

Outing
July, 1886

Ranch Life and Game Shooting in the West

V. The Last of the Elk

FROM that portion of the plains country, over which my cattle range, the elk have disappeared almost as completely as the buffalo; but in the more remote and inaccessible fastnesses one or two scattered individuals still linger. A year ago a couple of cowboys, while on the round up, killed an elk near the head of a very long and almost dry creek, up which they had gone in search of a small bunch of cattle; and the last individual of the species seen on the Little Missouri was shot by myself last September.

An old hunter, who had been under some obligations to me, brought me word, shortly before the fall round up began, that he had come across unmistakable fresh elk sign in a piece of wild broken land, some thirty miles from my ranch house. My informant was perfectly trustworthy, and was able to describe to me the position of the probable haunt of the game with great accuracy, and as the chance was too rare a one to be lightly thrown aside, I at once prepared to start the following morning in search of the doomed deer, it being more than doubtful whether we would be able to strike the trail of the beast for a day or two. I took along the ranch wagon, drawn by four shaggy horses, and driven by a weather-beaten old plainsman, who had been teaming for me during the summer; while I and one of my men, Will Dow, rode our hunting horses, I taking old Manitou, who for speed, strength, good-tempered courage, and downright common sense, surpasses any horse I have ever been on. There was, of course, no wagon trail for us to follow, and as the country was very wild and broken, one of the horsemen had continually to be riding ahead of the wagon, to choose the easiest and most practicable routes. Even thus, it seemed incredible that the wagon should be able to go through and over the incredibly rough places that we had to pass, and no man less expert than the old California stage driver, who was guiding it, could have carried a four-horse team, or indeed, any wheeled vehicle whatsoever, through such a country. The day's march had its monotony, varied by the usual incidents and accidents attendant upon plains travel. Across some of the steep canon-like gullies, the wagon had to be brought by the help of the saddle horses; all the team pulling together; often the ground being so steep as to render it necessary to unharness the hauling horses, and slip a rope from the end of the pole to the high ground upon which the animals could get good footing. There was little water, and when we finally struck an alkali pool, my own horse got mired in trying to reach it to drink.

We had started very early in the morning, and had pushed on at as fast a pace as possible, but it was well towards sunset before we reached the curious cluster of conical red Scoria Buttes, which the old hunter had told us to take as a landmark; and not far from their foot, in a winding valley, closed in by low hills, with steep sloping sides, we found, as we had expected, the three essentials for a camp in the plains country—wood, water and grass. There were two or three deep spring pools of cool clear water; clumps of small scattered cottonwood trees grew along here and

there through the valley, whose bottom was covered with rich grass. A better spot for a camp could not have been imagined, and that its beauties had been appreciated by others before us was shown by the presence of the remains of half a dozen old Indian tepees. We had taken no tent with us, making our beds under the protection of the canvas wagon sheet. Soon after reaching camp the sun went down, and by the time supper was ready, darkness had fallen. The tired horses grazed on the luscious grass almost within the circle of the flickering fire light, while we sat before the roaring logs, as the venison steak simmered over the hot coals that had been raked out to one side. Men living all the time in the open air are willing enough to go to bed early, and soon after supper we crept in under the heavy blankets, which the chill fall night already rendered so comfortable. But long after going to bed I lay awake, looking up at the myriads of stars that were shining overhead, with that peculiar and intense brilliancy so well known to the wanderer over the lonely western plains.

We were up by the first streak of dawn, and were ready to start after the shortest preparation. It was a beautiful hunting morning—the sun-dogs hung in the red dawn, the wind moved gently over the crisp brown grass, and the weather had that peculiar smoky hazy look so often seen about the time of the Indian Summer. We moved off along toward the edge of a great plateau, and by the time the sun was well up had reached the hunting grounds. From the jutting shoulder on which we stood we looked off far and wide over a great stretch of barren brown country, broken into countless valleys and ravines, which were separated by ridges of low, round hills. Although it was early fall, the touch of the frost had already changed the leaves of the trees, and the sameness of the landscape was relieved by the patches of vivid color that marked where the thickets of ash, cherries and wild plums were scattered along the hillsides, or where the tall cotton-wood trees grew in the bottoms of the larger valleys.

Before long, we, ourselves, came upon the fresh sign of large game, finding a small muddy pool, at which one or more elk had evidently drunk but a day or two previous. After this we proceeded— with great caution, hunting silently and stealthily through every locality where we deemed it possible that the animals we were in search of might be found. An elk, from his greater size, needs, of course, much more cover than does a deer, and we expected to find our quarry in one of the heavy timber coulies. A "coulie," I may explain, is a plains word, derived from the old-time French trappers and hunters, who traversed the basins of the upper Missouri and Saskatchewan before the men of the Anglo-Saxon race had penetrated even to their borders. The term is used to denote any small ravine or side valley, usually up near the head of a creek or water system, through which the snow or rain runs at certain seasons, but which does not contain a regular water course.

Near the base of the great plateau in whose neighborhood we were hunting, the creeks forked and branched again and again, and finally resolved themselves into a multitude of deep narrow coulies, in many of whose bottoms grew groves of cottonwood trees, which, favored by the shelter and moisture, reached a height that they rarely attain in the barren plains country. The look of the land, and our knowledge of the habits of the elk, led us to suppose that if we found one of the latter at all, we would be most apt to find it in one of these timber coulies, nor were we disappointed. After some hours of patient and fruitless search, mostly conducted on foot, I rode Manitou up to the edge of a deep and narrow defile, in whose bottom grew a band or grove of tall trees. As I peered over the edge, there was a crash and a scramble in the woods beneath me, and immediately afterwards I saw dimly through the scanty tree tops the glistening, light-colored hide of a great bull elk as he gallantly breasted the steep hillside opposite. I was off the horse in a minute, and, kneeling on one knee, waited for him to come above the tree tops into plain sight. In

another moment he stood out on the bare hillside over against me, and turning round, half faced us, throwing his head up into the air. Although less than a hundred yards off, and offering a splendid side shot, I yet, for some cause or other, pulled too far back on him. Nevertheless, the bullet inflicted a fatal wound; for the moment, however, he hardly seemed as if he were hurt, but breaking from the long ground-covering trot, which is so characteristic a gait for this species, and at which he had been going, he went off over the hill crest at a wild plunging gallop. Mounting old Manitou, I scrambled down into the ravine at a break-neck pace, then strained up the other side, the old fellow going over the rough ground at a speed that would be impossible for any horse not well accustomed to such country. On reaching the top of the crest, the elk was not in sight, and I feared I had lost him; with much labor, however, we followed his footprints, marked by an occasional drop of blood, for a half mile or so, till we came to a broader, shallower valley, with brushwood thick in its bottom. With increasing difficulty, we followed the trail that was ever growing fainter, and finally found where the great beast, changing his pace to a trot, had entered the thicket; and but a few rods within it, close to the opposite side, we found the elk himself already stone dead. He was a fine-large one, in excellent condition, but his antlers were small with few points.

This was an unexpectedly early and successful termination to our hunt, for although, from the sign, there must have been one or two other elk about, yet the latter were evidently much smaller, probably cows, and I did not wish to molest them, especially as the one we had killed furnished us with all the meat that we then needed. Accordingly the animal was skinned and cut up, and carried back on our horses to the wagon, by which time it was already late in the afternoon; and early next morning we broke camp and started home to the ranch. It is possible that other elk may be killed in our neighborhood hereafter, but I doubt this myself; and unless I am mistaken, the bull I shot will be the last of his kind to be shot in the immediate vicinity of the ground over which our cattle range.