

X

THE glimmer of gray dawn at last and he had never moved from his seat. A fine, drizzling rain had set in. Clouds of mist brushed against the walls of his cabin. In the stillness he could hear the big trees shedding their drops from leaf to bending leaf and the musical tinkle of these as they took their last leap into little pools below.

With the chilliness which misery brings he got up at last and wrapped his weather-coat about him. If it were only day when he could go to his work and try to forget! Restless, sleepless, unable to read, tired of sitting, driven on by the desire to get rid of his own thoughts, he started out to walk.

As he passed his school-house he noticed that the door of it, always fastened by a simple latch, now stood open; and he went over to see if everything inside were in order. All his life, when any trouble had come upon him, he had

quickly returned to his nearest post of duty like a soldier; and once in the school-room now, he threw himself down in his chair with the sudden feeling that here in his familiar work he must still find his home—the home of his mind and his affections—as so long in the past. The mere aspect of the poor bare place had never been so kind. The very walls appeared to open to him like a refuge, to enfold themselves around him with friendly strength and understanding.

He sat at the upper end of the room, gazing blankly through the doorway at the gray light and clouds of white mist trailing. Once an object came into the field of his vision. At the first glimpse he thought it a dog—long, lean, skulking, prowling, tawny—on the scent of his tracks. Then the mist passed over it. When he beheld it again it had approached nearer and was creeping rapidly toward the door. His listless eyes grew fascinated by its motions—its litheness, suppleness, grace, stealth, exquisite caution. Never before had he seen a dog with the step of a cat. A second time the fog closed over it, and then, advancing right out of the cloud with more

swiftness, more cunning, its large feet falling as lightly as flakes of snow, the weight of its huge body borne forward as noiselessly as the trailing mist, it came straight on. It reached the hickory block, which formed the doorstep; it paused there an instant, with its fore quarters in the doorway, one fore foot raised, the end of its long tail waving; and then it stole just over the threshold and crouched, its head pressed down until its long, whitish throat lay on the floor; its short, jagged ears set forward stiffly like the broken points of a javelin; its dilated eye blazing with steady green fire—as still as death. And then with his blood become as ice in his veins from horror and all the strength gone out of him in a death-like faintness, the schoolmaster realized that he was face to face unarmed with a cougar, gaunt with famine and come for its kill.

This dreaded animal, the panther or painter of the backwoodsman, which has for its kindred the royal tiger and the fatal leopard of the Old World, the beautiful ocelot and splendid unconquerable jaguar of the New, is now rarely found in the Atlantic States or the fastnesses of the Alleghanies. It too has crossed the

Mississippi and is probably now best known as the savage puma of more southern zones. But a hundred years ago it abounded throughout the Western wilderness, making its deeper dens in the caverns of mountain rocks, its lair in the impenetrable thickets of bramble and brakes of cane, or close to miry swamps and watery everglades; and no other region was so loved by it as the vast game park of the Indians, where reigned a semi-tropical splendour and luxuriance of vegetation and where, protected from time immemorial by the Indian hunters themselves, all the other animals that constitute its prey roved and ranged in unimaginable numbers. To the earliest Kentuckians who cut their way into this, the most royal jungle of the New World, to wrest it from the Indians and subdue it for wife and child, it was the noiseless nocturnal cougar that filled their imaginations with the last degree of dread. To them its cry—most peculiar and startling at the love season, at other times described as like the wail of a child or of a traveller lost in the woods—aroused more terror than the nearest bark of the wolf; its stealth and cunning more than the strength and courage and address

of the bear; its attack more than the rush of the majestic, resistless bison, or the furious pass with antlers lowered of the noble, amber-eyed, infuriated elk. Hidden as still as an adder in long grass of its own hue, or squat on a log, or amid the foliage of a sloping tree, it waited around the salt licks and the springs and along the woodland pathways for the other wild creatures. It possessed the strength to kill and drag a heifer to its lair; it would leap upon the horse of a traveller and hang there unshaken, while with fang and claw it lacerated the hind quarters and the flanks—as the tiger of India tries to hamstring its nobler, unmanageable victims; or let an unwary bullock but sink a little way in a swamp and it was upon him, rending him, devouring him, in his long agony.

Some hunter once had encamped at the foot of a tree, cooked his supper, seen his fire die out and lain down to sleep, with only the infinite solitude of the woods for his blanket, with the dreary, dismal silence for his pillow. Opening his eyes to look up for the last time at the peaceful stars, what he perceived above him were two nearer stars set close together, burn-

ing with a green light, never twinkling. Or another was startled out of sleep by the terrible cry of his tethered horse. Or after a long, ominous growl, the cougar had sprung against his tent, knocking it away as a squirrel would knock the thin shell from a nut to reach the kernel; or at the edge of the thicket of tall grass he had struck his foot against the skeleton of some unknown hunter, dragged down long before.

To such adventures with all their natural exaggeration John Gray had listened many a time as they were recited by old hunters regarding earlier days in the wilderness; for at this period it was thought that the cougar had retreated even from the few cane-brakes that remained unexplored near the settlements. But the deer, timidest of animals, with fatal persistence returns again and again to its old-time ranges and coverts long after the bison, the bear, and the elk have wisely abandoned theirs; and the cougar besets the deer.

It was these stories that he remembered now and that filled him with horror, with the faintness of death. His turn had come at last, he said; and as to the others, it had come without

warning. He was too shackled with weakness to cry out, to stand up. The windows on each side were fastened; there was no escape. There was nothing in the room on which he could lay hold—no weapon or piece of wood, or bar of iron. If a struggle took place, it would be a clean contest between will and will, courage and courage, strength and strength, the love of prey and the love of life.

It was well for him that this was not the first time he had ever faced death, as he had supposed; and that the first thought that had rushed into his consciousness before returned to him now. That thought was this: that death had come far too soon, putting an end to his plans to live, to act, to succeed, to make a great and a good place for himself in this world before he should leave it for another. Out of this a second idea now liberated itself with incredible quickness and spread through him like a living flame: it was his lifelong attitude of victory, his lifelong determination that no matter what opposed him he must conquer. Young as he was, this triumphant habit had already yielded him its due result: that growth of character which arises silently within us, built up

out of a myriad nameless elements—beginning at the very bottom of the ocean of unconsciousness; growing as from cell to cell, atom to atom—the mere dust of victorious experience—the hardening deposits of the ever-living, ever-working, ever-rising will; until at last, based on eternal quietude below and lifting its wreath of palms above the waves of life, it stands finished, indestructible, our inward rock of defence against every earthly storm.

Soon his face was worth going far to see. He had grown perfectly calm. His weakness had been followed by a sense of strength wholly extraordinary. His old training in the rough athletics of the wilderness had made him supple, agile, wary, long-winded. His eyes had never known what it was to be subdued; he had never taken them from the cougar.

Keeping them on it still, he rose slowly from the chair, realizing that his chances would be better if he were in the middle of the room. He stepped round in front of his table and walked two paces straight forward and then paused, his face as white, as terrible, as death. At the instant of his moving he could see the

tense drawing in of all the muscles of the cougar and the ripple of its skin, as its whole body quivered with excitement and desire; and he knew that as soon as he stopped it would make its spring.

With a growl that announces that all hiding and stealth are over, the leap came. He had thrown his body slightly forward to meet it with the last thought that whatever happened he must guard his throat. It was at this that the cougar aimed, leaping almost perpendicularly, its widespread fore feet reaching for his shoulders, while the hind feet grasped at his legs. The under part of its body being thus exposed, he dealt it a blow with all his strength—full in the belly with his foot, and hurled it backward. For a second it crouched again, measuring him anew, then sprang again. Again he struck, but this time the fore feet caught his arm as they passed backward; the sharp, retractile nails tore their way across the back and palm of his hand like dull knives and the blood gushed. Instantly the cougar leaped upon the long, wooden desk that ran along one side of the room, and from that advantage, sprang again; but he bent his body low so that it passed clean

over him. Instantly it was upon his desk at his back; and before he could more than recover his balance and turn, it sprang for the fourth time. He threw out his arm to save his throat, but the cougar had reached his left shoulder, struck its claws deep into his heavy coat; and with a deafening roar sounding close in his ears, had buried its fangs near the base of his neck, until he heard them click as they met through his flesh.

He staggered, but the desk behind caught him. Straightening himself up, and grappling the panther with all his strength as he would a man, he turned with it and bent it over the sharp edge of the ponderous desk, lower, lower, trying to break its back. One of the fore feet was beginning to tear through his clothing, and straightening himself up again, he reached down and caught this foot and tried to bend it, break it. He threw himself with all his force upon the floor, falling with the cougar under him, trying to crush it. He staggered to his feet again, but stepped on his own blood and fell. And then, feeling his blood trickling down his breast and his strength going, with one last effort he put up his hands and seizing the

throat, fastened his fingers like iron rivets around the windpipe. And then — with the long, loud, hoarse, despairing roar with which a man, his mouth half full of water, sinks far out in the ocean — he fell again.

XI

It was ten o'clock that morning of mid-May. The rain was over. Clouds and mists were gone, leaving an atmosphere of purest crystal. The sun floated a globe of gold in the yielding blue. Above the wilderness on a dead tree-top, the perch of an eagle now flashing like a yellow weather-vane, a thrush poured the spray-like far-falling fountain of his notes over upon the bowed woods. Beneath him the dull green domes of the trees flashed as though inlaid with gems, white and rose. Under these domes the wild grapevines, climbing the forest arches as the oak of stone climbs the arches of a cathedral, filled the ceiling and all the shadowy spaces between with fresh outbursts of their voluptuous dew-born fragrance. And around the rough-haired Satyr feet of these vines the wild hyacinth, too full of its own honey to stand, fell back on its couch of moss waiting to be visited by the singing bee.

The whole woods emerged from the cloudy