

# Bluebook

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# a Panther for my Bride

BY ZACHARY BALL



*The wife of Joey Billy, he boasted, would be  
the only woman of all the Seminoles with a white panther skin on her floor.  
He was right—but not in the way he thought.*

THE OBUNGAU HAUJO dance came abruptly to an end, and the Big Cypress Green Corn Festival was over for another year. The men who had taken part in the final ritual now stood about in groups, sleeveing their faces and letting the night breeze cool them. Seminole mothers were already herding their

children toward the river and the canoes, and young men and women were saying their hurried *awlyskashaws* and promising to see one another again soon. In a short while all of the clans would be on their way back to their villages.

A low-hung full moon was lighting the clearing



like dawn, and Joey Billy stood in the shadow of a cocoplum tree and watched the crowd of boys and girls over by the dying ceremonial fire.

At last, he thought truculently, Storm Dixie is going to open his gift package. Now maybe I can get a word with Mary.

He watched the giggling, excited girls crowding around the straight-backed Storm Dixie and wondered why women would get that excited over a paper-wrapped parcel.

Delighted squeals burst from the girls as Storm Dixie held up a length of bright-colored calico. After

they had all fingered the cloth and expressed their admiration in caught-breath exclamations, Storm Dixie folded the material and draped it around Mary Chokfee's shoulders.

Mary clutched the calico about her and turned this way and that for the other girls to admire it. The excited sounds the girls made burned in Joey Billy's ears, and jealous rage raked his brain to a hot rawness. To get away! To get away! Never to look on any of them again, not even Mary! He pushed away from the tree and started toward the river.

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## A Panther for My Bride

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"Joey! Joey Billy!" And Mary was clutching his arm. "Joey, look what Storm Dixie gave me! It is *hinklas*?"

Joey stopped and she made a full turn for him to admire her. "It is good enough," he mumbled.

The others were there now, and Storm Dixie said to Joey, "What's the matter you, Joey? You don't like the present I brought to Mary all the way from the white-man settlement?" He turned to the girls. "Maybe Joey gives girls better presents than this. Do you, Joey? Maybe you give them presents from the woods? *Allapataws* or *awpatanacs*?"

"Yes, Joey would give alligators and frogs!" one girl said and the others laughed. Mary Chokfee laughed with them.

Joey's anger built to a choking hot flood in his throat, and it was all he could do to keep from smashing a fist into the face of Storm Dixie, this smiling, handsome youth whom no one of the Bear clan had ever seen until two months ago. He had come down from some northern clan, Joey had heard, and he had shown an interest in Mary Chokfee from the first moment he saw her. But he had stayed at the Bear Clan village only two days that time, and Joey Billy had not expected him to return at Green Corn time, bearing gifts for Mary.

Joey Billy turned abruptly and tramped off toward the river. He got into his canoe and set his paddle viciously into the black surface of the river.

He hadn't thought to be returning to his village alone this night. All the winter he had planned how he would bring Mary back from the festival. He would show her *Umatilla*, the place of water rippling over sand. Then there was the tall tree of the great white flower that he would climb and bring her many of the blossoms, as pure and silvery as the moonlight itself. He could hardly remember when he hadn't loved Mary Chokfee, the most beautiful girl of the clan. She was as much a part of his life as his canoe and his gun. She was the sunrise and the sunset and all of the rainbows of the deep 'Glades country.

He himself had given her plenty presents when they were boy and girl. He had many times brought her the flower of the *tuckthluluste* and the *chofemusee*. And the time she stepped on the big thorn and couldn't leave her bed he had gone to her *chikee* every sundown and sung her the "Catfish Song," the "Fox Song," and the "Horned Owl Song." He had done all that when they were boy and girl. But now they were man and woman. Why would she want

present now that she was a woman? Gifts were for children.

And thinking these things, ancient Indian determination flowed through him in a fury, deadening his fingers on the paddle. In all his being he was a primitive man of the jungle, determined to have his woman.

All right, he told himself fiercely. If a present is what she wants, she shall have it. And she shall have it from Joey Billy, who has loved her from little girl to big girl. And my gift shall be no paper package from the settlement of the white man. It will be a Seminole present, a thing that only I, Joey Billy, can give her. She will see. He stabbed his paddle at the dark water, his jaw hard and his eyes spearing straight down the moonlit river.

His canoe was the first to reach the village. He was leaving his *chikee* with his hunting knife at his belt, his food sack over his shoulder, and his rifle in the crook of his arm as Mary Chokfee and her parents came up the bank slope toward the village. Mary stopped, and her parents went on toward their *chikee*.

"Joey, you're going into the 'Glades at this time of night?" she asked. She had the new calico folded over her arm.

"*Asechay*," Joey Billy told her.

"Why you go now? When you be back?"

"*Filoteschee*."

"Joey Billy, you are good man for the hunt," she said, and smiled up at him.

The moon was spreading its silvery softness over the contour of her oval face, making a little dark pool at the base of her throat and bright stars deep in the liquid depths of her eyes. Her hair was still down from the *Itshobungau* dance, and that was the way he liked it best, reaching to the waistband of her skirt of many colors, shiny and black and lovely. Looking down into her face, Joey Billy couldn't let go of his breath.

"This is time for sleep, not time for talk," a voice said, and Joey turned to see Storm Dixie standing near.

"Joey Billy is going for the hunt," Mary told Storm.

Storm Dixie nodded and took her arm. "Then come. I take you to your *chikee*." They started away and he said over his shoulder to Joey, "Bring back plenty frogs and 'gators, Joey."

JOEY watched them walk away through the moonlight, laughter alive between them.

"He will see," Joey Billy said in an angry whisper as he swung around and strode toward his canoe. "And it will be Joey Billy and Mary Chokfee who do the laughing together when I come back."

He stepped into his canoe, set his paddle and pointed the slender prow toward the deep swamp country. He knew exactly where he was going and what he was going after. Deep in the Dead Cypress Swamp lived Black Tip, the finest panther specimen

in all the 'Glades, a tawny animal with a black-tipped tail, whose cunning was legend among the 'Glades hunters. Some of the older men had tried for many hunting moons to bring the big cat in, and Joey Billy was always fearful when he saw a hunter's canoe returning to the village until he made sure that Black Tip had not fallen under the rifle. Joey Billy himself could have taken the panther a half dozen times if he had wanted to. But he never killed except for food, and even then he spared the animals he loved best. And that was always a hard thing to decide because he loved them all. The 'Glades bear was his brother, the deer were his cousins, the alligator was his grandfather, and always he talked in friendliness with the eagle and the wild turkey and the furry ground animals. And now, deliberately setting out to take old Black Tip, he could take no pleasure in the hunt. None at all.

Not for myself would I do it, he kept saying in his mind, but this is for the one I love.

AND so it was, with determination still strong within him, determination fringed with sadness, that he pushed his slim canoe into the Dead Cypress Swamp country at sunset of the second day. He had just drifted into the blue shadows of the west bank of the river when he saw another canoe coming around a broad bend farther down. He sat motionless in the shadows, watching it. When the other craft was 200 yards away, riding the middle of the stream, he recognized old Wildcat Sam of his clan.

"*Elaha, Wildcat!*" Joey called softly, and the hunter instantly rested his paddle and put his gaze on the shadows where Joey Billy sat.

Joey Billy chuckled and moved out to meet him.

Wildcat grinned when he saw who it was. Joey Billy, *echoose!*" he called. "I'm six days out, Joey. Maybe you got water?"

"Plenty," Joey said, and dug in his stuff and brought out his canteen. He drifted his canoe close and held it out. Then he looked into the bottom of Wildcat's canoe, and what he saw stopped the breath in his lungs. And it was as if the living fiber of his body had suddenly dried up, crumbled, and the twilight breeze was eating it away. He tried to say something but the words his mind formed were only dead things that stayed deep within him.

"How you like him, Joey?" Wildcat asked, and handed the canteen back. "Long time now I hunt that one."

Joey tried to smile against the deadness in his stomach. "You're fine hunter, Wildcat. You got to be good hunter to take old Black Tip."

"I'm good enough to bring him down, all right, Joey." He set his paddle. "Maybe you have some luck too, Joey. *Aulyskashaw, Joey.*"

"Good-by," Joey said, and dipped his own paddle. And as he again moved toward shore, he could see the long monotonous way he had come, he could see Mary Chokfee dressed in Storm Dixie's calico, he could hear them laughing together. And in his soul

lived a knowledge that it was useless even to go on living now.

As night came on, he pulled his canoe out onto the river bank, made his fire and ate his food. At moontime he lay in his blankets listening to the jungle world about him, feeling lonelier than he had ever felt in his life before. Lying on his back, he stared up along the trunks of the trees that rose arrow-straight to clasp their tops above eternal twilight. Time stood still in this musty shut-in world where even the silence seemed to have taken on the moldy smell of long-dead trees and motionless black water. And for a moment he hated this place that he had always loved so much.

A breeze moved across the jungle roof and pressed down over him, and with it came a sound that cleared his mind to instant alertness.

It came again, far off, the quivering weird call of a male panther out on forage, stalking the jungle for fresh meat.

Joey got to his knees, listening. Then he sank back onto his blanket. Of what use? Anyone could bring in an ordinary panther. Perhaps even Storm Dixie could do that.

No, if I can't take her something special, he told himself, I will take her nothing. And there was nothing special anywhere in the 'Glades now with Black Tip gone.

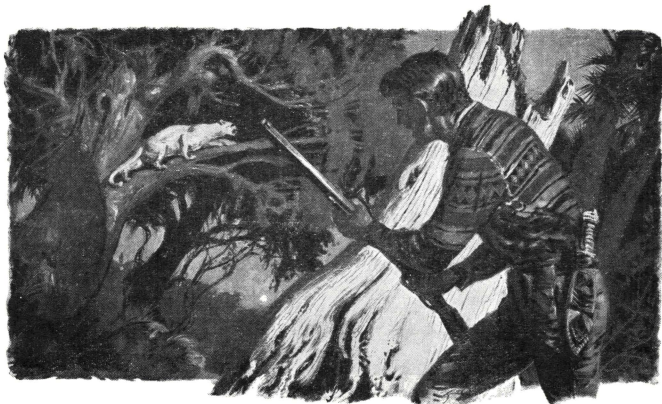
The panther screamed again and it was closer. Without really thinking about what he was doing, Joey Billy built his fire up to lure the animal in close. And when after several minutes it screamed again and was no closer, he took up his rifle and melted into the jungle.

When he had followed the panther for an hour he was going to turn back, but something kept him trudging on. He was a born hunter, and it wasn't easy to ignore a fresh trail, nor to quit one once he was on it. On and on he went, making his silent way through the moss-hung jungle, changing direction when the cat did.

WHEN the moon was washed out white and the dawn came creeping through the swamp like a gray old man blowing his cool breath before him, Joey Billy sat down on a log, his rifle across his lap. The panther had quit sounding now, and to continue the chase meant a tedious job of finding the spoor and following it for hours under the sickening pressure of the tropical sun. Discouragement gripped him, and he decided to sleep through the cool of the morning, then head for camp.

He slid off the log and started to scrape up some leaves. And that was when he saw it.

He froze there in a squat, staring. At first he refused to believe what he was seeing; then the big clump of white on the oak limb, no more than 80 yards from where he knelt, moved ever so slightly. He crouched lower. It was a panther, all right, but such a panther as the Seminole had never seen. It was as big as Black Tip, and was pure white.



It was a panther such as the Seminole had never seen—huge and pure white.

Time stood still as he watched the cat move along its limb in slow undulations of primitive gracefulness. Joey measured the distance between the animal and the two squirrels it was stalking, then crouched down behind the log and eased the barrel of his rifle up over it. He was shaking so his teeth were clicking together. He clamped his jaws hard, laid his cheek against the rifle stock, closed his eyes and took a deep breath. And gradually steadiness came to him, creeping over him like a paralysis. And now he was a man without nerves.

He opened his eyes. The first rays of the sun were touching the huge white animal up there against the morning sky, making it into a clump of pink gold. The great tail began to sway like a snake preparing to strike. That meant that at any moment now the panther would make its leap. Joey Billy moved his finger in against the trigger and gently squeezed.

The explosion ripped the jungle stillness to shreds. There was a dull thump as the panther hit the ground and lay still. Somewhere a startled water turkey squawked, the squirrels scampered out of sight, and a crow cawed in the distance, making three long scratches in the silence. And that was all.

Joey Billy walked over to the dead panther and stood a moment with head bowed, the way he always did, so that Great *Mieco* in the Beyond would understand that this kill was necessary. Then he knelt and rubbed a hand over the white coat and inspected the pink-amber eyes.

This was the most magnificent beast he had ever seen. He had heard tales of an albino panther in this swamp but he had always considered them idle

hunter-talk, as did everyone else except the men who claimed to have seen it.

Now we will see, he said exultantly in his mind. We will see whose present she likes best. This will be more than a skin to spread on the floor of her *chikee*. This shall be my wedding present to her. What you think of that, Storm Dixie?

The big cat was almost more than Joey Billy could handle, but he finally got it on his shoulders and started for the river, glad that it wasn't far. He put his kill down where the bank was low, covered it with brush and set out for camp. He was tired and hungry, but there was no time now for food. He must get back here with the canoe before the 'gators found the panther.

Coming up-wind toward his camp, he was still a half mile away when he smelled it. He began to run. When he reached his camp site, all that was left of his canoe and equipment was an oblong heap of cold ashes. He stood staring at the charred spot. The fire had burned only a 15-yard area then the river on one side and 'gator wallows on the other had snuffed it out.

What a hunter you are, Joey Billy, he thought bitterly, not to clear the brush from your fire before leaving it!

He had never done such a thing before. And he realized now how disturbed his mind must have been when he left here last night. Well, there was nothing to be gained by standing here staring at the ashes. He'd have to go back and skin the panther and hit out for his village on foot. The skin was all that he really needed to take, but he had wanted his people to

prowled the jungle, gorging itself on every living thing.

Joey Billy was always as much at home in the swamp as in his own village, but something strange and a little confusing had settled over him. He found himself wondering how far he had come, a thing that he always knew instinctively. He plunged on, the jungle heat, without a good breath of air in it, washing over him, coiling around him like a snared moccasin, fingering at his throat and lungs and keeping him constantly on the lookout for palm fronds with water at their base. And when he found one he would gulp every precious drop, then plunge on, clawing his way through matted undergrowth, relying blindly on his honing instinct to keep him going in the right direction.

It was late in the afternoon when he finally had to give up. He dropped his panther skin, which was now almost more than he could carry, and sank down on a needle blanket under a tall pine and stretched out with his head on his arm. The next thing he knew it was breaking day, and he had never known it to be so hot at daylight before. His mouth and throat felt as if he had been swallowing sand all night. He simply had to have water.

When he stood on his feet, all the surrounding jungle made a slow revolution then came to a stop. He carefully bent over and picked up his skin, slung it over his shoulder and went toward the river. He lay on his belly and drank of the black river water, a thing he almost never did. And lying there with the cool dampness of the muck under him, he was sleepy again. And that was a foolish thing, for he had just awakened.

He gave in to the drowsiness and closed his eyes. After a while there was a soft splashing of a canoe paddle near at hand. Then Mary Chokfee's voice was saying, "Stand up. You'll have to stand up. Now step into the canoe." No, it wasn't Mary's voice. It was something like hers but it wasn't hers, because there was no laughter in this voice. It was calm and gentle and somehow a very good voice, but it wasn't Mary's. Then the voice was gone and Joey Billy felt a softness under him, then another softness was pushed under his head. He wished the voice would come back. Well, he'd wait, and maybe when it did come back it would be Mary's.

WHEN next he opened his eyes he was staring at the thatched roof of a *chikce*. And that certainly was a strange thing. He should be looking at the jungle roof.

Now a voice spoke and it was that same gentle one. It said, "*Humbidaloneschay?*"

He rolled his head back and forth for no. The last thing he wanted was food. Now he saw the face that owned the voice. It was a plain face with large dark eyes and a soft sober mouth. But it was only there for a moment then it went swimming away into nothing.

When he awoke again the only light was from

see the beast before skinning, and he would liked to have shared the meat with all of the families.

He started back through the steaming jungle. He was still a very lucky man, he told himself. He could build another canoe, anybody could do that. But no hunter had ever brought in a white panther skin. And, he thought proudly, his own Mary Chokfee would be the only woman who could boast of a white panther rug on the floor of her *chikce*.

He made his way through tangled brush and vines, feeling good now. But the weather was certainly the hottest that he had ever experienced. Three times he stopped to kneel at the river's edge and wet his face and head. And the third time when he got to his feet he noticed how the heat was sapping his strength.

When he got back to where he had left the panther, he had to sit down and rest before starting the skinning job. Finally the hide was off, and he staked it out and scraped it then rolled it into a bundle and tied it with small ground vines. Then he again knelt at the river and wet his face and head, and decided he had better eat before starting for home, for his strength was badly in need of some building up.

He got a fire going, cut some strips from the panther carcass and cooked them over the flames. After that he drank thirstily from a traveler palm and started out. He hadn't gone more than a mile before he had to have more water. He scooped out a place in the ground and waited for it to fill with seepage. The heat was now a searching beast that

a big fire outside the *chikée*. There were men's voices close at hand now. Someone pried his mouth open and spooned medicine into it. The medicine was *possau*. This was the first time anyone had made him take the stuff since he was a small boy. He slept some more, and when he woke up he was given more *possau*. That happened several times, then he came fully awake and it was morning. He was so tired he could hardly move his arms, but he was cool. And he had never realized before how wonderful it was just to be cool.

He tried to sit up but that was no good. In a little while the girl of the plain face and large eyes came in. When she saw that he was awake the soberness left her mouth and she was smiling. It was a nice smile.

"Hinklas," she said, "you are better."

"What is this place?" he asked weakly.

"It is my *chikée*."

"Why am I here? How long have I been here?"

"I found you on the river bank three days ago.

I brought you here in my canoe."

He tried again to sit up. "My skin! My white panther skin!"

She gently pushed him back down on the pallet. "Plenty of time, Joey Billy. Your skin is taken care of. No man of the village has ever seen such a one before."

"How do you know my name?"

"I was at Green Corn Ceremonies. But you have been very sick. You need much rest."

"There's no time to rest! I have to get back! I have to take my panther skin—" He swung his feet to the floor and stood up. The *chikée* spun about him like a whirlwind.

Then he was lying down again and the girl was saying, "Now you see? Plenty rest for you. I will bring *sofkee*." And she went out.

He lay there perspiring and angry. He simply couldn't stay here. He had to get back to his own village. He had to take the skin to Mary Chokfee.

The girl came in again with *sofkee*, made thin and hot, and fed it to him.

"What is your name?" he asked her.

"Edna Osceola. This is the Motloe Village."

Joey knew of the Motloe Village, of course, but he had never been here before. "You brought me a long way in your canoe," he said.

She nodded. "You were sick. I could do nothing else."

He watched her face while she fed him. Her eyes were nice, but they were too large for her little face, which was like the little faces you see peeking at you from the shadows in the deep 'Glades. Looking at her, he thought of his Mary, and again asked about his panther skin.

"Tomorrow," was all she would say. And when he had finished the *sofkee*, which wasn't nearly as much as he wanted, she took the dish and left.

Every time he awakened during the day she

brought him more food, but never enough. The next morning the gray-haired old physic maker of the clan came in, looked Joey Billy over, grunted once and went out. Later, Edna came with two men who brought Joey's white panther skin and spread it out for him to see.

Joey sat up to admire it. It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. And the men had done a good curing job on it too. The men left the skin and went out and Edna spread it where he could put out his hand and touch it. Then she sat beside his bed and he told her about how he had set out to get Black Tip but had got this white panther instead. "And that's just the best thing that ever happened to me," he said. Then he told her about Mary Chokfee.

"And soon we will have our own *chikée*," he told her. "Mary Chokfee and Joey Billy. You should see

my Mary, Edna. She is most beautiful girl in any village."

He noticed that her mouth had gone sober again now. And when he finished telling her about Mary, she stood up and looked down at his white panther skin, her big eyes seeming to take it apart hair by hair. Then she laughed, a shrill unlovely laugh, spun around and ran out the door. Joey thought what a queer one she was.

After that a bent-over old woman with shoulder blades like sprouting wings brought his food to him, and he didn't see Edna again until the morning that he was well enough to leave. He was rolling up the panther skin when she stepped through the door.



"Good morning," he said. "I am well again, you see. You came to tell me *aitlyskashau*."

The lids were half down on her large eyes but her voice was very calm when she spoke. "I came to tell you that you are a fool, Joey Billy."

"What is this, 'I am a fool'?" he flared, staring at her.

She held out his hunting shirt. "It is washed and mended," she said, and put her eyes back on the panther skin. "She is not for you, Joey Billy. What kind of woman takes present from another man than the one she loves—if she loves him?"

"How did you know that?" he demanded.

"I told you I was at Green Corn Ceremonies. I saw it. You are a fool."

"You will see!" he said angrily. "The wife of Joey Billy will be the only woman in any clan with a white panther skin on her floor."

She turned her eyes on him now and they were very bright. Her mouth was soft, too soft. She had to harden it a little to keep her lips from quivering. She turned abruptly and walked straight-backed out of the *chikee*.

He saw nothing of her when he walked across the compound and down to the river and stepped into the canoe he had borrowed from one of the Motloe men.

He hadn't paddled far when he noticed the bundle in the prow of the canoe. He opened it and it was food, tied in a clean cloth, more than he would need on his entire trip. He knew a moment of illogical anger, then he was glad she had put it in. It would save him having to stop to shoot and cook game, and he would be with Mary that much sooner. He paddled on, not swiftly but steadily, not wanting to use up too much of his strength the first day.

When he arrived at his own village late in the afternoon of the third day, he pushed his canoe prow in among those lining the river bank, picked up his rolled-up present and went toward the village. As he neared the compound there was a softness in his knees that was not from weariness.

Most of the clan were down at the cook *chikee*, but he went straight on to Mary Chokfee's *chikee*. He saw she was alone and stepped through the door. She turned, a piece of Storm Dixie's calico in her hand, and she was surprised to see him. Joey Billy, his heart pounding, spread the white panther skin and held it out to her.

A soft sound caught in her throat as her hands reached for it. "Oh, Joey!" she exclaimed, and put her lovely face against the white softness of it.

"So the man of the frogs and alligators has come back," a voice with laughter in it said, and Storm Dixie was standing in the doorway. "Ho, Joey Billy! Looks like you'd ask a man's permission before going into the *chikee* of his wife."

Joey heard himself say "Wife!" and his voice sounded like an old man's voice.

"Yes, Joey," Mary said. "I am his wife." She

handed the skin to Storm Dixie. "See what Joey brought me." Then she looked at Joey and said, "You're not angry because we're married, are you, Joey?"

Joey stood a long moment with the drums of sadness beating fiercely at the soul of him. "Not angry!" he said then, and yanked the white skin away from Storm Dixie and tramped out and toward the river. He stepped into his canoe and set his paddle. And as he headed back the way he had come, he felt sicker than when the fever had pulled him down on the river bank.

He knew he shouldn't do it. Every mile that he put behind him he told himself that he was a fool, just as Edna Osceola had said. Else he wouldn't be trying to cover a three-day journey without any rest.

But he did. He paddled through the nights that were chill, endless, bitter and lonely, cut through by occasional unfriendly swamp sounds. He paddled under the molten sun that shot up into the brassy sky as soon as the darkness was blown away, to beat mercilessly at the jungle and send every living thing to shelter, leaving only an empty ravaging silence for a man's soul to feed on.

Early sun was burning the tops out of the trees to the east when he came again to the Motloe Village. He banked his canoe, picked up his panther hide and stepped out. And again it was as if the fever had him. The green morning world about him went black and that was all he knew until the coolness came. It was a wet coolness. And when he opened his eyes Edna's face was above him and she was wiping his forehead with a wet cloth.

"I got back," Joey said, and tried to make his parched lips into a smile.

"Yes," she said, and there were tears in her eyes and in her voice. Then she tried to assume a light tone. "Always I find you like dead on the river bank, Joey Billy." She laughed and it reminded Joey of the sound a bird makes when it tries to fly with one wing shot away.

After a while Joey was able to stand up, and they walked together to her *chikee* and she again put him on her own bed.

"Now you must rest some more," she said. "A very long rest this time."

"Mary Chokfee and Storm Dixie are married, Edna."

She caressed his cheek. And it was strange how that seemed the natural thing for her to do.

"You were right, Edna," he said. "I am a fool."

"You are good man, Joey." She was smiling down at him. "You are best panther hunter in all the 'Glades. And you are also man of wisdom." Joey was puzzled. "Truly you are, Joey. Did you not say that the wife of Joey Billy would be the only woman of all the clans with a white panther skin on her floor?"

And she bent down and spread the skin on the earth floor of her *chikee*. —BY ZACHARY BALL