

The Inglenook

Tad and His Panther.

"Did you hear the panther last night, sergeant?" asked Ted, the captain's son.

"No," said the sergeant, as he cut at the top of a sage brush with the loose end of the lariat hanging at his saddle. "I didn't hear it, but it yelled, I guess. Bill Murphy was on guard down at Post No. 2, and he didn't dare walk the length of his beat.

"Let's go to-night and fetch it in," said the boy.

"No—no!"

The soldier rarely spoke in so positive a manner to his younger companion. They had grown to be quite good friends. So Sergeant Gore looked at the trim figure by his side and admired—as a cavalryman would—Tad's posture in the saddle. And then he gazed down the long road to the bluff on the shingly ledges of which the panther they had been speaking of was said to prowl at night and call to the echoes in that fearsome voice.

Gore was a well-born, well-trained young fellow who had enlisted in the ranks of the regular army at a time when penniless and discouraged, as has many another son of a good family. He seemed peculiarly attractive to this boy. Tad admired Gore because he was cleverer than the others. Gore was a better shot and a better horseman and he was the best wrestler in the fort. And there is nothing that so appeals to the soul of the boy as ability in that close struggle of athletes, that embrace of gladiators, out of which comes the triumph of the unarmed hands, the victory of the unaided muscle and skill.

And Tad's father, the captain, had not discouraged an association which gave his son pleasure and seemed so make the lad more manly.

"Couldn't we kill the panther, sergeant?"

"We might and we might not. The last man in this troop who went out to kill a panther came back in a sling between two pack mules; and he didn't get off sick report for three months. Now, see here, Tad, get that wrinkle out of your brain! How would it do for me to risk the captain's son out there on the bluff at night? How would I go to the captain's wife and explain it if—"

"Wouldn't need any explanation if we brought back the panther."

"Or how would I square matters with the captain when the captain's little boy was lying in bed—the surgeon-plaster all over him?"

"Pretty nice thing to kill a panther!"

"Yes; and then—"

"Sergeant, are you afraid of her?"

"I'm not afraid of anything alive," said the sergeant calmly.

"If you are not afraid, why don't you go?"

"We don't do all things we dare to do."

"What, for instance?"

"Well, I dare tell Higgins, when we get to camp that I won't mount guard to-morrow.

"Then why don't you?"

"Because it is my duty to mount guard whenever he details me. He's the orderly sergeant."

"I saw you throw him one time," said Tad, irrelevantly; and then he stopped to laugh at the recollection.

Higgins was a very strong man; and one day in spring, before mounted drill was begun, the soldiers got up a tournament on the parade ground, where the orderly sergeant challenged any one to wrestle. Tad remembered Gore's acceptance and how the bigger man had strutted to the encounter; how the two had gripped to the work, and how presently Gore had caught the huge weight on his hip and had flung the other heels over head in one great sweep and had landed him fairly and finally.

But this was months ago. Tad looked up at the distant bluff while the bugler were blowing retreat, but he stood in "the attitude of a soldier" when the flag came down to the booming of the evening gun. That night he made his bed on the floor of the upper porch and lay there wondering at the stars till long after taps. Time and again he caught himself across the borderland of dreams and it seemed to him the lagging midnight must have passed when the sound for which he waited reached his ears. And then the suddenness of it, the savage strength of the panther's cry, startled the courageous little fellow till his heart was still. The half-human quality of the tone added to the terror of it.

Then his breath came back and with it his daring. And the next time the cry was raised he knew the shingly shelves of the bluff were then a promenade for the panther.

Next night Sergeant Gore was on guard, but the next after he was free; and time and again he wondered where Tad was hiding; for he had not seen the boy since dinner-call.

Lang and Warner were up the gulch with an eight-mule team, and they came in at sun-down with a load of wood. When they had unharnessed the mules Lang found Sergeant Gore stretched on his bunk, trying to read by the afterglow.

"Oh, Gore, here's a note from the captain's kid," said the teamster, Lang, carelessly.

Gore peered at the penciled lines:

Dear Sergeant: I am up on the bluff. If you don't come and get me, may be the panther will.

Tad. A cayuse pony was picketed back of the quartermaster's store, and Sergeant Gore took a turn of the rope around the animal's jaw, leaped to the bare back and

galloped to the hills. He carried his carbine, and a belt of cartridges was buckled about him. And every muscle of his splendid frame quivered; for he loved the captain's son.

Tad had calculated the note might not be delivered until dark; and he crept along the slaty shelves until he found a little recess where the loose earth had been worn away by the wind and rain, and he climbed down there and backed in. About six feet below was a broad ledge which reached far around to the right. By-lying flat 'is face just came to the edge of the narrow shelf, while his feet were pressed to the farthest spaces in his little refuge. He pulled his rifle within easy reaching distance, and then looked out and dared the panther to come.

Straight before him, down the valley, was the fort. He watched the twinkling lights go out in the mess-hall (and knew the belated teamsters arrived in camp.) And his faith was so firm in Sergeant Gore that he never doubted the soldier was coming.

Presently he heard the dull beat of hoofs on the long road. But it was from unshod feet, and not a cavalry horse. That chilled his courage a little. And just as he tried to convince himself that he was wrong, and searched for hope that an army horse and not a pony was galloping toward him, a shriek not fifty feet away rent the wonderful silence of the hills.

His little body was positively lifted

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