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HUNTING HONKERS

by

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"Onkle-onkle! Onkle-onkle!" windy and musical sounded the dark sky. The night was full of wings and voices, excited, babbling voices of the geese faring southward from the frosty northern swamps. There was no moon and it was foggy. At times they seemed to be confused and were so close that the swishing of wings could be heard. One might fly into the open window. Had they lost their way, and were they milling low to spy some landmarks and get started again?

For an hour or more the cohorts kept the air full of sounds; and I followed them as they trailed off faintly-- and were gone. I closed my eyes and pictured the V-shaped wedge forging along through the night. How I remembered them from former years. Sometimes a gust of wind struck them, the bird ribbons wavered and blew out of line and slowly struggled back. Sometimes there were tired ones that dropped behind, and others filled the gaps. Each bird needed as clear a field as possible, and the wedge formation allowed each one to look over the wing of the one ahead. It also provided more air resistance.

On they went, flying high when visibility was good, and ever more frequently passing over great squares on the ground that were ablaze with lights, out of which other and greater birds launched roaring into the sky to scare them from

their path. It seemed that all the earth was awake. Would they ever find that hidden island and slide down the air to its quietness? They didn't know that the world was on fire with war, and that there was no peace. Striking off into the wilder regions, they came to refuges where it was dark and cool, and they heard bird voices below. And finally they reached the long sandy island in the middle of the big river.

It was a cold, drizzly morning along the upper Columbia. The air was saturated. The wind swept up the gorge from the West. I pulled my sweater close about my neck, and buttoned my coat. A slicker is nearly as good as the close-fitting feathers on a duck's back.

"Rain and wind's just what we need for good ^{Rubber} goose shooting," said my driver.

In two minutes we were climbing out of the town of Arlington, which is set in a narrow dip that cuts two hundred yards wide into the rim-rock on the south bank of the Columbia. Arlington is not situated for a city. It is a landing place for goose hunters.

We founded over the ridge out of the canyon and caught the distant gabbling. By this time the dawn had come. We could see both banks of the broad river. Ahead of us and across nearly to the opposite bank lay a long, low gravel bar, the shape of a big rowboat with its prow cutting the current. Looking closer, I could see the tiny black specks upon it that were as thick as the pebbles. The island was laden almost to

the sinking point with Canada geese. Here and there was a white speck where a snow goose was mingling with the darker members of his tribe.

These canyons are the fly-ways of the geese from the Columbia to the grain fields above the rim-rocks. I suppose these air trails have been used many generations before the sheep paths were made up and down the ridges. When the geese alight on the gravel bars, they are not only protected by law, but the residents of the town do not allow anyone to land on the island and disturb the birds. It is illegal to shoot within a quarter of a mile of the high water mark. No matter how much geese are hunted in other places, they have learned that their rights are sacredly guarded on this refuge.

An old gander is as wise as any bird dressed in feathers. If a restless hunter takes just one peep over the rim, the game is up. A goose has an eagle eye, and one wink is enough to swing the whole line about and light out for the moon. And it seems if there is one clod in a four-hundred acre field out of place, he'll see it. A smart old bird makes a good leader. He will lead a bunch of these grain guzzlers up into a field, and they will mow a swath through a section like a combinè harvester at work.

By this time we had climbed to our rocky ambush which felt to me like one of the old Indian outlooks where the redmen picked off the pioneers as they trailed along the river bank below. This might have been one of the relics of

the Old Oregon Trail, for here were two round peep-holes just in the right place to point a rifle. I got my picture gun ready for I knew I would have to crouch low without a movement.

All this time the continuous honking and indescribable babel of sounds scattered upward from the throats of the feathered multitude and raised me to a pitch of excitement. The restless, moving spell of the morning was on the flocks. Bunches and small bands had started to move up and down the river. I saw a band of several hundred, evidently with a purpose in their minds. It was the first main flight, and instead of coming low over the rim, they were taking advantage of the wind and climbing high out of gun shot. Did they feel the gunners hidden in their blinds up here--and me, too?

"Bang! Bang!" came from across the canyon, followed by several shots to the left down the ridge. Not a feather fell. Dead silence again.

There was a lull for a few minutes, then another leader came flying over, followed by a company of twenty-one, but they, too, scented danger and climbed like a scared airplane going over a volcano. Then came a critical moment. A line of necks was coming straight for us, growing bigger every instant. Whether it was a slight movement or merely a suspicion, I don't know, but the old gander suddenly shifted to the right and the rear guard veered with him out of range, except the last seven. One of their number, evidently an inexperienced bird, shot off over our fortress. He was low. Here was a picture. Just before he got over us, a shot sounded

from below. He winced as the first barrel pelted into his feathers, and started to climb, but he had discovered his mistake too late. The second barrel broke a wing. He folded up and hit the ground with a thud that knocked the life out of him.

We lay crouched in the pit, and the minutes went by. I itched to peek over the edge and see what was going on. Then from a distance, I saw a long line coming toward us, closer, and closer. It was going to be a good shot. When the nose of the wedge was directly overhead, I lifted my camera and fired a broadside. *What a sport in hunting hawks.*