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During the last 25-odd years, mention of Charles G. Finney's name has invariably been accompanied by reference to his unique and dazzling THE CIRCUS OF DR. LAG. But Mr. Finney's talents are too impressive to be identified primarily with just one book, and in all justice there should soon be another equally worthy volume to rub shoulders with the good doctor on the bookshelf. The Horsenaping of Hotspur (F&SF, Aug., '38) was, incredibly, Mr. Finney's first short story; however there are, wonderfully, signs that it may have been only the first of many, and there is hope that one day there will be enough for a hardcover collection. . . . Mr. Finney this time offers a wry tale of a nightcrawler in the sunny backyards of Everyday.

The Black Retriever

by CHARLES G. FINNEY

I WAS FIRST MADE AWARE OF THE beast one Sunday morning in May. I was, at the moment, shaving. Our youngest daughter came running in, breathlessly as was her wont, and announced there was a big black dog in the patio.

I said nonsense and continued shaving. I knew the patio gates were closed; I had closed them myself. I said so to our daughter.

"But this dog doesn't use gates," she cried. "He just jumps over the wall."

Again I said nonsense, for the

wall was five feet high, and it had been there five years, and in all that time I had never known a dog to jump it.

"But it did," our little girl insisted. "And it's killing things out there." And she ran off for another look.

In a moment she let out one of her shrill yells. "It's on the patio wall! It's caught a bird! Come and see!"

I switched off the electric shaver, said things not appropriate to be said before a little girl,

and went outside and looked.

I saw—or thought I saw, because I wear trifocals and sometimes look through the wrong lens tier—a black blur on the patio wall. It moved along and disappeared. "See!" said our daughter. "It's jumped down and now it's gone. Look, it dropped the bird."

"Well," I said, "we will investigate later. Right now it's time to get to church."

And, our preparations completed, we packed ourselves into our Hillman Minx and drove off. I thought no more of the black blur or the black dog that I had seen.

In the afternoon my wife and I decided to sit in the patio while our daughters watched television. Our two little dogs elected to accompany us. The Cairn slept. The Dachshund dug a hole beside the flowering pomegranate. My wife and I talked of sundry things: television shows, shopping, the necessity of having the Minx greased.

The Dachshund stopped digging and began to snoop around the patio, sniffing at the shrubs and bushes. He disappeared behind some greasewood and then appeared again, this time with something in his mouth. He brought it to us. It was a small dead bird.

"Oh!" said my wife. "Snorkell! How could you!"

"He's innocent," I said. "He

merely found it. That other dog killed it. Roberta told me."

"Other dog?" she asked. "What other dog? You surely don't mean this lazy thing." And she indicated Mac, the sleeping Cairn.

"No," I said. "This was a strange dog. A big black one. It leaped over the wall into the patio and killed this bird. Then it jumped on top of the patio wall and swaggered around."

"I never heard of such a thing," said my wife. "Did you see it?"

"I saw a blur," I said. "But Roberta saw it plainly. She even saw it kill the bird. I didn't believe her at the time, but here the bird is, so the story must be true."

I took the little bird away from Snorkel and buried it in the alley, covering the grave with stones so that it would be protected.

A few days later I was in the patio again, this time neighboring across the fence with my friend Mr. George, who lived next door.

He was angry. At his feet lay the body of his Siamese cat. It was chewed and torn.

"A big black retriever did it," said Mr. George. "It jumped the wall, cornered the cat and killed it. Then it jumped up on top of the wall, walked around a little, leaped down and disappeared. It happened so quickly there was nothing I could do about it."

"I know," I said. "It happened

here, too. Only in our yard the thing killed a bird. Did it look like a blur to you?"

"Blur? Of course not! I saw it plainly—a big black retriever. They're usually rather gentle looking. But not this one. It was a brute. I think I'll put some poisoned meat on top of the wall. If it's so fond of parading on patio walls, maybe it'll return and find the meat. That ought to fix it."

A grotesque pattern evolved. Every time I met an acquaintance in the neighborhood, up came the subject of the black retriever. If the one I was talking to had not seen it himself he was sure to have a neighbor who had, a neighbor whose patio had been visited by the beast and in whose patio the beast had killed something... a pet rabbit, a cat, a puppy, a bird, once even a badger. A family down the street had a pet badger in their patio. The black retriever had jumped over their patio wall, caught the badger sleeping near the mouth of its burrow and killed it.

Despite what my neighbor Mr. George had said, I soon ascertained that neither he nor any of the others actually had seen the black dog clearly. In the main the one I talked to agreed it was a retriever of some sort, but one man insisted it was a poodle and another said just as insistently it

was a black Airedale. Some of them used the word I had used to describe it: a blur. But everyone agreed that it was black and that they saw it walking on their patio walls. As for its reality, blur or no blur, there were all those dead things to prove that its visitations had been made.

We lived in a suburban development. The houses were pretty much alike; the inhabitants very much alike—middle class people with middle class jobs. The children attended the district's middle class school. It was a tolerant neighborhood of friendly people.

Everything there was a little humdrum and, if you will, rather mediocre. But it was a pleasant, comfortable place to live, and the standard of living was probably as high as has ever been attained by a group of *Homo sapiens* since that biped began to walk upon the face of the earth.

No hordes of beggars swarmed the streets. No warring armies prowled about the land. If the people in that suburban development wanted water they turned a tap. If they wanted heat they jiggled a thermostat. If they wanted coolness they switched on an air conditioner. If they wanted light they pressed a button. If they wanted to go somewhere they got into an automobile and drove there at speeds ranging from twenty-five to eighty-five

miles an hour. They didn't need servants; electricity did for them what no staff of servants could ever do.

And now it seemed odd, incredibly odd, that a black dog, a black retriever, was leaping their patio walls and killing things that they loved.

At first various individuals tried various expedients to apprehend the retriever and put it away where it could do no more harm. My immediate neighbor, Mr. George, allowed me to talk him out of his poisoned meat project, my argument being that some innocent creature—even a child—might suffer. Instead, for he was a mechanically minded man, he contrived a long noose-and-spring arrangement and set it on his patio wall. His idea was to ensnare the retriever.

Another equally ingenious neighbor constructed a large doghouse with a hair-trigger door; he baited it with choice dog foods. His idea was to trap the retriever.

A third, an archery enthusiast, took down his long bow and stationed himself at odd times in his alley. His idea was to impale the retriever.

None of these expedients worked.

The black beast visited the patio wall on which the noose was positioned, ate the bait, sprung the spring, but was not ensnared.

It visited the doghouse arrangement, ate the bait, sprung the door, but was not entrapped.

It showed itself to the archery enthusiast, presenting a good target to his arrow, but was not transfixed.

Meanwhile, it continued its depredations. Did anyone set out new tender plants, those plants were sure to be dug up or torn out in a day or two; and everybody said it was the retriever that did it.

Sometimes days would pass without any fresh reports of trouble, but sooner or later, inevitably, someone would see the black blur on his patio wall, and, lying near by, the dead thing which the retriever had killed.

My neighbor Mr. George and I summoned an informal meeting, a council of the elders we called it, of the ones in the area who had felt the bite of a the black blur. We thought that by uniting our efforts we could conceptualize an aim, syncretize a program, finalize an operational method, and concretize the black retriever's doom. After all, other settlements, other civilized communities had been plagued by intrusive horrors, and had been able, through drastic communal action, to abate them. Surely, Mr. George and I argued, we should be able to do as much.

We held the meeting in my

patio, and a dozen people came. Our discussion was diffuse and not the least bit parliamentary, but it finally boiled down to one conclusion: The only thing to do was to shoot the retriever.

It was against the law to discharge firearms in the area, but we thought we would be able to get the police commissioner, or the mayor and council, or something or somebody to relax the ban long enough for us to carry out our purpose. So Mr. George and I were deputized to confer with the mayor and police commissioner and seek authorization to stage a dog hunt in our alleys.

Such authorization was promptly refused. There was in existence, the commissioner pointed out, an organization which offered a perfectly obvious solution to our trouble. That was the City Animal Shelter, a euphemism for dog pound. Why, he demanded, hadn't we gone to the shelter in the first place?

The answer to that was that we hadn't thought of it. However, now that it had come to our attention, we certainly would.

And we did. The pound master listened to us, smiled, and said he would send a man out. He wanted to know on what days and what hours of those days the retriever was mostly likely to show up.

We protested that the beast did not operate on a fixed time table. Sometimes it came at dawn,

sometimes at high noon, sometimes around dinner. It could be on a Thursday as well as on a Monday.

"I was just trying to narrow it down," said the poundmaster.

The dogcatcher came out in his wire-cage truck, equipped with a lariat, heavy gloves and a single barreled .410 shotgun. He was a businesslike young man in cowboy boots and cowboy hat.

I was at work at the time of his appearance, but my wife told me what happened.

"He snooped around the alleys a while," she said. "All the dogs in the neighborhood barked their heads off—just as if they were trying to warn the retriever. He got real hot and tired, and Mrs. Betty took pity on him and asked him to come in and have a can of beer and cool off. He had the can of beer and then made a pass at Mrs. Betty. She ordered him out of her house and called the animal shelter to report him. Before she got the number of the shelter she heard a gun go off and looked out to see what it was. He had just shot Mrs. Stella's Weimaraner. Mrs. Stella ran out screaming. So did I. That is, I ran out. I wasn't screaming. The dogcatcher said he guessed he'd made some kind of mistake. The Weimaraner, he insisted, looked black, real black, when he shot it, but now that it was dead it didn't look so black any more."

I started to say something, but she interrupted me. "Wait, I'm not through yet. While all that was going on, the black retriever, the real thing, you know, jumped into Mrs. Wilhelmina's patio and killed her toy Chihuahua. Then it paraded around on Mrs. Wilhelmina's patio wall for a while and then disappeared. Mrs. Wilhelmina is just sick. The doctor came and gave her a sedative. Of course the dogcatcher was still at Mrs. Stella's when this happened, so he didn't know about it."

And there it was. The black retriever was still on the prowl. Everything we had done or tried to do had been turned against us sardonically.

Two days later little Margarita, a child down the street, was bitten twice by a dog while she was playing in her yard. The bites weren't very serious—just skin punctures—but nobody knew whether or not the dog which had bitten her was rabid. Nobody had seen the dog except Margarita. She said it was big and dark, and everybody said it must be the retriever. Everybody agreed the retriever was rabid, too; that was the only way to account for its actions.

But this didn't add up, for rabid dogs die very quickly, and the retriever had been around for quite a while. However, there was no arguing the fact that the retriever might have become rabid just

lately, and that was what caused it to bite Margarita.

Margarita, incidentally, was given prompt medical care and was as good as new the next day. Everybody insisted the retriever was the dog which had bitten her; efforts to apprehend the brute were, as a consequence, doubled.

Another council of the elders was summoned. We decided not to go to the police and not to go to the dogcatcher. We would do this ourselves.

Mr. James, who had hunted a great deal in his boyhood, devised the *modus operandi*. We would secret ourselves in blinds as duck hunters do, await the arrival of the retriever, and shoot him down.

A successful blind, said Mr. James, must be something that blends into the landscape; hence, duck blinds are made of rushes and bushes, things the ducks see all the time and are not afraid of.

But for the retriever such things would not do. What would do were automobiles. The retriever had seen plenty of automobiles and was used to them.

We men, said Mr. James, would simply sit in our automobiles in the alleys or under the ramadas, wherever our automobiles customarily were parked, and would await the retriever. When he came along whoever saw him first would shoot him.

That would be that; the police could howl their heads off.

Mr. James assigned certain men to hold watch and ward in their cars at certain times of the day. The plan seemed foolproof.

My first shift came at five-thirty in the afternoon. I checked with and relieved my neighbor Mr. James who had been sitting in his car in the alley since three. I decided to take my station in my car rather than his. I was parked only a few feet behind him.

He chided me for being late, handed me his gun—a beautiful little Remington .22 automatic rifle—told me he hadn't seen anything except dozens of kids and scores of harmless dogs, remarked that Mrs. Betty—the one the dog-catcher had made a pass at—was wearing shorts and a Bikini bra, asseverated that this whole dog-watch was a lot of nonsense, warned me not to shoot without first making certain of what it was that I was shooting at, announced that he was going to have a drink and to perdition with the black retriever, and concluded by saying that this was his one and only trick at the dogwatch wheel—he wasn't going to waste any more time at it. The two and a half hours he had been sitting in his car had been two and a half hours lost, and he was finished, through, ended and done.

I got into my car, laid the little

Remington across my knees and began to read the collected poems of Dylan Thomas. It was a beautiful late afternoon. The children played, the birds sang, etc. The Welsh bard sang also, but he wasn't getting through to me. I put the book down and, for want of something else to do, looked into my rear-view mirror.

Through some unusual property of the atmosphere the mirror achieved a magnifying effect. Things seen in it were as large and clear, almost, as those on a Vistavision screen in a drive-in movie. I swiveled it around, picking up different views.

The chief attraction was Mrs. Betty in her shorts and Bikini halter. She was hanging up clothes on her clothesline; and, looking at her, I could not help recalling the dogcatcher and his flaming moment of temptation. She was a brunette.

It occurred to me simultaneously that there had been no proof adduced so far that the black retriever was a male. No one had ever seen the thing very clearly or very closely. How strange it would be, I thought, if the retriever were actually Mrs. Betty. That she, at certain unholy hours, transformed herself into the animal and did the things it did. I looked at her again in the mirror and watched as she adjusted her bra. There was something distinctly animal-like in her motion.

Far afield, I said, my thoughts are straying far afield. Nevertheless, I kept the mirror focused upon her.

She was behind the clothesline now, hanging up towels; and one of the towels hung down and all I could see of Mrs. Betty was her legs, the towel hiding the rest of her. Thus viewed, she gave the impression of wearing nothing at all. Then she hung up a sheet, and her feet were all I could see. Then she moved out of the mirror's field, and I could not see her at all.

I jiggled the mirror to get Mrs. Betty back on the screen; instead of her I picked up a black blur. It was far down the alley; it moved. I was torn, as it were, between trying to watch the black blur and trying to pick up Mrs. Betty again. I jiggled the mirror more vigorously and lost everything. All I could see was my own face. I was wearing a queer expression.

There was a scratching above, and I became aware that something had leaped on top of the car and was clawing to retain its footing. The alley was vacant. Mrs. Betty had disappeared. I was all alone, sitting there in the car with a .22 rifle and a book of poetry. And something was on top of the car, scratching and sprawling around.

A drop of foam or froth fell on the windshield. The thing on top

of the car was slavering, and this blob of foam had dropped from its mouth.

Then a black shape fell lump-like on the hood of the car, scrambling and clawing around. It regained its feet and stared through the windshield at me. It had horrible yellow eyes. I could not shoot through the windshield. I was too terrified to get out of the car and attempt to shoot from on foot. The windows of the car were open. It would only be a matter of moments until the black thing discovered they were open and came in to get me.

Other men, I knew, were off elsewhere in the neighborhood sitting as I was sitting.

I knew I must give them the alarm.

I pressed my hand on the horn button and honked loud and long.

The horn's bellowing woke me up. Apparently I had gone to sleep over Dylan Thomas's *Hold Hard These Ancient Minutes In a Cuckoo's Mouth*. There was no black beast on the hood of my car. There was no black blur in the alley. When Mrs. Betty came up to see what the honking was about she was dressed in modest housewifely garb and looked just as she always did—distinctly homely.

Obviously I had simply drowsed over a cryptic poem and fallen asleep. The rest I had

dreamed. They say daytime nightmares are the worst of all.

We called off the stakeout the next day. Nobody had seen anything. Everybody felt rather foolish. Several of the others had also fallen asleep. One of these diffidently asked us other drowsy ones if we had had bad dreams. One and all, we ridiculed the idea, but our ridicule seemed rather artificial. I even had such bad taste as to inquire of the diffident one if he had dreamed about Mrs. Betty. He looked at me a long time before denying it. The other ones who had fallen asleep looked at me a long time also.

We ran the retriever to earth—or at least we ran a retriever to earth. She was a big black bitch

and had a litter of pups in a culvert pipe in the arroyo. Some of the children of the neighborhood, playing in the arroyo, saw her run into the culvert with a pigeon in her mouth. They told us elders, and we called the dog pound. A different dogcatcher came out this time. He shot the black bitch when she attacked him, and took away her puppies.

We concluded the dog had been raiding our yards to feed her pups, and had dropped the dead things we had found when we flushed her at her depredations. It was a satisfactory conclusion.

But a very unsatisfactory thing happened on the heels of that conclusion. I went out to wash my car, and, there on the top of it, were dog's footprints and scratches.

