One side of the ravine was in darkness. The darkness was soft and rich, suggesting thick foliage. Along the crest of the slope tree-tops came into view—great pines and hemlocks of the ancient unviolated forest—revealed against the orange disk of a full moon just rising. The low rays slanting through the moveless tops lit strangely the upper portion of the opposite steep—the western wall of the ravine, barren, unlike its fellow, bossed with great rocky projections, and harsh with stunted junipers. Out of the sluggish dark that lay along the ravine as in a trough, rose the brawl of a swollen, obstructed stream.

Out of a shadowy hollow behind a long white rock, on the lower edge of that part of the steep which lay in the moonlight, came softly a great panther. In common daylight his coat would have shown a warm fulvous hue, but in the elvish decolorizing rays of that half hidden moon he seemed to wear a sort of spectral gray. He lifted his smooth round head to gaze on the increasing flame, which presently he greeted with a shrill cry. That terrible cry, at once plaintive and menacing, with an undertone like the fierce protestations of a saw beneath the file, was a summons to his mate, telling her that the hour had come when they should seek their prey. From the lair behind the rock, where the cubs were being suckled by their dam, came no immediate answer. Only a pair of crows, that had their nest in a giant fir-tree across the gulf, woke up and croaked harshly their indignation. These three summers past they had built in the same spot, and had been nightly awakened to vent the same rasping complaints.

The panther walked restlessly up and down, half a score of paces each way, along the edge of the shadow, keeping his wide-open green eyes upon the rising light. His short, muscular tail twitched impatiently, but he made no sound. Soon the breadth of confused brightness had spread itself further down the steep, disclosing the foot of the white rock, and the bones and antlers of a deer which had been dragged thither and devoured.

By this time the cubs had made their meal, and their dam was ready for such enterprise as must be accomplished ere her own hunger, now grown savage, could hope to be assuaged. She glided supplely forth into the glimmer, raised her head, and screamed at the moon in a voice as terrible as her mate’s. Again the crows stirred, croaking harshly; and the two beasts, noiselessly mounting the steep, stole into the shadows of the forest that clothed the high plateau.

The panthers were fierce with hunger. These two days past their hunting had been well-nigh fruitless. What scant prey they had slain had for the most part been devoured by the female; for had she not those small blind cubs at home to nourish, who soon must suffer at any lack of hers? The settlements of late had been making great inroads on the world of ancient forest, driving before them the deer and smaller game. Hence the sharp hunger of the panther parents, and hence it came that on this night they hunted together. They purposed to steal upon the settlements in their sleep, and take tribute of the enemies’ flocks.

Through the dark of the thick woods, here and there pierced by the moonlight, they moved swiftly and silently. Now and again a dry twig would snap beneath the discreet and padded footfalls. Now and again, as they rustled some low tree, a pewee or a nuthatch would give a startled chirp. For an hour the noiseless journeying continued, and ever and anon the two gray, sinuous shapes would come for a moment into the view of the now well-risen moon. Suddenly there
fell upon their ears, far off and faint, but clearly defined against the vast stillness of the Northern forest, a sound which made those stealthy hunters pause and lift their heads. It was the voice of a child crying,--crying long and loud, hopelessly, as if there were no one by to comfort it. The panthers turned aside from their former course and glided toward the sound. They were not yet come to the outskirts of the settlement, but they knew of a solitary cabin lying in the thick of the woods a mile and more from the nearest neighbor. Thither they bent their way, fired with fierce hope. Soon would they break their bitter fast.

Up to noon of the previous day the lonely cabin had been occupied. Then its owner, a shiftless fellow, who spent his days for the most part at the corner tavern three miles distant, had suddenly grown disgusted with a land wherein one must work to live, and had betaken himself with his seven-year-old boy to seek some more indolent clime. During the long lonely days when his father was away at the tavern the little boy had been wont to visit the house of the next neighbor, to play with a child of some five summers, who had no other playmate. The next neighbor was a prosperous pioneer, being master of a substantial frame-house in the midst of a large and well-tilled clearing. At times, though rarely, because it was forbidden, the younger child would make his way by a rough wood road to visit his poor little disreputable playmate. At length it had appeared that the five-year-old was learning unsavory language from the elder boy, who rarely had an opportunity of hearing speech more desirable. To the bitter grief of both children, the companionship had at length been stopped by unalterable decree of the master of the frame house.

Hence it had come to pass that the little boy was unaware of his comrade's departure. Yielding at last to an eager longing for that comrade, he had stolen away late in the afternoon, traversed with endless misgivings the lonely stretch of wood road and reached the cabin only to find it empty. The door, on its leathern hinges, swung idly open. The one room had been stripped of its few poor furnishings. After looking in the rickety shed, whence darted two wild and hawklike chickens, the child had seated himself on the hacked threshold, and sobbed passionately with a grief that he did not fully comprehend. Then seeing the shadows lengthen across the tiny clearing, he had grown afraid to start for home. As the dusk gathered, he had crept trembling into the cabin, whose door would not stay shut. When it grew quite dark, he crouched in the inmost corner of the room, desperate with fear and loneliness, and lifted up his voice piteously. From time to time his lamentations would be choked by sobs, or he would grow breathless, and in the terrifying silence would listen hard to hear if any one or anything were coming. Then again would the shrill childish wailings arise, startling the unexpectant night, and piercing the forest depths, even to the ears of those great beasts which had set forth to seek their meat from God.

The lonely cabin stood some distance, perhaps a quarter of a mile, back from the highway connecting the settlements. Along this main road a man was plodding wearily. All day he had been walking, and now as he neared home his steps began to quicken with anticipation of rest. Over his shoulder projected a double-barrelled fowling-piece, from which was slung a bundle of such necessities as he had purchased in town that morning. It was the prosperous settler, the master of the frame house. His mare being with foal, he had chosen to make the tedious journey on foot.

The settler passed the mouth of the wood road leading to the cabin. He had gone perhaps a furlong beyond, when his ears were startled by the sound of a child crying in the woods. He stopped, lowered his burden to the road, and stood straining ears and eyes in the direction of the sound. It was just at this time that the two panthers also stopped, and lifted their heads to listen. Their ears were keener than those of the man, and the sound had reached them at a greater distance.

Presently the settler realized whence the cries were coming. He called to mind the cabin; but he did not know the cabin's owner had departed. He cherished a hearty contempt for the drunken squatter; and on the drunken squatter's child he looked with small favor, especially as a playmate for his own boy. Nevertheless he hesitated before resuming his journey.

"Poor little devil!" he muttered, half in wrath. "I reckon his precious father's drunk down at 'the Corners,' and him crying for loneliness!" Then he reshouldered his burden and strode on doggedly.

But louder, shriller, more hopeless and more appealing, arose the childish voice, and the settler paused again, irresolute,
and with deepening indignation. In his fancy he saw the steaming supper his wife would have awaiting him. He loathed
the thought of retracing his steps, and then stumbling a quarter of a mile through the stumps and bog of the wood road.
He was foot-sore as well as hungry, and he cursed the vagabond squatter with serious emphasis; but in that wailing was
a terror which would not let him go on. He thought of his own little one left in such a position, and straightway his
heart melted. He turned, dropped his bundle behind some bushes, grasped his gun, and made speed back for the cabin.

"Who knows," he said to himself, "but that drunken idiot has left his youngster without a bite to eat in the whole
miserable shanty? Or maybe he's locked out, and the poor little beggar's half scared to death. _Sounds_ as if he was
scared;" and at this thought the settler quickened his pace.

As the hungry panthers drew near the cabin, and the cries of the lonely child grew clearer, they hastened their steps, and
their eyes opened to a wider circle, flaming with a greener fire. It would be thoughtless superstition to say the beasts
were cruel. They were simply keen with hunger, and alive with the eager passion of the chase. They were not ferocious
with any anticipation of battle, for they knew the voice was the voice of a child, and something in the voice told them
the child was solitary. Theirs was no hideous or unnatural rage, as it is the custom to describe it. They were but seeking
with the strength, the cunning, the deadly swiftness given them to that end, the food convenient for them. On their
success in accomplishing that for which nature had so exquisitely designed them depended not only their own, but the
lives of their blind and helpless young, now whimpering in the cave on the slope of the moon-lit ravine. They crept
through a wet alder thicket, bounded lightly over the ragged brush fence, and paused to reconnoitre on the edge of the
clearing, in the full glare of the moon. At the same moment the settler emerged from the darkness of the wood-road on
the opposite side of the clearing. He saw the two great beasts, heads down and snouts thrust forward, gliding toward the
open cabin door.

For a few moments the child had been silent. Now his voice rose again in pitiful appeal, a very ecstasy of loneliness
and terror. There was a note in the cry that shook the settler's soul. He had a vision of his own boy, at home with his
mother, safe-guarded from even the thought of peril. And here was this little one left to the wild beasts! "Thank God!
Thank God I came!" murmured the settler, as he dropped on one knee to take a surer aim. There was a loud report (not
like the sharp crack of a rifle), and the female panther, shot through the loins, fell in a heap, snarling furiously and
striking with her fore-paws.

The male walked around her in fierce and anxious amazement. Presently, as the smoke lifted, he discerned the settler
kneeling for a second shot. With a high screech of fury, the lithe brute sprang upon his enemy, taking a bullet full in his
chest without seeming to know he was hit. Ere the man could slip in another cartridge the beast was upon him, bearing
him to the ground and fixing keen fangs in his shoulder. Without a word, the man set his strong fingers desperately into
the brute's throat, wrenched himself partly free, and was struggling to rise, when the panther's body collapsed upon
him all at once, a dead weight which he easily flung aside. The bullet had done its work just in time.

Quivering from the swift and dreadful contest, bleeding profusely from his mangled shoulder, the settler stepped up to
the cabin door and peered in. He heard sobs in the darkness.

"Don't be scared, sonny," he said, in a reassuring voice. "I'm going to take you home along with me. Poor little lad,
_I'll_ look after you if folks that ought to don't."

Out of the dark corner came a shout of delight, in a voice which made the settler's heart stand still. "_Daddy_, daddy," it said, "I _knew_ you'd come. I was so frightened when it got dark!" And a little figure launched itself into the settler's
arms, and clung to him trembling. The man sat down on the threshold and strained the child to his breast. He
remembered how near he had been to disregarding the far-off cries, and great beads of sweat broke out upon his
forehead.

Not many weeks afterwards the settler was following the fresh trail of a bear which had killed his sheep. The trail led
him at last along the slope of a deep ravine, from whose bottom came the brawl of a swollen and obstructed stream. In
the ravine he found a shallow cave, behind a great white rock. The cave was plainly a wild beast's lair, and he entered
circumspectly. There were bones scattered about, and on some dry herbage in the deepest corner of the den, he found
the dead bodies, now rapidly decaying, of two small panther cubs.

(The end)
Charles G. D. Roberts's short story: Do Seek Their Meat From God

By Charles G. D. Roberts