

Slowly and wearily the time drags on. At first visions of a life and death struggle with a wounded puma keep the young herder in a painful state of anxiety. Every time a sheep sneezes he holds his breath in suspense, thinking the animal is coming. But hour after hour goes by, and still the sheep remain quiet, still the dog sleeps on. Finally Jack finds himself getting drowsier and drowsier. Once, twice, his head drops, and he brings himself up with a jerk, the second time nearly letting go his revolver. Just as he is going off for the third time he is roused by the ominous, unmistakable rush of terrified sheep, and the dog starts up with a smothered growl. Now comes a fresh anxiety. Will the lion prefer a live sheep, even with the trouble of catching it, to a problematical dead one? Jack gets horribly anxious, and curses his own thoughtlessness in an emphatic and earnest manner. But he cannot bear to give up this chance until the last moment. He listens intently; the stamping of the scared sheep gets fainter, and the tinkling of the bells sounds terribly far away.

Jack is just about to throw open the door and rush after them, when his attention is drawn to the behavior of his dog. Her smothered growl has changed to a long-drawn whine that expresses helpless terror, if any sound from a dog ever did so. He hesitates, with his hand on the lock of the door. Possibly the puma has scented the dead sheep and is close around, after all.

"Hist! What is that? Something brushing past the door? Yes, there it is again! No mistake about it, it must be the lion." Trembling with excitement, he slowly and cautiously turns the handle. Lap, lap—it is lickin' up the blood. Now for it! Throwing the door wide open with one hand, he fires in the direction of the enemy with the other. There is a hiss like that of a gigantic cat, and—dead silence.

With a quick impulse of self-preservation, Jack shuts himself into the hut again, though with small chance of warding off the danger in that way, for the creature could batter the slight framework of wood in with a blow of its paw. When will it come? Could he have killed it at the first shot? He must have hit it, the distance was so short. For a minute or two Jack remains quiet, listening; but soon the suspense becomes intolerable. He looses and unmuzzles the dog, which, to his surprise, trots quite comfortably up to the door, wishing to be let out again. Jack throws it open, standing ready for the onslaught of the wounded animal. But none comes. Skip walks out, snuffing about uneasily, it is true, but otherwise showing no particular agitation. Jack begins now to have a dim suspicion that he has made a fool of himself; that the mountain lion has a charmed life, and that "his last chance" has failed.

There is nothing to be done but to comfort himself with the idea, however, that the animal has been thoroughly scared and perhaps wounded; anyhow will not pester him again. At any rate, it will cause no more annoyance to-night; so, after hunting up the sheep, who have composed themselves to rest some three hundred yards off, our herder at last turns in.

His calculations do not, however, turn out correct. With a pertinacity truly diabolical this puma still prowls about on every dark night, and drives poor Jack into a state between callousness and despair. But all things come to an end in time, and after three weeks of this work he has his revenge. All day, before the night in question, the air has been fearfully oppressive, and by sundown heavy thunder clouds begin to gather, and by the time supper is over and the sheep are bedded down it is pretty evident that there is going to be a terrible storm.

Everything is perfectly still; the darkness can be almost felt. Suddenly the sky is lit up by a brilliant flash of lightning that lasts for nearly half a minute. Casting his eye in the direction of the sheep, Jack sees something that makes him dive into the house and buckle on his pistol, in spite of the great drops of rain that are beginning to fall. Only fifty yards from the sheep is the veritable mountain lion, seen now for the first time. If only a flash as bright as the last will come before the rain pours down! The sheep have also seen their enemy and come crowding up toward camp, baaing as if for protection, collecting, in their terror, about the man and dog, and even taking refuge in the dug-out. Another minute goes by; with his pistol held in both hands, to insure a certain aim, the young herder waits for the second flash of lightning. It comes. Twenty yards away now, standing erect and looking—Jack afterwards declared—"as big as a hippopotamus," is the puma.

"Crack" goes the revolver, and simultaneously with the report down comes the rain in torrents, and all further sound is drowned by the terrific peal of thunder following the lightning. Jack leaps back into the hut, and kicking out the intruding sheep, locks himself in, waiting until the storm subsides, and feeling instinctively that this time he has not missed his mark.

The rain, however, comes down in a steady pour that promises to continue all night, so Jack rolls himself in his blankets and leaves all further research till morning. At daylight he turns out, expecting to find that the sheep had taken their departure to happier lands, as they usually do when they are left to their own devices and it is particularly necessary for them to remain at home. This time, however, his fears are not realized—they having merely adjourned to the lee side of the hill.

Next he investigates the place where he fondly hopes he had slain his troublesome enemy the night before. There is no puma, that is quite certain; but on approaching the spot there are unmistakable signs of an animal having struggled in great agony. The grass is torn up by the roots in many places, and in three little hollows there are three little pools of blood. Evidently the puma has been hard hit; but how it contrived to take itself off and creep away to its den—probably at least a mile away—are problems not destined to be solved. For weeks afterwards Jack hunts in every possible and impossible direction for the body, but never discovers it. However, the game is played out. From that time forth he is not again annoyed by mountain lions.