

Short
Story

AND THE OWNER CAME

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"PETER," Eric said, "what is the *eighth* planet from the sun?"

"Why, Neptune, of course," Peter readily retorted.

"How about this: Who was the first man?"

"Moses—I mean, Adam."

"Bright boy! Now here's another: What is *eternity*?"

"I think it's something that makes a man stern."

"No... But if you give me the right answer I'll buy you a coke at Lynn's. Again, what is *eternity*?"

"Hmm... Now I know! It's the sacrament that makes a boy and a girl become husband and wife."

"Ohh..."

"You mean it's wrong? And I couldn't have that coke?"

"W-Well, come on. What are you waiting for? Lynn's going to miss us."

"You mean you'll buy me a coke *anyway*?"

"Yes."

"You heard what he said, Rover? Let's go, boy. He's taking us to Lynn's!"

"Don't hug that dog too much. Do you want to die with fleas?"

"Who's got fleas? Rover? Why, he's the cleanest dog you've ever seen. We bathe together — that's at least twice a day." Peter placed the bottle of coke on the table and resumed cuddling the curly, milk-white fur of the dog.

"You don't have fleas, Rover. You are clean. And don't believe Eric when he says you got fleas because it's not true. But don't get mad at him either because he's my good brother. Here — have some. Go on, sip it... Oh, not *that* way! Here, I'll show you how —"

"Peter! don't do that!" Eric flung the bottle away from the boy. There was a sharp, shrill clatter of glass against concrete. "Don't you *ever* do that again, Peter! It's dangerous. Why are you that *stup* — I mean, don't do that again, huh, Pete? Lynn, give him another bottle, please."

"I don't want a coke — not from you anymore!"

"Oh, Peter, I was just trying to help you. You don't want to die of rabies, do you?"

"Yes!"

"And leave Rover all alone — not fed, bathed and all?"

"I-I mean — No, I don't want to die."

"That's better. Now, we'll forget it—okay?"

"O-Okay."

"Peter, I wonder who is the real owner of that dog."

"Why, me, of course!"

"Oh, you're not telling me that nobody owned Rover before you found him wandering around the neighborhood two weeks ago, are you? Then, what if the owner comes here to claim the dog? It's possible, you know. That's why I'm telling you not to be too close to him so that you'll not be so worried when—"

"Yes, I see what you mean. You don't have to tell me! Why, if the owner comes here to get Rover, I'll just return him and bid him goodbye — that's all!"

Eric said nothing. He was certain that it would not be as simple as that. Then, he remembered the day Green Peck died, Peter's pet parrot.

"Where's Heaven, Eric?"

"It's somewhere very far above us... up beyond the clouds... beyond the skies... beyond everything."

"Is it very far from here?"

"Yes, very. Why do you ask?"

"Mama told me Green Peck's gone to Heaven."

"Oh, that..."

"I just wonder how one gets to Heaven... Do you know how, Eric?"

"Yes — I-I mean it's quite complicated. You see, one has to be old, so very old that he can't walk or eat or breathe anymore — when he becomes useless to the world — then, God takes him to Heaven."

"But Green Peck's not old and useless yet — I still need him — why did God take him to Heaven?"

"You know, Peter, birds are not like human beings — they get older very much more quickly than us."

"I don't believe that!"

"It's true."

"No! God shouldn't have taken Green Peck away yet because I still need him — I still love him..."

Peter did really mourn for his dead parrot for some time. But days later, a horror movie the two brothers saw in which a bird vampire was the villain had made the child forget Green Peck.

Now Eric wondered what movie could possibly do the job if the owner of Rover would come to take the dog back.

"Eric, I think I want that coke after all."

"That's good Peter! Lynn, another bottle of coke, please. And I'm very sorry about that other bottle being broken... I'll just pay for it."

"Eric,"

"Yes?"

"Eternity is forever."

"Why, you bright boy! You finally got it!"

"Eric,"

"Yes?"

"Rover..."

"Yes, what about Rover?"

"You really think the owner will come and take him away?"

"I said it's possible."

"I won't let anybody take Rover away from me!"

"Oh, Peter, don't say that... What if he is a little boy just like you and just as fond of Rover as you are... do you think he is happy with his dog being away from him all this time?"

"N-Now I see what you mean... He can take Rover with him after all. And I wouldn't be in the least worried about it. Can you believe that? Can Mama possibly believe that I wouldn't be worried when the owner takes Rover away? Just don't tell her about it now, though. I want her to get shocked or something."

"I'm sure she'll be shocked."

"Do you think he's brighter than me?"

"Who?"

"That boy who owns Rover."

"Oh... No, I don't think so."

"So you just don't think so — but he may really be brighter than me."

"No, Peter. I'm sure you're brighter than him."

"Honest?"

"Honest. You are the brightest boy in the whole wide world."

"Eric,"

"Yes?"

"I think you're the greatest brother of the brightest boy in the whole wide world."

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"Eric, has Peter gone?"

"Yes, Ma. And he was a little upset because the school-bus got here late."

"Well then, how about you — do you have a class today?"

"Yes, Ma. Nine-thirty."

"Dino is sick and can't get up. Would you please drive me to the office?"

"Sure. I'll get the keys first."

"No need... I have them already."

Here..."

"Thanks. Well, let's go."

"So, this old car won't start again?"

"It would... it's just the weak battery, — well, now, here you are. Hear that? I guess an engine purr is one of the most beautiful sounds I ever heard..."

"Oh, Eric, I don't have any time for that... I'm late already."

"All right, Ma."

"Now what has that?"

"Maybe a piece of wood or a rock Peter

placed against the tires. Just wait here... I'll go and see."

"Yes — and hurry up!"

"C-Come out here. Ma!"

"Now — what is it?"

"It's Rover, Ma."

"Why, what about the dog?"

"C-Come and... see."

"Yes, I'm coming... Oh God! It's Rover!"

The stout neck of the dog was now under the left-rear tire of the car. Thick, red blood oozed from its awesomely deformed mouth; its tongue stuck out to the concrete flooring of the driveway. The forepaws were stiff and rigid and the milk-white fur was stained with blood.

Eric saw the pair of green eyes that bulged out from their sockets staring at him, as if they were desperately pleading him to erase the terror they were suffering.

"Poor dog."

"Yes. He was probably sleeping under the car when... Ma, what are we going to do now? We can't tell Peter that..."

"No, we won't. You just take the dog... and bury him at the back of the garage."

"All right. Now, step aside a little, Ma... You'll get your shoes bloody."

"Ma, I think that's the school-bus now."

"Yes, I know... and don't torture yourself being so sorry... it was not your fault that—"

"Rover! Rover! Where are you, boy? Rover! Rover! Come out now, boy, it's time for our bath... do you want Eric to tell again that you have fleas?"

"T-That's Peter now, Ma."

"Ma! Eric, have you seen Rover around? Eric, have you seen my dog?"

"I'm v-very sorry, Peter, but Rover is d—"

"Eric, don't!"

"Why? What is it, Ma? — What happened to Rover?"

"Y-You know? Pete, the owner of the dog... a sweet little boy of your age... came here this morning while you were in school, and took Rover with him."

"You m-mean h-he..."

"Yes, Pete, but don't worry, dear... I'll—"

"Who's worried — ? Ma... if you were that little boy who owns Rover, do you think you'd be happy to be so far from the dog you're very fond of?" With a wink at his brother: "Right Eric?"

"Y-Yes, that's right, Peter."

"Oh, Eric,"

"Yes?"

"Here's the payment for that broken bottle."

The MOTHER gave him a quizzical look.