

Socrates

John Christopher

I HAD closed the lab for the afternoon and was walking down toward the front gate, meaning to take a bus into town, when I heard the squeals from the direction of the caretaker's cottage. I'm fond of animals and hate to hear them in pain, so I walked through the gate into the cottage yard. What I saw horrified me.

Jennings, the caretaker, was holding a young puppy in his hand and beating its head against the stone wall. At his feet were three dead puppies, and as I came through the gate he tossed a fourth among them, and picked up the last squirming remnant of the litter. I called out sharply, "Jennings ! What's going on ?"

He turned to face me, still holding the puppy in his hand. He is a surly-looking fellow at best, but now he looked thunderous.

"What the hell do you think I'm doing ?" he demanded. "Killing off a useless litter—that's what I'm doing." He held the pup out for me to observe.

"Here," he went on, "have a look at this and you'll see why."

I looked closely. It was the queerest pup I had ever seen. It had a dirty, tan coat and abnormally thick legs. But it was the head that drew attention. It must have been fully four times the size of any ordinary pup of its breed; so big that, although its neck was sturdy, the head seemed to dangle on it like an apple on a stalk.

"It's a queer one, all right," I admitted.

"Queer?" he exclaimed. "It's a monster, that's what it is." He looked at me angrily. "And I know the cause of it. I'm not a fool. There was a bit in the Sunday papers a couple of weeks back about it. It's them electrical X-ray machines you have up at the house. It said in the paper about X-rays being able to influence what's to be born and make monsters of them. And look at this for a litter of pedigree airedales; not one that would make even a respectable mongrel. Thirty quid the price of this litter at the very least."

"It's a pity," I said, "but I'm pretty sure the company won't accept

responsibility. You must have let your bitch run loose beyond the inner gate and there's no excuse for that. It's too bad you didn't see that bit in the Sunday paper a few weeks earlier; you might have kept her chained up more. You know you've been warned about going near the plant."

"Yes," he snarled, "I know what chance I've got of getting money out of those crooks. But at least I can get some pleasure out of braining this lot."

He prepared to swing the pup against the wall. It had been quiet while we were talking, but now it gave one low howl and opened large eyes in a way that seemed frantically to suggest that it had been listening to our conversation, and knew its fate was sealed. I grabbed hold of Jennings' arm pretty roughly.

"Hold on," I said. "When did you say those pups were born?"

"This morning," he growled.

I said, "But its eyes are open. And look at the color! Have you ever seen an airedale with blue eyes before?"

He laughed unpleasantly. "Has anybody ever seen an airedale with a head like that before, or a coat like that? It's no more an airedale than I am. It's a cur. And I know how to deal with it."

The pup was whining to itself, as though realizing the futility of making louder noises. I pulled my wallet out. "I'll give you a quid for it," I said.

He whistled. "You must be mad," he said. "But why should that worry me? It's yours for the money. Taking it now?"

"I can't," I said. "My landlady wouldn't let me. But I'll pay you ten bob a week if you will look after it till I can find it a place. Is it a deal?"

He put his hand out again. "In advance?"

I paid him.

"I'll look after it, guv'nor, even though it goes against the grain. At any rate it'll give Glory something to mother." At least once a day, sometimes twice, I used to call in to see how the pup was getting along. It was progressing amazingly. At the end of the second week Jennings asked for an increase of 2/6d in the charge for keeping it, and I had to agree. It had fed from the mother for less than a week, after which it had begun to eat its own food, and with a tremendous appetite.

Jennings scratched his unkempt head when he looked at it. "I don't know. I've never seen a dog like it. Glory didn't give it no lessons in eating or drinking. It just watched her from the corner and one day, when I brought fresh stuff down, it set on it like a wolf. It ain't natural."

Watching the pup eat, I was amazed myself. It seemed to have more capacity for food than its mother, and you could almost see it putting on weight and size. And its cleverness! It was hardly more than a fortnight old when I surprised it carefully pawing the latch of the kennel door open, to get at some food that Jennings had left outside while going out to open the gates. But even at that stage I don't think it was such superficial tricks that impressed me, so much as the way I would catch it watching Jennings and me as we leaned over the kennel fence discussing it. There was such an air of attentiveness about the way it sat, with one ear cocked, a puzzled frown on that broad-browed, most uncanine face.

Jennings said one day, "Thought of a name for him yet?"

"Yes," I said. "I'm going to call him Socrates."

"Socrates?" repeated Jennings. "Something to do with football?"

I smiled. "There was another great thinker with that name several thousand years ago. A Greek."

"Oh," Jennings said scornfully. "A Greek..."

One Friday, evening I brought a friend down to see Socrates—a man who had made a study of dogs. Jennings wasn't in. This didn't surprise me because he habitually got drunk at least one evening a week and Friday was his favorite. I took my friend around to the kennels.

He didn't say anything when he saw the pup, which was now, after three weeks, the size of a large fox terrier. He examined it carefully, as though he were judging a prize winner at Cruft's. Then he put it down and turned to me.

"How old did you say this dog is?" he asked.

I told him.

He shook his head. "If it were anyone but you who told me, I would call him a liar," he said. "Man, I've never seen anything like it. And that head... You say the rest of the litter were the same?"

"The bodies looked identical," I told him. "That's what impressed me. You are liable to get queer freak mutations around these new labs of ours—double-headed rats and that sort of thing—but five the same in one litter! That looked like a true mutation to me."

He said, "Mutations I'm a bit shaky about, but five alike in one litter look like a true breed to me. What a tragedy that fool killed them:"

"He killed a goose that might have laid him some very golden eggs," I

said. “Quite apart from the scientific importance of it—I should imagine a biologist would go crazy at the thought—a new mutated breed like this would have been worth a packet. Even this one dog might have all sorts of possibilities. Look!”

Socrates had pushed an old tin against the wall of the kennel and was using it in an attempt to scale the fence barring the way to the outer world. His paws scrabbled in vain a few inches from the top.

“Good God!” my friend said. “If it can do that after a month...”

We turned and left the kennels. As we came out I collided with Jennings. He reeled drunkenly past us.

“Come to feed little Shocratesh,” he said thickly.

I held his shoulder. “That’s all right,” I said. “We’ve seen to them.”

When I dropped in the following day, I was surprised to see a huge, roughly painted sign hanging over the kennel door. It read:

“PRIVATE. NO ADMITTANCE.”

I tried the door, but it was locked. I looked around. Jennings was watching me.

“Hello, Professor,” he said. “Can’t you read?”

I said, “Jennings, I’ve come for the pup. My friend is going to look after him at his kennels.”

Jennings grinned. “Sorry,” he said, “the dog’s not for sale.”

“What do you mean?” I exclaimed. “I bought him four weeks ago. And I’ve been paying you for his keep.”

“You got any writing that says that, Professor?” he asked. “You got a bill of sale?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Jennings,” I said. “Open the door up.”

“You even got any witnesses?” he asked. He came over to me confidentially.

“Look,” he said, “you’re a fair man. I heard you telling your friend last night that dog’s a gold mine. You know I own him by rights. Here, I’m a fair man myself. Here’s three pounds five, the money I’ve had from you in the last four weeks. You know he’s my gold mine by rights. You wouldn’t try to do a man like me. You know I paid five quid stud fee for that litter.”

“It was a bargain,” I said. “You were going to throw the pup at the

wall—don't forget that. You wouldn't even know the dog was anything out of the ordinary now, except for listening to a private conversation last night." I found my wallet. "Here's ten pounds. That will make good the stud fee and a little extra profit for yourself into the bargain."

He shook his head. "I'm not selling, Professor. And I know my rights in the law. You've got no proof; I've got possession."

I said, "You idiot! What can you do with him? He will have to be examined by scientists, tested, trained. You don't know anything about it."

Jennings spat on the ground. "Scientists!" he exclaimed. "No, I'm not taking him to no scientists. I've got a bit of money saved up. I'm off away from here tomorrow. I'll do the training. And you watch the theaters for the big billboards in a few months' time—George Jennings and his Wonder Dog, Socrates! I'll be up at the West End inside a year."

It was only three months later that I saw the name on the bills outside the Empire Theater in Barcaster. There had been no word from Jennings during that time. As he had said he would, he had gone with the dog, vanishing completely. Now he was back, and the bill read as he had told me it would:

GEORGE JENNINGS
AND HIS WONDER DOG,
SOCRATES

I went in and bought a seat in the front row. There were some knockabout comedians fooling together on the stage; and after them a team of rather tired-looking acrobats. Jennings was the third in appearance. He strode on to a fanfare of trumpets, and behind him loped Socrates.

He was bigger and his rough, tan coat was shaggier than ever. His head was more in proportion to his body, too, but it was still huge. He looked nearer to a St. Bernard than any breed I could think of, but he was very little like a St. Bernard. He was just Socrates, with the same blue eyes blazing that had surprised me that afternoon four months before.

Jennings had taught him tricks, all right. As they reached the center of the stage, Socrates staggered up on to his hind legs, waddled to the footlights and saluted the audience. He swung effortlessly from the trapezes the acrobats had left, spelled out words in reply to Jennings' questions, pulling alphabet blocks forward with his teeth. He went through all the repertoire that trick dogs usually follow, capping them

with an assurance that made the audience watch in respectful silence. But when he left, walking stiffly off the stage, the ovation was tremendous. They came back half a dozen times for encores, Socrates saluting gravely each time the mob of hysterical humans before him. When they had left for the last time, I walked out, too.

I bribed the doorman to let me know the name of Jennings' hotel. He wasn't staying with the rest of the music-hall people, but by himself in the Grand. I walked over there late in the evening, and had my name sent up. The small, grubby page boy came back in a few minutes.

"Mr. Jennings says you're to go right up," he told me, and added the floor and room number.

I knocked and heard Jennings' voice answer, "Come in!"

He seemed more prosperous than the Jennings I had known, but there was the same shifty look about him. He was sitting in front of the fire wearing an expensive blue-and-gold dressing gown, and as I entered the room he poured himself whisky from a decanter. I noticed that his hand shook slightly.

"Why," he said thickly, "if it isn't the professor! Always a pleasure to see old friends. Have a drink, Professor."

He helped me to whisky.

"Here's to you, Professor," he said, "and to Socrates, the Wonder Dog!"

I said, "Can I see him?"

He grinned. "Any time you like. Socrates!"

A door pushed open and Socrates walked in, magnificent in his bearing and in the broad, intelligent face from which those blue eyes looked out. He advanced to Jennings' chair and dropped into immobility, head couched between powerful paws.

"You seen our show?" Jennings asked.

I nodded.

"Great, isn't it? But it's only the beginning. We're going to show them! Socrates, do the new trick."

Socrates jumped up and left the room, returning a moment later pulling a small wooden go-cart, gripping a rope attached to it in his teeth. I noticed that the cart had a primitive pedal arrangement near the front, fixed to the front wheels. Socrates suddenly leaped into the cart, and, moving the pedals with his paws, propelled himself along the room. As he reached the wall, the cart swerved and I noticed that his tail worked a

rudderlike arrangement for steering. He went the reverse length of the room and turned again, but this time failed to allow enough clearance. The cart hit the side wall and Socrates toppled off.

Jennings rose to his feet in an instant. He snatched a whip from the wall, and, while Socrates cowered, thrashed him viciously, cursing him all the time for his failure.

I jumped forward and grappled with Jennings. At last I got the whip away from him and he fell back exhausted in the chair and reached for the whisky decanter.

I said angrily, "You madman! Is this how you train the dog?"

He looked up at me over his whisky glass. "Yes," he said, "this is my way of training him! A dog's got to learn respect for his master. He doesn't understand anything but the whip. Socrates!"

He lifted his whip hand, and the dog cowered down.

"I've trained him," he went on. "He's going to be the finest performing dog in the world before I'm through."

I said, "Look, Jennings, I'm not a rich man, but I've got friends who will advance me money. I'll get you a thousand pounds for Socrates."

He sneered. "So you want to cash in on the theaters, too?"

"I promise that if you sell Socrates to me, he will never be used for profit by anyone."

He laughed. "A hell of a lot I care what would happen to him if I sold him. But I'm not selling; not for a penny under £20,000. Why, the dog's a gold mine."

"You are determined about that?" I asked.

He got up again. "I'll get you the advance bills for our next engagement," he said. "Top billing already! Hang on; they're only next door."

He walked out unsteadily. I looked down to where Socrates lay, watching everything in the way that had fascinated me when he was a pup. I called to him softly:

"Socrates."

He pricked up his ears. I felt crazy, but I had to do it. I whispered to him, "Socrates, follow me back as soon as you can get away. Here, take the scent from my coat"

I held my sleeve out to him, and he sniffed it. He wagged his huge,

bushy tail slowly. Then Jennings was back with his billheads, and I made my excuses and left.

I walked back—a matter of two or three miles. The more I thought, the more insane did it seem that the dog could have heeded and understood my message. It had been an irrational impulse.

I had found new accommodations in the months since Jennings' disappearance; in a cottage with a friendly old couple. I had brought Tess, my own golden retriever, from home, and they both adored her. She was sitting on the inside window ledge as I walked slowly up the garden path, and her barks brought old Mrs. Dobby to the door to let me in. Tess came bouncing to meet me and her silky paws were flung up toward my chest. I patted and stroked her into quietness and, after washing, settled down to a pleasant tea.

Two or three hours later, the Dobbys having gone to bed, I was sitting reading by the fire when I heard a voice at the door I called, "Who's there?"

This time it was a little more distinct, though still garbled, as though by a person with a faulty palate. I heard, "Socrates."

I threw the door open quickly. Socrates stood there, eyes gleaming, tail alert. I looked beyond him into the shadows.

"Who's brought you, old chap?" I asked.

Socrates looked up. His powerful jaws opened. I could see teeth gleaming whitely.

Socrates said, slurring the words, but intelligible, "Me. Can speak."

I brought him in, shelving my incredulity. Sitting in the Dobbys' cosy room in front of a glowing fire, it seemed more fantastic than ever. Half to myself, I said, "I can't believe it."

Socrates had sat down on the rug. "True, though," he said.

I asked, "Does Jennings know?"

Socrates replied, "No. Have told no one else. Would only make into tricks."

"But Jennings knows you can hear and understand things?"

"Yes. Could not hide. Jennings whips until I learn. Easier to learn at once."

His voice, a kind of low, articulate growling, became more readily understandable as I listened to it. After a few minutes it did not seem at

all strange that I was sitting by the fire talking to a half-grown but large mongrel dog. He told me how he had practiced human speech by himself, forcing his throat to adapt itself to the complexities, succeeding through a long process of trial and error.

I said, in amazement, “But, Socrates, you are barely four months old!”

His brow wrinkled. “Yes. Strange. Everything goes so fast for me. Big—old...”

“Maturity,” I supplied. “Of course there have been ‘talking dogs’ before, but they were just stunts, no real intelligence. Do you realize what a phenomenon you are, Socrates?”

The vast canine face seemed to smile. “How not realize?” he asked. “All other dogs—such fools. Why that, Professor?” I told him of his birth. He seemed to grasp the idea of X-ray mutation very easily. I suppose one can always swallow the facts of one’s own existence. He remembered very little of that first month of infancy. When I told him of the fate of the rest of his litter, he was saddened.

“Perhaps best not to know that,” he said. “Sad to think I might have had brothers and sisters like me. Not to be always a trick dog.”

“You don’t need to be a trick dog, Socrates,” I said. “Look, we’ll go away. I’ve got friends who will help. You need never see Jennings again.”

Socrates said, “No. Not possible. Jennings the master. I must go back.”

“But he beats you! He may beat you for going out now.”

“He will,” Socrates said. “But worth it to come see you.”

“Look, Socrates,” I said. “Jennings isn’t your master. No free intelligence should be a slave to another. Your intelligence is much more advanced than Jennings’.”

The big head shook. “For men, all right. Dogs different.”

“But you aren’t even Jennings’ dog,” I said. I told him the story of Jennings’ trickery; how he had sold Socrates to me and then refused to acknowledge the sale. Socrates was not impressed.

“Always Jennings’ dog,” he said. “Not remember anything else. Must go back. You not dog—not understand.”

I said halfheartedly, “We would have a fine time, Socrates. You could learn all sorts of things. And be free, completely free.”

But I knew it was no use. Socrates, as he said, was still a dog, even though an intelligent one, and the thousands of years of instinctive slavery

to a human master had not been quenched by the light that brought intelligence and reasoning to his brain.

He said, "Will come here to learn. Will get away often."

"And be beaten by Jennings every time you go back?"

Socrates shivered convulsively. "Yes," he said. "Worth it. Worth it to learn things. You teach?"

"I'll teach you anything I can, Socrates," I promised.

"Can mutate more dogs like me?"

I hated to say it. "No, Socrates. You were a fluke, an accident. X-rays make monsters; once in a million, million times, perhaps, something like you happens."

The bushy tail drooped disconsolately. The huge head rested a moment between his paws. Then he stood up, four-legged, an outcast.

"Must go now. Will come again soon."

I let him out and saw him lope away into the night. I turned back into the warm firelit room. I thought of Socrates, running back through the night to Jennings' whip and I knew what anger and despair were.

Socrates came quite frequently after that. He would sit in front of me while I read to him from books. At first he wanted to be taught to read for himself, but the difficulty of turning pages with his clumsy paws discouraged him. I read to him from all the books he wanted.

His appetite was voracious, but lay chiefly along non-technical lines; naturally enough, in view of the impossibility of his ever being able to do even the simplest manual experiments. Philosophy interested him, and I found my own education improving with Socrates as he led me deeper and deeper into mazes of idealism, epistemology and sublineation. He enjoyed poetry, too, and composed a few rough poems, which had the merit of a strange non-human approach. But he would not let me write them down; now I can remember only a few isolated lines.

His most intense interest was in an unexpected field. I mentioned casually one day some new development in physical research, and his mind fastened on the subject immediately. He told me he could see all sorts of queer things which he knew humans could at the best sense only vaguely. He spent nearly an hour one evening describing to me the movements of a strange spiral-shaped thing that, he said, was spinning around slowly in one corner of my room, now and then increasing and

decreasing in size and making sudden jumps. I walked over to the place he indicated and put my hand through vacancy.

“Can hear it, too,” Socrates said. “High, sweet noise.”

“Some people have unusual senses and report similar things,” I told him.

He made me read through every book I could find on paranormal phenomena, in search of explanations of the oddities that surrounded him, but they annoyed him.

“So many fools,” he said wearily, when we put down one book that had painstakingly linked up poltergeists with angels. “They did not see. They only wanted to. They thought they did.”

The Dobbys were a little curious at my new habit of reading aloud in my room, and once I saw them glancing suspiciously at Socrates when he changed his speech into a growl as they came into the house from the garden. But they accepted his strange appearances and disappearances quite easily, and always made a fuss of him when he happened to turn up during my absence.

We did not always read. At times we would go out into the fields, and he and Tess would disappear in search of rabbits and birds and all the other things that fascinate dogs in the country. I would see them a field away, breasting the wind together. Socrates badly needed such outings. Jennings rarely took him out, and, as Socrates spent all the time he could filch from Jennings’ training activities with me, he saw no other dogs and had no other exercise. Tess was very fond of him and sometimes whined when we shut her out from my room, in order to read and talk undisturbed. I asked Socrates about her once.

He said, “Imagine all dogs intelligent; all men fools. You the only intelligent man. You talk to dogs, but you not like pretty women, even though they are fools?”

Then, for months, Socrates disappeared, and I learned that Jennings was touring the north of England, having a sensational success. I saw also the announcement that he was to return to Barcaster for a fortnight early in November. I waited patiently. On the morning before he was due to open, Socrates returned.

He was looking as fit as ever physically, but mentally the tour had been a strain for him. In philosophy he had always inclined to defeatism, but it had been defeat with a sense of glory. He had reveled in Stapledon’s works,

and drawn interesting comparisons between himself and Stapledon's wonder sheepdog. Now, however, there was a listlessness about him that made his defeatism a drab and unhappy thing. He would not read philosophy, but lay silent while I read poetry to him.

Jennings, I discovered, had steadily increased his bouts of drunkenness. Socrates told me that he had to carry the act by himself now; Jennings was generally too drunk to give even the most elementary instructions on the stage.

And, of course, with the drunkenness came the whippings. There were nasty scars on the dog's back. I treated them as well as I could, but increasingly I hated and dreaded the time when he would say, "Must go now," and I would see him lope off, tail low, to face Jennings' drunken fury.

I remonstrated with him again, begging him to come away with me, but it was beyond reason. The centuries of slavery could not be eradicated. He always went back to Jennings.

Then he came one afternoon. It had been raining for days, and he was wet through. He would not stay in front of the fire to dry. The rain was slackening a little. I took my raincoat, and, with Tess frisking beside us, we set out. We walked on in silence. Even Tess grew subdued.

At last, Socrates said, "Can't go on for long. Whipped me again last night. Felt something burn my mind. Almost tore his throat out. I will do it soon and they will shoot me."

"They won't shoot you," I said. "You come to me. You will be all right. Come now, Socrates. Surely you don't want to go on serving Jennings when you know you may have to kill him?"

He shivered, and the raindrops ran off his shaggy back.

"Talking no good," he said. "I must go back. And if he whips me too much, I must kill him. I will be shot. Best that way."

We had reached the river. I paused on the bridge that spanned it a few inches above the swirling currents of the flood, and looked out. The river was high after the rain, running even more swiftly than it usually did. Less than a quarter of a mile away was the fall, where the water cascaded over the brink into a raging turmoil below. I was looking at it abstractedly when I heard Jennings' voice.

He stood at the other end of the bridge. He was raging drunk.

He called, "So there you are! And that's what you've been up to—sneaking off to visit the professor. I thought I might catch you here."

He advanced menacingly up the bridge. “What you need, my lad, is a taste of the whip.”

He was brandishing it as he walked. I waited until he had almost reached the place where Socrates was cowering on the boards, waiting for the blow, and then I charged him savagely. He fought for a moment, but I was sober and he was not. I caught one of his legs and twisted. He pulled viciously away, staggered, fell—and disappeared into the violently flowing river.

I saw his face appear a few yards down. He screamed and went under again. I turned to Socrates.

“It’s all over,” I said. “You are free. Come home, Socrates.”

The head appeared again, and screamed more faintly. Socrates stirred. He called to Jennings for the first and last time, “Master!”

Then he was over the bridge and swimming down frantically toward the drowning man. I called after him, but he took no notice. I thought of jumping in myself, but I knew I could not last even to reach him. With Tess at my heels, I raced around the bank to the place where the water roared over the fall.

I saw them just as they reached the fall. Socrates had reached him, and was gripping the coat in his teeth. He tried to make for the bank, but there was no chance. They swept over the edge and into the fury below. I watched for their reappearance for some time, but they did not come up.

They never came up.

I think sometimes of the things Socrates might have done if he had been given the chance. If only for those queer things he saw that we cannot see, his contribution to knowledge would have been tremendous. And when I think that he was less than a year old when he died, the lost possibilities awe and sadden me.

I cannot escape the conclusion that at his full maturity he would have outstripped all the specialists in the strange fields he might have chosen to work in.

There is just one thing that worries me still. His was a true mutation; the identical litter showed that. But was it a dominant one? Could the strength and vigor of his intelligence rise above the ordinary traits of an ordinary dog? It’s a point that means a great deal.

Tess is going to have pups.

The End