

Whose Dog?

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From *The Forum*

"Hey--there's ladies here, move on--you!" The tone was authoritative and old John, the village drunkard, crouched away.

"I warn't doin' nothin'," he clutched feebly at the loose hanging rags that clothed him, "only wanted to see same's them. Guess this pier's big enough to hold us all."

"Halloo, John, have a drink?" A grinning boy held a can of salt water toward him.

The quick maudlin tears sprang to the old man's eyes. "Little fellers," he muttered, "little fellers, they oughtn't ter act that way."

"Give him a new necktie, he's gotta go to dinner with the Lodge." A handful of dank sea-weed writhed around the old man's neck. "That's a turtle, that is," the boy went on, the need for imparting information justifying his lapse from ragging the drunkard. "There--swimming round--it's tied to that stake. You orter've seen it at low tide when it was on the beach. It weighs ninety pounds."

"I seen a turtle onct," the drunkard quavered. "It was bigger'n that. En they tied it to a stake--en it swam round--en it swam round--." His sodden brain clutched for something more to say, some marvel with which to hold the interest of the gathered boys. It was good to talk. If only they would let him talk to them. If only they would let him sit on the store porch and smoke and gossip. He wouldn't be the town disgrace--

"Well--go on--what'd't do?"

"Hey you!"--the boys were interrupted by the authoritative voice--"I told you to move on, didn't I--now if I tell you again I'll run you in. D'yer hear? What you boys let that old bum hang around you for anyway. What's he doin' here?"

"Aw, he's fun. He warn't doin' nothin'. He was just awatchin' it swim. It's tied to that post. It don't come up no more."

"Watchin' it swim, eh, was he? A'right. Whose dog is it?" The officer turned and sauntered away.

Sudden horror seized the old man. The liquor seemed drained out of his veins: his brain worked almost quickly. "Whose dog--whose dog? Say!" he darted after the retreating boys. "Say--that ain't no dog--is it--no *dog*? Tied up like that to drown--say--"

"Aw--keep off--I told you onct--it's a turtle for the Lodge dinner." The boy shook himself free.

The old man stood a moment, shaken. His pulpy brain worked dimly toward the conception of the pain that was consuming him. "Whose dog--" that man had asked--and he hadn't meant to help it--"whose dog!" They could do it--tie up a dog to drown in sight of people--like that--cruel. He saw the policeman coming toward him again. In a sudden frenzy he clutched his tattered garments about him and began to run, to run toward the end of the pier.

The boys raced after him. "What yer gonter do?" they shouted. "What yer gonter do?"

The old man turned and looked at them a moment with twitching features. "I'm gonter die," he said.

"Come on, you fellers--come on--the drunk's gonter dive--come on--he's cryin'!"

There was a splash. A surge of green filth and mud spread and dyed the water. A row of expectant heads leaned over the rail. "Say--he ain't come up." They waited.

The policeman strolled leisurely down in response to their repeated cries. "*Who* ain't come up? What, him--the drunk?" The officer leaned lethargically over the rail. "What'm I gonter do? Why, leave 'm. He ain't got no folks gonter sit up nights waitin' fer 'm. Now you young ones go along home to your suppers," he indulgently commanded,

"and you little fellers, if you want crabs, be 'round here early. By tomorrow this place will be fairly swarmin' with them."