

Unilateral Sport

(By M. C. BLACKMAN in "The New Yorker")

ONE of my summer chores when I was a boy on my grandfather's farm was fetching home the two cows from the back pasture for the evening milking. To reach the back pasture, I walked through a lane that separated two fenced-in fields and was embowered with blackberry briars. It led over a gentle slope and ended in a little glade that was a sort of foyer to the woods beyond. A path wound through the woods to the pasture, an old field abandoned to grass. The cows were usually waiting for me at the bars at the end of the lane. If they were not, I had only to call, "Soooo-O-o-o cow," and presently they would come plodding along the path, lowing with the discomfort of heavy udders. I would open the bars and follow them home to the milking pen.

One evening, when I reached the beginning of the glade, I saw a rabbit sitting on its haunches in the grass a dozen feet from the bars. I reached for something to throw. My hand closed on a pine knot, about twice the size of a hand grenade and similarly shaped, which had fallen long before from a wagonload of firewood. I let fly with it, and the rabbit leaped twice and vanished through the wire fence into the woods. I took the cows home and thought no more of the rabbit.

The next evening, when I reached the glade, the rabbit was sitting in the same spot. This time, the only missile I could find quickly was a clod of dirt, which disintegrated into dust before it had gone half the distance to the target. The rabbit again vanished. After I had let the cows into the lane, I searched for the pine knot, found it, and dropped it at the spot where I had first picked it up, just in case.

The rabbit did not fail me the next evening, and only once did it ever fail me during the weeks that followed. It was always sitting in the same place, give or take a couple of feet, and the moment I saw it, I scooped up the pine knot and threw it, in what came to be one continuous motion. Then I retrieved the pine knot and left it where I could use it the next time.

RABBITS always run in zigzag fashion.

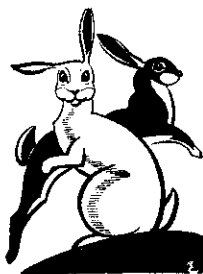
One leap to the right and one to the left were just enough to take this one to the fence, through which he could scuttle to the screening safety of underbrush. So, instead of throwing directly at the rabbit where he sat, I would lead him, as a hunter leads a bird on the wing, and aim at the spot where I expected him to be at the end of my throw, about twenty yards away. After a few days, I found, by trial and error, that my point of aim should be midway of the rabbit's second, or zag leap.

Thereafter, it was a matter of perfecting my aim. I got better and better, until at last a throw landed so close behind the rabbit that it caught him on the roll, upsetting him in the grass. He thrashed wildly for an instant, then regained his feet and resumed his flight, apparently uninjured.

The next day there was no rabbit when I came for the cows. I was disappointed and a little hurt, but most of all I felt apologetic. I lingered a few minutes, peering into the underbrush, wishing there were some way I could convey to the rabbit that I was sorry I had upset and scared him.

I arrived a bit early on the next trip. I hadn't much hope, but there he was, sitting motionless, as usual. I was so pleased that I yelled "Hello!" and the shout galvanised the rabbit into action faster than the pine knot ever had. But he came back the next day and he continued to come back.

After that, I deliberately pulled my shots. My object was to see how close I could come to the rabbit without hitting him. My aim had become very accurate, but the margin between safety and danger was too narrow to permit anything less than perfect control.



One evening I scooped up the pine knot from a tuft of grass and threw it with all the careless goodwill of a man saying hello in passing to a friend of long standing. The moment it left my hand, I knew. I checked my follow through abruptly and tried to close my eyes when the rabbit began his second leap, but I couldn't. The heavy pine knot caught him at the back of the head, between the long ears. He rolled over twice, kicked convulsively a few times, and lay still.

Each of those death kicks registered with sickening force in my stomach. I ran and picked up the soft, limp animal. I could barely see through my tears. The rabbit was dead. I threw him over the fence far into the underbrush.

My observant grandfather noticed the stains of tears that evening and asked their cause. I told him about the rabbit, and in a dither of grief and guilt, I cried, "But it was only a game, Grandfather. I didn't mean to kill him, really I didn't. It was just a game."

"Well, if that's the way you feel about it now," my grandfather said, "you should remember, the next time you invent a game involving rabbits, that it's only fair to consult the rabbit. If you can't find out how the rabbit feels about it, then it's not a game. It's a sport, and the pleasure is all yours."

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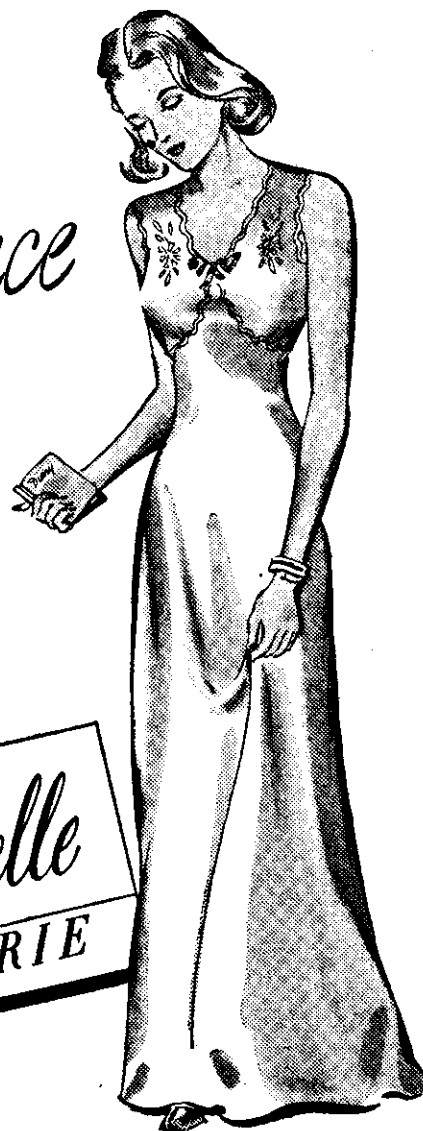
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