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Fiction

Beat It finds his star

by E. J. Ritter, Jr.
Art by Denise Giraud

HE WAS A SMALL DOG of no particular breed and no remarkable beauty. He was cold and he walked a little lame from the weariness of his journey. His name was Beat It.

At least, everyone called him that. But he knew it was not a real name, for he had never belonged to anyone. And belonging, Beat It knew, was that proper state of doghood that involved a master, a home, and a name.

Except for those few weeks in the Spring when he had lived with his mother in the packing case where he was born, he had been alone. Beat It missed his mother when first she disappeared, and for days he searched the alleys and streets, whimpering a little. But soon the problems of eating and finding shelter, and dodging kicks and speeding wheels and larger dogs, drove her from his mind, until now she was forgotten.

And when it began to grow cold, Beat It became strangely restless. Loneliness gripped his spirit. An urge to move on, to seek he knew not what, was strong in him. And then he heard about the Star.

Two children on a street corner talked about it first. Much of what they said was unintelligible to Beat It, but he understood that in a few days a wonderful transformation would occur that would make each man love his neighbor more, and show a kindness of spirit which was concealed on other days throughout the year. There would be singing, and friendliness, and great giving of gifts. And a symbol of it all would be the Star.

Beat It was not sure whether the Star would shine to let all living things know the day had come, or whether the Star had gleamed long ago and was remembered because it had once marked a slender moment of Earth's great happiness. There was no one to tell him about the arrival of the day. So Beat It knew he would have to find the Star himself, or else the wonderful time would pass without his knowing it had been.

But in the city, the buildings hid the sky; and on the outskirts, and in the country, no star shone so brightly, so warmly that Beat It could say in his heart, "That is the one! It can be no other!"

So on he walked, along the open roads and across the fields, through the towns dotting the way. He slept by day and walked by night, searching the sky always for the light which would tell him the Day had come.

Had it not been for the noises, he might have given up. They whispered to him in the wind, "Go on and find the Star." And on he went, footsore, bedraggled coat matted with mud and burrs, his brown eyes on the night sky and the urgent voices in his ears.

And then there was a cold night, the coldest he had known. It was snowing and there were no stars overhead at all. And exhaustion filled his limbs, cold blanketed his thin white body.

Suddenly the urging voice that was in the wind stopped. The gales still blew, but Beat It no longer heard the words, "Go on!" The new silence frightened him. He felt alone and lost. The cold and weariness were more than he could bear.

To his right, just off the road, a light filtered dimly

his star



The boy's sobs broke off as he heard the bark of a dog.

through the snow. Limping toward it, Beat It saw a small white house. Beside it yawned the open door of an unpainted shed into which he dragged himself and collapsed in the corner out of the freezing, snow-swept night.

He fell asleep.

IT WAS A STRANGE sound that awakened him in the pale dawn of a new day. A little boy, filling a wood box from a stack of logs before him, was sobbing heartbreak into the frosty air.

Always before, Beat It had fled from humans. He knew the sharp pain of stones flying from the hands of little boys. But now he was not afraid. Curiosity, interest, and a warm unknown emotion flooded his small frame.

Beat It gathered his sore muscles and stood up. He shook himself and barked.

The dark boyish head swiveled toward the corner. The sobs broke off in a gasp. Then, tentatively at first, the boy stretched his hand and rested it on the bedraggled white head.

It was the first time Beat It had ever felt a caress. It was the first time he had ever been touched with tenderness and love. His tail wagged wildly; his pink tongue darted over the grubby hand; his heart was filled with a bursting ecstasy.

Beat It was suddenly gathered into two young arms. Two swift feet dashed through

the snow and carried him into the house. "Oh Mother! Mother!" he heard the boy cry. "Santa did come—he didn't forget me after all! He brought me a dog—a white dog with funny ears and a long tail. Only Santa made a mistake and left him in the shed instead of the house!"

The tired face of the woman standing in the kitchen was startled, dubious, then it softened. The boy, Beat It thought, was quick to note the relenting.

"I can keep him, Mother, can't I? He won't eat much—see how little he is? And I'll clean him up and brush him every day, and we'll have such good-times together! And he likes me, Mother—truly he does. I'll call him Merry, because it's such a Merry Christmas."

"All he'll get will be scraps." Her tone was grudging, but the look on her face was a prayer of thanks for a little boy saved from Christmas heartbreak.

"Looks awful tired to me," she said. "Of course, Mother! It's a long way from the North Pole, even in Santa's sled."

Her worn, rough hand was gentle as it touched the dog's bruised paws. "He must have done most of the pulling. Well, he's probably hungry. I'll see what I can find."

She disappeared through the pantry door. Beat It, who was now Merry, put his head in adoration—into the eyes in which he saw the warm, bright brilliance of the Star.

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