

The Moose Race

Written for The Western Home Monthly by G. H. Smith

Maj. Moose was the biggest and strongest of all the wood folk. He was also vain and more given to boasting than some of the others thought was becoming. One day, toward the end of the long winter, Maj. Moose said:

"I am tired of grubbing here in the woods. To-night I shall go to the haystack of Farmer Goodman, a mile beyond the edge of the forest, and have a good feast."

"Be careful, Major," said Ray Coon. "I think that Farmer Goodman has a dog."

"Poof!" answered Maj. Moose. "Little do I care for a dozen dogs. Come along, all of you! I'll show you some fun, and perhaps there will be something good for all to eat."

When night came a party of the wood folk set out with Maj. Moose for the haystack of Farmer Goodman. The three deer did not go, because they were too timid. Grandpa Fox and Grandpa Coon said that the walk was too long for them. But Dame Bear and her son, Billy Bear, Ray Coon and the two Fox boys, Bouncer Rabbit and his friend, Gray Squirrel, and several other young folk of the Rabbit and Squirrel families—all were in the party, which set forth in high spirits.

It was late when they started and the walk was a long one. Some of them were pretty tired before they reached the haystack, which was just behind Farmer Goodman's barn. There was nothing to feast on except the hay, which none of them, except Maj. Moose, cared much for; but no dog appeared, and when the wood folk had rested a bit all were in the mood for a frolic.

"What strange thing is this?" called out Billy Bear from the barnyard.

"That?" said Ray Coon. "Why, that is Farmer Goodman's pung! He hitches his horse to it and rides to town. I have often seen him."

"I wish that we had a horse to haul us home!" sighed Dame Bear. "I've walked far enough for one night. I am tired."

"What's that?" said Maj. Moose. "Who is tired? Just pile into that pung, all of you! I'll haul you back home in a jiffy. I'm stronger than ten horses, and I'm the fastest of all the wood folk."

"You are the strongest, but not the fastest!" promptly cried out Gray Squirrel. "My friend, Bouncer Rabbit, is the fastest of all the wood folk. Ask the deer or the skaters. They know! See! Here is a tiny toy sleigh that Farmer Goodman's little boy forgot to take in last night. I'll get into that, and Bouncer will haul me home faster than you can haul the others in the pung."

Maj. Moose fairly snorted with scorn at the idea that Bouncer Rabbit could run faster than he could. While he was fuming and scolding, Billy Bear put the harness over his shoulders and tied the reins to his broad antlers. Then Billy Bear and all the others, except Gray Squirrel and Bouncer Rabbit, climbed into the pung.

Meantime Gray Squirrel was harnessing Bouncer Rabbit into the little toy sleigh, and as he did so he whispered something in Bouncer's ear and patted him on the back until Bouncer fairly danced with eagerness for the homeward race to begin.

It was daybreak by the time they were finally ready to begin the race. Then Ray Coon, who sat behind Billy Bear in the pung, gave the word.

"Go!" he shouted.

Maj. Moose plunged forward down the road that led from Farmer Goodman's barn toward the forest a mile away. He dragged the pung with all its passengers as if it had had no weight at all. Right beside him went Bouncer Rabbit in long leaps that would have made the little toy sleigh a very hard place for Gray Squirrel to ride in had he not been clever in keeping his balance. When they had crossed the field and were entering the forest, Maj. Moose looked out of the corner of his eye and saw that Bouncer was still close beside him. He flung his

head high and rushed on faster than before, but he could not leave Bouncer Rabbit behind.

The wood folk who had not been to the haystack were astir by this time. Jet Crow cawed loudly overhead, and the others stood aside in amazement as the racers rushed by.

So they sped onward, Maj. Moose plunging ahead with a great show of strength, and Bouncer leaping lightly beside him. Soon they came in sight of the frozen lake. It had been agreed that the race should end on the farther side, and the course was up round one end of it.

"We are almost there!" shouted Gray Squirrel, as he leaned forward in the little sleigh. "Now is the time, Bouncer! Now is the time!"

With faster leaps and longer leaps Bouncer Rabbit flashed to the front. All that Maj. Moose and those in the pung could see was a flurry of snow as he flew ahead of them, far toward the head of the lake. Maj. Moose half stopped and threw high his antlers in disgust.

"Look at that!" he grunted, panting hard. "Shall a rabbit beat a moose? No, indeed! I'll cut across the lake, and get there first, after all."

"But that will be cheating!" cried out Ray Coon.

"Who cares?" answered Maj. Moose. "If I can't win in one way, I will in another!"

So saying he crashed through the snow-covered bushes to the shore of the lake, with the pung bouncing heavily behind. Then he stepped out on the frozen surface. But it was late in the winter, and the sun had weakened the ice near the shore; it buckled under the weight of Maj. Moose and the pungload of wood folk. There was a sudden crackling and crashing, and all in an instant Maj. Moose and the others were splashing in the cold water. Maj. Moose flung himself about so desperately that he quickly broke the harness and floundered ashore, and the others, dripping and shivering, followed him as best they could. On the distant shore of the lake they could see Bouncer Rabbit loping leisurely along toward the finish line.

"What a mess!" exclaimed Maj. Moose, cross with himself and with everyone else. "To race with a rabbit and have it end like that! I'll have nothing more to do with a place where such things can happen!"

So he lumbered off through the forest toward the other side of the big mountain, and the wood folk saw him no more.

This is how Bouncer Rabbit, whom all the wood folk like because he is a modest fellow and everyone's friend, won the third race of the winter. That night he and Gray Squirrel took the little toy sleigh back to the yard of Farmer Goodman, whose little boy had wondered all day what had become of it; but the big pung was too heavy for the wood folk to drag out of the lake, and there it stayed, close to the shore, until Farmer Goodman himself found it. And he never ceased to wonder how it got there.

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