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# Kirby Goes Hunting

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## KIRBY GOES HUNTING

by Ray Granade

c 2002

You see, I have this friend. Arliss is really nice, and used to be a good ole boy. We grew up together, went to school together, and fished every dab of water and hunted every patch of woods around. We fished for anything that would strike a hook and hunted whatever was in season. We were inseparable.

Some folks thought we could pass for Mutt and Jeff, for by the time high school came along Arliss was a good half-foot taller. I was built for stability in high winds; he played center on our basketball team. I always moved at a trot; he just stretched his long legs and ambled along. When we hunted the bottoms, he moved along like a crane, impervious and oblivious to mud and knee-deep water. I swear, if there had been quicksand, he'd've touched bottom before his head went under. I envied him.

Arliss married after high school, but it only lasted one child. He traveled, his wife tired of it. They had a girl, and Arliss could hold her in one hand when she was born. She was that little and his hands were that big. Broke his heart when that woman left him and took the girl with her. Course, he was gone so often that he hadn't seen them much anyway.

They left him at loose ends when he did get back to town. My wife was glad to get me out of the house on occasion, so Arliss and I drifted back into our old field-and-stream ways. He would call me up, announce his return, and ask about coming attractions. Fishing was no problem. There were always places to wet a hook. Hunting was a different story. Trouble was, most of the county's landowners had leased their hunting rights to some club or another. If there was much game, especially big stuff like deer or turkey, rights to that land had been snapped up for a pretty penny. Most of the rest had been posted by landowners, and if it wasn't posted it probably wasn't worth hunting on. Our uncertain ways reduced us to reliance on the kindness of old friends for a place, and to the game few big-time hunters cared enough to pursue—mostly squirrel and sometimes 'coon.

The combination of our uncertain ways and the game we pursued forced us to face another reality. Serious squirrel- or coon-hunters kept dogs. These dogs were specialists, descendants of untold generations of like-favored progenitors. The guys who bought, sold, and kept them were as serious about their dogs as they were about the hunt. Those dogs might be mutts—or “sooners,” as we called them, because they'd just as soon be one breed as another. But their owners could trace the lineage of those sooners for generations. And one thing for sure—none of those folks ever had a pure-bred dog. It was as if an AKC registration unfit the holder for the hunt, and certainly excluded it from serious consideration in the many conversations that daily revolved around hunting dogs.

Squirrel dogs, and 'coon dogs, were bred for their nose, their stamina, their intelligence, and their obedience. They had to be good scent-discriminators, able to separate a squirrel or 'coon smell from all others. They had to be able to stick to that scent despite all distractions. A dog that ran rabbits when their scent—or even they—appeared was absolutely worthless. They had to be able to distinguish minute differences in a scent's age, so that they led the hunter toward rather than away from the prey. And they had to be able to spend long days in the woods.

A good dog, one which exhibited all those traits, had to be trained. Dogs had to learn to cast about in front of the hunter, sweeping the ground in an arc like a pendulum attached to the hunter. A dog that hunted in a straight line could be had cheaply, for no one wanted to follow it through the woods into the next county. Dogs had to learn to obey particular commands and directions. They had to learn to stay with a hot scent once they had treed the prey until released by their master. In short, they had to learn the disciplines of hunting to mold their natural abilities.

Any good dog would cost a lot due to high demand for such a prize. Neither of us was in a position to make that investment. Well, Arliss might have been able to, 'cause traveling paid well. But the main obstacle to our having a good dog was that to stay good, good dogs have to be hunted regularly. Since we didn't hunt regularly, any good dog we got wouldn't remain good long.

So, a poor dog being worse than no dog at all, we were reduced to "still hunting." That meant that we had to slip through the woods quietly,

stopping often to scan the trees and ground for squirrels or the sign of their searching through the fallen leaves for seeds or nuts. Often we'd sit down in a likely-looking place and hope for squirrels to come along. It was a much less productive way to hunt, and it separated us from serious hunters with their dogs. Shoot, we couldn't even join their conversations!

Neither of us cared to be considered the bottom of the hunter's social ladder. We didn't like to hunt game that didn't matter in a manner looked down on by our friends. We were better than that, but we couldn't prove it without a dog. And we couldn't have a dog. So while we enjoyed each other's company and took pleasure in tramping the woods together, something was missing from our life. That something was a dog.

We dreamed about and by fits and starts discussed getting a dog. We talked about squirrel dogs often enough that we had our ideal in mind. It ought to be about knee high (to Arliss, not to me), weigh up to thirty pounds, have a medium-length wiry coat, and possess the sonorous bark that comes from a large chest. We differed on color, but agreed that lighter was better than darker. We agreed that I could hunt the dog without Arliss—just to keep the dog's skills up, of course. All we needed was to find the dog that matched our dreams and buy it. Then we'd be in high cotton.

Reality is a cruel taskmaster. We didn't get beyond the talking stage for a long time. This state of affairs rocked along for several years, in fact. Arliss continued to travel and we continued to talk. Everything changed, though, when Arliss got sweet on a local girl. Amazing how a woman can change things!

Once Arliss discovered Prudence, I didn't see much of him. He'd get into town and call her instead of me. He'd go to her house instead of mine. He'd take her to the mall instead of going to the woods with me. And when we did talk, it was Pru this and Pru that and never a word about a dog.

Well, that's not really the truth. He did talk about a dog on increasing occasions, but it wasn't a real dog. Pru had this little Yorkshire terrier named Kirby that was the antithesis of everything we dreamed of. Kirby was ankle- rather than knee-high—to me, not to Arliss. Kirby probably tipped the scales at three pounds dripping wet. Kirby had a long, silky coat. And worst of all, Kirby had a high, shrill yap that from a

distance resembled a squeak. Pru doted on that full-blooded, AKC-registered Yorkie. She spoiled him rotten. He enjoyed all the characteristics of what we generally called "stomp dogs," because every time you saw one you just wanted to stomp it into the ground to stop its yipping.

About the only training Kirby'd ever had got him housebroken. Either Pru wasn't interested in teaching him tricks or he couldn't or wouldn't learn them. Kirby didn't fetch (probably thought it was beneath him!), and he wouldn't quit begging at the table. He went where he wanted and when, and he was a sneak thief *par excellence*. But, to give him his due, Kirby was a true terrier. He had a keen nose, and he loved to chase birds and squirrels around Pru's place.

Watching Kirby at Pru's gave Arliss an idea. He called me up one Saturday to say that he'd been watching Kirby chase squirrels. "You know, Dub," he said, "Kirby's got a keen nose on him. You should see the way he picks up a squirrel's scent. I'll bet he'd make a great squirrel dog." It was the most humiliating thing that I ever heard issue from Arliss' mouth.

"Aw, Arliss," I replied. "Come on, now. You know you can't take that pampered thing into the woods. Pru'd never let you, for one thing. And for another, that thing couldn't survive. There's no way it could keep up with us, much less do any hunting." I just couldn't bring myself to call that terrier a dog, and I certainly didn't want to be caught in the woods with that silky-haired, AKC-registered excuse for one.

I might as well have saved my breath. I knew it was coming, just didn't know when. It came sooner than I'd hoped, for two weeks later Arliss called to set up a squirrel-hunting date for Saturday. Neither of us said a word about Kirby, but there was no surprise when Arliss got into the truck, reached into his hunting coat, and brought that thing out in the palm of his hand while grinning into my face. "Dub," he said, "look what I brought!"

"Aw, Arliss," I complained. "You aren't really gonna take that thing into the woods, are you?" Even as I said it, I knew full well that he'd already decided that he would do just that, or that dog wouldn't've come along. I could've saved my breath, but there was no way I could stand the

day if I just went along mute. At least, having lodged my complaint, I could always say “I told you so!” when things went badly.

In answer, Arliss put Kirby on the ground. That little thing proceeded to run here, there, and yon, all within about five feet of us. Of course, he also couldn’t be quiet about it all. That shrill bark of his must have alerted every squirrel in a ten-mile radius of where we stood that man was in the forest (with dog!). Resignedly, I shrugged on my coat, pulled out my shotgun from behind the seat, and loaded it.

Arliss was like a kid with a new toy. He started loping off from the truck into the woods with Kirby and me farther and farther behind. When he looked back and saw that Kirby hadn’t been able to keep up, he slowed down. I must admit I was more than a little put out, for he’d never bothered to do that for me. And while my legs were a little longer than Kirby’s, I’d never been able to keep up—something Arliss knew and had never bothered to compensate for.

We wandered through the woods and soon fell to watching Kirby adjust to his new surroundings. He’d run and sniff trees and bushes. On occasion he’d act like a real squirrel dog and “wind” a scent (stick his nose up in the air while sniffing mightily, turning his head this way and that trying to locate the source of what he was smelling). For the first half hour, he’d also mark just about every tree and bush he sniffed at. Toward the end of that time he’d just lift his leg and try to squeeze out a drop or two. Finally he gave up on that and contented himself with picking up all the new scents.

We made enough noise shuffling through the leaves to alert whatever might be out there around us. It was kinda dry, and Kirby’s legs were short enough that it looked as if he were dog-paddling through a pond. Those legs worked overtime, too, so that what would’ve been an occasional crunch with us was a steady sound like that of an overzealous homeowner with a leaf rake in October. Kirby never scared up even a bird, much less a squirrel, so there wasn’t much reason for him to bark. Most of the time he looked like it was taking most of his wind to keep up the pace anyway.

Since Kirby hadn’t been much use in locating squirrels, Arliss finally said “Let’s sit a while and see if anything stirs.” I obligingly dropped down with my back to a tree, but facing where I could watch Arliss and his companion. Kirby stretched out nearby, almost covered by the leaves,

stuck his hind legs out behind and his front before, put his head down on his front paws, and closed his eyes.

We'd not even been still for a minute before Kirby was obviously asleep. His bark may have been shrill, but his snoring was full-bodied. It sounded as if his whole head were just one large echo-chamber of a sinus cavity. After we'd sat for a few minutes, the woods returned to something approaching normality. Its creature sounds and rustlings slowly emerged from the stillness. Still, nothing really moved in our eyesight. Above it all could be heard Kirby's snoring.

I knew nothing was going to happen with that dog's snoring, so I finally said "Arliss, let's try again. Now that Kirby's had a nap, maybe he'll be able to scare up a squirrel." Arliss agreed and we stood up. Kirby immediately woke up, stretched, and looked expectantly at Arliss. He pointed the way to go, and we all moved off.

By the time we'd walked about two miles into the woods, despite our little time of rest while still hunting, Kirby was obviously given out. He'd taken to walking right with us—well, actually, running to keep up. He'd quit all superfluous activity like sniffing trees and bushes and occasionally winding a scent. He'd even quit trying to mark his territory. He just ran along with his tongue hanging out. Occasionally he'd even stop and drop, sitting still for a few minutes and panting.

I don't know whether Arliss was soft on Kirby, worried about the dog's health, worried about Pru's reaction, or even whether it was some grand combination of concerns. Whatever the reason or reasons, long before we should've headed back Arliss announced "Well, I think we might as well go home."

From the way he said it, I knew that there was no use protesting that we'd not been out long, or that we were leaving while our best chances for finding squirrels lay ahead. I just ducked my head, sighed, and muttered "OK." Actually, I didn't even make two syllables out of it. I just said "K" and stopped to turn around.

It was sad to watch Arliss reach down, scoop up the dog-tired Kirby, and gently reach back and stuff the unprotesting form into the empty game pocket at the back of his hunting coat. Neither of them struggled, and Kirby obviously settled down immediately into his new environment. I figured that as long as he wasn't walking, he was happy.

As usual, I'd not taken the dog's full measure. He wasn't just happy. We'd not taken more than fifteen steps before I began to hear the snoring issuing from the hunting coat. He barely stirred when we got back to the truck and Arliss shed it, lifted Kirby out and placed him on top. As a matter of fact, the snoring didn't even really stop.

Arliss and I rode home in silence. It was the last time Kirby went into the woods. Actually, it was the last time and Arliss and I went into the woods together, too. It was not the last time that Arliss and that dog did things together, though.