

Takes My Breath Away

One morning in December, after a wild, tempestuous winter's night when the rain and sleet beat furiously against the windows and the house quivered under the force of northerly winds, the sun rose in a glorious clear sky, and the atmosphere possessed that feeling of crisp coolness indicative of a morning's frost. It being a holiday I grabbed my old double barrel and started out early after quail.

Soon, my livered colored pointer, Bess of royal lineage, pointed a covey, and the startled quail burst from a thicket, trailed by the crack of the gun. I bagged two on the rise, a beautiful right and left, the first double I'd ever made.

Bess, my pride and joy, behaved nobly, retrieving the birds in fine style. Placing them in my waiting hand, she looked at me and seemed to say, "I'll do my part, if you'll keep your end up."

We followed the birds into the woods where Bess pointed, rigid as a statue cast in bronze. As I approached, my motions slowed and cautious it was, while the alert bird flushed with a thunderous roar of pinions. With hurried aim, my shot went true as a puff of feathers floated down.

After retrieving the bird, Bess came to a chiseled point, with the dead bird in her mouth ó a picture to delight any old sportsman, much more a youth like myself. I flushed the bird and my shot went wide of the vanishing mark, and continued missing all that got up until I had fired perhaps ten or a dozen shots.

Here I left the woods and attempted a shortcut to another hunting ground. Somewhere along the way, I deviated from my intended course, but did not become aware of it until I saw the sheen of silvery water close before me beneath a patch of open sky.

It was quite new to me, enclosed on one side by a dense thicket of buttonbushes, on the other by a sloping bank bearing immense oak trees. It was the dead water of an old slough, but its surface was stirred by something that I could not see moving upon it, and I crept cautiously to a point that gave me a view of almost its whole length.

Then what I beheld nearly took my breath away. The little slough swarmed with mallards, some in rows on the mossy old logs that lay athwart and along it, some comfortably asleep with heads indrawn or tucked under a wing, some preening their plumage, some standing upright to stretch their wings, while the water was alive with others, indolently swimming to and fro, seaming the duckweed with innumerable aqueous paths, or nibbling the water, or thrusting their heads beneath it ó all in abandonment to a perfect sense of security that it seemed cruel to disturb.

Nevertheless, no emotion of pity softened the youthful savagery of my heart. It beat only with the joy of great discovery ó the chance of a lifetime that lay before me. It beat so vehemently that it was a wonder I so much as hit the slough, to say nothing of hitting one

of the uncounted dozen of ducks that flushed when Bess rambled up. I saw one tumble ó my very first duck.

It was then, when the thunderous roar of wings that was like the prolongation of the report of my gun, innumerable ducks arose and filled the air before me. I fired wildly into the mass of confusion.

As they fluttered away, the ducks seemed unable to realize that their safe retreat had been discovered and invaded by a youthful intruder, for they continued to circle and hover over it until with trembling hands, in more haste than speed, I reloaded my gun, and grown cool enough to select single birds, brought down one with each barrel.

Then the last and boldest lingerer reluctantly departed and the silence of desertion fell upon the place. There was not a sign to show that the slough was ever visited by any one else, and I congratulated myself on possessing sole knowledge of its existence.

Many a day thereafter, I went to it alone, guided from afar by the huge oak trees, which, towering above the second growth, were unmistakable landmarks, whether in leafage of green, or scarlet and brown, or in gray nakedness. All this was mine to command, and I said "this is mine, this sunny slough, the beautiful ducks ó this enchanted spot ó all mine!"

And while I kept my secret seldom was a visit unrewarded by at least one shot at a wood duck, or later in the season at the larger and warier mallard, which haunted the sequestered slough until it was frozen.

However, in an evil hour I disclosed it, under promise of secrecy, to a faithful friend. It was not long before a path was worn by the frequent tread of other feet than mine, and ducks began to be shy of a retreat that no longer promised rest and safety. In several years, it was common to every gunner in the neighborhood, and worth no one's while to visit.

As one still searches for something lost ó past all hope of finding ó so was I now and then drawn thither, but never to find more than a solitary heron standing like a gray statue in the desolate slough, or a lone coot skirting the low shore, or a muskrat channeling the duckweed with his silent wake.

I had given away my discovery only to have it taken away and made worthless.

With thoughts, which are but boy's thoughts, I find myself at an advanced age drifting back to scenes of glorious endearment of the slough and ducks which took my breath away.

Then what happy memories are awakened by the sight of the old double barrel resting above the mantle, with which my first duck was brought down. I was ten when it was

bequeathed to me from my Dad who had received it from his father, having died at the ripe old age of eighty-four.

As I held it in my hand for the first time, my boyish heart swelled with pride; my greatest desire had been gratified, and I would not have exchanged places with the heirs of the Rockefellers. What a wonderful gun it was.

But for use, the old gun is as good as it was then ó though its owner is not quite, perhaps ó and for looks, I have none the better of it. Maybe there were those who used it before my grandfather, old hunters of the bygone days when game was plenty; over whose tough bones the grass has grown and withered, and the snow lain for many a year, and who are now remembered more by the guns they carried than by their gravestones.

The old gun is a link that holds me to the past. Though it is rusted and battered and its maker's name is worn off and forgotten, it has more in it enduring than steel ó that which no new gun can have, no matter how handsome or engraved.

For the sights my now faded eyes beheld, what would I not give? I can only look backward upon it through the midst of years and of eyes grown dim with age. Yet blest am I who so beheld it and in such possession held it.

Oh! glorious days of long ago, even after all these years, it still takes my breath away.
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