



On Being Keen

*T*onight I saw the Hunter's Moon through thinning yellow leaves, Diana the hunting goddess naked in her roundness, and I, Actaeon the hunter with my dogs. Once again she put her charm on me, as in that far season when first I looked and she bewitched me for having looked and seen, as she's enchanted hunters down centuries of seasons. Charm me golden goddess if you will, Hunting Moon indolently dreaming now the chase is over; spin the spell you spin each autumn, making me the hunted, not the hunter. But I will have my way, for I will hunt tomorrow.

The spell has never left me.

Childhood matters are important only to the child, but to that child it is important that they are. I believe that no thing imprinted on the retina of the brain leaves it, ever. It is where tradition begins, and tradition is to gunning as the dog and the gun.

I am looking at a Stevens single-shot .22 rifle with its browned barrel, its odd falling-block action, its varnished stock scratched from many movings and waiting in closets. It came to me at the death of my favorite uncle and I used it to shoot my first head of game. It was a bona fide hunt, not a backyard affair, and we had walked what to me at nine seemed a long distance without a shot. A woodsman friend of my father's with an eye for spotting rabbits squatting motioned to me and pointed it out, finally

lifting me by the armpits until I, too, saw it. It was done with style—the guide, the "sport," the wordless moment with the front sight wavering, then steadying on the shoulder of the rabbit flattened under the log. The squeezing-off the shot and at the chunky report, the sudden leap and the sick feeling I had missed, and the rabbit's collapse with a broken neck. I was blooded with that rabbit and that smell of powder, and through the long years since, I've been keen.

Some years earlier, I was with my parents and my aunt and that special uncle whose rifle I inherited, staying at a mountain hotel on the Youghiogheny River, smallmouth black bass water. I doubt if I was six. In the summer evening after supper I walked with the men up the railroad track along the river, white water pounding down from what is still one of the wildest gorges in the Alleghenies. I must have had some sort of rod, for at a little feeder brook that flowed under the track to join the river I was allowed to drop my line. I wish I could tell that it had been a monster brook trout from that pure water, but I caught what must have been the smallest minnow ever to take a hook. It was so like my uncle to make much of the event, and we took my catch back to the Friend Hotel where, if my dusty memory of that trip is correct, it was prepared and served to me at breakfast the following morning. It would have been proper to have had me return my fish, but I'm glad it was the way it was, for it instilled in me the ritual of the affair, a respect for what you do with game.

Ruffed grouse, salmon, woodcock, brook trout—these are experiences, not words. Life in the flare of fan and beat of wings, wind on salmon rivers with enormous flow of motion, a long bill and exotic eye and whistling twitter-up in alders, cold fast water with a living red-speckled black-sided jewel in its depths have in them a quality of elegance that is imparted by association. We don't always begin with grouse and trout, but we begin with feeling. My rabbit was to me great game, my minnow a good fish. I grew in stature with them both.

A gun, no matter how rare, a dog, no matter how brilliant, cannot mean fulfillment without keenness in the man. It takes

the sportsman's edge honed fine, an "eye," a sense of what is good, the ear for what is right—the heart. There is something about the wildness, something in the blood that draws nourishment from the game.

Having been born too late the young gunner may never know prime grouse shooting, but he can learn, actually must live up to his responsibility, to savor each fragment of experience and not abuse the dwindling number of grouse. It is in an attitude toward grouse that I can fault a random sampling of hunters who accept the mindless pour-out of mass sporting magazines that asserts that ruffed grouse can survive shooting to the extent of exploitation. An approach to gunning that lets Big Brother do the thinking does honor to neither the man nor the bird. Grouse gunning in thinning woods throbbing with color and accents of dark hemlock and rhododendron is on the level of an idyll where you and your dog are one, inseparable from the smells and the solitude, with no place for excess, no room for another man's measure.

In "The Game Register of Captain Paul A. Curtis" in *The Upland Gunner's Book* (Amwell Press, 1979) I wrote:

Steeped in the idiom of shooting, Curtis had an appetite for killing that is beyond my comprehension. He began with an eagerness that was fanned almost to a mania by the trips to Britain in the 1930s A fold-out at the end of the Game Register itemizes the kill for each year through 1938, with a total of 6,754 head There was a time and a land where these things happened for Capt. Paul Alan Curtis in "a lifetime of wandering for sport." Part of this lay in the brilliance of the man.

That kind of drive, which is more than simply being keen, is something in a man that can't stop. Having once gone that far, when it becomes impossible for a certain type of gunner to carry on—and it does come—he goes desperate and uses the gun on himself.

There can be no doubt that men like Capt. Paul Curtis and Lord Ripon were keen. The bulk of Curtis's kills were released pheasants at spaniel trials and red grouse in Scotland; Ripon's

birds were, in part, reared pheasants and the same Scottish red grouse managed by skillful keeping on controlled moors to unnatural numbers. But such a past is an anachronism that has often set an example for overkill today, a transference of the Edwardian shooting attitudes into the late twentieth century with no regard for the difference in situations and in the game populations then and now.

I have close contacts with a shooter in the South who shoots bobwhites and doves on his plantation. From 1958 through 1978 he shot 6,808 doves, and a few years ago shot his 17,000th bobwhite. Speaking of my ruffed grouse gunning, he confided: "I'd go crazy with as little shooting as that."

The eager young grouse gunner, especially, finds himself identified with an age of overdoing. His hunting can become a hair shirt, his hunts self-flagellation in an effort to prove something. You will find him out in the most violent weather in January, the pusher trying to beat his own record, plowing through knee-deep drifts in conditions that would punish a dog, losing sight of the simple joy of walking into a woods with a gun and a dog. Grouse shooting is not life or death for anyone but the grouse, but there are young Turks who won't stop within reasonable bounds because they think "stop" means "quit." I've been told how one of them persisted in trying to kill a certain old drummer, devising tricks to get the grouse to flush his direction. The bird brain won. Since men first pursued game fowl in the company of a dog, there has been this tendency to out-do, not always clear as to what. Often it is the game, frequently the other man, sometimes a nebulous thing that is nothing so much as the self as adversary, the id.

I can remember when I could not seem to get enough of gunning. Still a college student with tremendous stored-up drive, I would come home to my mountains, keen, if ever anyone was keen. With the energy of a young bird dog I would disembark from my train in that bleak first-light, sit impatiently on the ride home in my parents' car, and hurry my father into shooting clothes to plunge into a frantic week or more of gunning.

After a few days of this, I remember Father saying, "Do you mind if I don't go today? You take Speck and the Hudson."

"Are you all right?" I would ask, puzzled.

"I'm all right," he would say, "but I've had enough. I was like you once. When you're my age you'll change, you'll see."

And Speck and I would be off, goading ourselves to that glorious state of weariness but never satiety; driving home over the dark mountains with the windshield of the old Hudson coach opened wide to let the cold air strike us like a blow—I with my eyes squinted against the force of it, Speck standing on the seat beside me leaning into the velocity of the airstream with his flews and ears flying.

Speck has been dead for long years and Father for more than thirty, but I think back on that like a scene from *The Late George Apley* in reverse. In Marquand's book the ailing father beseeched the son to come home for the woodcock shooting; in my scene the son couldn't stay away. The words still sound: *You'll change, you'll see.*

I haven't changed, but I have matured. I have matured beyond the stage where I thought it the mark of a keen sportsman to gun every day of the season that weather permits. The child tells what he got for Christmas, the mature man tells how he spent that day; the immature hunter tells how many birds he shot, the mature gunner tells of the experience. If I can impart a sense of gunning values through my writing, I urge the gunner at any age to lift himself above that childish state of mind, thinking only of himself and not what he is doing to the birds.

It is not totally a matter of ethics; it is possible to hunt yourself into a stupor from fatigue. When the goddamned briars begin tearing your goddamned cap off your goddamned head, you know it is time to rest for a day or so from gunning grouse. Get yourself together and you'll perform better for it.

Each of us has that ember within him to create his own Camelot, to form his life by taste. Being different from the crowd, like quality, is not a vice. Tradition and standards shape shooting as surely as manners make the man.

I was once called upon to be present at a property survey that involved one of our boundaries. The neighboring family was represented by the father and his Neanderthaloid son whom I had seen grow from a child and now knew as an adult with a child's brain. On that day he compulsively spewed obscenities as a release from tensions.

The abuse of game is equally obscene and pathetically often an expression of a need to show off; the man who tells you how many grouse he has shot (who cares?) or someone who knows someone who shot a hundred grouse in a season is striving for attention. I find it obscene to learn that a state game department wants to push the daily grouse limit to six "to get more people shooting more grouse on more land to have more recreation each season"—a need to outdo other states.

If you can keep that on your stomach, try this little bit about "Black Duncan" Campbell, 7th Laird of Glenorchy, who in the seventeenth century had a gallows erected in the form of a cross upon which he hung McGregors. History tells us: "His interest in hunting men was equalled only by his interest in hunting animals." Keen.

Cardiologists speak of the "type A" personality. Among shooting men he is the one for whom a "limit" is not something to stay within but something to be filled, leaving a sense of inadequacy unless it is. This inadequacy manifests itself as a blind concern with numbers, or in an exercise in vindictiveness toward the bird. You can expect this in the gunner who talks of "scoring," and in the man who speaks of "killing" instead of "shooting" grouse—men whose only inquiry about your gunning is "howmenyjaget?"

Type A hunters have been around as long as upland gunning; it is nearly impossible to go anywhere there are grouse and not find one. I remember such a character in my youth; everything about the man was something I didn't like—his face, his stocky bowed legs, his words the one time I was unfortunate enough to come on him in the woods, where he was searching for a downed grouse. It wasn't in him to say he had wing-tipped the grouse; he said, "I shot a wing off that bird." With everything he did he

worked hard at being a son-of-a-bitch, but there were men who looked up to him as the best grouse hunter in that area.

There are some hunters so eager they give off waves. One Michigan man stated that he could hunt leisurely and find four or five grouse in a half day, or hunt at a fast walk and flush fifteen. Moving through grouse coverts at military quick time is no way to give your dog a chance to do his work, nor do I consider it a pleasant way to gun grouse.

I know boys in their late twenties so involved with grouse shooting it has become a sort of emasculation, carrying them toward middle age without relating to a girl. I received a letter from one young reader to say that he was "obsessed with shooting grouse"; another phoned to tell me he was now "financially independent" and at thirty was free to do nothing but hunt and fish. This isn't being keen; the first is sick, the second is dull.

Knowing young gunners is stimulating, no group is more intense, but it would be kindness to point out to them that it is possible to be too eager, perhaps to be too young. It is desirable to assimilate shooting lore, but not to the degree of regurgitation. Young shooters know a phenomenal body of facts about guns, reducing them to shooting instruments. For some, the more efficiently a gun will kill, the more desirable it is, evident in the fad for cylinder bore barrels. Shooting a grouse or woodcock should not be the outgrowth of developing a gun that will throw a spray of pellets to envelop the bird like a cloud, regardless of whether or not it is centered. Serious thought as to bore, gun weight, stock fit, and balance is part of the charm of gunning, but slobbering down a grouse or 'cock with the edge of wide open patterns is removing decency as well as skill from shooting.

Man has brought his need to decorate his domicile with pictures of the chase all the way from the wall paintings of game in the Altamira Cave, an urge rooted deep in our preoccupation with hunting. I have been in houses with magnificent sporting art; I have been in homes where you couldn't get away from it. Overwhelmed by grouse in the curtain design and in the wallpaper, I have backed away from stuffed grouse peering at me from the mantel flanked by grouse fans and

sunk into an armchair only to find myself sitting on grouse in the chintz.

I can't plead innocent of overinvolvement. I learned a long time ago not to talk of kills, but I find it easy to get carried away with discussing birds moved and productive points. Numbers such as this mean something to the man who loves his dogs, but they can be boring to someone else. There are aboriginal people in Africa who have words for numbers only up to three; larger quantities to them are "many," a limitation grouse hunters might do well to follow.

You can hunt too hard for too many days in a row, or try too eagerly for too many hits in a string. No one has pushed up the last hill more determinedly or hunted that last hour more desperately than I, but I am growing up. When you get carried away by shooting, and wing shooting can become addictive, stop and do a little calm thinking. Remind yourself that the grouse, and not the killing, is what it is about, that "the quarry ceases to be quarry when the quarry's dead."

On the inside of my gun cabinet door beside a row of extinct non-resident license tags and an ancient note from Mel Heath telling me to come up if I wanted to hunt woodcock—"they are on the move"—is a typed strip of paper. I was taken aback when in one of my psychologically depressed shooting slumps Kay reminded me to read it. It was not that I didn't remember it, for I had written it in *The Upland Shooting Life*, but that it seemed to apply so particularly to me: *But if you can approach shooting as something to be enjoyed, not a frustrating obsession, it can enrich your life.*

It has been years since I first saw the Hunting Moon and knew her for what she was—wonderful years during which grouse permeated the subcellars of my mind. Now, enriched, I prefer to gun fewer days each week but more perceptively and, if I may be permitted a paradox, more keenly. I can think of no better way to know the quality of happiness in gunning than to live each shooting day as though it were the last, to have the good sense to do it in solitude with your dog, a world away from gun pressures where humans react like animals placed in experimental crowded situations.

It is essential that there be something in the soul of the hunter. Like a candle reflected in mirrors burning brighter with each reflection, an attitude of decency toward game gains strength from every gunner who becomes big enough to understand it. If I can give you a key to pleasure in a dwindling sport, it is that a shooting life can be rich in Henry Thoreau's terms: "A man is rich in proportion to the number of things he can afford to let alone." Be keen, but know the riches.

