

Selman's Panther Cub.

By H. MORTIMER BATTEN.

EXTENDING for a hundred yards or so, directly opposite the door of our forest-marooned shanty, was a straight, narrow avenue, carpeted with fresh green moss and short grass, and with flowering bushes on either side. We were proud of this natural avenue—Selman and I; just as proud of it as most people are of any one little beauty spot on their estate. It was there that I bagged my first cub, late one autumn evening when the huge brute sauntered casually out of the forest to sample the fresh young ferns. It was there, too, that the little grey squirrels delighted to gambol on moonlight nights, flitting from shadow to shadow, from tree to tree, like pixies among the dew-laden flowers.

The day's work done, there was nothing pleasanter than to sit at the door of the shanty opposite this avenue, with sleeves rolled up and pipe well going, and listen while the murmur of daytime gave way to the restless sounds of night—the thousand and one weird woodland noises that come from nowhere and vanish into nothingness.

On this particular evening I had sat in my usual place for about ten minutes, when Selman suddenly burst through the undergrowth at the end of the clearing and came hastening towards me. He had left home early that morning, and it was now sunset. That something was out of order I knew directly I caught sight of him. There was nothing of the easy backwoods slouch about the way he came. His steps were quick and cautious, while every few yards he stopped and peered into the thickets all round. Finally he broke into a run, keeping in the centre of the pathway, till he reached my side.

It was then that I guessed the reason for his strange behaviour. The stout canvas bag he was carrying over his left hip contained something alive—something very much alive, if kicking and whimperings are to be taken as signs. I fastened the leather loops, whereupon the prettiest little panther cub I had ever seen wriggled half out of the bag and dug its claws into my wrist by way of introduction. The fur of his body was soft, and like velvet, to the touch his limbs were plump and rounded, somewhat resembling those of a squirrel; while in his eye was a look of vague wonderment, expressive of a desire to see all that was going on. Such was the first impression I conceived regarding Selman's puna cub, which, by the way, was a very distinctive factor in the story I am about to relate.

"Where did you find the little beast?" I queried.

In a few words Selman told me. It appeared that he had been watching the two parent panthers for some time. Today he had discovered their fair, containing the solitary cub, in the depths of a deep waterway eighteen miles from the hut. Convinced that the parents were not at home, he had promptly annexed the youngster, and then hastened away from the place like a boy with a bag of stolen apples. Selman, however, was not quite so careless as the average sportsman. At times he waded naked down along the beds of mountain streams, hoping by such means to throw the old panthers off the trail, should they follow him. His efforts failed, however. Once he saw something move among the rocks to his left, but even as he looked the object seemed to vanish into the solid wall of granite. Taking steady aim, he fired, and the male panther shot into the air like a steel spring and fell in a heap—dead. That the female was somewhere near, and would continue to follow him in spite of his potent manifestation of the peril such a course would entail he was fully convinced.

"I saw her once or twice," he informed me, "but couldn't get a shot. I guess she will be paying us a visit before long."

"How much do you expect to get for the cub?" I asked.

Selman said that an animal dealer had made him a tempting offer of seventy dollars for a half-grown panther cub. "The youngster will just be a nice companion for you and Celt," he added.

Celt was our large, shaggy-haired hound.

"We aren't in particular need of a companion," I objected. "And, anyhow, I reckon you've been asking for trouble for the lot of us."

Selman acknowledged the receipt of this information with a self-contented nod, and proceeded to fondle the kitten between his two great hands. We filled the little creature up with warm milk till it resembled a Rugby football and was incapable of any further sound than an occasional sleepy grunt. After that we made it a bed in a butter-firkin, much to the disgust of Celt, whose attitude towards the cub was one of complete disdain—as usually assumed by an elderly dog towards a member of the feline tribe.

"What's up?" came the sleepy response. "Listen, and you'll know," I growled. "Get up and feed that wretched kitten!"

Selman's reply slipped into a snore half-way. The cub renewed its exertions, crying out in the most doleful strain imaginable, till at last the noise proved too much for even Selman's artistic taste.

In the shack it was quite dark, but outside the moon shone dimly through the background of pine trees. In the dimness I saw my companion sit up and stoop to pull on his socks, while the noise in the butter-firkin grew in volume every second. Selman answered the sound with occasional angry grunts, but suddenly his body became rigid and he remained in a stooping position. At the same instant Celt began to growl savagely, as a dog growls when an enemy approaches his bed.

"By Jingo!" muttered Selman, in a low tone. He said it deliberately and softly. A tense stillness followed. "By Jingo!" he repeated. "Just look at that!"

There was only one direction in which I could look with any real result—namely, towards the window. Lowering my head to avoid the dark background of trees, I looked. The next instant I

merely he did so the head of the panther dived down out of sight. For all her business she was in no mood to take risks.

The cub was duly re-filled and silence reigned again. I fell asleep with the sinister vision we had seen at the window haunting my mind, to dream that I rode a giant porcupine across an endless desert, with a huge grey panther crouching at either side, waiting with cunning glances for me to fall from my prickly mount.

Selman was half-dressed when I awoke in the morning. He opened the door and went out. Presently he returned, scratching his head, a puzzled look on his face.

"It strikes me," he said, pausing in order that his words should gain their full significance, "that the old panther will soon know a blamed sight more about you and me than happens to be convenient."

I got up and followed him through the door. All round the hut the grass had been trodden flat into a narrow pathway. Below the window on the wood-work were a number of pug marks, which showed clearly that the panther had several times stood up with her fore-paws on the sill and looked in. A number of white hairs sticking to the ground opposite the door bore evidence that she had more than once crouched to listen and sniff beneath the panels. There were marks, also, showing that she had taken full stock of the cowshed, and I felt very glad that I had left the place securely locked.

After an early breakfast, we set off with rifles to hunt the panther down, leaving the hut locked, and determined to accomplish our aim before nightfall. We knew that it would be unnecessary to extend the limits of our hunting-ground far beyond the shack, as the mother panther was not likely to go away while she knew where the cub was. Misfortune beset us at an early stage, however. While still within a hundred yards of the shack, Celt set off in full cry after a rabbit that bolted across the avenue in front of us. We always let him go on such occasions, for a rabbit was invariably a useful constituent to the stew-pot. For a matter of thirty or forty yards we heard him crashing through the undergrowth; then it seemed that he suddenly stopped dead, and silence followed.

"He's got it," I remarked, and turned to follow the dog through the undergrowth, intent on securing the quarry. Selman laid a restraining hand on my arm.

"Wait!" he said, grimly. "Then" he called the dog by name, but not the rustling of a leaf responded.

Slowly it dawned upon me what had happened. I knew the nature of the tragedy that had taken place beneath the shelter of those trees as well as if I had seen it all with my own eyes.

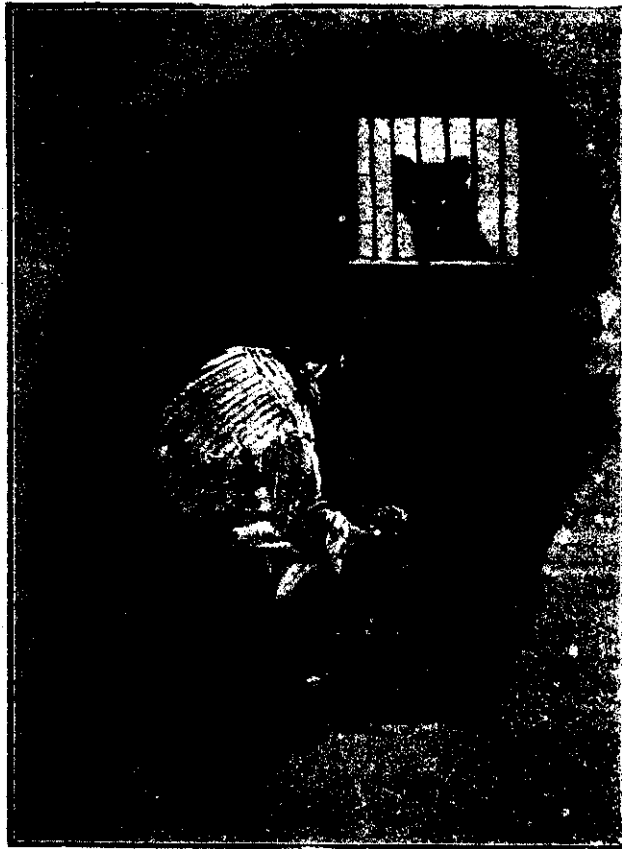
Separating to left and right and moving with infinite caution, we made a slight detour, meeting at the spot where the sounds of the chase had ceased. It was there that we found the remains of Celt, which we laid without delay in the little burial ground under the maple tree near to the hut. I suppose every shack, however crude, has its burial ground.

One comfort we had was that Celt had met with a far more merciful death than the ordinary course of Nature could ever have meted out for him. An animal with a crumpled crown, a broken neck, and a fractured spine does not linger long in the stages intervening between life and death. And thus the mother panther procured her first taste of revenge.

"It's going to prove a pretty dear cub of yours," I said, sympathetically, our sorry task completed, though afterwards I despaired myself for "rubbing it in."

Our hunt for that day was somewhat disorganised. We had now to rely solely on our own eyes and hearing to track the panther down. In the vicinity of the shack the trails were so abundant that it was impossible to follow any particular one. All the time, while we were dodging from cover to cover, I experienced an unpleasant sensation that the paggher was hunting us as doggedly as we were hunting her, and only awaiting a chance to drop on us from the trees. The idea was not a cheering one, following closely, as it did, on the gruesome example we had witnessed of the brute's handwork.

That night we left the kitten to go hungry, hoping that its cries would attract the mother to the window, which we left open in readiness. Selman took first watch, but the persistent cries that came from the vicinity of the butter-firkin made sleep for me almost impos-



"The mother panther was taking stock of our stronghold!"

Just before darkness I went out to look up the shanty in which our old milk cow was imprisoned at night-time. I executed the task with unusual care, for it struck me that an outraged mother panther would not be above wreaking her vengeance on an unoffensive cow in the absence of a more satisfactory medium. On returning to the hut I found Selman busily engaged in examining the slender iron bars on the outside of the window. I took the hut without comment, for, like most men who are used to living under an almost eternal canopy of risk, my companion usually kept quiet concerning matters of personal safety, leaving other people to use their own discretion. Nevertheless, the incident impressed me to no small extent, for I knew from past experience that when Selman began to get "nervy" trouble of some sort was to be seriously expected.

At nine o'clock we turned in, and at about ten the cub awoke, smitten with a severe attack of home-sickness. One would never have thought so small an animal could make so much noise.

"Selman!" I snorted.

experienced a somewhat unpleasant thrill. Peering through the dark window were two glowing points of light, that appeared to be floating midway upon the curtain of blackness. Then, hid by me, I discerned two delicately-pointed ears protruding from an evenly-rounded head in which the glowing oris were set, pressed against the window bars. The mother panther was just taking stock of our stronghold!

"Told you she'd be sniffing round," said Selman, in the same even tone. "We'll have to shoot her to-morrow."

"If we can," I added, knowing that the savage mother was likely to adopt more cunning methods than to expose herself to rifle-fire.

All this time the great cat stared in at us without twitching a muscle. Probably she was gazing at Celt, who lay directly within her line of vision, and it occurred to me that the dog would meet with a warm reception if ever he chanced upon the puna by himself. Certainly she would regard him as one of the marauders who had brought about her bereavement.

Adelinet Selman took to his feet. "Just