

Vixen And The Panther.

Horse-flesh as an article of diet is not in high repute in this part of the world. The panther, however, has no deep-seated prejudice against it; but probably there are few panthers in a generation that could place their paws on their hearts and declare that they had had an opportunity to indulge their fondness for such diet.

In the little Aroostook camp where I worked the winter I was sixteen years old there arrived an unusual kind of visitor. It was nothing less than a fine colt. Now it is seldom such a thing happens in camp, for a mare who is to be a mother is generally left at home in snuggler quarters than the camp affords.

The mother of this unlooked-for visitor was bay mare called Vixen. She had fine intelligence and great working qualities, but she was bad-tempered to all but her master who thought the world of her. Just now she was in a worse temper than usual, for she thought her foal ought to be in more civilized quarters than those of the camp stables.

The mare and her baby, however, were cared for with a solicitude that should have softened her heart. It was spring weather, warm in the sun at midday, and besides the roomy corner of the stable which had been fitted up for my lady's accommodation, the men had built her a wide pen in the yard, on the south side of the stable wall, where she could sun her offspring at all convenient seasons. The snow was trampled down hard in this enclosure, and then liberally spread with straw; and altogether Vixen had very little to complain of.

One day, in the early afternoon, when the men had gone far off to their chopping, the cook and I found ourselves alone in camp.

A week or so before this I had had the misfortune to sink my axe deep into my left foot. The cut was a bad one, and since the accident I had not been able to walk a step. But this particular day was unusually warm and sunny, and as I had been shut up in camp sometime and was eager for a breath of fresh air, the cook early in the afternoon took me up in his arms and carried me to the edge of the clearing, ten or fifteen rods away. Here I could sit on a big log in the sun, with the thick woods at my back to shelter me from the wind.

I was sitting there very still, enjoying the warm sun and clear air after my irksome confinement, when some slight sound attracted my attention. Glancing toward the camp, my eye caught a glimpse of a lank, tawney creature stealthily creeping between the trees on the other edge of the clearing. His belly dragged the snow, so low did he crouch. He had not seen me, and he took the utmost pains to escape observation. He was eyeing Vixen and her foal over the low fence of their pen, and was deciding on the tactics best calculated to give him colt for supper.

He crept slowly round the clearing, unobserved, as he thought, till he had the stable between himself and the pen; then he left his cover. But he had underrated Vixen's keenness. Her eye had been upon him from the first, and the moment he disappeared from her view she set up an excited whinny, which was intended to summon help from the camp. She did not like the looks of the stranger, and she was uneasy as soon as her eye was no longer upon him.

The cook heard her call. He ran to the door and took a glance toward the pen. The mare looked all right, the colt was prancing about merrily, and there was no sign of danger or trouble that he could see; but before he could go back to his work I shouted to him and told him what was the matter.

Without waiting for more than a glimpse of the panther, the cook started on the run for the chopping where the men were at work. I knew he had gone for his gun, the only one in camp, which Jean Batiste had taken with him after dinner. I had to stay there, helpless, on my log.

Seeing no help come from the camp, Vixen took her colt to the middle of the pen, and stood with it right under her nose, while she

kept a ceaseless watch on all sides. The colt seemed to realize, from its mother's alarm, that there was danger astir, and huddled itself apprehensively together. It followed its mother's every motion, remaining close by her head.

Presently round the corner of the stable crept the panther, a tawny shadow, flat on the snow. The moment he saw through the openings of the fence that the eye of the mare was upon him, he bounded to the top of the fence and made one bold spring for his prey; but the mare was no less lightning-swift than himself. At the first glimpse of him she had whirled so that her heels were toward the enemy, and had waited in a crouching attitude that one might have taken to indicate the extreme of terror. As the panther sprang, her iron heels met him with a thud that forced out of him an involuntary snarling gasp, and he fell against the pen fence. In an instant he flashed over the fence and lay down in the snow to recover his breath.

After a short rest the panther, deciding to try a new mode of attack, leaped over the fence just out of reach of Vixen's heels, and darted straight across the pen; then swifter almost than thought, he doubled and sprang at the colt; but quick as he was, the mare's heels were there to meet him, and he was knocked in a heap against the fence. He didn't wait for another such greeting, but slipped over and lay down in the snow in his old place at the corner of the stable.

Instead of making another direct attack the panther next rose to the fence and thence sprang to the roof of the stable, where he crouched down and snarled fiercely.

The colt was still the object of his heart's desire. The moment he mounted to the roof Vixen had withdrawn to the farther edge of the pen, and now she stood hunched together, with her head turned backward, so as to let no movement of her foe escape her eye.

Continued on page seven.

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