

## LAST OF THE LITTER

They were two little boys living in a big city in the suburbs. They wanted a dog. Of course they did. There was never a boy that didn't want a dog, but father didn't want a dog, and the more father did not want a dog the more the boys did want one.

After months of asking and being refused by father, there came a litter of Labrador puppies to one of father's friends, and he was offered the pick of the litter. But father refused and cited his desire for the offer and his refusal of the offer to remain a secret, which the friend agreed to do.

Several months elapsed and the boys laid siege to their mother and pleaded their case to such effect that she took up their cause. I protested feverishly, but once the little woman makes up her mind, I have learned to bring out the white flag of surrender, because my testosterone is no match for her estrogen. Besides, when I finish this story there will be no doubt that we love her better for it to this day.

We piled in the car and drove eastward to the country, fifty miles away. There the friend greeted us with words that still ring in my ears to this day: "I have been keeping her just for you. She is the last of the litter."

I barked back, "Of course you have." I knew beyond any doubt that she had been culled nine times, the others having been gobbled up the first month of their existence.

"Last of the litter," kept ringing in my ears. I was in trouble, deep trouble, and I knew no way out of it.

I picked her up. She stared with big brown, mysterious eyes that penetrated deep into my soul and seemed to ask, "Will you rub my fur and say pretty words, then put me down and never pick me up again like the others?" Her eyes conveyed confusion, hurt feelings and forgiveness, but most of all they conveyed love.

I remember years ago when another set of big, beautiful brown eyes conveyed love, thus capturing my heart and soul. When she opened the door at a party in a small college town where she was doing postgraduate work, I knew immediately she was the one I would marry. "She" in this case is the woman who had taken up the cause for her two boys.

I asked my friend, "Is the puppy a full-blood Labrador?"

"Why, of course she is. If you prick her nose and her tail, she will bleed at both ends," he said with all truthfulness. We almost came to blows, but the little woman stepped in.

When pressed for her lineage, he offered, "The puppy's mother is a yellow one and her father a long-legged black dog. The pup is colored after her mother, but shaped like the father. She has lived an aristocratic life of ease for the past four months."

“What’s her name?” I asked after simmering down from a rolling boil.

“Ain’t named her yet. She has no fashionable name like Shadow of Retrieverville, No. 6344. Neither parent has a pedigree.”

It was then that I pleaded for a chance to appeal my acquiescence, but the judge and my wife and jury and her two boys turned it down. We really the boys and their mother bore her home in triumph, while I moaned and groaned, “Last of the litter.”

The puppy was consigned to the backyard and we went to church, but our thoughts that day ran more on the pup than on spiritual matters.

During the next few months, I tossed objects for her to retrieve, and she might and she might not, depending on her mood. She was a shy dog, so with any harsh words she would cower and refuse to do anything.

“What have I gotten myself into?” I asked silently, or to anyone who would listen.

Training went on like this for months, with some progress made, more so in obedience than in retrieving. On occasion, a glimpse of brilliance shown through, but I had my doubts and wondered if she would ever be ready for prime time.

When not in training, she gnawed on everything; the drywall in the garage was no match for her canine teeth. She dug numerous holes in the backyard like she was trying to reach China, and maybe she was. We had no chance to win “Yard of the Month.”

At ten months, Jessie—that is what the boys named her—took her first duck hunt in some flooded green timber. On reaching the timber hole just at dawn, she began growling at the decoys. She tried to get at them. She failed. She tried again with somewhat uncertainty. She retreated a short distance, then advanced growling and barking. A light wind moved the decoys; she drew back in fear.

There is something uncanny in the situation. What looks like a retriever is not a retriever! “She is the last of the litter.”

Finally, with her tail between her legs and a yelp, she slinked away, glancing slyly back over her shoulder. I took her out time and again to view the decoys, and eventually she came to know them to be decoys as well as I did.

Not a retrieve was made that morning. The only positive of the inaugural hunt was that the other waterfowlers made no mention of her prowess, or the lack thereof.

Back home we trained some more, when she was in a training mood, but nothing changed. She might retrieve or she might not. The following summer, I decided to ship her off for expert training. I told the trainer she was a shy dog and no harsh words could

be spoken or she would cower. I also told him of her propensity to retrieve or not to retrieve.

“Oh, just leave her with me for a week, and if she won’t do anything after that you can come get her, and I won’t charge you a dime. However, I have never met a dog I couldn’t train.” Just the words I wanted to hear.

Four nights later, the phone rang. “Come get her. I can’t even get her to jump off the bank for a retrieve,” the dejected (maybe it was “elated”) voice said on the other end of the phone.

“What’d you pay for her?”

“Nothing!”

“Well, she’s worth about what you paid for her.” I felt my blood boiling, but managed to hang up without a cussword said.

The next season, on opening morning, for the first time she showed some ability. While hunting a large swamp, I shot several, and she found all but one, a wounded one. She wended and chased that old bird for some time. Just when I was ready to call her off, I heard a rustling among the willows. In a minute out swam Jessie holding proudly in her mouth a wounded greenhead.

Since then, Jessie learned to retrieve flawlessly without being trained in any way — all learned through repetition. She became the inspiration of many hunting romances — in the swamps, playmate, roommate and bedfellow in the South, professional, most proficient in the hunt, going on when others quit, measuring her endurance by the sun, a bit speedier at sundown than sun up, though legs sore in four places, and would have been in six had she had them.

Besides being an excellent swimmer, she had a nose on her that could find a fallen duck honestly half a mile away. At least it seemed so to me, for I have seen her, with her nose in the air, scent a duck and follow it across rice paddy after rice paddy, saying as plainly as she could that the tainted air which was stirring in her nostrils was telling her — and me — she would be back with the bird before long.

Jessie was always civil to other dogs and tried in a doggy way to live up to the golden rule, but if a dog persisted and seemed bent on a fuss she would accommodate him or her. Pedigreed dogs would often dart out after her when we jogged in the neighborhood; then she would trot to the opposite side of the road and give a perturbed glimpse as much as to say, “I am a peaceful dog and don’t want to fight.”

If the canine persisted, Jessie would stop and shake him well, and send him yelping back whence he came, a wiser if not a better dog. Then Jessie would trot on after me as if

nothing had happened. She in this way gave many a mongrel a lasting lesson, and many of them twice her size.

She was a vigilant watchdog, but never meddled with any one who kept his hands off our belongings. One day a neighbor came to borrow a shovel, and there being no one about to get it, he began searching the shed. Jessie followed him wherever he went, and when he found the shovel she laid hold of his trousers leg and held him until he dropped it, when she at once chased him away. And woe to anyone who came meddling in the night or who came in rags in the daytime.

She hated flies, and when they lit on her, she would catch nearly every one and eat them. After her sight began to fail, I concluded shadows like spider webs came before her eyes in like manner, as I had heard old people complain of, for right in midwinter she would catch and appear to eat imaginary flies.

On more than one occasion, Jessie escaped from the backyard through an opened gate that we had forgotten to close when leaving in our car. When that happened, she never saw a jogger go home alone. She went home with many a pretty young woman, and I often remarked that she might have been in far worse company.

On two occasions while out gallivanting, she was hit by cars. On the first, at the age of five, we got a call from a jogger. Jessie had been hit and her leg appeared broken. Not more than a mile away, I arrived to find her curled up, not moving, and not whimpering. Being a doctor it took me no time to realize her left forearm was broken as it flailed in the air when lifted. She nudged my hand to let me know it hurt.

Back home, I lamented to my wife that I would take her outside the city limits and shoot her to relieve her of her pain and suffering which was obvious by the expression on Jessie's face. In no uncertain words, she let me know that wouldn't be kosher and that we were going to the vet. I argued there was nothing they could do.

Three months later after surgery, with a rod and plate attached to her bones, she was good as new and ready for the coming season. I had no idea vets could do this kind of operation.

The second escapade happened when she was nine years old. Once again, she had gotten out and followed a jogger. The phone call came and this time it was a broken pelvis. Once again, I repeated, "I will take her out and end her misery." The same response from my wife sent us back to the vet's office.

This time surgery was not required, only rest for eight weeks. I asked the vet, "How do I keep an active dog at rest for eight weeks?" He mumbled something, which I will not repeat.

With the same results as last time, she was ready to go the next hunting season and none the worse, only a noticeable limp.

How well do I remember her last hunt at age twelve.

Suffering from rheumatism that caused her to move about slowly, I intended to leave her at home on opening morning. I would have, but that would have hurt her worse than taking her along. As I walked out the door with my hunting togs on, she danced and pranced that morning just as well or better than when she was a younger dog, letting me know she was ready and that I had better not leave her behind. And woe be unto me if I ever left her behind, because upon my return she would sniff my vehicle to see whether the smell gave any indication I had hunted, and she could always tell just from the smell of the mud or dirt. If she determined that I had hunted then she would mope around for hours.

A slow hunt, we hunted all-day, putting a few birds in the bag. Rheumatism or no rheumatism, she jumped from her stand beside the wooden blind and complained nothing of the years which had handicapped her powers, but instead put her last flickering spark of energy into the best way to show me a little of the sport that she loved as well as I.

Yes, she had grayed as I had, and she couldn't hear the whistling of the wings like she once did, and the wake in the water wasn't what it used to be when she made her retrieves, but age had not lessen her burning desire to retrieve and please her master.

With dusk drawing on, I steered the boat to the dock. Once there, I noticed she was distended. Walking back to the clubhouse, some one hundred yards, she swelled more and was in pain. I had seen this look of pain before, the previous two times when she had broken bones.

A few minutes more and still in pain, I loaded up and departed for home, some seventy-five miles away. When I arrived, she could not lift her head and was near death, taking a breath every few seconds or so. She was the size of a hot-air balloon.

I lifted her from the back of the Bronco, placed her on a blanket in the garage, went inside, and grabbed the boys and wife. This time I didn't utter the stupid words, "I'll put her out of her misery."

We agreed this was the end; nothing could be done. Our eyes moistened but no tears fell. We knelt down; the boys lifted her head and rubbed her fur. Her eyes pleaded, "I am in pain, help me!"

We cried, "We love you. Don't die!" It was piteous, with her beautiful brown eyes fixed on us so fondly and appealingly, asking for help. Silence and sorrow descended on the household.

Then she rallied. It was then the boys begged so earnestly for a vet's help that to satisfy them it was decided to make a trip to the dog emergency room. Maybe it wasn't the end. Maybe something could be done. I was in full compliance with the others.

Within a few minutes, the vet gave us the diagnosis of the dreaded "gastric bloat," a life-threatening condition of large breed dogs and the prognosis wasn't good.

He treated her with IV fluids, antibiotics and antiarrhythmics. Next, he attempted to decompress the stomach by passing a tube. It wasn't successful. That left the vet no other choice.

"She has no chance of survival if the problem is not corrected by surgery," he said. "On the other hand, if we operate to correct the problem, she probably will die because of her age, but there is always a chance she might live."

The next day after surgery, I got the call that no one wants to receive. "Jessie is dead! She has departed from this vale of sunshine and tears."

We raced to the vet's office. Jessie was asleep, with her head on her paws, in the dear old familiar attitude, asleep with a soundness that never would waken. She would not need to be shut in or never accompany another jogger, and closed gates would trouble her no more. No more would she go with my boys and me on hunting trips nor snuggle up to us at nighttime.

While we stood around her that bright afternoon, no one was ashamed of the tears that dampened our cheeks. And though Jessie was a dog and only a dog, her memory is cherished by every member of the family. She was a true friend and hunting companion, and he who despises the friendship of a dog misses one of the choice things in life.

We drove to the country where we had gotten her. My friend dug a shallow grave with his backhoe. We tenderly lowered her on green boughs and flowers and heaped a mound above her. I prayed these few words:

Night has come to Jessie, bringing everlasting sleep to her short life. No visible reminder of it remains now but the little mound of fresh earth underneath this oak tree. It seems too bad that a dog grows old so soon. I suppose most people would say this is the end of her. But is it? I only know that I have many pleasant memories of her.

No hunting season will ever be the same, for something precious has been taken from me. No more will we witness another misty sunrise over the wetlands and savor the breath of a morning breeze in our nostrils nor hear the sound of whistling wings. She has retrieved her last bird.

We left her to her eternal rest, knowing that no poet would ever sing her praise nor whose deeds, though heroic, at least in our eyes, would ever be recorded in history. The only record I have is my hunting journal which I thumb through now and then. Each page tells of her successes, her failures, my successes and my failures.

Her death saddened our hearts, for the twelve years she spent with us were among the brightest of our lives. It made us sad to reflect that all that is left of her beauty and her love is a grave beneath an oak tree and the crumbling earth above.

For twelve years, she acted well her part, did it willingly and lovingly, gave much to the entertainment of her family, and did all that was asked of her, all she was meant to do. During all those years, Jessie was our constant companion. We loved her just as much out of the hunting season as in.

Now memory ó at times inconvenient memory ó plays its pranks. It is overwhelming with good things that can never occur again, thus the inconvenience, then the sadness ó the world is full of Jessies, but only one is the average lot of man. The boys and I will be faithful to her memory, we cannot help it. With her passing on, the old zeal is coated, and a little rust on the gun barrel doesn't worry me so much any more.

Many summer afternoons, I lay underneath the oak tree where she is buried and listen to the voices of rustling leaves, wandering bumblebees droning in and out of hearing, and doves cooing. It is a pleasant place to do so and lulls me always to dreamy memories of her.

I see her still, swimming from here to there; that nose, so full of delicate and tender tissues on which the faintest scent made an impression, well into the wind speeding here, hesitating there. Her nostrils open, they drink the wind; it's tainted a second and gone; she changes her course, and the impression grows stronger that she is on the right course. In no time she has achieved her mission and returns ever so gracefully.

The boys and I may hunt on for years, and shoot over all kinds of dogs and own some good ones ó in fact, from a field point of view, some better than Jessie ó but when the hourglass is mostly run out and I look back, think back, dream back, of those days spent afield, preeminently above and beyond, and in a class of her own, will stand Jessie.

It is no mock sentiment when I say that not the least pleasant sight to my eyes upon the öfurther shoresö would be my trusted Jessie, and if she is there, I feel quite sure she will be standing with her forepaws in the water's edge when it is my turn to cross. May it be that she will leap on me whom she loved and lick my face in Eternity.

We shall never have another Jessie . . . and haven't replaced her although she died five seasons ago, and I . . . . well I fear I never will.

What of the other litter mates? History telleth not, but this we know ó the best ones are not always the first choice of the litter.