

The Soul of Caliban

By: Emma-Lindsay Squier

(1) From French Louie I had this story, which you will accept as true or scout as impossible, according to your liking and knowledge of dogs. For myself, I think it is true, for he was not blessed - or cursed — with imagination.

(2) French Louie is a curious mixture of savagery and simplicity. For many years he lived by trapping in the northern woods. And yet, despite his cruel occupation, he has always loved animals. Many a fox cub he has reared to adulthood when it came to grief in his traps. Many a tear has he shed — I can well believe it — when a dragged and bloody trap told the mute story of an animal's desperate gnawing of a foot or a leg as the price of freedom. One day when he heard a visitor to the menagerie remark that it was a pity that animals had no souls, he flew into a rage, fairly booted the visitor out of the place, and was still sputtering French and English when I dropped in upon him.

(3) "No souls, they say!" he snorted, spreading his hands and puckering his lips in contemptuous mimicry. "Faugh! They give me the gran' pain! The only animal they ever have, I bet you, is a canary bird that say 'Pretty Poll' all day long!"

(4) "That's a parrot," I said mildly. But he only snorted.

(5) "No soul, they say! Listen, I tell you somet'ing I bet you nobody believe, by Gar! Or they say, 'Oh, dat dog he obey hees instinct.' Bien, all I say ees, who know what ees instinct and what ees soul? And I bet you many a man he ain't got the soul that that dog got instinct—no, by Gar!"

(6) It was in the sheep country of Alberta that Louie knew the dog, Caliban. Leon Suprenon was his owner, and Louie used to visit the sheep man at his ranch, far removed from civilization.

(7) "Leon, he was one fine educated man, by Gar," he told me. "Books - with pictures - he had many of them in hees 'ouse. Dat dog, Caliban, he name' heem from a pleh by Shakespeare-you have heard of heem?"

(8) "Yes," I said, unsmiling.

(9) "You know a pleh with a dog name' Caliban in eet?"

(10) "Not a dog," I answered, "but a poor imprisoned monster, ugly, deformed, and very wicked, yet somehow very pitiful."

(11) French Louie nodded vigorously. "C'est la meme chose," he assured me. "Dat dog, Caliban-oh, mon Dieu, he was ogly! Hees lip she always lifted up like zis-in a snar-rl-all the time dat lip'. And hees eyes-leettle, mean-looking eyes, wid a frown between dem always, and teeth dat would snap together - clop! No tramps ever came near the place of Leon Suprenon. Dey know dat dog, Caliban; he was not a beast to be trifle' with."

(12) "What kind of a dog was he?" I asked of Louie the Frenchman.

(13) He shrugged his shoulders, spread out his hands and shook his head. No kind, and every kind, was what I gathered from his description - a big, shaggy dog, as large as a sheep dog, and much more stockily built. His hair had no silky smoothness to it. Rather it was like the rough, matted fur of a wolf-and Louie maintained that Caliban had wolf blood in him. There was a strain of bulldog, too, that made his legs short and bowed a bit. His under jaw came out pugnaciously-always with that lifted lip which was no fault of his, but which gave his face a perpetually savage expression. Ugly he must have been; yet useful, too. As a guard against tramps and the lawless characters who are to be found in any part of the country where civilization is at a distance, he was invaluable. As a sheep dog, too, he had not his equal in Alberta. Perhaps it is too much to say that he could count the sheep his master owned. But it is true that he would watch them, passing into the big corrals, his sharp, shaggy ears pointed, his small, close-set eyes never wavering in their intense regard, his whole body taut with concentration. And if any sheep lingered or did not come, Caliban would need no word of command to stir him to action. Like an arrow he would dart out, snapping at the lagging heels, turning in a scatter-brained ewe, or dashing off across the fields to find a sheep which he knew had strayed or had fallen into the river.

(14) A dog of strange, tumultuous jealousies, and incomprehensible tenderness. So rough was he, when herding the sheep, that Leon Suprenon was always shouting, "Caliban, you devil! Stop biting that sheep or I'll beat your ugly brains out!"

(15) Caliban would stop short, regard his master with a long, disdainful stare, and then look back at the sheep, as if to say, "Those silly things! What difference does it make whether I bite their heels or not?"

(16) And yet—that was the dog that, after seeing the sheep into the corral one winter afternoon when a blizzard was threatening to blow down from the north, did not come into the house to dream and twitch under the kitchen stove as was his custom. When darkness fell Leon noticed the dog's absence at first with unconcern, and then with growing uneasiness. The rising wind flung itself viciously upon doors and windows, the white snow whirled up against the panes with sharp, sibilant flurries. Leon went to the door and called. The blizzard drove his voice back in his throat; the wind hurled him against the portals, and drove an icy blast of snow into the hall.

(17) Leon Suprenon was not the man to be daunted by a storm. He remembered that after the gates were shut, Caliban had stood steadily gazing away toward the dim fields, where the menacing curtain of oncoming wind and snow was blotting out the contours of stream and distant forest.

(18) So he took a lantern and fought his way out into the terrible night, out toward the sheep corrals, and then out toward the invisible fields beyond the stream. A mile he went — perhaps more — fighting his way against the fury of the storm. It was out by the cluster of pine trees that marks the east line of the ranch that he met Caliban, coming home.

(19) The dim light of the lantern threw a weak golden circle against the driving white mistiness of the snow. And into the nebulous ring of light came Caliban, grim, staggering, a grotesque monster looming out of the white darkness, his mouth strangely misshapen by something he was carrying — a lamb, newly born. Beside him, struggling weakly yet valiantly against

the driving snow, came the mother sheep, which had given birth to her baby in the midst of the dreadful blizzard. Caliban was coming slowly, adapting his pace to hers, stopping when she would stop, yet with unmistakable signs that he expected her to struggle forward with him. And the lamb — the weak, bleating little thing that swung from his teeth as lightly as if it had been a puff of thistledown.

(20) Now the dog Caliban never begged for caresses. He was not the sort of dog to leap and bark and wag his tail when the master came home. Between him and Leon Suprenon there was an understanding — a man's understanding of mutual respect and restraint. A word of commendation sufficed him, or sometimes a pat on the head. But never, as long as Leon had owned the dog, could he recall a time when Caliban had ever sought to ingratiate himself by being friendly and playful, as the other dogs would do.

(21) Nevertheless, Caliban had his jealousies, fierce, deep and primitive. He killed a dog that Leon petted casually; he took it by the throat and crushed it with his great teeth, then flung the quivering body down and stared at it with those baleful, close-set eyes. There was blood on the perpetual snarl of his lifted lip. Then fearlessly he awaited his punishment. Leon beat him cruelly. But Caliban never flinched or whimpered, just stood there hunching himself up and shutting his eyes, licking his lips a bit as the blows hurt him more and more. When it was over, he shook himself, stretched, then pricked up his ears and looked Leon in the face, as if to say, "Well, that's over. Now have you any orders?" If he had whimpered once — but he did not. Leon swore furiously, and had the dead dog buried in the meadow. He did not caress the other dogs after that. They were valuable to him — but Caliban was priceless. And Leon knew that the only way of breaking his stubborn spirit would be to kill him.

(22) Caliban had one abiding hatred: cats. Whereas the other dogs chased them joyously, or ignored them as inferior creatures, Caliban loathed them, chased them savagely, killed them mercilessly. He had a short, brutal way of doing it; if he caught a luckless cat — and he would run like a yearling buck,

that dog Caliban — he would give it one shake, like the crack of a whip, and then toss the cat into the air. It usually died with a broken neck and a broken back. And by the law of the survival of the fittest, the cats that escaped from Caliban's savage sallies were wise in their generation and kept out of his way. But there was one small cat, not yet out of kittenhood, that had either come recently to the ranch, or else by an accident had not crossed Caliban's path — a gentle little cat, all gray, with a white paw which she was always licking as if proud of it.

(23) One day she sat sunning herself on the porch before the house. Caliban came by that way, and saw her. With the savage, deep-throated growl that all the other cats had learned to fear as the most deadly thing of life, he leaped at her, caught her, flung her up into the air.

(24) Perhaps it was supreme ignorance of danger that saved her from death. For the gentle little cat had not tried to run. Instead she stayed where he had flung her, dazed, inert, staring at the terrible dog, with round, uncomprehending eyes. He saw that he had not killed her. He came nearer, ready to shake her with the peculiarly deadly twist that he knew so well. Still she did not move. She could not. She only mewed, a very small, pitiful mew, and her stunned body twitched a little. Caliban hesitated, sniffed at her, turned away. After all, he seemed to tell himself, you could not kill a weak, helpless thing like that — a thing that could not run.

(25) Leon Suprenon came out and found the little cat. He took her up very gently, and she tried to purr as he stroked her quivering, hurt body. "Caliban," Leon said sternly, "that was not a sportsmanlike thing to do. I am ashamed of you!"

(26) And to his great surprise, Caliban, the insolent, the ever-snarling, put his tail between his legs and slunk down the porch steps. He too was ashamed. But Caliban, that ugly, misshapen dog with the perpetual snarl on his lifted lip, could make amends. And to the best of his ability he did. The gentle little cat did not die, but never did she fully recover the use of her limbs. She had a slow, halting way of walking, and running was

an impossibility. She would have been an easy prey for the joyous, roistering dogs that chased cats, not from enmity, but because it was the proper thing to do. But Caliban stood between her and eager, sniffing dogs like a savage, sinister warrior. Too well did the other ranch dogs know the menace of those close-set eyes, the ugly, undershot jaw, and the snarl that showed the glitter of deadly, clamping teeth. They learned — through experience — that the little gray cat was not to be molested.

(27) Not only did Caliban become the little gray cat's protector; he became her friend. She would sit on the fence and watch for the sheep dogs to come up to the house after the day's work was done. When the other dogs filed past her, she paid no attention, realizing perfectly that they dared not harm her. And when Caliban came, close at the heels of Leon Suprenon, she would yawn and stretch, purr loudly, and drop squarely and lightly on the big dog's back. He would carry her gravely into the kitchen, lie down while she got slowly off his back, and would lie under the stove, with the little cat purring and rubbing about his face. It was not in him to show affection. But he permitted her carefully to wash his face and ears, tug at burrs that matted his heavy coat, and to sleep between his forefeet.

(28) Once another cat, emboldened by the gray cat's immunity from danger, went to sleep between Caliban's great paws. When he awoke and found the intruder peacefully purring against his chest, he gave one terrific growl, sprang to his feet, seized the strange cat and shook it. Savagely he flung it across the room. It was dead before ever it struck the floor.

(29) Now it was at this time that Leon Suprenon married Amelie Morin, from Dubuqui, and brought her to the ranch that was bounded by dark forests and deep, turbulent rivers. She chafed a little under the isolation of the place, and shivered when at night the wolves howled far back on the distant slopes. But she loved Leon Suprenon, and in time became reconciled to the loneliness of the ranch — still more reconciled when a baby was born to her, and was strong and healthy and beautiful.

(30) Caliban had accepted the girl, Amelie, stoically, without apparent resentment. It was as if he knew that sooner or later his master would bring home a woman to share the lonely ranch house. But the baby—that was a different thing. He had not bargained on the small intruder who became at once the lord and tyrant of the household. When Leon took up the tiny baby in his arms, Caliban growled, and his eyes became a baleful red.

(31) When Leon put the baby in its crib, and spoke to it foolishly, fondly, as all fathers do, Caliban came and stood beside him, looking down at the red-faced crinkly-eyed baby; and again the dog growled, deep in his throat.

(32) One day when Leon caressed the child, Caliban sprang, trying to tear the infant out of his arms. Leon kicked the dog furiously aside, and beat him with a leather whip.

(33) "Caliban, you devil!" he panted between the blows. "If you ever touch that baby, I'll kill you!"

(34) And, as if the dog understood, he hunched himself and shut his eyes, licking his lips as the heavy lash fell again and again. Then he shook himself, stared at his master with somber, unwavering eyes, and went out of the house without once looking back.

(35) For a whole week he did not return. One of the ranchmen reported that he had seen Caliban in the forest, that the dog had mated with a female wolf.

(36) Leon Suprenon said that it was not true, and that Caliban would come back. But Amelie cried out, "No, no! That dog, he is a monster! Never again would I feel that my baby was safe!"

(37) "You misjudge him," Leon said soothingly, "he is a little jealous of the baby, it is true, but he will overcome that in time. An ugly-looking dog, I grant you, but he is very gentle, nevertheless."

(38) "Gentle - that beast!" the girl shut her eyes and shuttered.

(39) Caliban did come back. He appeared at the kitchen door one day when Leon was out looking after the sheep - sullen,

defiant, his glittering, close-set eyes seeming to question whether or not he would not be welcomed. The perpetual snarl on his lifted lip and the misshapen ugliness of his powerful body made him even more repellent to the girl Amelie, who snatched up her baby from where he was playing on the floor, ran with him to the bedroom, and closed and bolted the door. But a royal welcome he received from the little gray cat, that dragged herself toward him with purring sounds of joy. She mewed delightedly, rubbed against his bowed legs, and tried to lick his face. Caliban, for the first and last time, bent his ugly head, and licked the little gray cat, briefly and furtively.

(40) The dog had learned his lesson as to the status of the baby. And whether or not his heart was seared with that savage, primitive jealousy which he had shown at first so plainly, no hint of it now appeared. At first he ignored the child, even when it crawled toward him as he lay under the kitchen stove. Later he would watch the round-faced baby with rigid, attentive eyes—eyes in which there were blue-green wolf gleams behind the honest brown. Sometimes he would sniff at the child questioningly, as if trying to ascertain for himself what charm such a helpless crawling little animal could possibly have for the man who was his master and his idol.

(41) Little by little Amelie's distrust lessened, and she was willing that the baby should lie in his crib on the sunny porch, when Caliban was stretched out on the steps with the little gray cat sleeping between his paws.

(42) Then one day, after a morning of housework within doors, she came out to take the baby—and he was gone. The crib was empty, the little blankets were rumped into confusion. The dog Caliban still lay sleeping upon the porch, and the little gray cat purred drowsily against his furry chest.

(43) Amelie screamed, and the men came running up from the sheep pens and barns, snatching up sticks of wood, or fumbling with guns. Leon came running with a face the color of chalk; arid Amelie clung to him, screaming, sobbing, wild with

hysterical fear. She was certain that some wild animal had snatched her baby out of his crib and devoured him.

(44) "Nonsense!" said Leon Suprenon positively. "No wild animal could have come near the house with Caliban on guard."

(45) After an hour of frantic searching, they found the child. In back of the ranch house where the garbage was dumped and burned, there they found the baby, playing happily with an old tin can, dirty and bedraggled, yet quite unhurt and unharmed.

(46) In the first moment of acute relief, no one thought to question how the child had come so far. But afterward — Leon stood in deep thought, staring down at Caliban, who returned his look steadily, unflinchingly, as was his wont. For the first time a doubt of the dog's integrity came into his mind. He knew Caliban's great strength, knew that the dog could have carried the baby as easily as he had carried the newborn lamb. And the garbage pile—there was a grim humor in that which pointed to Caliban's line of reasoning. Undesirable things were thrown out there; things put upon the garbage pile were never brought back into the house; therefore, if the baby were put out there, with the rest of the rubbish ... "Caliban, you devil!" said Leon Suprenon between clenched teeth. Yet he could not beat the dog. The evidence was only circumstantial. Had the thing happened to any one else's child, he would have laughed heartily at the story. But to him it was not so funny. Anything might have happened to the child. The dog might have dropped it; or stray wolves might have come down out of the woods. The baby might have cut its hands terribly on broken glass or rusty tin cans.

(47) "Caliban," said Leon Suprenon sternly, "you have spoiled my belief in you. I will never be able to trust you again."

(48) The great ugly dog stared at him with those glittering, close-set eyes, then turned away abruptly and lay down. It was as if he accepted the defeat of his plans, the humiliation, the loss of his master's trust, with stoical resignation. It was almost as if he had shrugged his shoulders.

(49) Now there came the winter time — a lean, terrible winter, when the wolves howled about the ranch, sometimes

becoming so bold as to come close to the barns, and corrals, and the house. The spring was late, and even when the snow began to melt, and the first warm breezes to come up from the south, still the howling of the wolf pack was heard on distant hills, and still tracks were found in the crusted snow about the barn and the sheep corrals. One day in the spring an urgent message came to Amelie Suprenon, begging her to come to a neighboring ranch where a woman lay in child-birth. She could only go on horseback — and the need for her help was imminent. She saddled her horse herself, for the men were out on the ranges. Then she hesitated as to leaving or taking the baby. But Leon had said he would return at noon, and the sun was then almost at the zenith. She scribbled a note for him, put the baby in the bedroom in the little pen which Leon had made for it, and shut the door. Then she mounted her horse and rode hard and fast to the woman who was in need of her.

(50) Leon Suprenon did not get the note. A hint of spring sickness had come upon some of the sheep, and he worked all through the morning and late into the afternoon with sheep dip and sprays. When he was about to return to the ranch house, one of the men told him that he had seen Amelie riding by, at noon, in the direction of the Pourers' ranch. Leon frowned a bit. He did not like to have Amelie ride alone, especially on the forest roads. He flung himself upon his horse, shouted to his men to go on with their work, and took a short cut across the fields to ride home with Amelie. He met her just as she came out of the door, tired, but smiling.

(51) "Such a sweet little baby boy!" she called to Leon as he rode nearer. Then her face suddenly clouded. "The baby — our baby —" she said uncertainly. "You did not leave him alone?"

(52) Leon stared back at her, his forehead wrinkled.

(53) "The baby?" he repeated. "Why, surely, Amelie, he is with you?"

(54) For an instant she did not reply. A slow fear was dawning in her heart that stretched her eyes wide and made them hard and glassy. "No—no," she almost whispered. "I left a note —"

I thought you would come at noon. The baby then — he is there alone — perhaps with — Caliban —" Her voice died away, as if she were afraid of the name she had spoken.

(55) Leon tried to laugh, to make light of her fears. But his lips were a bit stiff, and he breathed as he helped her into the saddle. "Come, come, Amelie, you worry too much. The little one will be quite well — you shall see — only very hungry perhaps and exercising his small lungs terrifically. As for Caliban —"

(56) Amelie slashed at her horse's flank with the whip. Her face was dead-white. "Where was that dog — that terrible beast, when you came away?" she gasped as they galloped down the snowy road.

(57) "I don't know," Leon jerked out grimly, as if thinking aloud. "I can't remember seeing him — yes, yes, he stood looking away toward the ranch house; I remember now that he barked once-then trotted away. I thought he was rounding up a sheep. I did not call him back. One of the men laughed and said that he was going to meet the Lady - "

(58) "Wolf!" the girl finished hoarsely. "O grand Dieu, guard my baby! He is in danger, I tell you, Leon; I feel it, I know it! That beast — that horrible beast who mates with bloodthirsty wolves—you would not believe it, Leon, but I tell you it is true-true! Oh, my baby, my little baby!"

(59) She lashed her horse with frenzied, hysterical hands, and the startled animal reared and plunged forward. Fast, faster, the slender hoofs pounded through the snowy slush of the road, and Leon's horse followed, breathing hard and straining at the bit. They did not speak again, the husband and wife, but rode, rode as if for the saving of a life.

(60) It was Amelie who dismounted first, when at the end of that wild ride her horse came to a stop, panting and trembling. She dashed the unlocked door wide open, and an instant later a wild scream sent the blood ebbing from Leon's face and made his hands numb clods of flesh as they fumbled for the gun in his belt.

(61) The scene he saw as he stumbled through the hallway turned him sick with a deadly nausea of horror and despair.

Amelie lay fainting in the open doorway of the bedroom. Beyond, an empty cradle, an open window, with muddy tracks on the window sill, told a dreadful story. But the thing that made him cry out, savagely, hoarsely, was the dog-Caliban. The snarling, misshapen beast stood in the doorway, staring at him with red, malevolent eyes -and there was blood on the heavy jowls and the thick-matted hair of the chest.

(62) "You-you devil!" Leon screamed like a madman-and fired.

(63) The dog still stood there, just an instant. The small, close-set eyes blinked slightly, the ugly head jerked back once - and he fell in a silent, twitching heap.

(64) "Oh, God! Oh, God!" Leon was sobbing, hardly knowing what he said or did. And then-he heard a baby crying. Stunned, incredulous, almost believing himself in a tortured dream, the man went slowly forward. The baby lay behind the door, lay where it had been dragged to safety. It was crying with fright and was beating the air vaguely with its pink little hands. And over behind the dresser, in a pool of blood - lay a dead wolf.

(65) "There is a grave on the ranch of Leon Suprenon," said French Louie solemnly, in the language of his people, "where the dog, Caliban lies buried. And above it is a tombstone of marble - yes, the whitest of marble - with this inscription: Here lies Caliban, a dog. He died as he lived, misjudged, maligned, yet unafraid. In life he never failed in duty, and in death he was faithful to his trust. And dat is why," said Louie, the Frenchman, lapsing into the argot of his daily life, "dat I get so mad inside of me when people say animals dey have no souls. Did not the dog, Caliban, have a soul? Oh, mon Dieu! I know dis: when he died that day, and hees spirit went out of hees big, ogly body and rose up to the skies, the good Saint who guards the gates up dere he look out and sa,: 'Why, Caliban, ees dat you? Come in, mon brave. I did not know you. How beautiful you have grown!' "

FINIS