

THE LAST HUNT

By Charles Boardman Hawes

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The night was wearing into dawn when for the third and last time the clear *yap! yap!* of the running hound announced to old man Ballin that a coon was afoot. Major was getting old. No longer could he range the hills in sweeping, tireless circles; no longer could he dash in on the unwary rooter among the chestnut leaves and flitting, like a shadow at its heels, force it up the nearest tree. The craft of ten years in the game and a trained nose that could detect the faintest trace of coon in the winding mazes were all that was left to Major.

The first coon that night had reached the ledges before the dog's stiff legs could make him a dangerous pursuer; the second had gone down the brook, doubled back through the swamp, and left the old dog, trembling and discouraged, in the brambles of an old clearing, whence he came limping back to his kindly, patient master. Major was weary and down-hearted, and the old man was on the way back up the long hill that lay between him and home, when Major again gave voice.

"I declar'?" Mr. Ballin muttered, eying the steep western slope of Franklin. "He's got another. The way he hollers I'll bet three doughnuts he's mighty close onto 'im."

At first one by one, then by droves of ten and twenty and thirty, the stars were disappearing from the sky. A fierce wind squall came sweeping across the mountains and for the moment drowned out the *yap! yap!* of the running dog. In the hush that followed, the old man again heard the voice of his faithful servitor far down the hillside in the heart of the deep valley. Turning, he ran clumsily in pursuit. He ignored that one fierce gust of wind; he ignored the great wall of black cloud that was sweeping so ominously across the heavens. It was late November; the bitter cold foretold the winter; beyond a doubt there would be no more hunts that fall, and this was the third coon tonight.

Shambling along with the lantern and the axe in one hand and his ancient gun in the other, the old hunter plunged into the black gulf between the mountains. He stumbled doggedly along the old road and across the little bridge. There he stopped and listened to the eager baying of old Major.

"Treed!" he muttered. "The critter ran right down the brook. I yum, he must 'a' crossed the main road and the railway track!"

Down to the bars where the old road came out upon the new the old man ran as fast as he was able. Still he could hear ahead of him in the black night the frenzied *yap! yap!* of the excited dog.

"I swar he's treed!" Mr. Ballin affirmed solemnly, and then glanced skyward.

He hesitated for a moment there in the main road between Winchester and Keene. Never before in all his sixty years of hunting had the hills seemed so darkly forbidding. Every star had vanished. Over the summits of Franklin and Rattlesnake rolled dark banks of cloud. The bitter cold of coming winter congealed the drops of perspiration that clung to Mr. Ballin's white moustache. To right and to left, up and down the river, no light could he see except the green and red block signals beside the railway track. For a moment Mr. Ballin felt his age and his lameness more keenly than ever before.

Beyond the field by the bank of the Ashuelot, Major was barking frantically.

Mr. Ballin hitched his belt and squared his jaw. "It's his third coon tonight. He's done good, and I swar I ain't goin' back on him."

Over the field through blackness Mr. Ballin ran with swaying yellow lantern.

"Yeee-ah! Maje!" he yelled in shrill falsetto. "Go to 'im, old boy!"

Under the gnarled oak that leaned out over the river, Major leaped three times to the old man's shoulder, thrusting his cold nose into the wrinkled old face; then, conscious of having done his duty well, he lay down with his head on his paws and waited for the old man to bring down the coon.

Mr. Ballin was excited. Sixty years on the trail of Nimrod had not a whit diminished the exhilarating nervousness of that crucial moment. He laid down gun, axe and lantern, stepped to one side and surveyed closely the storm-battered tree. He saw nothing except the twisted limbs and weathered branches.

"I don't care—he's up thar!" he muttered.

He stepped back and looked toward the river, where three tall saplings grew. Mr. Ballin's heart thumped madly. Clutching tight the old single-barreled shotgun, he started forward, and uttered a yell so shrill and piercing that old Major came to his feet with every hair on end. On the lowest limb of the oak, slipping craftily into the tallest sapling, Mr. Ballin had seen a dark, round shadow.

At that moment the old man stumbled and tripped across the lantern. The lantern tinkled into a hundred bits, and with the ensuing darkness came the storm. Before Mr. Ballin could get to his feet, the wind swept down from the mountain and the black clouds. Snow, wind, sleet, hail burst out of the lowering heavens. The old oak tree creaked and swayed; the valley echoed the howling of the gale.

The coon scrambled from the sapling and, with Major at his heels, fled straight out on the thin ice along the river bank. Mr. Ballin heard above the raging of the storm a faint yelp, then a slipping, sliding noise, a crash, a splash—and then only the fury of the wind.

The hunt was forgotten. Gun, lantern and axe were forgotten. Mr. Ballin ran to the edge of the bank and stood there—a very old, white-haired man, tired and feeble, gazing into the impenetrable blackness.

“Maje!” he called in trembling voice. “Maje! Maje! Maje, whar be ‘ye?”

For a long time there was no answer. Snow beat about the old man’s face; the icy wind crept through his ulster and his hunting coat.

“Maje! Maje!” The old man’s voice quavered shrilly, but still there was no answer.

From the blackness of the river at last came a faint whine, a faint sound of splashing.

“Maje! Be ye in the river, Maje?”

The wind howled through the bare branches of the old oak; the snow drove down from the mountains in swirling clouds. So thick did it come, so black was the storm, that the old man could see neither the block lights by the railway track nor the gray sky overhead. As he stood there he heard again and yet again that faint splash and that appealing, pitiful whine.

Not for a moment did he hesitate. His thin hand trembled as he threw off his ulster; he shivered in the biting gusts; but his eyes, half shut against the stinging flakes, squinted angrily, and his jaw was thrust out below the white moustache. Never, since the day when Mr. Ballin carried Major home in his coat pocket to the white house under the hill, had the dog appealed for help in vain.

Straight out on the thin ice crept the old man. Inch by inch and foot by foot he advanced. When the ice cracked and buckled under him, he threw himself down full length. Out he crawled, and out—and all the time he could hear ahead of him those plaintive whines.

“I’m a-comin’, Maje! I’m a-comin’! ‘Hang on, old dog!’”

The old man’s voice sank to a whisper. “He’s tired—he’s run three coons. I hadn’t ought ‘a’ kep’ him out so long.”

Ahead of him in the darkness Mr. Ballin could make out a pool of open water, and in it two dark, moving shapes. Louder and louder howled the wind, swiftly and more swiftly beat the driving snow.

“I’m a-comin’, Maje!”

The old dog, swimming at the edge of the ice, whined joyfully.

Mr. Ballin experienced no shock when the ice gave way beneath him. He was already so nearly frozen that he scarcely noticed the chill of the black water. He began

clumsily to swim, for it had been many, many years since he had practiced the art. He kept afloat—although the water line cut round his white head above his ears and close below his nose. He struggled bravely to climb up on the ice—but it was no use.

Close beside his master paddled the dog, silent now; and beside the dog, safe now in the truce of common danger, paddled a square-headed, furry animal that tried in vain to gain foothold on the treacherous edge of the ice.

“It’s no use, Maje!” the old man gasped, as for the third time the ice broke under him. “I can’t get you out nohow, but I ain’t a-goin’ to have you drownded, too!”

He threw one arm over the edge of the ice and with the other drew the dog to him. He pressed his face into the drenched hair, and then, curving his arm under the dog’s body, partly pushed, partly lifted him to the ice.

The ice held. Major slid across it cautiously a foot or so, and then turned and whined through the darkness and the storm.

“Go home!” the old man cried hoarsely. “Go home!” Still the dog sat on the ice and whined.

“Go home! Consarn ye!”

But the old dog would not leave his master. Hopelessness was settling over the old man; his muscles were numbed and cramped.

“It’s the end!” he whispered. “It’s the end—go—home—Major!”

A few feet away the coon was splashing loudly; Mr. Ballin turned in the water and looked at the black shape. It seemed to be crawling out on the surface; perhaps the ice was thicker there.

Mr. Ballin pulled himself along the edge of the ice. The black something, which he knew must be the coon, was ahead of him. As best he could, the old man struggled after it.

Major was howling now, mournfully.

Straight toward the coon the old man worked his way. But the coon was not in the water! It was on a log that was frozen into the ice. It sat on the log, to which it had led the old man, until he too had gripped the rough bark and pulled himself from the water. Slowly regaining its strength, it trotted along the log to the shore, climbed the bank and disappeared. Major paid no attention to it.

“He brought me to the log—the coon did!” Mr. Ballin whispered hoarsely. He crawled up on the ice and, clinging with both hands to the old log, drew himself ashore. Still the snow came down, blinding him and confusing him. His knees faltered, his head dropped forward. As if from far off he heard old Major whining; then he felt him tugging at his sleeve. He followed Major with blind confidence, and the old dog led him to Nathan Parson’s door.

Mr. Ballin lay in an inert heap on the steps. The snow drifted over him. The wind wailed above him. But Major howled by his master's side until the Parson family awoke, came stumbling to the door, and took them in, dog and master. But when they laid Mr. Ballin on the great feather bed in the snug room under the eaves, he turned and whispered, "Whar's Major?" Nor would he rest content until the old dog was laid beside him.

"Did ye get a coon?" they asked him when he woke the next day.

The old man raised his head above the pillow; his eyes flashed fire. "No, I didn't catch no coon! And I'm glad I didn't!"

Major will never tree a coon again; the exposure of that wild night ended his hunting career forever. But as long as he shall live his is the old cushion behind the kitchen stove.

"Dogs," Mr. Ballin is wont to say, when he sits on the doorstep with dreamy eyes and reminiscent tongue, "dogs is more human than lots of men I know, and coons ain't so far-fotched, nuther!"