

Man and Dog

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One widely-held opinion is that a cat generally has the characteristics of a woman, whereas a dog, by his nature, is more masculine. I believe that this opinion is based on a curious natural fact: in reality, nearly all house cats are of the female sex, whereas an overwhelming majority of the dogs one encounters are male. A tomcat, that rare creature, is endowed with more masculine traits than are most men I know. If a cat is, as the saying goes, as faithless as a woman, the tomcat is as faithless as a one-hundred-percent hot-blooded male; but this time I want to talk about dogs.

A man appraises dogs above all by their breed, or at least tries to act as if he understood what it's all about. "This one has well-built legs," he says, "but I think his ears are wrong." "Whatever gave you that idea?" the other objects, "they're the best ears I've ever seen; look at the way he holds his left ear." In short, man has a somewhat kynological attitude toward dogs, perhaps atavistically, having once been a prehistoric hunter; a woman, however, places greater value on her dog's slavish adoration. "He loves me so much," she declares sentimentally; and she spoils her dog as much as possible, producing in him the over-sensitive, capricious and unruly nature that all creatures have that are loved too well. Let no one tell me that women are capable of everything; they aren't capable of creating systems of logic and they aren't capable of raising dogs.

But mostly we praise dogs for their intelligence. If only they could speak, we say of them, forgetting that they really do speak, only using a somewhat different language. I have frequently heard a dog mutter quite distinctly: "Damned fleas." At other times he is unmistakably yelping "Beat it!" or "Help!" and at still other times he swears rather coarsely. I believe that if only a dog could speak, he would be quite impossible. His disposition is human and direct; he is a good-hearted fellow, but he is not a gentleman.

When we speak to dogs, they look into our eyes; at times they even seem to understand us, with their mouths wide open in attention. Last year I lost my way somewhere in the Šumava mountains, looking for mushrooms; finally, I found a path which led out of the woods and through a swamp to an isolated farmhouse. Well, I travelled the path to that lonely spot, and what should come bounding over to me but a huge St. Bernard, bigger than I was

and snarling horribly. I had one mushroom in one hand and two in the other; I was completely defenseless. So I addressed myself to the dog and told him everything: who I was and why I was going that way and unable to go anywhere else; but the dog reviled me as if he were insane. Perhaps he doesn't know Czech, it occurred to me, and I tried to persuade him in German. I confess that I have never spoken so courteously as with that St. Bernard. I proposed peace; I abounded with good intentions and I pleaded for a reasonable attitude in our relationship. After I had talked that way for quite a while I saw that, just beyond the fence, solemnly listening to me, was the entire population of the farm, and the even the dog had fallen silent, in open-mouthed astonishment. It was the greatest speaking success of my life.

There are people who feel offended when a dog barks at them; they flail at the dog or pretend they are throwing rocks. Hardly anyone keeps his dignity when he is attacked by even the tiniest beast. In my judgment, it is best to begin by negotiating with said dog; magic is the power of speech and reason; even the bristliest cur catches on after a while to the fact that he can't outbark a man. If dogs really were able to talk, it might be as difficult to negotiate with them as it is with people.