

Author Leslie Thomas reveals an emotional and unexpected side to his character

Farewell, my good friend Furlong...



YOU MAY not have heard, but the greatest dog in the world is dead.

He was mine: Furlong, a basset-hound of lofty eyebrows and low profile, stubborn, loving, funny, indolent and everywhere. There seems to be so much more room in this house today.

Nine years ago, when I first saw him, he was swimming like a log in the Berkshire Thames. It was the only energetic thing I ever witnessed him do. He was already a year old, the back-marker of the litter, brown, black and white with a posh name, Thamsmead Pegasus, the misnomer of the century.

I took him home and, with difficulty, stood him up in the doorway. At once the dog's misty eyes creaked up. He looked like a crashed bomber. I knew I was in love.

Furlong was a country dog, familiar with farmyards, a denizen of dungheaps. I see him now, ambling among dandelion clocks and thistles, his tail protruding from a cornfield, or furlowing in January snow, a painful experience for one of such shallow construction. (His brother Humphrey was at the British Embassy in Moscow where, so a member of the staff once told me, he spent many ex-cruciating winters).

Wonderful

My dog, from a line of hunters, was so pedestrian and vocal that he never caught anything but a slow mouse which he carefully trod upon with one of his mallet paws. We have two other dogs, a doberman and a hairy dachshund, both chasers. But round rabbits by the dozen nibbled each evening on our lawn, confident of the early-warning of Furlong's baying. The rabbits will miss him too.

Few people approved of Furlong; everybody loved him, although most failed to realise it at the time. Those rug-sized ears, those shocked and sorrowful eyes, that body like a howitzer because known wherever those freckled and padded paws took him.

Oscar, the dachs, has lost not only a buddy but a bed, for every night he slept against Furlong's barrel chest, quietly gnawing through the basset's collar like one prisoner helping another to escape. Jake, the doberman, is puzzled.

How to know how

EXOTIC new courses face the 250,000 students who will enrol this autumn for the Inner London Education Authority's evening classes.

Among the 17,000 classes included in the 768 subject headings, night class devotees will now be able to sign up for a course on ecology and the gardener, Vietnamese, women's liberation and health, or one simply entitled, 'for a coronary club'.

Dressmaking and children's clothes, drawing and painting remain the most popular subjects listed in Floodlight, ILEA's course

I went into my greenhouse and cried my eyes out among the tomatoes

He must think that the old chap has gone for one of his extra-long

Furlong was wonderful at sleeping. Deep, deep, he would go, descending into volatile dreams of being a great hunter, his legs going like pistons, strangled yelps coming from his throat. At other times he would shudder with snores. He could sleep anywhere, at any time. Once he climbed into the back of a van delivering carpets and awoke 30 miles away.

He would also eat anything, and the wrapping. He once trespassed on a picnic, devouring salmon, sugar and sandwiches, while the owners were picking buttercups, adding a final insult by cocking his leg against their teapot. He once accorded the same treatment to a toddler in a pushchair (who thought it was fun until it got the blame from its mother) and the serene boots of an old man who sat watching the world from the innocence of a park bench.

When I was the subject of *This Is Your Life* my dog — my best friend — appeared only on film although he was present in the studio. They said they feared he might be indiscreet on something electric and fuse the programme not to mention himself. Later the producer admitted that he was excluded because they thought he might steal the show. Might?

A born blunderer, Furlong was a familiar figure at the vets. He had been assaulted by hornets, kicked by a donkey (whose infant he apparently mistook for some sort of dog) bitten by both an adder and a pony; this latter indignity being recorded by a television crew who were making a film at my home. Horse and dog were sup-

posed to be having a cosy confrontation when the pony buried its teeth in Furlong's ear. Once a veterinary surgeon told me that my dog was so ill that he ought to be put down. My world shattered, I pleaded, and got some last-chance pills. Furlong made a startling recovery. Joyfully I returned to the surgery only to find that the vet had died.

At home, bereft and very sad, we've been talking about his intransigence, his idleness, his many wanderings, his abject lack of finesse. Sometimes when we have had a dinner party he has sidled into the room and beneath the cover of table and talk has, with silent system, let off relays of wind. Horrified, we would wash our guests face each other with slow, astonished, unspoken, accusation.

providing the after-dinner cabaret which he readily enjoyed. Fixing his white-fleeced paws at each corner I would lift him to a crouch and command: "Go, Action Dog! Kill!" He would collapse with a great, bored sigh. He could also perform a fixed grin, all fangs and gums and, with some help from me and his wrap-around ears, do credible impersonations of a bank robber, a blind man, and a charlady in a headscarf, although personally I thought his impression of a Dowager Duchess by far the best.

An American film producer once spent a week-end at my home. We never signed a contract but he rang later to ask if the dog was available.

Leslie Thomas and Furlong: The end of a love story.



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Furlong made people laugh. At his George Robey eyebrows, his Queen Anne legs, his tail, white-tipped, like a candle, his expressions ranging from downcast to lugubrious. Village children would trail him mirthfully watching his undercart swing like the bells of Notre Dame. He did not mind. When they weren't looking he ate their Mars Bars.

Triumph

Undoubtedly he was waxing old and clumsy. One icy night last winter I called him from his late trip to the garden. The lantern eyes shone in the dark. Then, stepping forgetfully forward, he plunged into our ornamental pool. Unerringly he swam, shivering, beneath the net that keeps away the herons, and in the end I had to wade in after him.

I shall miss him in the evenings when he clambered into my lap while I sat in my armchair, all fifty Sippy pounds of him (some workmen weighed and measured him during their lunch-hour, so I know). His smashed old face would close on mine, those hung, red, eyes would gaze and glaze. That's a pleasure I shall now have to forgo.

Years ago, on holiday in Devon, I entered him for his only show. It was a family dog show and he won two rosettes, one as best sporting breed (one judge referred to him as a beagle) and one (easily) as the prize tail wagger. It was in a meadow by a river and after his triumph he paddled in the water. There are times when I think that was the happiest day of my life.

His tail won't wag again. He died after an operation and we brought him home in a shocking

(I thought so) pink plastic bag which the veterinary surgery provided. We buried him in the garden beside a camelia which has thrived despite, or perhaps because of, his attentions over a long period. Afterwards I went into my greenhouse and cried my eyes out among the tomatoes.

Last night I lay thinking about him. Curiously, a tennis ball was being pushed about by the wind on our terrace, I heard it bounce down the stone steps. I knew it was not Furlong's ghost out there. He never chased a ball, or anything, in his life. He was under the camelia. Sleeping. . . .

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