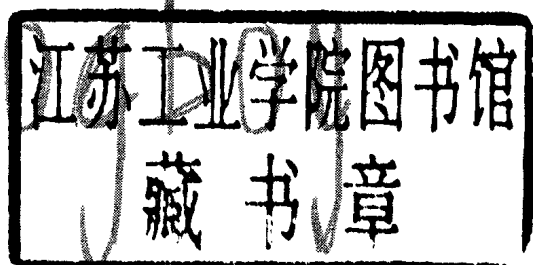


VICTOR KELLEHER

dogboy

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PART ONE

1

He was born on a bare hillside, near the end of what people called the 'Dry Time'.

No one else was present except his mother and a mongrel dog that trotted at her heels. Of the two, only the dog appeared pregnant. The woman's condition was hidden by a loose-fitting dress; and it was not until she gasped and clutched at the dress's loose folds that the swell of her belly became visible.

Beside her, the dog whimpered as she staggered to a halt; then let out a yelp of concern when she slumped to her knees in the raw dust.

The day was almost over. A mountain loomed through the fading light. Known as the Great Father, it stood taller than the surrounding peaks and blocked off this end of the valley.

An eagle, loosed from its eyrie on the high crags, soared on silent wings. Wind gusted along powder-dry gullies, raising the dust in a soft mist. A distant bear rumbled a warning from its cavern home. And as the night settled on the lower valley, the woman groaned and went into labour.

For three hours she made no complaint, one hand clamped

to her mouth to stop herself crying out. At last, with only the star-filled eyes of the dog as witness, she gave birth to a baby boy.

He lay squirming in the dust until she reached for him. Tired though she was, she coaxed the first gasping cry from his tiny body. The cord that bound him to her, she bit through with her teeth.

'Go free,' she murmured.

He responded by groping blindly for her, but she took care to avoid his clutching hands.

'No, you are my gift to the mountain,' she explained in a whisper. 'To the Great Father. You are His to keep and care for.'

Good as her word, she swaddled the child in a scrap of woollen cloth and eased him into a leather satchel she had brought. The satchel, with the child inside, she laid tenderly on the hillside.

Finally, she breathed a name into his ear: 'Boy, I call you Boy.' Then she left him there; abandoned him to the mountain and the mild spring night; gave him a final, tear-filled glance and trudged off into the dark.

In her loose-fitting dress, she appeared unchanged from the woman who had arrived at this place hours earlier. Only the discarded satchel spoke of her recent ordeal and of the heartache that had replaced the child within her.

The dog, dutiful as ever, followed her into the night. At the limit of human ear-shot, however, it heard a cry and paused. Not so the woman. Deafened by grief, she stumbled on. The cry came again, a long wail of loss and longing. It was the kind of wail that only an infant can make, and the dog, caught between the child's grief and the woman's, lingered on the dark slope.

From overhead there came a peal of thunder, as though the mountain itself were answering the child's cries. A drop of rain brushed the dog's snout and landed between its front paws. More drops scarred the thick dust all around. Soon, the rain had grown to a downpour, great squalls sweeping across the lightning-slashed hillsides.

Further up the valley, thunder rolled once more, like a voice from the mountain's heart, so loud that it almost dimmed the baby's cries. In a lightning flash, the dog glimpsed a wave-shape gathering at the valley's head.

Was that what decided the dog to turn back? Or was it the rushing sound of a river in spate? Whatever the reason, it reached the child only minutes before the water descended. Tugging at the satchel's leather flap, it heaved the child further up the slope. Higher and higher it went, its paws scrabbling in the dust, the crash of the river ever nearer.

The dog made its stand on a rough patch of rock, in the lee of a protective boulder. In the rain-thickened dark, a hissing wave surged past, its outer edges snatching at the satchel. Instantly, child and dog were swept along the bank, where by chance they lodged in a heap of ancient logs – the petrified remains of some long-forgotten forest.

There they lay, helpless, until the water receded hours later.

The mountain gave out a last rumble. The rain thinned and retreated. As a sliver of moon broke through the cloud, so the dog shook the river from its coat and settled its swollen body beside the now sleeping child.

Near the end of that warm spring night the dog also went into labour. In a pool of pearl-grey light, three pups were born.

Blind, mewling feebly, they reached for the nipple, and as they began to suckle, so too did the woken child.

That was more than the mother would tolerate. She turned and snapped, one of her teeth puncturing the lobe of the child's ear and leaving behind a jagged hole that wept bloody drops.

Too shocked to respond, the baby eyes stared blankly at her. Straight away she relented. After licking the wound clean, she lay back down and let the child continue feeding.

In the days that followed, the pups and child slept and fed together, sucking hungrily on the same milk-swollen teats, or lying in a tangle of warm limbs within the satchel.

The mother left them only at night, and then briefly, to hunt on the mountain's lower slopes.

It was a good time for wild game. Following the heavy rain, countless tiny rodents had emerged to feed on the fresh green shoots that pushed up through the once parched soil. These scurrying creatures were easy prey for the dog who usually filled her stomach within an hour.

After three days of such plenty, she began her return journey.

This took time and effort, because she was also burdened with the baby, regarded by now as one of her own. Much heavier than any pup, it weighed down the satchel and slowed her progress. With the satchel's flap gripped firmly between her teeth, she spent hours each day dragging her small family along the shoreline, her paws slithering in the mud.

The pups accepted the bumpy ride without complaint. So did the child. Although naked and filthy, he seemed content. Nestled amongst his doggy kin, he slept and woke according to their rhythms. He rarely cried. As if by instinct, he gave up human

sounds and copied the pups' mewing call whenever he felt hungry. He even learned to growl softly to himself as he nuzzled the teat, or to whine in protest if the dog licked at the wound in his ear.

In this dog-like state, and barely a week old, he was dragged to the edge of an upriver settlement.

A single hut, built of stone and clay, sat high above the riverbank. It housed a ragged family of goatherders, people so poor that they owned nothing but their animals and the goatskin clothes they stood up in.

It was the ageing wife who first came across the child. On her way to collect water, she glimpsed the satchel and the dog together, down on the muddy flats. When she approached, the satchel gave a twitch, and a blunt-muzzled pup crawled from the opening. Next, a tiny mud-streaked arm emerged – an unmistakably *human* arm – making her cry out in wonder.

Her cry brought the others running.

'What is it?' the goatherd demanded.

'A . . . a miracle,' she said, and pointed at the child's waving arm.

The dog snarled a warning when the man ventured near, but he drove it off with a sweep of his stave.

'What have we here?' he demanded, and carelessly, one by one, he tossed the pups into the river.

While the mother swam frantically to save them, he groped for the child and held it up by one ankle.

'D'you call this a miracle?' he said with a laugh. 'I call it one more mouth to feed, and we've too many of those already.'

He was about to hurl the baby after the pups, when the wife bleated out a single word.

'Mercy!'

At the same instant, the bewildered child, as though recalling its human origins, began to wail bitterly.

Its outburst made the man hesitate . . . and in that brief pause, a growl of thunder sounded from the mountain. To the man's ears it came as a timely warning, and he snatched his hand away, letting the child fall into the mud.

'Did you hear?' he said in a whisper. 'It's Him. The Great Father. He's tellin' us to tread careful. Witchin' business, that's what this is, an' I'll have none of it. Nor will you,' he told his wife. 'Let the brat lie where it is. The river brought it to us, an' the river can take it away.'

'But it's only a wee babe,' she pleaded.

'So you say,' the man snarled. 'But I say it's half beast. Why else would it be in the care of that bitch there?'

She had no answer, and together with her silent children, she was ushered back to the hut.

The dog, meanwhile, had emerged from the pool, a live pup in her jaws. It was the only one she had managed to rescue. Gently she laid it beside the child, and then licked them both dry and clean. Yet her patient care failed for once to stop the child's whimpering. His recent fright had unsettled him, jolting him from his animal state.

The anxious dog tried offering the teat, but even that worked only for a while. With the milk fresh on his lips, he began to whimper again. As the day advanced, his distress grew into a series of abandoned cries that found echo in the far-off mountain.

Peal after peal of thunder issued from the heights. Black clouds rolled in along the valley, dimming the late afternoon light. And still the child wept, so loud and long that the woman

disobeyed her husband and crept down through the falling dusk.

She took with her a makeshift crib – an open basket made from closely woven rushes. Also a stick for fending off the dog.

Snarling, it backed away. From a safe distance, it watched uneasily as she snuggled the child deep in the satchel, and then lodged the precious bundle in the crib.

‘Sleep well, pretty boy,’ she murmured, and stole away, leaving him to the mercy of the moist night winds.

Soon after dark those winds brought more rain. Mutely, the woman listened to the squalls sweeping across the stone roof. She listened also to the baby’s cries, which mounted higher as the storm increased.

Once, and only once, she peered out.

From up the valley there came a roar. In a flash of lightning she saw it – a solid wave of water – saw how it surged up the near bank, plucked the crib from where it lay, and rolled on.

Behind her the goatherd muttered gruffly: ‘It was neither man nor beast. Good riddance to it.’

And she, in a dismal voice: ‘Lost . . . ! Gone for ever!’

The dog, however, was not so easily defeated. With the live pup clamped in her jaws, she had found safe purchase on higher ground. Now, she stared off into the gloom, noting the progress of the flood as it smashed a path along the valley floor.

She knew that somewhere in all that foaming water lay the child, and a muffled whine of longing broke from her throat. Her pup responded by wriggling feebly. She shook her head, signalling for it to be still. Then, tightening her hold on its tiny body, she set off at a gallop.

For some time she made steady progress downstream, always

careful to match her pace to the speed of the flood. She never once thought to stop or rest. Her eyes fixed on the river's cresting wave, she followed it trustingly, on into the dark.

2

Her name was Magda, and she served the headman in the village of Bethel, a small upriver settlement. Once, the region around Bethel had been prosperous. But no more. Generations of drought had stripped away the topsoil in all but the deeps of the river valley, leaving behind a landscape of bony ridges and crags.

Bethel itself – perched above the riverbank and bounded on the landward side by a protective wall – consisted of a modest cluster of earth-and-reed huts. Although not much to look at, it was in fact more ancient than the great city of Delta, far downstream. Founded by a group of pioneer farmers, in the half-forgotten era of abundant rain, it owed its continued existence, in these less fortunate times, to the ruggedness of its people. And also to their faith in the eternal Spirit of the mountains, to whom they appealed whenever their crops failed and the parched land turned to stone. He, the Great Father, would always sustain them in the end, of that they were convinced.

Their simple faith, it seemed, had been rewarded yet again. For on this particular spring night, after a long and testing drought,

Bethel lay bathed in healing rain. Throughout the village, people offered up their thanks and sank into untroubled sleep, lulled by the drift of rain against their thatched roofs.

Only a few remained wakeful – amongst them, Magda, the serving woman. Hour after hour she tossed restlessly, conscious of the river roaring past, and of the distant murmur of thunder, high in the hills.

‘Mercy . . .’ she breathed, each time the thunder rumbled through the night.

It ceased at last, and she fell into a fitful doze – though not for long. At the first hint of dawn, she was roused partly by the silence – for the rain had also stopped – and then by the yipping cry of a hound.

No longer very young, she sighed as she rose from her bed of dry reeds. She would have preferred to sleep on, because a day of labour lay ahead, but further rest was impossible with the dog barking like that.

What could be bothering the animal? Tying her hair in a loose knot, she stepped out into the cool of early morning.

She spotted the dog at once, down near the swollen river. It was dancing along the bank, barking excitedly at something in midstream.

Magda peered through the twilight, trying to make out what the thing could be. Some kind of container by the look of it. A reed basket, perhaps, it lay crushed against a rock, held there by the pressure of water.

‘Fetch it,’ she instructed the dog.

Nervously, it ventured into the shallows, where the current knocked it off its feet. Only another line of rocks, further downstream, prevented it from being swept away. Bedraggled

and tired out, it floundered back to shore where it resumed its barking.

'Enough,' Magda muttered, and silenced it with a click of the tongue.

Warily now, it watched as she lifted her long skirts and also ventured into the flood.

A few probing steps, the water riding above her knees, and she was able to reach out and snatch the thing up. It felt strangely heavy, and moved when she placed it on the shore. Easing open the sodden neck of reeds, she revealed a stout leather satchel. And when she folded back the flap . . . !

She rose with a start, the colour draining from her lips.

'What is it?' a voice demanded.

The headman – called Phylo – stood on the bank above her, his ageing face almost as worn and leathery as the satchel.

'A . . . a child,' she told him.

'Nonsense . . . !' he began, and stopped short as he also spied the child.

It lay fast asleep in its grubby woollen nest, unharmed except for an open wound in the lobe of one ear.

'Where did *this* come from?' he asked in astonishment.

Magda merely pointed to the river.

'You mean it's a . . . a gift from the Great Father?'

She answered now with a shrug, and he bent down in wonder, meaning to lift the child from its nest, but the dog leaped forward, teeth bared, and drove him back. Cursing, he picked up a fist-sized rock . . . and hesitated. For the dog had settled beside the child, which blinked awake and reached out hungrily. With a soft gurgle, it began to drink, its dimpled fists kneading the milk-swollen teat as if it were in fact a puppy.

Moments later an actual puppy crawled from beneath a shelf in the bank and also began to suck – the two bodies, one human, one animal, twined easily together.

Phylo spat in disgust.

‘This is no child!’ he declared. ‘No gift from the mountain. This is a beast in human form. Leave it be, that’s my advice.’ He gave Magda a dark look and pointed skywards. ‘The heavens will deal with it in their own way once the sun is high.’

As he stomped off towards his hut, Magda glanced up at the dawn-pink sky. It was empty now, but she knew that within hours it would be dotted with hovering birds.

‘What if the vultures peck out its eyes?’ she called after him.

‘That’s for the heavens to fret about, not us,’ Phylo called back. ‘Now come away. The world of beasts is no concern of ours.’

Out of long habit she obeyed, though her footsteps dragged on the upward slope; and in the course of her morning’s work she stopped more than once to check on the small bundle down near the water’s edge.

Gradually the heat of the day built up. Columns of hot air rose from the baking rocks, and with the mounting heat came the vultures, weighty birds, hook-beaked and watchful, that spiralled ever higher.

By midday the sky was thick with them. So many that Magda began listening for the clatter of descending wings. Sick at heart, she checked the shoreline yet again – only to find it empty!

Had the river perhaps reclaimed the child? Could the vultures have carried it away? But then where was the pup? Or the satchel and the woven basket?

Baffled, she was about to go and search when she heard a growl almost at her feet. She turned, and there was the dog,