

A Wizard or What

If it were not for the feather pinned on my desk as I write this, I would think the incident a creation of too keen an imagination, but here the feather rests, and it is proof positive that the mallard has a flesh and blood existence, and is more than likely at this moment amusing itself on Reelfoot Lake, for the bird assuredly bears a charmed life and is not destined to die at the crack of a 12 gauge, nor otherwise than of sheer old age.

As I sit here, blowing meditative rings from my pipe, in the latter part of November, a very good fellow and chum of mine telephoned late one morning. He was one of the pioneers of this part of the country and was regarded as one of the foremost hunters of ducks and geese. And, incidentally, I must declare that he is a man strict in morals and religiously conscientious, even beyond the character of generally reputed good men; and there seems to be no admixture of superstition with the sound and sensible piety of Alfred Burton.

When he called, I was pouring over a medical book, trying with but poor success to follow the ins-and-outs the treatment for pneumonia, because it was a gusty day outside and my thoughts would escape from the medical office to conjure up visions of a blind somewhere in the whispering pin oaks or some flooded rice field, with a flock of decoys bobbing about on open water, where a free wind made little whitecaps dance and the teal were scurrying-.

But to that telephone. Burton was at the other end of the wire-öBurton the Tempter,ö for he was saying, öHello, Bryan. Don't you want to take some time off for the duck grounds?ö

I looked out the window and saw a long ribbon of black smoke from the chimney of a building opposite trailing away in the teeth of a strong southwest wind and again the Tempter chuckled, öSure to have a good shoot in the morning with this wind blowing. They will be looking for cover.ö

That settled it; of course I wanted to go; would go with pleasure, and my patients could wait for another day.

It was a matter of but a few minutes to gather my gun and a case filled with shells and go bumping over the cobblestones to Burton's house, where he met me, smiling at my weakness in thus stealing a mid-week shoot from my medical practice.

öI thought you'd come; the temptation was too much for you, eh?ö were his words of greeting.

öOh! I was not very busy, and I had a bit of a headache and thought a few days with the birds would be good for me,ö I replied, determined to convince myself it was so.

“But, did you not tell me yesterday that you would be very busy this afternoon? I thought there was a medical meeting or something.”

“Well, er, that is, I managed to arrange it all. I gave Chad my proxy for the partners’ meeting, and my patients will be left in the care of Dr. Jones. I’m here, so let’s quit debating.”

The train speedily whirled us across the Mississippi River and headed northward. Within an hour, we were at the clubhouse and disembarked to find the caretaker waiting for us. We plied him with queries and learned to our delight that the birds were in large numbers and the prospects for a good shoot were excellent.

That evening after dinner as we sat enjoying the fragrance of two huge perfectos of Burton’s private stock, for he prides himself on his cigars, and justly so, it was suggested that we put out the decoys before turning in, so that all would be ready for the morning.

Paddling leisurely up to the head of the lake, we chose two blinds within hailing distance of each other. When the decoys had been set and we had started for the cabin, guided by the light shining from its windows far across the lake, a flock of ducks, flushed in the darkness by the noise of the paddles and the sound of our voices, hurtled over our heads with frightened and protesting squawks. It was so dark that we caught only a glimpse of their rocketing form as they passed over, but one among them seemed to shine like a meteor among his dusky companions.

“Burton,” I said, “that was a white duck, an albino. I am willing to bet my life on it.”

“I didn’t see anything resembling a white duck. Have you been drinking, old boy?” he asked.

We arrived at the blinds the next morning before dawn. The air imparted a sense of vigorousness as nature emerged from her sleep. As Burton departed for his blind, I filled my brier and sat puffing great clouds of smoke in the vain hope of driving away evil spirits, if there were any.

Birds were dropping in from all quarters, some of them settling among the decoys, while others circled about quacking and squealing volubly to themselves. I wasn’t allowed to shoot, because by club rules no gun may be fired until the sun breaks the horizon.

It was interesting to watch the birds, though, and the sight of so many waterfowl wheeling by within a few yards of the blind managed to keep me at the height of anticipation and made my trigger finger tingle with eagerness to begin.

A flock of widgeon, looming up large in the uncertain light, were circling over the decoys, their wings set, their feet pushed out before them to meet the water. What a shot!

While I sat there gloating over the certainty of a good shot, there was a swish through the air, made by a duck descending rapidly from a height, and with a gentle splash, the bird dropped into the stool of decoys, not more than 10 yards from me.

In the misty twilight of early morning, it gleamed whiter than a cumulous cloud in the blue of a summer sky. It was doubtless the bird I had seen the night before. I was not used to such sights, so of course my nerves were visibly and duly affected.

It was a mallard and a drake at that from the note it was singing. It was so close I could count the number of feathers and fairly look into the depth of its clear, moist eyes.

Sitting high on the water, its long neck stretched up, its folded wings pressing tightly against its sides, it presented a picture of alert watchfulness. I hardly dared to breathe, because my heart was set on bagging that bird, if only it would stop pounding.

As the moments passed and nothing occurred to arouse suspicion, it began to preen itself in a dignified manner, and to swim slowly about with the grace of a swan.

It had been agreed that Burton was to fire the first gun, but I knew he would not shoot for several minutes, as the sun had not broken the horizon. Therefore, I kept close watch upon the visitor, determined to bag him as soon as he flushed, which he would doubtless do at the sound of Burton's gun.

I became impatient and was about to break my promise when I glanced over in the direction of Burton's blind for the last time, and as I did his first shot rang out. Quick as a flash, I brought my gun to my shoulder and gave a hurried glance in front of me, where I had last seen the albino. Waterfowl were filling the air in front of my blind in startled confusion, offering many easy shots, but I would take none of them.

To my astonishment, the drake was gone, vanished! He was just there. I searched and searched, but all in vain.

Where did he go?

Was it a wizard or what? Could it have been an optical illusion or witchcraft?

What does it all mean?

While trying to sort it out, the vanished one kept popping into my mind. But eventually, disappointed, I banished the thought and turned my attention to the other birds, and soon forgot the episode in the exciting pleasure of watching the rushing storm of reckless green-winged teal. They poured in, circled low, and landed in the decoys.

Bombarded and besieged, I sweated blood and had it in my eyes; I wanted no more disappointments. As I rose, at my feet hundreds of ducks flushed, fanning my face with their wing beat.

The sport was magnificent, and I was shooting well as the trophies of the lake were falling to my unerring aim. Gradually, the flight ceased. The birds had scattered, some of them speeding off to other parts of the lake, and many flocks keeping on their course to the Mississippi River a few miles away.

There is always a lull between the first fast, furious flight of early morning and the later flight of birds returning in small bunches, pairs and singles. During the lull, I again lit my brier and took pleasant note of the goodly number of dead birds, which were slowly drifting toward some brush.

From time to time, birds dropped in, singly and in pairs, with startling velocity, their stiffened wings parting the air with a sharp, tearing noise that gave warning of their coming several seconds before they were in sight.

Presently, I heard one of these rocketing birds, and with a sharp hiss, a shining white shape swung over the decoys, giving me a beautiful opportunity. A fine mark he was. One barrel followed the other in quick succession, and each time I was apparently holding dead on, but not even a feather dropped, and with an upward sweep, he flew away unharmed.

My heart stopped; I had missed. Exasperated, I missed the next four birds that decoyed.

An hour or more passed, and I was almost dozing in the blind, when without warning, I heard the slight splash that a duck makes when alighting and looked up to see the white drake calmly swimming among the decoys. My first impulse was to give the bird a chance, and I started to flush it. Then I remembered the awful missed opportunities, and I decided for this once to defy the ethics of sportsmanship and pot the bird, for I very much wanted it.

It was white as snow from the base of its bill to the tip of its tail.

“This is murder, nothing else,” said I, as I slowly brought the double up and sighted the bird over the barrels. The shot rained around and about it, for it was not more than 30 yards away, and the second barrel as he rose sent another ounce and a half of twos after it, but in vain. I felt like cussing, but I was too much chagrined for words and was afraid Burton might hear my profanity even though he was some distance away.

Slowly, I gathered the birds that I had killed during the morning, placed them on my strap, and traveled over to Burton’s blind, looking the entire time for the vanished one.

He was ready to go in, and as we paddled slowly back to the cabin, we discussed the sport of the morning, congratulating each other on our success. However, I said nothing of the failed events of the morning because I wasn’t ready to do such.

We lounged about the cabin, playing cards, smoking and chatting unto lunchtime. Later a nap overtook me, and dreams busily at work weaved pictures of what the afternoon might have in store.

About half-past three, we started for the blinds. The shooting was not as fast as it had been in the morning, but we passed an hour or two very pleasantly and again started for the cabin.

As we traveled along leisurely in the fading twilight, the whistle of wings caused me to turn. There, whizzing overhead went the albino. I watched him until he turned and again came toward us. I held my gun in a vise-like grip, born of grim determination to bag the bird this time. On he came, until about 30 yards from me, when he swerved to the left, at the same time rising, thus giving me a beautiful incoming quartering shot.

Deliberately, carefully, I covered and then swung ahead of him. First one and then the other barrel, dead on, but he flew onward and said his final adieu.

Slowly downward, circling and whirling, there floated a single gleaming white feather until it rested on the water.

“Why, Bob,” said Burton, “that was a white mallard!”

“Yes,” I replied

“How could you have missed?” he asked.

“It was the wizard!”