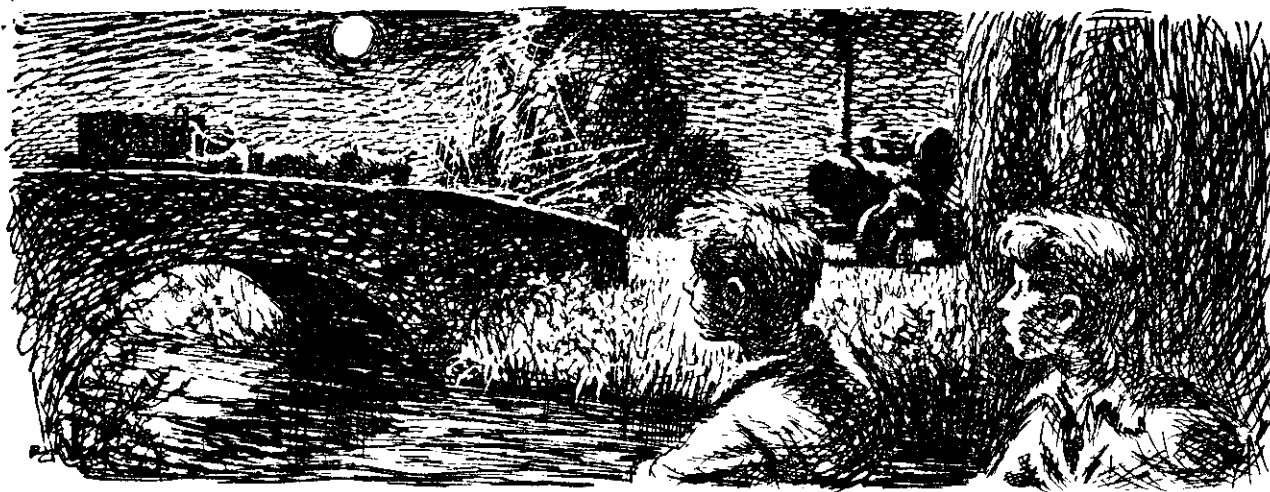




It was a perfect night for rattling. Under a clear, full moon we had been running with the dogs, Cocky and I, along the bank of the creek until we had come out opposite the harvest field. Now in sight of the bridge we dropped to a walk.

"We've plenty of time," Cocky said, pointing across. "They've only about half finished the stack."

"Think they might start moving quicker tonight, Cocky?" I said.

"Not on a night like this," he said. "It's pretty near bright as day."

Beside us as we walked the moon, reflected in the creek, was like a bull's-eye lantern drawn along underwater. The dogs, eager, whimpering and straining at the cords tied to their collars, pulled us through cocksfoot and cutty grass that rasped at our knees. Cocky's dog pulled so hard she looked like strangling herself. I had doubts about her. She was a well-marked, not full grown Airedale that didn't seem to be turning out as well as he'd expected.

Cocky had to pretend now that my runt of a black and tan terrier was exciting her.

"It's bad for her," he said, "running with a small game dog." Since he'd been going for a few hints to old Tom Nolan, who had the Kisselton pack, Cocky had taken to calling rabbiters and ratters "small game dogs."

In the centre of the field the red combine standing beside the traction engine was filling the still warm night with its steady drone. On the half threshed stack, caught in a sudden flare of an open firebox, the men on the stack stood out tossing the heavy sheaves; like in a game of "no man standing."

My feet were itching to run again; but Cocky seemed bent on keeping his dog in check. "What's the hurry?" he kept saying as we went along.

In the branches overhead a German owl hooted suddenly and fluttered across the creek. The bitch barked, and Cocky cuffed her twice. He'd bragged, too, about her being a good bird dog.

"Still jumpy," I said.

"She'll come all right," Cocky said, not liking it a bit.

"You're giving her time," I said. "You know you can't call a hunting dog your own till she's running quiet beside you without a lead."

"How do you know I can't run her without a lead?" Cocky said. "You'll see—next time we're out."

The bridge we had to cross was an old stone one, and it stood on a bend of the creek shaded by a clump of tall firs.

Cocky saw there was someone on the bridge before I did.

"Sawny Sam," he said.

"Sawny" Sam Biggs was water-joe for the threshing plant. He was a brother of Jim Biggs, who owned the plant, and Jim had Sam as water-joe because—well, because he wasn't any good with machinery.

I saw when we got close Sam Biggs perched on top of the water cart, and could hear the wheeze and clank of the old rusty pump taking its fill from the creek. Something told me I ought to have a word with Cocky.

"Cocky," I said—and there was a grin on his face already that I knew pretty well—"if you're going to start chipping Sam I'm going round by the foot-bridge."

"I didn't say so, did I?"

"I think I know what's in your mind. You said 'Sawny' Sam loud enough for him to hear. Nobody calls him that to his face."

"You afraid of him?"

Well, I didn't want to argue. Cocky had me there anyway. I was afraid of "Sawny" Sam. There was a look you caught sometimes when you looked close—which Cocky never did. The first time I saw it was one day last year on the same field when Sam was in one of his moods and Jim had asked him to do something or other. There was a look in Sam's eyes that day I'd hoped I wouldn't see again. Jim Biggs was said to be a hard man with his brother; but that was probably because he understood him better than anyone else.

"Remember what they say about the moon—how it affects queer ones like Sam?" I said.

"Old woman's yarn," he said. He walked on to the bridge whistling "When the Moon Shines Bright on Mrs. Porter."

"Sawny" Sam was climbing down from the cart to coil up the hose. He was big and heavy, and he did everything in a lumbering, awkward style.

The bridge was narrow, barely wide enough for a cart to cross, and Sam had it drawn across so that we couldn't pass. This was Cocky's chance, of course, to set us off on the wrong foot.

"Make way for the county rat-catchers, Sam," he said. "Have to report you for breaking the by-laws."

"What you talkin' about," said Sam. He had a kind of sing-song drawl. By listening to its pitch you could tell the sort of mood he was in.

"All right, Sam," I said, giving Cocky a nudge. "Take your time."

"Sawny" Sam was certainly doing that. And in case we might be tempted to squeeze past in front of the horse

COCKY

A Short Story by
H. J. KAVANAGH

he left off coiling the hose to square up the cart till he had the horse right abreast the rail.

"What a pal," said Cocky, while Sam gave him a long hard look. "Come to think of it, though, it's about time we had all this old threshing mill junk off the roads."

The bitch, held on a long lead, was straining forward. Sam stopped and walked over to Cocky. "I got a young horse here," he said. "Keep that mongrel back." There was warning enough in his voice.

I've wondered since if Cocky wasn't a little tone deaf. He didn't attempt to pull the bitch back and he went on to talk about "old junk."

Now hearing the plant called "old junk" wasn't the thing that was going to rouse Sam. Jim Biggs had told everybody that he was scrapping "Old Dora" after that year, and was going over to headers. I wanted to get Cocky away before he got further than that—on to the question that only someone with a brain like Cocky's would ask: "What was Sam going to do when Jim Biggs no longer needed a water-joe?"

He started: "How long have you been driving this contraption around?"

Perhaps that happened was partly my fault. I was too ready to interfere. I tried to get hold of the lead on the bitch.

"Come along Cocky," I said. "Better go along to the foot-bridge."

"Leave my dog alone," said Cocky. At the same moment that he tried to swing the cord clear of me the bitch gave a backward jerk and was free.

"Damn you," said Cocky. "Good for you, Tess. Come here."

"Tess" circled around—widening the circle. When she had been about twice she blundered into "Sawny" Sam. Scared, the bitch whirled and snapped. It might still have been all right if Sam hadn't kicked her. In a flash she came again and bit him twice in the leg.

It was a proper mix-up then—what with Sam yelling and hobbling to the cart for anything he could lay his hands on, and Cocky yelling, too, and diving after the trailing cord.

They each got what they were after. Cocky got the cord at the same instant Sam got a heavy shifting wrench. It might be that that was how it was

marked out for that one dog. I hadn't expected Sam to throw the wrench. It must have been sheer blind rage. The wrench fairly whizzed and struck the bitch behind the ears just as she turned her head to Cocky. She went down as though she'd been shot. It was plain as anything ever could be she'd never get up.

I heard Cocky's cry, "He's killed her." I couldn't bear to look again. After that Cocky didn't utter a word. He stood there, dumb, holding the cord. I thought it a queer thing to see someone holding a lead on something the life has just gone out of. He might have been waiting for someone to wake him from something he was dreaming. After a minute he dropped the cord and bent over the bitch. He turned her over once to make sure, got up and looked once at Sam. He had pretty good control of himself. I saw he wasn't going to make any fuss; and I think I understood him better at that moment than I'd ever done before. He blamed himself, I suppose, more than Sam. It was a hard thing all the same to lose a dog that way.

"That's the end of the rattling," he said. He walked across and leant over the rail of the bridge.

"That was just murder," I said to Sam. The way I felt then I wouldn't have been afraid of him if he'd held an axe. I doubt anyway if he could ever have cut the head off a chicken if someone had held it on the block. His face was the colour of putty and his big hands were shaking as he stood over the dog.

"She bit me," he said. He pulled up his trouser leg to show me. They were pretty deep bites.

"But, hell—," I said.

He shook his head. "I know," he said. He turned and looked towards Cocky. "But what right's he got to be always calling after me 'Sawny' Sam?"

I didn't say anything. I was going over to Cocky when Sam got in my way.

"Listen," he said. "Is that a right thing for a boy to call a man?" His eyes had a kind of pleading look. I couldn't answer that either.

He reached out and touched me on the shoulder. "You know I wouldn't like my brother Jim to know about this."

"That will be all right," I said.

"Jim's a pretty hard man," Sam said. He stood there shifting his big feet. "And don't you think she might have been the kind of dog to give a lot of trouble—worrying sheep, the like of that?"

What I thought of Cocky's dog, I might have told him, was between me and Cocky. All I said was: "Cocky reckoned she had show points. She was a good looking dog. And he'd bred her himself. Used to carry her round in his shirt."

Sam looked again at Cocky, down at the dog. He slouched off to the cart, muttering to himself. With his foot on the step he stopped and came back. His mind seemed to be working.

"There's only one thing," he said. "Jim's bitch has a litter just now, a there's a brindle pup that everyone after. I could ask Jim. Do you think—"

I nodded. "That would help," I said. "I'll tell him."

"You can let me know," Sam said slowly. "I could bring it to him myself."

He got up on the cart then and drove off the bridge.

After a while I went and told Cocky.

N.Z. LISTENER, OCTOBER 19, 1956.