

THE START OF THE SEASON

A MAN and a boy were walking through a plantation of pines, in rich pasture land in a valley. They were quail-shooting. A dog ranged ahead, but the boy was in the lead, setting pace, proud and awkward with the gun a pound and a half too heavy for him. He wore big boots turned down below bare knees, and he was pleased about the soft, sliding give of the pine needles beneath his feet, and always the strong, clean smell of pine. He was tired from the walk, but nowhere near through with it.

The man was not tired, and had only begun to feel the first itch of sweat where his cartridge belt pressed tightest. He carried his gun easily, as a hunter knows how, and he took his time now and let the boy set his own pace, knowing exactly what the distance they had covered would have been when he himself had been twelve years old. The boy had followed him all morning, believing he was leading, and he knew what it meant to the boy.

This particular day of the year meant a great deal to the man, too, although it never now meant to him as much as it used to mean. He hoped now only to recapture a small part of it, the memory of pleasure, past and a little stale. A brace of ducks flipfopped against his thigh as he picked the easiest course through the pines. He had taken them with the sun, the one a gift shot low over the water, and the other a good, long barrelful with a quick, accurate movement that had really pleased him. The boy had missed an easy one, which he, the man, could have taken easily with the second gun for himself. But the springer had been over the side and back again before the feathers of the brace were damp. He

had a good dog, and a bag to show for his first two shots of the season, and now he was going to try for quail.

"We'll get out of here and try the boxthorn, Fainy," he said.

"All right, Joe."

The boy was only a little nervous about shooting again, after the easy shot he had missed with the ducks. Joe had sworn to himself, because he was a real hunter and would hate to see a wasted shot. Joe was as good a shot as you would ever see, anywhere, and a leader you had to follow. You had to shoot easily and kill cleanly, and not be afraid of the big, heavy butt banging up into your chin the way you supposed a punch would be, and of the powder burning. It was all in the way Joe did it, the easy way he used the big double-barrelled gun, and his boots firm and sure in mud or over the smooth slopes of pine-needles; it was his hands, big and sure of themselves, and his eyes, and his man's strength. And it was all real.

It was never the hunt so much as being one of the hunters.

They came down out of the pines, and skirted them, then made for the thick, ragged cover of boxthorn hedging gone wild. Fainy could feel grass seed inside his boots, and the boots harsh where his socks had worked down over his heels. He was starting to worry about shooting again. Joe had the lead now.



A Short Story by PHILIP MINCHER

"You don't get much time," he said. "You've got to swing quick and there's no time for playing around with your aim."

There was a quick, urgent alarm of whirring wings, sharp on the afternoon's hot-heaviness, and Joe was showing what he meant about being fast. He got three quail with one barrel while Fainy was watching the last quick flash of the others with his gun in a tight hand at his side.

Joe said: "That's one hell of a fine kuri, son. He knows what it's about."

He replaced the spent cartridge without looking, while the dog did his work.

"I didn't hardly see the blasted things," Fainy said. He wanted to talk

big to cover it up, but his voice would not come strong enough.

"You've got to be quick," Joe said. "You'll get it."

They were moving again.

Watching the dog, Joe said: "You've got to reckon it out before they flush; nut out where they're going to fly, and make sure you're not in the way so you can get a straight shot—Watch the dog, son!"

As the second bunch of quail whirred up and away Fainy let go with the single barrel before the butt was up to his shoulder, and without aiming at anything. The wasted explosion nearly knocked him over, and with the split second he knew that Joe would be finished with him. Then came the crash of the bigger gun as Joe blew a straggler into the boxthorn. He had waited to give Fainy a chance.

Joe replaced his cartridge without speaking, watching the dog. They walked on. Fainy followed in silence, his ears hot and his throat hard. He was too old to cry.

At the end of the boxthorn Joe said: "We'll take a rest and then make tracks." He whistled the dog. They sat in the long grass on a slope, and Joe made himself a cigarette.

"That's a smart way to let boxthorn go," he said. "You'd think a man could take care of his boundary." He was not looking at Fainy. He smoked his cigarette through in silence and pressed it out on his boot; then he said quietly, "You got another shell in?"

"Yes," Fainy found his voice.

"You might still get something," Joe was fixing his cartridge belt. He said gently: "You got to be more careful with your aim. It's just practice."

They walked up the slope and Joe was thinking well, he thinks I'm God and I could break his heart without starting to unwind. That's what a man gets for having blue eyes or living clean, or whatever's supposed to make a good shot. It's brought me a lot of things, too, and not all peaches. Not when the target shoots back. But a kid's god is always a man, and with a healthy kid it's a man with a gun. It doesn't matter to matter what else he is.

He said kindly to the boy: "Day after tomorrow we'll get the rifle down and take in a bit of target practice."

Fainy did not say anything.

"Aren't you keen?"

"I don't know." The boy coughed away a catch in his voice. "I wouldn't be any good."

"Hell," Joe said. "I fired a couple of thousand rounds before I even made a mark on the target." He could see it was not the line to plug. "You keep your eye on the dog, kiwi," he said.

And he thought, all right; so the taste had to go out of it. I had a god when I was twelve, too, and it didn't matter tuppence what he was, except that he could shoot. There was a certain amount of practice involved there, too.

"You know how I learned to shoot, mate?" he said.

"No."

"Well, the man who taught me used to give me two cartridges. If I got anything with one he'd give me another. If I missed and got something with the second I got two more." Joe was remembering it, seeing it happen. "If I missed twice," he said, "I waited till another day."

And he swore till I was worse than you are now, Joe thought. So why is it important that a man knows how to use a gun? It goes deep. Old Ryan thought more of his aim than his whisky, and look how he was; I guess he took the

(continued on next page)

(Solution to No. 693)

P	M	M	E	T	H	I	N	K	S
B	E	G	I	N	G		A	W	
R	S	A	R	C	H	D	U	K	E
W	I	N	S	O	M	E	S	L	
D	I		E	T	H	E	R	E	A
L	O	U	V	R	E	S	D	A	S
T	E	A	R		M	E	E	S	
E	S	V		B	U	D	G	E	T
G	A	L	B	A	N	U	M	O	E
R	E	G		S	P	O	T	T	E
E	L	E	M	E	N	T	S	I	P
S	P		L		U	S	H	E	R
S	U	S	P	I	R	E	D	T	R

Clues Across

- I am Reg? This is only an-illusion.
- The inside of this crystalline rock evidently belongs to him.
- Tranquility about the attitude.
- Save.
- This country should never lack rain.
- Choke.
- It is abominable to see the bear excel.
- The little devil came to a stop?
- Found in soap extract.
- This defence of felled trees could be the answer to the question "What is a nocturnal mouse-like and flying quadruped?"

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- Confused phrase for a famous porter's nationality.
- Here you find us once mixed.
- Convey into exile; this might be "te trop."
- Net tax still in existence.
- This crustacean is obviously not cooked inside.
- Odd dwelling for an old woman with a large number of offspring.

Clues down

- Spoil the drink on the border.
- Creep in disorder around the French and the result is put back into position.
- The point of the register?
- Articles of toilet for one in a racing boat?
- Turned back in a flat peninsula; this is out of place.
- Adding machine?
- Her best mixture for a drink.
- Stingy period in the interim.
- Grass to spare?
- A Kipling character suffers a reverse in the face of a fuss, and produces a comic opera.

No. 694 (Constructed by R.W.H.)

