

A Last Fall's Pheasant Hunt

BY DON B. ESTES

I am quite certain, that so long as I live, it will be an easy matter for me to recall one evening last fall when a friend, Walt Paulson by name, came thundering up my front steps, showing little or no inclination to knock or ring, walked, or I might say stumbled, into the room where I was so comfortably seated and deeply absorbed in the most interesting section of a very good book, bid me good evening in a somewhat less dignified manner than is usually customary for a guest, especially one who so rudely and unnecessarily interrupts such a pleasant and comfortable pastime. With an overenthusiastic embellishment of zest and zeal he ambidextrously presented an unlimited amount of verbal impossibilities.

Some silver-tongued stranger had pumped him up, with unbelievable stories of a hunter's paradise, and he had sucked the whole thing in, hook, line and sinker. I was the first to whom he had spoken of this earthly heaven. Before he had finished, I too, was so enthused that I could hardly wait till morning. We were to leave at three A. M.; just Walt, my son, Joe Don, myself and the three dogs. The first thing to do was to find up the dogs. I had been using the dogs belonging to Clyde Barrows and Brick Leslie. Clyde's dog was a veteran, but Brick's dog was serving her first year as a China pheasant rouser outer, and showing remarkable promise. Having had a standing agreement that I was to use the dogs when I wished, I was not long in getting them collected and safely locked in my basement for the morning, the day of days.

I, like most others, will waste my last few shells on impossible shots at the close of a day's hunt, rather than carry them home. This I had done a few days previously and had neglected getting a new supply, leaving no other alternative than to borrow. After calling everyone I knew who might have a shell in their possession, I finally managed to beg, hum, borrow and buy about two full boxes. The legal limit being only two male birds, this was quite a few more shells than would be necessary, but it always pays to be on the safe side, and this borrowing in the field is not so hot; anyway we might stay more than one day. The finale of a hunting or fishing trip is one of the most uncertain things I know as to where, when or how it might end.

Walt was to come over and have breakfast with me; we were then to leave from my house. So I busied myself the few remaining minutes before midnight getting a light lunch thrown together for the three of us next day. Then there was the minor detail of trying to talk the little woman into getting up the next morning and fixing us a nice warm breakfast. Perhaps some of you other hunters have tried this with better success than I have; anyway I couldn't get her to show the slightest spark of enthusiasm, definitely deciding the fact that I would arise one-half hour earlier on the morning to favorably, (I hope), impress my guest with the remarkable results of my culinary achievements.

Everything was now in readiness with the exception of my hunting clothes. These I proceeded to collect, coat here, hat there, shoes in the basement, or at least I thought so. With the exception of one shoe I found everything with comparative ease. That was some consolation. I looked the basement over from stem to stern trying to find one, lonely misplaced shoe. Every time that I would move something, the dogs would start trying to dig holes in the concrete floor, or else grab something and start tearing around the furnace, just warming up and raising particular h..... in general.

Between the thoughts of wearing rubber boots, the dogs yelping and my wife yelling for me to come to bed or else get completely off the premises, I was not so sure that I would go on that so shortly but zealously planned trip. As a last effort I decided to look in the attic. A very short search brought forth from hiding this creator of evil thoughts. It is very remarkable, indeed, how hunting or fishing tackle or apparel has a most phenomenal way of absenting itself from its respective closet, nook or corner. Just lay something of this description down, walk around the house and it's gone! Some may attribute this to lack of memory, over-ambitious wives, or just one of the many unjust parallels of a hunter's existence.

About 12:30 a. m. I was more than ready to retire, the glorious road to dreamland was awaiting me with outstretched arms, that beautiful Utopia where liabilities become assets, probabilities become realities, and the rough, rugged street of existence becomes a romantic boulevard of golden ecstasy. I was just toying with

the idea of walking on fleecy white clouds with those mystical seven-league boots when a yelp and a ki-yi, a m-e-o-w- and a p-a-s-t from the basement brought back ghostly memories of concrete realization. My first thought was that it was time to start the day. However, happily as this thought had been conceived, it was soon discarded, as one look at the clock convinced me that I had been in bed less than half hour. Another yelp from below brought in return one from beside me; the little woman had returned from beautiful oblivion to yelping, ky-y'ng realities. No sooner had she returned to consciousness than the cat let out another painfully disgusted screech. I had to get those d..... dogs out of the basement, and get them out now, this minute. Her cat had lived in there for years, and I was not going to bring a pack of hounds home and run him out.

Anyway something had to be done, and immediately. There was nothing else to do than relieve the injustice done the cat as well as my wife, so once more I descended to the basement. Try as I might, I could in no way establish the idea that there was room for the three of them in there. To relieve the situation I brought the cat up into the house with a solemn promise that I would remember to put him out when I left in the morning.

I do not remember going back to sleep, but I have a faint recollection of bells, sirens, etc., as if a fire department was going by the house, and my wife again yelling at me to get up and shut off that blessed alarm clock. I was up in a flash, wide awake and raring to go. I called Joe Don—strange, but he heard me the first call, something he never does when I call him for school.

I brewed up some kind of a concoction for breakfast and hardly had the table set, when in came Walt grinning from ear to ear and walking on air. I will not go so far as to say that we ate our meal, we merely swallowed it whole, then washed it down with coffee that would float a monkey-wrench.

Everything was ready to be packed in the car, so that was not much of a job. The two dogs occupied the back seat, while we three jammed ourselves into the front, then we were off like grease through a tin horn to find Walt's dog who had not come home the night before. Walt had looked high and low for him but without avail, then gave up with the idea that he was out on a romantic adventure and would return with the wee hours of the morning. Having failed to do this left him wide open to pursuit by three very impatient hunters. We were not long in finding him, however. We used an easy method, process of elimination, an easy matter when you know every dog in town. The minute we put Walt's dog ("Cinders;" Cocker Spaniel) in the car, the expected happened, old Chief (Clyde's Irish Spaniel) tied into him, while Jerry (Brick's Cocker) hurriedly climbed over into the front seat; that was no place for a lady. We finally got the two of them separated and the idea established that they were to ride together, but never could we get Jerry to join her two flea-conveying companions. One more trip by the house, to let the cat out, and we were on our way to Roseburg, some sixty miles up the Coquille river when driving under normal conditions, but a somewhat farther and more tiresome journey when herding a carload of ambitious canines through dense patches of pea soup fog that could hardly be cut with a knife.

After passing through Bridge the fog began to settle or maybe I should have said that we began to get above it as we were just starting up the Oregon Coast Range, and the going was much easier. The prospects for a good day's hunt were encouraging, the tops of the higher mountains were just being cloaked in a golden haze by the first rays of a yellowish golden sun. The greater part of the trip was behind us; we were merely riding on the wings of the wind, our hearts and souls were so swiftly and surely being elated by this spirit of ecstasy that they were certain to overlap conventions and leave us, three material transgressors in a spiritual world.

The return to earth was very sudden. Just this side of Camas Valley we stopped and asked a small boy whom we chanced to pass at that hour of the morning, if there were many Chinns around that particular part of the country, and if we could obtain permission to hunt. His reply to both questions was in the affirmative; he also directed us to a farmhouse about a mile up the road where he thought would be our best bet. We were not long, I must assure you, in reaching the designated place where we were to materialize our dreams of the evening before.

Walt and I matched nickels to see who would ask the owner the everlasting question. Walt took me and I got out of the car to do the honors just in time to see the elderly male resident, barefooted, and clothed only in a long flannel nightgown, head-

ing for one of Chic Sales' more elaborately designed triple duty resorts. This was going to offer a splendid opportunity to practice emotional control. If I could keep a straight face, state my wants and not detain this gentleman from his early morning mission any longer than necessary, we might make the grade. I hailed him, walked up, bid him good-morning in a serious and placid manner, did my best to without any outward signs of embarrassment or discomposure, introduce myself, stated that I had my son, a friend and the dogs and would like to hunt on his place. We would be very careful; if we were so fortunate as to get any birds we would be more than glad to share them with him; that I would be responsible for any damage done by us or the dogs while hunting. He cut me off short with "yes boys" go right ahead, have a good time, and then added that he thought that it would be more advisable to go about half a mile up the road, then turn to the west for another half mile where we would come on his brother's part of the ranch and could hunt up through his place. He thought that we would do all right by ourselves as several fellows had shot their limit there in a short time the latter part of the week. With this he wheeled and was off on his mission, as well as I.

It did not take long to reach the place of his brother's, who was up feeding his chickens and turkeys. Walt stopped the car at the gate and I crawled out and went over and asked if we could hunt, stated the fact that his brother had sent us over. Everything was hunkey-dory with him, "Just drive your car through the gate where it won't be tampered with, pile out and help yourselves." He pointed out a large patch of tussocks and advised that we should go through that very thoroughly as he had seen several birds in there the last few days, and they are durned hard to get out. "You can almost step on them before they will fly," he added. I told him that we had three dogs. "Oh well, that's what you need to get 'em out of there."

I signaled for Walt to drive the car in, then started back to get ready so that we could get going at the earliest possible moment. It was now about six a. m. and everything looked rosy. I grabbed the car door open, called the dogs out, got my caulked shoes and was putting them on when I heard the dandiest cackling, gobbling, yeowling noise I think that I have ever heard in my life. I looked up and there in the midst of our friend's poultry were our three dogs, and were they going to town? Jerry and Cinders were working on the flock, while Chief would take the singles that strayed away. I could easily tell that the farmer was screaming at the top of his voice by the contorted motions of his face, though I could not hear a word he said but I could surmise aplenty. With a small switch in each hand, taking long, hurried rhythmic strides, accompanied by a semaphore-like waving of his arms, he was really going places, but the dogs were going just a little faster than he. Walt and I took out to help as soon as we got over the shock, Walt in his stocking feet, me with one shoe and one houseslipper. I only had to call Chief once, the same for Cinders, but Jerry was experiencing something entirely new, and from all appearances very fascinating. Every time she came through the flock she got results; the proof of this was a mouthful of feathers from the south end of some poor unfortunate turkey with which she came in contact.

To realize the impossible situation with which we were trying to cope, one only has to try to catch one of these playful little devils when they are having fun and being evasive. She was evidently doing no great damage other than disarranging a few feathers here and there, but the prestige and social standing of the head gobblers was rapidly diminishing and the three of us could do nothing about it. She finally discontinued the idea of working on the flock and trying to evade us at the same time, so she picked up where Chief left off, working the singles. I have seen a lot of disgusted people in my days, but nothing to compare with that poor, unfortunate farmer who was so helplessly standing by and watching turkeys and chickens being torn to pieces one at a time. Jerry soon had her fill of the sport and came back to me just as nonchalantly and undisurbed as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

The farmer surveyed his chief source of livelihood to his satisfaction and walked up to the car, where we were getting ready to move on to some other place, began laughing, took one look at Jerry and began stroking, petting and talking to her as if she were some abnormal creature whose existence was miraculous. She, the likeable little imp that she is, was more than glad to play and romp with him as if there had never been any friction between them. I was so sure that our hunting on this place was a thing of the past that I never even mentioned the subject, just started putting my slippers back

on, when he brought it up by asking if we were not going to hunt.

Maybe I did look like a fool, if I did, I'm sure that it came from the bottom of my heart for I sure felt like one, and I hope you will believe me when I say that I had company. Our host just kinda laughed the whole thing off saying (still playing with Jerry) "Well you know pups will be pups, you can't expect a novice to act like a veteran; go on and hunt, this little lady is going to make a mighty fine dog some day, sure has the spunk." You could have raked Walt's eyes off with a stick, not to mention my own.

Joe Don came out from a very secluded place from between the front and back seat, where he had taken refuge when he saw the farmer coming toward the car. This had been his means of letting it be known that he had taken no part at all in the little show that had just been staged and did not wish to become involved in any situation, where dogs, and not his own, were implicated. The man looked at him, smiled and spoke, only to receive a very weak "hello" in response. The farmer, showing no apparent signs of resentment, was a good tonic for the embarrassing situation we had just survived, and seeming to sense the mental anguish under which we were laboring, smilingly extended a second invitation to look the place over. This was all that we needed. We were in the car in a jiffy and ready to go, making sure this time that our little domesticated friends created no more scenes.

Shortly after leaving the barnyard we came upon the patch of tussocks, where we scattered out and went through them as if with a fine tooth comb, but in vain. The only excitement stirred up in the next field was when Chief picked up a hot trail, went into a berry patch and came out on the far side with a jack rabbit about four feet in front of his nose. I did not want to shoot a rabbit over the dog for fear it would ruin him, so just let him go to it. He was soon out-distanced, however, returned and really began to hunt in good shape.

The next hour or so we only found one good sign. All three dogs on one trail tracked for a hundred yards or more, then returned, only to do the same thing over. There had evidently been a bird in there shortly before, but not now. We made a complete circle of both ranches and did not even see a bird. I suggested that we head back to the car via the tussock patch and go on over to some of the neighboring ranches and try our luck. Walt agreed, but just before we started into the patch Jerry picked up some kind of a scent that led directly into the tall rat-tail like grass, completely losing herself from our sight. I didn't take much stock in her judgment as she seemed to track anything from turkeys to cats so I let Joe Don to follow her. Walt went to the right led by Cinders, and I to the left staying fairly well behind Chief. Jerry was still lost only for intervals when she would jump clear of the grass to locate us. We had gone scarcely twenty yards when Jerry put up a nice big rooster within ten feet of Joe Don. He shot and missed. Walt unloaded his automatic (3 shots) and the chick was still on the wing and doing himself proud when I cut loose. I missed the first two and crippled it with my last shot. Jerry was on it in a moment; followed shortly by Chief and Cinders. I thought for a moment that we would see Jerry take a couple of dogs, but they backed down. She would snap and growl at one and then the other. Had she not been so busily engaged I am sure she would have eaten our one and only. At least she showed every inclination to devour this strange-plumed creature that left the ground with a terrific b-r-r-r and dropped at the seventh shot of a gun.

We could not very well divide our morning's bag with our genial host. We did try (not very hard) to get him to take the whole bird, but he absolutely refused. I am sure that he knew how highly we valued this long sought and diligently hunted-for bird of many beautiful colors; anyway we appreciated his hospitality as well as his previously displayed sense of humor, thanked him from the bottom of our hearts and were soon on our way to better hunting grounds.

At the next few places we visited, our request to hunt was rejected with a "I'm sorry but we don't allow any hunting on our place," or "I'm sorry, but someone shot a cow for me last year and I can't afford to take any more chance," etc. We did manage to get into a few places, but they had evidently been hunted out, for we couldn't find any trace of birds.

The morning was getting pretty well spent and we were wasting a lot of valuable time going from one place to another. We decided that we might do better if we went on over around Sutherlin. This would take us through Roseburg where we would be able to stop and refresh ourselves and still reach our destination in time to do some early afternoon hunting in that vicinity.

At first it seemed as if we would

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have the same trouble obtaining permission to hunt that we had encountered since our early morning adventure. Shortly after passing through Sutherlin, I noticed a nice covey of quail cross the road directly ahead of the car which I brought to an abrupt stop. I was certain that I had seen them go down over an embankment to the left and into some berry vines which offered excellent cover. Walt and I got out, took Chief and started out with full intentions of hunting through this place without asking permission. In our excitement we had failed to notice a farmer doing his fall plowing just a short ways ahead of us. As we started down over the bank Walt spotted this nigger-in-the-woodpile, which forced us to ask and we received our wish.

With Chief between us, we headed for cover. As Chief went in, the birds started out, most singles. Walt got nine splendid shots and accounted for one bird, with six such shots, I brought down two, although one of them was shot at such close range that it was completely torn to pieces. Jerry ate the other one on the way home.

Seeing a nice corn field down a short ways and it being on the same ranch, the logical thing to do was to go through it, which we did with the result that Chief again came out with a jack rabbit on the end of his nose and led off toward where the farmer was plowing. Still maintaining the no-shoot-um-rabbit mood, I naturally let it go without even putting my gun to my shoulder. This evidently did not appeal to our host as he headed over our way on the trot, when he was within shouting distance he started hollering, waving his hands and pointing toward the road with the final addition: "If you guys are too d..... tight to waste a shell on one of those pests you can get the h..... off my place and stay off." I tried to explain that I didn't mind the shell so much, it was the dog that was foremost in my mind. But so far as he was concerned the hunting there was definitely over. That closed another painful event on a glorious hunting trip.

The time was drawing near when we should depart for the homeland. It seemed that old lady Misfortune had not only placed a finger, but her whole fist on us, and from looks of things, had not merely placed, but whole-heartedly slapped us in the pants. Well anyway, we might scare up something on the way home, and I hope I am not making a monkey out of myself when I say that it seemed many, many miles away. I think that I failed to mention that this had been one of the warmest days that the people in that part of the country had seen for many a moon. We, being from the coast where the weather is usually twenty or more degrees cooler than theirs, failed to appreciate their climate. We not only failed to appreciate it, but durned near failed to stand up under it.

Shortly after we left Sutherlin, we came to a little store somewhere up the country where we again stopped to refresh ourselves. The first bottle was so good that we lingered to tear the caps off a few more. Besides it was cool in there, and they were charging us absolutely nothing for the privilege of sitting at the table where we completely forgot the heat. I must say here and now that the outlook on life that Walt and I, in the last few minutes had assumed, was far more bright and beautiful. The transformation that we had so completely undergone was a thing not unlike a miracle of the olden days. Joe Don, in the meantime, had reviled

down so much pop that his thoughts were more or less concerned about the present, a condition created in small boys from over-estimating the capacity of their stomachs; with some, this practice ceases to exist after reaching adolescence, while in others it seems to grow as the years wear on. Time was again passing swiftly. Shortly after passing through Camas on our way home, for some unknown reason I was watching a little clearing on the bank of a creek that was running parallel to the highway. I thought that I noticed a big rooster feeding. Walt stopped the car and we got out to grab a look. Sure enough, there were three nice roosters feeding within one hundred yards of the highway. We were not long in getting our guns out of the car and starting in the general direction of the birds making every effort to stay concealed in what little brush there was. The pheasants were no longer in spotting us, however, and flew just across the creek, and into the brush on the other side.

We quickly decided that I should go up the creek a little ways and then cross over. Walt was to go down and Joe Don was to give us a little time then to close in. When they came up they would have to come within gun range of one of us. I went up the creek a few yards and found an old wind-fall that had fallen just right for a footlog. Of course, this was far better than sliding down the bank, wading the creek and climbing up the other side. I proceeded to walk the log and was just about halfway across when I saw my mistake. The bark was peeling fast and furious and I was peeling with it. It was jump "or else * * *" I hung on an instant longer and "or else" into about four feet of nice, cool, refreshing and disgustingly wet creek. I was soon on my feet but not soon enough to get the water out of my gun barrel and take a nice close-up shot at the three roosters as they flew over me in single file at a distance of not more than fifteen yards.

That was the last straw. I was completely washed up on hunting. I tried to dry myself off as much as possible before getting into the car. This was almost as fruitless as our hunting had been, so with a wet back and a sour puss, we brought to a close one of the most unsuccessful days in the field in which I have ever been so unfortunate as to participate.

The End

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