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The Talking Dogs excerpt

When I met Elke 11, the standard poodle bitch, and Belam, the saluki male, on a hot September afternoon in 1975 at Salzburg airport, they were sitting leashed at the entrance with their teacher, too shy at first to offer me their paws in greeting. Elke's white fur was dazzling in the remarkably clear, mountain-reflected sunlight, her eyes round and black and vivaciously attentive as she sat waiting rather stiffly for my arrival. At her side, Belam, taller and bonier, seemed the shyer of the two, with his long sensitive nose and gazelle-eyes, and deliciously straggling fur. He simply gazed away when I bent down to take Elke's paw. But at a word from his teacher he too shook hands.

They'd heard a lot about me. I'd been asked to write a book about them and help make their intelligence known to the world, but for the moment that was forgotten. It was a hot, exhilarating day, and we were about to drive across the Austrian border to Berchtesgaden, one of the most pleasant of Bavaria's medieval resort towns, once notorious as Hitler's mountain hide-out: well-known to skiers in the winter, and in the summer to those taking the saline waters of Bad Reichenhall.

I knew Berchtesgaden well but had little thought on my previous visits that I would one day be returning to witness two dogs 'talking'. All that summer I'd been studying the notes made by the dogs' teacher on her daily lessons with them, and was already convinced that Elke and Belam could add and subtract and tap out, not only answers to spoken questions, but messages of their own. But it was still a 'mental' conviction, not very deep.

I certainly felt in awe of them on the way from the airport, as if they deserved more formal behaviour from me than I would give to other animals. I'd always had a dog of my own, but here were Elke and Belam gazing at me with a special penetrating force. Or was that my imagination? How did they see me? I found this the uppermost question in my mind.

Later that evening, when I'd seen them 'talk', I realised that this awe of mine had nothing to do with a real recognition of animal intelligence. And what I witnessed in the next few days was to change my life as it had changed that of their teacher, Dorothy Meyer, but less suddenly than hers. After all, she'd started from scratch, with only printed records of previous tapping animals, from fifty or so years before, to go on. For weeks she'd worked in the dark, doubting her capacities as an animal-teacher and all the less prepared for the shock of discovery when it came. Like me she'd been ready enough to accept animal intelligence as an idea, but not to accept the reality of animals as equal beings. The discovery that in many respects animals have a moral integrity, truthfulness and compassion superior to our own was an even greater shock.