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A Shot at a Bull Elk

A YEAR or two ago, while on a hunting trip in the Shoshones, I was camped near the Buffalo Fork of the Snake. My companion was an old hunter, Tazewell Woody, and I had with me also a cook and packer, and a “kid” to wrangle the horses. We were after elk, and had already met with good luck.

Our camp was pitched in a point of open pine forest which jutted into the marshy bottom of a singularly wild and beautiful valley. Our saddle- and pack-animals grazed in the glades near by. High, steep mountains, their slopes covered with the unending evergreen forest, rose on either side of the valley; from their summits we looked out on a wilderness of peaks and ridges, the highest of the gray-rock mountains being capped with snow.

One evening Woody and I decided to cross the valley next day and make a hunt through a big basin lying to one side of the group of peaks immediately in front of us. Before nightfall, therefore, we brought in two of the saddle-animals and picketed them near by, where the grass was thick and luscious, so that we might have them ready to hand next morning. That night a bull elk came striding down the mountain close to our camp, uttering at short intervals his peculiar singing challenge; one of the wildest and most musical sounds to be heard by the hunter who roams over the timbered slopes of the Rockies. He did not pause, but crossed the valley, and plunged into the mountainous forests.

By daybreak we had eaten breakfast and were saddling our horses. It was not necessary to make a very early start, because in those lonely mountains the elk had been but little disturbed, and they fed and were on the move throughout the day. The air was clear and cold. Ice fringed the edges of the little brook whose loud, humming murmur had lulled us to sleep throughout the night, as we lay in our blankets on beds of odorous pine boughs. The morass in the bottom of the valley was frozen hard, and our horses crossed it with ease.

As the sun rose, we were riding in single file along an elk-trail which led through the dim archway of the pine forest on the side of the valley opposite our camp. We hailed its beams with joy, for they warmed the chilly air. Occasionally a Clark’s crow flew by, its wings making a hollow flapping sound, and gray whisky-jacks, with multitudinous cries, fluttered boldly alongside of us. The hunter in these lonely forests is always struck by the comparative absence of small bird-life. Hawks, eagles, ravens, grouse—these large birds like the wilderness; but the small birds love farm-land. On the other hand, noisy chipmunks and chickarees abound, and enliven the gloomy woods as they scurry to and fro over the logs, chattering and scolding.

For two miles the trail led alongside the willow thickets and wet, open meadows of the valley bottom. Then we turned abruptly to the left, and struggled up through a steep, narrow gorge for a mile or two more, until we emerged into the big basin where we expected to find game. A rapid brook foamed down the bottom of the gorge, in a succession of little cataracts and rapids; there was no trail, and no animals less clear-headed and sure-footed than our veteran

hunting-ponies could have picked their way over the timber-choked and boulder-strewn bottom of the pas.

In the basin itself the riding was easy, for it was all park-country, broad glades alternating with stretches of open woods. Here we began to see signs of game. In one place we came on a covey of blue grouse; they flew into the neighboring trees, and there sat motionless on the branches. If we had been on our way homeward, I should have been tempted to shoot off the heads of two or three, for they are very good eating, and offer a welcome change in the hunter's bill of fare; but it is never wise, when after big game, to run the risk of alarming it by firing at anything smaller. In another place two series of delicate, heart-shaped footprints betrayed where a blacktail doe and fawn had walked during the preceding night; and some vaguely defined marks proved on a close examination to be the week-old track of a bear. A number of fresh hoof-marks, looking much like those left by a herd of young cattle, and evidently made that morning, wrought us up to the highest point of attention; for they showed that a big band of elk had passed that way, probably heading toward their day beds on some spur of the mountains.

Our senses all on the alert, we rode silently forward, expecting every minute to hear afar off the roaring music of some bull elk's challenge. Suddenly Woody, who was ahead, pulled short up, and pointing downward to the dust of a game-trail, remarked with a disgusted expression, "Indians." Sure enough, there in the dust was the round footpring of an unshod horse, evidently not an hour old. We had known that a band of Shoshones was hunting to the southeast of our camp, and had come to this basin with the hope of forestalling them. It was very irritating; for the Indians hunt in parties, all going on horseback and scattering out in a widely spread line; they scour the whole country and shoot at anything they see, killing the cows or does and young by preference; and in consequence they not only work much havoc among the game, but drive all that they do not kill out of the country.

We soon saw the tracks of other Indian ponies; then we came on the sharply indented footprints of flying elk; and half an hour later we heard two or three distant reports of rifles. It was evident that they were hunting straight across the basin, and that all the game would be thoroughly alarmed and disturbed.

On one side of the big basin, however, lay another and smaller one—a tangle of wooded ravines which led into a different creek system; and we thought we might yet have a chance by hunting across these ravines. The forests were open and broken, the hillside steep. After picketing our horses near a little spring, where they could get fresh grass, Woody and I started on foot. Where possible, I like to use moccasins in woodland hunting; but this is not practicable in such rocky and mountainous ground as that in which we were. Moccasins are very hard upon the feet of those who are unaccustomed to wearing them, no matter how good as walkers and mountaineers they may be. Indians have soles as tough as leather, and therefore they are not subject to bruises which cripple a white man. The absence of heels makes going downhill in moccasins very tiresome; and leaping from rock to rock, with the feet protected by only one thickness of elk-hide or deer-hide, is sure to result in the laming of the unskilled adventurer. So on this occasion I was wearing stout shoes, well studded with nails. Even with these, if a man exercises reasonable caution, he can travel quite silently over the moss and pine-needles of the forest; but great care is necessary to avoid undue clatter on stones.

Woody and I had not gone more than half a mile before we found fresh elk signs; we moved slowly, both eyes and ears on the alert. We discovered our quarry, however, neither by sight nor sound, but through the exercise of another sense. Just as we were crossing a little steep gully, we both halted short, whispering simultaneously "I smell him." A band of elk have a

strong, sweet smell, somewhat like that of a herd of Alderney cattle; in old bulls during the rutting season, it becomes very rank and pungent. If a man has a good nose, and is to leeward, he may smell a band of elk half a mile off.

As soon as the odor struck our nostrils, I moved forward with my rifle at the ready, and began to go along the ravine up wind. Now and then puffs of the scent were brought to me, and again I could smell nothing. In several places, where the ground was soft, I saw the elk's tracks; it was a bull, and evidently on the move.

Finally I came to an old burn, the dead trees standing erect and gray. Immediately afterward I caught a glimpse of the elk's antlers behind a mass of fallen logs, as he stood with head tossed aloft, suspecting danger. In a moment he wheeled and ran across me, some eighty yards off. I covered an opening between two trunks, waited until he appeared, and fired well forward; and again, as he ran quartering to me through the forests, I put in another shot. Both bullets told, inflicting mortal wounds, and a hundred yards on he failed in trying to leap a large dead log, and fell helplessly back into the big cavity left by the uprooted trunk. In a moment we were both standing over him, admiring the head, with its massive, shapely antlers; the neck, with its mane of brown hair; the huge yellow body, and the brown legs, strongly yet delicately molded, with polished, perfect hoofs.

Then we made back to camp, and next day returned with a pack-pony to carry in the meat and trophies.