

# THE GREAT DANE THOR

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A boy and a giant dog face violence in the woods. The first dog story by the author of the famous **BLACK STALLION** books, etc.



# **The Great Dane Thor**

**by Walter Farley**

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# Powder Mill Hollow

Lars Newton had left his house before dawn and had been in the woods for several hours. Now he emerged from the trees along an upper road and climbed a four-rail fence. Straddling the top rail, he looked down the slope to his home in the valley known as Powder Mill Hollow.

There were certain figures to watch for and he wondered which would come first—the dog, the horses, or his father.

The air was cold and a thin veil of mist hung over the valley floor. There had been frost the night before—for the third time that month, Lars reflected—and during his

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walk through the woods he had found every leaf and pine needle carrying its tiny load of icy crystal.

The sun had not yet risen over the high eastern ridge to warm and lighten the frosted meadows below. How much there was to hear when one could see next to nothing! Lars listened to the liquid rolling notes of a winter wren, and a moment later came the clear loud whistle of a cardinal. He even caught a glimpse of the bird's red body as it dove stiffly into the heart of a thicket.

Lars sat very still on the top rail, his khaki clothes blending with the coloring around him. While waiting for the sun to rise he listened to the squeaks of meadow mice burrowing in the grass at his feet. And from somewhere in the cold, gray sky above came the caws of passing crows and the pip of a downy woodpecker. He heard too the angry scream of a broad-winged hawk and the frantic beat of its wings. The crows might be pursuing the hawk, he thought. But if the hawk turned out to be one of the falcons, it would be the crows that would suffer from their foolish attack.

From the nearby woods there was a loud crash in the brush, possibly made by a frightened running buck. Lars' insides tightened into a knot, for this was the time of year when he worried most for the safety of his woodland friends. The small-game hunting season was on and had still a week to go. For almost a month now the countryside had echoed to the firing of guns. Most small game—the rabbits, squirrels, raccoons, woodchucks and ring-

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necked pheasants—took cover during the day or were killed.

It was not yet legal to kill deer but the bucks and does weren't aware of that. They were as frightened as the small game, and often injured themselves in frenzied flight. Just a little over a week from now, on November 30th, the open hunting season for deer would begin. It would be the worst time of all for Lars. Much as he loved all the animals and birds in the woods, the deer were his favorites.

There were no further sounds from the running buck, if it really had been a buck, and he let his gaze rest on the valley below, where the golden ball of the sun could be seen rising above a wooded ridge.

He felt the early morning sunshine creep across his body and enjoyed its warmth. Slowly the light descended the slope of the meadow in an ever-widening band. It reached the stone barn and turned the frost on the red tin roof into clinging beads of moisture. The stone house below the barn emerged from the grayness too and he saw a thin plume of smoke begin to rise from the kitchen chimney. That meant his mother was up and cooking breakfast on the old wood stove which she loved so much but used only during the winter. Somehow breakfast always tasted better to him when she cooked on it. There would be scrambled eggs and ham and, since it was Saturday, hot biscuits, too.

The sun had reached the pond below the house, and

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was warming it as well. The mist rose from the water and from the marshy land through which the pond drained. They were always the last to submit to the rays of the sun. The rest of the valley glittered before his eyes, washed clean and bright and new, ready for another day.

Lars slipped off the fence and started down the slope, wondering what was holding things up this morning. Then, as he neared the barn, he came to a standstill.

A tall colt had trotted into the sun, already fed and eager for the freedom of the pasture. He was a dark chestnut with flowing red mane and tail and white markings on his legs and head. All at once he came to a stop and lowered his body carefully to the ground. Swinging over on his back, he rolled from side to side, kicking his white-stockinged legs in the air and grunting with pleasure as he drove his back into the ground. Pausing, he lay still, then scrambled to his feet, shook himself, snorted and stared about, his head high and ears cocked.

He looked at the boy on the slope above him, then with complete disinterest turned away and loped across the meadow. Two more horses ran from the barnyard and followed him. They were bay mares and, like the colt, purebred Arabians.

Lars watched them join the tall colt and move with him across the meadow. Although the colt was younger than they and had been purchased only the week before, they had accepted him immediately as their leader. With strong herd instinct they followed him wherever he went,

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knowing he was always on guard and looking out for them.

Lars' gaze swept back to the barn. He was waiting for the dog to make his appearance. Thor played rough, and the mares had not had an easy time of it before the arrival of the colt. Even now it wasn't what one might call peaceful.

Then he saw the Great Dane leave the shadows of the barn for his morning run with the horses. This was the way Lars' father wanted it to be, for according to him Thor needed the exercise as much as the horses did. No harm could come of it, his father had said, and yet it frightened Lars very much. Perhaps it was because he thought he saw more than his father did.

The Great Dane moved in long leaps across the meadow, making directly for the horses. The tall colt was encircling the two mares with long strides. He nickered to the mares, but his eyes never left the oncoming dog. Finally he came to a stop and pawed the ground.

Thor ran with his neck and head stretched out, his ears flattened back, his eyes glaring and teeth bared. He looked like the devil himself, Lars thought. But his father had said it was all bluff—Thor was just playing, he was an actor, a "ham."

Without shortening stride, the dog encircled the small group. The colt stayed between him and the mares, and this seemed to infuriate Thor all the more. Finally, he came to an abrupt stop. Not a muscle moved as he looked



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at the colt in fiery defiance.

Thor was two years old and just entering the prime of his life. His body was hard and sound, and the morning sun shimmered on his rich golden coat. He was tall, even for a Great Dane, measuring thirty-six inches from his shoulder to the ground. He was of great length as well, and yet his back was short and strong with a gently sloping line from powerful shoulders to a tail that was set high and thick at its roots and tapered down to a strong hard point, reaching just to his hocks.

He remained still while watching the colt. There was not a taut nerve in his body. He feared nothing.

For over a year he had run with the two mares. Now another male shared the pasture with him. He had never tolerated a male dog in the area and his antagonism for those of his own kind and sex was now transferred to the colt who challenged his right to be there.

Thor began moving again, slowly at first, then faster and faster around the horses. He ran with the fluid swiftness of a deer, his hindquarters providing him with great propulsive power while his back remained level, never bouncing or weaving.

The mares were becoming excited by his antics, but the colt stood his ground, waiting for Thor to come to him and biding his time.

Finally, one of the mares neighed shrilly and set out by herself across the pasture. Thor bolted after her, attempting to run her down. She ran fast but he gained





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on her. She kicked out, but it seemed more in play than intent to strike the running dog. Thor had no trouble staying clear of her hoofs, and although he matched her stride for stride, he did not spring at her. Only when she had completed a large circle and was headed back toward the others did his feet leave the ground in a great plunging leap. He flew through the air, striking the mare hard enough to make her strides falter but without knocking her down.

For a fraction of a second his head was at her neck, yet his teeth were not bared and he did not take hold. He slid from her body and back to the ground. For a few strides he had trouble regaining his balance as the mare thundered on.

Lars watched it all, and there was no easing of the turmoil within him. As often as he had witnessed Thor's rough play with the mares, he would never get used to it! His gaze left Thor for the tall colt. Perhaps the mares' new leader wasn't going to get used to it either . . . or accept it as part of his daily life.

The colt's ears were drawn back and he was running to intercept Thor. His mane and tail were whipped by a sudden gust of the north wind. He ran quickly on long, clean legs and the interplay of his muscles was beautiful to see. Only the rapid rise and fall of his ribs and the brightness of his eyes betrayed his fury. He let the mare run around him for protection and then, uttering a short scream, plunged at the dog.

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He struck out savagely with his forelegs as the dog swerved away from him. Then he turned slowly, making off across the meadow. To the dog it might have seemed he was running away. Yet the colt exuded power and self-confidence. He knew exactly what he was going to do. He had left the mares behind purposely, and at the sound of the dog following him he increased his own speed.

At the far end of the meadow he swerved, going downward into the hollow below the pond. The ground there was soft from the drainage of streams and pond, and his running hoofs made soft sucking noises as he moved fast but cautiously through the marsh.

He chose a familiar path between frosted swamp reeds, the dog following him in single file. Then in the middle of the marsh he came to a sliding, abrupt stop. His tail swished angrily and his powerful hind legs struck out at the dog directly behind him.

Thor too had come to a slithering halt, flinging himself to one side as the flying heels came back at him. They missed his head but grazed his body with such force that he was sent tumbling off the path, rolling head over heels into the marsh.

There he lay on his side, dazed and shaken by the encounter. This was different from the kind of play he'd been having with the mares. He rolled over slowly, tried unsuccessfully to regain his feet, and then lay still, resting before trying to get up again.

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The colt stepped lightly past the dog on his way back to the mares. He was breathing hard from his run, and his muscles bulged beneath his wet coat. Raising his head, he uttered the high-pitched clarion call of a young stallion. It would reach the mares and tell them of his victory. When it ended, the valley was once more quiet and peaceful in the morning sun.

A few minutes later, Lars stood beside his father and watched the colt rejoin the mares.

"He's taught Thor a lesson," Lars said.

"It could be," his father answered. "There might be less trouble between them from now on."

"Maybe he'll stop jumping at the mares, too," Lars said. "He's been getting worse."

"It's only in play, Lars. I've told you that before. It's instinctive for a Great Dane to jump; his great ancestors were used to hunt boars."

"That was over a century ago," Lars answered quietly. "It should be bred out by now."

"Some instincts are hard to breed out."

"If he's not stopped," Lars said, "he'll take hold someday."

"No, he won't. He's just an actor playing a part. A clown, really. Look at him now, coming up from the marsh. Did you ever see a more unhappy looking sight!"

Thor ignored the horses and came directly to Lars and his father. He was covered with mud but did not seem to be hurt except for a slight cut.

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While his father examined the cut, Lars looked at Thor's eyes. He didn't like what he saw. Too much lurked there, and he prided himself on being able to tell much about an animal from his eyes. He saw craftiness and cunning, even a hint of viciousness in Thor's dark gaze. Someday Thor might well take hold *even in play*—and it scared Lars to think what a dog that size could do.