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# Sirius

Olaf Stapledon



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SIRIUS

OLAF STAPLEDON

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# SIRIUS

*A Fantasy of Love and Discord*



OLAF STAPLEDON

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I should like to acknowledge my debt to  
Mr J. Herries McCulloch's delightful study,  
*Sheep Dogs and Their Masters.*  
He must not, however, be held in  
any way responsible for my  
sheer fantasies

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## CHAPTER I

### FIRST MEETING

PLAXY and I had been lovers; rather uneasy lovers, for she would never speak freely about her past, and sometimes she withdrew into a cloud of reserve and despond. But often we were very happy together, and I believed that our happiness was striking deeper roots.

Then came her mother's last illness, and Plaxy vanished. Once or twice I received a letter from her, giving no address, but suggesting that I might reply to her 'care of the Post Office' in a village in North Wales, sometimes one, sometimes another. In temper these letters ranged from a perfunctory amiability to genuine longing to have me again. They contained mysterious references to 'a strange duty', which, she said, was connected with her father's work. The great physiologist, I knew, had been engaged on very sensational experiments on the brains of the higher mammals. He had produced some marvellously intelligent sheep-dogs, and at the time of his death it was said that he was concerned with even more ambitious research. One of the colder of Plaxy's letters spoke of an 'unexpectedly sweet reward' in connexion with her new duty, but in a more passionate one she cried out against 'this exacting, fascinating, dehumanizing life'. Sometimes she seemed to be in a state of conflict and torture about something which she must not explain. One of these letters was so distraught that I feared for her sanity. I determined, therefore, to devote my approaching leave to walking in North Wales in the hope of finding her.

I spent ten days wandering from pub to pub in the region indicated by the addresses, asking everywhere if a Miss Trelone was known in the neighbourhood. At last, in Llan Ffestiniog, I heard of her. There was a young lady of that name living in a shepherd's cottage on the fringe of the moor somewhere above Trawsfynydd. The local shopkeeper who gave me this information said with an



air of mystery, 'She is a strange young lady, indeed. She has friends, and I am one of them; but she has enemies.'

Following his directions, I walked for some miles along the winding Trawsfynydd road and then turned to the left up a lane. After another mile or so, right on the edge of the open moor, I came upon a minute cottage built of rough slabs of shale, and surrounded by a little garden and stunted trees. The door was shut, but smoke rose from a chimney. I knocked. The door remained shut. Peering through a window, I saw a typical cottage kitchen, but on the table was a pile of books. I sat down on a rickety seat in the garden and noted the neat rows of cabbages and peas. Away to my right, across the deep Cynfal gorge, was Ffestiniog, a pack of slate-grey elephants following their leader, the unsteepled church, down a spur of hill towards the valley. Behind and above stood the Moelwyn range.

I was smoking my second cigarette when I heard Plaxy's voice in the distance. It was her voice that had first attracted me to her. Sitting in a café I had been enthralled by that sensitive human sound coming from some unknown person behind me. And now once more I heard but did not see her. For a moment I listened with delight to her speech, which, as I had often said, was like the cool sparkling talk of small waves on the pebbly shore of a tarn on a hot day.

I rose to meet her, but something strange arrested me. Interspersed with Plaxy's remarks was no other human voice but a quite different sound, articulate but inhuman. Just before she came round the corner of the house she said, 'But, my dear, don't *dwell* on your handlessness so! You have triumphed over it superbly.' There followed a strange trickle of speech from her companion; then through the gate into the garden came Plaxy and a large dog.

She halted, her eyes wide with surprise, and (I hoped) with joy; but her brows soon puckered. Laying a hand on the dog's head, she stood silent for a moment. I had time to observe that a change had come over her. She was wearing rather muddy corduroy trousers and a blue shirt. The same grey eyes, the same ample but decisive mouth, which had recently seemed to me to belie her character, the same shock of auburn, faintly carrotty hair. But instead of a rather pale face, a ruddy brown one, and a complete

absence of make-up. No lipstick, even. The appearance of rude health was oddly contradicted by a darkness under the eyes and a tautness round the mouth. Strange how much one can notice in a couple of seconds, when one is in love!

Her hand deserted the dog's head, and was stretched out to me in welcome. 'Oh well,' she said smiling, 'since you have nosed us out, we had better take you into our confidence.' There was some embarrassment in her tone, but also perhaps a ring of relief. 'Hadn't we, Sirius,' she added, looking down at the great dog.

Then for the first time I took note of this remarkable creature. He was certainly no ordinary dog. In the main he was an Alsatian, perhaps with a dash of Great Dane or Mastiff, for he was a huge beast. His general build was wolf-like, but he was slimmer than a wolf, because of his height. His coat, though the hair was short, was superbly thick and silky, particularly round the neck, where it was a close turbulent ruff. Its silkiness missed effeminacy by a hint of stubborn harshness. Silk wire, Plaxy once called it. On back and crown it was black, but on flanks and legs and the under surface of his body it paled to an austere greyish fawn. There were also two large patches of fawn above the eyes, giving his face a strangely mask-like look, or the appearance of a Greek statue with blank-eyed helmet pushed back from the face. What distinguished Sirius from all other dogs was his huge cranium. It was not, as a matter of fact, quite as large as one would have expected in a creature of human intelligence, since, as I shall explain later, Trelone's technique not only increased the brain's bulk but also produced a refinement of the nerve fibres themselves. Nevertheless, Sirius's head was far loftier than any normal dog's. His high brow combined with the silkiness of his coat to give him a look of the famous Border Collie, the outstanding type of sheep-dog. I learned later that this brilliant race had, indeed, contributed to his make-up. But his cranium was far bigger than the Border Collie's. The dome reached almost up to the tips of his large, pointed Alsatian ears. To hold up this weight of head, the muscles of his neck and shoulders were strongly developed. At the moment of our encounter he was positively leonine, because the hair was bristling along his spine. Suspicion of me had brushed it up the wrong way. His grey eyes might have been wolf's eyes, had not the pupils been round like any dog's, not slits like the wolf's. Altogether he was

certainly a formidable beast, lean and sinewy as a creature of the jungle.

Without taking his gaze off me, he opened his mouth, displaying sierras of ivory, and made a queer noise, ending with an upward inflexion like a question. Plaxy replied, 'Yes, it's Robert. He's true as steel, remember.' She smiled at me deprecatingly, and added, 'And he may be useful.'

Sirius politely waved his amply feathered tail, but kept his cold eyes fixed on mine.

Another awkward pause settled upon us, till Plaxy said, 'We have been working on the sheep out on the moor all day. We missed our dinner and I'm hungry as hell. Come in and I'll make tea for us all.' She added as we entered the little flagged kitchen, 'Sirius will understand everything you say. You won't be able to understand him at first, but I shall, and I'll interpret.'

While Plaxy prepared a meal, passing in and out of the little larder, I sat talking to her. Sirius squatted opposite me, eyeing me with obvious anxiety. Seeing him, she said with a certain sharpness fading into gentleness, 'Sirius! I tell you he's all right. Don't be so suspicious!' The dog rose, saying something in his strange lingo, and went out into the garden. 'He's gone to fetch some firewood,' she said; then in a lowered voice, 'Oh, Robert, it's good to see you, though I didn't want you to find me.' I rose to take her in my arms, but she whispered emphatically, 'No, no, not now.' Sirius returned with a log between his jaws. With a side-long glance at the two of us, and a perceptible drooping of the tail, he put the log on the fire and went out again. 'Why not now?' I cried, and she whispered, 'Because of Sirius. Oh, you'll understand soon.' After a pause she added, 'Robert, you mustn't expect me to be wholly yours ever, not fully and single-heartedly yours. I'm too much involved in - in this work of my father's.' I expostulated, and seized her. 'Nice human Robert,' she sighed, putting her head on my shoulder. But immediately she broke away, and said with emphasis, 'No, *I* didn't say that. It was just the female human animal that said it. What *I* say is, I can't play the game you want me to play, not whole-heartedly.'

Then she called through the open door, 'Sirius, tea!' He replied with a bark, then strode in, carefully not looking at me.

She put a bowl of tea for him on a little table-cloth on the floor,

remarking, 'He has two meals generally, dinner at noon and supper in the evening. But today is different.' Then she put down a large crust of bread, a hunk of cheese, and a saucer with a little lump of jam. 'Will that keep you going?' she asked. A grunt signified approval.

Plaxy and I sat at the table to eat our bread and rationed butter and wartime cake. She set about telling me the history of Sirius. Sometimes I put in an occasional question, or Sirius interrupted with his queer speech of whimper and growl.

The matter of this and many other conversations about the past I shall set down in the following chapters. Meanwhile I must say this. Without the actual presence of Sirius I should not have believed the story; but his interruptions, though canine and unintelligible, expressed human intelligence by their modulation, and stimulated intelligible answers from Plaxy. Obviously he was following the conversation, commenting and watching my reaction. And so it was not with incredulity, though of course with amazement, that I learned of the origin and career of Sirius. I listened at first with grave anxiety, so deeply involved was Plaxy. I began to understand why it was that our love had always been uneasy, and why when her mother died she did not come back to me. I began to debate with myself the best way of freeing her from this 'inhuman bondage'. But as the conversation proceeded I could not but recognize that this strange relationship of girl and dog was fundamentally beautiful, in a way sacred. (That was the word I used to myself.) Thus my problem became far more difficult.

At one point, when Plaxy had been saying that she often longed to see me again, Sirius made a more sustained little speech. And in the middle of it he went over to her, put his forepaws on the arm of her chair, and with great gentleness and delicacy kissed her cheek. She took the caress demurely, not shrinking away, as human beings generally do when dogs try to kiss them. But the healthy glow of her face deepened, and there was moisture in her eyes as she stroked the shaggy softness under his neck, and said to me, while still looking at him, 'I am to tell you, Robert, that Sirius and Plaxy grew up together like the thumb and forefinger of a hand, that he loves me in the way that only dogs can love, and much more now that I have come to him, but that I must not feel bound to stay with him, because by now he can fend for himself. Whatever

happens to him ever, I – how did you say it, Sirius, you foolish dear?’ He put in a quick sentence, and she continued, ‘Oh, yes, I am the scent that he will follow always, hunting for God.’

She turned her face towards me with a smile that I shall not forget. Nor shall I forget the bewildering effect of the dog’s earnest and almost formal little declaration. Later I was to realize that a rather stilted diction was very characteristic of him, in moments of deep feeling.

Then Sirius made another remark with a sly look and a tremor of the tail. She turned back to him laughing, and softly smacked his face. ‘Beast,’ she said, ‘I shall not tell Robert that.’

When Sirius kissed her I was startled into a sudden spasm of jealousy. (A man jealous of a dog!) But Plaxy’s translation of his little speech roused more generous feelings. I now began to make plans by which Plaxy and I together might give Sirius a permanent home and help him to fulfil his destiny, whatever that might be. But, as I shall tell, a different fate lay in store for us.

During that strange meal Plaxy told me that, as I had guessed, Sirius was her father’s crowning achievement, that he had been brought up as a member of the Trelone family, that he was now helping to run a sheep farm, that she herself was keeping house for him, and also working on the farm, compensating for his lack of hands.

After tea I helped her to wash up, while Sirius hovered about, jealous, I think, of my handiness. When we had finished, she said they must go over to the farm to complete a job of work before dark. I decided to walk back to Ffestiniog, collect my baggage, and return by the evening train to Trawsfynydd, where I could find accommodation in the local pub. I noticed Sirius’s tail droop as I said this. It drooped still further when I announced that I proposed to spend a week in the neighbourhood in the hope of seeing more of Plaxy. She said, ‘I shall be busy, but there are the evenings.’

Before I left she handed over a collection of documents for me to take away and read at leisure. There were scientific papers by her father, including his journal of Sirius’s growth and education. These documents, together with a diary of her own and brief fragmentary records by Sirius himself, all of which I was given at a much later date, form the main ‘sources’ of the following narra-

tive; these, and many long talks with Plaxy, and with Sirius when I had learnt to understand his speech.

I propose to use my imagination freely to fill out with detail many incidents about which my sources afford only the barest outline. After all, though a Civil Servant (until the Air Force absorbed me) I am also a novelist; and I am convinced that with imagination and self-criticism one can often penetrate into the essential spirit of events even when the data are superficial. I shall, therefore, tell the amazing story of Sirius in my own way.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE MAKING OF SIRIUS

PLAXY'S father, Thomas Trelone, was too great a scientist to escape all publicity, but his work on the stimulation of cortical growth in the brains of mammals was begun while he was merely a brilliant young research worker, and it was subsequently carried on in strict secrecy. He had an exaggerated, a morbid loathing of limelight. This obsession he justified by explaining that he dreaded the exploitation of his technique by quacks and profit-mongers. Thus it was that for many years his experiments were known only to a few of his most intimate professional colleagues in Cambridge, and to his wife, who had a part to play in them.

Though I have seen his records and read his papers, I can give only a layman's account of his work, for I am without scientific training. By introducing a certain hormone into the bloodstream of the mother he could affect the growth of the brain in the unborn young. The hormone apparently had a double effect. It increased the actual bulk of the cerebral cortices, and also it made the nerve fibres themselves much finer than they normally are, so that a far greater number of them, and a far greater number of connexions between them, occurred in any given volume of brain. Somewhat similar experiments, I believe, were carried out in America by Zamenhof; but there was an important difference between the two techniques. Zamenhof simply fed the young animal with his hormone; Trelone, as I have said, introduced his hormone into the foetus through the mother's blood-stream. This in itself was a

notable achievement, because the circulatory systems of mother and foetus are fairly well insulated from each other by a filtering membrane. One of Trelone's difficulties was that the hormone caused growth in the maternal as well as the foetal brain, and since the mother's skull was adult and rigid there must inevitably be very serious congestion, which would lead to death unless some means were found to insulate her brain from the stimulating drug. This difficulty was eventually overcome. At last it became possible to assure the unborn animal a healthy maternal environment. After its birth Trelone periodically added doses of the hormone to its food, gradually reducing the dose as the growing brain approached what he considered a safe maximum size. He had also devised a technique for delaying the closing of the sutures between the bones of the skull, so that the skull might continue to expand as required.

A large population of rats and mice was sacrificed in the attempt to perfect Trelone's technique. At last he was able to produce a number of remarkable creatures. His big-headed rats, mice, guinea-pigs, rabbits, though their health was generally bad, and their lives were nearly always cut short by disease of one kind or another, were certainly geniuses of their humble order. They were remarkably quick at finding their way through mazes, and so on. In fact they far excelled their species in all the common tests of animal intelligence, and had the mentality rather of dogs and apes than of rodents.

But this was for Trelone only the beginning. While he was improving his technique so that he could ensure a rather more healthy animal, he at the same time undertook research into methods of altering the tempo of its life so that it should mature very slowly and live much longer than was normal to its kind. Obviously this was very important. A bigger brain needs a longer lifetime to fulfil its greater potentiality for amassing and assimilating experience. Not until he had made satisfactory progress in both these enterprises did he begin to experiment on animals of greater size and higher type. This was a much more formidable undertaking, and promised no quick results. After a few years he had produced a number of clever but seedy cats, a bright monkey that died during its protracted adolescence, and a dog with so big a brain that its crushed and useless eyes were pushed forward along

its nose. This creature suffered so much that its producer reluctantly destroyed it in infancy.

Not till several more years had elapsed, had Trelone perfected his technique to such an extent that he was able to pay less attention to the physiological and more to the psychological aspect of his problem. Contrary to his original plan, he worked henceforth mainly on dogs rather than apes. Of course apes offered the hope of more spectacular success. They were by nature better equipped than dogs. Their brains were bigger, their sight was more developed, and they had hands. Nevertheless, from Trelone's point of view dogs had one overwhelming advantage. They were capable of a much greater freedom of movement in our society. Trelone confessed that he would have preferred to work on cats, because of their more independent mentality; but their small size made them unsuitable. A certain absolute bulk of brain was necessary, no matter what the size of the animal, so as to afford a wealth of associative neural paths. Of course a small animal did not need as large a brain as a large animal of the same mental rank. A large body needed a correspondingly large brain merely to work its machinery. A lion's brain had to be bigger than a cat's. An elephant's brain was even larger than a much more intelligent but smaller man's. On the other hand, each rank of intelligence, no matter what the size of the animal, required a certain degree of complexity of neural organization, and so of brain bulk. In proportion to the size of the human body a man's brain was far *bigger* than an elephant's. Some animals were large enough to accommodate the absolute bulk of brain needed for the human order of intelligence; some were not. A large dog could easily do so, but a cat's organization would be very gravely upset by so great an addition. For a mouse anything of the sort would be impossible.

Not that Trelone had at this stage any expectation of raising any animal so far in mental stature that it would approach human mentality. His aim was merely to produce, as he put it, 'a rather super-sub-human intelligence, a missing-link mind'. For this purpose the dog was admirably suited. Human society afforded for dogs many vocations requiring intelligence at the upper limit of the sub-human range. Trelone chose as the best vocation of all for his purpose that of the sheep-dog. His acknowledged ambition was to produce a 'super-sheep-dog'.



One other consideration inclined him to choose the dog; and the fact that he took this point into account at all in the early stage of his work shows that he was even then toying with the idea of producing something more than a missing-link mind. He regarded the dog's temperament as on the whole more capable of development to the human level. If cats excelled in independence, dogs excelled in social awareness; and Trelone argued that only the social animal could make full use of its intelligence. The independence of the cat was not, after all, the independence of the socially aware creature asserting its individuality; it was merely the blind individualism that resulted from social obtuseness. On the other hand he admitted that the dog's sociality involved it, in relation to man, in abject servility. But he hoped that with increased intelligence it might gain a measure of self-respect, and of critical detachment from humanity.

In due course Trelone succeeded in producing a litter of big-brained puppies. Most of them died before reaching maturity, but two survived, and became exceptionally bright dogs. This result was on the whole less gratifying than disappointing to Trelone. He carried out further experiments, and at last, from an Old English Sheep-dog bitch, produced a big-brained family, three of which survived, and reached a definitely super-canine level of mentality.

The research continued for some years. Trelone found it necessary to take more trouble about the 'raw material' to which his technique was to be applied. He could not afford to neglect the fact that the most capable of all the canine races is the Border Collie, bred through a couple of centuries for intelligence and responsibility. All modern champions are of this breed, and all are descendants of a certain brilliant animal, named Old Hemp, who was born in Northumberland in 1893. The Border Collie of today is hardy, but rather small. Trelone, therefore, decided that the best raw material would be a cross between some outstanding champion of the International Sheep-dog Trials and another intelligent but much heavier animal. The Alsatian was the obvious choice. After a good deal of negotiation with owners of champion sheep-dogs and enthusiasts for Alsatisans, he produced several strains, which blended the two types in various proportions. He then applied his improved technique to various expectant mothers