

Sparky's Gambit

by Daniel Harris

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Most days I saw Portia walking her dog, Sparky, a larger than usual sable and white Shetland sheep dog. I had owned one of them as a kid and had my dog for eighteen years. Many people thought he was a runt collie, but in fact he was a hearty large Shetland sheep dog, too big for show, but a perfect companion.

Sparky took to me immediately. In some atavistic canine way he knew I was *simpatico* to a dog like him. Whenever Portia went away for more than half-a-day, I took care of Sparky.

I was much more active and athletic than Portia, taking Sparky with me on runs on the beach and epic walks. Dogs like that want a job and demand work. Portia had him for protection. He would bark and nip, but he wasn't a true guard dog.

Of course, I admit to an ulterior motive: I wanted to bed Portia, if not marry her. Befriending her dog was my key to this woman's heart

My wife of twenty-five years had died from a congenital heart condition two years before. She and Portia were best of friends and very similar: both classy beautiful women with breeding, education and culture. By comparison, I was rather coarse, but then I was a successful artist who put in long solitary hours. I knew which fork to use, but had no time for the politesse of high society or clubby groups. I worked hard at my art and was successful enough not to have any monetary worries.

My art dealer, Consuelo Silvestre, kept buying me Giorgio Armani suits and I kept leaving them in hotel rooms after my art openings and receptions. On one memorable occasion, she bought me a handsome set of threads for a television interview with Charlie Rose. I arrived on the set in a t-shirt, Levis and paint spattered

Birkenstocks. When she asked me where the suit was, I told her that in a fit of generosity I gave it to the bellman at the Waldorf so he could attend his daughter's college graduation.

Portia had just gone to Europe with some billionaire who bought shaky companies, stripped them of employees and debt, and then sold them for huge profits. Sounded like Mitt Romney to me, but she was at a time in her life where she felt she needed the security of big money more than a man of strong ethical and moral convictions. Being a potential trophy wife, she attracted attention in the rarefied circle of super rich men in Sarasota. Current marriage status was no impediment in this circle, as long as fortunes could be protected.

When she returned from the trip, I trotted Sparky back to her house. She was happy to see Sparky, but I detected a note of melancholy in her demeanor.

—I guess big daddy sawbucks didn't turn out so well, I said.

—Mezzo, mezzo, she replied. I had an okay time, but after a couple of weeks he became repulsive to me. He was so full of himself, like he had some special powers. It got so bad, he wouldn't let me do anything alone. In Paris we went to Chanel to look around and he bought me three suits, a dozen blouses and a suitcase full of accessories, none of which I really needed. He wouldn't even let me buy a crêpe from a street vendor. Every meal had to be at a Michelin starred restaurant. He...

She suddenly changed the subject.

—Please excuse me. I'm not being a good hostess. Would you care for some wine? A whisky? Beer?

Portia was like that; she would censor herself suddenly, realizing she had just said too much to the wrong person.

—The strongest whisky you have, I replied.

—Oh, You're not a drunk are you?

I could see her eyes dart about with concern. I had heard that she had divorced her husband because he was a mean drunk. She blamed him for her two children's cavalier attitude about drugs and alcohol. One died from an overdose and the other in a boating accident.

—I'm not a drunk, but I probably shouldn't drink as much as I do. Like you, I've had some rough patches.

—Touché.

—On second thought, skip the drink. I should get back to work. As always, it was a treat caring for Sparky.

—Some other time, perhaps, she said.

—Absolutely. By the way, you should know, as you probably do, that the super rich regard people, things and events as mere investments. Everything has to have a positive financial spin. It's what makes Monte Carlo, that playground of the rich and famous, such a sad depressing place. The up side for me is the rich buy my paintings.

She had that inviting look in her eye, but I knew it was too soon to show my hand. She needed more space between suitors. Besides, I had too much work to do and this was not an opportune time. I gave Sparky a final pat, and quit the place.

At two in the morning, my iPhone signaled an incoming text. I put on my glasses and looked at the phone.

—sparky sick u come pdq

—k

I quickly dressed in jeans, t-shirt and Birks. When I opened her front gate, I heard Sparky bark. That sounded normal.

—Thank you for coming right over.

—No problem. I'm at your service 24/7.

I knelt down and examined Sparky. He looked okay except for the guilty look of a dog who had vomited on his mistress's best rug.

—Sparky's been sick twice, she said.

—What did you feed him?

—I gave him some *foie gras*, she replied.

—That's way too rich for Sparky. He's a working dog, not some chi-chi lap dog.

Portia bent over to stroke Sparky revealing youthful looking breasts for a fifty-something woman. I enjoyed what I saw

—Oh, excuse me, she laughed, tightening her robe around her body. She must have seen my reaction.

—I think Sparky is going to be okay, I said. Don't feed him that rich food, only his usual diet. He's been working pretty hard the last three weeks. I had him running a couple of hours a day. He's looking buff now. Let's keep him that way.

She looked at me with her big dark eyes.

—How could I be so stupid? she said. I didn't mean to hurt Sparky.

—Well, you were hanging out with a high roller. Your perspective changed. They invest in thoroughbreds. Thoroughbreds run a mile maybe a mile and a half a few times a year. They are sprinters; they eat only rich food. The cowboy has a quarter horse. He runs a quarter mile tops, but he can run all day, day after day on prairie grass, a handful of oats and water. Sparky is like a quarter horse. Don't feed him like a thoroughbred.

—What you are saying is sensible.

—You drink champagne; I drink beer, I said. They both bubble, but they are as different as thoroughbreds and quarter horses.

—I was a Chablis girl with a champagne bully the last three weeks.

—Exactly, I said.

—Maybe I should...

—Tomorrow, Portia, tomorrow and tomorrow. Dream with your eyes open in the light of day.

