

IN MEMORY OF OPENING MORNING

Gradually the change comes, the glory of autumn fades away, and the brown leaves drift and waver to the earth, while waterfowl migrate southward to the land of perennial feed.

Not everyone is glad to see winter's arrival, because they shiver instinctively at its name. They see the dreary desolation of the earth, stripped of its mantle of greenness and bloom and ripe fruitage, ready to don the white robe for dreamless sleep. Hopeless looks adorn their faces.

Nevertheless, with the arrival of winter, waterfowlers rejoice over our new freedom, for there is a sweet promise in its gusty breath ó a promise that we cherish and believe in. To us, winter is full of life and full of miracles and all nature seems a song.

Surely, the beauty of the world lives even amid the death of winter ó it is not death but beautiful life! And we are lucky to witness the beauty of each sunrise of purest azure or the sky blurred in the wild grandeur of a winter storm. We are glad to be alive.

Wherever we look, there is life ó abundant signs of it. Through the roar of the wind and gray clouds, we hear it declared by the trumpets of geese and the contented rejoicing of ducks ó hopefully, the promise of more to come.

Promises fulfilled, we watch the sky blossom into a shower of celestial ducks and geese and witness the wetlands come alive with the musical notes of waterfowl. We listen from afar as wood ducks converse. Their plaintive call echoes across the water and is tossed back from point-to-point in notes that grow ever fainter, but not less pleasing. Perhaps, in all the rivers and swamps there is no sound that appeals so strongly to the imagination of him who hears it. Nor is there in the swamps any other voice of nature that brings to the mind of the old hunter so many memories of hunts gone by, of rivers traversed, of hunting companions loved, but living no longer, and of my Dad who initiated me into the mysteries of the shotgun and taught me how to hunt ducks and the wily quail with as noble a pointer as ever stood to scent. One after another has gone; even the old place where I took my first hunt has changed its face to suit another age.

In the depth of winter, we pity our cousins who sleep away in terrified dreams each sunrise, while we witness God's handiwork. "Everything is perfect that comes from the hand of the Creator," wrote philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, cynic and skeptical though he was, and we believe him.

This hunting season we will pass through many of the delightful vicissitudes of cold, rain, and snow, which we will not heed, so long as there is success, and, if not, we will soon forget, because winter is the sportsman's golden days, filled with pleasures made possible by gloomy months so distasteful to many.

For each hunting season, there is an opening morning and a night before, where we lie half-dreaming, perfectly contented, awaiting the arrival of dawn. Into our reverie comes

chatter from the lips of happily feeding mallards. Rejoicing, there pours forth more harmonious carols.

Before long, from the ashes of night the morning sun sends long, mellow shafts of gold aslant the winter-tinted fields and reflects countless glittering sparkles from the frost-jewels that lavishly scatter on every hand, while the sky burns with a bewildering profusion of colors from horizon to horizon that would rival the choicest hues of a rainbow, and the crisp, life-giving air is sweet to breathe.

Is this a reverie? No, it's opening morning.

The day so long looked forward to is upon us, and each hunter's heart beats gaily with anticipation of the pleasure that we feel confident awaits us.

The flooded, harvested rice field is veiled in melting mists before waning stars and a rising globe. To the north, the dim background of cypress trees looks picturesquely beautiful, some few hundred yards distance. Every gentle sway of their feathery branches is grace itself.

Casting our eyes in different directions present visions of loveliness, dazzling us with their brilliance and glitter. We feel amply compensated for the early morning awakening.

Armed with every conceivable device known to man, decoys are tossed in orderly fashion to await our guests. Before long, winged creatures commence their daily need of toil and pleasure. The caller sends an invitation, and no sooner than the first note is out, firearms and shouts of triumph are heard. Ah! is this not the acme of happiness?

However, not all is joy, because some realize that we are not merely inviting them to play or to dinner, but enticing them down for our pleasure and off they go. Oftentimes, we empty our fowling pieces and nothing falls, not even a feather. Glances are given that broaden into stares and amazement.

“That's the reason it's called hunting,” someone says.

I remark, “Ah, well, I'm just from the city, and as Teddy Roosevelt said, ‘I'm not a good shot, but I shoot often.’”

We have more excuses, but I won't burden you with the details, for life is too short and I'm sure you've heard them before, and the list will only get longer the closer we get to home.

With each retrieve, our souls expand with enthusiasm of love for the beautiful, and there rings in our hearts a sweet refrain of gratitude to the giver of all this loveliness.

When Old Sol shows his face, the genial rays send a glow to our pulses accompanied by a glow to our spirits. And so the day passes, bringing health and strength and happy thoughts, as well as royal and memorable sport.

Back at the cabin, we eat, smoke cigars, count our trophies, and feast upon the fulfilled pleasures of opening morning. When time comes for us to leave, it is with a sense of regret amounting almost to apoplexy that we say good-bye. Before doing so, we give one last fond look at our happy hunting grounds.

We are loath to leave such pleasant surroundings, but business must be attended to sometimes so home we go, returning to the concrete city jungle with light hearts, many fat ducks in our bag and less substantial but more lasting than these, rich stores of memories to last us until some other time when it may be our fortune to loosen the shackles and hunt again.

That night I retrace my morning's wanderings and do not note the flight of time until sweet, shadowy bedtime steals upon me unawares. Well-pleased with everyone and the world in general, I find healthful sleep that only a tired waterfowler can properly appreciate.

So often have we seen the miracle of winter wrought, that with the eye of faith, more than of fancy, we hope to see it repeated even by those who have not sense enough to grow old. I am one of the guilty.

Why? Some of us, year after year, welcome winter and will answer every alarm clock with the zest and pleasure that we had when

öAll the world was green

And every bird a swan, lad,

And every lass a queen.ö

It seems as if it was just yesterday that I killed my first greenhead with the clang of a dear old double gun. That was a red-letter day ó one of those days one never forgets. When I did, kind Mother Nature touched my eyes and I loved her, and since then she and I have been very, very close friends.

The old double used that eventful day can't be bought; it has earned its asylum, and I wouldn't bear parting with it. Ever so often, I remove its resting place above the mantle, polish its rusted barrels with tender care, and smile at each scar on its shapely stock ó records of many a hard-fought battle.

When I gaze at its rusty form, there arises before me visions of bygone days in which we have been together in field and forest, marsh and cover. We have seen some red-letter days and some disagreeable ones too; but who is it that in memory's retrospect treasures

the gloomy and has naught but coldness for the bright and agreeable ó the sunny portion of existence?

How well do I remember picking up the old double and sitting in the old blind reconstructed for opening morning and think of former days when things were different; when Dad sit in the corner over there and between shots discussed with me past hunting campaigns.

Those were glorious days, but they have gone and so has Dad. I often wish he could steal away to the happy hunting grounds this side of paradise, where winged things are, but there are no angels.

õCan you Dad?ö

So long as rivers and swamps survive and the crisp, bracing breezes of winter arrive, I will find the temptation to go waterfowling irresistible, as I hope you do! Moreover, when opening morning arrives, I shall be present and trust for many more to come, and the memories will be preserved beyond any possible erosion of time in history's golden urn.

Thus, in my golden years, one day after another comes up, and after having been lived over is relegated to obscurity, there to remain until future occasion shall again call them forth.

Have you been there? Does your day's hunt end with the setting of the sun? If so, I think there is something sadly missing, for much that might be treasured is wasted, and there is lost to you one-half the real pleasure of a day spent afield.

Don't you remember ó aged and experienced sportsman ó how, when the old clock that you placed at the head of your bed the night before announced 5 o'clock, loud enough to be heard half a mile, you sprang from your warm bed, quickly donned your shooting outfit, took you well-oiled gun from the case, whistled for your faithful dog, and started for flooded fields?

Don't you remember when after hunting all day, and seeing thousands, but bagging only two or three by well-directed and skillful shots, you raced through the water as though you feared the ducks would come to life and fly away before you could reach them?

Do you not remember all these things? Oh, ye aged and experienced sportsman. Ye were not always old. There was a time when your pulse beat 140 times a minute and your hands trembled as you raised your gun.

Were not these happy days?

For the younger generation, sooner than you think, you will reach an age where you cannot hope for many more glorious seasons and a day will come when you can't answer

the call for opening morning, so cherish each and every one and don't let the first one nor the last one fade from your memory.

As I look out the window, the fire is getting low, my pipe is out, and a suspicious cold wind is beginning to sway the treetops. Rising to my feet, I observe, "Ah, a change; a northerner is on. That means good hunting tomorrow. Turn in."

The memories of halcyon opening mornings still cling to me and will, I trust, as long as I live, to dream of them beside my fire on winter evenings. Like the old chap in Charles Dickens's "Haunted Man," I say, "God keep my me