

Farewell, Miss Julie

Or
The Spoiled-Rotten Bird Dogs

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Chapter 6

Groundhogs

Julie Que-ly, her's no foolie,
Her's the daddy's sweetie-pie,
Julie Que-ly, little Julie,
Apple of her daddy's eye!

--From Dad's Doggy Doggerel

"The Aerie" was the inscription on the stone gatepost at Mama and Dad's home. The other post bore a plaque with an eagle in high relief. Dad considered the signs a bit on the pretentious side, but they came with the property. The late previous owner had been a retired Army colonel. From what Dad could learn, the colonel had been a bit on the pretentious side. Since most of the local people referred to the place as "The Aerie," Mama and Dad left the gateposts as they were.

The spacious house dominated a hilltop east of Front Royal. The back of the property sloped down to a wet-weather creek. Across the stream and a short distance up the next hill lay the boundary of what at one time had been the U. S. Cavalry remount station. This was a tract of several thousand acres where horses were trained for the Army. During World War II, after the cavalry replaced its horses with armor, the station became a training center for the K-9 Corps, as well as a camp for German prisoners of war.

Dad joked that if they had needed human subjects for training the Army's attack dogs, they had a most serendipitous arrangement. The Geneva Convention people might have had something to say about that.

After the war, the Remount, Re-dog, P.O.W. station was turned over to the Department of Agriculture. Under those auspices, Virginia Tech used the property as a cattle-research station. This was its status when Mama and Dad acquired The Aerie. The old remount station became Dad's favorite stomping grounds, where he spent hours tramping about. There were piney woods, hardwoods, pasture, scrub, ponds, and springs. Dad figured it must have been great duty for the Army people who loved to ride and hunt. Deer, grouse, and turkey were in abundance, and quail and rabbits thrived on the natural feed and cover. An occasional bear was seen, and there was the usual Northern Virginia assortment of crows, hawks, owls, raccoons, opossums, and groundhogs.

GROUNDHOGS! Julie took her bird dog duties seriously, and had learned not to incur Dad's disapproval by chasing deer or rabbits. All he

need say was a curt "Leave it!" and she would break off the pursuit. But there was something about groundhogs--okay, woodchucks to our Yankee friends--that turned Julie into an implacable warrior, oblivious to Dad's orders to cease and desist. Upon encountering one of these critters, she would offer a brief, but heart-felt, prayer of thanksgiving: "Thank you, Lord, oh, thank you for arrangin' dis massacre."

Then, practically hugging herself with delight, she would leap to the attack.

For those who consider ridiculous a contest between a fifty-pound dog and a fifteen-pound vegetarian, watch before you pass judgment. A large woodchuck presents a formidable front of wickedly gnashing incisors, backed by fierce determination. The dog will probably emerge the victor in a fight to the death, but will not get off scot-free. Unless you enjoy seeing your valuable bird dog and pal badly chewed, it is best to avoid the confrontation.

Julie cared not a whit for such namby-pamby considerations. Early in life she defined her goals. Her assigned vocation involved finding game birds for Dad, but she promised her fairy godmother (or whomever) that she would dedicate her life to the extermination of *Marmota Monax*. She would not count the cost. If the ground-hog had been the size of a Shetland pony, she still would have plunged headlong into the fray, colors flying, and eyes aglow with the joy of combat.

Dad indulged in some whimsy: perhaps in a previous life, she had been a carrot, cruelly plucked immature from a manicured garden and slowly gnawed by a diabolical woodchuck. What else could explain the murderous enmity exhibited by a little girl-dog of genteel raising? A dog whom no one had ever neglected or turned into a latch-key pup? A dog nurtured on the finest rations, and cajoled into good behavior with baby-talk? Nobody even called her a bitch during her formative years.

Whatever the cause, Mama and Dad grew accustomed to finding partially-eaten groundhogs near the back stoop. It reduced predations on the garden, but, invariably, when the dogs ate a raw groundhog, tapeworm resulted.

All his life, Dad would remember Julie's first (at least in his presence) encounter with *Marmota Monax*. Julie was still a half-grown pup, with only a few hunts behind her. Shotgun in hand, Dad was ambling along the edge of a cut-over cornfield, while Julie swept back and forth across his path. An autumn nippiness, moderated by bright sunshine, graced the air, and all was well with the world.

"Arrrgghhh!"