

KAY EVANS

## I'm Not a Gunning Widow

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*This is neither the place nor space enough for me to write a tribute to Kay, but it is difficult for me to express how much she enhances my gunning pleasure without risking superlatives. Our affair in the grouse woods began long before Kay started taking movies of the dog work and the shooting, and has been going on for forty-eight years. There has never been anyone with whom I could share a day's gunning who is remotely as much fun or as exciting. Students of the id might theorize that my affection for my gun dogs borders on the psycho-peculiar, but my being in love with my shooting companion certainly cannot be considered gay.*

*Rereading Kay's description in this piece of those early movie-taking sessions is like seeing myself in a three-panel mirror standing in my bones. I'm aware that I get testy when I'm into a string of misses, or when things aren't happening well with my dogs—situations where Kay soothes the fevered brow—but my overinvolvement in the problems of filming shooting action on—of all birds—grouse, I suspect discloses the inner man.*

*But those were wonderful days. If there can be any doubt that Kay and I have known the good years, those movies she has taken are the answer, bringing back seven generations of our setters, the glorious abundance of grouse and shots, those seasons ages ago.*

*Victor Herbert, speaking of his past, said: "God! what a lovely time it was to be alive." Kay, thanks be, eternally young, keeps this fragile thing that is perfection always in the Now. When I consider how fragile and how perfect, it is disturbing to think what it might be like to come back a century from now on such a day as one of these, with crystal air like this and deep, sharp shadows, but desolate without her, and them, the setters, and would even these same trees be here?*

—G.B.E.

I don't remember that there was anything said about gunning in the wedding vows, but that is what I promised, anyway—to love, honor, and go grouse hunting, even though I knew nothing about grouse. I'm sure marriage counselors would stress the sharing of hobbies or leisure-time interests. But grouse hunting is not my husband's hobby. Nor is his hunting a matter of leisure time. The other day he told me about meeting a doctor we know who asked, "Have you been writing any books lately?"

"Not for the last couple of months," George said. "I've been busy hunting grouse."

George told me of his reply as seriously as he'd given it to the doctor, and added incredulously, "He didn't seem to understand at all."

I've no idea if there are other men who are "busy" hunting grouse for almost a quarter of each year, or how many people would understand one who is. The main thing is—I do. It makes life a lot more enjoyable for us both.

Whether hunting is a man's leisure-time pursuit or the most important season of each year, a wife can never fully understand or share it unless she goes along into the woods. Naturally, she should start young if she's going to be a good brusher, able to pull through the densest laurel "hell" and climb rocky ridges. And oh, what wild beauty she will see, what good air she'll breathe, what excitement she'll share. Incidentally, what good color she'll have and how few worries about her figure.

I have never carried a gun, except that time we took Old Blue for his last hunt. He was 12 and we knew we should leave him at home, but we couldn't face going without him on opening day for the first time in twelve seasons. So we compromised on a short hunt and took him along with his 3-year-old son, Ruff. By late afternoon Blue's tired old muscles wouldn't take him another yard, and with a mountain mile between us and the car, this was a predicament. Resting and coaxing didn't work. Finally George handed me his Fox double and lifted Blue across his shoulders as if he were a bulky blue-belton neckpiece. Blue accepted this service with a why-didn't-we-ever-do-this-before look on his face. While George maneuvered through thick woods with his burden, I felt the 12-gauge shotgun getting heavier and more awkward with every step, and I've marveled ever since at the ease with which George handles it as though it were a part of him.

At first George talked of the kind of gun he'd get me. Meanwhile, I just went along without one. I watched grouse shooting as it is in our rough mountain cover—the smartest, most sporting of game birds casing all the angles of gun and dog, then whirring out on the other side of dense rhododendron or hemlocks, out of sight before I could think of raising a gun. It was then I made my own decision about the right gun

for me. None. I was happy just to go along, watching the dogs and George, and the thrills didn't seem at all second-hand. I'd follow along or, if paralleling on a path, always a few steps to the rear where George could count on me to stay, and I'd dream of being the hero of the hunt. I still do, but in all my years after the gun I can only think of two times when I felt indispensable to the action.

There was that twelfth of November high on an Allegheny ridge. George had missed one shot soon after we started. For a long time we hunted hard, but even one of our favorite coverts seemed barren of grouse. When at last we dropped over to the old logging road that would take us the two miles or more to our station wagon, the sun was low through bare trees. We were walking full-steam-ahead in order to get out of the woods before dark caught us, George in front, I about twenty feet behind. Blue made a couple of nice points, we heard two or three birds go out, but George got no shots. The sky was pink in front of us; snow on the ground added just enough light for us to see. Suddenly a grouse roared out of some brush to our left, flying back over my head. I ducked to the ground and called, "Shoot!" George did. Blue got there fast for the retrieve. I'm sure neither was quite as elated as I.

Then there was that New Year's Eve. Our own West Virginia season had closed weeks before and now it was the last day of the grouse season in the Maryland mountains. The weather was perfect. George had dropped a bird twenty minutes after we entered the woods and Ruff had retrieved it. The hunt was already a complete success, for one grouse makes the day. However, as a wind-up of a good year, we were hoping for a second.

We'd moved two more birds; Ruff had made a productive point; and we'd eaten lunch overlooking the steep ridges where the Youghiogheny cuts through. We hunted back along a slope through large woods with no amount of feed for birds. Ruff was ranging nicely ahead of us. Unexpectedly a grouse got out behind me and cut down the ridge toward George. I called, "Look out, there he comes toward you!" I suppose I should have called, "Mark left!" but anyway George swung to a fast lead, pulled, and the bird folded and fell. Ruff came in to deliver the enormous bronze. We watched two more grouse flush from almost the same place and wished them a fine New Year. All we asked for ourselves was that it would be as good as the one we were so gloriously finishing.

When I read in George's shooting notes of that day, "Kay achieved the ultimate in performance as a gunner's wife—perfect bird work," I glowed some more.

I'd have been content to finish out my allotted grouse seasons with only that much participation had not exactly the right fowling piece been lent me by a friend. A movie camera. Once I started "shooting," I

knew this was it. But first I had to go through all the frustrations of any novice at any sport!

On my first day as cameraman, George was the director. The opening scene had color: George's red cap and two orange belton setters against shining rhododendron. I got it all as George ordered Ruff and his son Feathers to "stay," holding up his hand. There were two blasts of the whistle as his hand waved them on and both dogs were away into the woods. I got some nice footage of them quartering, then Ruff on point with Feathers backing. Then Ruff's retrieve. It was Feathers' first season and he wasn't yet giving his father real competition on retrieves. My, I thought, this is splendid! I filmed another point. Then my director began to get production-minded.

"Just in case we might get another retrieve, let's get a sequence of me shooting first," he calmly ordered. "Don't worry about whether I hit the bird or not. By the time you know that, it'll be too late. But get me firing the gun."

Simple orders. Concise. All I had to do when I heard a grouse flush was put the finder on George and press the trigger. It wasn't long before I got the opportunity. A bird tore out with a terrific noise followed by the blast of George's gun. A miss—maybe because George was conscious of the camera. But in spite of that he turned to me almost triumphantly. "Get it?" he asked.

Which snapped me out of my buck fever and reminded me that I was holding a camera.

"No."

"Okay. Try the next time."

I did. And the next. And the next. It wasn't as though I hadn't heard grouse go out before. And I'd never been gunshy. But now I was supposed to do something about it.

By then George was taking impossible shots, his mind in back of him on the camera instead of out there on the bird. It was getting late and the light wasn't good, but the actor-director wouldn't give up.

"Keep ready," he ordered, as we trudged back along the hemlock-darkened path. "You still can get a shot and the flash from the gun may show up even better in this light."

Soon after that Ruff swung into a point along an old trail going off to our right. George muttered, "Get ready."

I moved into position behind him. The bird cut up the ridge through dense brush. George shot. Missed.

"Well," he turned with a smile. "You got it that time!"

I hung my head as I gave the familiar answer.

Hunting days passed with pictures of a lot of points and a satisfactory number of retrieves. George had overcome his tenseness about my camera work and was back in the swing of shooting. I'd start each day



saying "I *will* get a shooting sequence." I'd finish each day with a bewildered "I didn't."

We were going along a path through the woods. The dogs were circling off to our left when, to my right, I heard the preliminary-to-flight movements of a grouse, so quiet they didn't reach George out in front of me. I put the camera up to my eye, got George in the finder and gave three or four weak little whistles, which were all the warning I could manage in my excitement.

I guess I heard the shot. When I came to, George was looking jubilant. "Well, you got it that time!"

"I didn't! I—I must have been paralyzed."

"Go ahead and take the retrieve."

"Oh, you hit it?" I was still numb.

"Yes, and the way it was lined up, if you'd been taking the picture you might have caught the bird falling."

George and Ruff were happy enough about the whole thing and Feathers came in to admire but at the time it didn't occur to me that in a precamera day I'd have been proud of giving the warning before the

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shot. I took some pictures of the smiling trio and the beautiful bird, but I was low.

"George, when you shoot, please don't turn and say, 'Did you get it?' If I ever do, you can bet I'll tell you."

As that unsuccessful day wore into late afternoon, the footing seemed particularly rough, the hillsides steep, the briers tougher and stickier than ever. Feathers made a nice point against some dark brush and I didn't even try to get it. Then Ruff pointed. I had the camera ready and without waiting for the bird to flush I put the finder on George's back. As I heard a shot my finger started the camera. Another shot. The camera was still whirring.

I heard George's voice. "Feathers has him. It's a big one. Get this retrieve."

I did. And I told the whole mountain: "I took it! I got the shot! I got it all!"

Five minutes before I'd been tired and cold. But after that I floated through the long walk back to the car in the radiation of a glow that was rosier than the sunset.

Just one day without the borrowed movie camera convinced me we had to get one of our own. It was like being in the woods without a dog—one of the main parts was missing.

We started the next season with a few days' pheasant shooting on the Amwell Preserve near Lambertville, New Jersey. With birds in open cover it was easy to get all kinds of movie shots: birds in flight, birds dropping, dog work against the setting of flaming October color.

When we got back to Old Hemlock for the grouse season, I had a new assurance and got some sequences I'm proud of. In one you can see the grouse cross from right to left as George shoots. Maybe that blur of grouse isn't remarkable photography, but for us, it brings back the thrill of the actual moment. Ruff and his blue belton son, Shadows, vied for that retrieve, Ruff winning and making one of his beautiful deliveries from a sitting position.

A favorite point shows our blue belton Wilda (as in wildflower) backing her husband Ruff as George walks in, his shadow and that of his gun crossing the immobile Ruff. Wilda takes two steps forward like a child playing Giant Steps and freezes again, thinking in that mischievous way of hers that we'd never know. And we didn't—until we saw it on the screen.

We get a particular sense of achievement from two sequences that caught the birds falling, though they were entirely chance. The best flight pictures I've taken came one right after the other—two birds flushing from trees. On the second my swing was fast enough to get an unusual effect of the grouse in sharp detail with the background blurred. That once, and only that once, I had an elated feeling that perhaps I could actually shoot a flying bird.

This combination of a husband with a gun and a wife with a movie camera makes a wonderfully happy balance in the woods. Of course I take footage of mountain views: of the reds and golds of autumn set off by dark hemlock green, of trout streams, of the dogs drinking from a water hole or leaping across boulders. When there is snow and bright blue sky I need restraint not to try to take it all.

Our movies are a living record of each day I take the camera afield. There, on a warm October afternoon, is Ruff with a bird in his mouth trying to decide how to bring it across a rail fence and then finding a place where he can get through. Here, on a December day, George is sitting by a campfire under a rock overhang, drinking hot soup from a Thermos. In the next instance my breath freezes in the cold air as I stand by the fire feeding biscuits to Feathers and Shadows. And there is the record of a day we still remember with a shudder and a sickness in the pits of our stomachs.

A period of heavy snow had been followed by thawing and hard rain. We were hunting a valley with a large stream in roaring flood stage below us, walking an abandoned tramroad. As we approached the place where it once crossed the stream we could hear the water pounding. The bridge had been gone for years; only one rotting log still spanned the stream. As I stepped rather gingerly to the brink to take pictures of the foaming brown fury, it never occurred to me that the dogs would mistake my purpose. Ruff followed me to the high bank and without breaking his pace ran out onto that slippery log over churning water in which no animal could survive.

Afraid to call for fear of making him turn, we watched breathlessly as he crossed to the other side. Then, before we could stop him, Shadows was crossing too. Now we could see them both circling the far woods, wondering why we didn't follow. We could only stand there waiting.

Ruff looked over at us and we could see him making the decision. Back onto that log he came. I don't know what compelled me to do it, for I was fearing the worst as much as George, but I stood there and took movies of Ruff running toward me, crossing where a slip of his foot might mean his death. One hind foot did actually slip but he righted himself, and at the end he leaped sideways from the log to the bank. Then I kept the camera turning as Shadows blithely came running across. All this time George and I hadn't spoken.

After he had held the dogs to him, repeating their names over and over, we left that place. I put my camera with its awful sequence in the carrying case. How I could have filmed it—why—I still can't say. It was as though the camera had become a form of vision.

I had already been consecrated to our dogs and hunting, and now my movie camera has become as essential to me as the gun is to the gunner. On film, Ruff still moves through seasons from lemon-colored

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witch hazel bloom and red mountain ash berries against blue sky, to snow and a sky that is almost white; his points and retrieves are as present as those of his progeny he never saw. Each time the films are run we find them there—our dogs, and ourselves with them—in a sort of eternity, a gunning season that doesn't end.