser of two evils—leaving the bush for a quiet country road with small farms scattered at lonely intervals along it. He hurried his companions on, seeking protection for the night in the form of a barn or even an open field near a farm,

sensing that the wolf would not follow within sight of human habitation.

They approached a small hamlet at dusk, a few small houses clustered around a schoolhouse and a white frame church. When the young dog would have skirted this too, the old terrier suddenly turned mutinous. He was, as usual, hungry; and the sight of the warm lights streaming out from the houses convinced him that this evening there was only one sensible way of obtaining food—from the hand of a human being! His eyes brightening at the thought, he ignored the young dog's warning growl, and trotted on unheeding down the forbidden road towards the houses, his rounded porcine quarters swinging defiantly, his ears laid back in stubborn disregard.

The young dog offered no further resistance. His whole head was throbbing violently with the pain of infection from the quills, and more than anything he wanted time to scratch and scratch, to rub the burning cheek along the ground.

The rebel passed the first few cottages, so snug and inviting to his comfort-loving soul—smoke rising in the still evening air, and the reassuring smell and sounds of humans everywhere. He paused before a small white cottage, snuffing ecstatically the wonderful aroma of cooking drifting out mingled with wood smoke. Licking his chops he walked up the steps, lifted a bold demanding paw and scratched

at the door, then sat down, pricking his ears expectantly.

He was not disappointed. A widening stream of light from the opening door revealed a small girl. The old dog grinned hideously in pleasure, his slanted eyes blinking strangely in the sudden light. There is little to equal a bull terrier's grin, however charmingly presented, for sheer astonishing ugliness.

There was a moment's silence, followed by an urgent wail of "Dad . . ." Then the door slammed shut in his face. Puzzled but persistent, he scratched again, cocking his head to one side, his big triangular ears erect, listening to footsteps scurrying around within. A face appeared at the window. He barked a polite reminder. Suddenly the door was thrown open again and a man rushed out, a bucket of water in his hand, his face convulsed with fury. He hurled the water full in the face of the astonished dog, then grabbed a broom.

"Get out! Get out of here!" yelled the man, brandishing his broom so menacingly that the terrier tucked his tail between his legs and fled, soaking and miserable, towards his waiting companions. He was not afraid, only deeply offended—never in his long life had human beings reacted in such a way to his friendly overtures. Justifiable fury he knew and expected when he had terrorized their pets in the old days; laughter, and sometimes nervousness—

but never a crude, uncivilized reception like this.

Baffled and disappointed, he fell meekly in behind his leader.

Two miles along the road they came to a winding cart track leading uphill to a farm. They crossed the dark fields, startling up an old white horse and some cows, heading for a group of outbuildings clustered together some distance from the farmhouse. A thin curl of smoke rose from the chimney of one. It was a smokehouse, where hams were smoking over a slow hickory fire. Pressing against the faint warmth at the base of the chimney they settled down for the night.

The young dog spent a restless night. The running sores on his face had been extended, by his continuous frantic clawing, into raw inflamed patches over the glands on one side of his neck; and the spreading infection was making him feverish and thirsty. Several times he left the others to drink from a small lake a short distance away, standing chest-deep in the cool, soothing water.

When the old dog woke shivering with cold he was alone. The cat was some distance away, belly to ground and tail twitching excitedly, stalking his breakfast. Stealing through the morning air came a familiar smell of smoke and something cooking—beckoning irresistibly.

The mists were rolling back from the valley, and a

pale sun was lightening the sky when the old dog came through the windbreak of tall Norway pines and sat down outside the farmhouse door. His memory was short; already human beings were back on their rightful pedestals, cornucopias of dog food in their hands. He whined plaintively. At a second, louder whine, several cats appeared from the barn nearby and glared at him with tiger-eyed resentment. At any other time, he would have put them to instant flight; now he had more pressing business and chose to ignore them. The door swung open, a wondrous smell of bacon and eggs surged out, and the terrier drew up all the heavy artillery of his charm: with an ingratiating wag of his tail he glued his ears back, and wrinkled his nose in preparation for his disastrous winning leer. There was an astonished silence, broken by the deep, amused voice of a man. "Well!" said the owner of the voice, surveying his odd visitor, whose eyes were now rolled so far back that they had almost disappeared into his head. He called into the house, and was answered by the pleasant, warm voice of a woman. There was a sound of footsteps. The tail increased its tempo.

The woman stood for a moment in the doorway, looking down in silent astonishment at the white gargoyle on the step, and when he saw her face break into a smile that past master in the art of scrounging proffered a civil paw. She bent down and shook it,

laughing helplessly, then invited him to follow her into the house.

Dignified, the old dog walked in, and gazed at the stove with bland confidence.

He was in luck this time, for there could not have been pleasanter people or a more welcoming house for miles around. They were an elderly couple, James Mackenzie and his wife Nell, living alone now in a big farmhouse which still held the atmosphere of a large, cheerful family living and laughing and growing up in it. They were well used to dogs, for there had been eight children in that house once upon a time, and a consequent succession of pets who had always started their adopted life out in the yard but invariably found their way into the household on the wildest pretexts of the children: misunderstood mongrels, orphaned kittens, sad strays, abandoned otter pups—Nell Mackenzie's soft heart had been as defenceless before them then as it was now.

She gave their visitor a bowl of scraps, which he bolted down in ravenous gulps, looking up then for more. "Why, he's starving!" she exclaimed in horror, and contributed her own breakfast. She petted and fussed over him, accepting him as though the years had rolled back and one of the children had brought home yet another half-starved stray. He basked in this affection, and emptied the bowl almost before it reached the ground. Without a word Mackenzie

passed over his plate as well. Soon the toast was gone too, and a jug of milk; and at last, distended and happy, the old dog stretched out on a rug by the warmth of the stove while Nell cooked another breakfast.

“What is he?” she asked presently. “I’ve never seen anything quite so homely—he looks as though he had been squeezed into the wrong coat, somehow.”

“He’s an English bull,” said her husband, “and a beauty too—a real old bruiser! I love them! He looks as though he’d been in a fight quite recently, yet he must be ten or eleven if he’s a day!” And at the unqualified respect and admiration in the voice, so dear to the heart of a bull terrier—but so seldom forthcoming—the dog thumped his tail agreeably, then rose and thrust his bony head against his host’s knee. Mackenzie looked down, chuckling appreciatively. “As cocksure as the devil—and as irresistible, aren’t you? But what are we going to do with you?”

Nell passed her hand over the dog’s shoulder and felt the scars, then examined them more closely. She looked up, suddenly puzzled. “These aren’t from any dog-fight,” she said. “They’re *claw* marks—like the ones bears leave on fresh wood, only smaller—”

In silence they looked down at the dog by their feet, digesting the implication, the unknown story behind the sinister scars; and they saw now, for the first time, the gathering cloudiness in the depths of the humorous little eyes; the too-thin neck shamed by the newly

distended belly; and they saw that the indefatigable tail which thumped so happily on the floor was ragged and old, with a broken end. This was no bold, aggressive adventurer—only a weary old dog; hungry not only for food but for affection. There was no shadow of doubt in either what they would do—keep him, if he would stay, and give him what he needed.

They searched unavailingly under the white coat and in the pink ears for an identifying registered tattoo, then decided that when Mackenzie went into Deep-water to fetch some new churns later in the day he would make some inquiries there, tell the Provincial Police, and possibly put an advertisement in a city paper. And if nothing came of that . . . “Then I guess we’re landed with you for good, you disreputable old hobo!” said Mackenzie cheerfully, prodding his delighted audience with an experienced foot, so that the dog rolled over on his back with a blissful sigh and invited further attention under his forearms.

When he opened the door that morning Mackenzie had seen a flight of mallards going down in the direction of the small lake fed by the creek running through the farm. It was still early enough to walk over to see if they were still there, so he put a handful of shells in his pocket, took down an old pump gun from the wall and set off, leaving Nell stepping over and around the recumbent white form of their guest

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as she cleared the table. He noticed that an infinitesimal slit of eye followed her every movement.

Halfway over the still misty fields he stopped to load his gun, then walked quietly toward the cover of the alders fringing the little lake. Peering through the branches, he saw six mallards about halfway across, just out of range. With the wind the way it was he might wait all day for a shot, unless something startled them on the other side.

But even as he turned away he saw a disturbance in the reeds across the water. Simultaneously, quacking loudly in alarm, the mallards took off in a body. He fired twice as they came over, one bird plummeting into the water and the other landing with a thud on the shore nearby. He picked this one up, thinking that he would have to bring the light canoe for the other, when he saw to his astonishment a large head of a dog swimming towards it.

The sound of a shot and the splash of a duck had had the same effect on the Labrador as a trumpet call to an old war horse, and drew him as irresistibly. Without a second's hesitation he had plunged in for the retrieve, only to find that he was unable to open his mouth to grasp the heavy duck properly, and was forced to tow it ashore by a wingtip. He emerged from the water twenty feet from the man, the beautiful greenhead trailing from its outstretched wing, the sun striking the iridescent plumage. The Labrador looked doubt-



He emerged from the water twenty feet from the man, the beautiful green head trailing on an outstretched wing.

fully at the stranger, and Mackenzie stared back in open-mouthed amazement. For a moment the two were frozen in a silent tableau, then the man recovered himself.

"Good dog!" he said quietly, holding out one hand. "Well done! Now bring it to me." The dog advanced hesitantly, dragging the bird.

"Give!" said Mackenzie, as the dog still hesitated.

The dog walked slowly forward, releasing his hold, and now Mackenzie saw with horror that one side of his face was swollen out of all proportion, the skin stretched so tautly that the eyes were mere slits and one rigid lip pulled back over the teeth. Sticking out like evil little pins on a rounded cushion of raw skin were several quills, deeply embedded. Every rib showed up under the wet coat, and when the dog shook himself Mackenzie saw him stagger.

Mackenzie made up his mind quickly: no matter whose, this dog was desperately in need of urgent treatment; the quills must be extracted at once before the infection spread further. He picked up the ducks, patted the dog's head reassuringly, then "Heel!" he said firmly. To his relief the dog fell in behind unquestioningly, following him back to the farmhouse, his resistance weakened to the point where he longed only to be back in the well-ordered world of human beings, that solid world where men commanded and dogs obeyed.

Crossing the fields, the stranger padding trustingly at his heels, Mackenzie suddenly remembered the other dog, and frowned in bewilderment. How many more unlikely dogs in need of succour would he lead into the farmhouse kitchen today—a lame poodle this afternoon, a halt beagle tonight?

His long, early morning shadow fell over the wood-pile, and the sleepy Siamese cat sunning himself there lay camouflaged by stillness as he passed, unobserved by the man, but acknowledged by the dog with a brief movement of his tail and head.

Mackenzie finished cleaning up the Labrador's face nearly an hour later. He had extracted the quills with a pair of pliers; one had worked its way into the mouth and had to be removed from within, but the dog had not growled once, only whimpering when the pain was most intense, and had shown pathetic gratitude when it was over, trying to lick the man's hands. The relief must have been wonderful, for the punctures were now draining freely, and already the swelling was subsiding.

All through the operation the door leading out of the kitchen to a back room had shaken and rattled to the accompaniment of piteous whining. The old dog had been so much in the way when Mackenzie was working, pushing against his hand and obviously worried that they were going to do his companion some harm, that Nell had finally enticed him out

with a bone, then quickly shut the door on his unsuspecting face.

Now, still deeply suspicious of foul play, he was hurling himself against the door with all his weight, but they did not want to let him in yet until the other dog had finished a bowl of milk. Mackenzie went to wash his hands, and his wife listened to the anxious running feet and the thuds that followed until she could bear it no longer, certain that he would harm himself. She opened the door and the old dog shot out in a fury, prepared to do battle on behalf of his friend—but he drew up all standing, a comical, puzzled expression on his face as he saw him peacefully lapping up a bowl of milk. Presently they sat down together by the door and the young dog patiently suffered the attentions of the other.

It was evident by their recognition and devotion that they came from the same home—a home which did not deserve to have them, as Nell said angrily, still upset by the gaunt travesty of a dog that had appeared; but Mackenzie pointed out that they must have known care and appreciation, as both had such friendly, assured dispositions. This made it all the harder to understand why they should be roaming such solitary and forbidding country, he admitted. But perhaps their owner had died, and they had run away together, or perhaps they had been lost from some car travelling across country, and were trying

to make their way back to familiar territory. The possibilities were endless, and only one thing was certain—that they had been on the road long enough for scars to heal and quills to work their way inside a mouth; and long enough to know starvation.

“So they could have come from a hundred miles away or more,” said Mackenzie. “From Manitoba, even. I wonder what they can have lived on, all that time—”

“Hunting? Scrounging at other farms? Stealing, perhaps!” suggested Nell, who had watched with amusement in the kitchen mirror her early morning visitor sliding a piece of bacon off a plate after breakfast when he thought her back was turned.

“Well, the pickings must have been pretty lean,” said her husband thoughtfully. “The Labrador looks like a skeleton—he wouldn’t have got much farther. I’ll shut them in the stable when I go to Deepwater; we don’t want them wandering off again. Now, Nell, are you quite sure that you want to take on two strange dogs? It may be a long time before they’re traced—they may never be.”

“I want them,” she said simply, “for as long as they will stay. And in the meantime we must find something else to call them besides ‘Hi!’ or ‘Good dog.’ I’ll think of something while you’re away,” she added, “and I’ll take some more milk out to the stable during the morning.”

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From his sunny observation post on the woodpile, the cat had watched Mackenzie cross the yard and usher the two dogs into a warm, sweet-smelling stable, shutting the door carefully behind him. Shortly afterwards the truck rattled down the farm road, then all was quiet again. A few curious farm cats were emboldened to approach the woodpile, resenting this exotic stranger who had taken possession of their favourite sunning place. The stranger was not fond of other cats at the best of times, even his own breed, and farm cats were beyond the pale altogether. He surveyed them balefully, considering his strategy. After two or three well-executed skirmishes the band dispersed, and the black-masked pirate returned to his lair to sleep.

Halfway through the morning he awoke, stretched, and jumped down, looking warily around before stalking over to the stable door. He bleated plaintively and was answered by a rustle of straw within. Leisurely, he gathered himself for a spring, then leaped effortlessly at the latch on the door. But he was not quite quick enough; the latch remained in position. Annoyed, unused to failure, he sprang again, this time making sure of success. For a split second, almost in the same impetus as the spring, one paw was curved around the wooden block handle supporting his weight, while the other paw released the latch above and the door swung open. Purring with restrained pleasure, the cat



He surveyed them balefully, considering his strategy.

walked in, suffering a boisterous welcome from his old friend before investigating the empty bowl. Disappointed, he left the stable, the two dogs following him into the sunlit yard, and disappeared into the henhouse. Several enraged and squawking fowls rushed out as he made his way towards the nesting-boxes. Curving his paws expertly around a warm brown egg, he held it firmly, then cracked it with a neat sideways tap from a long incisor tooth, the contents settling intact on the straw. He had brought this art to perfection after years of egg stealing. He lapped with delicate unhurried thoroughness, helping himself to two more before retiring to his woodpile again.

When Mackenzie drove into the farmyard later on in the afternoon he was surprised to see the two dogs sleeping in the sun by the shelter of the cattle trough. They stood by the truck wagging their tails in recognition as he unloaded, then followed him into the farmhouse.

“Did you let them out of the stable, Nell?” he asked, opening a parcel at the kitchen table and sheepishly dropping a meaty bone into the sharklike mouth that had opened beside him.

“Of course not,” she answered in surprise. “I took them out some milk, but I remember being particularly careful to close the door.”

“Perhaps the latch wasn’t down properly,” said Mackenzie. “Anyway, they’re still here. The Lab’s face looks better already—he’ll be able to eat a decent meal by this evening, I hope; I’d like to get some meat on those bones.”

Nothing was known of the runaways in Deepwater, he reported, but they must have come from the east, for a mink breeder at Archer Creek had spoken of chasing a white dog off his doorstep the night before, mistaking it for a local white mongrel well known for his thieving ways. Most men thought the Labrador could have been lost from a hunting trip, but nobody could account for an unlikely bull terrier as his companion. The Indian Agent had offered to take the Labrador if nobody turned up to claim him, as his own hunting dog had recently died . . .

“Indeed he will not!” Nell broke in indignantly.

“All right,” said her husband, laughing. “I told him we would never separate them, and of course we’ll keep them as long as we can—I’d hate to think of one of my own dogs running loose at this time of year. But I warn you, Nell, that if they are heading somewhere with a purpose, nothing on earth will keep them here—even if they’re dropping on their feet, the instinct will pull them on. All we can do is keep them shut in for a while and feed them up. Then, if they leave, at least we’ve given them a better start.”

After supper that night the Mackenzies and their

guests moved into the little back room: a cozy, pleasantly shabby place, its shelves still filled with children's books, tarnished trophies and photographs; while snowshoes, mounted fish and grandchildren's drawings jostled one another for space on the walls with award ribbons, pedigrees and a tomahawk. Mackenzie sat at a table, puffing peacefully on a pipe, and working at the minute, intricate rigging on a model schooner, while his wife read *Three Men in a Boat* aloud to him. The replete and satisfied Labrador had eaten ravenously that evening, cleaning up bowls of fresh milk and plates of food with a bottomless appetite. Now he lay stretched full length under the table in the deep sleep of exhaustion and security, and the terrier snored gently from the depths of an old leather sofa, his head pillowed on a cushion, four paws in the air.

The only disturbance during the evening was the noise of a tremendous cat battle out in the yard. Both dogs sat up immediately and, to the astonishment of the elderly couple watching, wagged their tails in unison, wearing almost identical expressions of pleased and doting interest.

Later on they followed Mackenzie out quite willingly to the stable, where he piled some hay in a corner of a loose box for them, filled the bowl with water, then shut the door firmly behind him—satisfying himself that the latch was down and firmly in place, and would remain so even when the door was

rattled. Shortly afterwards the lights downstairs in the farmhouse went out, followed in a little while by the bedroom light upstairs.

The dogs lay quietly in the darkness, waiting. Soon there was a soft scrabbling of paws on wood, the latch clicked, and the door opened a fraction, just enough to admit the slight body of the cat. He trampled and kneaded the hay for a while, purring in a deep rumble, before curling up in a ball at the old dog's chest. There were several contented sighs, then silence reigned in the stable.

When the young dog awoke in the cold hour before dawn only a few pale laggard stars were left to give the message which his heart already knew—it was time to go, time to press on westwards.

The yawning, stretching cat joined him at the stable door; then the old dog, shivering in the cold dawn wind; and for a few minutes the three sat motionless, listening, looking across the still dark farmyard, where already they could hear the slight stirrings of the animals. It was time to be gone; there were many miles to be travelled before the first halt in the warmth of the sun. Silently they crossed the yard and entered the fields leading to the dark, massed shadows of the trees in the farthest corner, their paws making three sets of tracks in the light rime of frost that covered the field; and even as they turned on to a deer trail



*"Luath has taken them home—he has taken them
all back to his own home!"*

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leading westward through the bush, a light came on upstairs in the farmhouse . . .

Ahead of them lay the last fifty miles of the journey. It was as well that they had been fed and rested. Most of the way now lay through the Strellon Game Reserve, country that was more desolate and rugged than anything they had yet encountered. The nights would be frosty, the going perilous and exhausting; there could be no help expected from any human agency. Worst of all, their leader was already weak and unfit.

doubtful about his reunion; ever since he had been old enough to think at all he had known that, just as surely as Bodger belonged to him and was always there, so did he belong to the bull terrier—and his homecoming would be all the present that his dog would need.

And their father, seeing the endless arrowheads of mallards in the Canadian dawn, knew that soon he and the eager Luath would see them again, over the Delta marshlands and the stubble fields in the west . . .

A thousand miles westward of the liner, John Longridge sat at his desk, a letter from his god-daughter in his hand, his thoughts as bleak as the empty, unresponsive house to which he had returned only a short while ago. He read the excited plans for her reunion with Tao—and of course the dogs—with a sinking heart, then laid the letter down unfinished, his despair deepening as he looked at the calendar: if the Hunters caught an early plane they would be home tomorrow night; in twenty-four hours' time he must give them his heartbreaking news—his charges were gone; and he had no idea where, or what had befallen them.

Mrs. Oakes was equally miserable. Between them they had pieced together the fate of his charred note, and the course of confusion which had enabled three disparate animals to disappear without trace, and with perfect timing and perception. It was this perfection

Ten

PIECES OF a jigsaw puzzle were gradually joining together, and the picture was taking shape. In eastern Canada a liner was steaming up the St. Lawrence River, the heights of Quebec receding in the distance as she made her way to Montreal. Leaning against the railings on the upper deck, watching the panorama of the river, were the Hunters, returning from their long stay in England.

The children, Peter and Elizabeth, were wildly excited, and had hardly left the deck since the liner had entered the Gulf. Ever since they had wakened that morning, they had been counting the hours until their arrival home. There was all the joy and excitement of seeing their own homeland again, and soon their friends, their home and possessions—and above all they could not wait to see their pets. Over and over again Elizabeth had discussed their first meeting, for she was secretly longing to be reassured that Tao would not have forgotten her. She had bought him a red leather collar as a present.

Peter was perfectly happy and not in any way

which had convinced him that his charges had not run away—if they had been unhappy, they could have gone at any time during the months of their stay.

✱ He had already considered every possible catastrophe that could have overtaken them—death on the road, poison, traps, theft, disused wells—but not by the wildest stretch of imagination could he make any one of them account for three animals of such different temperaments. Nor could he understand how such a distinctive trio could pass unremarked in this small community: he had already spoken to some of Bodger's friends at the school, and not one sharp-eyed child had seen them that last morning, or any strange car, or in fact anything out of the ordinary; and Longridge knew that the area covered by rural school children was immense. The vast network of the Provincial Police could report nothing, either.

And yet he must have something more concrete than this to offer the Hunters tomorrow—if not a hope, at least a clear-cut finality.

He pressed his aching head into his hands and forced himself to set his thoughts out rationally: animals just did not vanish into thin air, so there must be some reasonable explanation for their disappearance, some clue as obvious and simple as the day-to-day pattern of their lives. A half-buried recollection stirred uneasily in his memory, but he could not identify it.

It was growing dark, and he switched on a lamp and

moved over to light the fire. The silence in the room was oppressive. As he put a match to the kindling and watched the flames leap up, he thought of the last time he had sat by it: saw again a pair of dreaming sapphire eyes in their proud masked setting; tenanted his armchair with a luxuriously sprawling white form; and returned to the shadowy corner its listening, grieving ghost . . .

Again the half-submerged memory distracted him: Luath's eyes . . . some difference in the pattern of his behaviour . . . Luath's behaviour on the last morning, the gesture of his unexpected paw . . . With a sudden flash of insight, he understood at last.

The door opened and he turned to Mrs. Oakes. "I know now—I know where they have gone," he said slowly. "Luath has taken them home—he has taken them all back to his own home!"

Mrs. Oakes looked at him in incredulous silence for a moment, then "No!" she burst out impulsively. "No—they couldn't do that! It's not possible—why, it must be nearly three hundred miles! And someone would have seen them—someone would have told us . . ." She broke off, dismayed, remembering that neither dog wore a collar. The terrier would carry no identifying marks, either, as he had been registered in England.

"They wouldn't be where anyone would see them," said Longridge thoughtfully. "Travelling by instinct, they would simply go west by the most direct route—

straight across country, over the Ironmouth Range.”

“Over the Ironmouth?” echoed Mrs. Oakes in horror. “Then there’s no use hoping any more, if you’re right,” she said flatly. “There’s bears and wolves and all manner of things, and if they weren’t eaten up the first day they’d starve to death.”

She looked so stricken and forlorn that Longridge suggested there was a good chance that they had been befriended by some remote prospector or hunter; perhaps, he enlarged, even now making his way to a telephone . . .

But Mrs. Oakes was inconsolable.

“Don’t let’s fool ourselves any more, Mr. Longridge,” she broke in. “I daresay a *young* dog could cross that country, and possibly even a cat—for there’s nothing like a cat to look after itself—but you know as well as I do that old Bodger couldn’t last ten miles! He used to be tired out after I’d walked him to my sister’s and back. Oh, I know that half of it was put on to get something out of me,” she admitted with a watery smile, catching Longridge’s eye, “but it’s a fact. No dog as old as that could go gallivanting across a wilderness and live for more than a day or two.”

Her words fell away into a silence and they both looked out at the ominous dusk.

“You’re right, Mrs. Oakes,” said Longridge wearily at last. “We’ll just have to face it—the old fellow is almost certainly dead. After all, it’s been nearly four

weeks. And I wouldn’t give a candle for Tao’s chances either,” he added, “if we’re going to be honest. Siamese can’t stand the cold. But if they *did* make for their own home there’s a chance at least that a big powerful dog like Luath would get there.”

“That Luath!” said Mrs. Oakes darkly. “Leading that gentle old lamb to his death! And that unnatural cat egging him on, no doubt. Not that I ever had any favourites, but . . .”

The door shut, and Longridge knew that behind it she wept for them all.

Now that Longridge had his conviction to work on he wasted no time.

He called the Chief Ranger of Lands and Forests, and received assurance that word would be circulated throughout the department, and the game wardens and foresters contacted—tomorrow.

The Chief Ranger suggested calling a local bush pilot, who flew hunters into the remoter parts of the bush and knew most of the Indian guides.

The pilot was out on a trip and would not return until tomorrow; his wife suggested the editor of the rural section of the local newspaper.

The editor was still not back from covering a ploughing match; his mother said that the hydro maintenance crew covered a large area of the country . . .

The Line Superintendent said that he would be able to get in touch with the crews in the morning; he

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suggested the rural telephone supervisor, who was a clearinghouse of information for miles around . . .

Everyone was sympathetic and helpful—but he was no farther on. He postponed the probable frustration of hearing that the supervisor would not be back from visiting her niece across the river until tomorrow, or that a storm had swept all the rural lines down, and searched for a map of the area.

He found a large-scale one, then drew a connecting line between his own small township and the university town where the Hunters lived, marking down the place names through which it passed. He found to his dismay that there were few of these, the line passing mostly through uninhabited regions of lakes and hills. The last forty or fifty miles seemed particularly grim and forbidding, most of it being in the Strellon Game Reserve. His hopes sank lower and lower, and he felt utterly despondent, bitterly regretting his offer to take the animals in the first place. If only he had kept quiet and minded his own business, they would all be alive now; for he was convinced, after looking at the map, that death through exposure, exhaustion, or starvation must have been inevitable.

And tomorrow the Hunters would be home again . . . Dejectedly he picked up the phone and asked for the rural supervisor . . .

Late that night the telephone rang. The telephone operator at Lintola—Longridge glanced at the map to

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find Lintola a good many miles south of his line—had some information: the schoolteacher had mentioned that the little Nurmi girl had rescued a half-drowned Siamese cat from the flooded River Keg, about two weeks ago, but it had disappeared again a few days afterwards. If Mr. Longridge would call Lintola 29 ring 4 tomorrow at noon she would try and have the child there and he could talk to her himself. The supervisor had one other piece of information which she offered rather diffidently for what it was worth—old Jeremy Aubyn, who lived up at the Doranda mine, had talked about “visitors” when he came in for his monthly mail collection, whereas everybody knew that the last visitor who had made the twelve-mile walk through the bush to the mine had been his brother who had been dead for the last three years—poor old man. His only elaboration had been that they were “delightful people” . . . Old Mr. Aubyn had lived so long with only wild animals for company that he might easily be confused, she added delicately.

Longridge thanked her warmly, and put the receiver back, picking up the map. He discounted the information about the old recluse at the Doranda mine—who had probably met some prospectors or Indians—and concentrated on Lintola. It looked as though he had been right, then—they were indeed making for their own home. Two weeks ago, he puzzled, the cat had been alive, and, according to Longridge’s map, must

have travelled over a hundred miles. But what had happened to the other two? Must he now face the probability that Luath, too, was dead? Drowned possibly, as the cat would surely have been except for a little girl . . .

Lying awake in the dark that night, unable to sleep, he thought that he would have given anything to feel the heavy thud on the bed that used to announce the old dog's arrival. How extremely unloving and intolerant he had felt so often, waking in the middle of the night to the relentless shoving and pushing of his undesirable and selfish bedfellow.

"Tonight," he reflected wryly, "I'd give him the whole bed! I'd even sleep in the basket myself—if only he would come back!"

Eleven

LONGRIDGE'S HOURS of telephoning the night he returned had brought results; and in the following week he and the Hunters spent many hours patiently tracking down evidence which was sometimes so conflicting and confusing that it was useless, and sometimes so coincidental that it was difficult to believe. Sometimes they felt wearily that every man, woman or child who had seen a cat or a dog walking along a road in the last five years had called to tell them so. But on the whole everyone had been extraordinarily helpful and kind, and they had evidence of several genuine encounters. When the results had been sifted down, they bore out Longridge's original guess as to the line of travel—the dogs (nothing further had been heard of the cat) had taken an almost perfect compass course due west, and the line he had drawn on the map had been remarkably accurate.

The brother of one of the bush pilot's Indian guides had met a cousin recently returned from rice harvesting who had some wild story of a cat and dog appearing out of the night and casting a spell over the rice crop

so that it multiplied a thousandfold; and the little girl called Helvi Nurmi, her voice distressed and tearful, had described in detail the beautiful Siamese cat who had stayed for so short a time with her. Somewhere in the Ironmouth Range a forester had reported seeing two dogs; and a surly farmer had been overheard in Joe Wood's General Store (Public Telephone), Philipville, saying that if he could lay hands on a certain white dog ("Ugly as sin he was—a great vicious powerful beast!") who had killed a flock of prize-winning chickens and savagely beaten up his poor peace-loving collie, he would break every bone in his body!

Peter had smiled for the first time on hearing this: it had conjured up for him a vivid picture of Bodger in his aggressive element, thoroughly enjoying himself in a fight, cheerfully wicked and unrepentant as ever. He would rather have heard this than anything, for he knew that his unquenchable, wayward old clown was not made for sadness or uncertainty. His deep grief he kept to himself, and would not undermine it now with this softening hope: Bodger was dead; Luath almost certainly so; and his conviction was steady and unalterable.

Elizabeth's attitude was the complete reverse of her brother's: she was completely and utterly convinced that her Tao was alive, and that sooner or later he would return. Nothing could shake her confidence,

even though there had been no word of her cat since he had left the Nurmis' so long ago and so many miles away. She dismissed all tactful efforts to explain the odds against his return—someday, somehow, a penitent Siamese would reappear, and, after a scolding due to a thoughtless truant, he would receive with pleasure and surprise his new red collar . . .

But she was the only one who held this cheerful confidence. After the kindly James Mackenzie had telephoned with the news that both dogs had been alive ten days ago, the family had pored over the map and seen the barrier that stretched between them and any admitted hope: wild, lonely terrain, rugged and cruel enough to beat down the endurance of any fresh and powerful dog, let alone the sick, half-starved, exhausted one that Mackenzie had described, leader and part sight for another whose willing heart could not withstand for long the betrayal of his years. All that could be hoped for now was that the end of their long journey had come quickly and mercifully in that wilderness.

Longridge was visiting the Hunters; and, partly to get away from the depressing telephone calls from well-meaning but ill-informed people, and partly because it was Peter's twelfth birthday the following Sunday, he suggested that they all go and camp out in the Hunters' summer cottage on Lake Windigo.

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Even though it had been closed for the winter, they could take sleeping bags, using only the living-room and kitchen which could be warmed by the Quebec heater.

At first there had been some qualms from Elizabeth about leaving the house in case Tao should choose that week end to return, but Longridge showed her that Lake Windigo lay on the direct westward route that he had traced on the map, and reminded her that Tao knew the surrounding area for miles from his many expeditions with the dogs. Elizabeth packed the red collar and seemed satisfied—too easily, he suspected, dreading her disillusionment.

The cottage was full of memories, but it was easier to accustom the mind to new ones and train it to the loss in surroundings that were so different at this time of year. It was as if they were discovering new land; a cold lake empty of boats, the few cottages nearby all blindly shuttered, locked and empty. Trails that they did not even know existed were apparent, now that the trees were bare and the undergrowth had died down. Peter had a new camera, and spent hours stalking chipmunks, squirrels and birds with it. Elizabeth spent most of the days in a precarious treehouse they had built the previous summer between three great birches on the lake shore.

On the last afternoon, the Sunday of Peter's birthday, they decided to make a last expedition,

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taking the old Allen Lake Trail, then cutting off up the face of the hill to Lookout Point, and returning by the lake shore. It was an exhilarating walk through the crisp, clear air, the leaves thick and soft along the quiet trails, and over everything the indefinable healing peace and stillness of the northland bush.

They walked for the most part in companionable silence, each busy with his own thoughts. To Jim Hunter a walk without a dog lacked savour—and he remembered other autumn days when, gun in hand, he had walked through this same peaceful solitude, Luath ranging from side to side: the excited summons to a treed partridge, and the gentleness of his dog's mouth around the soft fallen bird; then dawns and dusks on Manitoba marshes and lakes crowded his memory—freezing hours of patient waiting shared in canoes and blinds and stubble fields. The thought of Luath's last retrieve as Mackenzie had described it affected Hunter more than anything else; for he knew the frustrated humiliation his dog would feel with a pain-locked mouth and a bird to be brought in.

Peter had taken a short cut up the steep rockbound side of the hill. He sat on a log, staring into space, and he too remembered this time last year—when he had tried to train Bodger as a gun dog by throwing a stuffed leather glove into the bush after firing a

BB gun: the willing co-operation and eager retrieves the first day; then, increasingly limp-tailed boredom and sulky ears, followed by deepening deafness, limping paws, and an unbearable air of martyrdom; and terminated two days running so subtly, by Bodger's appearance out of the bush with a diligent, puzzled expression—but no leather glove. The corners of Peter's mouth lifted when he remembered the scene that followed—the third day's throw and shot; then his quiet stalk after his White Hope into the depths of the bush—and the wily Bodger furiously digging a third glove grave . . .

He sighed now—in his sudden loneliness rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand—and picked up his camera, for he could hear his family coming.

They sat for a long time on the flat rocks of the Lookout Hill, where long ago the Indians had built their warning signal fires, looking across the endless chains of lakes and tree-covered hills to the distant blur that was the great Lake Superior. It was very peaceful and quiet; a chickadee sang his poignant little piece for them, and the inevitable whisky-jack arrived on soundless wings to pick up cooky crumbs from within a few feet. Everyone was silent and pre-occupied.

Suddenly Elizabeth stood up.

"Listen!" she said. "Listen, Daddy—I can hear a dog barking!"

Complete and utter silence fell as everyone strained their ears in the direction of the hills behind. No one heard anything.

"You're imagining things," said her mother. "Or perhaps it was a fox. Come along, we must start back."

"Wait, wait! Just one minute—you'll be able to hear it in a minute, too," whispered Elizabeth, and her mother, remembering the child's hearing was still young and acute enough to hear the squeaking noise of bats and other noises lost forever to adults—and now even to Peter—remained silent.

Elizabeth's tense, listening expression changed to a slowly dawning smile. "It's Luath!" she announced matter-of-factly. "I know his bark!"

"Don't do this to us, Liz," said her father gently, disbelieving. "It's . . ."

Now Peter thought he heard something too: "Shhh . . ."

There was silence again, everyone straining to hear in an agony of suspense. Nothing was heard. But Elizabeth had been so convinced, the knowledge written so plainly on her face, that now Jim Hunter experienced a queer, urgent expectancy, every nerve in his body tingling with certain awareness that something was going to happen. He rose and hurried down the narrow path to where it joined the broader track leading around the hill. "Whistle, Dad!" said Peter breathlessly, behind him.

The sound rang out piercingly shrill and sweet, and almost before the echo rebounded a joyous, answering bark rang around the surrounding hills.

They stood there in the quiet afternoon, their taut bodies awaiting the relief of suspense; they stood at the road's end, waiting to welcome a weary traveller who had journeyed so far, with such faith, along it. They had not long to wait.

Hurting through the bushes on the high hillside of the trail a small, black-tipped wheaten body leaped the last six feet down with careless grace and landed softly at their feet. The unearthly, discordant wail of a welcoming Siamese rent the air.

Elizabeth's face was radiant with joy. She kneeled, and picked up the ecstatic, purring cat. "Oh, Tao!" she said softly, and as she gathered him into her arms he wound his black needle-tipped paws lovingly around her neck. "Tao!" she whispered, burying her nose in his soft, thyme-scented fur, and Tao tightened his grip in such an ecstasy of love that Elizabeth nearly choked.

Longridge had never thought of himself as being a particularly emotional man, but when the Labrador appeared an instant later, a gaunt, stare-coated shadow of the beautiful dog he had last seen, running as fast as his legs would carry him towards his master, all his soul shining out of sunken eyes, he felt a lump in his throat, and at the strange, inarticulate half-

strangled noises that issued from the dog when he leaped at his master, and the expression on his friend's face, he had to turn away and pretend to loosen Tao's too loving paws.

Minutes passed; everyone had burst out talking and chattering excitedly, gathered around the dog to stroke and pat and reassure, until he too threw every vestige of restraint to the winds, and barked as if he would never stop, shivering violently, his eyes alight and alive once more and never leaving his master's face. The cat, on Elizabeth's shoulder, joined in with raucous howls; everyone laughed, talked or cried at once, and for a while there was pandemonium in the quiet wood.

Then, suddenly—as though the same thought had struck them all simultaneously—there was silence. No one dared to look at Peter. He was standing aside, aimlessly cracking a twig over and over again until it became a limp ribbon in his hands. He had not touched Luath, and turned away now when the dog at last came over, including him in an almost human round of greeting.

"I'm glad he's back, Dad," was all he said. "And your old Taocat, too!" he added to Elizabeth, with a difficult smile. Elizabeth, the factual, the matter-of-fact, burst into tears. Peter scratched Tao behind the ears, awkward, embarrassed. "I didn't expect anything else—I told you that. I tell you what," the

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boy continued, with a desperate cheerfulness, avoiding the eyes of his family, "you go on down—I'll catch up with you later. I want to go back to the Lookout and see if I can get a decent picture of that whisky-jack." There will never be a more blurred picture of a whisky-jack, said Uncle John grimly to himself. On an impulse he spoke aloud.

"How about if I came too, Peter? I could throw the crumbs and perhaps bring the bird nearer?" Even as he spoke he could have bitten back the words, expecting a rebuff, but to his surprise the boy accepted his offer.

They watched the rest of the family wending their way down the trail, Tao still clutched in Elizabeth's arms, gentle worshipping Luath restored at last to the longed-for position at his master's heels.

The two remaining now returned to Lookout Point. They took some photographs. They prised an odd-shaped fungus growth off a tree. They found, incredibly, the cylindrical core of a diamond drill. And all the time they talked: they talked of rockets, orbits, space; gravely they pondered the seven stomachs of a cow; tomorrow's weather; but neither mentioned dogs.

Now, still talking, they were back at the fork of the trail; Longridge looked surreptitiously at his watch: it was time to go. He looked at Peter. "We'd better g — " he started to say, but his voice trailed

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off as he saw the expression on the face of the tense, still, frozen boy beside him, then followed the direction of his gaze . . .

Down the trail, out of the darkness of the bush and into the light of the slanting bars of sunlight, joggling along with his peculiar nautical roll, came—Ch. Boroughcastle Brigadier of Doune.

Boroughcastle Brigadier's ragged banner of a tail streamed out behind him, his battle-scarred ears were upright and forward, and his noble pink and black nose twitched, straining to encompass all that his short gaze was denied. Thin and tired, hopeful, happy—and hungry, his remarkable face alight with expectation—the old warrior was returning from the wilderness. Bodger, beautiful for once, was coming as fast as he could.

He broke into a run, faster and faster, until the years fell away, and he hurled himself towards Peter.

And as he had never run before, as though he would outdistance time, Peter was running towards his dog.

John Longridge turned away, then, and left them, an indistinguishable tangle of boy and dog, in a world of their own making. He started down the trail as in a dream, his eyes unseeing.

Halfway down he became aware of a small animal running at lightning speed towards him. It swerved past his legs with an agile twist and he caught a brief

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glimpse of a black-masked face and a long black tail before it disappeared up the trail in the swiftness of a second.

It was Tao, returning for his old friend, that they might end their journey together.



Peter hurled himself towards his dog.