

The Hunger Moon

By H. Mortimer Batten

IT was very early in the spring, while the region of Glacier Cutting was still a quagmire, that a half-starved, ragged and homeless Indian boy arrived at Lombert's shanty and offered to trade a straddle-legged, wild-eyed moose calf, clearly only a few days old, for food. The calf was tired and dejected as the boy himself, and as Lombert regarded the pair, the boy towing the calf behind him by means of a willow wand twisted to form a noose between her eyes and nostrils, a good-natured smile curved the heavy lips of the woodsman.

"Cheero, Sonny! What's the price of moose meat?" called Lombert jovially, but as the large, black eyes of the little woodlander met his own he saw that the time was ill-chosen for jesting.

"Where did you get her from?" he enquired more soberly. The Indian seated himself on the extreme edge of the verandah, and waved a shaking hand northward.

"Land of Little Trees. You trade?" Lombert answered the question with another. "How far you come?"

Again the boy waved listlessly northwards, but he seemed not to have the strength to answer. Lombert touched his shoulder. "You hungry, little man? Come along in," said the woodsman.

Before the eyes of the starving boy Lombert spread a meal which filled that youth with wonder. It was just the same meal as Lombert would have spread before a travelling missionary, for color and station played no part in Lombert's code of hospitality, and having filled up the boy he turned his attention to the young moose. The tired animal had laid itself down just where they had left it and with the same air of dejection as one sees on the face of a calf trussed up in a sack on a railway station platform.

Lombert mixed a homely solution in the household bucket, and having convinced the young moose that the bucket was not some new instrument of torture, he induced the animal to drink out of it. Thereafter, incidentally, the affection of the calf was equally divided between Lombert and the bucket. From that moment onward, indeed, it shared its attentions equally between the two, either investigating the one or stumbling at the heels of the other.

Fate had thrown two new and curious friendships at the feet of Nat Lombert, who for two years now had wearied out his life in one man loneliness. Only the ugly scar over his right eye reminded the world how his last partnership had ended, but the soul of the man was still bitter. To-night, however, it was strangely refreshing to have new blood—young blood—sharing his shanty.

A long series of funny incidents enlivened the next few days. The boy and the calf between them were a source of endless amusement, though their dispositions were utterly the reverse. The boy hated to be laughed at, while the calf seemed to delight in it, Lombert's roars of mirth having the effect of reducing the young animal to a state of prancing jubilation. The boy was out to learn all he could by observation and thought, whereas the calf had doggedly turned its back upon anything which savoured of profiting by previous experience. She refused to accept the very obvious fact that soapuds were entirely the reverse from food to drink; that they were contained in that maternal bucket was enough for her, and whatever the contents of that piece of household equipment, she would contrive to consume them. She never learnt that it was unwise to investigate the kettle when it hissed and spluttered in playful mood, and these investigations cost her a skinless snout ere the first week was up. Day after day she would blunder innocently into the same old mischief, day after day the frying pan clouted her out of it. Lombert divided his time between working his trench and clouting the calf.

As for the boy, his natural dread of ridicule was such that he never twice made the same mistake. Watching Lombert closely he soon learnt that it was incorrect to eat the soap, to take pepper with one's coffee, or sugar with one's caribou steak, and at every meal he would wait timidly till Lombert had shown the way in which the dish was tackled. Then, mechanically, and shadow-

like Kaswin would follow exactly Lombert's movement, drinking when Lombert drank, diving his hand into the salt or sugar tin instantly Lombert's hand was withdrawn, and so on. Thus he imbibed the habits of civilization. He learnt to eat canned peas with his hunting knife and with wonderful dexterity, though swilling down vast volumes of coffee with one's mouth full of dry bread was an act which took some days to master.

It never seemed to occur to Lombert that the natural result of their chance meeting was that they must part after the usual period of hospitality, and now, between intervals of lighting fires and grovelling the slush from the bottom of his assessment trench, Lombert amused

himself by "rigging up the kid with decent gear." An old buckskin parki of Indian origin, lavishly ornamented with stained porcupine quills and glass beads, was cut down for Kaswin. Kaswin, with eyes of pride, watched its development, as likewise he watched the skilful cutting down of an old pair of shoebacks, and the reduction of a pair of bags to fit his own diminutive members. The result of this absorbing process was that one gorgeous May morning Kaswin strutted on to the verandah—apparently for the sole purpose of allowing the calf to see him, resplendent in such garments as he had never dreamt he might live to wear. The tan shirt exactly matched the rich color of his skin, and the brightly tinted ornaments seemed in natural harmony.

The moose calf regarded him curiously, then suddenly wheeled, squealed, shook her head, and bolted round the clearing.

But that day the heart of the boy was heavy, in spite of the pride that was at his soul. These two men had not yet come to know each other, as they came to know each other in later years. They could not read each other's thoughts by the passing of a glance, and neither knew what was in the mind of the other during that sunny May day. Out on the lake the loons called, and though to the boy the sad note was sadder than ever before, to the man it was the joyous voice of spring.

That night, when the fireflies flickered and vanished along the margin, Nat Lombert leant against the corner post and watched the last ghostly beams of the aurora fleet northward. "Nat, old boy," he soliloquised, "I guess a good thing's happened for you. Afore these youngsters came along there was nothing for it but whisky. It was getting you

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