

# A Bit of a Coon Hunt

## An Adventure in the Woods of New Hampshire

By F. M. STEVENS, M. D.

COON hunting in New Hampshire is, perhaps, the most strenuous sport indulged in by the great army of outdoor recreationists. It must be carried on in the night, in an extremely rough country, through fallen trees, underbrush, swamps, brooks and mountains. In case one gets caught in the rain, he must push along in extreme darkness. The hunter must have a good knowledge of the game, know the points of the compass by intuition, and keep his head as well as his bearings at all times. He must be well supplied with proper equipment and the knowledge of the use of it, and be ready to take instant advantage of circumstances. He must not forget that he has a foe worthy of his steel, and in the coon, especially an old female, he is dealing with one of the shrewdest animals that roams over nature's face. The absolute necessities are a dog that knows his business from A to Z; a lantern; two or three electric flash-lights and extra batteries; a good pistol; a small-caliber rifle; a pair of climbers; a barrel of courage, energy and determination to follow the dogs to the end—through sunshine and shade (in this case mostly shade), up hill and down, through thick and thin (brush) to the finish. So much for a slight outline of the coon-hunting game.

For several seasons I have had a standing invitation from my old friend, "Hen" Miller of Farmington (who, by the way, is a veteran in the coon-hunting line and an all-round good fellow), to go with him on a hunt. Untoward circumstances prevented it from one season to another until last November, when I bumped into "Hen" and was telling him about a locality up in the foothills of the old Granite State, where I had been earlier in the season on a trout-fishing trip. He at once became enthusiastic, and by my description was convinced that Mr. Coon "voted in that precinct." The country round about there is quite hilly, with plenty of

brooks and ponds and heavily wooded with old growth, both hard and pine—an ideal place for the home of the object of our visit. The more we talked and thought on the subject, the more enthusiastic we became, so we finally set a date.

The day dawned bright and clear, followed by one of those glorious November nights, with a good moon to cheer us on and help us follow the course of the wary Mr. Coon. Off we set, with two of the greatest coon dogs that ever followed the trail—Old Zeke and Young Zeke. Nine years had the old fellow been hunting coons, always with much honor to himself. Young Zeke was but two years old, a son of Old Zeke, a marvelous chip of the old block—full of go, energy and fight, but he lacked the judgment that years of experience had given the veteran.

Taking the train north, we arrived at a little flag station, where we were met by "Uncle" Hiram White, who transported us across country about four miles to a hillside farm, presided over by "Aunt" Hannah, a nice, motherly old lady, and, we found later, a most excellent cook.

Sitting on the veranda, waiting for dark, "Uncle Hi" told us the names of the mountains and hills, and among other things pointed across a little valley to a piece of ground on the side of a hill and exclaimed:

"You fellers see that piece of land yonder? Well, earlier in the season my neighbor had the likeliest piece of corn there that was on the whole ridge, but the coons got into it when it was in the milk, and the tarnal critters clawed more'n half of it to pieces, so he had to cut it for fodder."

This little speech was music to "Hen's" ears, and he exclaimed:

"Why didn't he catch the coons?"

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"He tried hard enough," said Uncle Hiram, "but he couldn't. He set traps, but the critters was too smart to be caught that way. They are a goldarned nuisance, anyway."

"Aunt" Hannah soon called, "Supper is ready, and if you boys are going to ramble in the woods all night, you'd better eat a good big supper."

After a few minutes' talk and instructions from "Uncle" Hiram about the topography of the country we began to get ready for the hunt. We soon had our "regulation uniforms" on, the dogs brought from the barn and fed and off we started, just as the silvery moon began to peep up from behind a hill.

We concluded to make for the corn patch first, and off we went, down hill, across a meadow, and after a climb through a lot of underbrush finally reached what was a corn field earlier in the season. The dogs were scurrying about, and "Hen" said they had found a "cold" trail—that is, that the coons had been gone so long that the scent was nearly dead. So we passed on to the top of the hill and down the other side, where a little brook ran along. Here Old Zeke found a fresh track and began to let out those long howls—music to our ears. Young Zeke, who was behind the old dog, heard them, too, and didn't he climb for his father! In a very short time he was on the spot and leading, the trail taking him up the brook, while we were climbing over the rough country as fast as the hard going would permit. This continued perhaps for a quarter of a mile, when the howls ceased, the dogs stopped coursing and permitted us to catch up. When we arrived the dogs had lost the trail completely, the coon having taken to the brook. What was to be done? We hardly knew, but concluded to let Old Zeke unravel the mystery.

In a minute or so the dogs started up the brook, one on each side, and when the young dog crossed to Old Zeke's side the old dog would immediately jump to the other. They seemed to know Mr. Coon would eventually have to leave the brook, and then one dog or the other would immediately pick up the trail. Soon the youngster gave voice and Old Zeke crossed the brook and away they

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went, making enough noise to supply a dozen hunts.

Turning at right angles, they were making for some old hard growth on the side of a hill. Their voices soon became less distinct, yet could be heard plainly enough to follow. On we went, full tilt, and finally "Hen" suddenly said: "Listen! Old Zeke is barking up"; which, on getting closer, proved to be a fact.

The coon had taken to a large oak and both dogs were at the foot of the tree, each doing the best canine elocutionary stunt he knew.

The tree was located in a thick copse, and consequently it was somewhat dark up among the branches. "Hen" at once put on the climbers and prepared to interview the individual higher up. On getting up thirty or forty feet he exclaimed, with some surprise: "There are two of them," and continued: "Look out; I'm going to shoot." He had a revolver, and I soon heard the report, and down came as fat a coon as one usually sees. It was a young one, but nearly full-grown and a beauty. He had no sooner struck the ground that Young Zeke had him on the first bounce, and soon wrote "finis" to his earthly career. The other coon had gone farther up the tree, and with the flashlight "Hen" could just make him out at the extreme end of a limb. He was about to shoot, when suddenly he called: "Look out; he is going to jump." Jump he did, with what help "Hen" could give him by vigorously shaking the limb.

We could hear him coming through the branches, and both dogs were wild to be on the reception committee. He no sooner struck the ground than the pair were on him—one at each end—and such a noise—growls, snarls and gnashing of teeth—I never heard before or since in the woods. "Hen" was clambering down as fast as he could, and cried:

"Don't shoot; the dogs will take care of him." True enough, as the saying goes, he "lasted quick."

After surveying our two prizes and getting our increased baggage in shape to carry, we started back down the brook. "Hen" figured it out that we had started a family of coons, and had merely captured two of the young ones. We

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reached a place where the brook forked, where the dogs seemed to be a little confused, but soon straightened matters out and started down to the right at a rapid pace, giving voice in hearty manner. The hunters got away from us for a time, but we finally came up to them in a swamp. They detained us but a short time, and finally dashed down the brook and were soon "barking up," but only one voice could be heard. What did it mean? Old Zeke was giving voice with all his might, but Young Zeke, who was usually the loudest talker, was quiet.

"Hen" said something was wrong, and we slid through the brush, beating records for speed.

Something was wrong. The old dog was guarding a coon that had taken to a tree that hung over the small pond the brook emptied into, and the young dog was in the water with the old female coon, giving her the battle of her life.

As soon as "Hen" saw the state of affairs he dropped the coon that he was carrying, took off part of his clothing and dashed into the pond to rescue the young dog, who was getting decidedly the worst of the affair. One shot from his revolver settled the affray, giving the victory to the half-exhausted hound, who, however, had enough fight and energy left in him to drag the coon to shore, and then give her a good, sound threshing until he was satisfied.

In the meantime I had shot the other one from the tree. A very easy shot, as by a little calculation I got the animal directly between myself and a good, bright moon. The coon in the tree fell into the water and Old Zeke brought it ashore. We had four coons. "Hen" and both dogs were wet and beginning to shiver. We were very tired and several miles from the house. So we made up our minds to start for "Uncle" Hiram's.

We had kept the range of hills and valleys in mind, and finally started up the brook until we came to the place where we first struck it earlier in the evening. From then on it was easy to calculate the location of the house, and although the moon had gone to bed, we finally discovered the lantern that Uncle Hiram had hung on top of the tall well-sweep, by agreement earlier in the eve-

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ning, and we were very glad to finally land our load of coons on the spacious veranda and get in where it was warm and rest.

"Uncle" came clambering down stairs into the kitchen, and after a hearty welcome we showed him the coons, and a more surprised agriculturist is seldom seen. He seemed as well pleased as we were, and said he was "mighty glad we got as many of the tarnal critters as we did." After getting us a glass of hot milk, he suggested that we "turn in" and sleep as long as we wanted to.

We thought such a suggestion very timely and acted accordingly. It was not many minutes before we were a pair of the happiest sleepers that ever held down a live-goose feather bed, and so full were we of nature's anaesthetic that we didn't "come to" till we heard "Uncle" Hiram saying: "Well, boys, do you think you can get awake long enough to come down stairs and eat a little baked coon for dinner?" disturbed our slumbers.

Looking at the clock, we found it was 12:30. The aroma that rose from that kitchen! Didn't it smell good? Ye gods and little fishes—fat coons and hungry men! Didn't we do a good job with the knife and fork? According to the records in our memory, we did.

In the afternoon we were transported back to that little flag station, where the train soon took us to more familiar scenes, leaving hills and valleys, brooks and ponds, coons and kind farmer folk behind; but one thing we took with us, and not the least, by any means, and that was the pleasant memories of "A bit of a coon hunt."

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