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Chapter 24

Eating Moose Meat from One Year’s End to Another at the Moose Mountain Camp

All of us had moose meat throughout the year. The unwritten law of the unsurveyed country did not make a closed season. The only demand upon us was that nothing should be wasted, and that nothing should be killed that was not used for food or fur. Black bears were a nuisance. As camp robbers they became unbelievably bold. So we had traps out for them all the time. A French youth was our most expert bear trapper. He used pens, deadfalls, pits, steel traps, hooks on trees and sharpened spikes so driven into the open end of a pork barrel that the bear could crawl in and lick the honey or maple sugar or burnt molasses bait on the bottom of the barrel, but could not crawl out. When the bear would start to back out the spikes would run into him and very soon Jacques would have a frantic bear cavorting around with a barrel on the forward two-thirds of his body, that held to him, and muffled his growls and roars. It was not very humane and I ordered them to kill a bear as soon as they caught him in a barrel. I am afraid that always they did not obey this.

We also had in our crew an American boy named Harold, about the same age as Jacques. They did not get along well together and several times they clashed, only to a draw. Jacques insisted on flying a Canadian English beaver flag over the camp, and Harold would haul it down and run up the Stars and Stripes. Then there would be a fight and no flag at all for some time, when Harold would run up Old Glory and Jacques would pull it down, and another drawn scrap would be pulled off.

Finally one day Jacques turned up missing. There was no one at the camp except the two boys. All hands had gone out to celebrate Dominion Day, July 1, or for some other reason. Harold
searched for Jacques just as faithfully as though they were bosom friends. Finally he heard cries for help and discovered Jacques fast in a steel bear trap. The boy's hand was caught and his fingers crushed. He had stoically suffered and had hallooed for help, but now that Harold was there he would not ask any favors. He afterwards said that he thought, as a matter of course, that Harold would release him at once. The Yankee boy had no such idea. He made the French youth promise to be good and allow the American flag to fly over the camp. When he had settled everything he got a birch lever, and pressing down the huge springs that clamp the ponderous jaws of the bear trap together, he released his rival. There was great friendship between them forever afterwards, and the way Harold took care of Jacques' maimed hand was good to see.

The boys at camp, as boys in the woods always do for entertainment and relief, and by boys I mean all hands young and old, played harmless, though sometimes disagreeable, tricks upon every visitor that they dared subject to their fun. A prominent Chicago doctor was a guest. He shot a young moose. It was late in August and the two-year-old bull was fat and juicy and just the thing for camp. But it was too good a chance for the boys to have some fun for them to overlook. So they sent word to Sudbury and had the doctor arrested by fake constables, not only at Sudbury but at several towns between there and the American border. Even after the August moose-slayer had gotten out of Canada they had a telegram for his arrest sent to the American Sault. By this time it had gotten on his nerves, as he had spent nearly two hundred dollars in fees, tips, bribes, eats and drinks, and had obtained the impression that the Canadians are the biggest lot of crooks in the world. To escape further persecution he hid in a cellar, and left town towards Chicago on a freight train.

It was a long time before he discovered that he had not seen a bona-fide Canadian constable, which did not prevent him from continuing the story he had been telling of how he had escaped from the Northwest Mounted Police, when he had not been within a thousand miles of where that fine body of men operate.
EATING MOOSE MEAT

Upon an afternoon in early November Donald Mann’s private car was sidetracked at Sudbury. He had not then given into the British exchequer enough to have been made a knight, so he was just plain Dan Mann, a big, wholesome, industrious, brave, enjoyable person. I met him at the railroad and took him to Moose Mountain.

By this time I had gouged a road into the wilderness and had taken in drills, boiler and other machinery. The road was not a Via Appia by any means. It clambered over rocky kopjes and ascended a great norite dyke, that may form the northern rim of a huge volcanic crater that, according to the conjecture of some, includes the entire Sudbury nickel formation.

This wall of rock gave us a wonderful view that strained the vision to the sky line. Not a soul lived, or ever was, where the sweep of eye ranged from hill to valley and lake. Pointed conifers looked like so many green serpent tongues or earth spearmen marching up to attack the hosts of Jove. Winding over plains and across muskeg marshes, where the corduroy floated like pontoons and the horses should have been shod with driving calks, the blind worm trail drew us on. My companion speculated upon the agricultural and timber value of the region, and has had his roseate prophecies already justified. We crossed several creeks and rivers and came to a long, flat stretch of gold-bearing sands carried down by the old ice, and by the west branch of the Vermilion.

Upon this peneplain grew banksian pine and blue berries and trailing arbutus. At early springtime the air is laden with the smell of heavy sugars of blossoms. I never pass a sandy stretch similar to this one that I do not especially marvel at the chemistry of nature, and ask where does the floweret growing in the white sand obtain its sensuous breath of sweetest garden love, rare enough to make the wild rose marry the wood violet if God’s nature police would permit.

I told Mr. Mann about a close call I had one early morning in this garden of epigæa. I had left camp long before daylight. Just
when the sun made the iridescent dew drops clinging to the arbutus sepals look like little fairy soap bubbles, I entered this dryadic stretch. I drank the morning fragrance in all its moist freshness. It seemed to me that I could taste it and I believe I did.

All at once my senses refused to function, or else everything took on such a dead average of delight that I could neither distinguish nor record it. Greedy for more of the nectar I got down upon my hands and knees, and crawled among the lush flowers, sniffing and sniffing deep rhinal drafts from the acres of pink and white emarginate clusters that carpeted the earth. Pine needles bore up the hairy vines and waxen leaves, and I did not make a sound.

What is it tells us of the presence of the unseen? A subtle something registers mysteriously and is vaguely communicated to our senses, whereupon we unconsciously look up and around. This happened to me while, like Nebuchadnezzar, I was on all fours.

Horror! an Indian stood with leveled rifle pointing at me.

I gave a whoop and he gave one too.

Then he started to run away. I ordered him to stop and he obeyed. He managed to make me understand that he had taken me for a bear, and that he would have shot before only I kept on moving, and he waited for a standing shot to make it sure. When he saw me as a man he was greatly frightened because of the Indian superstition that a bear, and also some other animals, may turn into a man.

The bear is nearly always an Indian avatar. Nor was the Indian aware of the presence of a white man in that country. It was a close call indeed. I was glad. The Indian was glad. I gave him all of the tobacco I had and we parted good friends. Some time later I saw him on the Abitibi.