

The First Shoot of a “Goose” Hunter

By Orel R. Geyer

Illustrations from Photographs

JACK and I stepped out onto the station platform, caught the baggage the brakeman cast at us, rubbed our eyes and looked around. We were standing on a rickety little platform, the rain was beating down a gallon a minute, and no sight or sign of human kind could we see. For we were in the very wilds of the famous hunting spot—Cape Cod. It was October, and it was very cold. Jack, whose talk of geese and ducks had so fired me, a placid, everyday business man, with the burning desire to shoot and kill, that here I was, far from wife and home, freezing to death and soaked to the skin,—Jack had been here before. “Sure,” he said, as the train was pulling out of Boston, “sure, a barge will meet us at the station and take us right down to the beach. Then we’ll only have to walk about a half mile.”

We were looking now for that barge, but not a sign of it. “Blessed if I know what’s the matter,” grumbled the would-be guide, “it was always here before. It looks like a walk for us.”

I was mad, but I managed to ask:

“How far is it to the beach?”

“Three miles.”

Three miles in the pouring rain, with a load of luggage that weighed a ton! The life of a sportsman lost much of its attraction for me, as I gazed down that muddy, dark road and started to pick up my many and varied belongings. Away we went, no words passing, for our conversational tendencies were rather out of kilter. If there had been a train home that night, I would have waited for it, but that’s one of the beauties of traveling the wild and woolly districts of our country—when you land in a little

town, you’re supposed to like it so much that you don’t feel like leaving, so they don’t have any trains in the afternoon. Anyway, we walked, walked, interminably walked. It was growing dark, and I thought of home, my wife and the kids just sitting down to a hot supper, and me away out here in the wilderness, tired and cold. I grunted, but said no word.

The rain was running down my neck in rivers, but I could do nothing to relieve my misery. In each hand I held a suitcase, under one arm was a gun, under the other an extra overcoat. My arms were aching, my back felt as if it was being ripped up with a dull axe, and my poor legs were so sore and weary that each step almost made me howl with pain. You amateur sportsmen, listen here to a word of warning. If you go on a trip, pay no attention to your wife or your mother, or anyone who tries to tell you how cold it will be and how much clothing you will need. Take your clothing on your back, and you’ll be happy. If I ever have to suffer again as I did that awful day, I’ll find some handy river and jump into it.

After we had walked what seemed to me forty miles, pain conquered my injured feelings, and I broke the stillness and asked Jack how far the beach was. When he swore solemnly that it was but a few hundred yards distant, it cheered me up a little, and I gritted my teeth and kept plugging. About the rest of that awful journey I will say nothing. No words have I to describe its hellish horror. In darkness—Stygian, impenetrable darkness—we finally stumbled against something, and a shout of “Here we are” from Jack told me that our trials were over.

Oh, but it was good to go in out of the rain and the blackness and to drop those cursed suitcases and to stretch numbed hands over a hot stove. I saw an empty box and sank down on it, and never a rich upholstered chair felt half as glorious. It was a blissful reverie I fell into. How long I sat there I know not. But I woke up and saw Jack standing in front of me.

"Billy, here's Barney and Fred."

I shook hands with the two rather wild-looking individuals before me. I had not noticed them before. Barney—what other names he had I don't know, for it was always Barney and Fred and Billy and Jack the two weeks we were there—was the older one of the pair. About fifty, I should say, long-haired, long-limbed, stoop-shouldered and gaunt. His skin was so black that I thought he must be a negro, but a glimpse at him when he was retiring that night showed me that his face was once the same color as our own. What exposure to the wind and the rain must he have seen to be so tanned by it! At a glance one would take him to be rather decrepit and weak—I know I did—but a look into his eye, and the illusion was dispelled. There lurked the fine light of life; there was pictured the keenness and the watchfulness of the hunter. And the eyes told no lie, for the way he could work was something to astonish one. His abilities in every conceivable kind of occupation taught by nature and life with nature, were simply wonderful. He was a cook, a housekeeper, a carpenter, a sailor, a fisherman—in fact, a Jack-of-all-trades. Truly, appearances are deceptive. I can see him now, sprawled on a cracker box, his head hunched between his shoulders, eyes half closed, the fingers of his right hand playing with the straggly edges of his long mustache, his bare feet stretched out to the grateful warmth of the little stove. And I can still hear his soft baby voice, "Bout year 'go, when they started to fly," as he drifted on in one of his indescribable stories of bird and gun.

Fred was a young fellow of a score and five, mayhap. He, too, was a character. Short and chunky, with black, restless eyes and dark curly hair, he made a

fitting campmate for the other nimrod. His voice, when we heard it, for he was silent unless questioned, was, like the older man's, quiet and peaceful, with the same indefinable hushedness, withal somewhat sad. It must be the long silent communion with nature that awes and hushes their very souls—these men of the solitude. They were indeed a strange couple, and fitted well in their surroundings.

When our togs were stowed away and our weary limbs rested, a table was dragged out in close proximity to the stove, and Barney called: "Eat up, friends."

What a meal was that—clam chowder, without milk, but none the less the best I have ever tasted, stew—duck, I think, for I was too busy eating to inquire—canned beans, bread and coffee. Not so much, you may say, but just walk three or four miles the way we had, and then sit down to it and you will quickly change your mind. I can honestly say that it was the finest meal of my life. I had been to a banquet some nights before, a real swell affair, for it cost me five of my hard-earned dollars, but I didn't begin to enjoy the *pates* and the *ragouts* and the other high-fangled dishes as I did that supper in the little camp, with the sound of the crashing waves and the honking of geese and the quacking of ducks (the decoys) in my ears. We ate in perfect silence. The pans were on the stove, and what you wished for you had to reach yourself. Here were no waiters ever at your elbow to care for desires. No idle conversation had to be carried on. We ate till we were satisfied, and no propriety or convention held us back. Neither did thoughts of dyspepsia or broken slumbers. I still blush, though, when I call back to mind that Lucullan feast.

After supper we helped wash the dishes—there's always something practical breaking in on the romance of camp life—and then settled back and listened to the delightful ramblings of our host. With an old, broken pipe, which was always going out, in his mouth, he talked on and on, stopping now and then to light up. Story after story he told, his gentle voice going on and on, with never an interruption from his listeners. He

must have been talking for several hours, when a snore from a corner caused him to cease, and I looked around to find Jack in the land of dreams, lulled off, no doubt, by the music of Barney's voice. So then we decided to retire for the night. We went into a little room leading off the kitchen, and there found a row of bunks arranged like a ship's forecabin. Now I have always been a light sleeper, one of those fellows who cannot sleep the first night in a strange place. My bunk was hard as a rock, and there was an everlasting racket from without—the calls of the decoys, the beat of the rain, the wild howl of the wind and the terrific roar of the breakers, as well as the kicking of a horse that the hunters had anchored in a room next our sleeping quarters. Despite all this, I, the light sleeper, dozed off as soon as my head hit the pillow, or the board they called a pillow.

It was dark when I awoke. Jack was in his berth, but Barney and Fred were already out. I arose, and as soon as I had jumped into a rig, declared by the snoring-goods dealer to be just the thing for camping, I went out into the kitchen. Barney was there preparing breakfast, and as he gazed at me, a faint smile passed over his wrinkled face.

"Purty wet out; I callate yu'd better let off them store togs and put on some rubbers an' a sou'wesser," and he pointed to a heap of clothes piled in a corner. Surprised, but knowing Barney's advice must be right, I changed my apparel, and cast my "store" clothes in the pile, and I guess they're there yet. I know I never put them on again. Then I went out. It was still storming—a wild, howling northeaster. The rain was swept along by the gale till it seemed to be traveling in a horizontal line. So thick was it that one could hardly see for a hundred yards.

The stand was situated on the top of a little sand dune. The south side, the front, faced a large bay, the water being about twenty-five yards distant. Before the cabin on this side was built a sort of a straw parapet, thirty yards long and some ten feet high. Six feet away no sight or sign of any building could be seen. On the sand at the water's edge were a number of ducks

and geese attached by leather straps to stakes. These were the decoys, the unconscious traitors to their kind. They were calling, calling, and reminded me at once of the bookies at a race track inviting their fellows to ruin. In the water of the bay were hundreds of ducks, some wooden and some live, and beyond them were about a hundred geese blocks. Surely, I thought, no wild bird with any sense would ever pass by such a fine-looking resting-place. My fingers began to itch as I looked at the scene. Then I walked over toward the beach.

When I came to the top of the little hill, I stopped still with involuntary admiration. The grandest sight that I have ever gazed on met my eyes. A few hundred yards from where I stood, the ocean was engaged in churning itself into a foam. A solid mass of white, with fountains of spray shooting every second forty feet or more into the air, seething, angry and terrible, it filled the air with a dull insistent booming that sounded like the roar of thousands of cannon. Grand, majestic and glorious it was, and the beauty of it appalling, and then I knew why it was these men of the quiet voices and the gentle manners loved their life. A long time I stood there, and then went back to the camp.

Breakfast over and dishes washed—I was beginning to see that there was no fun in this—we all went outside and squatted down behind the blind. We were sitting there some time and I was beginning to think there wasn't much fun looking continually at a rather rough stretch of water, when the geese in the pens started a most terrible honking and calling. Fred took a glimpse skyward.

"Stand up easy: don't speak," he whispered.

We arose and I took a scared look up and saw seven large birds high in the air flying slowly, directly over our heads. Barney left us, and crouching low went over to the goose pens. As I could see him without breaking my neck or making any movement, I watched his actions with interest. At the front of this pen, which held some twenty geese, was a platform which went up at an angle of about thirty degrees. Here was a gate opened by a cord running to the back of the coop. Barney



IN THE BAY WERE THE DECOYS

grasped this cord, sho-sho-ed the geese to the front, and with a cry much the same as a goose call, pulled the string. The gate opened, the geese rushed up the incline, and shot up into the air. Straight they went for a full hundred yards, then circled wide over the bay, swung in and lit on the shore directly in front of us. The wild birds had ceased their flight when our decoys went up, and now they circled, came in toward us, and dropped on the water several gunshots out. Our birds on the shore honked and honked, and the wild fowl swam nearer and nearer. By this time my hands were shaking so that I could hardly hold my gun, and my knees were knocking together. I had heard of "buck fever" and scoffed at it, but now I had a very bad attack of it myself. I looked over at Jack—his face was pale, his mouth shut tight and his gun, too, was shaking. I felt that he, as well as myself, was a fever victim. As he had been a hunter previously, the thought rather cheered me up.

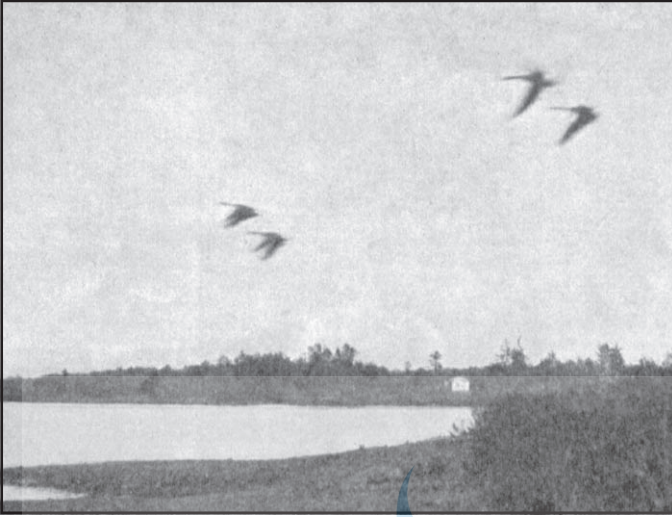
After an interminable wait, Barney nodded to Fred, who whispered: "Look out; they're in range. Here, take this gun," and he handed me an old muzzle-loading blunderbuss that must have seen service in the Mexican War. The cannon, for I can call it nothing less, weighed about twenty pounds, and I began to wonder what might happen to my shoulder if I fired it. Now, my own gun was a hammerless, with all the latest improvements, and didn't weigh more than ten pounds. It was guaranteed and warranted to be almost able to kill an elephant at a mile's distance, but Fred said it was too light for geese, so I took him at his word.

"Don't shoot till I say 'Fire.' We want 'em all." This from Barney.

Now the birds were swimming in, well bunched and perhaps fifty paces off.

"Get ready!"

Bang! Bang! and I lay on my back in the sand, and heard a crash of guns that sounded like a full-fledged battle. My head was reeling, and my neck and



FLYING SLOWLY OVER

shoulder felt as if a ton or two of bricks had sought a resting-place there. In my nervousness, I had fired before the word was given, and when I recovered enough to think, I realized that I had probably scared away the birds, and that the righteous wrath of my fellows was about to be vented on my deserving head.

"Got 'em all. A little luck, guess," I heard Barney speak. He turned to me:

"You got three o' 'em. Don't b'lieve you meant ter, though." Then they told me about it. When I fired, three of the birds lay still, and they had knocked down the other four as they jumped. Happy? I was so delighted that I didn't care if we never saw another feather. I—the unsophisticated, the greenie, the man who had never shot at anything other than a clay pigeon—I had killed three geese on my first shot. Lots of gunners—experienced ones, too—will tell about the birds they have killed and the fun they have had; but when you question them, you find out that they fired at the bunch with the crowd—shot to kill the flock—and then concluded that they must have hit something. Very few of them have actually killed a goose alone and unaided. Oh, but I felt like singing for very joy.

We had all kinds of good luck, though we didn't see any geese after the first day. There was a flight of plover and

small shore birds, and a constant procession of mallards. Just how many birds we killed in those two weeks I cannot state, but anyway, according to Barney, we broke the camp records for that time of the year. Our hosts considered us the best mascots ever, and were earnest in their requests to have us come another year. The day we were leaving we asked Barney how much we owed him and he smiled and said: "Nuthin'; come and bring us the same luck 'gain an' you'll allus be welcome."

So we went away, this time in a carriage that was as picturesque as its proprietor. It was an old broken-down carryall, mended and patched with rope, string, leather, pieces of tin cans, old boards and scraps of harness. It was a grand rig for rough spots in the road, having so much give that we might have gone over a mountain and never noticed it. In fact it had so much give that we were ever a-tremble lest it give us a tumble. It was drawn by two noble equines, tandem fashion. The harness, with the exception of a piece here and there, was rope. The guiding reins of the leader resembled a pair of clotheslines, and from a short distance the entire harness ensemble resembled the upper fittings of an old square-rigger. It was a suitable equipage to take us away from the uncouth, though happy, life we had lived for those two short weeks. We left the beach; the sound of the surf grew fainter and fainter. We were all silent. Lonesome? Yes, we were lonesome and sad for the soothing, beautiful scenes we were leaving. The train puffed into the station. We shook hands with Barney, and without a word boarded the train. He stood there on the platform and waved us farewell. We went inside, and it was only after half-an-hour's silent communion with ourselves that Jack and I spoke to each other.