

The Monarch of Park Barren

Whether the Fight Goes to the Giant of the Hoofs and Antlers or to the Slugger Beast

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Illustration by Arthur Heming

FROM the cold spring lakes and sombre deeps of spruce forest, over which the bald granite peak of Old Saugamauk kept endless guard, came reports of a moose of more than royal stature, whose antlers beggared all records for symmetry and spread. From a home-coming lumber-cruiser here, a wandering Indian there, the word came straggling in, till the Settlements about the lower reaches of the river began to believe there might be some truth behind the wild tales. Then—for it was autumn, the season of gold and crimson falling leaves, and battles on the lake-shores under the white full moon—there followed stories of other moose seen fleeing in terror, with torn flanks and bleeding shoulders; and it was realized that the prowess of the great moose bull was worthy of his stature and his adornment. Apparently he was driving all the other bulls off the Saugamauk ranges.

By this time the matter became of interest to the guides. The stories came in from different quarters, so it was hard to guess just where the gigantic stranger was most likely to be found. To north and north-east of the mountain went the two Armstrongs, seeking the stranger's trail; while to south and south-eastward explored the Crimmins boys. If real, the giant bull had to be located; if a myth, he had to be exploded before raising impossible hopes in the hearts of visiting sportsmen.

Then suddenly arrived corroboration of all the stories. It came from Charley Crimmins. He was able to testify with conviction that the giant bull was no figment of Indian's imagination or lumberman's inventive humour. For it was he whose search had been successful.

In fact, he might have been content to have it just a shade less overwhelmingly successful. That there is such a thing as an embarrassment of success was borne in upon him when he found himself jumping madly for the nearest tree, with a moose that seemed to have the size of an elephant crashing through the thickets close behind him. He reached the tree just in time to swing well up among the branches. Then the tree quivered as the furious animal flung his bulk against it. Crimmins had lost his rifle in the flight. He could do nothing but sit shivering on his branch, making remarks so uncomplimentary that the great bull, if he could have appreciated them, would probably have established himself under that tree till vengeance was accomplished. But not knowing that he had been insulted, he presently grew tired of snorting at his captive and wandered off through the woods in search of more exciting occupation. Then, indignant beyond words, Charley descended from his retreat, and took his authoritative report in to the Settlements.

At first it was thought that there would be great hunting around Old Saugamauk, till those tremendous antlers should fall a prize to some huntsman not only lucky but rich. For no one who could not pay right handsomely for the chance might hope to be guided to the range where such an unequalled trophy was to be won. But when the matter, in all its authenticated details, came to the ears of Uncle Adam, dean of the guides of that region, he said "No" with an emphasis that left no room for argument. There should be no hunting around the slopes of Saugamauk for several seasons. If the great bull was the terror they made him out to be, then he had driven all the other bulls from his range, and there was nothing to be hunted but his royal self. "Well," decreed the far-seeing old guide, "we'll let him be for a bit, till his youngsters begin to grow up like him. Then there'll be no heads in all the rest of New Brunswick like them that comes from Old Saugamauk." This decree was accepted, the New Brunswick guides being among those who are wise enough to cherish the golden-egged goose.

IN the course of that season the giant moose was seen several times by guides and woodsmen—but usually from a distance, as the inconsiderate impetuosity of his temper was not favourable to close or calm observation. The only people who really knew him were those who, like Charley Crimmins, had looked down upon his grunting wrath from the branches of a substantial tree.

Upon certain important details, however, all observers agreed. The stranger (for it was held that, driven by some southward wandering instinct, he had come down from the wild solitudes of the Gaspe Peninsula) was reckoned to be a good eight

inches taller at the shoulders than any other moose of New Brunswick record, and several hundred-weight heavier. His antlers, whose symmetry and palmation seemed perfect, were estimated to have a spread of sixty inches at least. That was the conservative estimate of Uncle Adam, who had made his observation with remarkable composure from a tree somewhat less lofty and sturdy than he would have chosen had he had time for choice.

In colour the giant was so dark that his back and flanks looked black except in the strongest sunlight. His mighty head, with long, deeply overhanging muzzle, was of a rich brown; while the under parts of his body, and the inner surfaces of his long, straight legs, were of a rusty fawn colour. His "bell"—as the long, shaggy appendix that hangs from the neck of a bull moose, a little below the throat, is called—was of unusual development, and the coarse hair adorning it peculiarly glossy. To bring down such a magnificent prize, and to carry off such a trophy as that unmatched head and antlers, the greatest sportsmen of America would have begrudged no effort or expense. But though the fame of the wonderful animal was cunningly allowed to spread to the ears of all sportsmen, its habitat seemed miraculously elusive. It was heard of on the Upsalquitch, the Nipisiguit, the Dugarvan, the Little Sou'west, but never, by some strange chance, in the country around Old Saugamauk. Visiting sportsmen hunted, spent money, dreamed dreams, followed great trails and brought down splendid heads, all over the Province; but no stranger with a rifle was allowed to see the proud antlers of the monarch of Saugamauk.

THE right of the splendid moose to be called the Monarch of Saugamauk was settled beyond all question one moonlight night when the surly old bear who lived in a crevasse far up under the stony crest of the mountain came down and attempted to dispute it. The wild kindreds, as a rule, are most averse to unnecessary quarrels. Unless their food or their mates are at stake, they will fight only under extreme provocation, or when driven to bay. They are not ashamed to run away, rather than press matters too far and towards a doubtful issue. A bull moose and a bear are apt to give each other a wide berth, respecting each other's prowess. But there are exceptions to all rules, especially where bears, the most individual of our wild cousins, are concerned. And this bear was in a particularly savage mood. Just in the mating season, he had lost his mate, who had been shot by an Indian. The old bear did not know what had happened to her, but he was ready to avenge her upon anyone who might cross his path.

Unluckily for him, it was the great moose who crossed his path; and the luck was all Charley Crimmins's, who chanced to be the spectator of what happened there beside the moonlit lake.

Charley was on his way over to the head of the Nipisiguit, when it occurred to him that he would like to get another glimpse of the great beast who had so ignominiously discomfited him. Peeling a sheet of bark from the nearest white birch, he twisted himself a "moose-call," then climbed into the branches of a willow which spread out over the edge of the shining lake. From this concealment he began to utter persuasively the long, uncouth, melancholy call by which the moose cow summons her mate.

Sometimes these vast northern solitudes seem, for hours together, as if they were empty of all life. It is as if a wave of distrust had passed simultaneously over all the creatures of the wild. At other times the lightest occasion suffices to call life out of the stillness. Crimmins had not sounded more than twice his deceptive call, when the bushes behind the strip of beach cracked sharply. But it was not the great bull that stepped forth into the moonlight. It was a cow moose. She came out with no effort at concealment, and walked up and down the beach, angrily looking for her imagined rival.

When the uneasy animal's back was towards him, Crimmins called again, a short, soft call. The cow jumped around as if she had been struck, and the stiff hair along her back stood up with jealous rage. But there was no rival anywhere in sight,

and she stood completely mystified, shaking her ungainly head, peering into the dark undergrowth, and snorting tempestuously as if challenging the invisible rival to appear. Then suddenly her angry ridge of hair sank down, she seemed to shrink together upon herself, and with a convulsive bound she sprang away from the dark undergrowth, landing with a splash in the shallow water along-shore. At the same instant the black branches were burst apart, and a huge bear, forepaws up-raised and jaws wide open, launched himself forth into the open.

DISAPPOINTED at missing his first spring, the bear rushed furiously upon his intended victim, but the cow, for all her apparent awkwardness, was as agile as a deer. Barely eluding his rush, she went shambling up the shore at a terrific pace, plunged into the woods, and vanished. The bear checked himself at the water's edge, and turned, holding his nose high in the air, as if disdaining to acknowledge that he had been foiled.

Crimmins hesitatingly raised his rifle. Should he bag this bear, or should he wait and sound his call again a little later, in the hope of yet summoning the great bull? As he hesitated, and the burly black shape in the moonlight also stood hesitating, the thickets rustled and parted almost beneath him, and the mysterious bull strode forth, with his head held high.

He had come in answer to what he thought was the summons of his mate; but when he saw the bear, his rage broke all bounds. He doubtless concluded that the bear had driven his mate away. With a bawling roar he thundered down upon the intruder.

The bear, as we have seen, was in no mood to give way. His small eyes glowed suddenly red with vengeful fury, as he wheeled and gathered himself, half crouching upon his haunches, to meet the tremendous attack. In this attitude all his vast strength was perfectly poised, ready for use in any direction. The moose, had he been attacking a rival of his own kind, would have charged with antlers down, but against all other enemies the weapons he relied upon were his gigantic hoofs, edged like chisels. As he reached his suddenly waiting antagonist he reared on his hind-legs, towering like a black rock about to fall and crush whatever was in its path. Like pile-drivers his forehoofs struck downwards, one closely following the other.

The bear swung aside as lightly as a weasel, and eluded, but only by a hair's breadth, that destructive stroke. As he wheeled he delivered a terrific, swinging blow, with his armed forepaw, upon his assailant's shoulder.

The blow was a fair one. Any ordinary moose bull would have gone down beneath it, with his shoulder-joint shattered to splinters. But this great bull merely staggered and stood for a second in amazement. Then he whipped about and darted upon the bear with a sort of hoarse scream, his eyes flashing with a veritable madness. He neither reared to strike, nor lowered his antlers to gore, but seemed intent upon tearing the foe with his teeth, as a mad horse might. At the sight of such restless fury Crimmins involuntarily tightened his grip on his branch and muttered: "That ain't no moose! It's a —" But before he could finish his comparison, astonishment stopped him. The bear, unable with all his strength and weight to withstand the shock of that straight and incredibly swift charge, had been rolled over and over down the gentle slope of the beach. At the same moment the moose, blinded by his rage and unable to check himself, had tripped over a log that lay hidden in the bushes, and fallen headlong on his nose.

UTTERLY cowed by the overwhelming completeness of this overthrow, the bear was on his feet again before his conqueror, and scurrying to refuge like a frightened rat. He made for the nearest tree, and that nearest tree, to Crimmins's dismay, was Crimmins's. The startled guide swung himself hastily to a higher branch which stretched well out over the water.

Before the great bull could recover his footing, the fugitive had gained a good start. But desperately swift though he was, the doom that thundered behind him was swifter, and caught him just as he was scrambling into the tree. Those implacable antlers ploughed his hindquarters remorselessly, till he squealed with pain and ter-