

"When there was no danger, Pussy would take a comfortable nap on her cushion."

THE CONSCIENTIOUS CAT.

(By Agnes A. Sandham, in St. Nicholas.)

It was a curious place for a cat—the lonely "Hydraulic Mines," on the crest of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in California. Where she came from, no one could tell. My acquaintance with her was made in a singular and altogether startling manner. It was in this wise: I was visiting the mines, and, under the guidance of the superintendent, had just passed over the brow of a great hill crowned with a thick growth of magnificent sugar pines, when suddenly we came upon the Hydraulic Mines—so lonely, so dreary, so utterly uninviting in appearance and situation, that I could not help asking, "Could anything but a gold-hunting man be induced to live in such a place?"

"Wait and see," replied the superintendent as he walked in the direction of a rough shanty used by the miners as a place of shelter.

Just then I was startled at seeing a white cat come dashing toward us at full speed, her tail puffed out to an enormous size, and apparently pursued by a number of men armed with picks and crowbars.

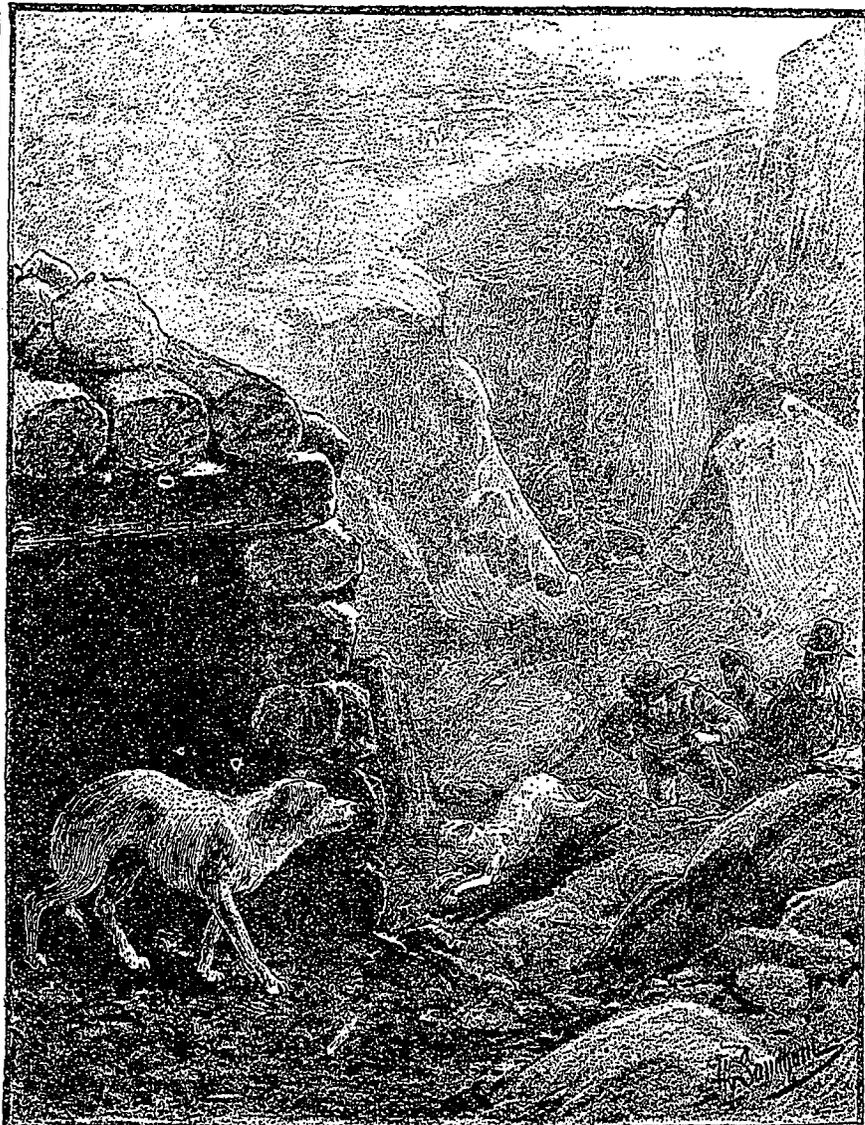
Full of sympathy for the poor cat making such a wild race for her life, I glanced toward the shanty which must be her only refuge. As I did so a dog's head was thrust cautiously out—only the head—and then stopped. Round the corner of the hut dashed the flying cat, and, before the dog's head could be drawn in, there came a violent collision, and a perfect storm of howls and hisses which marked the meeting of the angry cat and the much astonished dog. In spite of my sympathy, I could not help laughing heartily at this ludicrous collision—and my laugh was echoed by the cruel men who, as I supposed, were chasing poor pussy with murderous designs. But my laughter was suddenly cut short as I saw what seemed to be the great mountain sliding directly upon me, and, following the example of the cat, I turned and fled for shelter to the hut, while the men redoubled their laughter.

"What in the world is the matter?" I asked, perplexed alike by the cat, the rushing men, and the moving mountain.

And then, with many jokes and much laughter, the whole matter was explained.

It appears that one cold and stormy night, about a year before my visit to the mines, the men were startled by a pitiful mewing outside the camp. One of the miners, following up the sound of distress, soon returned with a most forlorn and miserable-looking kitten, more dead than alive. How she came to that desolate camp and where she came from was a mystery, but the miners, naturally tender-hearted, and welcoming anything that brought a change in the monotony of their daily life, took pity on the foundling and at once adopted her. Perhaps, too, the sight of such a home-body as a cat, away off in that desolate spot, brought back memories of their boyhood and the old homes far to the east and called up, for all of them, a picture of the happy childhood days before the fever of adventure had led them so far from the dear old home in the mad race for gold.

Well, whatever their thoughts, they adopted the cat and made her so warm and comfortable, with plenty of milk to drink and a warm fire to curl before, that pussy was soon purring away as contentedly as if she had never been a homeless wanderer.



"A white cat dashed toward us apparently pursued by a number of men."

There is no such thing as stopping work in the mines. Day and night the work goes on, and the men are divided into day and night gangs, each of which works for a certain length of time, relieving the other at regular intervals. So it happened that pussy, dozing before the fire, was aroused by a stir in the room, and glancing up saw the miner who had rescued and cared for her preparing to go out to his work. Determined not to lose sight of her preserver, she jumped up and followed him. When the men arrived at their destination, pussy at once took up her position near her friend and carefully watched the proceedings.

A hydraulic mine, my young readers must know, is one in which water is made to take the part of pick and shovel. A tremendous pressure forces the water through a great iron pipe three or four feet in diameter, and sends it in a torrent against the bank of earth in which the gold is hidden. This mighty stream of water washes away the bank and brings it caving and tumbling down, while it separates the gold from the gravel, and with the occasional assistance of blasting powder does a vast amount of mining work.

It was at one of these hydraulic mines that the fugitive cat had found friends; and as after several visits she lay watching their operations, she seemed to reason it all out in her own mind that as soon as

the great earth-bank opposite her showed signs of giving way under the action of the water forced against it, the men would rush for shelter to the shanty near by, to which, of course, she too would scamper to escape the falling earth. So, reasoned pussy, if these kind friends of mine are always in danger from these tumbling-down banks, why cannot I, in return for their kindness, watch the earth-banks and give them proper warning?

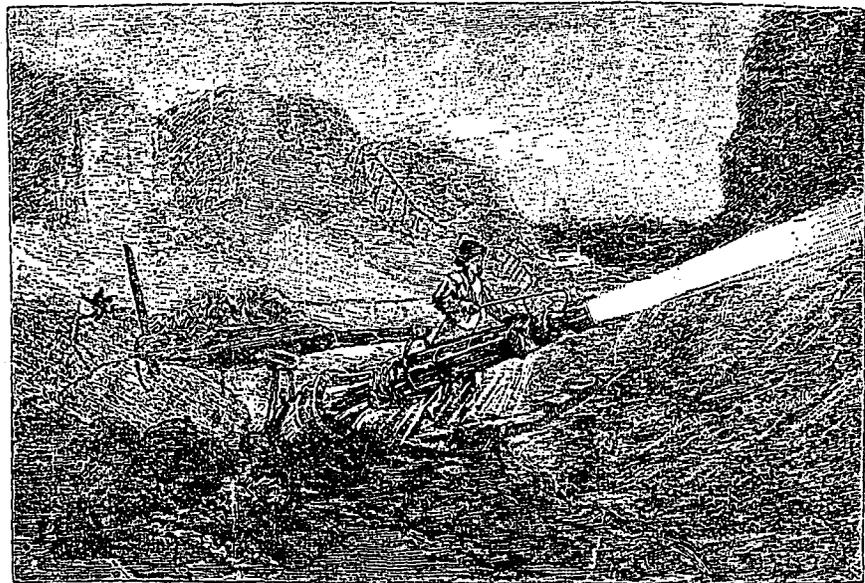
Now, as you all know, there is nothing a cat dislikes so much as water; just watch your kitty shake her paws daintily when she steps into a puddle, and see how disgusted she is if a drop of water falls on her nose or back. But this Sierra Nevada pussy was a most conscientious cat. She felt that it was her duty to make some sacrifice for her friends; and so, after thinking it all over, she took her place right on top of the nozzle of the "monitor" (as the

like a flash with all the miners at her heels until they all reached the shelter of the hut. So faithfully did she perform her self-imposed task that, in a little while, the men gave up their precaution of keeping one eye on the dangerous slide and waited for pussy to give the signal. As soon as they saw her spring down from the comfortable bed which the miners had made for her on the "monitor," they would all cry, "The cat; the cat!" and start on a run for the shanty. And it was at just such a moment that I came to the mine and encountered this most conscientious cat leading her friends to safety.

She soon learned also to distinguish between the various phases of hydraulic mining; and when the "monitor" was being used simply for washing the gold or for general "cleaning up" purposes, she knew that there was no danger, and would serenely close her eyes and take a comfortable nap on her cushion, regardless of what was going on around her, until by some strange instinct she knew that the "monitor" was turned upon the bank again, and was awake and watchful in an instant. Her very color, too, was a help to her friends, as, being a white cat, she served on dark nights as a guide to the men who came to relieve the gang to which pussy belonged, and which no consideration would induce her to desert.

Now, it happened that about the time of pussy's appearance at the mine a very unprepossessing mongrel pup had been left at the camp, as not worth taking away, and so he too was adopted by the kind-hearted miners. But alas! the dog proved as great a coward as the cat was a heroine. His only thought was to look out for number one, and he did that so thoroughly that when he too had learned that a sudden move on the part of the men meant danger, he would scud into the hut in an agony of fear, and, like the dastardly dog he was, retreat into the farthest corner with his tail between his legs. Evidently, when I first made his acquaintance, he had not heard them rushing toward the hut and had thus been caught napping, and hence the collision I had witnessed. He was such a good-for-nothing that they called him "Tailings"—which also means the refuse gravel and dirt out of which every speck of gold has been taken. And in such awe did he stand of pussy that, though they took their meals together, "Tailings" always waited until pussy had finished before he presumed to take a bite, wagging his tail until the ground was swept clean, and whining meanwhile with hunger and impatience. Once, and once only, he endeavored to assert himself and take a bite before his betters. Pussy stopped eating, looked the culprit sternly in the eye, and then, slowly lifting her paw, brought it down with a sudden blow exactly in the centre of the dog's nose. "Tailings" gave such a howl that the miners thought the whole mountain was caving in, and rushed out to see what was the matter. Pussy went on calmly finishing her dinner, and "Tailings" never again presumed to eat at the first table, or rebel against Pussy's rules.

You don't know, boys and girls, how greatly this story of the miner's cat pleased me. All my life I had been taught to look upon the dog as the type of nobility, faith-



The "Monitor" at work.