

AUTUMN'S CLARION CALL

With such unmistakable signs made manifest to the eye and ear, summer in Alberta, Canada, has signaled its adieu, that one stirring now from a sleep that fell on him months ago might be assured of the season with the first touch of awakening. Here winding walks lead you to scenes of unimaginable magnificence, and it is as if some land of autumn whose splendor has never been told lay unveiled before you.

The air is of a temper neither too hot nor too cold. These are days that should be made the most of, days that have brought the perfected ripeness of the year and displayed it in the richness of its glory.

During autumnal days, as in all others, the woods, fields, and rivers are beautiful to the lover of nature and to the sportsman who in his love finds the finer flavor of his pastimes. And the hunter who finds game abundant knows nothing of the melancholy days sung by the poets.

The greatest harbinger of autumn's arrival, in the distance, faring so easily along their aerial paths, comes the clangor of clarions, wild and musical, proclaiming the march of a battalion of geese riding southward on a north wind through the hills and dales of cloudland.

How pleasant are the voices of these friendly messengers, bringing tidings of approaching winter. We rejoice that they have come again!

Watching them as they soar across the sky so much swifter than the white clouds drifting above them, we soon note that the clouds stand still as we verify by their blue shadow on the ground, lying motionless, with the palpitating shadows of the geese plunging into them on this side, then, lost for an instant in the blue obscurity, emerging on that side with the same untiring beat of shadowy wings.

The voyagers are in perfect discipline as they obey the clarion call of their leader whose broad wings beat the air with steady and majestic strokes. Now in single file, now in the form of a gigantic V, and again in open order, they fly in response to his clarion note as it rings down the feathered ranks; but ever on and on, steadily pursuing their course, until the haven reached, the flight is ended and the travelers rest among earlier flocks, who linger contently in the grain fields as if they care to seek no clime more genial.

Then comes another flock, rapidly approaching, and they pass in review before the others, with big wings moving with mechanical regularity and their white collars and glossy plumage glistening from the sun. They show their delight at the prospect of a pause in their long flight by a tremendous hubbub as each gabbles and honks in as many different keys.

Now the old gander in the lead suddenly jacks his wings and followed by the entire flock scales down in a long decent until, with a heavy surge, they land with the others, and their feat is accomplished.

The gabble is immediately renewed with fresh vigor and continues with gradual diminishing energy until the excitement having passed they waddle quietly on the ground conversing in ordinary tones. Now and then one scolds another with an endless variety of discordant outcry.

Our guide sweeps the golden plains with the glass, searching every promising spot, every feeding ground where the geese might congregate.

“I can see them in the distance, feeding and preening. This is the field we will hunt tomorrow,” he declares.

At sunset, with its lane of golden sheen across the bountiful fields, the supper bell rings. Afterward, adjournment to the sitting room, when, amid thickening clouds from a half dozen meerschaums in full blast, a spirited and general discussion ensues upon the relative merits of guns, decoys, blinds, and gear of all descriptions, with an occasional digression into the realms of natural history where peculiarities of waterfowl in general, their mode and strength of flight, their cunning in eluding decoys, their favorite food, etc., etc., are dwelt upon at great length by all in attendance.

Nothing but excitement greets us as each recollects a time that has passed and gone forever, oblivious to the approaching hour of midnight. Soon thereafter, everyone journeys to the land of dreams except me. In the darkness, nothing is heard, save now and then the hoot of an owl.

Filled with the anticipation of youth awaiting his first hunt, I walk outside. A hunter’s moon greets me, swimming from the east, so high, so white it hangs. With no hint of a storm in sight, I marvel at its beauty, because life holds few pleasures to match such glimpses.

Truly, there is magic in it!

On the still air, faintly is heard a distant tone of music; a sweet whistle, at first low, rising and falling, then gradually becoming more distinct. It comes nearer and nearer until it fills the air all about, then passing on, recedes, grows fainter, until at last the sound is lost. The ducks are flying, dark fleeting flecks in the moonlit sky.

Faint and faraway, from a lake comes a trumpet note, and then another ó the mellow call of the goose. The world is awakening.

Not a stir is heard within the cabin. But then there are muffled grunts and groans, a yawn or two, the rustling of clothes, then the faint sound of footsteps. Voices are heard. Some

prepare breakfast, while others busy themselves passing in and out at the door loading their hunting gear. Soon the call to breakfast is heard, and hurriedly eaten.

On the horizon in the east lies a line of gray, which slowly broadens and makes twilight where all before was dark. In the distance, the outlines of tree trunks are seen standing like ghosts reaching out shadowy arms as if feeling their way through dimness.

Arranging the decoys, the twinkling stars are paling now, and day is near as light has spread itself over all the heavens, while in the east streaky clouds have flushed to deep red and paled again to richest gold. To the west, the moon lingers, resisting the encroaching daylight. Looking again toward the east, the rim of the sun appears over the prairie ridge and a stray shaft of pale sunlight strikes the decoy Judases.

As we breathe the clear, fresh morning air, my hunting companion passionately echoes, "The time has come." And we, who have toiled through the summer with the hope of reward among the southbound waterfowl, are about to be amply rewarded.

We are possessed by a strange feeling of exhilaration, which is soon heightened by the sight, far aloft in stately flight, of a dark wedge moving steadily onward, heading our way. They send an answering "honk" to the greeting call from our vociferous guide, who protrudes his snakelike neck from his layout blind, knowing as well as we that he is in for a morning sport.

We cower down, grasping our fowling pieces. Now begins the anxious time. They may come or they may not. Now-now-they serve. Immediately, our guide gives a shrill series of honks. Now they turn again and he stops his calling. So sure as they turn off, he pipes up and the leader veers our way. As long as they continue toward us, he doesn't say a word.

We move not a muscle, but shake with nervous excitement.

Here they are, right in front of us, with extended wings, inspecting the decoys, each unconscious of the reception awaiting them. How strange it is that they don't see us. How pretty they look. Darn, if I don't think I could catch one.

Then they veer in confusion from some suspected or discovered danger.

"Take 'em!" comes the command.

And up we spring like mushrooms after a summer rain. Nine puffs of gray smoke curl up from the waiting committee, marking a moment of our expectations. From the report, six geese drop from the flock, striking the ground with a sounding thud.

The remaining birds go onward with unfaltering rapid wing-beats, while the guns thunder and harmless shots fly behind them. The ones in the rear indicate by rapid wing beats the

severity of their situation, while the yellow rays of the sun touch them gently as though in sorrow at their fate.

Now we gather the dead, reload our guns, snuggle down into our blinds, and go through the same excitement of alternate doubt and certainty. Often, just as they get almost within range, they don't like the looks of things and off they go. We go through mental gymnastics: did we breathe too hard, were we not low enough in our blinds?

But others come and every report marks a moment of some one's expectation, some one's satisfaction or disappointment, and some thing's sudden pang of death or exultation of escape.

It's good to be afield in these glorious days!

And so they keep coming until long after the sun has taken possession of the sky. Then we gather the birds and say adieu.

At the end of the first day, gray clouds glow with red and yellow fire that burns about their purple hearts in tints of infinite variety, while below the clouds the dark blue rampart of the prairie ridge flames the last glory of the departing sun, fading in a tint of tender green to the upper blue, and the eastern hills blush roseate against the climbing, darkening shadow of the earth.

That night we gather in the cozy cabin and enjoy its comfort over our pipes and the affairs of our absent friends. At times, the drafty little stove ceases its fluttering monotone as if holding its breath to listen to the conversation. Then it resumes its roar as if the subject was too trivial for its attention.

Finally, the day arrives and the words are uttered that no one wants to hear: "It's time to depart for the busily affairs of life."

To me all seasons are kind, all days pleasant, wherein I might pursue my sport, though the rain may pelt me, chill winds assail me, or the winter sun shower upon me its most fervent rays, and as in years past in autumn I find my full measure of content.

I welcome the marvel of transformation of the days of winter to come and in them, I hope, will find content as I drift into memories indelibly written on my mind, wrapped in winter sleep with dreams of another hunting season. (Published in DOUBLE GUN JOURNAL)