

"Yaller"

The story of a dog that knew

Written for The Western Home Monthly by H. Mortimer Batten.

Note to the Editor.—This story is based on the following facts:—That within the author's experience a sheep dog, uncertain as to the safety and future of her puppies, has been known to carry a poisoned bait to them; that a fox, tormented beyond endurance after an encounter with a porcupine, the quills of which were causing it great pain, was found drowned in a shallow, sandy bedded pond, into which it must purposely have walked in order to take its

own life. These facts would seem to indicate that an intelligent animal understands that by doing certain things it can relieve itself of all misery. As to whether a dog and a fox have been known to run together, I cannot say, but at certain seasons many dogs will not fight a vixen. Dogs have been known to mate with wolves and coyotes, and there is no reason to think that a similar union should not exist between a dog and a fox.—H. M. B.

YALLER was a little mongrel sheep dog, so much of a mongrel indeed that no one strain in his composition predominated another. He had a long shaggy coat and was about the size of an Irish terrier, but when one looked into his eyes—bright, lustrous, brown eyes they were—it did not seem to matter much what breed he was. All his life he had trodden the prescribed pathway of virtue; he had been a wise puppy and he grew up an ultra wise dog, and had it not been for the coming of temptation in that occult form it so often assumes, he would have lived his poor drab little life with hardly a diversion from the pathway of righteousness.

Don, Yaller's master, was a poor shepherd boy. In truth his hair bore the first shades of autumn, but there are some men who are always boys. If he

had money his friends sponged it out of him, but he was as unsophisticated and generous as the skies. He lived an appallingly lonely life in a small peat and boulder hut in the centre of the great moor known locally as the Black Allotment, and since for days on end he and Yaller saw no living soul but each other, it is not to be wondered that, as is so often the case, the dog acquired many of his master's characteristics. Anyone could fool him, so limited was his knowledge of the world of men and dogs.

Don lived for his shepherding—so did Yaller. He knew each and every one of his master's charges, and on glancing at the flock he could tell not only when one was missing, but he knew which one. Away he would go ere Don had time to count his flock, presently to reappear with the straggler, and await further orders. Don had only to point to one sheep and Yaller would sort it out and bring it to the pen, even if it were among two hundred and a hundred and ninety-nine crossed and criss-crossed its trail. In fact, shepherding was born in Yaller, as it was in Don, for both of them sprang from a long line of shepherd ancestors.

It was one early spring night when the great temptation came into Yaller's life. The curlews and lapwings had just arrived from the lowland swamps to fill the heathered hills with their wild, sad whistlings, and that evening, while Don sat over his porridge and Yaller sat at his side, looking up into his eyes, the sharp yap-yap of a fox sounded over the bracken ridge to the south. "Yap-yap-yahh! Yap-yap!"

Yaller pricked his ears and whined. Don quietly rose from his place and took the rusty fowling piece from the two hooks above the stretch of bleached sheep skin which served as a window. In this land the hand of every shepherd and keeper is raised against the long-limbed red fox of the hills, the notorious sheep killer, particularly at this season when there are young lambs about.

Don quietly opened the door and peered out. Yaller at his heels. "Yap-yap-yarr!" And there at the crest of the ridge they saw the fox, clearly silhouetted against the sky as it pointed its muzzle northwards and gave utterance to that sound, which is the fox's love song all the world over.

Don knew that the distance was great, yet it would be useless to leave the hut, so taking steady aim he fired, hoping to wound the fox when his dog might run it down. The fox disappeared on hearing the shot, and Yaller needed not the urging to "go on, boy, and fetch her," for well he understood his master's feud—which was therefore his feud—against all foxes.

Over the ridge went Yaller, to vanish from view, and there, straight ahead of him he saw the fox, seated on a boulder watching his approach. As he drew near she leisurely descended and loped away, at which Yaller made the best of his speed and found himself gaining.

Then a strange thing happened. The fox had not yet exerted herself, and when only thirty paces separated them she stopped and came back to meet the dog, wagging her tail and leering in the most friendly manner possible. Yaller, taken completely by storm, veered aside then circled round, sniffing and growling, but the growls died in his throat as the little lady fox, for such it was, made various signs of her friendly spirit.

Truly she was a beautiful little creature, golden and russet, and the kindly, unsophisticated little heart of Yaller was won straight away. Ere five minutes had elapsed he and the vixen were running flank to flank, Yaller showering his kisses upon her muzzle, but very shortly his master's whistling reminded him of his duty, and he went bounding back for home.

When Don and Yaller had been the last round of the sheep that night, Yaller was left to mount guard—that is, his master gave him to understand that the fox might return, and that therefore he must not sleep too soundly. Don retired to his bunk, the old fowling piece ready, and Yaller curled up as usual at the foot of the bunk, but one corner of the sheep skin window was left hitched up so that Yaller could steal out if he chose.

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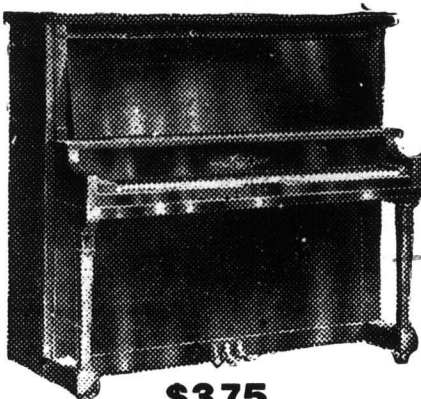
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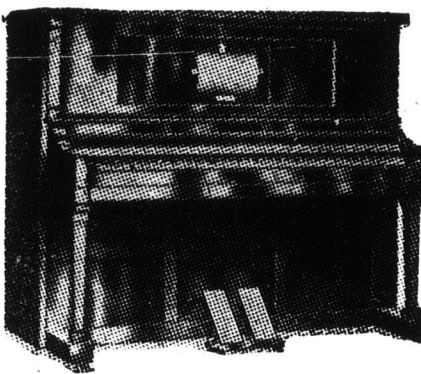
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