

The Importance of Being Happy

By Pat Mosel

Each day before the accident, Happy would sniff around his mistress's face to wake her up. His breath on her face sometimes made her screw up her nose and lips as if she was going to sneeze. The golden cocker spaniel would try to restrain his natural exuberance and sniff gently, in case - after making out she was going to sneeze and not sneezing - she got cross and ended up burying her head in the pillow. If that didn't happen, she would simply lie there, her hair floating around her head. Eventually, she'd make a big effort to open her eyes, and she would more than likely brush him away with a hand. "In a minute, Happy."

Given time, she would sit up and Happy would race her to the kitchen. Happy raced. His mistress did not. The dog would have to go back to see what was happening. Jackie Gilmour was still just sitting on the edge of the bed. It looked as if she had something in both eyes. She would be rubbing them with her fists. Then, slow as ever, she would put on her slippers. Happy would wag his tail and thump his front paws on the carpet to give her the message that he was ready to go. To go for his morning toilet walk. To smell all the smells that his nose could find – smells of breakfast, other dogs, birds, and people. Jackie knew these things, but before it all got started the household was aware that she had to have a cup of tea.

With this mistress - in those days - it seemed that it all boiled down to cups of tea. The kettle would sound out a purr, bubble and hiss. Click. The water had boiled. After she had done the pouring and stirring, she sat down and drank from her mug. And she would sigh with contentment. Happy drank his water from a bowl. It was always there. Always half-

full; never half empty. He was an optimistic dog. For example, he was optimistic that she would finish her tea and take him for a walk. At this point his bladder was bursting. But he realized that some things were sacred: like her cups of tea and his special chair in the living room. Even the man who used to live with them acknowledged these things. This man had a loud voice and big feet. He would stand on Happy if he got in the way. Then one day the man disappeared, and it was just the two of them again. Happy was pleased that the man had gone. He got more attention.

Happy would try his best to understand Jackie, but he didn't always succeed. He knew when he had done something wrong because he would be called a "bad dog, Happy" and, especially for a dog with a superior family tree, that was the worst thing to hear. When he heard these words he usually crawled under the bed and didn't come out until he was sure that it was safe. This didn't happen very often and he considered himself refined and disciplined. All the same he did have strong likes and dislikes. He didn't mind cats, as a general rule, but there were some dogs he detested. One was the Alsatian who lived on the corner. He was not just big. He was huge. He was about three times cocker spaniel size and was very intimidating. Unlike Happy, he didn't need a lead when he went for a walk. Happy would have described him as arrogant but well-behaved if it weren't for the fact that once the Alsatian caused him to be called a "very bad dog".

That spring day they went to the park later than his internal clock said they should. She knew when they should go out – the same times every day – but she would get involved in sitting at the table above his bed in the living room. She would sit there and stare at a computer screen and books, sometimes taking up a pen and writing, sometimes just turning pages. That day he jumped up and pawed her leg, wagging his tail, and, if she

had taken notice of these signals to go out, what happened might not have occurred and he would not have been called bad.

They went to the park and he had a run around. The best bit was when she let him off the lead and he could tear across the grass. All the time he was scavenging. He found bread, chips and chocolate. To get back to the flat, they had to cross a busy road with cars coming and going. Gigantic lorries, too. The procedure here was that he was put on a short lead and told to sit at the edge of the pavement. He let her make the decision about when to cross, but he was always ready. He would be trembling and when she said, "Walk on, Happy" they would hurry across the road. "Good boy. Heel." Once at the other side, they would slow down, thankful to have escaped the wheels of cars.

That day, he sat obediently on the pavement waiting to cross the road. He waited and he waited. Tense. Getting ready to hurry across. Finally, she said, "Walk on, Happy." Then it happened. He spotted the snobbish Alsatian crossing the road, coming the other way. He forgot her commands and lunged at the high and mighty dog. "Happy!" He felt the lead give way, and then become taut as though there was a heavy weight at the end of it. It was stopping him getting to his quarry who just walked on with his nose in the air. That was bad and insulting behaviour but Happy gave up trying to get a rise out of him. By this time, he was in the middle of the road and, turning around, he saw that she was in the middle of the road also. But she wasn't standing upright. She was lying down on the tarmac. What a place to lie down and go to sleep! He started sniffing around her face like he did in the mornings. She seemed to be breathing but she wasn't getting up. She was just lying there. He was still annoyed about the Alsatian's attitude.

He heard the car coming before he saw it. That instinct that dogs and other animals possess, was telling him to run with all his might. At the same time, he knew that he

could never leave his mistress, and certainly not in the middle of the road with cars coming. He tugged at her sleeve. She wasn't moving. She was groaning. She wasn't even calling him a "bad dog". He decided there and then that his place was beside her, come what may. He sat down beside her head and whined to let her know he was there, to call her back from wherever she had gone. The oncoming noise of a car engine frightened him. He cowered when he heard a high-pitched screeching that hurt his ears. The car stopped a dog's length away from their noses. Hooting followed, and he realized there was a long line of cars behind the one that nearly ran them over. A man jumped out of that car and rushed around to them. Yet, he ignored Happy and put his arms out and around Jackie, and he pulled her to her feet. She was still holding the lead so, attached to the other end, he got tugged around too. The man took them to the pavement and he sat Jackie down so that she could recover. Happy was very quiet now, and very worried. He needn't have been because soon they were up and she was limping to the flat. When they got in and she'd had a cup of tea he realized she was better because she called him a "very bad dog". He hung his head in shame, crawling under the bed, although it was really the Alsatian's fault.

That was a near miss, but in the summer the accident happened. It was early evening when the cars outside the flat had stopped being noisy and they were watching TV. It was still light outside. Jackie was occupying the comfy sofa, forbidden to him. He was lying sprawled out in his chair. He had just had a bath and was feeling as if he wanted to roll in some dung to get rid of the smell of shampoo. He didn't have any food in the evening, even if he was hungry. Well... to give her some credit, she would offer him some biscuits and those special dental chewies that were so good for his teeth. That was the usual routine, but that night Happy didn't get a chewie because Jackie had staggered up and

was (would you believe it?) suddenly lying on the floor. Not again! First in the road, and now here. He was used to her getting down on the floor to do exercises once a day. She would lie down on the carpet in front of the sofa and stick her hands and legs in the air and get annoyed if he interrupted. But this was off schedule. Her arms were by her sides and her legs had flopped down. The funny thing he noticed was that she was lying on her tummy with her face turned sideways, squashed against the carpet. This wasn't an exercise he'd seen her do before. He nudged her. He thought she might cuddle him or, at least, stroke him or, even, push him away. On the contrary, she did nothing. So, he went to his bowl and drank some water. Then he went back to his chair. There was a dog on TV that distracted him. But he couldn't concentrate on television for long with her not sitting in her usual place on the sofa. She was still lying on the floor. He went and got his squeaky toy. He wagged his tail and he thumped his front paws on the carpet, ready for a game. He squeaked the toy, and still she did not respond. That's when he realized that something was seriously wrong.

He crawled close to her and cuddled in to her side. She still smelled like his mistress; a human, sweet, sweat smell. She was warm and even warmer after he had been snuggling up to her for a while. It was her stillness that he was afraid of. He wanted Jackie's man, even with his big feet, to walk in the door and encourage her to get up. When he thought of the man, he realized that there were other people who could come in and help her. Like the man in the car who lifted her up after she had fallen in the street. It was time to call for help. There was no way of getting out of the flat because he couldn't open the doors. When he came to think of it he was pretty reliant on his mistress for all sorts of things. However, there was one thing he could do to save her. He could make a noise which would bring the neighbours running. He would bark and wail.

Sitting by her side, he barked and barked and barked. And yowled. And howled.

After some hours, someone rang the doorbell. How did they expect anyone to open the door? Still he barked, still sitting beside her. There was a banging on the door. He didn't let up although his throat was sore. He kept on barking and it worked because there was a thunderous crash as the front door flew open. In came two men followed by some neighbours. He didn't know the two were policemen, any more than he understood what had happened to his mistress.

What followed was a kind of a blur. The policemen were trying to talk to him and make friends with him. He wasn't having any of it. Although he had wanted help to come, this was his territory. Their hands were too threatening, and it wasn't like him to let anyone touch his mistress. They even tried tempting him with a biscuit. When the biggest, fattest one tried to grab him by the neck fur, he squirmed free, ran between their legs and into the bedroom where he hid under the bed. He was too tired to bark any more. Besides, he thought that if he kept very quiet they wouldn't find him.

A neighbour enticed him out in the end because he was hungry and thirsty. Someone had made him a bowl of his favourite dog food. The smell was too much for him to resist. It was after he had wolfed down the meaty chunks that he realized Jackie had gone. He fell prey to a horrible, sinking feeling. He had that feeling all through the time when he was at the kennels, a place where he usually went for his holidays. He moped and whined and pined. Yet he couldn't count on his claws the number of times people were calling him a "good dog". And then one day she was there at the kennel gate. He launched himself at her. She stroked, cuddled and complimented him, calling him a "clever dog". She was smiling as she hadn't smiled since her man disappeared.

They went home together. Unexpectedly, Jackie's man – his name was Derek – was waiting there to greet them. Happy, in his turn, surprised them all when he wagged his tail enthusiastically and invited Derek to play by dropping a ball at his feet.