

THAT PANTHER TRACK.

I had come to that far Texan wilderness, where panthers are still afoot, some months before, lured by tales of the wild adventure and sudden wealth the wilderness lavished so freely, in the early days, upon her adopted children.

My camp was many miles from the headquarters of the ranch and I lived there month after month in charge of a flock of sheep. I knew no human companionship other than that sparsely bestowed upon me by the foreman on his weekly rounds of inspection. It was my daily wont to graze the sheep away for two or three miles in the morning, let them rest at noon and drift slowly campward as the evening shadows lengthened.

Long before the break of one of those long, dry, breeze-freshened sun warmed days which make the weather of western Texas, my camp fire was blazing. By sunrise my breakfast of venison and flap-jacks was finished. When the clear twilight of the dawn brightened with the first sunshine the sheep commenced to leave their bedding-ground, and I, stirred up the stragglers and commenced the long drill of herding. It is a strange art, the controlling of eighteen hundred rascal wethers. After an hour or so of careful work I had the sheep under control, deployed abreast, as is the skirmish line in a mimic battle, and, as I walked back and forth in front of them, the rearmost straggler was within reach of the scare of a stone whirled from my Mexican sling; a weapon that might well have served for the braining of a giant. As the sun grew warm I brought the flock to the margin of the water-hole I had chosen for our nooning place. As the sheep caught the smell of the water the leaders broke away with the whole flock trailing in thirsty rabble after them.

It is not for a tenderfoot to hold the long wings of the bleating phalanx at the waters edge until he gives the word to drink: Such obedience is only found in the flock of him whose sling-thongs, girt about his loins, are worn smooth from the chafe of years of wandering with his flock, whose speech is slow and infrequent or breaks in unsteady floods of unpent garrulity, whose solitude is so dear to him that he will not keep a dog. His sheep obey as far as each may hear the various queer, long-drawn calls, as does a cavalry horse his bugle.

As the sheep drank their fill and trailed slowly up to the welcome shade of the great live-oak, I strayed to the far side of the water hole to fill my canteen beyond the muddy trample and there, in the soft earth at the water's edge, I saw that panther track!

There was no dozing in the shade of the great live oaks for me that day. What a mad thirst for blood! What thrilling hope for a chance meeting with the beast! What wild schemes for tracking him to his lair! What an ecstasy of excitement as I stood in the blaze of the dry-country sun beside that panther track.

Ah me! and yesterday, running a land-line across the open prairie, with compass and tripod over my shoulder and eye fixed upon a distant object, I all but trod on one of the great cats where he lay watching a cow with a young calf; and this with such sad dearth of thrill that my eye never wavered, lest I should lose the course, until I had set up the instrument and brought it to bear upon my sight.

In the evening, when I had led the sheep to within half a mile of camp, I left them grazing, in such demure order as one may see when a parading regiment stands at ease. When I had dug up my pot of beans and had set the bread to bake in the dutch oven and the coffee pot to simmer on a rake of coals, I went clear of the cover of the cedar-brake to have a look at the incoming

flock and to watch, as they melted in the blue of the dry country sky, the changing sunset lights—faint and intangible as the under-lights in the eyes of a young girl, yet something more, and fairer than the blue. And as the sunlight faded and the stars took heart, there fell the evening hush of the wilderness, that comes between the dying of the day and the waking of the night, while the sheep bells tinkled softly and the camp-smoke rose with the brooding curl of incense.

But as I stood there, thrilled with the charm of that sweet hour, there came a sudden wild wrangle of the sheep bells, a surf-like roll of the trampling feet and a rush of heaving gray as the stampeded flock swept past me towards the bedding-ground.

"The Panther!" I cried, aloud, though I well knew that a bramble caught in the wool of a young wether is quite enough to spread headlong terror through the flock. Loosening my six-shooter in its scabbard, I walked briskly about the flock, calling and singing and whistling with a queer straining for a calm that should soothe the frightened sheep. In a few minutes they were still, and with an odd taste in bedding were seeking places on the many rough, flat rocks for which we had chosen the bedding-ground.

As I poured a handful of coffee into the simmering pot there came from far up the valley I had followed campward, a long, plaintive call, as of one at loss. Raising quickly, startled by a sound so rare in that far wilderness I shouted in answer. In a moment the call sounded again, and nearer. Thinking my voice might not have carried so far, I drew my pistol and fired in the air.

There was a quick huddling of the sheep. The echo of the shot had scarcely died when again came the cry. A traveler, catching the answer to his call, would ride in silence. And the mournful plaint of it! As of the cry of a child! Then I knew the panther was trailing the way I had come.

In the dense cover of the cedars the dark of the star-lit night showed black and fearful beyond the light of my fire. The brute might crawl to within leaping distance before I could see him. I felt that he would attack me on the side farthest from the flock. Heightening the blaze with fagots of dry cedar, I set the bleached buffalo skull, that served me for a seat, within the doorway of the tent and sat there with the heavy pistol in my hand.

A shot at the leaping form? and in the dark? It would be useless! But a stout blow with the axe? Yes! and then the knife! And so I set the axe-helve against my knee and drawing the sheath of my bowie to the front, loosened the great knife in it and again sat listening, with the six-shooter ready beside me and the winchester laid in front. And then, while my strained ears caught every breath of the night and the sobbing of the whip will's-widow beat upon them with blows as of the sound of breakers falling in the calm that follows storm and the rustling of each small child of night set my hands gripping at the axe-helve, my knees went all aquiver with a sudden trembling and a damp sweat broke out upon me.

"Man!" I cried, springing to my feet, —though in truth no man was there—"are you afraid?" and, at that, shoving my pistol into its scabbard, I walked out around the restless flock, that glowed faintly with eye-shine, in the dim light, as does a southern sea when the night breeze stirs the phosphorescence.

Rolling a cigarette as I walked, I whistled an old frontier melody that my sheep knew as a babe knows its mother's lullaby. I heard the cry no more until the sheep were still and I had come back to camp, and then it rose again, a flood of boy's bravado swelling up from the ebb of the fear that had left me and

I cried out to the brute with taunting words and could have dared him to bare-handed combat.

And as I stood so there came from near by in the gloom of the brake a well known gasping cry of the cat owl—that villian mocker of the night—"Hkyake! Hkyake!"

"Cake!" quoth I, queerly, "By jove! You've won it!"

RIDGWAY VAN BLARCOM.

"My dear," said the editor's wife to her husband, "I want \$20 to pay for my new bonnet. It is a perfect poem."

"I never pay for poems," replied the brute of a man. —The Decliner.

Hewitt—I don't dare cross the street just now, I'm afraid I shall be run over. Jewett—There's only one carriage coming.

Hewitt—I know it, but a woman is driving. —The Roadster.

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