

The Black Godmother

By John Galsworthy

SITTING out on the lawn at tea with our friend and his retriever, we had been discussing those massacres of the helpless which had of late occurred, and wondering that they should have been committed by the soldiery of so civilised a State, when in a momentary pause of our astonishment, our friend, who had been listening in silence, crumpling the drooping soft ear of his dog, looked up and said, "The cause of atrocities is Fear. Fear's at the back of all crimes, and most follies."

Knowing that his philosophical statements were always the result of concrete instance, and that he would not tell us what that instance was if we asked him—such being his nature—we were careful not to agree.

He gave us a look out of those eyes of his, so like the eyes of a mild eagle, and said abruptly: "What do you say to this, then? . . . I was out in the dog-days last year with this fellow of mine, looking for Osmunda, and stayed some days in a village—never mind the name. Coming back one evening from my tramp, I saw some boys stoning a mealy-coloured dog. I went up and told the young devils to stop it. They looked at me in the injured sort of way that boys do, and one of them called out, "It's mad, guv'nor!" "Nonsense!" I said. "Get off with you!" They took to their heels and the dog followed me. It was a young, leggy, mild-looking mongrel, cross—I should say—between a brown retriever and an Irish terrier. There was froth about its lips, and its eyes were watery; it looked indeed as if it might be in distemper. I was afraid of infection for this fellow of mine, and whenever it came too close shooed it away, till at last it slunk off altogether. Well, about nine o'clock, when I was settling down to write by the open window of my sitting-room—still daylight, and very quiet and warm—there began that most maddening sound, the barking of an unhappy dog. I could do nothing

THE BLACK GODMOTHER

with that continual "Yap—yap!" going on; and as it was too hot to shut the window, I went out to see if I could stop it. The men were all at the pub, and the women just finished with their gossip; there was no sound at all but the continual barking of this dog, somewhere away out in the fields. I travelled by ear across three meadows, till I came on a haystack by a pool of water. There was the dog sure enough—the same mealy-coloured mongrel, tied to a stake, yapping, and making frantic little runs on a bit of rusty chain; whirling round and round the stake, then standing quite still, shivering. I went up and spoke to it, but it backed into the haystack, and there it stayed shrinking away from me, with its tongue hanging out. It had been heavily struck by something on the head; the cheek was cut, one eye half-closed, and an ear badly swollen. I tried to get hold of it, but the poor thing was beside itself with fear. It snapped and flew round so that I had to give it up, and sit down with this fellow here beside me, to try and quiet it—a strange dog, you know, will generally form his estimate of you from the way it sees you treat another dog. I had to sit there quite half an hour before it would let me go up to it, pull the stake out, and lead it away. The poor beast, though it was so feeble from the blows it had received, was still half frantic, and I didn't dare touch it; and all the time I took good care that this fellow here didn't come too near. Then came the question what was to be done. There was no vet, of course, and I'd no place to put it except my sitting-room, which didn't belong to me. But, looking at its battered head, and its half-mad eyes, I thought: "No trusting you with these bumpkins; you'll have to come in here for the night!" Well, I got it in, and heaped two or three of those hairy little red rugs landladies are so fond of, up in a corner, and got it on to them, and put down my bread and milk. But it wouldn't eat—sense of proportion all gone, you see, fairly destroyed with terror. It lay there moaning, and every now and then it raised its head with a 'yap' of sheer fright, dreadful to hear, and bit the air, as if its enemies were on it again; and this fellow of mine lay in the opposite corner, with his head on his paw, full of dark thoughts. I sat up for a long time watching that poor beast, sick enough, and wondering how it had come to be stoned and kicked and battered into this state; and next day I made it my business to find out." Our friend

paused, scanned us a little angrily, and then went on: "It had made its first appearance, it seems, following a bicyclist. There are some men, you know—save the mark—who, when their beasts get ill or too expensive, jump on their bicycles and take them for a quick run, taking care never to look behind them. When they get back home they say: 'Hallo! where's Fido?' And there's an end! Well, this poor puppy gave up just as it got to our village; and, roaming about in search of water, attached itself to a farm labourer. The man—with excellent intentions, as he told me, himself—tried to take hold of it, but too abruptly, so that the startled puppy snapped at him. Whereon he kicked it for a dangerous cur, and it went drifting back towards the village, and fell in with the boys coming home from school. It thought no doubt that they were going to kick it too, and nipped one of them, who took it by the collar. Thereupon they hullabalooed and stoned it down the road to where I found them. Then I put in my little bit of torture, and drove it away, through fear of infection to my own dog. After that it seems to have fallen in with a man who told me: 'Well, you see, he came sneakin' round my house, with the children playin', and snapped at them when they went to stroke him, so that they came running in to their mother, an' she called to me in a fine takin' about a mad dog. I ran out with a shovel and gave 'im one, and drove him out. I'm sorry if he wasn't mad, he looked it right enough; you can't be too careful with strange dogs.' Its next acquaintance was an old stone-breaker, a very decent sort. 'Well! you see,' the old man explained to me, 'the dog came smellin' round my stones, an' it wouldn't come near, an' it wouldn't go away; it was all froth and blood about the jaw, and its eyes glarin' green at me. I thought to meself, bein' the dog-days—I don't like the look o' you, you look funny! So I took a stone, an' got it here, just on the ear; an' it fell over. And I thought to meself: Well, you've got to finish it, or it'll go bitin' somebody, for sure! But when I come to it with my hammer, the dog it got up—an' you know how it is when there's somethin' you've 'alf killed, and you feel sorry, and yet you feel you must finish it, an' you hit at it blind, you hit at it agen an' agen. The poor thing, it wriggled and snapped, an' I was terrified it'd bite me, an' some'ow it got away.'" Again our friend paused, and this time we dared not look at him.

"The next hospitality it was shown," he went on

THE BLACK GODMOTHER

presently, "was by a farmer, who, seeing it all bloody, drove it off, thinking it had been digging up a lamb that he'd just buried. The poor homeless beast came sneaking back, so he told his men to get rid of it. Well, they got hold of it somehow—there was a hole in its neck that looked as if they'd used a pitchfork—and, mortally afraid of its biting them, but not liking, as they told me, to drown it, for fear the owner might come on them—they got a stake and a chain, and fastened it up, and left it in the water by the haystack where I found it. I had some conversation with that farmer. 'Yes,' he said, 'but who was to know? I couldn't have my sheep worried. The brute had blood on his muzzle. These curs do a lot of harm when they've once been blooded. You can't run risks.'" Our friend cut viciously at a dandelion with his stick. "Run risks!" he broke out suddenly: "That was it—from beginning to end of that poor beast's sufferings, fear, fear, fear! From that fellow on the bicycle, afraid of the worry and expense, as soon as it showed signs of distemper, to the man with the pitchfork—not one of them, I dare say, would have gone out of his way to do it a harm. But they felt fear, and so—by the law of self-preservation, or whatever you like, it all began—till, there the poor thing was, with a battered head and a hole in its neck, ravenous with hunger, and too distraught even to lap my bread and milk. Yes, and there's something uncanny about a suffering animal—we sat watching it, and we were afraid, looking at its eyes and the way it bit the air. Fear! It's the black godmother of all damnable things!"

Our friend bent down, crumpling and crumpling at his dog's ears. We, too, gazed at the ground, thinking of that poor lost puppy, and the horrible inevitability of all that happens, seeing men are what they are; thinking of all the foul doings in the world, whose black godmother is Fear.

"And what became of the poor dog?" one of us asked at last.

"When," said our friend slowly, "I'd had my fill of watching, I covered it with a rug; took this fellow away with me, and went to bed. There was nothing else to do. At dawn I was wakened by three dreadful cries—not like a dog's at all. I hurried down. There was the poor beast—wriggled out from under the rug—stretched on its side, dead. This fellow of mine had followed me in, and he

THE ENGLISH REVIEW

went and sat down by the body. When I spoke to him he just looked round, and wagged his tail along the ground, but would not come away; and there he sat till it was buried, very interested, but not sorry at all."

Our friend was silent, looking angrily at something in the distance.

And we, too, were silent, seeing in spirit that vigil of early morning: The thin, lifeless, sandy-coloured body, stretched on those red mats; and this black creature—now lying at our feet - propped on its haunches like the dog in "The Death of Procris," patient, curious, ungrieved, staring down at it with his bright, interested eyes.