

OL' JAKE *The Warrior of Drummonds Lake*

Pine Snake Returns
Friendship of Man
Who Saved It by
Attacking and Killing
Five Rattlers That
Had Him Surrounded

By WILLIAM HORNE

IN READING the headlines of North Carolina's newspapers not so long ago you may have seen: "Recluse of Dismal Swamps Held Captive of Deadly Diamond Backs Until Rescued by Pet Snake—"

But this short, two-inch item that gave mention to the harrowing experience of one Jud Baker, aged hermit of the Drummonds Lake district of Dismal Swamps, did not touch on to the colorful side of this strange drama that depicted, strange to say, the character of a snake.

And the man, Jud Baker? He probably never knew at the time, nor cared in the least, what had seeped into the papers of an outside world. This little episode in his life of solitude deep in the fastness of Dismal Swamps; what did it matter to him whether the world knew or not?

I visited him at his cabin on the western edge of Drummonds Lake. I carried with me the newspaper clipping mentioned at the opening of this narrative. I found him not at all interested in what the papers had said.

Meet "Ol' Jake"

IT WAS more than a year ago when Jud Baker first saw the six-foot pine snake he later named "Ol' Jake."

Jud had just paddled his bateau from across the lake to the landing a few yards down from his cabin. As he stepped on to the bank a darting form whirred upward on glistening wings from the bushes that bordered the opening.

Jud turned and looked. It was the flitting form of an enormous snake hawk. It came back down again into the bushes with a crash, seemed to struggle there a moment, then strove to take the air again.

Puzzled, Jud went to the edge of the bushes to investigate. He found the big bird of prey hovering a few feet from the ground, wings beating the air powerfully, and in its sharp talons was the beautiful, white-patterned form of a pine snake.

The reptile's torso writhed about the roots of a tree, the snake hawk doing its utmost to tear the hold away and lift it into the air.

Now, the pine snake is a powerful constrictor, and one snap from its mighty jaws can almost sever a man's wrist. No reptile in all the wilds can conquer it in combat, and the steel-like muscles of its glistening body can crush the bones of a wildcat or a dog.

But the snake hawk is its equal in swiftness and in strength, and in all outdoors the only living thing that it fears.

True, the snake hawk does not immediately kill the snake with claws or beak. Instead, it flies to an enormous height, releases the prey and lets it crash to its death far below, where it eats it at leisure.

Jud Baker knew this, and with a stick he drove the hawk away and captured the snake and took it with him to his cabin. The rippling skin of the snake was torn in a dozen places. Blood oozed from deep lacerations where the snake hawk's talons had torn in.



For days afterward Jud Baker thought his snake would die. The live mice and frogs he placed inside the improvised cage were left untouched; the snake lay prone and motionless.

But with passing days came improvement, and after two weeks the big reptile crawled about in his cage.

One night he escaped through a crack in the door. He disappeared, and Jud saw nothing of him for a month. But then he came back again—and stayed.

From then on he made his home there with the old recluse. He became a pet. He would crawl on to Jud Baker's dining table while the man ate his meals; he would coil on his bunk and sleep through the long, hot days of Summer.

During last Winter he coiled for hours on the hearth before the fire during the night, and during the short days he would lie outside in the corner of the rock chimney and bask in the sun.

It was during the month of March that he disappeared. Days passed, and finally Jud decided he had either strayed off and found a mate and had forgotten or a snake hawk had at last captured him. Jud searched for his strange pet, but never found him, so he finally gave up.

It was two months after Ol' Jake had disappeared, when the first warm days of Summer came to Drummonds Lake, that Jud Baker opened his eyes one morning to a strange sound at the little window just above his bunk.

For a long time he lay there blinking his eyes. What made that strange sound? It had seemed oddly familiar, and yet he couldn't quite place it.

Then suddenly it came again. And Jud Baker's form stiffened, the hair on his scalp prickling. It was the angry whir of a rattlesnake's rattles, and it came from just a bare yard from his face on the low sill of the open window.

The old man turned his head, and the movement brought the sound again. But he could see now, plain enough, the scaly form of a coiled rattler on the edge of the sill.

Two wicked, beady eyes stared at him from a small, flat head. A tiny, forked tongue flicked in and out the slitted mouth. Jud Baker stared into those eyes and his blood seemed to freeze in his veins.

After several long moments he moved his head slightly. Instantly the tail that

Ol' Jake, the pine snake, came through a crack in the floor and immediately gave battle to the rattlesnake, while Jud looked on with horror

lay in the center of the coiled reptile jerked up and wriggled spasmodically. There came the whir of rattles. Jud Baker lay motionless, lest the deadly fellow suddenly decide to strike downward in his straining, sweating face.

An age seemed to pass before those rattlers quieted down and another one to go by before the old man ventured to move again.

"Rattlers" All Around Him

HE HELD his breath and slowly moved one foot toward the edge of the bunk. If he could only slide noiselessly to the floor beyond reach of those deadly fangs things would be well. But he never quite managed it, for as his foot slid slowly to the very edge of the bed there came a new sound to his roaring ears, the sound of another set of rattlers from the floor just beneath the edge of the bed.

Jud Baker stiffened. He groaned in abject terror. Cold sweat beaded his leathery face. He strained his eyes to glance at the floor toward that new menace, and what he saw brought a gasp to his drawn lips. Beside the bed, on the floor, lay four diamond-backed rattlers. Each was coiled. Each snake's tongue flicked in and out, while the rattles gave angry warnings.

Ol' Jake to the Rescue

THE sun went on down behind the timber line to the west. Shadows lengthened. Suddenly the five rattlesnakes began their song of warning. The din kept up in a steady drone, and the man on the bunk roused himself from a half stupor.

Had he unconsciously made a movement that had aroused their anger? He lay there listening, expecting every moment to feel the fangs of the snake beside his head.

Then through the corners of his eyes he saw it. That glistening, rippling shadow that came through the crack beneath the door of the cabin.

Jud Baker lay there. Rigid. Staring with eyes that suddenly dimmed with tears that flooded them.

The long, shining length of sinuous black and white torso glided like a shadow across the floor. Slow. Rippling. And ominous. And deadly in its purpose.

The four rattlers on the floor kept up their hellish din, and the lone reptile on the window sill tensed in its coil and prepared to strike. And the big pine snake lay in an "S" form on the foot of the bunk, with its tail braced against the wall in an attitude of certain defense at the first hostile move.

And it came. From the snake on the window sill. Like lightning it shot down toward Ol' Jake like a coiled spring and, as quick as it was, Ol' Jake was quicker.

The rattlesnake's mouth gaped open and two needle-like fangs glistened in the evening light. And the big pine snake's mighty open jaws met those open jaws in midair with a sickening crunch.

Instantly both snakes became a writhing mass and tumbled from the bed to the floor amid the other waiting rattlers.

Battle to Death

AND then bedlam tore loose. Jud Baker leaned from his bed and watched that fight. He saw the four remaining rattlesnakes attack the big, twisting form of Ol' Jake with gleaming fangs. He saw those fangs sink again and again into that rippling hide, and he saw the big pine snake writhe and tie its muscular length into a dozen contortions about the floundering rattlers.

The battle couldn't have lasted more than three or four minutes. Jud Baker lay there above it, rigid in fascination. And suddenly the forms grew still, only the knotted length of the big pine snake slowly releasing its crushing holds from the dead forms of its enemies.

True, enough venom must have been injected into Ol' Jake's length to kill a dozen men. But a pine snake is immune to a rattler's venom, and presently the big fellow crawled loose and made his way slowly across the floor and out the door crack into the evening sunlight. Jud Baker was free. He lay on his bunk and watched his friend glide majestically from sight beneath the door.

Ol' Jake had come home. And had paid a debt he owed.