

JIM, THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG

Charles G.D. Roberts

Table of Contents

<u>JIM, THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG</u>	1
<u>Charles G.D. Roberts</u>	1
<u>I</u>	1
<u>II</u>	2
<u>III</u>	5

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- I
 - II
 - III
-

I

JIM'S mother was a big cross-bred bitch, half Newfoundland and half bloodhound, belonging to Black Saunders, one of the hands at the Brine's Rip Mills. As the mills were always busy, Saunders was always busy, and it was no place for a dog to be around, among the screeching saws, the thumping, wet logs, and the spurting sawdust. So the big bitch, with fiery energy thrilling her veins and sinews and the restraint of a master's hand seldom exercised upon her, practically ran wild.

Hunting on her own account in the deep wilderness which surrounded Brine's Rip

Settlement, she became a deadly menace to every wild thing less formidable than a bear or a bull moose, till at last, in the early prime of her adventurous career, she was shot by an angry game warden for her depredations among the deer and the young caribou.

Jim's father was a splendid and pedigreed specimen of the old English sheep-dog. From a litter of puppies of this uncommon parentage, Tug Blackstock, the Deputy Sheriff of Nipswaska County, chose out the one that seemed to him the likeliest, paid Black Saunders a sovereign for him, and named him Jim. To Tug Blackstock, for some unfathomed reason, the name of "Jim" stood for self-contained efficiency.

It was efficiency, in chief, that Tug Blackstock, as Deputy Sheriff, was after. He had been reading, in a stray magazine with torn cover and much-thumbed pages, an account of the wonderful doings of the trained police dogs of Paris. The story had fired his imagination and excited his envy.

There was a lawless element in some of the outlying corners of Nipswaska County, with a larger element of yet more audacious lawlessness beyond the county line from which to recruit. Throughout the wide and mostly wilderness expanse of Nipswaska County the responsibility for law and order rested almost solely the shoulders of Tug Blackstock. His chief, the Sheriff, a prosperous shop-keeper who owed his appointment to his political pull, knew little and thought less of the duties of his office.

As soon as Jim was old enough to have interest beyond his breakfast and the worrying of his rag ball, Tug Blackstock set about his training. It was a matter that could not be hurried. Tug had much work to do and Jim, as behaved a growing puppy, had a deal of play to get through in the course of each twenty-four hours. Then so hard was the learning, so easy, alas! the forgetting. Tug

Blackstock was kind to all creatures but timber thieves and other evil-doers of like kidney. He was patient, with the long patience of the forest. But he had a will like the granite of old Bald Face.

JIM, THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG

Jim was quick of wit, intent to please his master. But it was hard for him to concentrate. It was hard to keep his mind off cats, and squirrels, the worrying of old boots, and other doggish frivolities. Hence, at times, some painful misunderstandings between teacher and pupil. In the main, however, the education of Jim progressed to a marvel.

They were a pair, indeed, to strike the most stolid imagination, let alone the sensitive, brooding, watchful imagination of the backwoods. Tug Blackstock was a tall, spare figure of a man, narrow of hip, deep of chest, with something of a stoop to his mighty shoulders, and his head thrust forward as if in ceaseless scrutiny of the unseen. His hair, worn somewhat short and pushed straight back, was faintly grizzled. His face, tanned and lean, was markedly wide at the eyes, with a big, well-modelled nose, a long, obstinate jaw, and a wide mouth whimsically uptwisted at one corner.

Except on the trail and even then he usually carried a razor in his pack he was always clean-shaven, just because he didn't like the curl of his beard. His jacket, shirt, and trousers were of brownish-grey homespun, of much the same hue as his soft slouch hat, all as inconspicuous as possible. But at his throat, loosely knotted under his wide-rolling shirt collar, he wore usually an ample silk handkerchief of vivid green spattered with big yellow spots, like dandelions in a young June meadow.

As for Jim, at first glance he might almost have been taken for a slim, young black bear rather than a dog. The shaggy coat bequeathed to him by his sheep-dog sire gave to his legs and to his hindquarters an appearance of massiveness that was almost clumsy. But under this dense black fleece his lines were fine and clean-drawn as a bull-terrier's.

The hair about his eyes grew so long and thick that, if left to itself, it would have seriously interfered with his vision. This his master could not think of permitting, so the riotous hair was trimmed down severely, till Jim's large, sagacious eyes gazed out unimpeded from ferocious, brush-like rims of stubby fur about half an inch in length.

II

For some ten miles above the long, white, furrowed face of Brine's Rip, where Blue Forks Brook flows in, the main stream of the Ottanoonsis is a succession of mad rapids and toothed ledges and treacherous, channel-splitting shoals. These ten miles are a trial of nerve and water-craft for the best canoeists on the river. In the spring, when the river was in freshet and the freed logs were racing, battering, and jamming, the whole reach was such a death-trap for the stream-drivers that it had come to be known as Dead Man's Run.

Now, in high summer, when the stream was shrunken in its channel and the sunshine lay golden over the roaring, creamy chutes and the dancing shallows, the place looked less perilous. But it was full of snares and hidden teeth. It was no place for the canoeist, however expert with pole and paddle, unless he knew how to read the water unerringly for many yards ahead. It is this reading of the water, this instantaneous solving of the hieroglyphics of foam and surge and swirl and glassy lunge, that makes the skilled runner of the rapids.

A light birch-bark canoe, with a man in the stern and a small child in the bow, was approaching the head of the rapids, which were hidden from the paddler's view by a high, densely-wooded bend of the shore. The canoe leapt forward swiftly on the smooth, quiet current, under the strong drive of the paddle.

The paddler was a tall, big-limbed man, with fair hair fringing out under his tweed cap, and a face burnt red rather than tanned by the weather. He was dressed roughly but well, and not as a woodsman, and he had a subtle air of being foreign to the backwoods. He knew how to handle his paddle, however, the prow of his craft keeping true though his strokes were slow and powerful.

JIM, THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG

The child who sat facing him on a cushion in the bow was a little boy of four or five years, in a short scarlet jacket and blue knickers. His fat, bare legs were covered with fly-bites and scratches, his baby face of the tenderest cream and pink, his round, interested eyes as blue as periwinkle blossoms. But the most conspicuous thing about him was his hair. He was bareheaded his little cap lying in the bottom of the canoe among the luggage and the hair, as white as tow, stood out like a fleece all over his head, enmeshing the sunlight in its silken tangle.

When the canoe shot round the bend, the roar of the rapids smote suddenly upon the voyagers' ears. The child turned his bright head inquiringly, but from his low place could see nothing to explain the noise. His father, however, sitting up on the hinder bar of the canoe, could see a menacing white line of tossing crests, aflash in the sunlight, stretching from shore to shore. Backing water vigorously to check his headway, he stood up to get a better view and choose his way through the surge.

The stranger was master of his paddle, but he had had no adequate experience in running rapids. Such light and unobstructed rips as he had gone through had merely sufficed to make him regard lightly the menace confronting him. He had heard of the perils of Dead Man's Run, but that, of course, meant in time of freshet, when even the mildest streams are liable to go mad and run amuck. This was the season of dead low water, and it was hard for him to imagine there could be anything really to fear from this lively but shrunken stream. He was strong, clear-eyed, steady of nerve, and he anticipated no great trouble in getting through.

As the light craft dipped into the turmoil, jumping as if buffeted from below, and the wave-tops slapped in on either side of the bow, the little lad gave a cry of fear.

"Sit tight, boy. Don't be afraid," said the father, peering ahead with intent, narrowed eyes and surging fiercely on his blade to avoid a boiling rock just below the first chute. As he swept past in safety he laughed in triumph, for the passage had been close and exciting, and the conquest of a mad rapid is one of the thrilling things in life, and worth going far for. His laugh reassured the child, who laughed also, but cowered low in the canoe and stared over the gunwale with wide eyes of awe.

But already the canoe was darting down toward a line of black rocks smothered in foam. The man paddled desperately to gain the other shore, where there seemed to be a clear passage. Slanting sharply across the great current, surging with short, terrific strokes upon his sturdy maple blade, his teeth set and his breath coming in grunts, he was swept on downward, sideways toward the rocks, with appalling speed. But he made the passage, swept the bow around, and raced through, shaving the rock so narrowly that his heart paused and the sweat jumped out suddenly cold on his forehead.

Immediately afterwards the current swept him to mid-stream. Just here the channel was straight and clear of rocks, and though the rips were heavy the man had a few minutes' respite, with little to do but hold his course.

With a stab at the heart he realized now into what peril he had brought his baby. Eagerly he looked for a chance to land, but on neither side could he make shore with any chance of escaping shipwreck. A woodsman, expert with the canoe-pole, might have managed it, but the stranger had neither pole nor skill to handle one. He was in the grip of the wild current and could only race on, trusting to master each new emergency as it should hurl itself upon him.

Presently the little one took alarm again at his father's stern-set mouth and preoccupied eyes. The man had just time to shout once more, "Don't be afraid, son. Dad'll take care of you," when the canoe was once more in a yelling chaos of chutes and ledges. And now there was no respite. Unable to read the signs of the water, he was full upon each new peril before he recognized it, and only his great muscular strength and instant decision saved them.

JIM, THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG

Again and again they barely by a hair's-breadth, slipped through the jaws of death, and it seemed to the man that the gnashing ledges raved and yelled behind him at each miracle of escape. Then hissing wave-crests cut themselves off and leapt over the racing gunwale, till he feared the canoe would be swamped. Once they scraped so savagely that he thought the bottom was surely ripped from the canoe. But still he won onward, mile after roaring mile, his will fighting doggedly to keep his eyesight from growing hopelessly confused with the hellish, sliding dazzle and riot of waters.

But at last the fiend of the flood, having played with its prey long enough, laid bare its claws and struck. The bow of the canoe, in swerving from one foam-curtained rock, grounded heavily upon another. In an instant the little craft was swung broadside on, and hung there. The waves piled upon her in a yelling pack. She was smothered down, and rolled over helplessly.

As they shot out into the torrent the man, with a terrible cry, sprang toward the bow, striving to reach his son. He succeeded in catching the little one, with one hand, by the back of the scarlet jacket. The next moment he went under and the jacket came off over the child's head. A whimsical cross-current dragged the little boy twenty feet off to one side, and shot him into a shallow side channel.

When the man came to the surface again his eyes were shut, his face stark white, his legs and arms flung about aimlessly as weeds; but fast in his unconscious grip he held the little red jacket. The canoe, its side stove in, and full of water, was hurrying off down the rapid amid a fleet of paddles, cushions, blankets, boxes, and bundles. The body of the man, heavy and inert and sprawling, followed more slowly. The waves rolled it over and trampled it down, shouldered it up again, and snatched it away viciously whenever it showed an inclination to hang itself up on some projecting ledge. It was long since they had had such a victim on whom to glut their rancour.

The child, meanwhile, after being rolled through the laughing shallows of the side channel and playfully buffeted into a half-drowned unconsciousness, was stranded on a sand spit some eight or ten yards from the right-hand shore. There he lay, half in the water, half out of it, the silken white floss of his hair all plastered down to his head, the rippled current tugging at his scratched and bitten legs.

The unclouded sun shone down warmly upon his face, slowly bringing back the rose to his baby lips, and a small, paper-blue butterfly hovered over his head for a few seconds, as if puzzled to make out what kind of being he was.

The sand spit which had given the helpless little one refuge was close to the shore, but separated from it by a deep and turbulent current. A few minutes after the blue butterfly had flickered away across the foam, a large black bear came noiselessly forth from the fir woods and down to the water's edge. He gazed searchingly up and down the river to see if there were any other human creatures in sight, then stretched his savage black muzzle out over the water toward the sand spit, eyeing and sniffing at the little unconscious figure there in the sun. He could not make out whether it was dead or only asleep. In either case he wanted it. He stepped into the foaming edge of the sluice, and stood there whimpering with disappointed appetite, daunted by the snaky vehemence of the current.

Presently, as the warmth of the flooding sun crept into his veins, the child stirred, and opened his blue eyes. He sat up, noticed he was sitting in the water, crawled to a dry spot, and snuggled down into the hot sand. For the moment he was too dazed to realize where he was. Then, as the life pulsed back into his veins, he remembered how his father's hand had caught him by the jacket just as he went plunging into the awful waves. Now, the jacket was gone. His father was gone, too.

"Daddy! Daddee-ee!" he wailed. And at the sound of that wailing cry, so unmistakably the cry of a youngling for its parent, the bear drew back discreetly behind a bush, and glanced uneasily up and down the stream to see if the parent would come in answer to the appeal. He had a wholesome respect for the grown-up man creature of either sex, and was ready to retire on the approach of one.

JIM, THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG

But no one came. The child began to sob softly, in a lonesome, frightened, suppressed way. In a minute or two, however, he stopped this, and rose to his feet, and began repeating over and over the shrill wail of "Daddy, Daddee-ee, Daddee-ee!" At the same time he peered about him in every direction, almost hopefully, as if he thought his father must be hiding somewhere near, to jump out presently for a game of bo-peep with him.

His baby eyes were keen. They did not find his father, but they found the bear, its great black head staring at him from behind a bush.

His cries stopped on the instant, in the middle of a syllable, frozen in his throat with terror. He cowered down again upon the sand, and stared, speechless, at the awful apparition. The bear, realizing that the little one's cries had brought no succour, came out from its hiding confidently, and down to the shore, and straight out into the water till the current began to drag too savagely at its legs. Here it stopped, grumbling and baffled.

The little one, unable any longer to endure the dreadful sight, backed to the extreme edge of the sand, covered his face with his hands, and fell to whimpering piteously, an unceasing, hopeless, monotonous little cry, as vague and inarticulate as the wind.

The bear, convinced at length that the sluice just here was too strong for him to cross, drew back to the shore reluctantly. It moved slowly up-stream some forty or fifty yards, looking for a feasible crossing. Disappointed in this direction, it then explored the water's edge for a little distance down-stream, but with a like result. But it would not give up. Up and down, up and down, it continued to patrol the shore with hungry obstinacy. And the piteous whimpering of the little figure that cowered, and with hidden face upon the sand spit, gradually died away. That white fleece of silken locks, dried in the sun and blown by the warm breeze, stood out once more in its radiance on the lonely little slumbering head.

III

Tug Blackstock sat on a log, smoking and musing, on the shore of that wide, eddying pool, full of slow swirls and spent foam clusters, in which the tumbling riot of Brine's Rip came to a rest. From the mills behind him screeched the untiring saws. Outstretched at his feet lay Jim, indolently snapping at flies.

The men of the village were busy in the mills, the women in their cottages, the children in their schools; and the stretch of rough shore gave Tug Blackstock the solitude which he loved.

Down through the last race of the rapids came a canoe paddle, and began revolving slowly in the eddies. Blackstock pointed it out to Jim, and sent him in after it. The dog swam for it gaily, grabbed it by the top so that it could trail at his side, and brought it to his master's feet. It was a good paddle, of clean bird's-eye maple and Melicite pattern, and Tug Blackstock wondered who could have been so careless as to lose it. Carelessness is a vice regarded with small leniency in the backwoods.

A few minutes later down the rapids came wallowing a water-logged birch-canoe. The other things which had started out with it, the cushions and blankets and bundles, had got themselves tangled in the rocks and left behind.

At sight of the wrecked canoe, Tug Blackstock rose to his feet. He began to suspect another of the tragedies of Dead Man's Run. But what river-man would come to grief in the Run at this stage of the water? Blackstock turned to an old dug-out which lay hauled up on the shore, ran it down into the water and paddled out to salvage the wrecked canoe. He towed it to shore, emptied it, and scrutinized it. He thought he knew every canoe on the river, but this one was a stranger to him. It had evidently been brought across the Portage from the east coast. Then he found, burnt into the inside of the gunwale near the bow, the letters J.C.M.W.

JIM, THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG

"The Englishman," he muttered. "He's let the canoe git away from him at the head of the Run, likely, when he's gone ashore. He'd never have tried to shoot the Run alone, an' him with no experience of rapids."

But he was uneasy. He decided that he would get his own canoe and pole up through the rapids, just to satisfy himself.

Tug Blackstock's canoe, a strong and swift "Fredericton" of polished canvas, built on the lines of a racing birch, was kept under cover in his wood shed at the end of the village street. He shouldered it, carrying it over his head with the mid bar across his shoulders, and bore it down to the water's edge. Then he went back and fetched his two canoe poles and his paddles.

Waving Jim into the bow, he was just about to push off when his narrowed eyes caught sight of something else rolling and threshing helplessly down the rapid. Only too well he saw what it was. His face pale with concern, he thrust the canoe violently up into the tail of the rapid, just in time to catch the blindly sprawling shape before it could sink to the depths of the pool. Tenderly he lifted it out upon the shore. It was battered almost out of recognition, but he knew it.

"Poor devil! Poor devil!" he muttered sorrowfully. "He was a man all right, but he didn't understand rapids for shucks!"

Then he noticed that in the dead man's right hand was clutched a tiny child's jacket. He understood he saw the whole scene, and he swore compassionately under his breath, as he unloosed the rigid fingers. Alive or dead, the little one must be found at once.

He called Jim sharply, and showed him the soaked red jacket. Jim sniffed at it, but the wearer's scent was long ago soaked out of it. He looked it over, and pawed it, wagging his tail doubtfully. He could see it was a small child's jacket, but what was he expected to do with it?

After a few moments, Tug Blackstock patted the jacket vigorously, and then waved his arm up-stream.

"Go, find him, Jim!" he ordered. Jim, hanging upon each word and gesture, comprehended instantly. He was to find the owner of the little jacket a child somewhere up the river. With a series of eager yelps which meant that he would do all that living dog could do he started up the shore, on the full run

By this time the mill whistles had blown, the screaming of the saws had stopped, the men, powdered with yellow sawdust, were streaming out from the wide doors. They flocked down to the water.

In hurried words Blackstock explained the situation. Then he stepped once more into his canoe, snatched his long, steel-shod pole, and thrust his prow up into the wild current, leaving the dead man to the care of the coroner and the village authorities. Before he had battled his way more than a few hundred yards upwards through the raging smother, two more canoes, with expert polers standing poised in them like statues, had pushed out to follow him in his search.

The rest of the crowd picked up the body and bore it away reverently to the court-room, with sympathetic women weeping beside it.

Racing along the open edge of the river where it was possible, tearing fiercely through thicket and underbrush where rapids or rocks made the river's edge impassable, the great black dog panting onwards with the sweat dripping from jaws and tongue. Whenever he was forced away from the river, he would return to it at every fifty yards or so, and scan each rock, shoal or sand spit with keen, sagacious eyes. He had been told to search the river that was the plain interpretation of the wet jacket and of Tug Blackstock's gesture so he wasted no time

JIM, THE STORY OF A BACKWOODS POLICE DOG

upon the woods and the undergrowth.

At last he caught sight of the little fluffy-headed figure huddled upon the sand spit far across the river. He stopped, stared intently, and then burst into loud, ecstatic barkings as an announcement that his search had been successful. But the noise did not carry across the tumult of the ledge, and the little one slept on, exhausted by his terror and his grief.

It was not only the sleeping child that Jim saw. He saw the bear, and his barking broke into shrill yelps of alarm and appeal. He could not see that the sluice between the sand spit and the bank was an effective barrier, and he was frantic with anxiety lest the bear should attack the little one before he could come to the rescue.

His experienced eye told him in a moment that the river was impassable for him at this point. He dashed on up-stream for another couple of hundred yards, and then, where a breadth of comparatively slack water beneath a long ledge extended more than half-way across, he plunged in, undaunted by the clamour and the jumping, boiling foam.

Swimming mightily, he gained a point directly above the sand spit. Then, fighting every inch of the way to get across the terrific draft of the main current, he was swept downward at a tremendous speed. But he had carried out his plan. He gained the shallow side channel, splashed down it, and darted up the sand spit with a menacing growl at the bear across the sluice.

At the sound of that harsh growl close to his ears the little one woke up and raised his head. Seeing Jim, big and black and dripping, he thought it was the bear. With a piercing scream he once more hid his face in his hands, rigid with horror. Puzzled at this reception, Jim fell to licking his hands and his ears extravagantly, and whining and thrusting a coaxing wet nose under his arms.

At last the little fellow began to realize that these were not the actions of a foe. Timidly he lowered his hands from his face, and looked round. Why, there was the bear, on the other side of the water, tremendous and terrible, but just where he had been this ever so long. This creature that was making such a fuss over him was plainly a dog a kind, good dog, who was fond of little boys.

With a sigh of inexpressible relief his terror slipped from him. He flung his arms about Jim's shaggy neck and buried his face in the wet fur. And Jim, his heart swelling with pride, stood up and barked furiously across at the bear.

Tug Blackstock, standing in the stern of his canoe, plied his pole with renewed effort. Reaching the spit he strode forward, snatched the child up in his arms, and passed his great hand tenderly through that wonderful shock of whitey-gold silken curls. His eyes were moist, but his voice was hearty and gay, as if this meeting were the most ordinary thing in the world.

"Hullo, Woolly Billy!" he cried. "What are you doin' here?"

"Daddy left me here," answered the child, his lip beginning to quiver. "Where's he gone to?"

"Oh," replied Tug Blackstock hurriedly, "yer dad was called away rather sudden, an' he sent me an' Jim, here, to look after you till he gits back. An' we'll do it, too, Woolly Billy; don't you fret."

"My name's George Harold Manners Watson," explained the child politely.

"But we'll just call you Woolly Billy for short," said Tug Blackstock.