

The Chore-boy of Camp Kippewa.

A Canadian Story.

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CHAPTER X.

A HUNTING TRIP.

THE hold of winter had begun to relax ere Johnston was able to fully resume his work, and, a good deal of time having been lost through his accident, every effort had to be exerted to make it up ere the warm sunshine should put an end to the winter's work. Frank was looking forward eagerly to the day when they should break camp, for, to tell the truth, he felt that he had had quite enough of it for one season, and he was longing to be back to Calumet and enjoying the comforts of home once more. He was not exactly homesick. You would have very much offended him by hinting at that. He was simply tired of the monotony of camp fare and camp life, and anxious to return to civilization. So he counted the days that must pass before the order to break camp would come, and felt very light of heart when the sun shone warm and correspondingly down-cast when the thermometer sank below zero, as it was still liable to do.

"Striving" was the order of the day at the lumber-camp—that is, the different gangs of choppers and sawyers and teamsters vied with each other as to which could chop, saw, and haul the most logs in a day. The amount of work they could accomplish when thus striving might astonish Mr. Gladstone himself, from eighty to one hundred logs felled and trimmed being the day's work of two men. Frank was deeply interested in this competition, and enjoying the fullest confidence of the men, he was unanimously appointed scorer, keeping each gang's "tally" in a book, and reporting the results to the foreman, who heartily encouraged the rivalry among his men; for the harder they worked the better would be the showing for the season, and he was anxious not to lose the reputation he had won of turning out more logs at his shanty than did any other foreman on the Kippewa.

As the weeks passed and March gave way to April, and April drew toward its close, the lumbermen's work grew more and more arduous, but they kept at it bravely until at last, near the end of April, the snow became so soft in the woods and the roads so bad that no more hauling could be done, and the whole attention of the camp was then given to getting the logs, that had been gathered at the riverside all through the winter, out upon the ice, so that they might be sure to be carried off by the spring floods. This work did not require all hands, and Johnston now saw the way clear to giving Frank a treat that he had long had in mind for him, but had said nothing about. They were having their usual chat together before going to bed, when the foreman said:

"Is there any thing you would like to do before we break up camp?"

Frank did not at first see the drift of the question, and looking at Johnston with a puzzled sort of expression replied, questioningly:

"I don't know. I've had a very good time here."

"Well, but can you think of anything you would like to do before you go back to Calumet?" persisted the foreman. "I'm asking you because there'll not be enough work to go round next week, and you can have a bit of holiday. Now, isn't there something you would like to have a taste of while you have the chance?" And as he spoke his eyes were directed toward the wall at the head of his bed, where hung his rifle, powder-flask, and hunting knife. Frank caught his meaning at once.

"Oh, I see what you are driving at now!" he exclaimed. "You want to know if I wouldn't like to go out hunting."

"Right you are," said Johnston. "Would you?"

"Would I?" cried Frank. "Would a duck swim? Just try me, that's all."

"Well, I do intend to try you," returned Johnston. "The firm have some

limits, over there near the foot of the mountain, that they want me to prospect before I go back, and pick out the best place for a camp. I've been trying to make out to go over there all winter, but getting hurt upset my plans, and I've not had a chance until now. So I'm thinking of making a start to-morrow. There's nothing much else to do except to finish getting the logs on the ice, and I can trust the men to see to that, and, no odds what kind of weather we have, the ice can't start for a week at least. So if you would like to come along with me and take your rifle, you may get a chance to have a shot at something before we get back. Does that suit you?"

This proposition suited Frank admirably. A week in the woods in Johnston's company could not fail to be a week of delight, and he thanked the foreman in his warmest words for offering to take him on his prospecting tour.

The following morning they set off, the party consisting of four—namely, the foreman, Frank, Laberge, who accompanied them as cook, and another man named Booth as a sort of assistant. The snow still lay deep enough to render snowshoes necessary, and while Johnston and Frank carried their rifles, Laberge and Booth drew behind them a toboggan, upon which was packed a small tent and an abundant supply of provisions. Their route led straight into the heart of the vast, and so far little-explored, forest, and away from the river beside whose bank they had been living all winter. It was Johnston's purpose to penetrate to the foot of the mountain range that rose into sight nearly thirty miles away, and then work backward by a different route, noting carefully the lay of the land, the course of the streams, and the best bunches of timber, so as to make sure in selecting a site for the future camp in the very best locality.

He was evidently in excellent spirits himself at the prospect of a week's holiday, for such it would really be, and, all trace of his injury having entirely disappeared, there was no drawback to the energy with which he led his little expedition into the forest where they would be buried for the rest of the week.

The weather was as fine as heart could wish. All day the sun shone brightly, and even at night the temperature never got anywhere near zero, so that with a buffalo robe under you and a couple of good blankets over you it was possible to sleep quite comfortably in a canvas tent.

"I can't promise you much in the way of game, Frank," said Johnston, as the two tramped along side by side. "It is too late in the season; but the bears must be out of their dens by this time, and if we see one we'll do our best to get his skin for you to take home."

The idea of bringing a big bear skin home as a trophy of his first real hunting expedition pleased Frank mightily, and his eyes flashed as he grasped his rifle in a way that would in itself have been sufficient warning to bruin, could he only have seen it, to keep well out of the way of so doughty an assailant.

"I'd like immensely to have a shot at a bear, sir," he replied. "So I do hope we shall see one."

"You must be precious careful, though, Frank," said Johnston, "for they're generally in mighty bad humour at this time of the year, and you need to get your work in quick, or they may make short work of you."

Various kinds of game were seen during the next day or two, and Frank had many a shot. But Johnston seldom fired, preferring to let Frank have all the fun, as he said. One afternoon just before they went into camp the keen eyes of Laberge detected something among the branches of a pine a little distance to the right of their path which caused his face to glow with excitement as he pointed eagerly to it, and exclaimed:

"Voila! A lucifée—shoot him, quick!"

They all turned in the direction he pointed out, and there, sure enough, was a dark mass in the fork of the tree that, as they hastened toward it, resolved itself into a fierce-looking creature, full four times the size of an ordinary cat, which, instead of showing any fear at their approach, bristled up its back and uttered a deep, angry snarl that spoke volumes for its courage.

"Now then, Frank," said Johnston, "take first shot and see if you can fetch the brute down."

Trembling with excitement, Frank threw up his rifle, did his best to steady himself, took aim at the bewhiskered muzzle of the lynx, and pulled the trigger. The sharp crack of the rifle was followed by an ear-piercing shriek of mingled pain and rage, and the next instant the wounded creature launched forth into the air toward the hunters. Frank's nervousness, natural enough under the circumstances, had caused him to miss his mark a little, and the bullet, instead of piercing the "lucifée's" brain, had only stung him sorely in the shoulder.

But as quick as were his movements, Johnston was still quicker, and the moment its feet touched the snow, ere it could gather itself for another spring, his rifle cracked, and a bullet put an end to his career.

"Just as well you weren't by yourself, Frank; hey?" said he, with a smile of satisfaction at the accuracy of his shot. "This chap would have been an ugly customer at close quarters, and," turning the body over to find where the first bullet had hit, "you see you hardly winged him."

Frank blushed furiously and looked very much ashamed of himself for not being a better marksman, but the foreman cheered him up by assuring that he had really done very well in hitting the animal at all at that distance.

"You only want a little practice, my boy," said he. "You have plenty of pluck; there's no mistake about that."

The lynx had a fine skin, which Laberge deftly removed, and it was given to Frank because he had fired the first shot at it, so that he would not go back to Calumet without at least one hunting trophy on the strength of which he might do a little boasting.

Further and further into the forest the little party pierced their way, not following any direct line, but making detours to right and left, in order that the country might be thoroughly inspected. As they neared the mountains the trees diminished in size and the streams shrank until at the end of their journey the first were too small to pay for cutting, and the second too shallow to be any good for floating. With no little difficulty they ascended a shoulder of the mountain range, in order to get a look over all the adjoining country, and then, Johnston having made up his mind as to the location of the best bunches of timber and the most convenient site for the projected lumber camp, the object of the expedition was accomplished, and they were at liberty to return to the shanty. But before they could do this they were destined to have an adventure that came perilously near taking away from them the youngest of their number.

It was the afternoon before they struck camp on the return journey. The foreman was sitting by the tent mending one of his snowshoes, which had been damaged tramping through the bush, Booth was busy cutting firewood, and Laberge making preparations for the evening meal. Having nothing else to do, Frank picked up his rifle and sauntered off toward the mountain side, with no very clear idea as to anything more than to kill a little time. Whistling cheerfully one of the many sacred melodies he knew and loved, he made his way over the snow, being soon lost to sight from the camp, Johnston calling after him just before he disappeared:

"Take care of yourself, my boy, and don't go too far."

To which Frank responded with a smiling, "All right, sir."

At the distance of about a quarter of a mile from the camp he noticed a sort of rift in the mountain, where the rocks were bare and exposed, and at the end of this rift a dark aperture was visible, which at once attracted his attention.

The boy that could come across a cave without being filled with a burning curiosity to take a peep in and, if possible, explore its interior would have to be a very dull fellow, and Frank certainly was not of that kind. This dark aperture was no doubt the mouth of a cave of some sort, and he determined to inspect it. When he got within about fifteen yards, he noticed what he had not seen before, that there was a well-defined track leading from the cave to the underbrush to the right, which had evidently been made by some large

animal, and with somewhat of a start, Frank immediately thought of a bear.

Now, of course, under the circumstances, there was but one thing for him to do if he wished to illustrate his common sense, and that was to hurry back to the tent as fast as possible for reinforcements. Ordinarily, he would have done so at once, but this time he was still smarting a bit at his poor marksmanship in the case of the "lucifée," and the sight of the track in the snow suggested the idea of winning a reputation for himself by killing a bear without any assistance from the others. It was a rash and foolish notion, but then boys will be boys.

Moving forward cautiously, he approached within ten yards of the cave and then halted again, bringing his rifle forward so as to be ready to fire at a moment's notice. Bending down until his eyes were on a level with the opening, he tried hard to peer into its depths, but the darkness was too deep to pierce, and he could not make out anything. Then he bethought him of another expedient. Picking up a lump of snow, he pressed it into a ball and threw it into the cave, at the same time shouting out:

"Halloo there! Anybody inside?" A proceeding that capped the climax of his rashness and produced quite as sensational a result as he could possibly have desired, for the next moment a deep angry roar issued from the rocky retreat, and a fiery pair of eyes gleamed out from its shadows. The critical moment had come, and, taking him a little below the shining orbs, so as to make sure of hitting, Frank pulled the trigger. The report of the rifle and the roar of the bear followed close upon one another, awaking the echoes of the adjoining heights and then came a moment's silence, broken the next instant by a cry of alarm from Frank, for the bear, instead of writhing in the agonies of death, was charging down upon him with open mouth! Once more he had missed his mark and only wounded when he should have killed.

There was but one thing for him to do—to flee for his life. And, uttering a shout of "Help! help!" with all the strength of his lungs, he threw down his rifle and started for the tent at the top of his speed.

It was well for him that the snow still lay deep upon the ground and that he was so expert in the use of his snowshoes, for while the bear wallowed heavily in the drifts he flew lightly over them, so that for a time the furious creature lost ground rather than gained upon him. For a hundred yards the boy and bear raced through the forest, Frank continuing his cries for help while he ran. Looking back for an instant, he saw that the bear had not yet drawn any nearer, and, terrified as he was, the thought flashed into his mind that if the brute followed him all the way to the camp he would soon be dispatched by the men, and then he, Frank, would be entitled to some credit for thus bringing him to execution.

On sped the two in their race for life, the boy skimming swiftly over the soft snow, the bear ploughing his way madly through it until more than half the distance to the camp had been accomplished. If Johnston had heard the report of the rifle and Frank's wild cries for help, he should be coming into sight, and with intense anxiety Frank looked ahead in hopes of seeing him emerge from the trees which clustered thickly in that direction. But there was no sign of him yet, and, shouting again as loudly as he could, the boy pressed strenuously forward. There was greater need for exertion than ever, for he had reached a spot where the snow was not very deep and had been firmly packed by the wind, so that the bear's broad feet sank but little in it, and his rate of speed unobviously increased. So close was the fierce creature coming that Frank could hear his paws pattering on the snow and his deep panting breath.

Oh, why did not Johnston appear? Surely he must have heard Frank's cries. Ah, there he was, just bursting through the trees into the opening with Laberge and Booth close at his heels. Frank's heart bounded with joy, and he was tempted to take a glance back to see how close the bear had got. It was not a wise thing to do, and he came nearly paying dearly for doing it, for at the same instant his snowshoes caught in each other, and before he could recover himself he fell head-long in the snow with the bear upon him.

(To be continued.)