



Why the Mountain Lion is Long and Lean

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Intermediate
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Have you ever seen the plains in the morning — a June morning, when the spurred lark soars and sings — when the plover calls, and the curlew pipes his shriller notes to the rising sun? Then is there music, indeed, for no bird outsings the spurred lark; and thanks to Old-man he is not wanting in numbers, either. The plains are wonderful then — more wonderful than they are at this season of the year; but at all times they beckon and hold one as in a spell, especially when they are backed or bordered by a snow-capped mountain range. Looking toward the east they are boundless, but on their western edge superb mountains rear themselves.

All over this vast country the Indians roamed, following the great buffalo herds as did the wolves, and making their living with the bow and lance, since the horse came to them. In the very old days the “piskun” was used, and buffalo were enticed to follow a fantastically dressed man toward a cliff, far enough to get the herd moving in that direction, when the “buffalo-man” gained cover, and hidden Indians raised from their hiding places behind the animals, and drove them over the cliff, where they were killed in large numbers.

Not until Cortez came with his cavalry from Spain, were there horses on this continent, and then generations passed ere the plains tribes possessed this valuable animal, that so materially changed their lives. Dogs dragged the Indian’s travois or packed his household goods in the days before the horse came, and for

hundreds — perhaps thousands of years, these people had no other means of transporting their goods and chattels. As the Indian is slow to forget or change the ways of his father, we should pause before we brand him as wholly improvident, I think.

He has always been a family-man, has the Indian, and small children had to be carried, as well as his camp equipage. Wolf-dogs had to be fed, too, in some way, thus adding to his burden; for it took a great many to make it possible for him to travel at all.

When the night came and we visited War Eagle, we found he had other company — so we waited until their visit was ended before settling ourselves to hear the story that he might tell us.

“The Crows have stolen some of our best horses,” said War Eagle, as soon as the other guests had gone. “That is all right — we shall get them back, and more, too. The Crows have only borrowed those horses and will pay for their use with others of their own. To-night I shall tell you why the Mountain lion is so long and thin and why he wears hair that looks singed. I shall also tell you why that person’s nose is black, because it is part of the story.

“A long time ago the Mountain-lion was a short, thick-set person. I am sure you didn’t guess that. He was always a great thief like Old-man, but once he went too far, as you shall see.

“One day Old-man was on a hilltop, and saw smoke curling up through the trees, away off on the far side of a gulch. ‘Ho!’ he said, ‘I wonder who builds fires except me. I guess I will go and find out.’

“He crossed the gulch and crept carefully toward the smoke. When he got quite near where the fire was, he stopped and listened. He heard some loud laughing but could not see who it was that felt so glad and gay. Finally he crawled closer and peeked through the brush toward the fire. Then he saw some Squirrel-people, and they were playing some sort of game. They were running and laughing, and having a big time, too. What do you think they were doing? They were running about the fire — all chasing one Squirrel. As soon as the Squirrel was caught, they would bury him in the ashes near the fire until he cried; then they would dig him out in a hurry. Then another Squirrel would take the lead and run until he was caught, as the other had been. In turn the captive would submit to being buried, and so on — while the racing and laughing continued. They never left the buried one in the ashes after he cried, but always kept their promise and dug him out, right away.

“Say, let me play, won’t you?” asked Old-man. But the Squirrel-people all ran away, and he had a hard time

getting them to return to the fire.

“You can’t play this game,’ replied the Chief-Squirrel, after they had returned to the fire.

“Yes, I can,’ declared Old-man, ‘and you may bury me first, but be sure to dig me out when I cry, and not let me burn, for those ashes are hot near the fire.’

“All right,’ said the Chief-Squirrel, ‘we will let you play. Lie down,’ — and Old-Man did lie down near the fire. Then the Squirrels began to laugh and bury Old-man in the ashes, as they did their own kind. In no time at all Old-man cried: ‘Ouch! — you are burning me — quick! — dig me out.’

“True to their promise, the Squirrel-people dug Old-man out of the ashes, and laughed at him because he cried so quickly.

“Now, it is my turn to cover the captive,’ said Old-man, ‘and as there are so many of you, I have a scheme that will make the game funnier and shorter. All of you lie down at once in a row. Then I will cover you all at one time. When you cry — I will dig you out right away and the game will be over.’

“They didn’t know Old-man very well; so they said, ‘all right,’ and then they all laid down in a row about the fire.

“Old-man buried them all in the ashes — then he threw some more wood on the fire and went away and left them. Every Squirrel there was in the world was buried in the ashes except one woman Squirrel, and she told Old-man she couldn’t play and had to go home. If she hadn’t gone, there might not be any Squirrels in this world right now. Yes, it is lucky that she went home.

“For a minute or so Old-man watched the fire as it grew hotter, and then went down to a creek where willows grew and made himself a great plate by weaving them together. When he had finished making the plate, he returned to the fire, and it had burned low again. He laughed at his wicked work, and a Raven, flying over just then, called him ‘forked-tongue,’ or liar, but he didn’t mind that at all. Old-man cut a long stick and began to dig out the Squirrel-people. One by one he fished them out of the hot ashes; and they were roasted fine and were ready to eat. As he fished them out he counted them, and laid them on the willow plate he had made. When he had dug out the last one, he took the plate to the creek and there sat down to eat the Squirrels, for he was hungry, as usual. Old-man is a big eater, but he couldn’t eat all of the Squirrels at once, and while eating he fell asleep with the great plate in his lap.

“Nobody knows how long it was that he slept, but when he waked his plate of Squirrels was gone — gone completely. He looked behind him; he looked about him; but the plate was surely gone. Ho! But he was angry. He stamped about in the brush and called aloud to those who might hear him; but nobody answered, and then he started to look for the thief. Old-man has sharp eyes, and he found the trail in the grass where somebody had passed while he slept. ‘Ho!’ he said, ‘the Mountain-lion has stolen my Squirrels. I see his footprints; see where he has mashed the grass as he walked with those soft feet of his; but I shall find him, for I made him and know all his ways.’

“Old-man got down on his hands and knees to walk as the Bear-people do, just as he did that night in the Sun’s lodge, and followed the trail of the Mountain-lion over the hills and through the swamps. At last he came to a place where the grass was all bent down, and there he found his willow plate, but it was empty. That was the place where the Mountain-lion had stopped to eat the rest of the Squirrels, you know; but he didn’t stay there long because he expected that Old-man would try to follow him.

“The Mountain-lion had eaten so much that he was sleepy and, after travelling a while after he had eaten the Squirrels, he thought he would rest. He hadn’t intended to go to sleep; but he crawled upon a big stone near the foot of a hill and sat down where he could see a long way. Here his eyes began to wink, and his head began to nod, and finally he slept.

“Without stopping once, Old-man kept on the trail. That is what counts — sticking right to the thing you are doing — and just before sundown Old-man saw the sleeping Lion. Carefully, lest he wake the sleeper, Old-man crept close, being particular not to move a stone or break a twig; for the Mountain-lion is much faster than men are, you see; and if Old-man had wakened the Lion, he would never have caught him again, perhaps. Little by little he crept to the stone where the Mountain-lion was dreaming, and at last grabbed him by the tail. It wasn’t much of a tail then, but enough for Old-man to hold to. Ho! The Lion was scared and begged hard, saying:

“Spare me, Old-man. You were full and I was hungry. I had to have something to eat; had to get my living. Please let me go and do not hurt me.’ Ho! Old-man was angry — more angry than he was when he waked and found that he had been robbed, because he had travelled so far on his hands and knees.

“I’ll show you. I’ll teach you. I’ll fix you, right now. Steal from me, will you? Steal from the man that made you, you night-prowling rascal!”

“Old-man put his foot behind the Mountain-lion’s head, and, still holding the tail, pulled hard and long, stretching the Lion out to great length. He squalled and cried, but Old-man kept pulling until he nearly broke the Mountain-lion in two pieces — until he couldn’t stretch him any more. Then Old-man put his foot on the Mountain-lion’s back, and, still holding the tail, stretched that out until the tail was nearly as long as the body.

“There, you thief — now you are too long and lean to get fat, and you shall always look just like that. Your children shall all grow to look the same way, just to pay you for your stealing from the man that made you. Come on with me”; and he dragged the poor Lion back to the place where the fire was, and there rolled him in the hot ashes, singeing his robe till it looked a great deal like burnt hair. Then Old-man stuck the Lion’s nose against the burnt logs and blackened it some — that is why his face looks as it does to-day.

“The Mountain-lion was lame and sore, but Old-man scolded him some more and told him that it would take lots more food to keep him after that, and that he would have to work harder to get his living, to pay for what he had done. Then he said, ‘go now, and remember all the Mountain-lions that ever live shall look just as you do.’ And they do, too!

“That is the story — that is why the Mountain-lion is so long and lean, but he is no bigger thief than Old-man, nor does he tell any more lies. Ho!”

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