

Flare of Fan

Last night I dreamed of Winding Ridge.

I had been going over my gun diary looking for a day's shooting to use in the last spot in this book, reading my entries for those grand hunts in 1954 during Ruff's golden prime—tales of grouse moved, the points and retrieves, one hundred and seven shots that season, day after 44 days moving 16 grouse for 23 flushes, 15 for 21, 14 for 22, 8 for 12, 14 for 21, 16 for 18, 13 for 17, 14 for 21, 14 for 20. That was the year I moved 303 grouse for 581 flushes with an average of over 11 grouse in every covert I gunned. It is small wonder I wrote 166 pages in the 1954 section of my diary. The following year I had my Fox restocked and there were almost as many grouse and shots and as much glorious dog work. Why then did I dream I was on Winding Ridge on a day in 1971?

Big Winding Ridge sprawling across Pennsylvania northeast-to-southwest like all the mountains of our Alleghenies, largely hardwoods with hemlocks in the hollows, is the second main ridge after you top Chestnut Ridge on the west edge of the "Endless Mountains" of the early maps. It is separated from Laurel Hill Mountain by the deep Youghiogheny River Valley and flattens out after the initial climb to gently swell to Maryland where it scrapes the sky at the Mason-Dixon Line.

It wasn't that Winding Ridge wasn't shot hard; it always was. There was the ole boy who came home every season bringing a contingent of ole boys with him, and although they hunted the same coverts every year, the grouse somehow held up. That was before the baby boomers matured and spread out. There was the local who

dragged himself away from the beer tavern on the old National Pike long enough to ground-shoot the woods road on Winding Ridge from a jeep, with a .410 double propped muzzle-down on the seat beside him. He took care of the grouse in what the ole boys thought was "the cycle." And still, as late as the 70s, Winding Ridge was a place for grouse.

Kay and I were hunting with Briar on the west face of the ridge just up under Maryland on a Tuesday, the 16th of November, 1971. It was 60°, mostly cloudy, and we got started about 2:00 p.m. There had been a farm here once, and a man and probably a woman and just as probably a litter of children living and working and worrying and, I hope, enjoying this high piece of heaven. They either had no other place to go or liked it enough to endure the rocky washed-out road all the way out the ridge to what now was a cellar hole and fields being taken back into the bosom of the mountain, like the man and the woman in their six feet of earth. There was a collapsed shed that had outlived the house and barn, but that was all.

I kept Briar clear of a patch of dried burdock and swung him into a field on the lower side. In a clump of locusts and dead goldenrod extending as a neck of cover from the woods, Briar went on point. He was in his third season and approaching the performance of the grand grouse dog he was for the rest of his life. A grouse flushed below him with no chance for a shot, but it was a good start.

We circled the old clearing and I found Briar pointing in waist-high goldenrod opposite the locust stand. His tail was as high as on the first point but this time he was pitched low in front in a way that said *woodcock*. I walked directly toward him and the 'cock came up between us and dropped at my shot less than twenty yards out. Briar made the retrieve, delivering an adult hen.

This shoulder of the mountain is a series of gentle slopes connecting flats that were fields before they reverted to mountain laurel and blueberry bushes. The old road at one time led past the farm and pitched steeply into White's Creek Valley on the north. I doubt if anything but hunting jeeps have traversed it since World War I.

We walked the road for a short distance and I waved Briar into an area with islands of greenbrier cropped by deer where the previous season we had moved a group of five grouse. He struck scent and

drew to an empty point, then went on, reaching, and pointed again. I had to maneuver around a clump of greenbrier so dense it looked like trimmed English boxwood, and the grouse flushed exactly opposite me, staying out of view for its entire flight. Kay heard a second bird take off and we followed the two flushes by sound in a northwesterly direction but didn't locate either grouse.

Soon after 3:00 we stopped for lunch near a sour gum sapling with its few persistent leaves a vivid red, stirred by the intermittent breeze. While Kay unwrapped our sandwiches I took our woodcock out of my game pocket and laid it on the dead leaves, its eyes already sunken but still the wild beautiful thing that woodcock are. It seemed late for hens to be coming through, but this had been an unusual year for 'cock.

We were on a large shelf broken on the west edge by a ledge of rocks that runs around the mountain like a contour line topped with rhododendron. When we resumed hunting, I walked parallel to the rock formation with Kay on my right and Briar quartering out in front. Sound that was part motion became a grouse skimming in a low left-quartering flush toward the security of the rhododendron, and I fired swinging through and saw the bird fall. For a moment it fluttered on the ground, then as I reloaded and called Briar, it righted itself and began to run for the rocks and I knew what we were in for. Briar and I arrived simultaneously and while I tried to get my eyes in focus, he began circling excitedly. The ground looked innocently normal with a covering of dead oak leaves but there were deep crevices down into underground rocks. Briar found several barred flank feathers and was searching furiously.

There was one opening large enough for a dog to crawl into and within seconds Briar had found it and without hesitation went underground where I soon could hear him sniffing somewhere down below.

In several places I could look through and follow his progress to the end of the grotto. I found a dead rhododendron stem and poked it down into the rocks as far as I could reach with no effect. Briar made the circuit three times, then came back aboveground, searching in widening circles until I called him in. I was certain the bird was lost, in spite of Kay's effort to encourage me.

Once more I got Briar down into the hole. His response to my directions was better than any dog I could remember, and he simply would not give up. He was at the far end of the passage and as I peered down from on my hands and knees I saw him go rigid, with his head turned into an opening on the right. Crouching, unable to stand, he was pointing and I knew he had our grouse.

I called *fetch!* and in his cramped position Briar began worrying at a narrow space in the rocks. Then I saw the grouse in his mouth and called to Kay that he had it.

In his excited state he wanted to lie and mouth the bird but I finally got him moving. Kay was ready with her camera at the main opening of the corridor when he emerged with the grouse held proudly, an adult hen that I accepted and dispatched.

Weeks later when I saw myself in Kay's movie I looked washed-out and limp but grinning as wide as Briar, who sat beside me feasting his eyes on his grouse and panting. Opinion was unanimous: when we did something, we did a production.

Fifteen years is not an enormously long time in a shooting life of sixty-two seasons but much had changed since our day on Winding Ridge. Kay and I looked quite a bit the same—at least Kay did—and we hunted about the same number of days each season, but we hunted harder to find far fewer grouse. I was carrying the little Purdey over Belton—Briar's son/grandson—and Quest, who looked so much like his five-times ancestor you could believe it was Briar quartering out there in front.

We were in the high West Virginia valley of "A Covert Out of Time" and it was early February 1987. I don't approve of February hunting, but when you have had your seventy-ninth and eightieth birthdays without shooting a grouse, you become a little desperate.

Two parallel roads bisect the upper end of the valley lengthwise. One is what is left of a county road that was in use when my 1902 topographic map was revised in 1923. Today a dotted line would be doing it honor. I've hunted it many times, grassy with soft mossy mud and tall trees hanging with grapevines closing in from both sides. The lower "road" is mostly what the deer have made of it—

a narrow trail through hawthorn-crabapple-ironwood thicket, stopping dead-end halfway up the hollow.

We took the lower road and let the dogs unlace the cover on both sides. Within ten minutes of leaving the station wagon we moved our first grouse, a mere sound but from Belton's attitude we felt he'd had the point.

When we failed to relocate the bird, we switched to the upper road. In "Mending Wall" Robert Frost wrote: *Something there is that does not like a wall.* I paraphrase it nearly every time I walk a woods road; if a tree falls, it will fall across the trail, not in another direction. We bypassed one after another tangle of grapevine and fallen trees and came to a large expanse of hawthorns, with Belton crissing as Quest crossed.

After eating our lunch in a rocky wood, we followed a tiny stream back down to the swampy flat, bleak looking today without the 'cock we found there last Indian summer. We made the complete circle of the bottom land with no sign of the grouse I felt should be there. Nowadays you hear that grouse are "spotty," which means you won't find them where you are hunting.

As days draw to a close there comes an urgency often associated with a sense of frustration and a need for a break that just won't materialize. Kay tried to dispel it by reminding me of times when we'd had a shot at end of day, but knowing the season was paying out I wasn't consoled.

It had clouded over and the sun was a smear of light above the treetops as we hunted the upper woods road back. Belton was in the thick cover to my left, Quest was scouring the steep slope above me, but no amount of determination on their part or fervent yearning on mine produced a grouse.

We came out on a rough field grown to coarse grasses and I could see the car looking diminutive where it was parked by the old chimney with the undulating Brieries in blue distance. Belton was with us when we reached the station wagon but Quest, ever questing, had deliberately overshot it and was hunting in the hawthorns on the other side of the dirt road.

I opened the tailgate and we sat on the rear and waited for Quest to get it out of his system, which he wasn't likely to do any more

than I wanted to stop, but we had given the day all we had and it was too late to expect anything now. I remarked to Kay that of the many times I had gunned the cover across the road there had been only one grouse—a bird that Belton had pointed at the corner down where the big high tension powerline crosses. As I was speaking, Quest's bell went silent and I saw Kay turn in a quick movement toward the hawthorns and at that I heard the flick of a wing on bare branches. Seconds later, Quest came to us, strung-up from his point and contact with the bird.

I got to my feet, Belton jumped from the open tailgate and both dogs led the way down the muddy road with Kay following me. The sun had broken below the clouds and was a gold ball showing through bare twigs of winter trees. We had hunted hard today with only the sound of two grouse instead of a shot; now we were following one more sound, grasping hope.

In cool shadows and damp smells of day's end, Belton and Quest were keening in the side cover. There was a sudden flushing sound over my right shoulder and I wheeled to see a grouse leaving a tree. It seemed to hang against sky through the bare treetop and my gun muzzles were under it in the exact spot with my finger on the trigger and I didn't fire. The "uncertainty" Alaric Alexander Watts wrote about so concisely had undone me and the flash moment was gone. I don't think I could have missed the shot but something—too many days, months without a hit—undermined the assurance it takes to shoot a grouse.

Muttering self-condemnation, I walked on to the powerline and turned right, hoping—and what can you do with hope—to move the grouse again somewhere along the edge cover of the right-of-way. Quest had heard the flush and was searching frantically on the far side of the road and it took some doing to get him to us.

We were pushing through deep dead grass and lumpy footing under the powerline when I heard Kay call from behind me that she had seen the grouse lift ahead and fly toward a steep open slope on the left. Quest, unaware of the flush, raced up the bare hill and ran head-on into the grouse on the skyline, coming up beneath the scent current. It exploded under his paws and bored straight out to land

in the top of a bare tree where it perched precariously and watched Quest running in circles, oblivious of it.

Some sparse saplings blocked my view and I moved closer as Kay picked her way around to the right beyond the tree, with the grouse still watching Quest, its head and neck extended incredibly. I waited for the flush while the bird teetered on the slender twigs and I tried to judge which direction it would go, wanting not to accept the fact that I might miss. The grouse must have seen Kay—certainly not me—for it gathered itself in that short crouch grouse do, then came off the tree directly in line for me, a high one. The new gunstock length, the new choke, the new me, even the shoulders, combined perfectly and the grouse took the pattern about ten yards in front and above and was somersaulting at my head. I ducked and it missed me by a foot or two and hit the ground behind me—dead.

When it finally comes it is hard to believe after all those days of trying. I yelled *I got it!* and heard Kay's wild exclamation like an echo. The grouse lay behind me, its fluttering reflex dying to stillness. Quest reached me just before Kay, and after some bewildered casting, caught scent and saw the immobile bird.

He had pointed other grouse, but it seemed beyond believing that, surrounded by glorious cover such as ours, this bird in Quest's third season was the first grouse shot over him. His initial move was to take the bird in his mouth and carry it to one side and start to bury it in the dead grasses, but he stopped at my command. He stood holding the grouse, unable to break out of his hypnosis, then, still dazed, he brought it to me and sat to deliver. For a long time he remained sitting, grasping the lovely thing in his mouth while Kay took pictures of the sacrament of his first grouse retrieve.

Belton came and just before he reached us I put the grouse in the dried grass for him to find and deliver, and it was like Ruff's late years all over again, seeing that everyone had his share of pleasure. Emotion ran high as we examined our bird, a yearling cock.

I suppose there have been grouse as perfect among the others I have shot. Each in its time seemed ultimate, as always each grouse should. The one that came to us on Winding Ridge, those birds shot lovingly in the big years of grouse, no one cock or hen or

yearling was more splendid, no one less a miracle of identification than another, each a moment grasped, to live, to love it *now*.

As we walked to the station wagon, the grouse still warm in the game pocket against my back, I thought of all this covert has given us with its big hawthorn flats, its blue mountains across its southern mouth—Bliss's first-season kill-over-point near the Steamboat House in the long ago; the chance and hit that dropped the grouse that zoomed across this same powerline right-of-way that christened the Holy Rocks; the woodcock shot over young Belton that fell in the middle of the mountain road under these very high tension cables; the 'cock in '84 over Belton's point shot in pain two weeks after I messed up my shoulder, the bird that blooded Quest; the dud shell that spared a grouse on our 52nd Anniversary; and this glorious end today to a dry spell without a grouse that had been eating my gut out and gave Quest his first grouse retrieve. No one who has not lived at a pitch like that can know.

This night, as I had hoped, as I had almost ceased to hope, a big grouse hung from the antlers on the hewn-log wall of the porch of Old Hemlock House under a half last Hunter's Moon—a gorgeous red-ruffed cockbird, its plumage perfect, its red tail band total, ease to yearning that has not dulled with the years, that strange need to take a thing so beautiful, so necessary to the gunner's soul. And yet, as always, with the joy there was that remorse for killing anything so grand and wild and rare.

Flare of fan, flight of fancy, these game birds in the coverts of our minds, the many hundred hours, the thousand passages of ecstasy, each grouse, each woodcock, every point, each shot hit or missed reached a new level of experience, a *joie de vivre* that can be compared with nothing else on this earth.

It is good to know that there will be Time Enough at end of day.