

open? The man was annoyed at the uncertainty. Raising himself to his full height in order to command a better view of the trail, but at the same time keeping well hidden, he stood hesitating, doubtful whether to hurry on as fast as possible, or to wait awhile in this safe ambush in the hope of getting a shot at his pursuer.

BACK to the cleft in Red Rock, beneath the down-sprung pine, came the female panther. She had been lucky. She had made a quick kill and satisfied her hunger, and now she was hurrying back to nurse her cubs.

Just before the door of the cave she caught the scent of the man. The fur rose angrily along her neck and backbone, and she entered in anxious haste. Instantly she came out again, whining and glancing this way and that as if bewildered. Then again she plunged in, sniffed at the place where the kittens had lain, sniffed at the spots where the man's feet had stepped, and darted out once more upon the ledge. But her appearance was very different now. Her eyes blazed, her long and powerful tail lashed furiously, and her fangs were bared to the gums in anguished rage. Lifting her head high, she gave vent to a long scream of summons, piercing and strident. The cry reached her mate and brought him leaping in hot haste from his ambush beside a spring pool where he was waiting for the appearance of some thirsty deer. But it did not reach the ears of the running man, who was at that moment threading a dense coppice far down the valley. Having sent out her call across the wide silence, she waited for no response, but darted down the trail. The tracks of the despoiler were plain to follow, and her nose told her that they were a good half-hour old. She followed them down to the water's edge, out on the rock, and across the torrent. Then she lost them.

When her mate arrived, crouching prudently behind a thick fir bush to reconnoiter before he sprang out into the grass, she was bounding frantically from one side of the stream to the other, her enormously thick tail upstretched stiffly, as a sort of rudder, through the course of each prodigious leap. For a moment or two the pair put their heads together, and the mother apparently succeeded in conveying the situation to her mate in some singularly laconic speech. Almost at once, as it seemed, their plans were completed. The two started down stream, one along each bank. A couple of minutes more, and the man's trail was picked up by the female. A low cry notified the male, and he instantly sprang across and joined her.

It seems probable, from the female's future actions, that the two bereaved animals had now a fairly right idea of what had happened. The absence of blood or sign of disturbance in the den or on the trail conveyed to them the impression that their little ones had been carried off alive; because, to a wild creature, death is naturally associated with blood. It is possible, moreover, that there was nothing so very strange to them in the fact that the man should wish to carry off their cubs alive. What was so precious to themselves might very well be precious to others also. Mother birds, and mother quadrupeds as well, have been known not infrequently to steal one another's young. If, then, the panthers imagined that their kidnapped little ones were still alive, the furious quest on which they now set forth had a double object, vengeance and rescue.



She Soon Rescued the Two Cubs.



For the Sake of Her Offspring She Would Take No Risks with the Man.

They ran one behind the other, the female leading, and they went as noiselessly as blown feathers, for all their bulk. From time to time, being but short winded runners and accustomed rather to brief and violent than to long continued effort, they would pause for breath, sniffing at the trail as it grew rapidly fresher, and seeming to take counsel together. Their pursuit at length grew more stealthy, as they approached the farther side of the timbered valley and realized that their enemy could not now be very far ahead.

The two panthers knew all that it concerned them to know about the man, except his object in robbing them of their little ones. They had often watched him, followed him, studied him, when he little guessed their scrutiny. They knew where he lived, in the cabin with one door and one window, at the back of the stumpy clearing on the side of Burnt Ridge. They knew his wife, the straight, swarthy, hard featured woman who wore always some bright scarlet thing round her neck and on her head. They knew his black and white cow, with the bell at her neck which made sounds they did not like. They knew his yoke of raw-boned red steers, which plowed among the stumps for him in the spring and hauled logs for him laboriously in the winter. They knew the disquieting brilliance that would shine from his window or his open door on nights when all the forest was in darkness. Above all, they knew his incomprehensible power of killing at a distance, viewlessly. On account of this terrible power they had tried to avoid giving him offense. They had refrained from hunting his cow or his steers, they had even respected his foolish, cackling chickens, being resolved in no way to risk drawing down his vengeance upon them. Now, however, it was different.

As the two grim avengers followed the trail, like fleeting shadows, a red doe stepped leisurely into their path before she caught sight of them. For one instant she stood like a stone, petrified with terror. In the next she had vanished over the nearest bushes with such a leap as she had never before achieved. Those grim beasts might have sprung upon her neck almost without effort; but they never even raised a paw against this easy quarry. It was a higher hunting that now engrossed them.

WHEN at length the two running beasts came to the edge of the open ground on the slopes of Burnt Ridge, they hesitated. The female, though the more deadly in the persistence of her hate, was at the same time the more sagacious. First of all, she wanted to recover her cubs. No mere vengeance could be so important to her as that. She shrank back into deeper cover and started off to one side to skirt the dangerous open. But, noticing that her mate was not following her, she stopped and looked back at him inquiringly.

The male, more impetuous and more bent upon mere revenge, showed himself for a moment beyond the fringe of the woods. In that one moment, though it was impossible that he should have detected the man in his hiding across the open, he nevertheless seemed to receive some impression from the man's challenging eyes. He felt that his enemy was there, in that dense clump of young firs. Instantly he dropped upon his belly in the undergrowth, flattening himself to an amazingly inconspicuous figure. Then he began creeping, slowly and with infinite stealth, out across the space of peril, beneath the full, revealing glare of the sun. The female gave vent to a low whimper, trying to call him back. Failing in that, she stood and watched him anxiously.

She could just see his tawny back moving through the light green leafage of the scrub. He was crawling more swiftly now. He had covered nearly half the distance. All at once there came a spurt of flame from the fir thicket and a sharp, cracking report. In the next instant she saw her mate rise straight into the air on his hind legs, clawing sav-

agely. Then he seemed to fall together and tumble over backward.

SHE knew very well what had happened. This was the power of the man. She knew her mate was dead. A further sullen heat was added to her hate; but it did not make her reckless. She ran away down the slope, skirted the open at a safe distance, and closed in once more upon the man's trail a good mile farther on. She had got ahead of the fugitive; for even now she could hear the faint thud-thud of his loping feet. She hid herself far up a tree, some twenty feet from the trail, and waited.

As the man came up, she eyed him with a mingling of mad hatred and anxious question. She saw the bundle on his back writhe violently, and she caught a little growling complaint that came from it. That settled her policy. Had she thought that the cubs were dead, she might have dropped upon the man from her post of vantage. But the cubs were alive. For their sakes she would take no risks with the man.

When he had passed on, she followed at a safe distance. The strange procession crossed the ridge. It neared the clearing and the cabin. At this point the panther heard, some little way back from the trail, the tonk-tonk of a cowbell. There was no need of following the man so very closely for the moment. She swerved aside, ran straight, like a cat going for milk, through the thickets, and with a burst of intolerable fury sprang upon the cow's neck. There was not even a struggle; for the animal's neck was broken before it had time to know what was happening. The desperate mother tore her victim; but ate none of it. Then she hurried on toward the cabin. At least she had tasted some beginnings of vengeance.

As she reached the edge of the clearing and came in sight of the cabin, the man was just entering the door, with the precious bundle in his hands. She saw the door close behind him. At this she whimpered uneasily, and started round to skirt the clearing and come upon the cabin from the rear.

As she went she caught sight of the two red steers feeding in the pasture close by the fence. She crept up, eying them, but too sagacious to reveal herself in the open. As luck would have it, one of the steers at this moment came up close to the fence, to scratch his hide on the knots. With a snarl the panther struck at him through the rails, and drew a long, ragged gash down his flank. Snorting with pain and terror, the steer turned and raced for home, tail in air, and his comrade, taking the alarm, bellowed nervously and followed him.

A few minutes later the man came out of his cabin, followed by his wife. The steers were at the barn door, a place they usually avoided at this season. One of them was shivering and bleeding. The man examined the wound—and understood. Turning to the woman, he said:

"That there's the mother's work. We must hunt her down an' settle her to-morrer, or she'll clean out the farm."

Letting the frightened steers into the barn, he waited anxiously for the tonk-a-tonk of the black and white cow coming home to be milked. When she did not come, that too he understood only too well, and his wide mouth set itself grimly. It looked as if those were going to be an expensive pair of cubs.

After dark, late, the mother stole close up to the cabin. Everything was shut up tight, barn, shed, and house alike. At the doorsill she listened long and intently, like a cat at a mousehole. Her fine ear made out the heavy breathings of the man and the woman within. It also at length distinguished some faint little growlings and gruntings, such as the cubs uttered only when they were well fed. She prowled round the house all night, the pale flame of her savage and anxious eyes glowing upon it from every direction. Then, at the edge of dawn, she stole away, but not far, to a hiding place whence she could command a view of the cabin door. It was within that door that her cubs had vanished.

THE sun was not a half-hour high when the man set forth, and the woman with him, to hunt down the dangerous adversary they had challenged. The woman,

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