

ORBIT

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A STERLING PUBLICATION

Beast in the House

by Michael Shaara

THE DOG walked out of the trees on the far side of the mountain and paused for a moment in the sun. Betty was on the porch, knitting. Her head was down and she did not see it. The dog's head swivelled slowly, gun-like, came to rest with the black nose pointed up the hill. The morning was clear and cool,



**TERROR CAN TAKE MANY FORMS. IN THIS CASE
IT IS A DOG—JUST A DOG—WHOSE EARS DO NOT MOVE.**

the grass was freshly wet. After a moment the dog began to move.

It came on across the meadow and up the long hill, moving in a steady, unvarying line toward Betty and the house. It broke through the bushes down by the garage, came up the gravel path with stiff even strides, until the shadow of it blotted the corner of her eye. Startled, she looked up.

At the front steps it stopped and waited, watching. Betty dropped her knitting in her lap.

"Well, hel-lo," said Betty, smiling. She leaned forward and held out a hand toward the dog, making coaxing, clucking noises. But the dog did not move. It stood motionless on the gravel before her, watching her silently with round, brassy eyes.

"Whose dog are you?" said Betty, clucking again cheerfully. These silent mountain mornings were often very lonely; with the baby asleep they were lonelier still. She rose up from the rocker and walked down the porch steps, her hand outstretched. It backed stiffly away.

"Oh, come on," she smiled. "I won't hurt you."

The dog continued to back away, stopped when she stopped, but did not turn its eyes. After a while she gave up trying to say hello and went back up onto the porch. The dog kept watching her gravely and she was forced to laugh.

"Coward," she said coaxingly, "fraidy cat."

The dog did not move.

It was not a neighbor's dog. Even though she knew very little about dogs she was certain she had never seen this one before. It was a big dog, larger than most; she hazarded a guess that it was what they called a police dog. It was long and trim, sleek, with high, stiff pointed ears. Deciding that perhaps if she fed the dog it might begin to cotton up to her, she went inside to the icebox for some cold scraps of chicken. While she was inside she heard the dog come onto the porch. But when she returned it ran quickly back down the steps. It resumed its position on the lawn, watching.

She set down the chicken on the lawn, but the dog wouldn't touch it. It seemed preoccupied with her. For several moments she smiled and asked it questions, but it never even sat down, and it never moved its eyes from her face.

Presently she felt a slight annoyance. There was something odd in the dog's stare, something nerveless and chill and unvarying, almost *clinical*, as if the thing were examining her. She shrugged and bent to her knitting, forgetful and relaxed for a moment.

But she couldn't help looking up. The dog's eyes, like balls of cold metal, were still on her. It was a peculiar, ridiculous thing, to be stared at like this by a dog. She began to grow irritated.

"All right," she said at last, peev-

ishly, "if you won't be friends, then shoo!"

The dog did not move. She went down off the porch and tried to chase it. But it only retreated as before, silently, watching. When she tired and sat down, it took up its place on the lawn again and waited.

Well, I never, she said to herself. She had no idea what the dog wanted. Gradually, under the pressure of the cold metal eyes, she felt the beginnings of a slight fear. The thing was certainly strange. She knew very little about the behavior of dogs, but she had never known a dog—or any animal, for that matter—to sit so long in one place just to watch.

Unless it was about to pounce, the thought came to her.

Momentarily she felt unnerved. But it was silly, she chided herself, dogs didn't do that sort of thing. And there was nothing hostile about the dog. It was just standing there, stiff-legged and gray, observing.

Now for the first time she began to examine the dog in detail. She sensed immediately that something was wrong—*physically* wrong. It was a short while before she could place it—those blank, staring eyes distract ed her—but then she remembered.

The ears of the dog did not move.

All around her in the air there were light, sudden sounds, far-off grindings of trucks on the highway, quick calls of birds; yet the ears of the dog did not move at all. *But the ears should move,* Betty thought con-

fusedly. She had noticed even as a little girl that the ears of most animals were never still, that they swivelled automatically to follow sudden sounds even when the animal was preoccupied. The ears of this dog were high and free, and why didn't they move?

It was very odd. She had begun to retreat unconsciously toward the screen door behind her when she heard the baby begin to cry. Suddenly she felt released from thinking of the dog, and she went inside almost gratefully to prepare the bottle. A few moments later she came back quickly and locked the door.

Shortly after noon she looked out again and the dog was gone. She was relieved for a moment, and at the same time she felt angry with herself for being upset over such a little thing. Then she saw the dog again. The door of the garage was open, and she saw the dog come out and look immediately toward the house, toward the window, as if it knew she was there. She watched with a new, growing terror as the dog walked stiffly across the grass and disappeared behind the barn.

This morning, when her husband left, she had locked the garage door!

Of that she was certain, yet the door now faced her—dark and open. She continued to tell herself that she was being perfectly silly, but she went around immediately and checked all the locks on all the doors

and windows of the house. For the rest of the afternoon she sat stiffly in the parlor trying to read, halting occasionally with real fright as the dark form of the dog padded by her window. Toward the end of the afternoon there was a crash from the cellar. Somehow the dog had gotten in. Immediately, and for some unknown reason, she feared for the baby. She ran to bolt the door and listen, terrified. But there was no sound. Finally she thought of her husband's gun. She found it in a drawer and locked herself in the nursery with the baby. In the evening when her husband returned she was hysterical.

The next day was Saturday and Harry stayed home. He knew his wife well enough not to be amused at what she had told him; he took the gun and searched for the dog carefully, but it was gone. How it had gotten into the cellar or the garage he had no idea. Like most country men he had a respect for dogs, but he supposed that the doors had not been locked. Anyway, by morning Betty seemed to be pretty well recovered and calm. He saw no reason to talk about the dog any more and went out to the barn to putter with the homemade three-inch telescope which was his hobby. Later on he came back to the house for a while to play with the baby. The day passed and the dog did not return.

In the evening, as was their cus-

tom, they went out under the stars. They lay down in the cool grass of the lawn. Harry began to talk about a great many things, about the office and about taking up painting as a hobby, and about the way the baby called everything "didi." Betty lay back and said nothing.

She was a tiny girl, moody, new to the wide mountain loneliness and in many ways unsure. She was given to long silent periods which she could not explain and which Harry had learned not to try to question. As she lay now restlessly in the silent dark, a small-edged wheel of uneasiness whirling inside her, Harry did not ask what was wrong. Instead he became consciously boyish and cheerful, began to talk happily about nothing in particular.

It did not occur to him that she might still be thinking of the dog—by this time he had forgotten the dog completely. What he was doing was ritual. In a little while she would reach over and pat his hand and begin to smile, and whatever had bothered her would die away. He was fully aware of the childlike, deceptively naive and charming quality which he seemed to be able to turn on at will, and he saw no reason not to use it. And she knew that too, but it did not bother her.

On this evening, as always, she began to respond. She was just beginning to return to herself when she saw the dog.

She put one hand to the throat of

her blouse. With the other she clutched Harry's arm. The dog was not moving and Harry had to search before he saw it.

It was a sharp-pointed shadow, black and lean, by the corner of the garage. The moon shone down with a pale, glowing glow; in the softness and the radiance the dog stood out with an odd unmoving heaviness. Its legs drove sharply into the ground below it, like black roots. It had been standing there, perhaps, for quite some time.

Harry started to rise. At his movement the dog turned and walked silently into the bushes, vanished. Harry was about to walk down toward the spot when Betty pulled at his arm.

"No!" she said earnestly, and he was astonished at the strong edge of fear in her voice. "No, please, let it go!"

"But honey—" he looked at her, then back toward the bushes where the dog had disappeared. He was about to say that it was only a dog, when he recalled quite clearly that it was, after all, a fairly large animal.

"Well," he said, "all right." He patted her arm soothingly. He was thinking that the thing might just possibly be wild. And there was no sense in dashing off into the woods to look for it. Not in the dark, at any rate, although if it kept coming back like this, frightening Betty—

"Was that the same dog?" He led her toward the house. She nodded,

looking back over her shoulder. She was trembling.

"I think so. I . . . couldn't really see, but I think so."

He folded his arm protectively on her shoulder, squeezed warmly.

"Poor old hound's probably just looking for a home. Probably lost. Let's go put out a plate of—"

"It was watching, just like the other time."

He grinned.

"Unfortunately, it didn't see much. Remind me to draw the blinds to-night."

"Harry, it was watching us."

She was insistent; her hands were balled at her sides and she continued to look back.

"What does it want?" she said, still trembling.

"Now honey—"

"It was looking for something." She stopped on the porch and stared out into the blackness. "It was looking for something in the house and the garage. What does it want?"

He marched her firmly inside and put her to bed. He promised to go out looking for the thing in the morning. Joking was of no value now, and so he turned on the radio and played soft music. He chatted brightly about baby-sitting problems. The light was out and he was almost asleep when he heard the soft pads come up on the porch.

Suddenly and thoroughly angry, he dashed to the door. When he reached it the dog was gone.

The same thing happened again three times during the night.

In the morning Ed Benson drove down from his farm on the hill, pulled up with a sliding crunch on the gravel in front of the porch. Normally, he was a glum and unexcited man. But right now he was very much annoyed, and his face was bright red against the gray of his hair as he slammed the car door and stalked up onto the porch.

"Some louse," he roared huskily, flinging out a red-plaid arm to point at the mountain, "some slimy, miserable, cotton-pickin' louse done killed a dog!"

Harry grinned instantly, without thinking of the effect on Benson. It had been a long night, mostly sleepless. So the doggone thing had pestered one porch too many. He wiped the grin off as Benson glared at him. "What in hell are you laughin' at? Dog killin' all right by you? Why, for two cents I'd whomp—"

"No no, Ed, no," Harry said quickly, soberly. "I wasn't thinkin' about that at all, really. Now—what's the trouble? Somebody kill a dog? Who? What dog?"

"I don't know who killed it and I don't know what dog!" Benson roared again, impotently. "All I know is they's a poor mangled carcass lyin' up there on the mountain. Skinned. Skinned, by God, can you tie that?"

Harry's eyes widened. He did not

have Benson's great love for dogs—which in most cases surpassed his love for people—but Harry had never heard of anyone skinning a dog. The thought was revolting.

"—and if I ever find the mangy louse that done it, I'll strangle him, I swear!"

He went on to ask if Harry had seen any strangers around lately. No mountain man would have done such a thing. Harry was shaking his head when Betty came out onto the porch.

She had heard the word "dog." She stood wiping her hands nervously on a dish towel, the sleeplessness of last night thick in her eyes.

In the presence of a woman Benson calmed a little and told them what had happened.

"I found the carcass out back in the woods this morning. The skin was gone. Can you figure that? They skinned the dog neat like a rabbit, then took the skin. Why in hell would they want the skin?"

He lifted his bony hands helplessly. Harry was still shocked.

"Are you sure it was a dog's body?" Betty said.

"Sure I'm sure. Couldn't be nothin' else. Too big. Looked like a German police dog. Only dog I know like that is Bill Kuhn's, over at Huntsville, but I called him right away and he said his dog was right there."

He stopped to look with surprise at Betty. She was relaxing now, lift-

ing a hand to smooth back her hair as the tenseness went out of her. She spoke to Harry.

"I'll bet it was the same one."

Harry nodded.

"The same what?" Benson asked, looking from one to the other. They told him about the dog on the porch, and he agreed that it was mighty queer for a dog to act like that. But he ended up shaking his head.

"Couldn't have been the same dog."

"Why?" Betty's head lifted quickly.

"Your dog was here last night. The one I found had been dead for a couple of days."

Harry frowned his disappointment. "You're sure?"

"Doggone it," Benson exploded, irked, "'course I'm sure. I seen a lot o' dead animals in my time . . . say," he suddenly added, thrusting his nose belligerently up at Harry, "you act like you *want* that dog to be dead!"

Betty turned away. Harry smiled with embarrassment.

"Well no, not really. But it sure was a pain in the neck. Scared heck out of Betty. It—uh—broke into the house."

"That so?" said Benson with raised eyebrows. And then he added: "Well, hell, ma'am, ain't no dog'll hurt you, not if you treat it right. Couldn't of been mad, you'd've seen that right off."

Betty spun suddenly, remember-

ing. She spoke to Benson with a tight, now obviously worried voice.

"Ed, shouldn't a dog's ears move?"

Benson looked at her blankly.

"I mean," she said hesitantly, "a big dog like that with pointed ears—not ears that hung down, but high, pointed like a cat's. Shouldn't ears like that move? When the dog is looking at you and there's a sound somewhere, the ears should turn toward the sound, shouldn't they?"

"Well, hell," Benson said, his face screwed up in a baffled frown, "sure they move. The dog can't keep 'em still. Why?"

They waited for her to explain, but she looked at their faces and could say nothing. They had not seen the dog, nor the ears . . . nor the brassy eyes. She sensed a horror in all this which she could not impart to anyone, and she knew it. And maybe she was after all just a green, helpless girl from the city. For her pride's sake now she did not say anything. Just then the baby began to cry and she turned and went into the house.

That the dog Benson had found and the dog they had seen were the same was a thing which would not have occurred to Harry in a thousand years. He thought no further than the fact that Benson had said the animal had been dead for two days. That ended it. It also, for a time, ended it for Betty. But not for long. The dog had come after her into the

house. It had opened a locked door. In the horrifying visits of the night before was all the proof she needed that the dog was evil; the dog was danger. But because there was nothing she could say to Harry, to anyone, she went off by herself to think. It occurred to her at last that the two dogs were the same.

Harry, in the meanwhile, passed a miserable day. Little Hal was cutting teeth and wouldn't stop crying. Betty was no help, and when Harry went out into the garage he couldn't find half his tools. He had to put the baby to sleep himself and it was only at the end of the day, as he stood gazing down at the slight woolly mound of his boy, that he was able to regain his smile. *Poor little codger*, he thought. He turned out the light and tiptoed into the bedroom. His smile faded. Betty was awake.

He sat down and pulled off a shoe. "If that damn thing comes again tonight," he announced dramatically, but with honest feeling, "I will skin it myself."

Betty spoke suddenly from the other bed.

"Harry," she said in a very small voice—the same voice she always used when she had something to say which she knew he would not like—"Harry, will you listen to something?"

He heaved the other shoe. "Sure," he said cheerfully. "Dogs?"

She sat up in bed and nodded earnestly.

"Don't think I'm silly, please, just listen. Don't you think it's funny about the *two* big dogs? I mean, two big dogs, both the same size, both maybe the same kind, both of them new around here, the one skinned and the other a—a prowler?"

He shrugged. Of course it was strange.

"And the way it came into the house and into the garage, and just . . . stood there, watching." She paused, not wanting to get to the point. He waited patiently.

"Well . . ."

He turned to look at her.

"Come on, pet, get it out. What's your idea?"

Her words came out in a sudden rush.

"The skin! What happened to the skin?" she said it with some violence, lifting her eyes to meet his with mingled doubt and defiance. "Why would anyone skin a dog and take the skin. *Why?* What possible reason could there be? And why should a dog the same size, two days later—a dog that breaks into houses and has ears that don't move—why should *another* dog come out of nowhere?"

He stared at her blankly.

"Honey—"

"You didn't *see*," she insisted, "you didn't see the eyes. They weren't a dog's eyes. They were—" she broke off as he stared in amazement. "I don't know," she moaned. "I don't know."

He knelt down on the bed and

took her in his arms. She pushed him away.

"It was the same dog!" she cried, almost shouting. "But the thing we saw was only the skin!"

"Ssh! The baby!" Harry said.

"But it wasn't a dog at all. There was something *inside*."

He sat on the bed not knowing what to say. He had never seen her like this, and the business about the dog was so completely ridiculous that he could not understand her at all. He wished mightily that he had seen the damn thing.

He waited until she quieted—she kept asking him why didn't the ears move—and then reached over to the end table for a cigarette. He handed her one. She pushed it away.

"You won't even think about it," she said with despair.

He made the mistake of trying to be funny.

"But, pet," he grinned cheerfully, "you tell me. What in the sweet holy Hanna would want to crawl inside a dog?"

He did not expect any answer. He could not possibly have expected the answer he got. But she had been thinking and thinking, and once she had believed that the two dogs were the same the rest of it followed.

"Someone something is watching."

He drew a blank, an absolute blank.

Her face was set. "Suppose, just suppose that there really were

beings from somewhere else. From another world. It's possible, isn't it? Isn't it?"

After a moment he nodded dumbly.

"Would they be like people, necessarily? No. Maybe they couldn't even live on Earth. Maybe that's why the saucers have never landed."

At that he jumped.

"Oh now, honey—"

She refused to be interrupted.

"Listen, please. Hear me out. It's all possible. If there are people from some place else and they're different from us, they can't come down, can they? They can learn all about our science, maybe, that we have radios and airplanes. But what can they learn about us, about people? They don't know our language, our customs. From 'way up there they can't really learn anything. They have to come down. They have to come down if they want samples of the real thing."

His grin died slowly. She had obviously thought a great deal about this and had worked it all out. And even if he could not possibly believe all she was saying, he was by nature an objective man and at least he had to admit the possibility.

She waited, watching him. He sat and tried to think it through, to show her where she was wrong.

All she had said so far was possible. Granted. In the morning, of course, in the broad plain dullness of daylight, it would be a lot less

possible. But now in the night he could think about it. There was a warm bed near him and a darkness over the land outside, and a legion of dark thoughts became almost overwhelmingly real.

Aliens. He had a brief, disgusting picture of slimy things with tentacles. But whatever they were—if they were—they would most likely not be able to pass unnoticed among men and women. And there were, so people said, the flying saucers.

Thus the skinned dog.

He followed the logic with an increasing chill.

From above, with telescopes, it could be observed that dogs and cats and a few other small animals seem to pass freely among men without undue notice. How simple then, thought Harry incredulously, to land in some out-of-the-way place—like the mountain—and trap a stray dog. It would be simple to skin it carefully without damaging the pelt, and to insert an observer.

His mind did not waver, it dragged him on.

The observer could be an actual alien—if they were that small—or a robotic device. When the dog had stood so long observing Betty, had it been, perhaps, taking pictures?

Well, this was silly, this was absolutely ridiculous. He was about to say so to Betty when he remembered the tools he had searched for in the garage-tools he had not been able to find.

In the garage.

He rose up suddenly.

"Where are you going?"

"I'll be back in a minute. By gum, this is the craziest thing I ever heard." He shook his head quickly, unable to suppress a bewildered grin. What if the tools were really gone from the garage? Along with its observing, wouldn't the thing take samples?

He was dressing quickly, laughing aloud at the weirdness of it all, when he heard the sound. It was a faint sliding noise as of a window falling and being stopped. It was coming from the nursery. Betty screamed.

No time for the gun. He leaped past the door and crashed into a chair, wrecking it to get to the door beyond. He tore at the knob, the greatest fear he had ever known boiling and screaming in his mind. He stared agonizingly into the black. Even before he turned on the light he felt the fresh cool breeze from the open window, and a part of him died. Because the thing had been watching to take one more sample—the one sample it would obviously have to take—and he stared with utter horror at the crib.

The crib was empty.

They searched all night and into the morning, but they never found the baby. Not ever. What they did find at last, hung from a bush like an old worn rag, was the empty skin of a large grey and black dog. * * *