



Author of "The Hungry World," "Sunwing," etc.

But a desert stretched and stricken, left and right,
left and right,
Where the piled mirages thicken under white-hot
light—
A skull beneath a sand-hill, and a viper coiled
inside,
And a red wind out of Libya, roaring, "Run and
hide!"

—"Jabson's Amen" (*Kipling*).

IF YOU had killed, and what was worse, barely otherwise made use of, three colts, a heifer, twenty-one sheep and eleven pigs belonging to other people, so that four hundred dollars would not even begin to cover your debts—if, moreover, you had done to death two valuable dogs sent to interview you upon the subject, and spoiled the sleep of not less than two dozen stockmen for an uncounted number of nights, you might have expected consideration—but you would certainly not get it.

All these things, and more, had the jaguar done, and he was beginning to reap his harvest. Things became hectic for him, and by the time he had escaped death by bullet and poison four times, and worse than death by trap upon nine occasions, he came to the conclusion that a change of air was for him imperative.

The jaguar was like a large leopard, only with his spots run into rosettes. He was heftier than any leopard, though, and fiercer by some few fierces.

The trouble was, where was there a refuge to go to for a hunted wild hunter upon all those desolate plains and sun-baked stretches? Where, indeed?

The jaguar left home—the ruined tomb of the king of some long-forgotten race—in the almost intolerable glare of the full sun upon his journey. He would much have preferred to "flit" during the darkest night, but a pillar of dust as yet far away but approaching, warned him of the starting of a big hunt on horseback—for him.

As the horsemen might be accompanied by dogs, he knew he would be found if he stayed. So he decamped—at a long, loose, padded, swinging trot, that hiked him over the rough ground much faster than it appeared to; and, of course, being a cat, a supercat, he hugged what cover he could get.

This time, however, the stockmen were in earnest, and did not stop to think on the brink of a drink when the sun got hot enough to frizzle all things save the little lizards upon the rock-slabs. They kept right on going. So did the jaguar; but with the grim, slow realization that he was a sprinter, but no stayer, and that his ever growing thirst was worse than death.

Thus it came about that by noonday he could not very well ignore the drumming of a bronco's hoofs not far to his right rear, and another to his left.

He heard also a shout, and threw an ominous snarl over his spotted, tawny shoulder in reply as he broke into a gallop.

He was heading toward the coast. The smell of water, any water, in his nostrils made him do that. Water, said instinct, means forest in that land; and he was a forester by right, or his ancestors had been.

Then came the lasso—the first one.

The jaguar did not see it. He heard it fall short just behind, and make slithery noises like a snake. He set back his ears. His fangs bared.

Then came the second lasso.

The jaguar saw that. He had to jump over it as he flew—fairly flew now, in his last desperate dash to the shelter of some thick but shortish grass.

He gained the grass-patch even as the third lasso hit, and slipped along, his back. Untamable, ferocious beyond compare, a dread that stalked by night, a terror among the Indians, intolerant, implacable, lonely, the jaguar dived to the middle of that slight cover quaking in every limb, a beast beaten and cowed even to inertia. It was the lassos that had done it.

For full ten minutes the jaguar lay there, spent, in the middle of the grass-patch, only his head visible, a picture of fury and hate, while the finest horsemen in the world circled around outside, trying to lasso that furious head—and failing.

The broncos would not enter the grass, and the dogs thought that the reason the horses had was a good one—for a cornered jaguar in thick grass is several kinds of a deadly proposition. And in the end the stockmen set fire to the grass, and waited.

THE seared stems burned like tinder, the flames racing along before the wind in a crackling, reeking furnace, but the jaguar did not move.

The red, dancing, leaping line fairly flew down upon him, chasing its own choking clouds of smoke, till they both together seemed to envelop him, and that terrible, great, spotted, broad head, still and motionless and grinning, faded, faded gradually out before the amazed onlookers—faded and was swallowed up.

Not when the smoke fumes nearly asphyxiated him; not when the smell of his singeing fur mingled with the rest; not till the sting of the flames, actually licking up his legs, broke the spell, did the jaguar come to life, as it were back, and leap for that life ahead of the fire. By then he was invisible.

If it had been a race before, it was a greater race now. The flames fairly tore along in that dry place, and he could not see a yard on either hand whither

he was going. He only knew that the flames were gnashing at his tail, and that instinct shrieked in his ear—

“Make for the sea!”

He made for the sea accordingly, the sea he could not see—nor anything else for the first quarter of a mile, for the matter of that—but knew was there.

The fire was far behind when the great spotted cat got to the shore by way of sandhills, and lay down, panting. It had stopped with the gutting of the grass-patch—but the stockmen were not far behind.

They had spotted the jaguar at last, clear of the smoke, galloping like a great dog far across the blistered plain, and were now drumming down upon him, dogs, horses, and men, in a yelling cloud of dust, that—it seemed—must end with his end.

Now for it!

The sea, in that burning sun, almost blinded him; but the jaguar could see far enough across the waves a low line of dark trees, walking, so it seemed, upon the face of the waters—or was it a mirage dancing tauntingly in the heat flurry? Could the jaguar see a mirage anyway?

The big, flat, spotted, brilliant head turned slowly and gazed steadfastly at the excited crowd sweeping down upon him. For a moment he permitted himself a bare-fanged, twisted-lipped, evil snarl—the jaguar’s “blessing”—then waded into the warm, glinting, blinding water and resolutely struck out.

The brute was a fine swimmer. Though he personally had been born and had lived upon the plains all his life, and never crossed anything bigger than a stream, he came of forest ancestors used to dealing with the world’s largest rivers.

He forged ahead grandly, head well up, and with the confidence that comes of conscious ability.

A rifle cracked along the old-gold sand, but the sundance on the water dazzled, and the bullet spat—*plup*—yards short. Another and another spoke, and the bark of the .30-30 Marlin repeaters came to the swimmer’s ears plainly as the bullets shot up miniature spouts all around him; but the broad, yellow head kept on, and on, and on, steady, straight, untouched, unflurried.

At last one long shot clipped his right ear. It looked like a biscuit from which a piece has been bitten, but even that did not turn or stop him. A last flurry of reports, a last “covey of death” spattering

up the surface, and he was out of range—their range anyway.

“Never mind,” said the stockmen to each other. “Guess the sharks’ll get him, fellers. You betcha.”

But the sharks did not get him. They had heard the firing, or felt the concussion of the bullets in the water, or something, and turned their knife-bladed back-fins the other way.

Slowly but strongly the jaguar came to the mangrove forest. It was a remarkably wet, and a lugubrious, dark, noisome, muddy, and smelly place. In fact, it was not like any ordinary forest at all. Dante might have described it.

It was not tall—the sea winds saw to that. It had no true tree trunks—the sea itself saw to that. It was like a forest of pier-piles; a forest of many-headed hydras with hundreds of legs stuck in the mud. And the sea sucked and gurgled in and out among the legs, otherwise roots. Great freak crabs, blue and freakish crabs, red played grimly in and out among the branches that wound and twisted like a thousand snakes.

THE jaguar—his claws rasped in the wet hollowness—had hauled himself up the roots, high above high tide among the writhing stems and branches, before he discovered that the mangrove forest was a world unto itself—inhabited by its own living beasts and birds, insects and sea folk, beside the crabs.

Wings flapped above, and great herons removed themselves from his company. Some diving bird thing, all wet and shiny, hit the water with a loud *plop* as it took the sea.

A head, yellow, flat, broad, black-spotted, big and slit-eared, thrust from a tangle of branches and foliage and made evil remarks to his address in a language that—petrified him. It was his own language, the talk of the jaguar people, *their* swear words.

And the jaguar changed as he stiffened from heavy jaw to padded heel. He contorted into a calamity, ready set for trouble—a cast statue of ferocity. It is a way cats have. Nine times out of ten it is just thrice perfected bluff.

This was the tenth time.

For one thing, the plains jaguar had grown larger; that was fur on end. For another, he had sprouted some height; that was arched back. For another, he moaned, horribly, quietly, and to himself; but it is not quite clear what that was for.

The head remained, like a head in a picture, framed in gnarled stems.

The jaguar did not. He turned half side-wise—to side-leap at need. He stood like a horse hard held with a bearing rein on, champing at air. Then—he faded out, still sidewise, crab-fashion, a step at a time.

But he had seen what human eyes could not have seen—the flick of a thin ear tickled by a fly, two yards to the left of the head among the foliage. And he had smelled what human nostrils most assuredly could not have smelled on the salt breeze—though the bigger cats bear an acrid taint—the odor of not one jaguar, but two, and the other a lady—*dux femina facti*.

Upon the plains, where the jaguar had lived all his life, the stockmen had seen to it that lady jaguars were rare creatures. Indeed, this plains jaguar had never seen one till that precise psychological moment. If he had, he might not have wandered afar worrying the herders of cattle. As it was—

The return of the jaguar ten minutes later, and flying—at least, he was not touching anything as he came—from the opposite side to that in which he had faded and gone out, was intended as a surprise, and would have been to humans, but not to the other jaguars. Cats do that sort of thing. It is one of their little specialties.

Surprise is the essence of tactics. Meeting it—the art.

The other male jaguar did not show whether he was surprised or not; probably not. He was not there when the plains jaguar landed where his back had been. He left the branch as the other arrived upon it. Also he exploded like a firework benefit in the process. Perhaps he realized what he had missed, or what had missed him.

But both jaguars were so obsessed with each other that they forgot their surroundings. Cats are likely to do that when they squabble, all the world over. There is no health in it, though.

The plains jaguar’s lathy hind-limbs landed upon a crab and a branch; you could hear the claws scrape upon the horny carapace. And he knew nothing about crabs! Then he spun with a startling explosion.

The crab had locked home one pincer to his tail. The jaguar would have acted the same if a baby had touched him from behind with a little finger; his nerves were in that state. He pictured rival male

jaguars on every hand. He was all heated up and scorched! But even a jaguar cannot for long chase his own tail on mangrove branches slippery with the green scum of the sea.

A loud and spluttering double splash announced the end of his catherine-wheeling.

The other jaguar, to save himself, had sprung at what seemed to be an inviting wall of foliage he could pull himself up on. It grew, however, like a screen that gave toward the sea.

Thus resulted the picture of one fine male jaguar, very flat-eared, hanging futilely on to some branches of mangrove that swung out and out, and bent down and down, until he realized that there was no sense in hanging on to them any longer. He was already up to his neck in water.

Now, see how Fate lets down those good, scientific, learned ones who dogmatize upon the survival of the fittest.

The water was shallowish at that precise spot. There was mud upon which the mangroves thrive in their own peculiar way. As the jaguar turned and struck out for the nearest root-landing his hind legs churned up this mud.

THERE was a flash as of red flame in the depths, a blurry, indistinct outline of something big and long that writhed, and—the jaguar shot upward, pawing wildly, with a blood-curdling roar.

Then he fell back inert, struggled feebly, galvanized to madness again, collapsed and drifted away on the strong tide, swimming feebly, banged his head on a root, spun round, drifted on, hit something else, revolved, and so, in and out among the lugubrious roots, was carried, slowly, surely,

drifting from sight.

He did not come back.

He had touched off an electric eel, a nasty, big, brown, compressed thing, with a flaring scarlet throat, from what little could be seen; and it, fearing attack, had given him a shock, perhaps two shocks. A flood must have washed the eel to that unfortunate place.

Meanwhile, the plains jaguar, having shaken off the incubus of the crab, slowly scratched, and scraped, and scrambled his way up the first roots he found that offered a hold.

As he did so his tail came within an inch of the gigantic eel thing, and had that tail touched it, contact would have been effected and the tail would have been as good a conductor as any other part of the body so far as the resulting shock was concerned. But that *is* Fate.

Above, among the twisted mangrove branches, the jaguar found the eternal feminine, sitting humped and cynically comfortable, as she had sat all along. She turned her yellow, spotted head and regarded him with cruel, inscrutable eyes.

Then she rose, and, stretching deliberately and insolently, yawned in his face.

The other jaguar had been the finer beast, but—well, he was gone, and meanwhile there was this one purring and blandishing in his place. Enough. She patted at that other a furtive, saucy pat, the sort of pat that would have ripped half his cheek off if he had not dodged unconcernedly as only cats can.

Then the two slouched off to fish for turtles, which is perhaps a more exciting way of spending a honeymoon than fishing for compliments.