

PRELUDE

Song of Autumn

*The scarlet of the maples
can shake me like a cry . . .*

A Vagabond Song (Bliss Carman)

Looking into the night and the mountain stars with all the longings and joys we live by, you sense this thing we know as Time. Those beams of light that are Orion the Hunter climbing the sky will be the stars a million light years after our longings have vanished with our fears.

In grouse and 'cock shooting there is Truth, the bird and the dog and the gunner in unity. Days we glory in in rare places are ours only if we seize them, know them for what they are—wild air to nourish on, bright-sunny mornings with frost-crunchy leaf pack and frozen forest earth, the full flavor of the moment. There have been men who put it in words; we shooting men put it in our brains by living it, days when things are right, knowing this Nirvana will end when October ceases to be fairyland and becomes merely a time of year.

Memory cells retain everything they are exposed to like photosensitized film, but much becomes clouded until reactivated by a fragrance or a word. Proverbs seem mostly to have been the province of Benjamin Franklin or Confucius, with Confucius having usually said it first. *The strongest memory is weaker than the palest ink* speaks to every gunner who has tried to recall days in coverts ten seasons back. If you have stored those days on paper they lead you like lanes into yesterday, lighting memory buds that await awakening—fallen leaves of other years, warm feathers and the look of setter eyes, a sinking sun decades after it has set.

There was a period in the seriousness of youth when I used to ponder which was the most impelling—anticipation, experience, or reminiscence. I now know that memory is all three. Gun diary days can be relived whenever you go to them, those yellowed pages overlaid with the smell of years. In your diary, game doesn't deplete; if grouse were there then, they are there still in words; those big woodcock flights continue to drop in under the Woodcock Moon; points and shots and retrieves don't fade as they did in tired sleep after a day in windy places. On paper, Time is forever.

Over the years since 1932 when I began keeping shooting notes, I have described more and more of the experience. At the head of each entry I do a synopsis in the manner of a British game register telling me in condensed form what happened on that date. The following was in November of 1980, the last of a five-day trip to the Blackwater country:

Friday 7 November	<i>Sugar Run</i>	Belton:
Partly cloudy, warm, breezy at times, 60°	moved 1 grouse/1 flush no shot	6 productives 'cock 3 kills
2:10-5:10/3 hrs.	moved 2 'cock/3 flushes 1 shot-1 hit	3 retrieves
	<i>Church Thorns</i>	
2 IF, 1 AF	moved 2 grouse/2 flushes no shot	
	moved 7 'cock/9 flushes 3 shots-2 hits	

For identification, woodcock data is in red. "IF" means immature female woodcock, "AF" is an adult female.

As an index to the season's gunning and quick reference to covers and what they held, on a separate sheet I keep a one-line record of each visit showing date, number of birds moved, total flushes, and hits. The above day appears in the index as:

Sugar Run: 11/7 grouse 1-1-0 'cock 2-3-1

Church Thorns: 11/7 grouse 2-2-0 'cock 7-9-2

At the end of each season I write a summary in which I describe the development of any young dog I am bringing along, and the performance of the older ones. I usually analyze my shooting for the year and try to solve any gun problems, and comment on grouse and woodcock populations as I have found them.

Recently I counted the number of coverts I have gunned in West Virginia, Pennsylvania, Maryland, Ohio, Michigan, Virginia, New Jersey, New York, and Massachusetts. In the process it grew from coverts to days to hours—not times spent but Time hoarded, a treasure compounded each year with Kay and our setters, and occasionally a friend. It became an alphabetical list of all the places I have hunted, places to gun again, some of which I hadn't thought about for years, some places that have gone to where I can't go to them. It is a condensation of a shooting life gloriously lived and being lived—477 coverts and 2,027 shooting days through 1988, more than six thousand golden hours.

I have kept shooting averages from the beginning, counting hits per shells fired, not hits per birds shot at. Some have been fairly respectable, others scandalous. Averages reflect gun fit and loads, but it's important to remember that they are affected by the way the birds are behaving, and above all by a fair number of chances. No one shoots well with sparse opportunities.

What may eventually be the most valuable feature of my gun diary is a graph begun in 1939 when I came to West Virginia, showing the relation between the grouse per covert and the closing dates of the seasons. There was an average of 8.77 grouse in the coverts I gunned that first year, with a season of 39 hunting days that closed on November 29; in 1988 there was an average of 1.57 grouse per covert with a season of 114 hunting days. Since the mid-1970s grouse have wavered feebly between a high of 2.5 and a low of 1.0, with the seasons closing on the last day of February, a monument to DNR grouse management.

West Virginia isn't the only state killing off its grouse breeders with January and February shooting, but no other state does it more proudly in the name of "recreational opportunity." In *An Affair with Grouse* I included 42 seasons of the graph. It has now run past the 50th season with no change in DNR policy and with grouse at the

near-extinction level. If the game biologists had kept such a record they could point out that in the last "ten-year cycle", grouse "peaked" at a miserable 2.5. Their approach to grouse management is like a mountain woman who told Kay about a deceased neighbor: "We prayed for him but things just seemed to happen anyway."

A gun diary offers ideas to the man who keeps it. If an individual bereft of words is a moron, a gunner without his shooting life on the pages of a diary to light up memory is a zombie existing only in the moment he fires the gun.

I am looking at eight large wooden slipcases on my bookshelf, containing close to 4,800 pages with the joy of October's color, the bare bleakness of November, the winds and snow clouds of December and the pulse-quickenning lift of points and flushes, shots and retrieves. In them I have those days to live each time I open the pages. I want those grouse and those years again, but in spite of my yearning for that paradise of gunning, what I miss most is the fact that the grouse existed, knowing they were there to have for my dogs to work, to see them as I saw them then, having them in home coverts, not for one-week trips to far places.

Gunning grouse over a grand dog is the stuff fantasy is made of even as it is happening. It is a sharing of the inevitable fact of Death, an awareness that it will come to the dog and the gunner as they have brought it to the bird, a self-punitive attraction that draws us to the sport, blinding us to the cruelty that taints it. My commitment to gunning, killing a bird I love in spite of reason, helps me to understand the acceptance of religions—not that it is logical but because I cannot conceive of Life without gunning.

My gun diary is fifty-seven of the sixty-four seasons I have shot, a game country spreading like a vista from a mountain, widening as I climb. Moving through the years, each of us longs to go back to the coverts of our minds. As my dogs' minds are memories of smells; my mind is overtones of sounds, reflections of vision, the tug of heartbeats quickened by the splendor of a point, a flare of fan and thud of recoil followed by the smell of powder and a float of feathers, and beauty retrieving beauty to my hand. There were moments when senses were drawn almost to the breaking pitch, when I saw and heard and felt more keening than at any other times, intermingling

bliss with sadness, like shadows on a mountain in changing light; there are thoughts that come at end of day when I *sit beside the fireside hearth and stretch the hands of memory forth*. . . .

All men praise some beauty, tell some tale if only to themselves. Many of us have had a dream of a place beyond the world of Mondays, a place where trees are taller, or so they seem, where spring water is more crystal, air more distilled, where civilization remains outside and only those things we love are in; where dogs are more beautiful, more adored, where all things are exciting, where the night wind and the stardust of the Milky Way are just for us.

Until that Nirvana is reached, Life can bestow an ease to gunners who have tasted perfection in some covert especially their own, a place where things are good each time they go there, not always measured in shots, but how the gunner feels—the smells of being where he and his dog belong, a reverence for the place and for Life, that thrills him to the bone.

Throughout the so many, so wonderful Indian summers, past the period of purple asters and goldenrod, there has been the question whether each might be the last. Each has brought the loveliness of a sugar maple's rough bark in fall sunlight in the glow of sifting leaves, the year dying in its glory; the after-shooting drives homeward in darkness full of smells, feeling old groans and twinges like my dogs; Belton with his trophy head, Quest, the five-times duplicate of Briar; gun diary sketches done before the body heat had left the bird; the passing of the color, the search for solitude, the relief from crowds. It is good, when you have all this, to live it in pieces such as days.

Those of us who have lived the shooting life when grouse seemed everywhere, know disappointment these days when Time is spinning good fortune thinner. But there is meaning to gunning beyond shooting birds. It is a questing in special places, an enchantment with cover in secret corners, an old house with daylight showing between its bones, a grouse flushing from the garden given way to spiky Angelica, a ghost bird subsisting on the past; a red sun in the southwest through November-bare trees, beauty that takes you by the throat, so precious because it is yours only, and your dogs'.

The carpet of leaves is gold as I consume the fragrance of a new Autumn, like taking a first sip of a vintage Bordeaux. There is a

premonition of woodcock in the color of Ruff's Maple catching the early ray of morning sunlight and burning from the inside out, more beautiful this year than any October in the past or in the future, *as if it could not be, as if it had not been.*

As a boy, I used to sit and listen to my father playing his Scudder guitar, handmade for him in the 1890s like a good gun. I have the old beauty, its rosewood back scarred by the heavy gold watch chain Father wore across his vest, its fingerboard worn between certain frets, the feminine curves of its body outlined by ivory yellowed with Time, her voice a thing to make you cry. Father gave me much beyond bird dogs and gunning. Stimulating my interest in music, he would say: "Listen to this chord calling for the next. Listen, and you can hear it *asking.*"

My gun diary days are like those silent chords still singing in my brain. On an October night when the Hunter's Moon reflects the gold around me, those days come back. Standing in the moonlight with the small sounds of leaves falling, I am once again in an enchanted Indian summer when my dog was superb, my shooting good, with the lovely agony of a grouse warm in my hand, and with my Kay, the one person in the world I wanted to be near—days asking to be lived again. It is there for those of us who have the ear to hear the song of Autumn. Listen, and it is yours.