

Hound Dog Days

One Dog and his Man
A Story of North Country Life
and Canine Contentment

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Mr Dodds was the first dog-related acquaintance I had made. I met him the first time I took Ingemar for a walk and from then on, for a decade or so, I bumped into him every morning. Mr Dodds was a retired farmer. He had a strong Northumbrian accent, one of the last of a breed who still talked with the authentic rolling, phlegmy ‘r’ that was said to have been affected originally in homage to the speech impediment of Harry Hotspur, the fifteenth-century Duke of Northumberland. Maybe that was right but to most outsiders it conjured up images of Edith Piaf. And besides, when you came across somebody as tough, violent and heavily armed as Harry Hotspur I’d imagine the last thing you’d want to do is imitate his speech impediment: ‘Art thou taking the pith?’ Crunch!

A small man who stooped perpetually forward as if walking into a stiff wind, Mr Dodds had a wrinkled and weather-beaten face that put me in mind of an overripe orange pippin. That, at least, was how he looked when he was out walking the dog. One day when I was in the bank a smart elderly fellow in a tweed jacket tapped me on the shoulder. ‘Now then, young man,’ the smart man said. ‘What are you up to?’ I had no idea who he was at first, but as I chatted with him it gradually dawned on me that it was Mr Dodds. He’d been to a lunch at the cattle mart. It was the first time I’d ever seen him with his dentures in. It’s amazing what a difference a set of teeth make to a face.

Mr Dodds’ dog was a corgi named Taffy. Most people in Britain nowadays associate corgis with the Queen and

judge it a bit of a lapdog. Mr Dodds had used Taffy for the corgi's real purpose, as a herding dog on his farm. Taffy was black and tan. His foxy face had a no-nonsense set to it. 'I've had that little beggar for thret-teen years,' Mr Dodds said, 'and you know what? If I turn my back on him for two minute he still runs up and bites me.'

'Really,' I said.

'Oh aye,' Mr Dodds said. 'He likes to keep me on my toes.'

It sounded to me as if Mr Dodds and Taffy were like Inspector Clouseau and his manservant Cato in the Pink Panther films. I imagined Taffy leaping from behind doorways and darting out from under beds when Mr Dodds least expected it. I saw Mr Dodds, involved in filling out some complex form about EU milk yield quotas, yelling 'Not now, Taffy!' as the corgi dived on him from the top of a light fitting.

Later I suffered similar problems with Ingemar. It wasn't that he attacked me if my back was turned (or that he jumped from light fittings), it was just that if I played with him he would start off quite gently, but slowly he'd start to bite. And the bites would gradually get harder and harder. Ingo had a particular ability to locate joints and knuckles, and when he darted in and grabbed your ankle or wrist it hurt. Eventually he'd push too far and I'd end up having to grab hold of him and wrestle him to the ground until he did the dog submission thing of going limp.

'Why does he do that?' Catherine asked one day after Ingo and I had had a prolonged tussle on the front lawn.

'I think he's testing me,' I said. 'He wants to be the alpha male in the pack. He knows I'm older than he is and he's checking to see if I'm weakening. One day he reckons

I'll be too old and decrepit to fight him off and when that happens he'll take charge.'

'And you'll be forced to limp around outside, living off scraps and curling up in the coal shed,' Catherine said with a chuckle.

'You're laughing now,' I said, 'but remember: if he does triumph it won't be me he's expecting to sleep with.'