

The Doctor and the Dogs

He was not a medical Doctor, you understand, he was a Doctor of Philosophy and he worked for the Government. He was known as the Dr Dolittle of the Department of Ag., but his real name was Dr Mack. It was rumoured that he could talk to the animals, but on this occasion he was coming to lecture to the local farmers on the subject of *Animal Behaviour - Do Your Animals Suffer From Stress?* The town of Moroota was small and remote and a visiting lecturer signified quite an occasion.

It seems that everyone is worried about the animals these days. Captain Peter Peters, ex-public school, ex-army and expatriate, newish, local farmer and district identity, was no exception. He was going to the lecture to learn more about how to control his own livestock - several hundred sheep, seventy breeding cows - Aberdeen Angus - and a few goats, dogs, chickens and so on. He was certainly no fool as a farmer, but he felt there was more he could learn.

In the truck with Captain Peters, as he drove into town for the lecture, was his mate Bluey - not to be confused with Blue, the much-loved, cattle dog which also accompanied them on this outing. Bluey was a happy-go-lucky, teenage, refugee from the city who had arrived - out of the blue, as it were - about six months ago and stayed to help the Captain on the farm. With hair like copper, freckled all over his body, he was an orphan with virtually no formal education, nor hint of any aptitude for it, and a heart of something rather precious, if not exactly gold. The two had become good mates partly because neither of them really had any other mate.

"Do you think we're cruel to the animals, Boss?" They had been talking about animal stress and the forthcoming lecture.

"Well, Bluey, I think the stock like to be kept strictly under control, not left to their own devices. Then they know exactly where they stand, you know." He did have some doubts, in fact, but decided to keep them to himself.

"You always do what you're told, don't you Blue." The dog wagged its tail in reply.

"The main thing they like is to be well fed. That's all they really need," the farmer added. He stroked his moustache with a hard, dry, hand and shifted his stiff, bony, frame in the seat as the truck droned along the monotonous road to Moroota.

Arriving at the meeting, The Captain and Bluey were early enough to get seats right at the back of the Hall near the exit and Blue lay beside them on the floor. There was a buzz of anticipation as the speaker, Dr Mack, could be seen nervously shuffling his papers at the long table which served as a makeshift podium. Riding boots clattered and chairs scraped on the bare wooden floor. The double doors at the end of the Hall were left open for ventilation - or perhaps for latecomers, also.

Opening the proceedings, a reasonably acceptable thirty minutes after the advertised starting time, the Chairman was unexpectedly forthright - at least, in Dr Mack's opinion, anyway. He simply announced that Dr Mack had composed his own introduction which reads as follows . . . (reading closely) very famous research worker, expert . . . world authority . . . author of . . .

(mumble mumble) who once held the title of Acting, Senior, Principal, Chief of the . . .
(mumble mumble) and he is going to talk to us about . . . er, his work.

The audience was as intent in its examination of the speaker as a family on its first outing to the zoo. Dr Mack had a pointy beard and well-receded hairline and wore a rather wild-eyed expression.

"Singer said speciesism is immoral," the Doctor began, "and Skinner said behaviourism is everything. Konrad Lorenz - Ah! the great Konrad Lorenz - he said that ethology is a science (or should be anyway), but I am pleased to inform you that my evidence has proved all these people to be wrong. Not entirely wrong, mind you. There are no blacks and whites in this business, you know - only beautiful shades of grey."

Much of the attention waned as the good Doctor talked of ethostasis, someone called Selye, adrenal hypertrophy and hormones; the manifold aspects of stress. Some interest was rekindled when he mentioned cattle and sheep with respect to the symptoms of stress, one of which, he told them, unfortunately, was death.

"It's not only pain which causes stress, but excitement as well," he explained. You may be surprised to learn that a particular breed of pig - the Finnish Landrace, which is not only highly productive, but also very highly strung - is prone to drop dead in the act of copulation!

This brought the house down. Guffaws of laughter were quickly followed by knowing looks between mates and ironic chuckles from the handful of women present. If the audience remembered anything from this lecture it would be that fact, and Dr Mack was now daring to think that he might be a success after all.

The Animal Freedom representative, Ms Marjorie Middlebank, had feared from the outset that the main issue - man's ruthless exploitation of innocent animals - was going to be overlooked and now she was pleasantly satisfied that she had been right. Bluey was spellbound by this startling revelation that sex could be lethal. At his age it seemed a cruel blow.

As the lecture resumed its irrelevant course and minds wandered over the ramifications of stress and many other matters, few people noticed the sudden departure of all of the dogs at the meeting and the onset of barking in the street outside. Blue had been asleep beside his master's chair until the explosion of laughter, but then he had lifted his head for a moment for the slightest sniff of the air and abruptly departed.

A few minutes later the meeting was brought to a halt by the raucous interjections of a woman who came running in through the open doorway. It was the new Policeman's wife who had arrived in the town just a few days before. Nobody knew her, but everyone knew who she was.

"Somebody help, please," she was screaming. "My puppy is being attacked. There are wild dogs, by the hundreds, knocking my plants down and mauling poor Miffy to death."

She had no experience of dogs, or any animals for that matter, but before leaving the city to move to Moroota she had been given a fully-grown, pedigree, Poodle bitch as a going-away present - to take to the country. She was quite unaware that the bitch, having not been de-sexed, had just come into season, to the delight of every male dog in Moroota.

"Your bitch must be on heat . . . in season, Madam," the Chairman was quick to announce, with some echoes from throughout the audience in a generally jocular style.

"The dogs are just trying to, er . . . mate with her." Trying to rape her, I'll bet, Ms Middleclass was thinking.

"How did all the dogs find out so fast?" asked an inquisitive lad.

"Pheromones," said Dr Mack, thinking the question was directed to him. Bluey thought he said "telephones" and wondered how they all managed to get through at once.

"I'd better go and see to the bitch," the Chairman declared as he swept off after the Policeman's wife, who looked as if she may have misunderstood his remark.

Having been seated for rather too long anyway, most of the men in the audience were glad to get up and walk around to the Policeman's house too. Dr Mack had lost his place and was shuffling through papers again. Captain Peters stiffened instinctively at such undisciplined goings-on, but he joined the rabble also, and Bluey could not have been restrained from visiting the action. Soon, the entire congregation was assembled in the Policeman's garden. Luckily, the Policeman was away in the next town at a meeting.

What a sight it was to behold! There seemed to be dogs everywhere, all extremely aroused, and engaged in the most extraordinary melee - barking, fighting, sniffing and running here, there and anywhere. There were farm dogs such as Kelpies and Blue Heelers and Huntaways, even a Collie, intermingled with all of the town dogs, which were of every breed and size you could imagine. Not a single male canine in the whole Moroota district had missed out on the action this time.

Partly fenced off from the general scuffling, there was Blue, well and truly engaged in the conjugal act with the Policeman's wife's pedigree Poodle; Blue thumping and panting and the Poodle occasionally yelping - presumably from the stress.

The crucial fact was they had already reached the stage of being physically locked together - as only happens with dogs (due to a special bulb on the end of the dog's penis) - and could not be separated easily for some time to come.

Almost everyone present was stirred into a frenzy of action.

"Send back for Dr Mack," cried the inquisitive lad who was one of the first to arrive at the scene.

"Come here, Buck. Get out of that, come here. Here Billy. Stop that, you crazy mutt." Everyone was trying to outshout the din.

The Captain was standing across the fence from the nuptial pair, but, already, his confidence was failing rapidly.

"Blue. I'm ordering you to get out of that and come here to me." His voice was still thunderous and impressive to the crowd as he waved his hand sharply for the umpteenth time, but Blue took absolutely no notice.

"Blue, mate, don't do it," cried Bluey, desperately not wanting his favourite animal to die.

Then, as he watched, Bluey began to giggle. Something stirred in his native instincts and it occurred to him that Dr Mack could be a phony, for all that. Looking around, he stopped complaining, let out a laugh, and started to cheer.

At this point, Dr Mack himself arrived, muttering something about the sexual behaviour of dogs being outside his field of expertise and they should really ask Whatsisname from the University about it. He did rally to the cause, briefly, however, delivering an explanation of pecking order and social dominance to an audience consisting of the inquisitive lad and a large garden gnome, while a German Shepherd knocked a small Terrier senseless in front of them.

Meanwhile, back at the Hall, in a large side room which had long trestle tables draped in white linen for the occasion, the doughty women of the CWA were quite ready to serve up the tea. Mrs Peta Peters was a very new member (not in years, but relatively speaking), but she had risen to the post of Catering Secretary in less than a decade. Driving in to the meeting separately from her husband was an example of her independence of action and she was not going to be fazed by any unexpected interruption to her plans.

"We'll move it all up to the Policeman's house," she said firmly, and no sooner said than it was done.

It was Bluey who helped to draw the proceedings to a close. "Arrh, come on!" he called. "Let's stop all this fuss. They're only doin' what comes naturally, after all."

The other dogs, and the spectators, were getting tired, so except for Blue who was still conjugally locked, it was the most natural consequence in the world for all concerned to adjourn for a strong cup of tea and several helpings of scones, lamingtons and sandwiches with lemon meringue pie and pavlova to follow.

The Doctor returned to the hall, having mislaid his 35 mm slides - including a precious one showing the putative structure of Pheromone X. They were eventually found in the projector and he was farewelled with reasonably good feeling all round.

Eventually, Blue rejoined them too. Having fulfilled his obligations he was feeling quite tired, but satisfied, in a canine sort of way. In the truck driving home to the farm, Bluey and the Captain were also quite exhausted from the day.

"Well, I guess the dog does what I tell him most of the time, anyway," the Captain mused, in consolation, mostly to himself. Blue opened one eye, then closed it again, but he didn't stir from his curled-up position on the floor of the truck. For a moment Bluey imagined that the dog might have winked at him.