

Pets Should Be Zoned, Said Father—

He Knew By Experience

—But The Girls Wept And Won



THE JUDAS GOAT

My daughters, Mary and Gretchen, have recently revealed to their father another startling item of local news. Burgess Meredith, the actor, who lives only a piece up the road, has, it seems, just given his tiny Mexican burro to Tyke Pettit.

"How cruel of him," I replied. "I saw his last play. He seems such a kind and considerate person."

"Oh, no, Daddy," Gretchen cried. "He loved Peco very much. It—it's just that Mr. Meredith works nights and must sleep late mornings. Tyke says, well, Peco doesn't eat much and isn't hardly any trouble at all to take care of. Tyke's just keeping him until they can find a home, or maybe—"

"It would be almost like owning a horse, Daddy," Mary said. "Of course we would take care of him and—"

Tyke, if you are interested, owns a Rockland County riding stable where Peter Townsend, Blotto, Hilda, Togo, Tiger and Zipper live. Zipper is a Shetland pony. For a small consideration of only two dollars, Tyke permits my daughters to visit and ride horses. They started on Zipper and worked up through Hilda and Blotto. They live for the day when Tyke says they are ready for Peter Townsend. Peter is an ancient jumper.

Of all my daughter's equine friends, I've always had a soft spot for Blotto. Blotto is not really a lazy bum, as Tyke has been rude enough to suggest. It is not because Blotto is lazy that he sits down and refuses to get up after the third or fourth little girl has trotted him around the ring. It's just that he gets tired. After all, he's almost 19, and that is as horse-old as Daddy is man-old. There was a time when Blotto might have been purchased for twenty-five dollars by two little girls who, in Tyke's opinion, could give him proper love and affection. Savings were counted, baby-sittings contracted for in advance. All that was needed to consummate the deal was parental approval. Unfortunately, our family took a summer vacation at this time and when we returned Blotto had found another home.

"The nicest thing about a miniature burro," Mary said, "is that you don't really need a stable. There's enough pasture in the average lawn and—"

"And they make braying noises in the morning, and attract flies out of the woods—and probably Tyke needs Peco as a mascot for Peter Townsend—"

"Oh, no, Daddy, Tyke wants to find a good home for him—"

"I'm sorry."

Tears came into Mary's eyes. Gretchen disappeared behind a slamming bedroom door, then sobs sounded throughout the house.

"Daddy, didn't you ever have a pet of your own when you were a little boy?" Mary asked. "You don't understand what it's like to want something like a horse, or a little pet Mexican burro of your very own."

"Yes, I know what it's like," I said. "Did I ever tell you about Old Bill?" I hadn't thought about Old Bill in years.

"Was he a horse, Daddy?"

"Old Bill was a goat, the biggest, meanest, most destructive goat that ever lived. Wait a minute, I think I've got a picture of him."

I went into my office and searched through my files until I found a faded issue of the *Chicago Tribune*. I'd been keeping it for more than thirty years. As I looked at the yellow newsprint and at the picture of a huge Angora goat, leading a string of sheep to their destiny in the Chicago stockyards, I remembered a fourteen-year-old boy who had come home from school to find his friend and cross-to-be gone. The villain who had shipped Old Bill with a carload of sheep to Chicago from our small Illinois village had been my father, who must have felt almost as bad upon hearing my sobs then as I now felt listening to Gretchen's.

I returned to the living room. "Get Gretchen, Mary," I said, "and I'll tell you about Old Bill."

I got Old Bill when he was seven months old. I traded a double-barrelled shotgun that I had received as a Christmas gift for him. He had soft fleecy wool, the beginnings of a set of horns that were to reach a spread of almost two feet and which, eventually, had to be capped with large brass knobs, which he kept polished until they looked like burnished gold. His whiskers, long and coarse, made him look like an ancient grandfather. His sly, amber eyes were intelligent and wise as he returned your stare, turning his head from side to side.

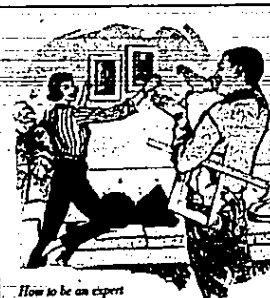
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Just then Old Bill appeared to spot his target for the day.

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