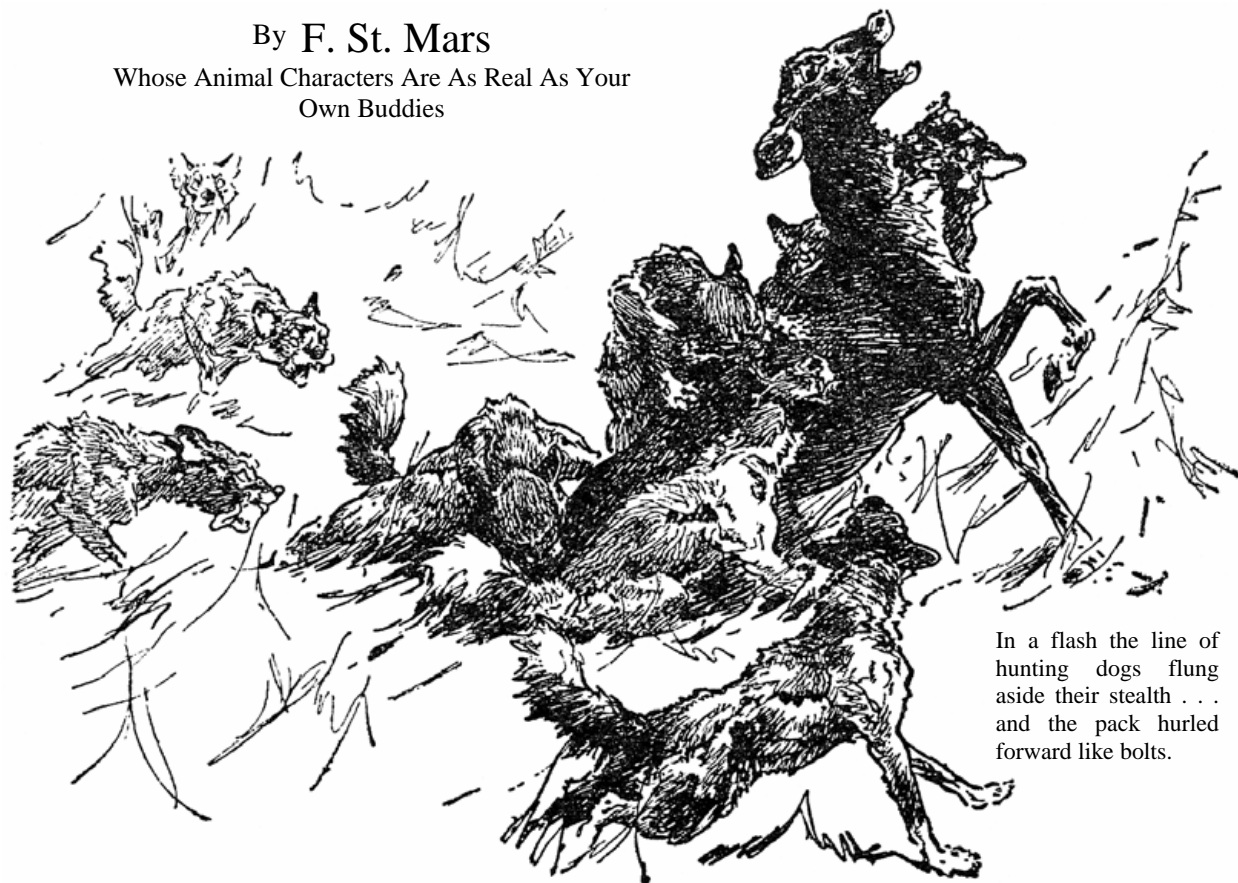


A Wild Education

By F. St. Mars

Whose Animal Characters Are As Real As Your
Own Buddies



In a flash the line of
hunting dogs flung
aside their stealth . . .
and the pack hurled
forward like bolts.

HE was born one fine April night in a disused ant-bear's hole, which had been enlarged by his mother and her "sisters of the pack" out of all resemblance to its original self, and for many weeks he knew nothing more of the world than that he lay huddled with some seven more whelps—of which one only was his brother and one his sister, the remainder belonging to his mother's lady friends aforementioned—in a stifling atmosphere of semi-darkness, but anything but semi-smelliness.

At certain intervals his mother was there nursing his brother and sister and himself—not, I think, the other whelps—and at certain intervals she went away. Usually, however, one of his mother's lady friends was there seeing to her own whelps, and so they were not generally utterly alone. But there were times when none of the mothers was there, and there was a period of brooding, instinctive dread, utter silence, broken once or twice by happenings.

Thus there was the happening of a sharp, wet muzzle—smaller than his mother's—which poked into the hole, obscuring the moonlight, grabbed a whelp, and vanished, the whelp protesting in a high key, and the sudden rush and awful noise of worrying without, followed by a death howl that announced his mother's return in time to slay a thieving jackal. Once, also, there was another snout that came on a dark, rainy night—not a small and sharp snout this time, but long, and hard, and tusked, which rooted up the ground all about and enlarged the entrance to get at the whelps, and the sound of battle that followed on the return of his mother, and of her friends, who heard her rallying cry at once, must have raged round the hole for ten minutes, before the enemy, who was one of a party of the fierce red bush pigs, was driven off. And once there was a third, and very terrible time, when something with yellow eyes aflame stared into the hole, and inserted a great mittened paw, unfolded suddenly deadly hooked claws, and started to fish a

whelp out, but after patting about at the little creature, who crawled in a helpless, shivering heap to the extreme corner, it was nearly stung by a scorpion—who might have stung one of them if not disturbed and went away spitting, and that was, without doubt, a leopard.

Nevertheless, strange to say, except for the one slain by the jackal, it was no living foe that accounted for the steady, and almost pathetic, dwindling of the united litters, so that by the time our little friend was able to sit outside and play with his mother's tail, or do his best to strangle his sister, he found himself but one of five whelps, of which his brother was not one—inflammation of the bowels and other diseases had done for the rest, and would have done for him, too, if he had stayed in there as one of that pestiferous heap much longer.

Our little friend was the first of his companions to struggle outside, tottering groggily on small paws, but once accustomed to take the air, he made headway amazingly—as if the good air were draughts of life itself—so that by the time his sister was able to take her place beside him he was already far in advance of any members of the combined litters—first to dart for shelter at a hint of danger, and first to appear when all was safe.

It was not till these days when he could see his mother in the open that he learned to know her by sight. She was a lean, leggy, hyena-like beast, with enormous ears, and of a blotchy light-tan, black-and-white color, with a broad muzzle, and intelligent, dog-like eyes. She was, in short, what is aptly known as a Cape hunting dog, or wild dog.

EVERYTHING was strange and new and wonderful outside, from the great thorn-trees, the upreaching fig-trees, and the spiky "bush," down to the basking lizards, and the armies of ants, and the pinging flies, many of which were the dread tsetse. There were sounds, especially at night, of everlasting mystery and interest to our young wild dog, who cocked his big ears to listen to the hoarse reverberating grunts of the lion, the melancholy howl of a wandering hyena, the bark of some startled antelope, the locomotive-like snorts of a rhinoceros, or the whiny, snarley voice of friend leopard going out to kill.

Moreover, he had much to see and to learn, his mother teaching him always with a patience that the constant strain of watchfulness to guard his and

her life made wonderful. Thus he saw the graceful, lyre-horned impala antelope—that was to be his chief food one day—come down to drink, and learned at the same time how to stand quite still in the open and not be seen until "winded."

Thus, also, he beheld the striped zebra canter up to water at the same place, but, clumsily showing himself too near, learned that a zebra has teeth, and that the stallions know how to use them. Thus, too, he saw the little gazelle go down to the same water, where, at the very edge, it was slain by a serval cat, who in turn was driven off by his mother, and he, in his ignorance, was just about to scramble on top of the still hot carcass and play "king of the castle" with his sister, when, suddenly and without apparent reason, he fled with a yelp; he beheld great horny jaws open up from the water behind him, and, engulfing the little dainty gazelle bodily, with a snap, sink back gurgling into the turbid depths. He never drank afterward, or even approached water, without feeling an instinctive and lively dread of crocodiles.

Thus, too, it was at dusk one evening that, strolling all alone from the den across the little clearing in the thick "bush" outside, he came without warning face to face with a big, spotted beast—a bit like his mother, it was, but more "stocky," slouching, and with a strangely sloping maned back—standing quite motionless under a tree. He was so taken aback that he stood head up, "at gaze," instead of spinning like a top and diving homeward, as his mother had taught him to do. For a moment the gaunt, evil-looking, worse than evil-smelling, brute glared at him, its head hung low. Then, lifting its head, it burst into an infernal peal of maniacal laughter calculated to make even the blood of a hangman turn cold. Our friend nearly fell over backward, and, pivoting quicker than thought, fled, the laughter, which was a spotted hyena, hard at his heels. But the hyena was too late; master hunting dog got to the den first, and the eater of carrion and baby beasts went away with the knowledge that "he laughs best who laughs last." He should have done his killing first, and laughed after, anyway.

Soon after this our bold dog began to accompany his mother upon short hunting trips, his sister not at first accompanying them, and it was while waiting for her to come and take him for a hunt one evening that he beheld a strange sight, as it were a scene at a play.

For a long time after dawn, and again toward evening, he had heard at intervals, now from one point in the dim mysterious "bush," now from another, an odd but unmistakable cry that was new to him—and he reckoned that by then he was familiar with every cry of the "bush," too. First, there would come a nasty, goblin-like, gibbering chatter, and then, long drawn and wild, a deep howling. "Koo! koo! koo! koo! koo! koo! koo! koo!"

It was not a nice cry, and probably to any other ears would have suggested something of evil. Indeed, to the other denizens of the "bush," it appeared to spell terror, for nearly all day he had heard antelope passing steadily, and as if frightened, in a direction that led away from the cry. Nevertheless in his heart it awoke something, a new feeling he could not understand, and left him strangely excited.

SUDDENLY, from the opposite side of the glade where he waited, came a crash, and, looking up with that instant rigid attention peculiar to all the wild folk, he caught a fleeting glance of a magnificent impala antelope, his beautiful lyre-shaped horns laid close along his back, bounding at immense speed across the open. In a flash he was gone. Followed then a quick pattering, growing nearer as he listened, and, stretched out at a loose, long gallop, supple and sinister, a procession of five beasts slid over the open on the trail of the impala, and were gone, leaving our young friend dancing about and whining with maddened excitement like any domestic puppy. The beasts were exactly like his mother, full-grown hunting dogs chasing their prey, an off band from the big main pack of fifty strong, who wandered eternally round a thousand square miles' circuit along rivers and streams, and rarely remained in one place for more than one day, except in the case of their females with young, who, of course, had to part from the pack for a time and do housekeeping on their own.

The mother was late in appearing that night, and when she did there was blood on her muzzle, the blood of an impala buck, for the deep howling "koo! koo! koo! koo! koo! koo!" which is the rally call of the hunting dogs when they kill, all over Africa, had fetched her from afar and in time to—dine.

Long before his mother appeared, however, our

puppy, above himself with excitement—after the fashion of all dogs in the presence of a chase—had, after whining for and calling out his sister, adventured on his very own hunt.

The "bush" was strangely still after the passage of the hunt as our young hunting dog led his sister to a new trail across the clearing that he had discovered himself, and only the distant "Hoo! hoo!" of an owl, and the chirping of the everlasting tree crickets, broke the silence.

There was no mistaking the trail, or any possibility of losing it, for young dogs, wild or tame, need a great deal of training that way. It was, indeed, a very pronounced trail, a highly pungent scent. Even his sister, who had run only one or two trails of rats and things with them up to that time, could follow it.

In among the bushes—the acacias and the wait-a-bit thorns, and the rest of the dark spiky mystery—they trotted hot on their first very own hunt. They whimpered as they trotted, and became quite oblivious of the risk they ran, for this haunt of a hundred strange forms of death was no place for them by night or day, especially by night, without their mother's sinister presence to guard them. However, with the luck that belongs to the beginner, they not only remained alive—if not with quite a whole skin apiece by reason of the thorns aforementioned—but by chance ran into their quarry within three hundred yards of the start.

He was a strange little beast, and rather pretty; at least, if a jet black animal about a foot long, with four clean, white bands down his back, and a fine bushy, white tail that gave him quite another eight inches of length, could be called pretty, he was that. Yet there was that in his face that was not sweet, and he carried his tail up in the air and a little curled over his back, as a kind of danger signal and directly he saw the two young hunting dogs running his trail, which he did at once, the stench with which he filled the still air was anything but sweet. Also, he had something alive beneath his forepaws which writhed.

The two puppies were, however, far too hot upon their first lone trail—all the more exciting because stolen in their mother's absence—to notice the stench, albeit it must have almost physically hurt their delicate olfactory organs, and paused not till they were nearly on top of their quarry, which was what is known familiarly as a Cape polecat.

THE little beast, bristling at every hair, especially about his wonderful tail, which looked more like a danger signal than ever, and exuding an odor that was simply awful—or offal, if you like—danced away a yard or two, taking off from all four feet at once in a peculiar way of his own as if each foot had a spring under it. Promptly the puppies turned to chase him as he moved, but swerved off when he stopped, because they infinitely preferred to hunt a thing that ran away than one that faced them.

In that, instant the female puppy stumbled suddenly as if she tripped, uttering a quick yelp of pain, clapped down her tail between her legs, and fled back into the “bush,” where she cowered, whimpering.

Our young friend stopped dead, and yapped aloud with the best show of anger his age could muster. He was very frightened really. If, however, the bluff was meant to make the enemy turn tail and run, in which position he would be much safer to bite than from in front, it failed. The polecat did not run, and the appalling odor he was giving forth was nearly making our friend ill.

In a few seconds, of course, the inevitable happened. The puppy courage—at no time a thing to boast about even when the hunting dog is not a puppy, by the way—collapsed, and the puppy fled as if ten thousand fiends were at his heels, followed by the maledictions of the polecat. He fled straight back to the clearing, not stopping till he reached the mouth of the den, where he lay down shivering and panting.

A few minutes later he jumped to his feet, ready to dart in. Something was following him slowly, something in trouble, so that it could not help saying so all alone to itself. Till then he had had no time to think about his sister, but he now saw it was she. She appeared ill, so ill that she could not reach the den, quite, but, sinking down a few yards off, tried to drag herself to it, and failed. Before dawn came stealing gray and wan over the treetops, she was dead. Nor could all the licking of her mother save her, or stay her end by one instant. She had trodden on the live thing that writhed, which the polecat had been engaged in killing, and it was a puff adder, a fat and sluggish little devil of a snake whose bite is death.

Our puppy left the den for good after that. His mother took him away, and they hunted the lone trail together, the puppy now long and lanky,

always growing, like young grass after the rains.

They did much harm, for not being gifted with a courage above proof, they took their meals how they could, and there was in consequence rather a heavy mortality among the antelope-calves that were—the crafty mother had gauged her time pretty carefully in this—all about just then. They would run them down, and their mothers also, if weak, and slay them in a clumsy and wasteful fashion, for they never returned to a “kill” like the other beasts. In fact, they broke one of the strictest laws of the wild in this, and in consequence suffered rather heavy punishment.

Their punishment was administered by the grim judge Nature in the form of fears, the terrible “waiting, watching” shadows, which in Africa are always just around the corner. There was the fear by night of the lion and the leopard—this was a very sinister fear—when all though the dreaded dark hours—they were not strictly night feeders like other hunters—his mother and he would lie huddled and shivering together in the heart of some dense thorn-bush, listening to the deep, coughing thunder of the king of beasts, or the “yarl” of stealthy prowling “spots”; or, worse still, the snapped twig, or faint rustle that might mean so much, close at hand. There was also—and this was terrifying—the fear of that water devil, the crocodile, when they drank, which they did pretty often, straining back on their haunches, crouched, tense, lapping fearfully, one eye on the water in front, one eye roving round.

THERE was also the ever present fear of the serpent, when any step at any time, or any moment, hunting, drinking, walking, galloping, rolling, asleep or awake, might bring upon them the lightning death-stroke of the venomous snake. The greatest fear of all, man, they had not, till then, encountered.

Then at last came a morning when the first haze of dawn had barely paled the east above the interminable thorn-bush, when his mother, roughly nosing him awake, bid him follow her swiftly into the dread dark, misty shadows, by the simple process of running a little way, then stopping to look back and whine at him.

Our young friend followed reluctantly, shivering with cold, or fright, or both, his back humped, his tail tucked between his legs, his neck looking very long, and his great, big ears moving

all ways at once, so to speak. Every tree held a leopard to his eyes, and he shied sidewise round every bush like a nervous horse, and that that might come from behind occupied as much attention as anything ahead, so that he got what we call a "kricked" neck, and ran into full many a thorn. Once he heard a lion grunting on his royal way to water not forty yards off, and once—here he nearly died with terror on the spot—an old bull hippopotamus; weighing not much more than three tons, went by en route for the river, after the fashion of a steam engine, and with neither less noise than speed.

Thus it came about that when, just as the nearer bushes were beginning to stand out from the general dimness, and the first francolins were announcing the dawn, he scarcely noticed that his mother had stopped on the edge of a clearing, on the far side of which gleamed, or rather spoke, the river. When it did strike him, he stopped, too, and peered, all attention, over her shoulder.

At first there was nothing remarkable to be seen about the place, certainly not the antelope-fawn he expected. Then he became slowly aware, with the increasing light, of a mass that occupied the very center of a thick thorn-thicket, which in turn, occupied the center of the clearing; and next instant, with a start, and a tightening of every muscle, he discovered that the mass was alive. It was moving oddly. It was falling apart into separate masses, or shapes of the mist, which were stretching and yawning. Then and then it came home to him that he was looking at a big pack of his very own kind, of Cape hunting dogs, that had been lying also all huddled together there in among the thorns, just as his mother and he did. They, too, even in their strength of numbers, were under the punishment of the fear of the lion, and just as he watched he beheld one or two of the big, evil-looking beasts slink down to drink, and in that sight learned finally that they were under the ban of the fear of the crocodile as well.

When they had drunk and washed—there were very many of them, and they fairly well filled the clearing and they lay and sat about, licking and scratching themselves like a pack of loose-limbed hounds—they moved off slowly into the bush away from the river.

Our puppy and his mother followed in the rear, and if he had not been so excited he might have noticed that he was not the only puppy with a

mother following in the rear, either. He was, however, far the largest youngster, being almost a grown wild dog.

As the pack moved, it spread out fan-wise, but with the points of the fan curved outward instead of in. Now, however, the likeness to a pack of hounds left them. Decidedly hyena-like at the best of times, they became more so. Also, they virtually vanished, as they crouched and slunk stealthily from cover to cover, stopping from time to time to raise their heads silently above the long grass, or to jump into the air, like a terrier hunting, to see as far ahead as possible. Not a dog made a sound; they were as quiet as cats, and as deadly.

SUDDENLY a big old male, remarkable in that he was nearly black, except for his tail, which was white, that was running ahead of our puppy—and that, though he did not know it, was his father—dropped his head and began questing about. He had come upon the scent of game, and in a moment he was off—not specially quickly, not excitedly, not with any outcry, but dumb and deadly, working out the line, one or two other old males joining in to help him.

No one had spoken, but the pack seemed to know, as if by wireless, that the old leader had happened on a trail. If there was excitement, they hit it well; if hurry was toward, it only appeared in redoubled caution. The horns of the line swung forward; the dogs were endeavoring to encircle the prey. Trained men could have done no more.

Our puppy began to jump, without knowing it, at intervals above the grass to see ahead, and it was in one such jump that he caught sight of a high, brown back, whose neck was sunk in the act of feeding. In the next jump there were three backs, and they all had heads raised on graceful necks, and one had long horns, and they were looking his way with their beautiful full eyes. They were waterbuck antelope.

Perhaps in that instant they saw him. I don't know. Anyway, quick as a challenge came a loud, prolonged snort, a crash, another crash, and—chaos. In a flash the line of hunting dogs flung aside their stealth, which they knew to be now useless, and the whole pack hurled forward like bolts. Indeed, in the first rush, one of the female waterbuck was surrounded and pulled down by a portion of the pack, and another portion had gone off, pressing hard on the heels of another.

Our puppy, however, knew none of these things. He had been carried almost off his feet and his head with excitement, and, forgetting all else but the newly awakened lust of the chase, he galloped straight ahead, following always the waving white tail of the old pack-leader and father that he did not know, though probably his mother was wise enough. Always that white tail raced on, and on, and on ahead, at such a pace that our friend fairly had to stretch himself out to keep up at all. In fact, he must have been an exceptionally fine young specimen of his race to "live" with the portion of the pack he was following, even for one minute.

THEY were on the trail of the old herd bull waterbuck.

There is no need to enter at length into the details of that hunt; or how, the buck making for water always in a slight circle, members of the pack took the inner ring of the circle to cut him off; how the pack hunted in relays, allowing the tired members to drop back and the fresh ones to come forward; how our young hunter found himself pressed into one such relay; how he saw the grand old bull ahead, weakened by loss of blood by many cruel bites from the rear, turn suddenly and come to bay against a tree; and how, almost before our friend could swerve, the bull had made his rush clean through the van of the pack, splitting the next ahead dog clean through with his long, curving black horns, and hurling him with such force against our friend that the two, the dying and the unhurt, rolled over and over together.

By the time the young dog had picked himself up, the bull, after killing another dog, was down, five hundred yards away, and dead; and the weird rallying cry of the wild dogs, the unmistakable "Koo! koo! koo! koo! koo! koo! koo! koo! koo! koo!" was sounding on all sides.

The young dog jumped off, taking no notice of his silent but mortally stricken companion, and arrived in time to throw himself upon the antelope with the rest, and start tearing off huge chunks of

flesh, which he bolted whole like a starving beast.

It was then, or about then, that, one after the other—the whole of that portion of the pack that had come up in response to the rally and were gathered about the carcass—left off feeding suddenly and, so far as he could see, without reason. Every head went up, and all big ears were cocked one way. At the same time there began a curious gibbering chatter, quite indescribable, but decidedly uncanny.

Our young dog looked and saw that his companions were leaving the carcass and were drawing together, all facing to the right, chattering as they did so. So persistent was their gaze that he followed it, and from head to foot he "froze."

For the first time in his life he was beholding a white man.

Just at that moment his father, the old dark-colored dog, crossed nearly in front of him, and in the same instant a little jagged stab of flame flickered in the man's hands. There was a clear, sharp, smacking report that seemed to tap you over the heart, and the old hunting dog, wincing all over, collapsed in a heap where he stood.

Very quickly can the modern sporting magazine rifle be used, and very quickly it was used; but our young wild dog did not wait to see it. He fled without shame, quaking with fright, the slapping reports in his ears, and other hunting dogs stumbling or rolling headlong in their death struggles all about him. But perhaps the most terrible part of it all was the fact that none of them made a sound. Altogether, five were hit, and there was not so much as a whimper from the lot of them.

That about completed our puppy's education, I think, and ends this story. In fact, I haven't seen him since, because, as I told you before, the pack never stays in one place, and he will have to complete a thousand square miles' circuit round pretty well before he again finds himself back in the district where he was born.