

# THE HORN

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## AN ELK BATTUE IN RUSSIA.

(Prof. Whistler in Outline.)

My friend Arthur and myself were out on the spree. I do not wish to convey by this expression that we had emancipated ourselves from the restraints of polite company manners and were engaged in making a day or a night of it, enjoying the dissipations of town life; very far from it. We were miles away from town or village, away in the free, delicious air of a Russian forest in January, with the thermometer about zero, and the sun shining above our heads in a way that preached of the goodness of the Creator, and the pure happiness that is to be got out of life if one only knows how to get about looking for it.

On every side of us were pines: glorified pines, whose tapering heights were tipped in every point of every needle with the most delicate and most beautiful filigree of resin, which the sunshine converted into silver work such as the most cunning smith that ever was born could never hope to imitate. At our feet was snow: glorified snow; here the sunbeams were at work again, making diamonds out of myriads of snowflakes, each crystallized pointlet blazing out with an effulgence all its own. Upon our feet were the long Russian snowshoes in use in that country: strips of narrow wood, well-seasoned and tough, about six feet long by four or five inches in width. In our hands were guns, loaded with smallish shot, for we were intent upon stalking blackcock, hare, or others of the small fry of the forest; but in our pockets, at hand for immediate substitution in case of need, we had a good supply of cartridges containing large shot, slugs, and even bullets. These were intended for possible bear, wolf, elk, or lynx; which four names include the entire catalogue of the larger creatures to be found in Northern Russia.

Numbers of beautiful blackcock were to be seen perched upon the trees in the distance, as they love to sit during the cold months, apparently half asleep, but in reality about as wide awake as any one need be, as we found when we endeavored to creep upon them. The cunning rascals would allow us to approach within sixty yards or so, and then, just as we made up our minds to go another five yards and then shoot, they were up and safely away. Blackcock are up to date as to the exact range of guns; and before the check-bone came into fashion the blackcock perch upon his pine-tree would confidently permit his good friend the sportsman to approach within forty yards; and now he drops the line at sixty paces, and prefers rather long ones for choice.

Finding blackcock too wide awake for us, we transferred our attention to the ringing and driving of hares. I may men-

tion in this place that our two keepers, Stepan and Simon, had been dispatched at early morning in different directions in order to scour forest and moor for tracks of anything they could find; anything, that is to say, of larger dimensions than a fox. They knew where to find us in case their wandering quest proved successful.

Has my reader ever attempted to "ring" a hare in the snow? In case he should not understand the expression used, I will explain that to "ring" a creature is to walk round and round its tracks until you are satisfied that those tracks have not crossed your own, pointing out of the circle; in which case it may be assumed that the animal is still within the radius thereof. It sounds a simple enough process; but let the reader try it when next he has the opportunity. Hares seem to run about the country without any object in life, dodging higher and thicker and crossing and re-crossing their tracks. Arthur thought he had ringed one and generously offered to drive it out towards me; but his bent was a terrible failure. Not only did he not succeed in driving the hare towards my snout, but he himself never came in my direction at all, and wandered away in a diametrically opposite direction with the hare amblering after him, anxious to discover who was shouting and what the matter was, but this discovery occurred afterward by the tracks of pursuer and pursued. Arthur explained that it was a very difficult matter to preserve a straight line through thickish cover, which is true.

Soon after the collapse of this erratic hare battue, as we were busily engaged in endeavoring to fathom the mysterious intentions of another hare, we suddenly became aware of a snow-shed figure flying toward us at a speed which argued matters of import. It was Simon. On he came, skating at terrific speed, helping himself with his Alpenstock-like staff and gesticulating and shouting to us in great excitement.

He came panting up to us presently, and communicated the joyful intelligence that Stepan had elk ringed for us—three of them, a fine bull and two grown cows. Straight as a line we flew—for Simon could follow a bee-line through the forest if we could not—over hills and into gulleys and out again, shooting the easy despatches like winged things, and putting mile after mile behind us.

When at length we reached the ledge our condition resembled that of a boiled potato; but what is discomfort; what is anything, when there are elk ringed and waiting for one to come and shoot them? To rush into the bushes, seize any scraps of broken food that the flurried old house-keeper could show us, gather up flasks and sheepskin coats and to jump into the sledge that was waiting for us was the work of a moment; the next, a three or four of us were being whirled along by the little galloping Finn pony, which appeared to have caught the general excitement.

There was a long three miles to drive,

Simon explained, and we had better settle ourselves comfortably and eat what food we had, for it was very uncertain when we would get another opportunity if the elk should, unfortunately, happen to have broken the ring—in which case we would be obliged to follow them.

So we ate our lunch and took turns at the flask, letting Simon have his turn with ourselves—a piece of hospitality which we regretted afterward, for Simon but scruples as to leaving anything in a flask.

Those three miles took but a short quarter of an hour to negotiate. We had barely swallowed our lunch when we flew to ourselves the end of the journey and Stepan, prince of woodcraftsmen, awaiting us, and smiling in a manner to indicate that things were going very prosperously indeed.

The elk went still safely within the charmed circle, and scarcely more than half a mile, said Stepan. The beaters were placed, thirty of them, and there was no time to be lost, for the elk were on their travels and had merely stopped for a short rest and a feed.

On went our snowshoes once more, and on went, also, two white calico overalls, designed to render us invisible in the snow when the animals should be driven close to our ambuscades. Then amid silence as of the grave, Stepan led the way toward the spot where those three huge creatures were still browsing, as we trusted, in blissful ignorance of the thirty-beaters crouched around them in breathless silence, all ready to do their part in the work of destruction.

On we crept, through the sparkle of the sun-bathed snow-crystals, a silent procession of sliding white figures, all taking our step simultaneously in order to make one sound instead of many. Before a quarter of an hour had elapsed Arthur and I were safely ensconced behind our respective pine trees, while Stepan and Simon had disappeared to take their respective positions in the ring, and to give the signal for the fun to begin.

With heart throbbing and with nerves twitching with the excitement of the moment, I completed preparations, loaded the rifle, placed it beside me, then I studied the bearings of my position, noting where I could see to shoot and where I must not attempt a shot. Then I took up the rifle, cocked it, and settled myself to wait, endeavoring, at the same time, to reason myself into a less excited state of mind, but making a very poor job of it. However, what reason failed to achieve, was soon accomplished by the perfect repose of the forest. There was absolutely no sound. Not a tree swayed; not a creature stirred. Where were all the hares, the willow-grouse, the small birds, the foxes, the tree partridges? Where, above all, were the elk; was it possible that they, too, as well as thirty silent men and women, were really and truly braced somewhere over yonder amid the hush of the breathless noon? As though in an-

swer to my thoughts, a red fox suddenly appeared from somewhere in mid-forest, trotting cautiously along and peering here and there into the scrub and cover. He did not observe me and came straight for my ambuscade; he ambled lazily along toward me. He caught sight of me when there were but a couple of yards between us. In an instant there was no fox in the case, but only a streak of red flashing away into the distance.

But if that fox received a scare, the start which I was destined to get a moment later made honors even. All of a sudden, the spell of the perfect stillness was broken with an abruptness which caused my heart to leap into my mouth. A shrill whistle first, then hideous shrieks, yells, drummings and rattlings arose in a storm of unlovely noise. Oh, how those thirty Finnish throats exerted themselves! Verily, Stepan had bargained well; the forest became a pandemonium in a moment. The hidden life of the woods revealed itself on every side; flocks of tall birds, field fares, grosbeaks and beautiful wax-wings fluttered about. Hares scampered in every direction, my friend, the fox, or his twin brother, hounded his rifle, more at full gallop; birds flew over my head; first an old blackcock, then a pair of tree-partridges, closely followed by a gray partridge, which hurled and crashed through the pines.

But where were the elk all this time? The beaters were becoming perfectly frantic in their yells, and I inferred from this fact that the giants were doing their best to break out of the ring. Half frantic myself with the excitement of the moment I peered this way and that, wild with apprehension lest I should allow the animals to go by in the thick cover without catching sight of them. As I turned my head for the twentieth time toward the spot where I knew Arthur stood concealed, I saw a puff of smoke and heard a shot. At the same instant there was a crashing of wood, a shout from Arthur, and in a moment I saw two huge creatures cross an open spot one hundred yards in my place, in full retreat toward the beaters.

Should I fire or not? Fire by all means! said my sportsman's judgment. There was not much time in which to make up my mind, just enough to raise my rifle, point it as well as I could in the direction of the leader, and pull the trigger. This I did. The next moment both bull and cow had disappeared—in all probability I had clean missed; and no wonder; but oh! what a beautiful creature he had been, even in that fleeting moment; what a revelation of strength and freedom, of majesty and beauty? How grandly he had held up his mighty head, laying those heavy, handsome antlers back upon his regal shoulders, and stepping proudly and ad resistlessly through the deep snow. How those beaters were yelling; it really seemed a sacrilegious thing to shout and scream at that regal beast.

I don't know whatbourne my thoughts were bound for, but just at this moment

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