

My Fight With a Catamount.

My guide, Alaric, and I had gone in after moose to the country beyond Mud Brook, in Maine. There its watershed between the east branch and the west is cut up into valleys, in one or another of which a herd of moose, in winter, generally takes up quarters. It was not yet yarding-time, for the snow was still only about four inches deep, making it just right for the moose-hunter who is at the same time a sportsman.

Our task was slow one; we had to examine each valley for moose-tracks, tramping up one side and down the other, or, as we usually managed it, separating at the valley's mouth, each taking a side, meeting at the end and then, if unsuccessful, taking the quickest way back to camp.

And unsuccessful we were, since for three days we found no trail. But Alaric was not in the least discouraged.

'You can never tell about moose,' he said; 'they travel so. There were moose in this country before the snow, and there were moose within a day's walk of us now.'

It was on the second day that we found that, while after moose, we had been tracked by a catamount. The print of its paw was generously large.

'I've seen bigger,' said Alaric, 'but this feller's big enough. He's just waiting round, I guess, so as to get some of the meat we kill. We'll remember him,' he said, looking up at me as he knelt on the snow, 'so's to see that he doesn't spoil the hide or the head.'

I accepted the theory, and thought little more of the matter for twenty-four hours. At the end of the third day we found that the catamount had for a second time been following our trail—not only our trail, but also mine.

He had followed me all day as I walked along the hillside, looking ahead and on both sides, but seldom behind. Alaric examined his tracks carefully for half a mile.

'He was in sight of you all the way,' he said. 'See here, where he stood for some time, just shitting about in one place, watching?' I saw—and thought.

After a while, it seemed to me, a catamount might get tired of waiting for us to kill his meat, and would start in to kill it for himself. Unquestionably the easiest game for him to get would be human.

For there were no deer in the region, and the caribou were all herded on Katahdin and Traveller. The previous severe winter had decimated the partridges, and big is the catamount that will tackle a moose. I mentioned the theory to Alaric.

'Um—yes, perhaps,' he said and eyed me dubiously.

Then I wished that I had not said anything. It is not well to let your guide think that you are afraid.

In the morning, when we had attained our valley's mouth, Alaric was about to keep with me, instead of leaving me as before; but that made our hunting much slower, for we could cover much less ground, and I sent him around the other way.

'All right,' said he. 'But keep a good looking out behind you now.'

He disappeared in a cedar swamp, and I made my way along the slope of a hill. I watched indeed behind as well as in front, and in every fox's track I crossed I saw a catamount's, until finally I got used to the situation, and believed that the 'Indian devil' had concluded to let me alone.

The day was fine. The sun shone bright, and the softening snow, dropping from the upper branches of the trees, kept up a constant movement in the woods. I took and held a good pace, and with my eyes searching the snow ahead and on all sides of me for signs of moose walked for a full hour, seeing nothing living but the woodpeckers and the chickadees, hearing nothing but the rustle of the branches, as released of their loads they sprang back into place. Then, quite needlessly, I found insecure footing under the snow, and plunged suddenly at full length. My rifle whirled from

my hand with force, and I heard it strike against the uncovered top of a sugar-loaf stone. I jumped up in fear and hastily examined it. The breech was shattered—my rifle was as useless as any stick.

Now I thought of the catamount, as, with the broken rifle in my hands, I looked about me in the woods, bright with sun and snow. I was not entirely helpless, for my revolver and knife were in my belt. Yet a thirty-eight calibre revolver, even with a long cartridge and a long barrel, is not a sure defence against an animal as heavy as myself, which in facing me would present for a mark only a round head and a chest with muscles so thick and knobby that they would probably stop any revolver bullet. I doubted my ability to hit the eye.

Very likely I was no longer followed; and in any case, I might call Alaric. And yet he was too far away for a shout to reach him, and I dared not fire signal shots for in order to travel light, I had left at camp all revolver cartridges but those in the chambers. So I started at once for the bottom of the valley, hoping to strike Alaric's trail on the opposite slope, and intending to follow it until I caught him.

My rifle I left where it was; it was useless and heavy. I cast many a glance behind me as, almost at a trot, I made my way down the long hillside.

I strode on rapidly, for I had certainly a mile to cover before I could strike Alaric's trail, much more before I could catch my nimble guide. I was cheerful and unalarmed until, pausing to look behind, I saw, a hundred yards away, a tawny animal quickly slip behind a tree.

I hastily drew my revolver and knife; but no movement came from its hidden breast, and rather than stand and wait, I pursued my retreat. I moved more slowly yet as fast as I could and still guard myself against another fall and watch for a rush from behind. I scanned the ground in front of me, and glanced back every second. For some time I saw no more of the catamount.

But when I did see him, I was startled at his nearness; he was within fifty yards. I hurried on as he slipped aside again; but looking again in a moment, I saw him now following boldly upon my trail. I stopped, but he stopped, too, and stood regarding me. He was too far away for me to fire yet, and as he made no movement to approach, I cautiously continued my retreat, always after a few steps stopping to face him.

He stopped as I stopped, yet each time I turned away came quickly closer. I was already thinking of awaiting him without further movement, when the way was blocked by a ravine.

It was cut by the stream that drained the valley, and its steep sides were nearly fifteen feet in height. They even overhung in places but this I did not then know. I was in no mind to trust myself in the deep gully, where the catamount might drop upon me before I could scramble out upon the other side.

I walked into an open space, and took my stand close to a birch that grew on the very edge of the bank. For thirty feet there was no good cover for the catamount; so, armed and determined, I waited his action.

The animal skirted the bushes about me, as it examining the ground, and to my disappointment, began to come upon me along the edge of the ravine. This gave him the best cover before his charge, and at the same time assured him that the momentum of his rush would not carry him tumbling into the gully. Always keeping too well concealed for a good mark, he crept up behind a fallen tree, on the near side of which a little bush grew, and flattened himself there, watching me, I felt sure, and waiting in hope that he might catch me off my guard.

I cannot describe how stealthy and noiseless and altogether perfect his maneuvering was. Although the trees that grew about were all small and the bushes bare, and although the white snow gave no background for concealment, he covered himself so perfectly at one time, and slipped in and out of sight so quickly at another, that although I stood with revolver pointed and cocked, I could find no opportunity for a shot.

As he circled for position he came ever nearer, and I could see at one time the round head, with its short, pointed ears; at another the long, sinuous, muscular body; but they moved so rapidly that before I could shoot they were gone from sight.

All the time he made no sound but a rustle. In his final concealment I saw nothing of him but his tail, that twitched and twitched and twitched.

At last I caught the glint of his pale green eye and fired. There came a snarl from behind the bush, and it was dashed to one side and the other, while round head and bared teeth and tawny body came carshing through I pulled the trigger again and the report sounded muffled and the smoke for an instant obscured the beast. All was white, when, like a breath it passed and I saw the rushing catamount not ten feet from me.

I had not time to fire or crouch, but with ready legs hurled myself to one side, and threw my left arm around the tree that grew at the edge of the bank. With an awful dread I felt the ground giving way beneath me.

I dropped my knife and caught the tree closer, when it, too, leaned to fall. It hung for a moment over the steep slope, and I could not save myself. The frost had not clamped the overhang to the solid ground. The last fall rains had cut it under; the first spring thaw would have brought it down, had not my weight been thrown upon it.

With a twist the tree and I fell together. I clutched my revolver desperately, despite the sickening fear of the fall, and in my grasp it exploded in mid air. Then I fell, and although my body struck easily in the snow-covered ravine, my right hand had been beaten against a sharp rock, and the birch was upon me so that I could not move.

My legs were on the bank, and under-

neath the snow beneath my shoulders I soon felt the ice, from which stones protruded. One snow-covered rock received and supported my head. I lay upon my right side, and my right hand, swinging in a curve, had struck with force upon the ice, the only part of my body, except my head, which was free. My left arm was pressed close to my side by the birch, which lay across my body and legs.

The weight was not so great but that I could have lifted it, could I but have gained purchase. But I must at the same time lift my own body, for my hips were lower than my feet, my shoulders lower than my hips; and I could not gather ten pounds of force in that position.

My fall confused me somewhat, and I could not at first feel anything, either the pain in my hand or the danger I was in. I noticed only the fine, powdery snow which, cast up by the fall, settled upon me as I lay. Then I saw my arm stretched out in front of me, with a bloody hand at the end of it, and I came fully to myself.

A pain shot from finger-tip to shoulder as I closed my hand tighter upon the butt of the revolver. But I clenched my teeth and tried to rise—tried twice more before I gave it up as hopeless. Then I raised my hand and put it in a better position, propped upon a stone.

The movements hurt me terribly, but I thought of the catamount, which would surely not be satisfied with two bullets for its breakfast. I was scarcely ready when the head of the beast was thrust over the edge of the bank to look for me.

He saw, and glared as a human enemy might have done. His savage snarl was full of intelligence, and his slow approach was deliberate torture. He stood for a moment in full view—then slipped and slid down to the surface of the ice, where, ten yards away, he stood and looked at me.

I saw his magnificent build, his superb muscular development, as with his body in profile, his head turned toward me, he waited before approaching, playing with my helplessness; but I was not entirely helpless! With shaking hand I took aim; I could not use my thumb to cock the revolver, but drew hard at the trigger, and the hammer rose and fell.

My turn for gloating had come now, for the catamount was crying with rage and pain. He fell writhing, striking with his forepaws at the snow, and raising his head to snap at nothing; but this did not last long. Slowly he dragged himself to a sitting posture, and I could understand his plight and estimate my own danger.

My first two bullets had but torn his flesh. My last had broken his back. He was paralyzed in his hind legs, as I have seen a deer, yet he had many minutes to live, perhaps hours, and was strong and angry enough to finish me. Painfully he started on that short journey to me. With his forepaws, his claws digging the snow, he began to drag himself toward me.

I could only wait. I had but one more shot, and wished to hold it till he should be close; but my torn hand was weak, and the bruised tendons had already begun to stiffen. Into that deep place, where bank and trees overhung, the sun did not come, and I felt the cold striking into my raw flesh. More than that, my weight upon my shoulder began to cut off the blood from my arm. I felt pricking in my flesh, my arm began to be numb, and I feared that I might not be able to shoot.

If he could not hurry! He dragged himself at a snail's pace. It would be so long before he came close that my hand would be useless. Yet as he crawled directly at me, the mark was a poor one. I saw with satisfaction that he would have to turn aside for one of the rocks in his path. When at last he reached it, and began to drag himself around it, he gave me my last chance.

I saw the space behind his shoulder, prayed that my bullet might miss his ribs, summoned the last force at my almost dead hand, and fired.

A little drift of air blew the smoke aside so quickly that I could see the fire fly. He bit savagely at his side, but he crawled on without stopping. From my numb hand the revolver fell without noise in the snow—my first was finished. He came on; he was only fifteen feet away from me, when he stopped and coughed. Would he sink, unable to move farther?

No; he started again! Although his legs dragged behind him, impeding, although he left a red trail on the snow, and each step felt rather than heard, hasty, heavy foot steps on the bank above me. As soon as I knew anything clearly, I knew that the tree had been pulled away, and that Alaric was bending over me. He had, with ears alert for any sound, and with footsteps kept as near to me as they might be with obedience to my order, come rushing to my aid at the sound of my first revolver shot. But the distance was so great that he did not arrive until my fight was over.

—ALLEN FRENCH in the Youth's Companion.

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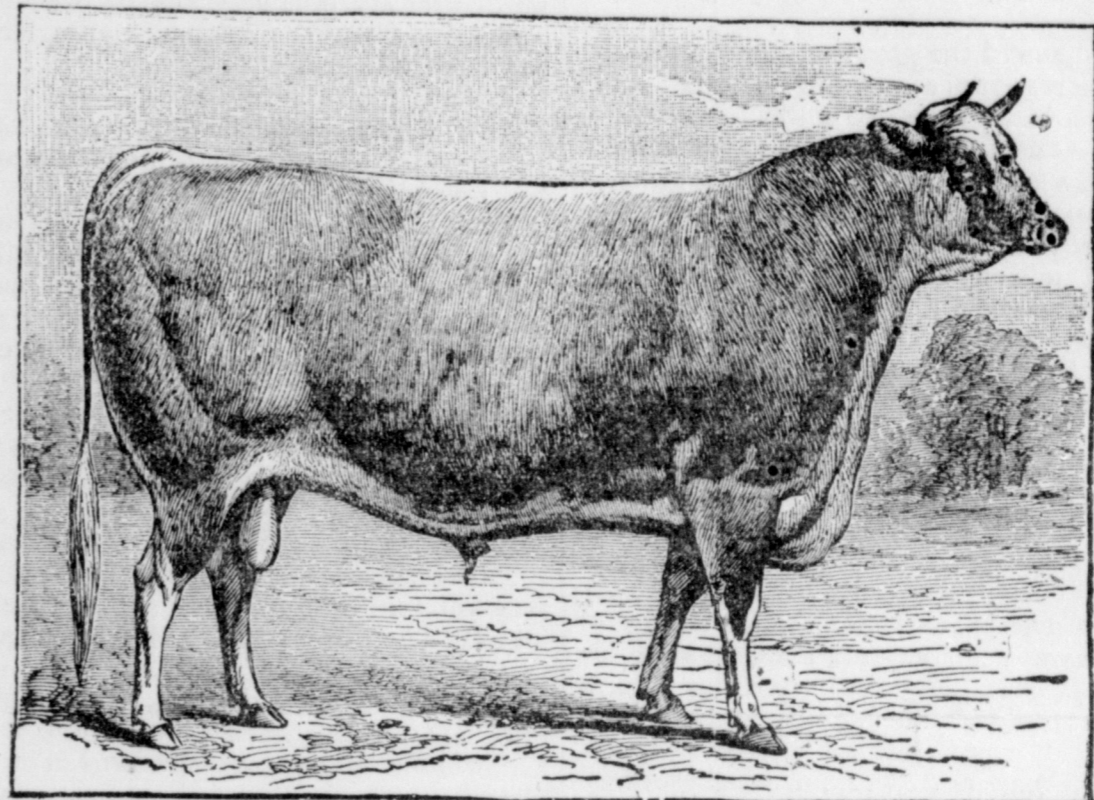
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to seize it, even as I waited to see, rather than feel, the crunching of my senseless arm, his head dropped. He raised it once more, but his power was gone. He laid his head, once so powerful, upon my hand, rested his body against the stone, that stood high enough to support him, and glared at me with his fierce malignant eyes.

Then the fire changed in his eyes, clouded, flickered, glowed—went out. The last breath was expelled with a wheeze. He was dead.

Then my own powers sank, and I thought that I dying, too. Somewhere in the midst of my faintings I had a sense as if I felt rather than heard, hasty, heavy foot steps on the bank above me. As soon as I knew anything clearly, I knew that the tree had been pulled away, and that Alaric was bending over me. He had, with ears alert for any sound, and with footsteps kept as near to me as they might be with obedience to my order, come rushing to my aid at the sound of my first revolver shot. But the distance was so great that he did not arrive until my fight was over.

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Six Words.

A little court scene in Tennessee is thus described by the Clarksville Leaf Chronicle:

Aunt Cherry Mallory was recently put on the witness-stand to tell what she knew about the annihilation of a hog by a railway locomotive. After being sworn she was asked by the lawyer if she saw the train kill this hog. 'Yes,' she said, 'I seed it.'

'Well,' said the lawyer, 'tell the court, in

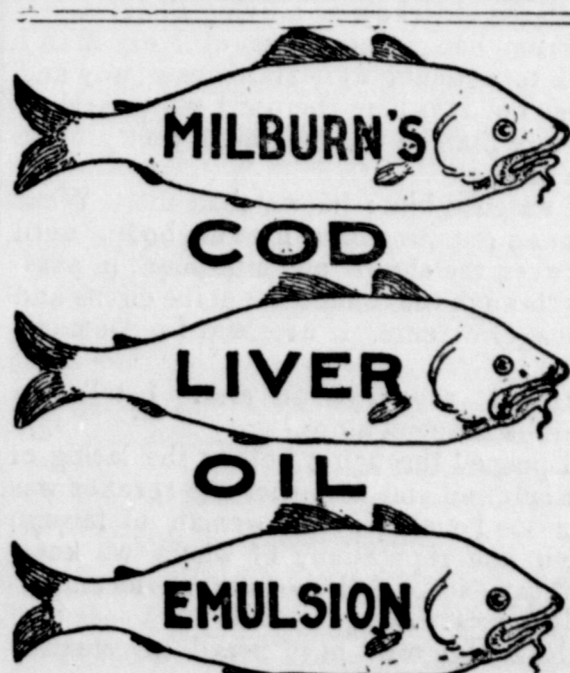
as few words as possible, all you know about it.'

'I kin do dat in a mighty few words, said Aunt Cherry, clearing her throat, and with one eye on the judge and one on the lawyer, she said: 'Hit jus' tooted and tuck 'im.'

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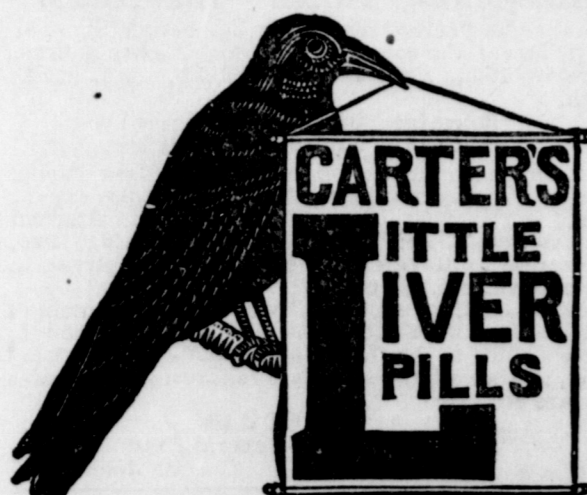
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