

AN OLD SHOOTING COAT

My earliest recollections are of a time when I reposed with dozens of my fellows, stacked high on the shelves of a gun store, and from there I could see the long rows of guns in the racks across from me.

I was a stout youth, fashioned of crisp, olive drab, ten-ounce canvas, and I remember rubbing elbows once with a conceited chap in the stack next to mine. He was a corduroy lad, and held aloof from us ugly ducklings, though to be sure we had corduroy collars and cuffs, and were undoubtedly entitled to claim cousinship with him.

It was a dull and sleepy existence, enlivened only when a group of gunners idled away an occasional hour of the closed season, telling of sport they had had, of trips they had taken, of bags they had made. Thus early in life I was introduced to the talk of the field and to the things of the field.

The long summer passed. Crisper nights and shorter days proclaimed the approach of autumn. Then one day a clerk called, "Here's a 40."

I was snatched from the stack and tried on by a chap I had often noticed among the gunners who sometimes gossiped there. It was a fit, as those things go, and then my life began in earnest.

At his cabin, my new owner hung me on the wall containing several other canvas duds and such duds! I will never forget the faintness that came over me at my first scent of blood, for the other duds were streaked with stains of it here and there. Not to mention the awful gamey smells and oily smells. At least I thought them awful at the time, but I have since learned to love them. I shrank back on the wall, aloof in my crisp spotlessness.

"Hello," said a pair of khaki trousers, gruffly. They were a sight.

"He's been getting a new coat, eh? So what's your name?"

"Red Head."

"Well, youngster, you need breaking in, and you'll get it soon enough." Then silence.

There came a day soon after that when the trousers and I, with many other duffel, were dumped into a carryall and put aboard a train. My owner was with many of his friends, carrying gun cases and shell cases and what not. The engine bell was clanging, dogs were yelping and all was confusion. Somebody's shells were missing. They were found at last and the train started.

In the smoker where I was, I soon learned from the talk going on around me that the morrow would be the opening of the season. Everyone seemed to be in high spirits.

“You’ll catch it tomorrow,” chuckled the trousers.

“I detest a new shooting coat,” said my owner in the dawn of the next morning.

There is no need to dwell on the incidents of that first day afield with its constant succession of shocks and surprises. By evening, my right shoulder was pounded to a frazzle, my arms spotted with blood, mud and grime; my crispness gone in places; my pockets bulging with a motley assortment of and in my game pockets a lot of beautiful birds, quail they were, with a most pungent odor. I was beginning to like it. How tired I was, though.

This all happened years ago. The friends of my youth would not know me now. A few of my buttons are missing, my seams ripped in places and my right shoulder nearly worn through. My color is nondescript. Originally, I was an olive drab but now I am faded in places, and to it is added a trace of muck of the swamps, the blood of game, gun oil and powder grime.

The year for me was divided into two seasons of autumn and winter, when we, my owner and I, spent days in duck blinds or tramped the coverts for quail; and the spring and summer, when we went into the Ozarks where the trout streams tumbled and roared over the ledges and boulders. I learned what a creel was (and how the willow basket frayed my side).

I learned to love the scent of the pines and the song of the mountain stream and to watch the play of the rod. I learned to stalk deer, though a little of that went a long way, for it was hard work and the thorns gave me some awful rents. At night, I was folded and laid at the head of my owner’s blankets, and served him for a pillow.

The days I love best to dwell on, and those that are indelibly impressed on my memory are the ducking days, when he and I would paddle to the blind in the starlight and pray the wind might move the decoys. That half hour’s wait for the dawn, with the old pipe going, the ducks streaming to the lake from their night on the grain fields, the whistling of wings and the calling of hen mallards, how well I recall it all.

I lived with Old Dan at his cabin in the woods for many years, and in all that time, I did not enjoy nor greatly desire any other companionship, for he was a type of manhood once prevalent enough, but now seldom met with in these modern times of a backwoodsman by birth, a sportsman by instinct and a hunter by profession. We never had any occasion to become lonely and time never hung heavily on our hands.

Every year at the end of the hunting season, he stored me away in my resting place and I wondered if he would ever wear me again.

Well, enough of my babbling, for Old Dan has removed me from the peg in the closet where I have hung this long closed season. He looks me over of lovingly, carefully. I feel

his keen eye take in every rip and note each missing button. The frazzled right shoulder is the worst of all. I hoped he would pass that by, for it is really the gun's fault.

Sitting in his rocking chair enjoying a restful pipe, he places me on his knee and begins to reminiscence

There are certain memories clinging to this old shooting coat that are nonetheless charming despite its humble origin. What a treasure of remembrances I unearth when I go through it systematically. Through the mists of years, they take shape before my eyes as I hold the time-honored garment at arm's length.

Along the Mississippi River bottoms, I toss out decoys, watch a runway for deer at the mouth of some canebrake, scour the tallest trees for squirrels or hunt a swamp for rabbits. Beside some crystal stream or beneath some grateful shade of oak, where the air is heavy with the incense of fallen leaves, I pause to eat my lunch and afterwards we count trophies and feast on the promised pleasures of the afternoon. Then homeward bound, we retrace our morning's wanderings, and do not note the flight of time until sweet, shadowy evening has stolen upon us unawares.

This (pointing to a tear on the right sleeve) is where the wire fence caught me when I was chasing that crippled mallard. Moreover, the right shoulder is frayed and worn where the friction of the tip stock of my gun has overcome the toughness of the canvas. It took many excursions to wear the old shooting coat that way.

I feel in the upper left-hand pocket, sacred to my tobacco pouch, and as I take out a pinch of powdery, dusty leavings, I can almost tell just when and where I burned them.

In a lower pocket, I find a big blue and red cotton handkerchief used for neck protection only, and guiltless of the laundry for more than a few years. How many times its soft ample folds have kept out the sun, rain and wind in bygone years.

Reaching deeper, I find a tin matchbox of sulfur matches so old and decayed that any attempt to light one only yields a faint sizzle. Years ago, I packed it full, thinking some day they might come in handy, but they never did.

In the same pocket, clinking weirdly against its mate, I discover an old brass compass scarcely one-half inch in diameter. It was given me by a friend many years ago and gratefully received as a most useful addition to my kit. It is an open-faced affair, and how it ever survived the hard knocks it has received in company with the matchbox I don't understand. Nevertheless, as I remove it and rest it in the palm of my hand, it looks as bright and clear as a new penny and flops around to the north as quickly as a private at salute.

In the other pocket, I discover a few shells and a long-bladed clasp knife, given me more than twenty years ago by a friend in the hardware business. The blade is a splendid piece

of steel and so arranged that once open it cannot be closed without pressing a spring in the back.

Before my friend went over the river we all must cross, he taught me the way to clean rabbits and squirrels. So when I take out this fine old knife, it all comes back to me. The friend and I are sitting in a meadow, each with a pile of squirrels before us, plying our knives and pipes and voices, while the grand old hickory-clad hills look down on us tenderly.

Last of all, I take out a soft rubber-drinking cup and contemplate it affectionately. I wonder from how many springs and mountain streams I have taken water through the medium of that cup? Originally, the color of it was white, but times and corroding influence of a variety of waters have had their effect on the old cup, and it is now a dingy gray. Nevertheless, it is still pliable and watertight and will do good service for many years to come.

I turn the old coat around and dive into the roomy game pocket, and draw forth bits of twigs, fur and feathers, and as I turn them over in my hand, how the days in the autumn and winter swamps and coverts come back to me, and I recall many a satisfactory contribution made to that old pocket.

The dotted one I will warrant is from the breast of a greenwing drake. I must have gotten it the day my two sons and I went duck hunting at the old club. This one must be a mallard pinion feather. What beautiful penciling. This one is from a cock pheasant. As a matter of curiosity, I wish that I knew how many quail, pheasants, ducks, geese, squirrels and rabbits had filled the game pocket.

Ah well, I don't find anything more in the old shooting coat but pleasant memories, so I relegate it to its accustomed peg in the closet again, noting with pleasure that it doesn't seem to be growing old any faster than its owner.

A long silence followed, and with a faraway look in his eyes while he smoked his pipe out, suddenly he said, "I wonder if you will hang together for another season, old chap?"

It is a far cry to the days of my youth. I am old now; the end is not far off, yet I look back to my young days without a sigh of regret for their vanished delights. Mine has been a well-filled life, full of incident and adventure. The scars I wear are honorable scars.

Nevertheless, I look forward to the ripening harvests, the beautiful autumn tints of matured vegetation, glorified here and there with bright purples, yellows and reds where Jack Frost has touched his chilly, sharp brush on the landscape, denoting that the game birds are ready for the gunner, and the game laws will no longer bar us whose pleasure afield is with dog and gun.

And oh, how I remember the opening of the duck season last year, and with what eagerness I await the hunting season when I can once more slosh away spare moments in

search of the winged denizens of covert and marsh, when I become more alert, buoyant, vigorous and purposeful, and my blood courses more quickly. That will happen, I know, when the game season arrives.

I presume every old-timer has an old shooting coat as I have, and they might protest against my flaunting it before them, sneering at the very idea of there being anything worth mentioning in an old coat. But wait a moment; we all love an old gun, old friend, old dog and old rod. Why not an old shooting coat?