

THE AVENGER

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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 savagely.

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, eyeing 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 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 where 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, who carried a rifle of the same pattern as the man's, was almost as sure a shot as he. The continued absence of the cow, the wound on the red steer's flank, the defiant network of tracks all about the cabin, showed clearly enough that the fight was now to the death. The man and woman knew there would be no security for them so long as the mother panther remained alive. Therefore they were in haste to settle the matter. They picked out a distinct trail and followed it. It led them straight to the body of the slain cow, which the slayer had visited twice in course of the night, just to satisfy her thirst for vengeance.

But at the moment when the two indignant hunters were examining the carcass of the cow the panther was at their cabin door listening. She had seen the man and woman hurry away. Now she could hear quite distinctly the little complainings of her young. She pushed against the heavy door till it creaked; but it would not yield. Close by was the window. Standing up on her hind legs, she stared in. At last she managed to make out the two cubs lying in a corner in a box of rags and straw. The sight scattered all her caution to the winds. Scrambling up to the windowsill, she dashed her head and shoulders through the glass. That the jagged fragments cut her mouth and muzzle severely she never

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