Small dog SYNDROME

The familiar scenario unfolds. There we’ll be, me and dogs, following our usual route, let’s say we’re walking up Witty’s Passage, when from somewhere nearby there’ll be an outbreak of shrieking, accompanied by desperate cries of: “TALLULAH! STOP IT! No! Be NICE....” My two will roll their eyes: we’ll look at one another and sigh, knowing what’s waiting round the corner.

Sure enough, there will be a harassed, red-faced woman ( sad to say that it usually *is* a woman) pressed up against the nearest wall/hedge/car whilst desperately trying to restrain some pint-sized monster intent on shredding everything in sight. Said monster, about the size of a domestic cat, is invariably a terrier or a hybrid Something-Hua or something-Poo. It will also, whatever the weather and however thick its fur, be wearing an embarrassing coat, or possibly a novelty bandanna. It will be tenuously attached to an extendable lead, or a no-control hi-vis harness. My dogs, heard it all before, will walk on, unimpressed, but that won’t stop Little Miss Gobby, who’s hungry for a set-to. Hackles up, teeth bared, gargling defiance and snapping wildly at the nearest target (usually the hapless owner’s legs) ‘*Well, come on, Big Boy! Do ya feel lucky???’*

There will follow an accusing glare. “She’s *scared* of big dogs!” (well, no, love, she plainly isn’t) or failing that, an attempted negotiation. “Tallulah. TALLULAH! Nicely!.Good girl (no, she isn’t) Sit! Wait! Lie down! BISCUIT!” (Interesting, but futile, given that the only two words Tallulah recognises are her name and ‘biscuit.’) All of which might sound amusing, but it’s not, because it doesn’t have to be like that. Welcome to the reality of Small Dog Syndrome.

Artificially elevated status....

How do these situations come about? Is it that *all* small breeds are snappy, antisocial have-a-go fiends? Of course they’re not. Chihuahua, Yorkie, or Pomeranian, Wolfhound, Westie or Tibetan Mastiff, a dog is a dog is a dog. But each breed does have its unique characteristics: Chihuahuas are generally one-person dogs, miniature Schnautzers and Pomeranians tend to be extremely vocal and quite territorial, while Jack Russells, bred as ratters, are brave, feisty little creatures who will stand their ground. Some dogs are gobby, but that doesn’t have to mean aggressive.

And neither does mini=horrible. Human beings are hard-wired (or should be) to protect the small and vulnerable. So of course, you take no risks with your cute, big-eyed fluffball. There’s a big, bad world out there, and she’s soooo tiny! Problems begin when you forget that she’s a dog. Carry her everywhere, she’ll lap it up! Let her up beside you while you watch Corrie...share your bed with her, pick her up whenever another dog approaches, just in case. Wrong! Wrong, because you’ve raised her profile. She’s become your equal, no, your pack-leader, and now *she’s* in charge! Which does her no favours at all. Dogs, large or small, are world-class opportunists: if they can get away with it, they will. And if they *keep* getting away with it, you’ve got yourself a problem, or more likely, a Syndrome.

.....and demotion to the ranks

Meanwhile, back in the alleyway: Tallulah may well be scared of bigger dogs. But if that’s true, then she has no confidence that her owner can or will sort out the problem. Therefore it’s down to Tallulah to protect both of them the only way she knows how. Poor Tallulah, all that bravado, and nowhere to hide.

Arguing with her achieves nothing beyond giving her attention (albeit the negative kind.) And as for that biscuit-offer, reward for bad behaviour, or what? Would you hand out chocolate to your mid-tantrum toddler? Maybe Princess Tallulah has ruled the roost since puppyhood: that’s misguided leadership. Or possibly she came from a lovely home with a darling old lady who showed love by giving in to her: it’s all the same. Dogs need boundaries, guidelines, and ultimately, they have to know who’s in charge.

So, if you live with a mini-dictator, socialise him/her as much as possible. Do you have a friend/relative/neighbour who has dogs she can run with? If she needs it, book her into a training-class: a great leveller, because it takes the fear out of meeting dogs en masse. And work on the home-situation: show her/him you’re the Boss. My house! My furniture! (invitation only.) My bed! (you’ve got your own.) My doorways (which I cross first, thank you) My food, My biscuits (I eat before you, sunshine) and most of all, My rules. Small, subtle things that can help change bad behaviour. Welcome to Nice Little Dog Syndrome.

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