

*The angel Gabriel has gone. Now Mary, a very real teen-age mother-to-be, quickly leaves home on a six-day journey across Israel to visit her relative, Elizabeth. On the road, Mary befriends a Roman war-dog. Through the dog's watchful eyes, we see her touch the lives of all those she meets.*

## **MARY'S DOG**

by Glenn Lamb McCoy

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# MARY'S DOG



GLENN LAMB MCCOY

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## PREFACE

This is a work of fiction, a product of both my imagination and years of wondering. What was Mary of Nazareth like? There is no clear and complete answer in the Bible or in any historical records. All attempts to create an image of her with paint, marble, melody or words are necessarily creative efforts, not fact-based representations.

Since love demands expression and Mary is deeply loved by many, we persist. Throughout the centuries we have met this young mother-to-be from 1st century Israel as a blue-eyed blonde, an Italian peasant, a well-dressed medieval noblewoman, a stiff and stern-faced matron, and countless other variations. She has been a member of every race on earth. She has been slender, voluptuous, sturdy, and child-like. All of these versions of her coexist in a rich panorama, happily standing side-by-side like members of a huge family posing for a picture at a reunion picnic.

This time Mary comes to the picnic in the company of a dog. Remember: this is fiction. The dog in this story is a constant reminder that imagination is at work here. This is not Biblical exegesis, although the narrative is woven from threads firmly attached to the scriptures and the historical record. The Gospel of Luke, the Book of Psalms, Roman military records, ancient caravan life, the memory of the lost Molossus breed of war-dogs: all this and more has been carefully researched.

The particular fictional dog himself is another matter. He appeared by my side as I was contemplating that small span of days between the angel Gabriel's visit to Mary and her arrival at Elizabeth's home. Like most dogs, he wanted to come along for the ride. How could I refuse?

## CHAPTER 25

There is a child standing behind the wagon. The setting sun flashes on the gold trim of her small sandal as she stamps her foot. "Now!", she shouts, and stamps her foot again. I have seen this one before, on the first day on the job when we met the caravan leader. She is the man's daughter, and she is nine years old.

Mary rises from the ground in one graceful motion. Facing the child, she says, "Hello. I am called Mary."

The girl says, "I didn't ask for your name, I said I want to see the dog."

Mary responds to this rudeness by smiling, stretching out her arm in my direction and saying, "Well, here he is. Behold!"

"I don't want to see him just standing around looking stupid," the girl snaps. "They say he ran with the speed of an eagle and attacked a whole band of robbers and left their bodies all torn to pieces and covered with blood. Everyone was teasing me because I missed it. So I want to see him attack something."

Mary turns in a circle and looks all around. She says, "Sorry, I don't see any bandits anywhere. Maybe later."

"Not later. Right now!", and the girl's foot stamps the ground again. She is not an interesting child. She is rude and repetitive. I yawn and lie down.

She walks over to me and pokes at my paw with her little sandal. She does not seem afraid, and I am tempted to snap at



her tiny exposed toes to correct her behavior. But Mary is still smiling, so I lay my head down and ignore the irritating pup.

"If there aren't any bandits he'll have to attack something else. Tell him to kill one of those donkeys over there," she demands.

I raise my head from its resting place and focus on the child. I am not fond of donkeys, but I have a code of honor. Roman war dogs do not run wild and harm innocent non-combatants, especially not on the orders of small and annoying children. And besides, my friend Ethan loves these donkeys as if they were his own sons and daughters.

Mary's smile is gone now, and her face is troubled. "These donkeys are God's creatures, and they serve us well and faithfully. If anything happened to them their owner wouldn't be able to make a living, and he'd have to go hungry. And besides, he really loves them, so it would make him very sad. Please think carefully. Do you truly mean to harm them?"

The child turns toward Mary and the small foot stamps down again, her heel so close to my mouth I can almost taste it. "You heard me, Girl", she shouts. "Command your dog to attack. How dare you question me! My father is the leader of this whole big caravan, and you're nothing but an old woman's servant!"

I send out a low warning growl, but Mary stops me with a look. She gets down on one knee in front of the child and bows her head. "What you say is true," Mary says. "I am a servant, a handmaid with no earthly power at all." Now Mary raises her head and looks up into the eyes of the child.

"I serve the Lady in the wagon, but there is a Lord all of us serve, you and I included, and His command is mercy and kindness. This is the command I follow, and I know this command is planted in your own heart, too, if you seek for it. This is my prayer for you, that you will find mercy and kindness hidden within you."

The child stands perfectly still, and Mary and I wait in silence. Suddenly the girl begins to make a sound like a screech-owl. She breaks and runs, and her wailed words fade as she dashes away. "I'm telling! I'm telling my father! You'll be sorry! You'll be so, so sorry."

Ethan comes back to see what all the noise is about, and since I have no words I nudge his leg with my snout to let him know I am not a ruthless killer and I would never harm his donkeys. He pats my head and goes to Mary, who is still looking in the direction of the screeching child. When she turns she is brushing tears from her face. "I'm afraid life is going to be very hard for that poor little girl," she says. "She has so many sharp edges to catch on whatever comes her way." Ethan looks puzzled, but instead of explaining Mary goes to Ethan's team and starts stroking the nearest donkey's back as she unbuckles its harness.

Ethan joins her, and I follow along. I have never been this close to the front end of these or any other donkeys. I am surprised when one of them lowers its muzzle and uses it to caress the back of my neck. The touch is gentle, and I stand still instead of leaping away. Ethan says, "That's right, Rosie, let him know he's one of the family." Soon all four of them are unharnessed and standing around me in a circle, their

breath warming the air around my face. Instead of the imagined foul stench there is a scent of dried grass and honest sweat. I reach up and give Rosie's chin a tentative lick and she makes a low, unexpected sound like a purr.

They are looking down their long noses with great soft eyes full of curiosity, and I begin to understand why Ethan calls them his 'family.' Donkeys always appeared stupid to me when I was driving them along from the back, demanding that they go where I directed. It was Claudius who told me what these beasts were like, and I believed him without question. But now I can see not just intelligence but a kind of wisdom in their faces. All my former opinions about them are slipping away under the steady gaze of my four fellow-creatures.

Ethan squeezes in beside Rosie and puts his left arm around her and his right around the animal on his opposite side. "This lovely lady with the white face is Lily, and next to her is her twin, Myrtle. And that handsome sandy-colored fellow over there is Barley." I wonder if Barley is named for his color or his eating habits, which must be impressive judging from his rounded shape. Maybe I should invite him to trot along beside me tonight in my training session.

Ethan continues, "Of course everybody here already knows your name, Tobias, since Mary's always talking about you, although everyone else in the caravan seems to have you confused with that amazing Bellator fellow". Ethan laughs and I can hear Mary joining in from somewhere behind him, but I do not mind, even when Barley raises his head to bray along with them.

I hear the voice of my Master calling my name, and for the first time in my life I do not want to run to his side. Instead I walk, head down, unsure of every step. But when I reach him he is his old self, laughing and joking with Mary. "Cardamom!", he shouts. "That stuff costs a fortune. Who else but Ethan tosses it into a cook-pot at a camp fire? What a character!" He gives my head a friendly pat and says, "Everybody's still talking about you, Boy. My shoulder's been slapped so many times in the last few hours I feel like it went into battle all by itself. What a day!" My Master is in a very good mood.

All through our training my Master laughs and tells Mary stories about the people he talked with this afternoon. Sometimes he even forgets to give me a command when I return to him and I must sit and wait until he notices me, but this inattention is not meant as a punishment. He has never been famous before, and it makes him as excited as a pup on his first real hunt. My tail wags at his happiness.

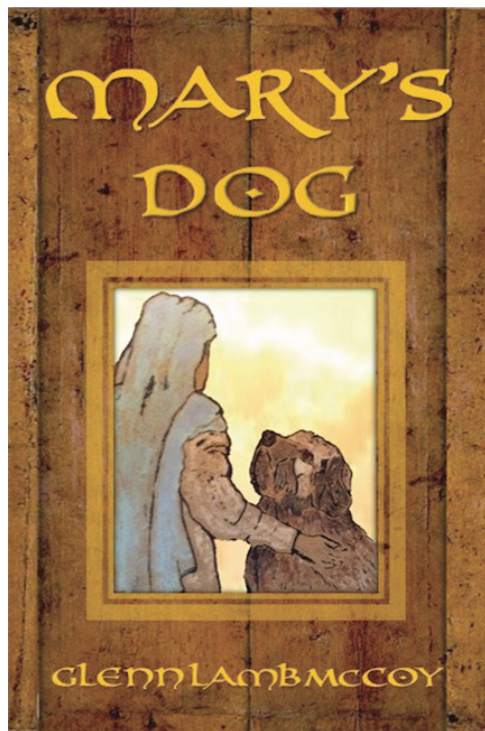
Instead of counter-thrusting with her own tales of all those who visited us as we walked along, Mary listens to my Master and lets him have his joy without interrupting. She is giving him a gift, but he will never know about it or thank her. I do not think that being famous is Mary's joy. Just as she told me, she does not need other people to tell her who she is because she can see her reflection in the eye of God. This is why she hoped I would do the same.

Finally my Master says, "And here's the best part, Girl. Three of them are very rich men, and they asked if I have any other dogs like Bellator. I told them he was going to the king's

*Mary's Dog*

palace but I was breeding from his bloodline, and they gave me their names and told me to contact them when the time is right. So today was a very good day for my plan."

By this time the last drill is finished and I am sitting by his side waiting for the command to hunt, but instead my Master turns to me and says, "No hunting tonight, Boy." So this is to be my punishment. I remain at attention, although I can feel my ears droop with disappointment. But my Master continues. "People have been giving me tidbits for you all afternoon, and there's more than enough good meat in my pouch back at the wagon for your supper." My ears rise and tilt forward. Mary would be disappointed if she knew how much of my joy comes in a wooden bowl.



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