

in the shingles overhead. Mary realised that the panther was giving his attention to the chimney; she knew that he was circling about it, and now and then pausing, no doubt to rear his sinewy length against it. The wide mouth offered ample entrance room for such an intruder. The few smouldering embers on the hearth would not check him.

Again the baby cried, and close upon the sound bits of mortar came rattling down the chimney into the fireplace. It was plain that the panther, attracted by the child's crying, was trying to make an entrance by way of the chimney. The falling mortar suggested that he was already testing the steep sides with his formidable claws.

Mary's eyes flew to the loaded musket, hanging on the wall within reach. Like all girls in pioneer households, she could use a gun with a fair amount of dexterity; but even as she moved to take it down, doubt caused her to hesitate. If she shot up the chimney at the possible intruder, she was more than likely to miss, and before she could reload, the infuriated creature might be upon her. If she waited for his descent, she must shoot to kill. There would be no chance for a second shot.

She ran back into the bedroom, where the baby's fretful crying had begun again. Mistress Murray, seeing by the light of the candle what Mary carried, the white determination of the girl's face, needed to ask no questions. 'Mary!' she gasped. She lifted herself on her elbow, cast a terrified glance toward the cradle, and then fell back in a dead faint.

Snatching the pillow from beneath the unconscious head, Mary closed and bolted the door on the fainting woman and the crying child. She had no time to weigh methods. Again the rattling mortar told what the big cat was about.

Mary caught her father's hunting knife from the nail where it dangled and slashed the heavy linen cover of the pillow. Then upon the ashes of the dying fire she emptied the contents of the case. The gleaming white goose feathers fell like snow upon the smoldering embers. In an instant a cloud of smoke was ascending the chimney, and with it the indescribable smell of burning feathers.

Overhead a great cough waked the echoes. The big cat, his head hanging over the top of the chimney, as he meditated a downward leap, received the ascending fumes full in the face. The cough was repeated. There was a scurry, a rattle of claws, and then a tawny body launched itself from the roof into the dark, as if that breath of civilisation had aroused in it an overwhelming desire for the unsullied atmosphere of the forest. And Mary Murray, with trembling hands and shaking knees, proceeded without delay to build a roaring fire.

When Mistress Murray came to herself, her step-daughter was bending over her, moistening her forehead and rubbing her hands. The composure of the girl's manner was in itself an answer to the question that sprang to the young mother's lips. Nevertheless, she asked it.

'Has it gone, Mary? Are we safe?'

'It has gone,' said Mary, quietly, 'and we are quite safe.' Then she noticed that her stepmother, now that her mind was partly at ease, was sniffing uncertainly.

'Tis a most unpleasant odor, dear Mary,' she murmured.

'Burnt feathers are the best of all remedies for faintness, or so I have been told,' Mary replied, demurely. And it was long before the other woman knew the more weighty reason for the sacrifice of one of the best pillows. As Mary's hands smoothed the damp hair back from her forehead, Jonathan Murray's wife was comparing herself with his daughter, to her own great disadvantage.

'You are brave, like your father, dear Mary,' she said, at last. 'And I am a coward. Yet your father loves me despite my weakness. I wish you were like him in that, too.'

Something stirred in Mary's breast as it had stirred when she had taken the baby in her arms. She could have resisted kindness, affection, even, but the service that she had done chained her irresistibly. With no help but her own keen wits, she had defended her father's wife and her father's son. Their very lives, perhaps, they owed to her, and that debt made a bond between them that never could be broken. Something hard and unyielding melted within her, and swept away

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