

POSTLUDE

October Day

The days that make us happy make us wise.

Biography (John Masfield)

Some men spend their lives making money; others inherit it and live their lives spending it. My wealth is in jeweled coverts and I squander my shooting seasons gathering the golden days with Kay, my setters, and my gun. Often in my dreams I tread those woods again and see the flaming Indian summer leaves. But dreams are nearly always frustrations or at best unfinished; it is the days we live that nothing can take from us.

October 31st in 1974 was such a day, seventy-degrees-sunny with color at its screaming peak and everything happening in less than three hours. We were atop one of the big mountains, gunning from a cabin in the Canaan, and I could have reached any of six grand 'cock coverts within a mile. It was woodcock-gunning time in the Alleghenies when life becomes splendid. There are more famous woodcock coverts in North America, but there are none more lovely. One thing marred this pleasant idyll: Kay had injured her kneecap on Opening Day and only now was recovering enough to walk on smooth level ground.

Hot dry weather was holding the birds abnormally late in the North, and we had yet to find enough 'cock to call a flight, moving mostly locals. Today a late start from the cabin had put us into coverts after 2:30, and I shared Briar's impatience to get hunting.

Kay found her knee still too tender to negotiate the rocky terrain and turned back to return to the station wagon to wait for me at the

empty old house where we had parked. Almost immediately I heard her call that she had walked-up a grouse that flushed into the woods where I was headed.

I put Briar in the general direction of the flush and he made a nice point about where I expected it. It turned out to be a woodcock that went out low and "around the corner" but my pattern caught it with a fast close shot and the bird's trails were dangling when Briar delivered it, an immature hen.

Below the wire fence on the upper edge of the woods there was a black oak fully five feet in diameter and straight-trunked far up to the lowest branches. Too enormous to be handled efficiently, it had survived the lumberman's saw each time this piece had been timbered. It had stood there, a sentinel tree, two centuries ago when this was a hillside pasture, and I wondered if flight woodcock stopped here then.

Today we weren't finding the 'cock that were usually here. Late starts leave doubt as to whether a covert has been gunned a few hours earlier, especially during the first couple of weeks of the season. In these days of reloads there are seldom empty shells to show that a flight has come or gone or may still be in. My dogs give sign if other dogs have been there, and although woodcock white-wash has a queer way of disappearing within a day, if 'cock are present you will usually see it.

Down in the swampy bottom I came to Briar pointing into a mass of grapevine around a bare snag—a situation for a grouse, but the point, low in front with a nearly vertical tail, said *woodcock*. I couldn't push in and had to circle and wait on the lower side, straining my eyes for a chance for a shot above the tangle.

When it came, the flush was like one of the two woodcock in Lassell Ripley's watercolor on the jacket of William Sheldon's *The Book of the American Woodcock*, and I took it as it showed against the sky. It dropped into a jungle of blackberry canes, leaving a puff of feathers floating in the balmy air with the bouquet of gunpowder. Briar had to search for several minutes but he found and retrieved another hen. Shooting the only two woodcock moved in a covert is not like taking the only two grouse; during the flights, woodcock can be replaced.

In the distance I heard Kay sounding the car horn, her signal to let me know she had moved the station wagon down the road. I worked my way out of cover toward her, wallowing through redolent black muck at the mouth of each spring seep I crossed. Normally these little draws would yield 'cock, but not today.

Kay knows me as well as I know myself, and she was waiting in the car at the place I came out. On the slow rough drive up the hill we overtook a pair of bobwhites on a sandy flat of the road—he with his white bib, she with her tan throat, in an erect indignant walk before relinquishing the way to us and hopping up the bank into the thicket. What those two were doing in that rugged terrain I'll never know.

It was late afternoon when we reached the big plateau of hawthorns on the mountaintop and we cast Briar and followed him into the immense quiet. Kay was able to walk on a log road winding through the thorns, and I hunted parallel with her in the spiky cover, the only sounds in this high solitude were the small tinkle of Briar's falcon bell and the monotony of a cow bawling far out on the flat.

At a cattle path Briar's bell went silent, and I found him pointing, his eyes bulging. The 'cock lay tight, letting me get all the way to the point, then bounded up in a crossing arc that ended in a globe of feathers. The fall was to one side of Briar and he took my wave of hand, racing out, and almost immediately struck scent, pointing dead for a moment, then picked up the limp bird and delivered it to hand. All three of my woodcock had been hens, a promise that the flights had just begun.

The sun was dropping toward the treetops, imparting a need to hurry. After a big circle, I turned in the direction of the car. Briar was ranging a shade too wide, eager to cover as much ground as possible to beat the sunset. His bell stopped and I hurried to him where he was rigid in a thicket red with haws among thinning leaves. He had his head thrown right toward a hawthorn separated from the others, and I knew that no matter which way I approached, the 'cock would take one of the remaining 359 degrees to go out. It chose this time to break the rule and flushed straight up through interwoven thorny branches, its wings thrashing like a grouse. I fired at the top of its rise and saw it drop back down and lodge on the spikes, then flutter free and fall and Briar had it.

The bird had almost landed on him, and I accepted his offering of the warm soft form and wiped feathers from his flews before I examined it. It was another hen, and as I spread the wings the distinct terminal bands showed on the secondaries, the mark of a yearling. Kay had been missing the action today, and when she heard the shot and my congratulations to Briar she got to us with her cameras, injured knee be damned, in time for pictures of dog, bird, and gunner.

While Kay went for the station wagon, I sent Briar, or rather followed him, for he knew the terrain as well as I did, into a flat regrowth woods, a place for grouse at this hour. This time it was empty.

Briar didn't want to stop, but I got him swung around and headed toward the road, where Kay was waiting for us with the station wagon tailgate open. Stowing my gun away, I stood in that coming-out-of-covert mood, remembering a woodcock I shot over Briar in his first season, a large bird that I mistook for a grouse when I dropped it five years before, not two hundred yards from where I was standing now.

Breathing the cool fragrance in the ambience of the sunset glowing behind the thicket Briar and I had just come through, knowing it with Kay, I felt a magnificent satisfaction as my mind clung to Briar's four productives, the four shots, four hits-over-points, his four retrieves, and four long-billed lovelies I was removing from my game pocket. Briar, the rascal, was stalling, lying on the far side of the wire fence unwilling to admit that it was over.

I got him through and into the rear of the station wagon like a tired child fighting sleep. It had been a grand day, too hot, too dry, too perfect. I had been gunning fifty seasons; how many more days like this could I hope to have with a dog like Briar?

As I drove us back toward our cabin in the Canaan, into the red streak that was all that was left of the sunset, the enormous smoky-gold Woodcock Moon rose over Allegheny Front and seemed to float in pace with us, telling me in the wondrous manner of Hunter's Moons that it would never end.