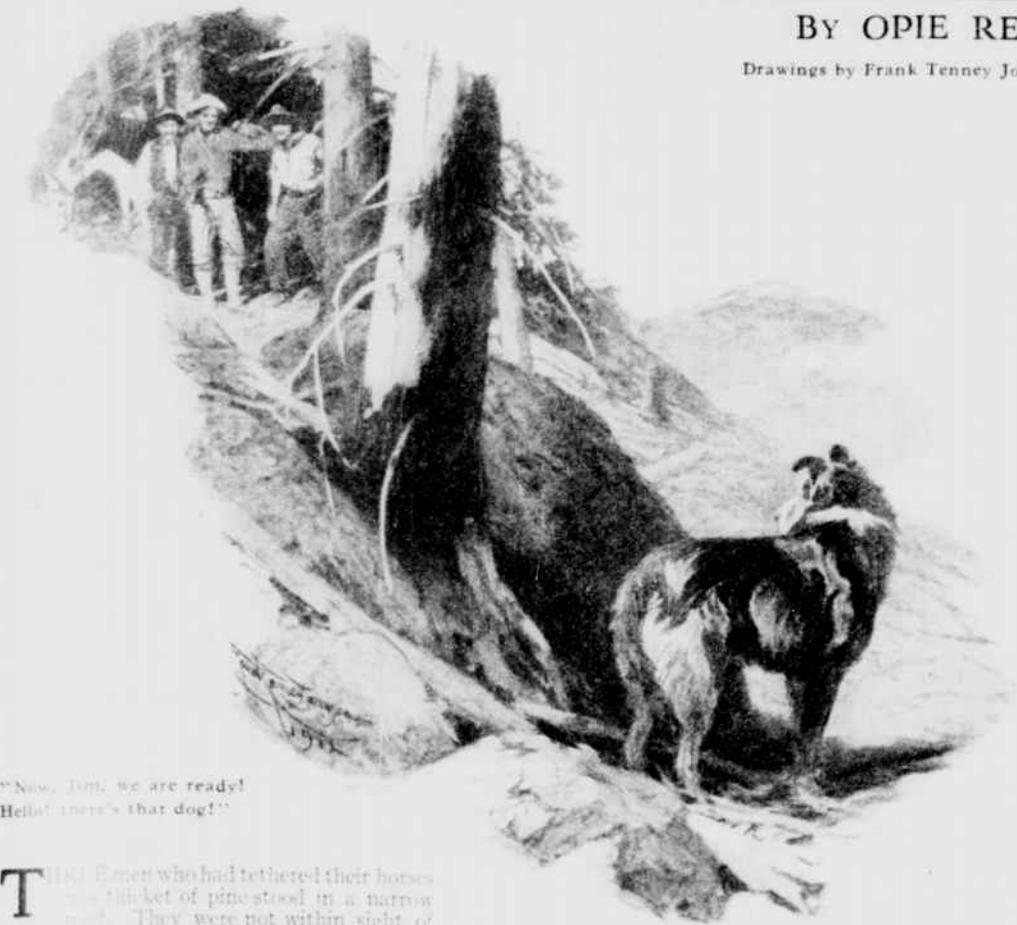


RATTLER

BY OPIE READ

Drawings by Frank Tenney Johnson



"Now, Jim, we are ready!
Hello! there's that dog!"

THREE men who had tethered their horses in the thicket of pine-stood in a narrow valley. They were not within sight of human habitation. Not far away the serpentine road wavered over the top of a steep hill. Suddenly a big yellow dog came out of the bushes. He looked about, discovered the men, turned, and ran away. One of the men spoke. "This is the third time that dog has caught sight of me, and each time he has been to his heels. And now he has confirmed a suspicion. His master, whoever he may be, is the man we want."

His companions looked at him as if demanding an explanation.

"Don't you understand?" he continued. "That dog knows the strangers in this neighborhood, and he has been trained to report to his master whenever a stranger appears. Now let's find out where the dog lives."

"They were looking for an illicit distiller."

"How will you go about it?" one of the companions inquired.

"Oh, I think I can outwit him. Tomorrow I will let him see me on one of the highest hills about here, and then, with a field glass, I will watch him from the summit."

"You'll draw the one who had been silent, and in the meantime we may be shot from the bushes."

The chief deputy marshal laughed. His name was Clyde. "We are in a business that requires every man to take a desperate chance," he said. "Well, come on. There is no use standing here." And then he added, "I wish I owned that dog. What a fine detective! Hello! You're here again. He studies every motion we make. Come on. We'll go down to the village."

After supper at the meager pretense of an inn Clyde engaged the landlord in a talk about dogs. The old fellow was glib over the dogs he had owned. There were no such dogs now as there had been in his day. Like man, the dog had degenerated. "Once I had a dog—"

Clyde shut him off from a recital that threatened to be long. "No doubt you have trained a great many dogs in your time; but I should think that up here, where man is still so natural and so strong, there are dogs of rare worth. Do you happen to know anybody that has a dog of striking intelligence?"

"Bosom dog," the landlord inquired.

"Well, not necessarily. Any sort of dog that happens to be wiser than the common breed."

The old fellow squinted. "Foxhound?"

"No, not a dog smart enough to attract attention. Some people say that a yellow dog hasn't much sense, and a rule that may be true, especially among the short-haired varieties; but I have seen yellow dogs that were wonderfully smart. I don't suppose you have any such yellow dogs around here?"

The old fellow looked at him.

Clyde continued, "Once I had a dog, yellow dog too, short-haired, that would go to market, bury vegetables—and, Sir, he would insist on the best steak and roast—could look at a chicken and tell whether it was fresh! Why, he would tell me when the bill collectors were coming, to give me warning! Haven't any such dogs around here—I shouldn't think."

The landlord struck a match, held it up to get a better view of Clyde's countenance, lighted his pipe, and said, "No, Sir, we haven't any such dogs; but I know of a fellow that has trained a pet bear to milk the cows, and he'd be right good at it if his claws wa'n't so sharp."

When Clyde and his companions had gone up to their room the chief deputy whispered:

"Now I know that the dog belongs to the man we want. That old fellow has been primed, and he is afraid to say anything."

EARLY the following day their horses were saddled. Silently the men rode to the top of the highest hill. Clyde, dismounting, spoke to one of his companions.

"Now, Jim, we shall— Hello! there's that dog!"

They had halted beneath a tall pine. Up ten feet of smooth trunk Clyde climbed, seized a limb, and drew himself up among the branches. Quickly he ascended to the bending top. Then with field glasses he began to scan the valley that lay between two distant hills.

"Do you see him?" came an inquiry from below.

"Yes, I've got him. He's down in the valley, swimming a stream. Now I've lost him in the bushes. No, there he is, running through the timber on the other side, up the hill. He must be a mile and a half away. Hello! There's a cabin on the hill, and he's making for it. Now he stops and looks round. He's throwing up his head—he's barking. Ah! a man comes out. They both go into the cabin. Now, boys, we've got him!"

In the valley they tethered their horses, and then stealthily through the bushes they picked their way toward the cabin. A flight of birds might give warning of their approach; but there were no birds, no sign of life. The air was as still as if Nature was holding her breath. The men were afraid lest the snapping of a twig might betray them.

The cabin stood in the midst of a small clearing. From the chimney there came no smoke. The place was as devoid of life as a colored print on a postcard. And there was color—the brown leaves of the scrub-oak, the green of the pine, and the bold red of the winterberry. The cabin faced toward the men, now hidden in the edge of a thicket. The door stood open.

"We'll make a swift run for it," Clyde whispered. "Now!"

THE space was not more than twenty yards. A rush, and they were at the door, in the cabin. In the room there was nothing except a large box in a corner. "Go!" said Clyde. "Wait a moment. I'm going up this ladder into the loft."

He put his hand on the ladder. Then there came a scramble, a rush, and a dog leaped from behind the box and darted at Clyde. In a second the chief deputy fired his pistol, the dog howled and fell back with a broken leg; and at the instant a voice from above called out:

"Don't shoot him again! I'll come down."

Down the ladder came a young man, tall, black bearded, powerful. He held up his hand as a token of surrender, and this was the only attention he bestowed upon his captors. In a voice of pathetic tenderness he spoke to the dog. "Poor old Rattler! Don't cry. They won't shoot you again. If they do, they'll shoot through me! Don't try to walk. Let me take you. Here you are!"

He took the dog into his arms, held him close, and then, easing him gently to the floor, he tore the bosom from his shirt and began to examine the dog's wound.

"His leg will have to be splinted," he said. "But I'll fix that all right, Rattler."

With his pocket knife he cut thick shavings from the edge of the box. His captors, silent, looked at one another, and then watched him. He set the broken bone, and the dog's lips showed that he was suffering; but he bore it without a whimper.

"I'm sorry I had to shoot him," said Clyde.

"Well, it's better not to talk about it," replied the bearded man, looking with soft eyes upon his completed work.

"I have some tape that will hold firmer than those strips of domestic," Clyde ventured.

The man looked at him. "No, Rattler wouldn't accept it from you."

"Jim," said Clyde, "go down and fetch the horses." Then he added, speaking to the prisoner, "I suppose you know why we have arrested you?"

"I know that you have shot my dog. Does it still hurt, Rattler? I should at least think it neighborly to tell a fellow why you come into his house and shoot a member of his family, and I'm waiting to hear from you."

"The United States court wants you, down at Louisville."

"Well, I guess we can find the place."

"And you'll go without any trouble, will you?"

"I don't want any trouble."

"But what are you going to do with the dog? You can't take him with you."

"I've got a place for him. About two miles from here lives the young lady I'm going to marry. She will nurse you—won't she, Rattler? We have to go right by her house, and I will carry you in my arms."

"We have only three horses."

"I'll walk and carry him."

"I can carry him on the horse in front of me," said Clyde.

Again the prisoner looked at him. "He wouldn't let you. You couldn't persuade him. He'd die first. Does it hurt you so much, Rattler? Don't you know I'd rather it was me than you? You do know it, don't you? Never mind, it will soon get well. Miss Callie knows how to make sick folks well. And you are folks, old fellow! I'm mighty sorry to leave you; but I'll come back soon, and then we'll go hunting. Recollect when you killed the big swamp coon that had whipped all the dogs in the neighborhood? I was mighty proud of you that night; but I love you now better than ever before, and I want you to feel it. What, you ain't going to cry, are you? You mustn't. If you do, I'll have to cry too, and then these men would laugh at us, and that would make us ashamed. You know that. Let me take you up now. I hear the horses coming."

"By the way," said Clyde, "would you mind telling us your name?"

"You may call me Bill."

"Yes; but the court will demand your other name."

"But you don't happen to be the court. Here are the horses. As I know the way, I'll lead off. Come, Rattler, let me take you now. Oh, don't let on that you're so awful heavy. I've carried many a back log. Now put your head on my shoulder. That's it."

They followed him across the cleared space, into a path that led into the valley. Crossing a stream, they pursued the trail over the hill; and when they had reached level ground the prisoner walked fast, with the dog's head pillowed on his shoulder.

"He's a sprinter," Jim remarked.

"A wonderful fellow physically," the chief deputy made answer. "Look at his stride! Handsome, too."

Silence fell upon them, broken only by the tender words from Bill, spoken to the dog.

After a time Clyde inquired, "Are you tired, Bill?"

The prisoner pillowed the dog's head on his other shoulder and answered, "No."

Then they traveled a mile without speaking a word. Sometimes the road dipped down between high rocks. Sometimes it threatened to squirm over into dark pools where late overflows of the stream had stored reservoirs of water. Out of the rough land they passed upon a rolling tract where the soil could be cultivated.

ON a knoll a farmhouse rose into view. The shingles of its deserted flashed in the sun. It was a modest habitation, built of logs, gray with its many years. From beneath its roof men with long rifles had sallied forth in response to the war cry of old Andrew Jackson. Daniel Boone might have been present when these walls were reared. To a romantic mind it would have inspired a poem of the brave and humble past.

At the low rail fence that surrounded the house the party halted. In a loud voice Bill called, "Hello!"

Instantly the door was opened, and out came a young woman.

She gave one look, and then it seemed that with winged feet she flew to the yard gate. Gazing, she was dumb; but her eyes, obsequent as an epic, flashed forth their questioning.

"Oh, these ain't much the matter, Callie," said Bill. "These men insist on my going down to Louisville with 'em—and one of their party went off and hit Rattler, broke his leg. I want you to take care of him till I get back."

"Yes, Bill," she said, almost in a whisper.

"I won't be gone long."

"No, Bill."

She held out her arms to take the dog.

"That's right," he said, "you take him in the house. I could do it myself and lay him on the bed; but one of these fellows would follow me in to see that I didn't get away, and I don't want the recollection of one of them crossing that door to come back to me in the night when I wake up. I thank you for not asking any questions, Callie. I know you wouldn't. Easy, Rattler! She's almost as