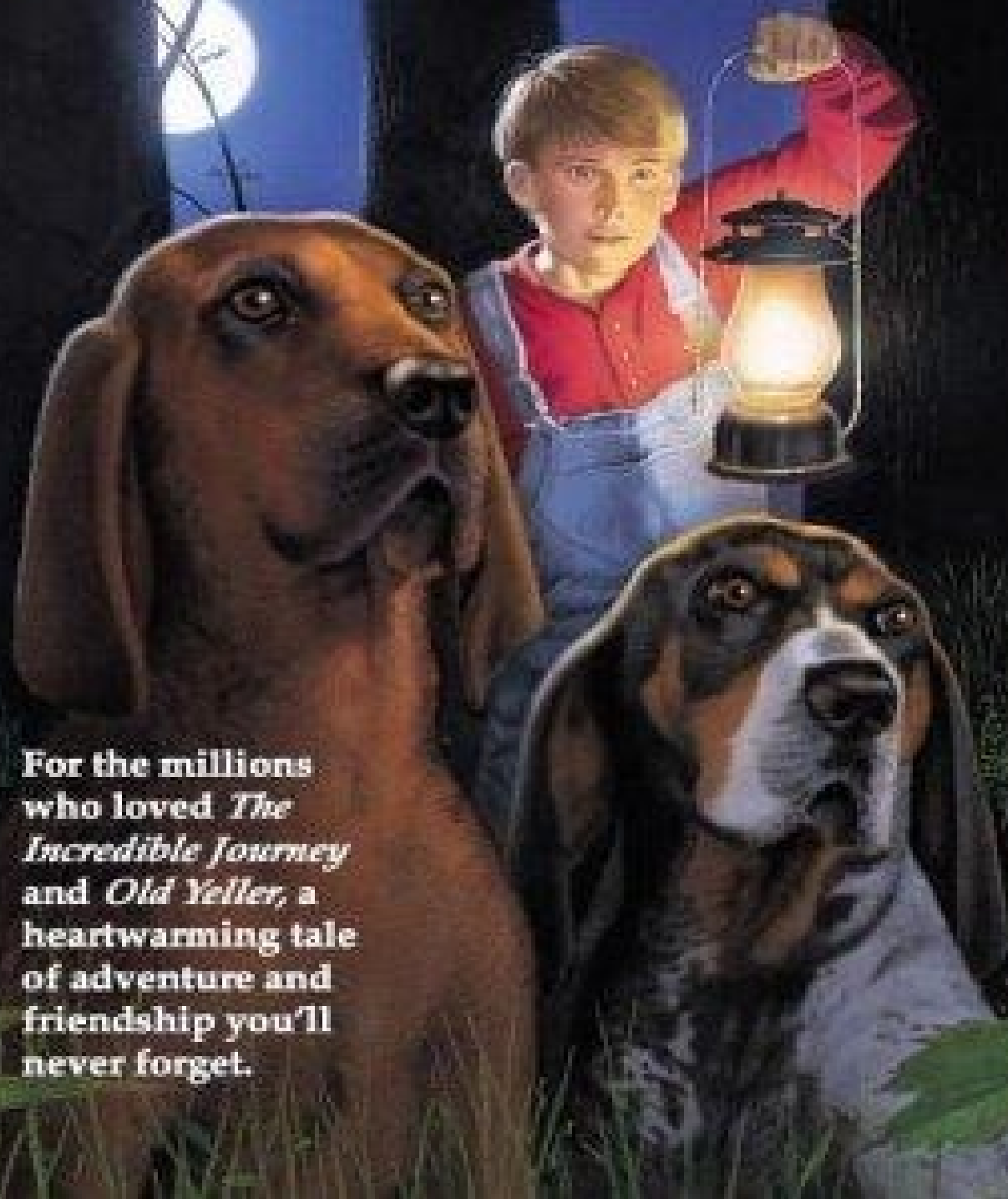


WHERE THE RED FERN GROWS

Wilson Rawls



YEARLING



For the millions who loved *The Incredible Journey* and *Old Yeller*, a heartwarming tale of adventure and friendship you'll never forget.

Where the Red Fern Grows

by

Wilson Rawls

I

WHEN I LEFT MY OFFICE THAT BEAUTIFUL SPRING DAY, I HAD no idea what was in store for me. To begin with, everything was too perfect for anything unusual to happen. It was one of those days when a man feels good, feels like speaking to his neighbor, is glad to live in a country like ours, and proud of his government. You know what I mean, one of those rare days when everything is right and nothing is wrong.

I was walking along whistling when I heard the dogfight. At first I paid no attention to it. After all it wasn't anything to get excited about, just another dogfight in a residential section.

As the sound of the fight grew nearer, I could tell there were quite a few dogs mixed up in it. They boiled out of an alley, turned, and headed straight toward me. Not wanting to get bitten or run over, I moved over to the edge of the sidewalk.

I could see that all the dogs were fighting one. About twenty-five feet from me they caught him and down he went. I felt sorry for the unfortunate one. I knew if something wasn't done quickly the sanitation department would have to pick up a dead dog. I was trying to make up my mind to help when I got a surprise. Up out of that snarling, growling, slashing mass reared an old redbone hound. For a second I saw him. I caught my breath. I couldn't believe what I had seen.

Twisting and slashing, he fought his way through the pack and backed up under the low branches of a hedge. Growling and snarling, they formed a halfmoon circle around him. A big bird dog, bolder than the others, darted in. The hedge shook as he tangled with the hound. He came out so fast he fell over backwards. I saw that his right ear was split wide open. It was too much for him and he took off down the street, squalling like a scalded cat.

A big ugly cur tried his luck. He didn't get off so easy. He came out with his left shoulder laid open to the bone. He sat down on his rear and let the world know that he had been hurt.

By this time, my fighting blood was boiling. It's hard for a man to stand and watch an old hound fight against such odds, especially if that man has memories in his heart like I had in mine. I had seen the time when an old hound like that had given his life so that I might live.

Taking off my coat, I waded in. My yelling and scolding didn't have much

effect, but the swinging coat did. The dogs scattered and left.

Down on my knees, I peered back under the hedge. The hound was still mad. He growled at me and showed his teeth. I knew it wasn't his nature to fight a man.

In a soft voice, I started talking to him. "Come on, boy," I said. "It's all right. I'm your friend. Come on now."

The fighting fire slowly left his eyes. He bowed his head and his long, red tail started thumping the ground. I kept coaxing. On his stomach, an inch at a time, he came to me and laid his head in my hand.

I almost cried at what I saw. His coat was dirty and mud-caked. His skin was stretched drum-tight over his bony frame. The knotty joints of his hips and shoulders stood out a good three inches from his body. I could tell he was starved.

I couldn't figure it out. He didn't belong in town. He was far out of place with the boxers, poodles, bird dogs, and other breeds of town dogs. He belonged in the country. He was a hunting hound.

I raised one of his paws. There I read the story. The pads were worn down slick as the rind on an apple. I knew he had come a long way, and no doubt had a long way to go. Around his neck was a crude collar. On closer inspection, I saw it had been made from a piece of check-line leather. Two holes had been punched in each end and the ends were laced together with bailing wire.

As I turned the collar with my ringer, I saw something else. There, scratched deep in the tough leather, was the name "Buddie." I guessed that the crude, scribbly letters had probably been written by a little boy.

It's strange indeed how memories can lie dormant in a man's mind for so many years. Yet those memories can be awakened and brought forth fresh and new, just by something you've seen, or something you've heard, or the sight of an old familiar face.

What I saw in the warm gray eyes of the friendly old hound brought back wonderful memories. To show my gratitude, I took hold of his collar and said, "Come on, boy, let's go home and get something to eat."

He seemed to understand that he had found a friend. He came willingly.

I gave him a bath and rubbed all the soreness from his muscles. He drank quarts of warm milk and ate all the meat I had in the house. I hurried down to the store and bought more. He ate until he was satisfied.

He slept all that night and most of the next day. Late in the afternoon he grew restless. I told him I understood, and as soon as it was dark, he could be on his way. I figured he had a much better chance if he left town at night.

That evening, a little after sundown, I opened the back gate. He walked out,

stopped, turned around, and looked at me. He thanked me by wagging his tail.

With tears in my eyes, I said, 'You're more than welcome, old fellow. In fact, you could've stayed here as long as you wanted to.'

He whined and licked my hand.

I was wondering which way he would go. With one final whimper he turned and headed east. I couldn't help smiling as I watched him trot down the alley. I noticed the way his hind quarters shifted over to the right, never in line with the front, yet always in perfect rhythm. His long ears flopped up and down, keeping time with the jogging motion of his body. Yes, they were all there, the unmistakable marks of a hunting hound.

Where the alley emptied into the street, he stopped and looked back. I waved my hand.

As I watched him disappear in the twilight shadows, I whispered these words: "Good-bye, old fellow. Good luck, and good hunting!"

I didn't have to let him go. I could have kept him in my back yard, but to pen up a dog like that is a sin. It would have broken his heart. The will to live would have slowly left his body.

I had no idea where he had come from or where he was going. Perhaps it wasn't too far, or maybe it was a long, long way. I tried to make myself believe that his home was in the Ozark Mountains somewhere in Missouri, or Oklahoma. It wasn't impossible even though it was a long way from the Snake River Valley in Idaho.

I figured something drastic must have happened in his life, as it is very unusual for a hound to be traveling all alone. Perhaps he had been stolen, or maybe he had been sold for some much-needed money. Whatever it was that had interrupted his life, he was trying to straighten it out. He was going home to the master he loved, and with the help of God, he would make it.

To him it made no difference how long the road, or how rough or rocky. His old red feet would keep jogging along, on and on, mile after mile. There would be no crying or giving up. When his feet grew tired and weary, he would curl up in the weeds and rest. Water from a rain puddle or a mountain stream would quench his thirst and cool his hot dry throat. Food found along the highway, or the offerings from a friendly hand would ease the pangs of hunger. Through the rains, the snows, or the desert heat, he would jog along, never looking back.

Some morning he would be found curled up on the front porch. The long journey would be over. He would be home. There would be a lot of tail-wagging and a few whimpering cries. His warm moist tongue would caress the hand of his master. All would be forgiven. Once again the lights would shine in his dog's world. His heart would be happy.

After my friend had disappeared in the darkness, I stood and stared at the empty alley. A strange feeling came over me. At first I thought I was lonely or sad, but I realized that wasn't it at all. The feeling was a wonderful one.

Although the old hound had no way of knowing it, he had stirred memories, and what priceless treasures they were. Memories of my boyhood days, an old K. C. Baking Powder can, and two little red hounds. Memories of a wonderful love, unselfish devotion, and death in its saddest form.

As I turned to enter my yard I started to lock the gate, and then I thought, "No, I'll leave it open. He might come back."

I was about halfway to the house when a cool breeze drifted down from the rugged Tetons. It had a bite in it and goosepimples jumped out on my skin. I stopped at the woodshed and picked up several sticks of wood.

I didn't turn on any lights on entering the house.

The dark, quiet atmosphere was a perfect setting for the mood I was in. I built a fire in the fireplace and pulled up my favorite rocker.

As I sat there in the silence, the fire grew larger. It crackled and popped. Firelight shadows began to shimmer and dance around the room. The warm, comfortable heat felt good.

I struck a match to light my pipe. As I did, two beautiful cups gleamed from the mantel. I held the match up so I could get a better look. There they were, sitting side by side. One was large with long, upright handles that stood out like wings on a morning dove. The highly polished surface gleamed and glistened with a golden sheen. The other was smaller and made of silver. It was neat and trim, and sparkled like a white star in the heavens.

I got up and took them down. There was a story in those cups-a story that went back more than a half century.

As I caressed the smooth surfaces, my mind drifted back through the years, back to my boyhood days. How wonderful the memories were. Piece by piece the story unfolded.

II

I SUPPOSE THERE'S A TIME IN PRACTICALLY EVERY YOUNG boy's life when he's affected by that wonderful disease of puppy love. I don't mean the kind a boy has for the pretty little girl that lives down the road. I mean the real kind, the kind that has four small feet and a wig-gly tail, and sharp little teeth that can gnaw on a boy's finger; the kind a boy can romp and play with, even eat and sleep with.

I was ten years old when I first became infected with this terrible disease. I'm sure no boy in the world had it worse than I did. It's not easy for a young boy to want a dog and not be able to have one. It starts gnawing on his heart, and gets all mixed up in his dreams. It gets worse and worse, until finally it becomes almost unbearable.

If my dog-wanting had been that of an ordinary boy, I'm sure my mother and father would have gotten me a puppy, but my wants were different. I didn't want just one dog. I wanted two, and not just any kind of a dog. They had to be a special kind and a special breed.

I had to have some dogs. I went to my father and had a talk with him. He scratched his head and thought it over.

"Well, Billy," he said, "I heard that Old Man Hatfield's collie is going to have pups. I'm sure I can get one of them for you."

He may as well have poured cold water on me. "Papa," I said, "I don't want an old collie dog. I want hounds-coon hounds-and I want two of them."

I could tell by the look on his face that he wanted to help me, but couldn't.

He said, "Billy, those kind of dogs cost money, and that's something we don't have right now. Maybe some day when we can afford it, you can have them, but not right now."

I didn't give up. After my talk with Papa, I went to Mama. I fared no better there. Right off she said I was too young to be hunting with hounds. Besides, a hunter needed a gun, and that was one thing I couldn't have, not until I was twenty-one anyway.

I couldn't understand it. There I was sitting right in the middle of the finest hunting country in the world and I didn't even have a dog.

Our home was in a beautiful valley far back in the rugged Ozarks. The country was new and sparsely settled. The land we lived on was Cherokee land, allotted to my mother because of the Cherokee blood that flowed in her veins. It

lay in a strip from the foothills of the mountains to the banks of the Illinois River in northeastern Oklahoma.

The land was rich, black, and fertile. Papa said it would grow hair on a crosscut saw. He was the first man to stick the cold steel point of a turning plow into the virgin soil.

Mama had picked the spot for our log house. It nestled at the edge of the foothills in the mouth of a small canyon, and was surrounded by a grove of huge red oaks. Behind our house one could see miles and miles of the mighty Ozarks. In the spring the aromatic scent of wild flowers, redbuds, papaws, and dogwoods, drifting on the wind currents, spread over the valley and around our home.

Below our fields, twisting and winding, ran the clear blue waters of the Illinois River. The banks were cool and shady. The rich bottom land near the river was studded with tall sycamores, birches, and box elders.

To a ten-year-old country boy it was the most beautiful place in the whole wide world, and I took advantage of it all. I roamed the hills and the river bottoms. I knew every game trail in the thick cane-brakes, and every animal track that was pressed in the mud along the riverbanks.

The ones that fascinated me the most were the baby-like tracks of a river coon. I'd lie for hours examining them. Before leaving, I'd take a switch and sweep them all away. These I called my "trail looks." The next day I'd hurry back, and sure enough, nine times out of ten, there in the clean-swept ground I would again find the tracks of a ringtail coon.

I knew he had passed over the trail during the night. I could close my eyes and almost see him, humped up and waddling along, fishing under the banks with his delicate little paws for crawfish, frogs, and minnows.

I was a hunter from the time I could walk. I caught lizards on the rail fences, rats in the corncrib, and frogs in the little creek that ran through the fields. I was a young Daniel Boone.

As the days passed, the dog-wanting disease grew worse. I began to see dogs in my sleep. I went back to my father and mother. It was the same old story. Good hounds cost money, and they just didn't have it.

My dog-wanting became so bad I began to lose weight and my food didn't taste good any more. Mama noticed this and she had a talk with Papa.

"You're going to have to do something," she said. "I never saw a boy grieve like that. It's not right, not right at all."

"I know," said Papa, "and I feel just as badly as you do, but what can I do? You know we don't have that kind of money."

"I don't care," said Mama. "You've got to do something. I can't stand to see

him cry like that. Besides he's getting to be a problem. I can't get my work done. He follows me around all day long begging for hounds."

"I offered to get him a dog," said Papa, "but he doesn't want just any kind of dog. He wants hounds, and they cost money. Do you know what the Parker boys paid for those two hounds they bought? Seventy-five dollars! If I had that much money, I'd buy another mule. I sure do need one."

I had overheard this conversation from another room. At first it made me feel pretty good. At least I was getting to be a problem. Then I didn't feel so good. I knew my mother and father were poor and didn't have any money. I began to feel sorry for them and myself.

After thinking it over, I figured out a way to help. Even though it was a great sacrifice, I told Papa I had decided I didn't want two hounds. One would be enough. I saw the hurt in his eyes. It made me feel like someone was squeezing water out of my heart.

Papa set me on his lap and we had a good talk. He told me how hard times were, and that it looked like a man couldn't get a fair price for anything he raised. Some of the farmers had quit farming and were cutting railroad ties so they could feed their families. If things didn't get better, that's what he'd have to do. He said he'd give anything if he could get some good hounds for me, but there didn't seem to be any way he could right then.

I went off to bed with my heart all torn up in little pieces, and cried myself to sleep.

The next day Papa had to go to the store. Late that evening I saw him coming back. As fast as I could, I ran to meet him, expecting a sack of candy. Instead he handed me three small steel traps.

If Santa Claus himself had come down out of the mountains, reindeer and all, I would not have been more pleased. I jumped up and down, and cried a whole bucketful of tears. I hugged him and told him what a wonderful papa he was.

He showed me how to set them by mashing the spring down with my foot, and how to work the trigger. I took them to bed with me that night.

The next morning I started trapping around the barn. The first thing I caught was Samie, our house cat. If this didn't cause a commotion! I didn't intend to catch him. I was trying to catch a rat, but somehow he came nosing around and got in my trap.

My sisters started bawling and yelling for Mama. She came running, wanting to know what in the world was going on. None of us had to tell her, Samie told her with his spitting and squalling.

He was mad. He couldn't understand what that thing was that was biting his foot, and he was making an awful fuss about it. His tail was as big as a wet

corncob and every hair on his small body was sticking straight up. He spit and yowled and dared anyone to get close to him.

My sisters yelled their fool heads off, all the time saying, "Poor Samie! Poor Samie!"

Mama shushed them up and told me to go get the forked stick from under the clothesline. I ran and got it.

Mama was the best helper a boy ever had. She put the forked end over Sarnie's neck and pinned him to the ground.

It was bad enough for the trap to be biting his foot, but to have his neck pinned down that way was too much. He threw a fit. I never heard such a racket in all my life.

It wasn't long until everything on the place was all spooked up. The chickens started cackling and flew way up on the hillside. Daisy, our milk cow, all but tore the barn lot up and refused to give any milk that night. Sloppy Ann, our hog, started running in circles, squealing and grunting.

Sarnie wiggled and twisted. He yowled and spit, but it didn't do him any good. Mama was good and stout. She held him down, tight to the ground. I ran in and put my foot on the trap spring, mashed it down, and released his foot. With one loud squall, he scooted under the barn.

After it was all over, Mama said, "I don't think you'll have any more trouble with that cat. I think he has learned his lesson."

How wrong Mama was. Sarnie was one of those nosy kind of cats. He would lie up on the red oak limbs and watch every move I made.

I found some slick little trails out in our garden down under some tall hollyhocks. Thinking they were game trails, and not knowing they were Sarnie's favorite hunting trails, I set my traps. Sarnie couldn't understand what I was doing out there, messing around his hunting territory. He went to investigate.

It wasn't long until I had him limping with all four feet. Every time Papa saw Sarnie lying around in the warm sun with his feet wrapped up in turpentine rags, he would laugh until big tears rolled down his cheeks.

Mama had another talk with Papa. She said he was going to have to say something to me, because if I caught that cat one more time, it would drive her out of her mind.

Papa told me to be a little more careful where I set my traps.

"Papa," I said, "I don't want to catch Samie, but he's the craziest cat I ever saw. He sees everything I do, and just has to go sniffing around."

Papa looked over at Samie. He was lying all sprawled out in the sunshine with all four paws bandaged and sticking straight up. His long tail was swishing this way and that.