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THE GOOD DOG

BY JEROME BIXBY

Mr. Bixby is an impeccable gentleman with a heart only slightly smaller than left field at Yankee Stadium. As a dedicated defender of the underdog, his stories carry a strong message of equality for all — even if he has to go to Hell to prove his point . . .

ONCE, long ago, the Devil built a bridge — in the twinkling of an eye a bridge of seasoned wood and greystone appeared over a stream in the center of a small village which shall here be nameless, for both village and bridge are gone, and what's past is past.

The Devil built the bridge with the proviso that the soul of the first being to pass over it should belong to him. To this the townspeople agreed — for they had a plan.

The poet Longfellow has recorded what followed:

“At length the bridge being all completed,

The Abbot, standing at its head,
Threw across it a loaf of bread,
Which a hungry dog sprang after,

And the rocks reechoed with the
peals of laughter
To see the Devil thus defeated.”

Longfellow does not go on to describe with what earth-shaking snarls the Devil greeted this strategem. Nor does he record the wails of the offending dog as the Devil pounced upon it ere it had even sniffed the bread which had lured it to its doom, and wrested its soul brutally from its galvanized body and disappeared Hellwards in a puff of rotten smoke. The bridge had been gotten, the Devil had been done, and that was enough for the townspeople, and evidently, for Longfellow as well.

But this seems rather an anthropocentric view to take of the matter. What of the *dog*?

Some of you will object that animals have no souls. Let me assure you that they do. Regard if you will the faithful watchdog, the mother tiger defending her young, monkeys at their clever play, swallows in migration slowing for a cripple, the limpid eye of the fawn, the dog mourning at his master's grave or, *probatum est*, finding his way with mystic determination to his master's side across miles upon miles of unknown terrain; regard the mother bird feeding her young, the mating minuet of the peacock who in the East symbolizes immortality, the community spirit of an ant-city — regard all these, and tell me animals have no souls: and I will tell you that we had better define our terms.

But let's have no debate — the dog had a soul, and the Devil made off with it, albeit with exceeding lack of enthusiasm.

The dog's lineage is as uncertain as is certain the fact that it was a very good dog. It was frankly a mutt. At the time of its demise it was six years and odd months old; and never in its life had it bitten anyone, or bayed with sleep-destroying vigor in the early morning hours, or chewed or torn up any possession of the villagers', or stolen one particle of food. It was known as a friendly dog: mothers had trusted it to romp with their children. As-

surely it had chased cats; but this scarcely figures as a canine sin, and besides it had killed none of them. Far from blood-lust, its sole emotion at such times was regret that it could not climb trees and continue the sport.

Children wept at the scene of its sacrifice, while adults admired the bridge, and the episode proved to be one of the basics of many later and interesting neuroses.

A brief description will suffice: medium size, white with brown spots, one floppy ear and a tail that had been broken by the wheel of a farmer's cart as the dog had slept by the roadside. Of these characteristics the dog in dying suffered the loss only of its coloration: its soul was uniformly grey.

Upon reaching Hell, the struggling, howling, thoroughly outraged dog-soul under his arm, the Devil paused at the great bronze doors of his Castle, faced in the general direction of midwestern Gehenna, released the soul and, before it could fall to the smoking flagstones, swung one cloven foot and punted it away with every ounce of his fury and indignation.

Yowling, legs and tail rigid, the soul rose up, up, up, to disappear into the red-flickering haze that surrounded the Castle. The superhuman impetus of the kick traveled it in fantastic flight like some Spartan dog of Diana, high above the landscapes of Hell. Gradually



D. STONE

the flight leveled, rounded downward, faster and faster, thick stinking air whistling louder and louder past the dog-soul's flapping ears, ruffling its grey soul-fur, bringing tears to its horrified eyes; faster and faster descending toward the ugly terrain that waited below. Its soul-hackles rose at the sight of coiling, unquenchable flames, of vast red-shot towers of smoke like dragons' breath; it curled its lips at the sight of spraying torrents of lava and blinding lakes of molten brass and iron; it gritted its teeth at the sight of jagged cliffs and dizzy black mountains and abysmal valleys from which rose the crack of whips, the clatter of demoniacal hooves, the cacophonous screeching of the damned.

It began to howl.

Far below, a demon looked up, pricking his ears. "What in Hell was *that*?"

Another demon wrenched his pitchfork from the buttocks of a prostrate soul. He squinted upwards. "Don't know . . . it's the Damnedest sound *I* ever heard. Maybe the Chief is trying out some new method of tormen —"

"Look out," said the first demon. "Something's falling toward us . . . *duck!*"

The dog-soul came turning and twisting down to splash deep into a pool of lava. Droplets like liquid rubies flew in every direction, some of them lighting on the soul-

skin of the prostrate human soul, who whined shrilly, and others on the skins of the demons, which twitched in pleasure.

The dog-soul surfaced and swam about in the pool, lips drawn back, ears flattened, nose pointing upward, head straining forward, eyes wide. He dog-paddled. He barked his many misgivings.

The demons approached the pool cautiously. One, whose name was Zut, poked his pitchfork at the swimming soul. "What is it?"

The other demon, whose name was Pud, dropped to his knees, thrust his arm into the pool, fished around, got a good grip on the dog-soul, yanked it out. The dog-soul snarled and shook itself, eying the demons with utter distrust.

"I think it's a dog," said Pud, rubbing the lava into his arm.

"A dog?" said Zut doubtfully. "In Hell?"

"That's what it looks like. I wonder what on Earth he did?"

They leaned on their pitchforks, regarding the dog. The dog squatted, staring back at them warily. Some silent moments passed. When the demons made no hostile move, nor any move at all, the dog began to lick at the lava on his fur, worrying hardening bits with his teeth, keeping one eye always on the pair who stood watching.

Stinging smoke curled along at

ground-level, like the ghosts of snakes. The prostrate human soul took advantage of his tormentors' preoccupation, and crawled away, inch by inch, and soon was lost to view in the red-flickering smoke.

Pud said, "They just never learn, do they? That Damned fool thinks he can give us the slip."

Zut said, "Yetzer will get him."

From nearby in the smoke came a blood-curdling shriek. The sucking sound of a pitchfork being withdrawn from fatty tissue. The dog pricked its ears.

Pud grinned evilly. "Yetzer got him."

They looked at the dog; finally

Zut said, "Well?"

"Well, what?"

"How do you torment a dog?"

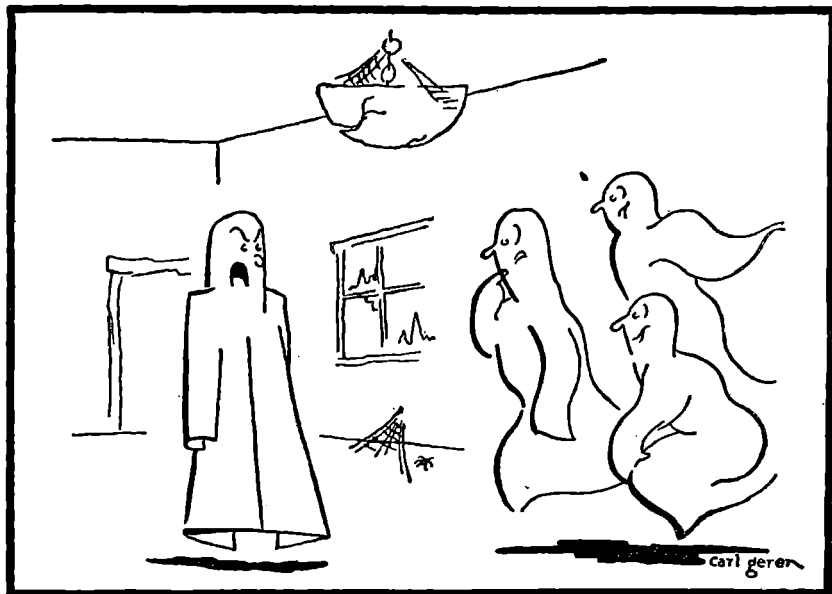
"H'm."

"I've heard they bite."

The dog stood up, reassured by the relative peace and quiet after that walloping kick and his resultant vast flight. He gave his tail a tentative wag, eyeing the demons somewhat more warmly.

"Watch out," Pud said.

The demons moved back a pace. The dog followed, frisking a little. The demons clutched their pitchforks in front of them and retreated another step. The dog halted and squatted, tongue lolling, eyes now merry.



"Okay—what wise guy put starch in my soup?"

When the dog stopped, the demons stopped.

"You know," Zut said finally. "I think it wants to be friendly."

Pud scowled. "Watch your language."

"Well, *look* at it."

They studied it. It looked back at them, panting, eyes sparkling, tail thumping the ground and sending up little whirls of black ashes.

"You may be right," Pud said. "Go find out."

After a moment he said, "Well, go *on*. You can see he wants to be friendly."

"Why don't *you* go, then?"

"I'll see that he doesn't get away."

Zut skinned back his lips, revealing three-inch fangs.

"That's right," Pud said encouragingly. "Ours are bigger than his. Besides, there are two of us."

"Then let's *both* go," Zut said. He gave Pud a shove. "Follow me."

Together, pitchforks ready, they advanced toward the dog.

Playfully the dog bounded away into the smoke.

A moment later he bounded back, straight toward them, eyes gleaming redly, barking at the top of his lungs, grinning a dog grin.

The demons yowled and started to run. Pud tripped over his pitchfork. Zut tripped over Pud. They

tumbled to the ground one this way and one that, dropping their pitchforks in order to protect themselves at close quarters.

The dog came over and sniffed at Pud's ear. Pud moaned. The dog dropped to his belly with a grunt. He licked the ear.

Pud flushed a dead white.

"You see?" said Zut, looking on in awe. "He *does* want to be friendly."

Slowly Pud's hand went toward the pitchfork beside him.

"Careful," Zut cautioned.

"I don't care," Pud said in a low, tight voice. "It's too much. Bless me, I — I feel *unclean* . . . to *think* that a damned soul would try to be friendly! I only hope nobody *saw* —"

"Courage," Zut whispered.

Pud's hand groped for the handle of the pitchfork, found it, closed on it.

He said a silent sacrilege. He leaped to his feet, raised the pitchfork high:

"Your damnation begins!" he roared.

The tines of the pitchfork swished down, entered the dog's hindquarters, traveled through the length of his body as through vapor, emerged from the very point of his nose. No agonized howl. No agonized leap. He only blinked.

Pud looked astounded. He tried again. This time the dog leaped

at the shining tines as they emerged from his chest, and seemed disappointed when his jaws failed to close on solid substance. He barked playfully.

Pud spat vitriol and tested the tines on the ball of a long-clawed thumb. "Now what do you make of *that*?"

Zut had rolled over and was sitting up, looking thoughtful.

"He doesn't feel a thing," Pud said sourly. "I don't get it."

Zut pursed his lips. "C'mere, boy," he said, masking his revulsion. "Nice dog."

Tail wagging, the dog went to him.

Pud shuddered and looked around uncomfortably. "Now *you're* displaying what almost amounts to — to friendship!"

"Well, I'm not enjoying it!" Zut snapped. "I just want him to hold still, so I can find out something." He led the dog over to the pool of red-glowing lava into which it had originally plunged. The dog eyed the pool doubtfully and pulled back a little.

"What are you doing?" Pud asked.

"Well, it just occurred to me that he didn't wail and scream when he fell in here. He didn't seem to suffer at all. And now he doesn't feel our pitchforks."

"So?"

"So maybe he isn't . . . well, I know it sounds crazy, but — maybe he isn't *damned!*"

Kneeling beside the dog, he thrust one of its paws into the pool of lava. Interested, Pud came over to watch.

The dog stood there, paw in lava. He whined in friendly, puzzled fashion. Zut released the paw. The dog commenced licking off the lava.

Pud passed the tines of his pitchfork through the dog's abdomen and shrugged. "I guess he isn't, all right."

"What is *this*?" roared the superior demon, glaring at the stern-wagging soul they had brought in.

They told him.

"What is *this*?" roared the Chief Demon, glaring at the stern-wagging soul.

They told him.

"What is *this*?" roared the Fiend in Charge of Torment, glaring.

They told him.

"I know what this is," the Devil sighed. "In fact, I've been expecting it to show up. First time I've lost my temper in centuries. Hand it over . . . I've already made the necessary arrangements."

"Well, *hello*, boy," said Saint Peter. "They told me you'd be showing up. Come on, now . . . no, not *that* way — not so close to the edge. *This* way . . . through the gates. You missed out on that bread, but there's a Heavenly steak waiting. . . ."