

The Panther's Claw

By Mortimer Batten

IT was late that night when Frank Ward left the city and began his journey homewards along the shadowy waterway. A great stillness reigned upon the forest, but there was a taste of snow in the air.

It was Christmas Day—a poor sort of a Christmas Day for Frank. Left a penniless orphan scarcely a year ago, the boy had thrown in his lot with Sam Ravenstone, little knowing what sort of a man his new master would prove.

Since then he had learnt the truth by sad experience. Sam Ravenstone was a new comer to Aura Lake when first their partnership began, but now he had established the name far and wide as the hardest traveller, the hardest fighter, and the hardest drinker north of Minween.

Why did Frank stay with him? The boy himself could not have told you. Perhaps it was because he had learnt to like Sam in spite of his many weaknesses. Reckless daredevil, spendthrift, ne'er-do-well that he was, Sam Ravenstone was one of the most generous men on earth, and the boy had one cherished hope—almost a dead hope now—that some day his partner would pull round, and that Sam's sterling qualities would triumph in the end.

Though the hour was late, Frank did not hurry home. He knew that Sam had spent the night in the city, and he did not relish the thought of his partner's return. Good God—could not something be done to bring the man to his senses?

Frank had uttered the words aloud, but next moment he came to a sudden halt, a cry of alarm on his lips. His eyes were fixed upon a motionless figure lying in the snow, face downwards, a few paces ahead of him. Was it Sam? If so, how long had he been lying there, for a few minutes of such exposure might mean death in this dreadful cold.

The boy hurried forward, and stooped over the motionless form. No, thank God, it was not Sam! It was an Indian. For some moments the boy thought the man was dead. He raised the limp form, and pressed his flask to the red man's lips. The Indian opened his eyes, muttered hoarsely, then tried to rise.

What was wrong with the man Frank did not know. Evidently he had been overtaken by a sudden illness. The boy covered his shivering body as best he could, then kicked off his own snowshoes and slipped the Indian's moccasined feet into them.

"Come on, partner," said Frank. "I can't leave you out here, or you'll die. Guess you'll have to have my bunk to-night."

He half carried, half dragged the red man to their shanty, and pulled him in. To Frank's utter surprise Sam had already arrived home, and was now sleeping soundly in his own bunk. The boy did not wish to waken him, so having fed the Indian on bacon and coffee he helped the red man into his own bunk, he himself occupying a blanket on the floor.

Though Frank was fond of Sam, he nevertheless feared him. He knew that Sam would raise Cain if he found an Indian—and an uncivilized Indian at that—occupying the shanty when he awoke next morning, and accordingly Frank decided that he must get the poor wretch out of the way before Sam awoke.

The Indian needed no rousing, however. He was astir early, and seemed quite himself again. He nodded smilingly to the boy, but though Frank questioned him he gave no explanation as to the cause of his plight last evening. They had breakfast together, then Frank indicated that the red man must go his way before the boss awoke.

The Indian nodded, then he took from his wallet a polished panther claw, prettily stained a bright crimson.

"You carry that, little paleface," he advised, in his own soft lingo. "It bring you good luck. It make you mighty hunter."

Frank understood that it was a token of gratitude. Doubtless he had saved the Indian's life, and evidently the red man knew it. Frank saw now that he was an Indian of some position, probably a chief, for he was well and gaily attired. The man glanced across at the sleeping Sam, then he went two paces nearer and looked down into the sleeper's face. He turned to Frank with the eyes of a pan-

"That man your partner?" he demanded savagely.

Frank nodded. He felt almost ashamed as he met the Indian's eyes—ashamed of being Sam's partner, for Sam had a bad name among the Indians.

The red man said no more, but all the friendship had gone from his eyes. He strode across to the door, but ere he closed it behind him his gaze again sought Sam's face, and the look in his eyes made Frank shudder. It was a murderous look, full of treachery and bitter hatred, the sort of murderous glance that only an Indian could give.

Sam woke with a start that morning, and dressed himself hurriedly. Frank had prepared breakfast, but his partner declared that he did not want any. He had lost something on the trail last night he said, and was going back to look for it. He seemed nervous and excited, and Frank was puzzled at his strange behaviour.

"Should I come along with you?" the boy suggested, but Sam's negative answer was definite enough.

"I'm going alone," he said, "You stay here and get your breakfast."

The boy rose to his feet. "Sam," he said, "don't be a fool if you can help it. It's Christmas time, and you're best away from the city."

"I ain't going near the city!" Sam answered, then he slammed the door and hurried down the trail.

Sam Ravenstone did not waste time on the way. He slipped over the snow at a run, but presently he stopped, a new fear on his face, his eyes fixed on the white expanse ahead. Were those wolf tracks? Yes, by Jupiter they were! Sam was running like a madman now, and every few yards the fatal wolf tracks crossed his path—the tracks of many wolves. At length he reached the spot where Frank had found the Indian lying, and there he paused, his eyes, half frightened, searching the white expanse to right and left.

Yes, here too were the wolf tracks—many of them, but nothing else! Snow had fallen during the night, and great mounds of it were piled up across the frozen creek. Was this the exact spot? Sam hurried on, then slowly came back. He began to search about in the mounds of snow, digging into them with his snowshoes, but every where he turned were the hated wolf tracks.

Suddenly Sam stood upright. It was as though some dreadful realization had dawned upon him. His face was the face of a man who was listening to his own death sentence. Then, as though he had heard it through, he flung himself on his face in the snow. His great shoulders trembled and heaved. He was blubbering like a child!

Sam Ravenstone, hard fighter, hard

drinker, hard gambler, lay motionless in the snow, his face buried in his arms, till the cold warned him to move on. Then he struggled to his feet. He looked down the waterway towards the city, only four miles distant. Should he go back to his friends, and try to forget all? No! He had but one friend, the boy he had left behind at the shanty.

The city! A sudden savage hatred of the place came into Sam's soul.

"No, by heaven, never again!" he cried aloud. "I swear it! By my mother's name I swear it!"

Then, with bowed head, white and trembling, he returned to the shanty.

It was New Year's Day, and Frank Ward was not slow to realise the change that had come over his partner. The Christmas festivities were over, but Sam had not visited the city since Christmas Day. He had been silent, almost morose, yet, since Christmas morning, he had never spoken in the hasty, savage manner with which Frank was so familiar.

Evening came—New Year's Eve—and a number of the boys called at Sam's shanty to bear him away to the city to spend the evening there. Sam met them at the doorway, and they greeted him with a blast of trumpets and mouth-organ, telling him he was quite a stranger.

"Come along and have a good time with the rest of us," they invited, trying to drag him out, but Sam held back.

"I'm not coming boys," he said. "I've done with that sort of thing?"

A wild laugh greeted this statement. "Ain't joined the Band of Hope, are you?" one of them inquired.

"No," answered Sam. "But it's a fool's game anyway. You mark my words."

At that moment Frank appeared at his partner's side. The boy's eyes were blazing savagely, and his teeth were clenched with fierce determination.

"Can't you let a man live clean when he wants to?" he asked bitterly. "Sam's trying to keep straight, and he'll succeed if you swipes will keep away."

He said a good deal more, plainly and savagely, and in fierce backwoods language. To be talked to thus by one who was scarcely more than a child brought a blush of shame to the cheeks of Sam's former pals. Not one of them spoke, not a single word of defence. It was the plain, unblushing truth of what Frank said that stung them most. He cursed their vile gambling dens, their dancing saloons, and all the hateful vice and debauchery associated therewith. It was the speech of a strong minded, straight dealing boy, who above all things on God's earth tried to live clean. It was the speech of the innocent to the guilty, the speech of one fighting for the manhood of someone he loved, fighting to defend his partner, and to his listeners it brought a sad and wistful thought of their own departed boyhood.

They went away with never a word. Down on the creek one of them said—

"Jingo!—that boy ought to have been a priest! Did you ever hear such a flow of language? He made me think of my old mother."

"Then you thought of someone besides yourself," answered another. "That boy told us the truth in a way we never dreamt of. It might have been a woman's tongue. Gee, he made me sweat."

The weeks passed by. The long winter went, summer came. Sam was a stranger at the city in these days. In every sense, he was a changed man. Everyone was talking of it, but why the change had come about, not even Frank knew.

One day the boy was rummaging in his pockets when he came across the polished claw the Indian had given him. "Jingo!" he cried. "The token of good luck. My stars, there must be something in it! I'll buy a gold chain and wear it round my neck."

He went to the city to buy his chain, and when he got back a surprise awaited him. There was Sam with all his luggage piled up at the door, evidently prepared for a long journey.

"Jupiter!" cried the boy. "Where on earth are you going?"

But the expression on Sam's face as their eyes met brought a new fear to the boy's mind. Sam was white as a ghost, and his eyes were indescribably sad.

Sam stretched out a brawny hand and gripped the boy's shoulder. "Sonny," he said in a quiet voice, "I meant to slip away while you were at the city, but I hadn't the heart. I wanted to thank you for all you've done for me, and I tell you that is a great deal. You've helped me to live clean, and by God I'll do it, Frank! I swear I'll do it!"

"What on earth are you getting at?" cried the boy. "Are you mad, Sam?"

"No, sonny, I'm not mad," answered Sam Ravenstone. "I was never more sane. But I'm going to leave you. I'm going right away—Texas, the Yukon, the Gold Coast—somewhere. I hardly know where yet. But I'm going. You will never see me again. But you needn't worry about me. I'm strong enough and clever enough to live anywhere. And I shall live straight."

"In heaven's sake explain yourself," cried the boy. "I don't understand you."

"I will," answered Sam. "But there are heaps of things I want to say first. Let's squat down here and talk the thing out properly."

They squatted down at the edge of the verandah, and a gay little chipmunk scuttled across the turf at their feet.

"The first thing I have to explain is this," Sam began—"that I've left you well provided for. I've made a fair decent pile of money during the last few years, and I've had it transferred to your name. I want you to do what good you can with it—I want you particularly to help the Indians. If you are my friend you will agree to this, and give me your promise."



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