

Abram's Canine Clowns



So much can change in one year of a dog's life. One year ago, Pierre had been an unhappy agility champion. He had a comfortable home in a big city kennel for pedigreed poodles, but he had longed for freedom and friends.

One year ago, Dare and Mouse had been grubby strays. They liked living on their own, but they had been coming to the end of a harsh prairie winter, and didn't know if they would survive it.

One year ago, Mew hadn't even existed. She had been curled up inside her mother, waiting to be born.

Pierre left the kennel, Dare and Mouse survived, and Mew came into the world. The dogs became friends, then a family. Now they lived together with a basset hound named Old Sam in a fine new house with a fine old human, Mr. Abram.

On a cold night in the later half of winter, hundreds of humans and dogs gathered in the Silvertree High School gymnasium. The humans sat on metal chairs facing the stage and their dogs sat at their feet. Some of the dogs sat on chairs themselves, because after a lifetime of living with humans, they thought of themselves not as dogs but as people with extra hair.

Mr. Abram strolled onto the stage. He was an elderly gentleman in a purple suit, a top hat and a green bow tie. He carried a plastic hula hoop in one hand and a tooth-marked wooden cane in the other. Behind him trotted Old Sam, and behind the basset hound came Pierre the miniature poodle, Dare the terrier, Mouse the Chihuahua and Mew, who was half beagle and all dog but sometimes thought she was a cat.

Everyone in the audience recognized the four smaller dogs. The humans knew them as the dogs who had once saved Mr. Abram's life. The dogs in the audience knew them as the Prairie Dogs, the smallest pack ever to roam the dusty streets of Silvertree; the dogs who had saved them from the tyranny of the vicious Bull Dogs.

The dogs of Silvertree considered Pierre the leader of the Prairie Dogs, which made Pierre laugh. The only orders his friends ever obeyed came from Mr. Abram. In fact, they obeyed him so well, it had given him the remarkable idea that had led to their appearance here tonight.

Mr. Abram bowed to the audience and the dogs lined up behind him.

“Good evening!” Mr. Abram said. “Allow me to introduce Sam. He will dazzle you with his intelligence and agility as he performs intricate feats at my command. As for my other canine companions, pay them no attention. They are Sam’s apprentices. Not too bright, I’m afraid, but tonight they might learn a thing or two from the master.”

Turning his back on the four smaller dogs, Mr. Abram faced the basset hound. “Sammy, sit up!”

The hound gazed at him with mournful eyes. Behind Mr. Abram, the four dogs sat down and raised their paws in the air. The audience snickered.

“The old fellow is a little hard of hearing,” Mr. Abram explained, and raised his voice. “Sammy, dance!”

Old Sam slumped into a more comfortable position. The other dogs twirled on their hind legs and hopped over one another’s backs. Pierre did a backwards flip right over Mouse.

Ignoring cries of “Behind you, look, look!” Mr. Abram turned to the audience, scratching his head. “Perhaps I’ve

been working him too hard. I know what will perk him up—the Hoop of Death!”

He picked up the hula hoop, fitted with what appeared to be jagged steel blades (they were actually tin-foil-covered cardboard) and held it in front of the basset hound. “Sammy, jump!”

Old Sam yawned. The smallest of the dogs, Mouse, ran towards the old man, who broke into a sneezing fit. Eyes squeezed shut, he bobbed up and down with the force of his sneezes, and each time he came up, he held the hoop a little higher.

On the first sneeze, the Chihuahua popped through the hoop.

On the second and third sneezes, Dare and Mew jumped through.

On the fourth and final sneeze, Pierre sailed through the hoop, now held level with Mr. Abram’s chest. The audience gasped and yipped in amazement.

When Mr. Abram recovered from his sneezing fit and opened his eyes, the four dogs were once again lined up behind him. Old Sam lay on his side, snoring.

“The dear old boy is exhausted from our heavy performing schedule,” Mr. Abram told the audience. “I apologize for taking up your time. Perhaps our next performance will be more of a success. By then these youngsters may have picked up a few tricks from him!”

Dr. Elbright, a veterinarian the dogs knew well, stepped onto the stage.

“Let’s hear a round of applause for the amazing antics of Abram’s Canine Clowns!” she said. The humans clapped wildly, and the dogs barked. “Thank you for taking part in this fundraising talent show. The proceeds from the animal acts you have seen tonight will go towards our town’s animal shelter.”

Again the humans applauded. The sound set Pierre’s tail wagging. He loved impressing the humans, and he loved impressing Mr. Abram most of all. His previous humans had taken the fun out of performing, but Mr. Abram had put the fun right back into it. With agility trials Pierre had to do the same routines for each competition, but with Mr. Abram, the dogs were always learning new tricks.

“I could do it, you know,” Old Sam told Pierre as Mr. Abram led them off the stage and into the audience. “I could easily jump through the hoop. I was quite agile as a young hunting dog.”

“But it’s not part of the show,” Pierre reminded the basset hound. “It’s funnier if we do it. Besides, Old Sam, your eyes have gone a little cloudy this year. I don’t think you see as well as you used to. Sometimes you bump into things.”

“I see perfectly well, thank you,” Old Sam huffed.

A man in a baseball cap trotted past them, crouched over as if he had a stomach ache. It was Mr. Abram’s friend, Mr. Calloway. He hunched his way through the crowd, peering under chairs and around people’s legs.

When he came upon a St. Bernard, he pried the dog's jaws open and looked inside.

"Darn that Calloway!" Dare growled. "He's lost Pepper and Cinnamon. Tell the big dogs to watch where they step, Old Sam. They might find a puppy under their paws!"

Becoming a mother hadn't much changed Pierre's mate, whose full name was Daredevil. Dare still tormented big dogs. She still stole anything that caught her interest or her appetite. She still loved to roll on smelly stuff. Fortunately, she didn't approve of smelly puppies. She cleaned them so often that if she so much as licked her nose, the puppies would run and hide. Maybe Calloway had licked something and scared the puppies away.

Mouse and Mew, who had wandered away to visit friends, came running back to Pierre and Dare.

"It was a great show, wasn't it?" said Mew. Mr. Abram called her Mitzy, but the other dogs called her Mew. It was the name given to her by the farm cat who had adopted her as a puppy. "I'm getting better and better at jumping. I think I've finally outgrown my clumsiness."

"Never mind the clumsiness," Pierre said. "We've got a bigger problem. Or rather, two little problems. Pepper and Cinnamon are missing."

"Leave it to me! I'll sniff them out." Being half beagle, Mew had the sharpest nose of their little pack.

"Never mind, I think I've found them," Dare said, darting out of the way of a stampede of humans who had

nearly stepped on her. The humans were trying to avoid a large sheepdog, who was leaping in wild circles in the middle of the gym.

Pierre yelped in dismay. His two puppies were latched on to the shaggy tail of the sheepdog. The furious dog whirled around and around, trying to catch them.

“Wheee!” the puppies squealed through a mouthful of fur.



“That sheepdog used to be a Bull Dog!” Mouse groaned.

Mew, who had picked up a few feline habits from her cat mother, hissed and arched her back. The Bull Dogs were an ill-tempered pack who had roamed the streets of Silvertree last year. They had chased Pierre and his friends throughout the summer, trying to bully the small dogs into joining them.

“Stop spinning and sit down,” Dare called to the sheepdog. “Honestly, these big dogs have no brains at all.”

The dog stopped whirling and planted her haunches on the floor. The puppies let go of her tail and scrambled out of the way.

“I should have known they belong to *you*,” the sheepdog growled. “Only you Prairie Dogs could produce such an obnoxious pair of pups. Keep them away from me or I’ll bury them in my yard!”

Dare marched over to the sheepdog and glared up at her, unconcerned that the angry dog was ten times her size. “If you lay one paw on our puppies we’ll send our skunk friends after you!”

The sheepdog looked around uneasily, as if she feared the dogs might have sneaked the skunks into the school. The skunks were hibernating, but not many dogs knew about hibernation. Pierre and his friends were knowledgeable about such things because they had spent many days and nights exploring the prairie when they were strays.

The puppies were stamping their little paws and sticking their rumps in the air, pretending they were skunks. Cinnamon had dark red fur, and Pepper black fur. Cinnamon had long, curly ears that flew out behind her as she ran, and Pepper had short, pricked ears that twitched wildly in all directions when he was excited.

Pierre sneezed at his puppies. A dog’s sneeze could mean many things. This sneeze told the puppies he disapproved of their behaviour.

“We told you to stay with Calloway while we per-

formed,” he reminded them. Calloway, an exotic animal rancher, had once been at war with the dogs, but that ended when he helped Pierre and his friends save Mr. Abram’s life. He wasn’t exactly a friend, but he was definitely a non-enemy.



“We don’t like him, Papa,” Pepper said.

“He smells funny,” Cinnamon added.

“There you are!” The funny-smelling rancher came puffing up to them. The puppies scampered away. “Hey, get back here, you crazy mini-mutts!”

As Calloway chased after the puppies, the dogs noticed Dr. Elbright had returned to the gymnasium stage. The vet motioned to Mr. Abram to join her.

“Mr. Abram has wonderful news for us,” she said, and the audience went quiet.

“My dogs and I are going to Telemiracle!” Mr. Abram said.

Many dogs believe human chatter is just mindless yapping. Some try to train their humans out of this bad habit by pawing at them or scolding them with a sharp bark if the chatter goes on too long. However, Pierre was certain the humans were actually communicating with one another. He even understood a word here and there, if he paid attention. He recognized the word “Telemiracle” because Mr. Abram said it often these days. Pierre didn’t know what it meant, but he could see Mr. Abram was excited about it.

“Those dogs are going to tell a miracle? What are you talking about?” snapped a white-haired human with whiskers growing out of his ears.

“Well, I—I’m not quite sure how to describe it.” Mr. Abram looked flustered. “I’m new to the country, and—”

Dr. Elbriht stepped forwards. “The Kinsmen Telemiracle is a telethon, a live television show that raises money for people with medical problems. It holds a world record for the millions of dollars people donate to it year after year. Stars from all over the world come to Saskatchewan to perform on the Telemiracle stage. Mr. Abram and his dogs will perform as well, and the Silvertree delegation will present a ten-thousand-dollar cheque to Telemiracle on behalf of our town.”

“I think you’re nuts to take these lunatic mutts onto the stage of Telemiracle,” said Calloway, who had finally

caught the puppies. “You know they can’t be trusted. They’ll turn that place upside-down.”

“I think it will be fun,” Dr. Elbright said. “We can’t wait to see you folks on TV with these cute little dogs. What’s the worst that could happen?”

Calloway shuddered.

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