

RAIDED *By* PANTHER

Mountaineer Rescues Wife and Son From
Huge Monster That Had Invaded His Home
and Held Them
Prisoners

By WILLIAM HORNE

IN A shallow valley on the edge of Mount Guyot, 6000 feet above sea level in the Great Smokies where the edge of Tennessee touches the State of North Carolina Lyman Gantt lives with his wife and 4-year-old son on his five-acre farm.

Three of his five acres of fertile, porous soil lie level in the very shadow of the dome of Mount Guyot, but the other two acres taper down to drop suddenly to a sheer cliff edge. Far below tumbles the restless waters of Panther Creek.

"Painter's Crick," if explained to you in the native dialect of the Smokies. If you ask Lyman Gantt or any other native of the region if the name has any specific meaning he'd say: "Wal, hit shore do, now and that's a natural fact. 'Pears to me as if they'd put Painter's Crick on th' maps, seein' as how hit's been nigh ont two year since I named 'er that—"

I visited Lyman Gantt at his home just above Panther Creek high in the Guyot region of the Great Smokies. I asked him that question, and that was his answer.

I found it no small task to get a story out of this bronzed young giant as he greeted me late that evening at the door of his humble mountain cabin, for his has been a life of simplicity and more or less isolation from the prying eyes of the outside world. It is traditional with superstitious mountain folk never to take "furriners" for granted. Until they prove themselves friends, the natives greet them with a stolid aloofness and a we-don't-need-you-in-these-parts attitude.

But luckily for me, I had been recommended by a native of the region in the valley far below who had been my host during many sojourns through the alluring Smokies, and I was at once made welcome by Lyman Gantt and soon had the story of the naming of "Painter's Crick" which is fast becoming a legend in mountain folklore.

IT WAS nearing midnight early in the Spring when Lyman crossed the ridge a mile below his house and started up the narrow lonely sled trail that led through Sleeping Gap toward his cabin.

He had been down to the settlement store three miles away for some tobacco and it was a long, arduous trip over the winding, rocky trail down through the valley.

Lyman Gantt picked his way uncanonically through the jackpines and junipers. He crossed deep fissures in the fitful moonlight with feet as sure as a mountain deer.

The thought that a sudden misstep would send him hurtling down sheer granite walls to his death 500 feet below never entered his mind when his dim trail led him to the very edge of a towering precipice.

As he swung into the last mile that would take him through the wildest terrain of Mount Guyot he shifted the heavy, ancient revolver from one hip pocket to the waistband of his jeans trousers.

Not that he was afraid of the dense undergrowth through which he must



pass, but he knew that bear and timber wolves and great cats haunted the region, and he knew that during the mating season these denizens were formidable antagonists when encountered in their natural habitat.

He whistled a lively tune as he picked his unerring way through the thick hackberries and oak berries. From somewhere far to his left the weight of some prowling creature cracked a pine limb. On the stillness it resounded like a pistol shot, but the mountain man paid no heed.

Presently as he emerged from a clump of thick undergrowth the surface of a stream glistened in the pale moonlight a few yards below him. He reached the edge, crossed it on the stones that studded the shallows and turned to the right to take the winding trail that skirted the sheer walls of the cliff above which lay his farm.

Suddenly there came a sound to his keen ears that quieted the tuneless whistle on his lips and brought him to a rigid standstill.

For a long time he stood there in the shadows of the cliff in a motionless crouch, his ears keyed to catch any whisper out of the night.

Then it came again, the far-off, unearthly scream. At first it seemed to surge up to him from the valley floor far below. Then its eerie volume rose and shattered the still air from the dim edge of the cliff high above.

It quivered as he listened. It died slowly down to a moan and echoed in ghostly gyrations from the granite cliffs, then went away into nothingness.

He had killed many "painters" during his thirty years in the Smokies, but had never seen any signs of the big killer cats above the ridge that flanked the northern edge of Sleeping Gap before.

He turned as swiftly as a darting shadow into the underbrush of the narrow trail. He carried the heavy revolver in one great fist, now, and his lips were clamped in a firm, thin line.

There in that dark room he saw a panther on a bureau near the bed of his son. Two yellow-green phosphorescent eyes glared at him.

He clutched his revolver and started forward, and as he did the silent clearing was split by a high, terror-filled scream. It wasn't the scream of a killer cat this time, for Lyman Gantt recognized the horror-filled voice of his wife.

He answered her with a mighty yell as he dashed the few remaining yards across the yard, but no answer came.

With terror gripping his throat he called again, and still no answer came.

Gripped in an unknown fear he had never before known, Lyman Gantt raced across the narrow porch and crashed his brawny shoulders against the closed door. There came the splintering of wood and the screeching of twisted hinges as he staggered into the dimly lit front room.

For one agonizing moment he stood there trying to accustom his eyes to the semigloom, then he saw the form of his wife sprawled in the open doorway that led into the one bedroom.

With a hoarse cry he bounded across the room, knelt beside her and lifted her head in his arms.

"Martha—," he gasped—"In th' name of God, what is it—"

She raised her bloodless face and looked at him with wide eyes filled with stark terror.

Her lips opened in a scream, and without a word she pointed one trembling hand toward the darkened bedroom and fell back in a faint.

Lyman Gantt raised his straining face toward the open door and looked, and what he saw there in that dark room caused the hair along his nape to stiffen and icy fingers to clutch his spine.

Two yellow-green phosphorescent eyes glared balefully into his face. Like a man in a trance, he rose stiffly to his feet, reached one trembling hand around and moved the tiny kerosene lamp where its pitiful glow would fall into the bedroom.

And a weird, unbelievable sight greeted his staring eyes. It was the tawny figure of a panther, and it rested on the low bureau a few feet from the small, crude bed that held his sleeping son.

Finishing the Invader

THE big cat's eyes were unblinking on Lyman Gantt's face and its lips were drawn back over the wicked, glinting fangs. From the deep throat came a low, savage growl and behind it the long, sinuous tail writhed like a live thing against the wall.

Like a man in a hideous dream Lyman Gantt crouched there above his unconscious wife the lamp in one hand and his revolver in the other.

Slowly, very slowly and deliberately, he raised the gun. Carefully he aimed at that point just where the neck joins the left shoulder, and with a silent prayer in his heart he squeezed the trigger.

The report was deafening in the tiny room, it blended with the second shattering shot, and both shots were accompanied by a snarling, spitting scream as the 200-pound body left the bureau in one mighty lunge, collapsed in mid-air and went crashing to the floor at the very foot of the trundle bed.

"That painter, now," Lyman said to me, "ne'er belonged on th' cliff. How he came 'r be thar, an' leave th' crick at th' bottom whar I'd heard him f'r nigh ont' five year, I can't say.

"But hit don't 'pear jes' right, seems t' me, that Painter's Crick ain't on no maps when I named 'er that nigh ont' two year ago—"