

The Clash of the Wolves

By Susan Orlean

Excerpt from "Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend"

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Of the six Rin Tin Tin silent films still in existence, the most memorable is "Clash of the Wolves," which was released in 1925. Rin Tin Tin plays a half-dog, half-wolf named Lobo, who is living in the wild as the leader of a wolf pack. The film begins with a disturbing scene of a forest fire, which drives Lobo and his pack, including Nanette and their pups, from their forest home to the desert ranchlands, where they are forced to prey on cattle to survive. The ranchers hate the wolves, and especially Lobo; a bounty of \$1000 is offered as a reward for his hide. In the meantime, a young mineral prospector named Dave arrives in town. A claim jumper who lusts after Dave's mineral discovery (and Dave's girlfriend, Mae) soon schemes against him. Mae happens to be the daughter of the rancher who is most determined to kill Lobo and who also, for some reason, doesn't like Dave.

The wolves, led by Lobo, attack a steer, and the ranchers set out after them. The chase is fast and frightening, and when Rin Tin Tin weaves through the horses' churning legs it looks like he's about to be trampled. He runs faster and for longer than seems possible. He outruns the horses, his body flattened and stretched as he bullets along the desert floor, and if you didn't see the little puffs of dust when his feet touch the ground, you'd swear he was floating. He scrambles up a tree – a stunt so startling that I had to replay it a few times to believe it. Can dogs climb trees? Evidently. At least certain dogs can. And they can climb down, too, and then tear along a rock ridge, and then come to a halt at the narrow crest of the ridge. The other side of the gorge is miles away. Rin Tin Tin stops, pivots; you feel him calculating his options; then he crouches and leaps, and the half second before he lands safely feels very long and fraught. His feet touch ground and he scrambles on, but a moment later he somersaults off the edge of another cliff, slamming through the branches of a cactus, collapsing in a heap, with a cactus needle skewered through the pad of his foot.

The action is thrilling, and it would have been even more exciting on a huge screen, in an elegant movie palace, with hundreds of people cheering and the orchestra pounding out the score. But the best part of the movie is the quieter section, after Rin Tin Tin falls. He limps home, stopping every few steps to lick his injured paw; his bearing is so abject and afflicted that it is easy to understand why Lee felt the need to explain he was just acting. Rin Tin Tin hobbles into his den and collapses next to Nanette, in terrible pain.



Lobby card has Rin Tin Tin looking on as a scuffle ensues among the main characters. Courtesy Library of Congress

Do the wolves of his pack gather around and help pull the cactus thorn out of their leader's paw? No, they don't. In an earlier scene in the movie, one of the wolves is injured and the pack musters around him. At first it looks like they are coming to his aid, but suddenly, their action seems more agitated than soothing, and just then an intertitle card flashes up, saying simply "Law of the pack. Death to the wounded wolf." This establishes the fact that the other wolves will kill Rin Tin Tin if they realize he's injured. Rinty and Nanette try to work on the cactus needle in his paw surreptitiously. But the pack (which is played by an assortment of German shepherds, huskies, coyotes, and wolves) senses that something is wrong. Finally, one of them approaches, a black look on his face, ready to attack. Rinty draws himself up and snarls. The two animals freeze, and then, very subtly, Rinty snarls again, almost sotto voce, as if he were saying, "I don't care what you think you know about my condition. I am still the leader here." The murderous wolf backs off.

The rest of the plot is a crosshatch of misperception and treachery. Rinty, fearing he will still be killed by his pack and attract harm to Nanette and their pups, decides to leave so that he might die alone; his wobbling, wincing departure is masterful acting. The humans in the movie, all flawed to varying degrees by either greed or naiveté or prejudice or stupidity – except for Mae, who is played by June Marlowe – stumble around double-crossing one another. Dave comes upon Rinty as his is on his death walk. Knowing there is a \$100 bounty for the animal, he pulls out his gun, but then gives in to his sympathy for the suffering animal and removes the cactus thorn. (Actor Charles Farrell must have been a brave man; Rinty was required to snap and snarl at him in the scene when Farrell is tending to his paw, and there are a few snaps when Rinty looks

like he's not kidding.

Dave's decision to save Lobo is of great consequence because, of course, according to the perfect circular arc of life within a film, Lobo ends up saving Dave's life. He chooses to be a dog – a guardian – and protect Dave, rather than give in to his wolf impulse to be a killer.

The film doesn't just set good against bad; it raises the questions of natural versus domesticated, and needs versus wants, and even the triumph of subtle thinking over unilateralism, since the characters who can't ignore a narrow rule and make an independent decision (as Dave does with Lobo) prevail. Even wolfishness, in the movie, isn't a simple evil. The forest fire in the opening scene establishes that the wolves are reluctant cattle killers, that they are forced into it not because they are vicious but because they have been driven from their home and have no other option.

The film has its share of silliness – a scene in which Rinty wears a fake beard as a disguise to avoid being identified as Lobo, for example – and the human acting, to the modern eye, is stilted. But "Clash of the Wolves" made me understand why so many millions of people fell in love with Rin Tin Tin and were moved by the way he wordlessly embodied many of the questions and conflicts and challenges that come with being alive.

The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.

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