

JUST GINGER

by Beth Slater Whitson

"You'll haf to get rid o' that dog, Davy." David's Aunt Johnetta, tired-looking and flushed from stooping over a tub of steaming clothes since early morning, straightened up for a minute the better to deliver her ultimatum.

David, sitting on the Wobbly back steps, holding a little brown terrier with a white left ear, a white left eye and a spot where his tail began, was silent. He had learned long since that silence was golden.

"I got all I can do sense yuh uncle Larry stopped workin'," went on aunt Johnetta, "to feed you and me and him, let alone a dog."

A look of apprehension flitted over David's round babyish face.

B-but Ginger d-don't eat nothin' much, Aunt Netty, 'ceptin' old b-bones an' rags an'— an' things," he faltered.

"Maybe he don't," returned Aunt Johnetta, "but I ain't goin' to even furnish him bones and rags after this. You can give him away to somebody, or you can let me call the dog catcher to come an' get him, just which ever you want, Davy."

A sudden sharp spasm of fear went thru David. In all the months he and Ginger had lived under Aunt Johnetta's roof, she had never before mentioned the dog catcher! Times beyond count she had said that Ginger would have to go, that she wasn't going to put up with a boy and a dog, too. In fact, ever since David and Ginger had made their appearance at Aunt Johnetta's door, David, a legacy from an unfortunate younger sister of Aunt Johnetta's, and Ginger the only play-mate David had known up to that hour. Aunt Johnetta had, at regular intervals, railed at the little brown dog; and just as regularly, after her irritation wore off, had slipped an extra choice morsel aside for him.

But somehow, the terrifying belief took hold on him that Aunt Johnetta was in earnest this time; she looked different.

"No, I ain't goin' to change my mind," she said coldly. "Take the dog out on the street and give him away or I'll have him took up."

A queer thing happened to David as she finished speaking. The yellow sky seemed to descend upon him, the scorching flagstones to rise upward. There was a terrible gripping about his throat which made him speechless for a moment, then, with a great effort he stood on short, unsteady legs.

"Aunt N-Netty," he gasped, "I won't eat nary nothin' 'tall if you'll jest f-feed muh d-dog. I — I jest can't sure 'nuff live 'thout Ginger, Aunt Netty." David's voice rose to a little wail.

"You'll haf to try it, anyhow," returned Aunt Johnetta grimly, going on with her washing. "B-but ef I wouldn't eat nary nothin'," sobbed David.

“You gotta eat. Take that dog on down the street and give him to somebody – anybody that wants him.”

Down the street David moved almost unconsciously. Presently a boy somewhat larger than himself hailed him from the opposite sidewalk.

“Where yuh think yuh goin’—you’n Ginger?”

David lifted piteous eyes. “I—I gotta give G—Ginger away, Sammy.”

Cold shivers ran up and down Sammy’s spine. If David had said he was going somewhere to have an arm or a leg cut off he could hardly have caused greater astonished—greater concern.

“Whatcher mean, yuh gotta give Ginger away?” he demanded roughly, when he could master his emotions enough to speak.

“Aunt Netty, she—,” began David.

Sammy’s face brightened magically.

“Pshaw! She’s allers sayin’ that, Davy.” He gave a long sigh of relief.

“But she’s a-meanin’ it this time, Sammy,” persisted David. “Ef I don’t give him away she’s goin’ to—to call the—the,” David paused and swallowed hard.

“Goin’ to call what?” Sammy grasped David by the shoulder and shook him excitedly.

“The—the—,” David paused again, unable to go on.

“Not ole Bailey?” shouted Sammy.

David nodded mutely, and Sammy, as tho struck speechless, put a supporting arm thru David’s and pulled him slowly down the street.

At the corner they met Heinie Baumgartner.

“Davey’s got to give Ginger away,” was Sammy’s greeting, “ef he don’t, his aunt’s a-goin’ to call the—the—old Bailey.”

Heinie’s eyes bulged. “Mein Gott!” he cried. And without further speech he joined arms with David and Sammy.

On the curb in front of Hooberry’s delicatessen two small boys were playing knucks in a listless don’t care sort of manner; one was white, the other black. In order of their standing they were Slat Flinn and Andy Johnson Halfacre. It was Andy Johnson’s shoot. He paused in the act of taking aim and pointed up the street. “Looky yondah.”

There was an air of solemnity about the approaching group that caused both boys to pocket their respective taws and move forward to meet it.

Sammy's voice reached them when he was yet afar off.

"His old Aunt Net's a-goin' to give Ginger to the d-dog ketcher." Sammy's tongue stumbled over the awful word, but he got it out as last.

"If Davy don't give him away himself," supplemented Heinie.

David explained as well as he could in a broken, lisping voice.

Andy Johnson's face, which had been very lugubrious during David's recital, brightened perceptibly.

Maybe my mammy 'ud let me take 'im," he began eagerly.

Three pair of disdainful eyes were focused on the little darky—David's were closed; the mere suggestion of turning his one treasure over to anyone nauseated him, but to Andy Johnson—the thought was intolerable.

Sammy voiced his feelings to the other three.

"Yuh don't reck'n Davy's a-goin' to let Ginger be a nigger dawg, do yah?" he asked contemptuously.

Andy Johnson stood his ground. "I ain't hearin' none o' the rest of yuh offahin' to take 'im," he sneered, "and I guess a niggah dawg am bettah'n a dead dawg—huh!"

David gave a little stifled groan as Andy Johnson finished.

"Ginger ain't a-goin' to be neither one," he denied.

At mention of his name in his little master's voice, Ginger licked David's face rapturously, and David, hugging him closer, gave voice to his pent up agony.

"My po'r little dawg—my po'r little dawg," he mourned.

"Ah shucks! This kind o' stuff ain't gettin' us nowher'," interrupted Slats, gazing around at the sympathetic face, his own eyes suspiciously moist. "What we gotta do," he went on, "is find somebody close about where Davy can still play with him. Ain't that right?"

"Y—Yes," gulped David.

"I tell yuh," resumed Slats, "let's start in houses clothes' to Davy's, askin' if they don't want a good dawg."

Heinie, broke in Sammy, "What's the matter with yore ma lettin' you keep Ginger?"

A light flashed up in Heinie's eyes, but died out as quickly as it came. "She would not haf him; she likes no dawgs," he admitted sorrowfully.

"What about yore ma, Sammy?" asked Slats.

“My ma had as lief I bring in a rattlesnake; I dast not even let one in the back yard,” returned Sammy hastily.

“My Aunt Jane is too like that,” said Slats. “I guess there ain’t no chance ceptin’ from house to house. Come on Davy.”

The five moved slowly back up the street toward the section where David lived. There they began a systematic house to house canvas in search of a home for Ginger.

Dog lovers were scarce in that neighborhood, it appeared. In some of the houses the children were good-naturedly laughed at when they stated their errand; from other houses they were ordered out by shrill-voiced women and by gruff-voiced men. “Times are hard,” nobody wanted an extra mouth to feed; only the children in the make-shift homes had a welcome for the little dog. Baby eyes brightened for Ginger; little hands were out-stretched to him, but there was no room for even a little dog that “ate only old bones an’ rags and things,” as Davy was careful to state.

Along the middle of the afternoon they found a palsied old man who agreed to give Ginger a temporary if one couldn’t be found elsewhere.

David’s face was piteous as the little band turned away.

“I—I couldn’t leave him there nohow,” he faltered. “He couldn’t live there—Ginger couldn’t—he’d ‘ist be dead--I know he would. They ain’t nobody to play with him after dark, and he wants to play worse’n any dog ‘at ever was.”

That settled it in the minds of the other children. Davy had to be sort o’ satisfied, anyhow. The tramped tirelessly on; it was fiercely hot, and they had all perspired freely. They were grimy from the dust which rose in clouds from the street. Dust and sweat together had laid a grayish pallor on Andy Johnson’s face; excepting David, he was the smallest of the group, and his short, sturdy legs felt ready to break from sheer weariness. He had been called a nigger that morning, and his offer of a home for a homeless dog had been scornfully rejected—but his loyalty to David—his love for Ginger, drove him on with the others.

As night began to descend, the children’s courage waned; they had tramped miles and were footsore and weary.

“I guess we better go home and try ag’in tomorrow,” said Slats.

B—But what’ll I do with Ginger tonight?” asked David, his chin quivering.

“Slip him in the coal-house,” suggested Sammy.

Sammy’s plan met with loud-voiced approval and they turned homeward. On the way, hungry as they were, having gone without lunch, they pooled their pennies and bought a big bologna and a half loaf of bread for Ginger. He ate ravenously and was still licking out his small red tongue when Davy crept stealthily around Aunt Johnetta’s house and back to the coal shed. He was about to pull cautiously at the door when Aunt Johnetta’s voice startled him from the back porch.

"Is that you, David?" she asked.

"Yes'um." David's voice was weak and frightened. "You got Ginger out there, Davy," she said. It sounded like an accusation to David.

"They wouldn't nobody h-have him, yet, Aunt Netty—I tried an' tried, an' nobody ain't got no room for a little dog—nobody," he sobbed.

"Come on in and hush cryin'," said Aunt Johnetta. "Let me sh-shut Ginger up f-first," pleaded David.

"Bring him on in and feed him. I—I guess they'll be someway p'vided to feed a dog, too, Davy. I don't know sometimes what it's all for, this livin', anyhow," answered Aunt Johnetta.

Tears streamed down David's cheeks, but a great wave of joy engulfed him. He bore the little brown dog up the wobbly steps, aching legs and tired arms forgotten—all the misery of the day blotted out in a minute. Ginger didn't have to go after all!

Supper was on the table and three plates were laid, but there was no sign of a third party. Aunt Johnetta's face was no longer hard, but troubled. She heaped David's plate and set one down for Ginger but took nothing for herself.

David ate heartily after the long fast, but Ginger, already stuffed with bologna, treated his disdainfully and went frolicking about the room.

"I tol' you he didn't eat much, Aunt Netty," said David, then felt a sharp prick of conscience, remembering the fat bologna.

Aunt Johnetta smiled faintly. "We'll give him a rag and a bone in the morning, David," she said, but she kept her eyes on the door and seemed to be listening—listening.

David went to bed early—the little bedroom was hot and stuffy, but with Ginger curled up in his arms, he was unconscious of any discomfort—the awful thing that had threatened him had passed on. He fell asleep with a singing heart.

Next morning there was still third plate at the table, and still only Aunt Johnetta and David.

Aunt Johnetta's eyes were red. David wanted to ask something about the third plate, but after a look at Aunt Johnetta, he ate his breakfast in silence.

When they had finished, Aunt Johnetta merely tasking her food, she put down a place for Ginger's breakfast—no bones and rags—but plenty for a healthy little dog.

David lugged in the coal for Aunt Johnetta's ironing. He had never been so industrious as on this particular morning. He thot Aunt Johnetta should be pleased with him, whereas she only appeared to grow more silent, her face more troubled.

The desire to tell Sammy and Heinie and Slats that Aunt Johnetta had taken Ginger back grew on David.

"Is there anything more you want I should do, Aunt Netty?" he asked gravely.

“No, nothing more, Aunt Johnetta spoke dully.

David gave another little boy sign. He watched Aunt Johnetta steadily ironing for a minute; he looked at Ginger sleeping peacefully—he would sleep a long time—and he, David, would only go as far as the corner. He could be right back to help Aunt Johnetta if she should need him, and to look after Ginger.

Having settled it all in his mind, David tip-toed down the rickety steps; he sped silently around the house and down the street in search of his little friends. Sammy was waiting at the first corner.

“I was waitin’ for yuh,” he called out at sight of David, “and I was scared she had—“

“She__she’s tuk Ginger back,” panted David. “She—she fed him herself last night an’ this mornin’, and she said as how she guessed she could feed a little dog right along. He—he’s asleep up there on the porch where she’s been a-ironin’ right now.”

Sammy’s face reflected David’s joy. “Le’s go and tell Slat and Heinie that the dog butcher ain’t a-goin’ to get his hooks on Ginger,” he boasted.

“Who said he wasn’t,” a voice sneered.

Sammy and David turned quickly to face the neighborhood bully, a big over-grown, swaggering boy much their senior.

“I said so,” retorted Sammy. “You go on, Bull Evans, and stop buttin’ in when you ain’t been spoke to.”

The big one made a grab for the small one, but Sammy and David had taken to their heels and the other could only shake an angry fist after them, but he turned up the alley muttering.

Slat and Heinie were on Hooberry’s corner. Sammy waved his old hat when he saw them.

“She’s tuk Ginger back,” he shouted, “she’s a-goin’ to let Davy keep ‘im.”

There followed a hubbub of excited boyish voices, numerous questions and answers.

At last a clock striking twelve, close at hand, turned the little band of celebrators homeward. They had almost reached Hooberry’s and were about to halt for a brief rest, when another small figure came dashing madly around the corner, looking up and down the street.

It was Andy Johnson. His eyes were rolling perilously, and as he caught sight of the marching four he shrieked something which sent them flying to meet him.

“G—Ginger! She’s done it; she’s done it!” was what he shouted. Then he stood gasping like a fish as the others crowded around him.

Sammy shook the trembling little darkey, “Spit it out!” he yelled.

Whatcher mean, 'She's don it? Whatcher you know about Ginger? Who is it's done somethin'?

Andy Johnson gasped twice before words would come again.

"T—the d—dog ketcher—Davy—yo'r Aunt Netty's g—give him Ginger."

T—the color went out of David's face like a lamp blown out. A moment before it had been glowing. It suddenly was grayish and old-looking, like a burnt out cinder.

The dog catcher had Ginger! Then Aunt Netty had lied—she had lied! She had made him think she was going to keep Ginger just so she could get hold of him! The thot flashed thru David's mind, burning as it went. He hated Aunt Johnetta—she was the vile thing Slats had called her and worse. He would never willingly lay eyes on her face again. But, he must get Ginger back—there must be some way to save him. He crowded closer to hear how it had happened.

"He 'uz barkin' at de front, an' de dawg ketcher jumps out an' grabs 'im quick," related Andy Johnson.

"Bull Evans 'uz standin' coss de street and I begs him to make de dawg man tu'n Ginger loose, but he jes' laff in muh face an' say he skin me alive if he ketch me, an' I—I runs to fin' Davy an' tell 'im," He stopped out of breath.

"Let's go after him," shouted Sammy. And five little boys started on a run.

The dog catcher was nearing the police station before the children overtook him. They set up a shout as they came close. A little brown dog with a left white ear and a left white eye stood in the rear of the wagon, his little black nose thrust thru the wire netting. At sight of David he set up a joyous barking.

A great choking lump rose in David's throat. He couldn't swallow it; he couldn't get his voice past it. He could only look at Ginger with blurred, aching eyes.

"Say, yuh let that little brown dawg out," cried Slats. "It belongs to Davy."

"Yeah, yuh let that little dawg out," echoed Sammy.

"Yuh bettah let dat dawg our ef you don' want somethin' to happen to yuh," threatened Andy Johnson.

After a few more vain threats they followed the wagon in silence until it turned down the alley by the police station. David would have followed even then, but Sammy stopped him gently.

"We gotta go in there and see the Jedge," he said.

David seemed not to hear; his gaze followed the wagon until it turned from view, then he cried loud.

“O, my Ginger! my Ginger!”

“There, there,” murmured Salomy, “hush cryin’, Davy, we’ll get Ginger back. Come on,” and she led the way into a big, gloomy building.

They paused at the first blue coat they found.

Slats pulled off his dilapidated hat. “The dawg ketcher has got this little kid’s dawg,” he began, pointing to David.

“An’ he ain’t got no money,” broke in Sammy.

“An’ no folks ‘cept his mean old Aunt Net, an’ she’s the one what give Ginger to the dog man,” added Salomy Jackson.

David plucked timidly at the gold braided sleeve. “He’s all I got, Mister – just Ginger.”

The officer’s face softened. He was just about to speak when Andy Johnson broke into a loud wail. The look on David’s face had been too much for him.

Several bystanders snickered, as the officer’s softened expression changed to one of annoyance.

“Aw, beat it out o’ here,” he ordered, “and be quick about it or I’ll—” he made a threatening gesture with the club he carried.

The children never waited for the finish; they beat it, frightened almost speechless by the sudden change.

Once outside, they ran a block before stopping for conference.

“We gotta do somethin’ quick if we save Ginger’s hide,” Salomy denounced in awed tones. “I bet he’s the dog killer.”

David gave a little Shriek.

“Aw, cut it out, kid,” ordered Salomy brusquely, “this ani’t no time for the waterworks to be turned on. We gotta raise some chips.”

“I gotta dime,” ventured Heinie timidly.

Sammy sniffed. “Huh, that wouldn’t sweeten the pot,” he said. “the old tax is a dollar, and they’s a fine, and a collar to buy on top of that.”

Davy’s blue eyes were wells of despair. Andy Johnson watching him, drew a clenched fist from the pocket of his frayed knickerbockers.

“Heah’s a quartah, Davy.” He thrust it eagerly towards the little white playmate.

“That ain’t no good, neither,” scoffed Slats. “Sides if yuh hadn’t let that alarm clock o’ your’n to off down there at the station we might a got Ginger off.”

At that three more pair of disapproving eyes were turned on the little darky—one sorrowful pair of David's.

"He—he didn't mean to—to go off like that, Slat's," David defended. "L-let 'im alone, b-boys."

"Well," grumbled Sammy, "this ain't gettin' us nowhere, anyhow. We gotta do some thinkin'. Come on, let's go home."

It was getting late when the silent procession halted in the neighborhood of David's aunt, Johnetta. The street lights were coming on.

He slipped quietly around the house at last and sank wearily on the steps—a memory of the morning flashed across his vision: Aunt Johnetta ironing on the porch – Ginger curled up at her feet fast asleep – a little boy with a singing heart on the steps: the thing that had been a heart was a lump of ice now in David's breast—heavy, heavy.

Presently Aunt Johnetta came to the door and peered into the dusk.

"W'y, Davy!" she cried. "I been clean worried about yuh. Where yuh been all day? Come on to yuh supper."

"Uncle Larry has a fine job at last, David," said Aunt Johnetta, beaming. Then she helped David's plate bountifully and went on talking to Uncle Larry. She looked young and pretty. David wondered how she could smile like that after sending Ginger to his death. He slipped down from the table and went on the porch again, crouching in his favorite place on the steps.

"I'm afraid the child's not well" – Aunt Johnetta's voice floated outward and made him shudder.

After a while she came to the door again. "Where's Ginger?" she asked.

That was the last straw. Without a word, David stumbled blindly down the steps and out toward the alley, a queer singing noise in his ears—a near murderous feeling in his heart.

Bill Haggerty, tramp, beggar, and ne'er do well, sat in the friendly darkness leaning contently against the alley fence, just back of Aunt Johnetta's house. He had been "movin' on" all day long and was leg weary. He was hungry, too, but there was a silver half dollar in his pocket. He would buy a feed later if he couldn't beg one. He was roused from a luxurious doze by the sound of children's voices. He sat erect and listened intently. Children always interested Bill. Cautiously, he crept nearer sound of the voices, and presently, he lightly vaulted the back fence and went around to the front of the house where Aunt Johnetta lived.

Aunt Johnetta and Uncle Larry sat side by side on the front step, their hands clasped. Uncle Larry was smoking, and Aunt Johnetta was humming a tune she had learned in childhood from her mother.

Haggerty took off his battered hat as he approached them.

"I want to say something," he began, "and I ask you kindly listen."

"Go on," said Aunt Johnetta. She was used to odd visitors. "If it's somethin' to eat yuh want," she continued, "yuh can have it."

Haggerty flushed. "O' course you can see that I'm a hobo," he returned, "but it ain't that this time. It's just some little kids I want to tell you about. Out in the alley they are prayin' the Lord A'mighty to give 'em back a little brown dog the dog catcher got today. Of course it ain't none o' my business, ma'am," he went on, twisting his shapeless hat round and round, "but they ain't nobody in the wide world that'll stick through thick and thin like a kid's dog, and it 'ud be the finest thing you ever done for this kid to get Ginger back."

Aunt Johnetta sprung to her feet. "Ginger!" she cried, "who said the dog catcher had Ginger?"

"Them kids said so in their prayers," answered Haggerty solemnly.

Uncle Larry stood up, knocking the ashes from his pipe. "Do you know anything about it, Netty?" he asked.

"I—I did threaten' yesterday mornin' to call the dog man if David didn't give the dog away. I—I was that worried that I couldn't feed him, Larry. But when Davy brought him back last night and said nobody wanted a dog I told him we'd feed him s-somehow—"

Her voice broke and Uncle Larry patted her on the shoulder.

"Old Bailey must a just picked him up," he said, "and—"

"David thinks you give him to the dog man, ma'am," Haggerty interrupted.

"Let's call David," said Aunt Johnetta. "That's why he wouldn't eat – and that's why he wouldn't answer when I asked him where Ginger was. Go call him, Larry."

"If you'll excuse me, ma'am, I think you better send after Ginger first. They get rid o' them little dogs if the fine ain't paid in mighty quick."

Uncle Larry reached down into his pocket and brought out a handful of small change. "I just got two dollars," he announced apologetically after a moment. "I ain't had a reg'lar job in a long time until today, yuh see."

"I gotta a dollar left from my ir'nin'," said Aunt Johnetta.

"Maybe this half will help some," added Haggerty in a hopeful voice. And he laid his last penny in Aunt Johnetta's hand. He was seeing a homeless boy and a shaggy cur dog trampling the streets years before.

David tossed restlessly on his cot. He had crept thru the window into his dark little room and thrown himself down without removing his clothes, all hope gone. He had waited ages, it seemed, on the steps for God to send Ginger back as Salomy had said He would if they prayed hard, but Ginger had not come—nothing had happened. David rolled and tumbled

about on his narrow bed. A fresh, cool breeze came in thru the small window, but sleep would not come. Something throbbed and ached in David's throat—it was hot and dry—so dry; his eyes burned but wouldn't stay shut.

Suddenly, he sat up, staring into the thick darkness—there was a noise at the front door—there were hurrying steps in the next room. David's door was thrown open, letting in a flood of light.

Someone was crossing David's room—it was Aunt Johnetta—she was carrying a familiar object. Presently she was on her knees by the bed, laughing and crying by turns, and the familiar was in David's eager outstretch arms. It wore a shiny collar and barked joyously.

“Oh, Ginger—my Ginger!” cried David.

“Oh, little David,” cried Aunt Johnetta, “I didn't give your little dog to the dog man. I didn't know he was gone until tonight.”

David squeezed the little brown dog closer.

“T—thanky, Aunt Netty,” he half whispered, his eyes shining, “and thanky, Mr. God.” He added, his face lifted reverently.

Suddenly the significance of Aunt Johnetta's speech seemed to reach him. He sat up.

“I'll bet it was Bull Evans what told old Bailey to get Ginger,” he shouted. “I'll lick him, Aunt Netty when I get big as—as—”

His voice trailed off drowsily, the agony of the day already forgotten. He dropped back on his pillow and smiled faintly at Aunt Johnetta. Suddenly his tired eyes dropped shut. Another moment, and David was fast asleep, his arms clasped closely in straining love about a little brown dog with a white left ear and a white left eye, and a white spot where his tail began.

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