

Summer Days

A beautiful, crisp, and cool morning, with just a suspicion of autumnal haze in the atmosphere, such a morning as really belongs to October, greets me during the first days of August.

Enjoy it while I can, for the fierce sun and winds will soon return and remind me that you are only a forerunner of days which are not yet but soon will be.

What vision such a morning brings to the memory of the lover of woods or mountains or outdoor life in general, after having suffered for weeks with the oppressive heat, intensified by the heaps of bricks and stone, which go to make up a great city!

It causes my mind to wander back to the time of my boyhood and dwell lovingly on the many agreeable experiences of days gone by.

What sportsman does not remember his first gun and the thrill of rapture that attended his first successful shot? He had killed a bird on the wing; he knew just how he had accomplished it and fondly believed he had mastered the art. Alas! Nevertheless, subsequent frequent failures only tend to sweeten an occasional success, and as he is a true sportsman, discouragement is unknown to him.

In looking back upon the years, I recall to mind my first gun and the beginning of my education in the art of shooting. I was 10 years old when my Dad handed down to me a 20-gauge double, a family heirloom, light and a good shooter.

My Dad, thirty-three years my senior at the time of my bleeding into the hunting fraternity, was a tireless hunter, a good wing shot, owned a side-by-side and a faithful pointer.

Small game was plentiful in those days in Tennessee, where we lived, and I still live. Almost every meadow contained a bevy of quail, and woodcock were numerous in the willow thickets on low ground, while snipe abounded in the swamps and marshy places.

During many excursions with my Dad, he did all he could to teach me, giving me the best positions and often waiting until I missed a bird before he fired.

I missed many times before I killed a bird on the wing. I well remember the first one. It was a quail and looked to me as big as a spring chicken. My Dad had stationed me in a good position and had gone into a thicket where Bess had pointed.

“Look out,” he called, and above the thicket the bird appeared. I raised my gun and fired, and by good luck held so true that without a flutter it dropped almost at my feet.

I gave a triumphant yell, and he asked in some surprise, “Did you get him?”

“Of course I did,” said I proudly, puffing out my chest, what chest I had.

After discussing the shot, of which I gave the minutest details, we resumed the hunt and soon had another bird on the wing, which I neatly downed, or at least I thought so. We both fired at the same instant the bird fell. I was sure that I had hit it and explained that it was a much easier bird than the one I had just killed, and if I could kill a hard one, of course an easy one like this could not get away from me.

He admitted with glee that undoubtedly the bird was mine.

We now began to feel the need for refreshments and ascending a rising piece of ground seated ourselves in the shade of an oak tree near a fence, which separated it from a meadow, where we purposed looking for quail after lunch.

While I sat in the enchantment of the scene and was quietly engaged in appeasing hunger with vienna sausages, my attention was attracted by Bess, which had for some time been uneasily sniffing the air while staring excitedly straight ahead. Looking in that direction, I saw a pretty sight.

Under the fence from the meadow, a bevy of quail was scurrying along, daintily threading their way between weed stalks and scattered bushes. Ten to twelve were in sight at intervals, and still they came.

Cautiously lifting my gun, taking quick aim, I fired into the midst of whirring wings as they rose, and my Dad did the same. He brought down one with each tube in as neat a manner as could be desired, while I did my part.

Bess was told to retrieve and brought in one after another, three fine plump quail.

We finished our interrupted lunch and going into the meadow proceeded to hunt up members of the scattered flock. We found more quail, of which my Dad bagged several, and I missed as many. Hunting on as the day was drawing to a close, he let me shoot alone ó missing all.

As it was getting late, while we were walking along, reliving the incidents of the day, a streak of brown feathers rose from a clump of berry bushes, almost at our feet. So sudden and unexpected was his appearance that I reflexively brought my gun to my shoulder, and as I fired the bird shot up into the air, higher and higher, when after a few convulsive flutters it fell to the ground, dead.

I learned then that a bird often towers in this manner when shot in the head as this one on examination proved to be.

As we hunted, we passed some woods whose scenes of beauty elicited these words from my Dad, “The beauty of the surroundings brings to mine pleasant memories of days and nights spent here in the past, which has been among the happiest of my life.

“The woods over yonder, in my boyhood, were gray squirrel cover, or, as all hunters know, this means oak, beech, hickory, and acorns. In the long ago, I killed many a squirrel in those woods.

“If I remember right, I chopped my first cord of wood there. I delivered it to the local jeweler to pay for the first gold pen I ever owned. It was not first-class hardwood, but then the pen was not over 10-karat fine.

“To the west, and on the opposite side of the gully was once a cornfield, and it fed many a coon. When corn wasn’t planted, it offered up watermelons for our delight.

“Down in the valley to the right, where you see the mist arising, is the lake where the bass play, but as we have no rod nor reel we will leave them alone to catch another day.

“To the left, where you see that line of mist, is the river, which, when overflowed upon the grain fields, makes a resort for the wintering waterfowl. It is there that I killed my first duck.

“Even though I have hunted in many wild and pleasant places, there is yet a charm about the woods and marshes of my boyhood of which I know every tree and bog that will never wear away.”

“They may cut down the timber,

Drain the land if they will,

But the old smell of woods and bog

Will hang around it still.”

(anon)

As he talked, I was in another world, the hunter’s world, where all is joy, and where no sorrow or dull care can come, for the latter belongs with the common moneymaking world.

He continued, “It’s not the taking of innocent blood, as all we hunters know, that causes us pleasure, but rather the pursuit and capture of our game. I never shoot any game, but if I had the power I would cause another of the same kind as good or better to take its place.

“But as we cannot have our cake and eat it too, it stands us in good stead to be saving of our supply.

“I would like to see the days of my grandfathers and father renewed, when the wood, water, and air teemed with life of all kinds. And if every one that shoots would take only what they needed and no more, I think it would be very near it, even at this late day.

“My father’s creed was this: “Never shoot more than you need to eat at the present. Never shoot in the spring or summer. And last, but not least, if you do not care for it yourself give it to the sick or poor. Remember that we are not the only ones that are living or will live on this earth, so let us not take more than our share, but leave enough to keep up the stock, that the rising generations shall call us blessed. Let us not be selfish.”

Leaving this never-to-be-forgotten spot, we took the old wood road south and reached home at twilight with a respectable bag of birds, well pleased with the results of our day’s hunt.

In a grand culminating moment of great achievement, I laid at my mother’s feet in triumph my three quail and received her praise. I remember her words as if it was yesterday, “It’s not all of shooting to shoot, and when you have nothing but memories some little trifle will bring to mind this day, and it will be lived over again and bring sunshine and gladness and loosen your shackles.”

One by one the stars shone forth, and the dark sky, as black as ink in the gloom, was thrust aside by fleecy clouds that drifted slowly past the crescent moon.

I stood at the threshold and as I gazed overhead at the vast expanse of sky, that has been the theme of poet’s pencil and artist’s brush, I felt the spell come stealing over me in the breath of the summer zephyr, which was wafted beneath the sparkling stars of the heavenly sky.

After the evening meal, Dad and I reclined to the den where he reminisced, “Times there are that come to all of us when life seems an empty endeavor. Our friends, one by one, have left us, some forever, some for a time. Others have grown cold, others false, and we sit by the fireside alone.

“Our eyes grow dim trying to look into the beyond, but the clouds are too dense and hide hope, even from our vision. We have nothing left then but memories, and the old happy days will come back to us and will be worth more to us than the glitter of the gold we have hoarded or the honors reaped.”

His eyes moisten as he said, “Be a good steward of the land, for it may not always be.”

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I can explain it no better than this:

“I hear the far off voyager’s horn,

I see the Yankee’s trail-

His foot on every mountain pass,

On every stream his sail.
Heø whistling round St. Maryø falls
Upon his loaded train;
Heø leaving on the pictured rocks
His fresh tobacco stain.
I hear the mattock in the mine,
The axe stroke in the dell,
The clamor from the Indian lodge,
The Jesuitsø chapel bell.
I see the swarthy trappers come
From Mississippiø springs,
And war chiefs with their painted brow
And crests of eagle wings.
Behind the scared squawø birch canoe
The steamer smokes and raves,
And city lots are staked for sale
Above old Indian graves.
By forest, lake and waterfall
I see the peddlerø show:
The might mingling with the mean,
The lofty with the low.
I hear the tread of pioneers
Of nations yet to be,

The first low wash of waves where soon

Shall roll a human sea.

The rudiments of empire here

Are plastic yet and warm;

The chaos of a might world

Is rounding into form.

Each rude and jostling fragment soon

Its fitting place shall find-

The raw materials of a State,

Its muscle and its mind.

And westering still, the star which leads

The new world in its train

Has tipped with fire the icy spears

Of many a mountain chain.ö

(öSeer,ö John Greenleaf Whittier)

öThis poet's dream has come true to pass, and it is up to you to protect what's left,ö he imparts.

As the years passed, I had a family of two boys and they accompanied me in my sport, to the pleasure and advantage of both.

I thrilled with delight as each showed a quick eye and wit and was pleased and proud more than the youngsters themselves if they got bird, beast, or fish skillfully and honorably.

With these quick imitators by my side, I grew punctilious in following every law laid down by man or by nature concerning the game we sought, that I might teach by my practice a reverence for such laws and obedience to them.

From too great familiarity, or from the oppressing cares that added years often lay upon the elder (and that will not stay behind), if unaccompanied by these quick observers, he

would pass unnoticed many objects of interest and beauty: here a wood duck preened her plumage and left a many-hued feather on the log for token; a water lily, late blooming, gleams under an overhanging water maple; a hawk circles the far-off hilltop; a fox has left a chicken bone or turkey feather on the gray rock where he feasted the night before, or a woodcock has twice bored the black mud by the wooden bridge.

To the boy such companionship brings numberless benefits. He learns safe and legitimate methods of sportsmanship so pleasantly that he will not forget to practice them in coming years. For him there will be no careless handling of the gun, no foolhardy feat attempted on the water, and no fingerlings in his creel nor unlawful game in his bag.

He learns to love the woods, as by his father's side he steals silently over their sunny slopes to surprise a quail; or as he stands by him, with finger on trigger and heart in throat, under birch or oak in October sunshine, listening to the nearing bugles of the hounds.

In like manner, he loves the grass-bordered brook, from whose pools the bass leaps to his father's skillful cast, and the broader streams, where bream and crappie play. And mingled with this love of nature and her healthful recreations, there grows a stronger filial affection, not likely to grow less as the years increase.

As I close this story, I know that morning will come all too soon, but I shall not loathe to arise, because the scenery of my boyhood grows more attractive every year, and there is a delicious freshness in the countless forest islands and flowery meadows that dot the countryside in every direction.

I can imagine of no more tempting retreat from asphalt streets and concrete jungles in town than these woods and fields where my boys and I have spent many red-letter days. I can see a spot and there another where the heart had quickened. I can almost fancy the dull boom of the double barrels, the rush of wings as the bird went on or fell to the shot.

I know that June days, with the perfect skies of purest blue, flecked with drifts of silver, and fields and woods in the flush of fresh verdure with streams winding among them in crystal loops, invites the angler with promise of more than fish, something that tackle cannot lure nor creel hold.

All about, nature unfolds the manifold beauties of this joyous month to show us what wondrous miracle of spring has been wrought within our touch.

In July, the woods are dense with full-grown leafage. Of all the trees, only the basswood has delayed its blossoming, to crown the height of summer and fill the sun-steeped air with a perfume that calls all the wild bees from hollow trees.

Half the flowers of woods and fields are out of bloom. The early grain fields have already caught the color of the sun, and the tasseling corn rustles its broad leaves above the rich loam the woodcock delights to bore.

As we journey onward, never is it so enjoyable as in late August when the thin blue haze hangs over the land, softening the outline of distant hills and valleys and lending a dreamy air to everything, when the golden rod and sunflower bend their yellow heads to the sun and the gold and black bumblebee drones his buzzing songs among their petals.

If you have watched the sun go down and lingered through the long twilight, seen the crimson and gold slowly fade from the fleecy clouds, and watched the nighthawk's silhouette cross the aftermath of sundown which lingered in the deep blue dome above, traced the great horned owl's noiseless flight passing by on nocturnal hunting bent, and listened to the voices of evening come over the landscape in that softly subdued way, then truly you have lived and not always existed.

Some people say, "It is so lonesome away out in the woods!" Bah! They exist, while he who roughs it and lives a life of freedom in the open air really lives.

In the olden days, the real opening of the shooting campaign took place in this month. Sportsmen hunted beach birds, the rail, and the reed birds, which in the long ago came by the thousands and gave to the gunner an opportunity to use his fowling piece and to prepare himself for the later cold weather work on quail, grouse, and ducks.

As my boys are grown, I hunt mostly alone now, except for these memories. Oh, how I love to cling to the days of my boyhood when Bob White sitting on the fence sang his solo so sweetly and clearly that ears deaf to all other sounds drank in his music as essential notes in the melody of life. Did we not feel better and happier then, and had no dust of the city in our nostrils or our throats to clean out or clouds of its thick atmosphere to dispel before catching the first sunbeam from the eastern hills?

"This is the place; stand still my steed

Let me revisit the scene,

And summon from the shadowy past

The things that once have been."

(anon)

If there was nothing about hunting but simply the game one gets, I never should hunt very much now, whatever I might have once done.

And so, as all things, both good and bad, must have an ending, one of the pleasantest August mornings which I have ever enjoyed passes all too swiftly, and I somehow fear I have wearied you with the memories that emanate from me when I think of the golden hours of the long ago.

But sport without sentiment seems much like a harp without strings or a shadow with no sunshine to me nowadays. It may not always be good taste to shake out this sentimental flag every time one takes his rod, gun, or pen, but shall we not be better men, and will not the enjoyment of our field sports be keener and more lasting the closer we entwine them with the affections of our hearts? It seems so to me.

In a few days, summer will wane, flowers will fade, and birdsongs will falter to mournful notes of farewell, but while regretfully I mark the decline of these golden days, I remember with a thrill of expectation that they will slope to the golden days of autumn, wherein the farmer will garner his latest harvest, the sportsman his first worthy harvest, and that to him that waits comes all things, and even though he waits long, may come the best.