

TALES TOLD BY A RANCH FIRESIDE.

III.—A Mysterious Enemy.

Frontiersmen are not as a rule apt to be very superstitious. They lead lives too hard and practical, and have too little imagination in things spiritual. I have heard but few ghost stories while living on the frontier, and these few were of a perfectly commonplace and conventional type.

But I once listened to a sort of goblin story which impressed me. It was told by a grizzled, weather-beaten old mountain hunter named Bauman, whose father was a German immigrant, but who himself was born and had passed all his life on the frontier. He evidently believed what he said, for he could hardly repress a shudder at certain points of the tale; but of course it was impossible to tell exactly how accurate was his recollection of the details.

When the event occurred he was still a young man, and was trapping with a partner among the mountains which divided the forks of the Salmon from the head of Wisdom river. Not having had much luck, he and his partner determined to go up into a particularly wild and lonely pass through which ran a small stream said to contain many beaver.

The pass had an evil reputation because the year before a solitary hunter who had wandered into it was there slain, seemingly by a wild beast; the half-eaten remains were found by some mining prospectors who had passed his camp only the night before.

But this event weighed very lightly with the two trappers, who were as adventurous and hardy as others of their kind. They took their two lean mountain ponies to the foot of the pass, where they left them in an open beaver meadow, the rocky, timber-clad ground being from thence onward impracticable for horses.

Then they struck out on foot through the vast, gloomy forest, and in about four hours reached a little open glade where they concluded to camp, as there signs of game were plenty.

There was still an hour or two of daylight left, and after building a brush lean-to and throwing down and opening their packs, they started up stream. The country was very dense and hard to traverse, for much timber was down, although here and there the sombre forest was broken by small glades of mountain grass.

At dusk they again reached their camp. The glade in which it was pitched was not many yards across. Tall, close-set pines and firs rose around it like a wall. On one side was a little stream, beyond which rose the steep mountain slopes, covered with evergreen forest.

The men were surprised to find that during their short absence something, apparently a bear, had visited camp, and had rummaged about among their things, scattering the contents of their packs, and in sheer wantonness destroying their lean-to.

While Bauman got supper, his companion began to examine the tracks, and soon took a brand from the fire to follow them up, where the intruder had walked along a game trail after leaving the camp. When the brand flickered out, he returned and took another, repeating his inspection of the foot-prints very closely.

He then came back to the fire, stood by it a minute or two peering out into the darkness, and suddenly remarked with a queer laugh, "Bauman, that bear has been walking on two legs."

Bauman laughed at this, but his partner insisted he was right, and when they again examined the tracks with a torch they certainly seemed made by but two paws or feet. However, it was too dark to make sure.

After expressing a conjecture that the tracks might be those of a human being, and coming to the conclusion that they could not be, the two men rolled up in their blankets and went to sleep under the lean-to.

At midnight Bauman was awakened by some noise, and sat up in his blankets. As he did so his nostrils were struck by a strong, wild-beast odor, and he caught the loom of a great body in the darkness at the mouth of the lean-to.

Grasping his rifle, he fired it at the vague, formless shadow; but he must have missed, for immediately afterwards he heard the smashing of the underwood as the thing, whatever it was, rushed off into the impenetrable blackness of the forest and the night. After this the two men slept but little, sitting up by the rekindled fire. But they heard nothing more, and in the morning they started out to look at the few traps they had set, and to put out new ones.

By an unspoken agreement they kept together

all day, and returned to camp towards evening. On nearing it they saw, to their astonishment, that the lean-to had again been torn down. The visitor of the preceding day had returned, and in wanton malice had tossed about their camp kit and bedding, and destroyed the shanty. The ground was marked up by the creature's tracks, and on leaving the camp it had gone along the soft earth by the brook, where its trail was as plain as on snow.

A glance at this trail made one thing evident. Whatever the creature was which had made it, it had certainly walked off on but two legs.

had gone out, though the thin, blue smoke was still curling upwards. The packs all arranged were by it.

At first Bauman could not see his friend; nor did he receive an answer to his call. Stepping forward he shouted again, and as he did so his eye fell on the body of his friend, stretched out dead beside the trunk of a great fallen spruce.

The footprints of the unknown beast-creature, printed deep in the soft soil, told the whole story.

The unfortunate man, having finished his packing, had sat down on the spruce log with his face

to the fire, and his back to the dense woods, to wait for his friend. While thus waiting, his monstrous assailant, which had evidently been lurking near by in the woods waiting for a chance to catch one of the adventurers unprepared, came silently up from behind, walking with long, noiseless steps, and as the tracks showed, still on two legs.

Evidently unheard, it reached the man, and must have broken his neck by wrenching his head back with its fore paws, while it buried its teeth in his throat. It had not eaten the body, but apparently had gambolled round it in uncouth and ferocious glee; had rolled it savagely over and over and had then fled back into the soundless depths of the woods.

Bauman, utterly unnerved, and believing that the creature with



On Two Legs!

The men, thoroughly uneasy, gathered a great heap of dead logs, and kept up a roaring fire throughout the night, one or the other sitting up on guard most of the time. About midnight the thing came down through the forest opposite, across the brook, and stayed there on the hillside for nearly an hour.

In the morning the two trappers, after discussing the strange events of the last thirty-six hours, decided that they would shoulder their packs and leave the valley that afternoon. They were the more ready to do this because, in spite of seeing a good deal of game-sign, they had caught very little fur. However, it was necessary first to gather their traps.

All the morning they kept together, picking up trap after trap, each one empty. On first leaving camp they had the disagreeable sensation of being followed. In the dense spruce thickets they heard a branch snap occasionally after they had passed; or there would be slight rustling noises among the small pines to one side of them.

Finally, oppressed and made angry by this extraordinary pursuit, they turned suddenly and ran back on their trail.

In a minute, in a mossy open space they came on fresh footprints, of great size, of the same kind as those they had seen in camp. But the creature itself had vanished, nor did they hear it again during their walk.

At noon they were back within a couple of miles of camp. In the high, bright sunlight their fears seemed absurd to the two armed men, accustomed as they were through long years of lonely wandering in the wilderness, to face every kind of danger from man, brute, or element.

There were still three beaver traps to collect from a little pond in a wide ravine near by. Bauman volunteered to gather these and bring them in, while his companion went ahead to camp, and made ready the packs.

On reaching the pond Bauman found three beaver in the traps; and one of the traps had been pulled loose and carried into a beaver-house. He took several hours in securing and preparing the beaver, and when he started homeward he marked with some uneasiness how low the sun was getting.

As he hurried towards camp, under the tall trees, the silence and desolation of the forest weighed on him. His feet made no sound on the pine needles; and the slanting sun rays, striking through among the straight trunks, made a gray twilight in which objects at a distance glimmered indistinctly. There was nothing to break the ghostly stillness which, when there is no breeze, always broods over these sombre primeval forests.

At last he came to the edge of the little glade where the camp lay, and shouted as he approached it but got no answer. The camp-fire

which he had to deal with was something either half-human or half-devilish, some great goblin-beast, abandoned everything but his rifle and struck off at speed down the pass, not halting until he reached the beaver meadows where the hobbled ponies were still grazing.

Mounting, he rode onwards through the night, until far beyond the reach of pursuit.

Such was his story. Bauman was of German ancestry, and in his childhood had doubtless been saturated with the ghost and goblin lore of the German peasantry, so all kinds of gruesome superstitions were latent in his mind. As for the tracks being seemingly those of an animal walking on two feet, it is perfectly possible that the bear may have been injured, by a trap or otherwise, in one of its fore legs, and that in consequence it was apt to move about on its hind legs even more commonly than its brethren, who all walk quite freely in an erect position.

In reconnoitring the camp it may have frequently assumed this upright posture from mere desire of keeping a better lookout; and it may be that by chance those places where its tracks were clearest were precisely those where it had happened to rise for a few paces on its hind legs.

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