

TWENTY-FOUR

THE WILD GOOSE CHASE

The only story in this collection not signed “N. Vernon-Wood,” this is also the only piece not set in the Rockies or adjacent ranges (Selkirks, Cariboos, etc). One reason for using a fictitious name is that another story of his, “It’s a Woman’s World,” appeared in the same issue of the magazine. Tex seems to have been trying his hand at a genre piece outside of his own immediate experience—or perhaps he hunted in New Jersey when visiting one of his Wall Street or other New York clients [his daughter Dorothy, herself also a mountain guide, on and off, until her seventies, visited some of them in the 1950s, with my father Harry in tow—AG]. The style is clearly the same as in the other “straight stories,” and the gentle irony alone would mark this as one of Tex’s. It is worth noting that mountain masculinity is transposed here into the register of winter masculinity; a man’s ability to withstand the cold functioning as a gauge of his hunting prowess on cold marches and sea-shores in early winter. Success comes only at the expense of considerable discomfort and risk, though these are clearly secondary to the successful hunt and occasion some grumbling on the part of the narrator.

—AG



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THE WILD GOOSE CHASE

Hank the Viking puts out to sea in pursuit of a wounded gander

by Ramon Chesson

Illustrations by the Author

YOU'VE SEEN THE MARSH tossed and flattened by a cold, driving wind. You know how low, gray clouds sweeping in from the northwest can drive snow down your neck and chill you to the marrow. It's bad enough in daylight, but only a duck hunter can stand it before dawn. And only a most hardy duck hunter really likes it.

Hank is that kind of duck hunter. He has hunted ducks all the way from the east coast to the west. He has knocked birds down in the Louisiana bayous when you could fry an egg on a tin roof. He has lolled in the Texas marshes with his collar open and his sleeves rolled to the elbow and played pinochle between shots. But he'd rather get one duck in the south Jersey lowlands with a blizzard howling around his ears than to bring down ten with perspiration soaking his arm pits.

I guess I kind of like it, too. That's why we were both out there that morning. But even if you like a thing it can be overdone . . . or so it seemed to me after about an hour. The east had lightened almost imperceptibly. I hauled out my watch and leaned over to get the glow of Hank's cigarette on the dial. "Still plenty of time to wait," I announced. Hank got up, shook off the snow, and looked out at the white marsh. Then he settled back in the flimsy blind and puffed away. For stoicism, Epictetus was a bush leaguer.

After a while the east was distinctly gray. Hank got up, shook off the

snow, and looked out at the white marsh. Then he settled back in his corner, lighted another cigarette and declared, "This is the life!" I was silent.

"This is the best spot, you know," he said after a few puffs. I was still silent.

"Maybe we did get here a little early," he continued after a pause.

"That sounds reasonable," I agreed.

"But then," Hank observed, "we had to come early to make sure nobody would beat us to it."

I didn't remember seeing anybody groping around in the marsh looking for the blind. I still think we might have gone out there a little later without danger of finding the place occupied. However, there we were and there we stayed. And along about the time the sun must have been coming up somewhere back of that storm, we saw our first ducks. Funny how the sight of a flock of mallards can chase the cold away. The snow still drove through the gray pall of dawn. The cutting wind still whistled through our blind. Out across the bay the waves still whipped along with icy white caps. But when that old drake led his harem by a scant hundred yards to our left I actually broke out in a sweat. On they went. The few battered decoys we had thrown out in the dark might as well have been home in the shed. We stood straining our eyes as those ducks rode the tail wind out over the bay and were swallowed by the snow.

Hank pulled out another cigarette and squatted out of the wind to light it. Then he settled back in his corner. "You better stand up a while and watch," he suggested. "I'll sit back here and try to think of something."

I STOOD UP AND WATCHED. All I could see was a silvery gray expanse of flattened marsh, and I could only see a couple of hundred yards of that. Snow flakes as big as acorns were hurrying by on all sides. Our skiff was completely covered and looked like a muskrat mound. And my ears were frozen. Before long the biting wind seem to whisper in them that I was getting a raw deal.

"Listen," I said, crouching beside Hank, "I don't know what you're trying to think of, but I'll be glad to help you." So I bummed one of his smokes and we just sat there.

After about fifteen minutes the deadened report of a shot rolled by with the storm. From somewhere over the marsh came another shot. At last the inland duck hunters, the pond shooters, were getting busy. And that's where we came in, for we were on a point that afforded practically all the

shelter the bay had to offer to ducks driven out of the ponds, and now that the war had started we forgot the cold and felt very happy about the whole thing. In fact, as well as I can remember, we were standing there in the storm exchanging congratulatory hand shakes when that first teal came by and brushed the snow off our caps. The little fellow made a short swing and plopped right in the middle of the decoys. We peeped over the top of the blind at him like a couple of G-men savoring the predicament of a cornered public enemy. And he saw us, too, for he sailed straight up into the wind like a kite. It was a beautiful shot. I still don't see how we both missed him.

The pond shooters were raising the devil by that time. Muffled booms were coming with regularity. And occasionally small bunches of mallards, black ducks and teal were coming, too. But there weren't coming close enough. All we could do was crouch there and cuss and pray and hope. But they still didn't come close enough.

"Maybe the decoys have blown away," Hank suggested. So we raised up on the other side of the blind to take inventory, and when we did about eight mallards came out of that bunch of decoys and started climbing. I won't try to guess how long they had been there. They went straight up in the wind for about ten feet and they looked as large as box cars. I heard Hank squall, "MEAT ON THE TABLE!" and we went into action. When that flock got straightened out we had three down. They were in close to shore with little chance of the wind taking them away, so we just let them lay and gave our attention to the marsh again.

"I can't understand it," Hank said after a few more flocks went by out of range. "They must be transients. They don't know the lay of the land or they certainly wouldn't pass up this cozy spot."

"Those last two words," I grunted, knocking the snow loose and pulling my collar up around my paralyzed ears. "Please repeat those last two words."

"Cozy spot," Hank blinked the snow flakes from his eyelashes. "Why?"

"Never mind," I said. "I'm in no condition to get into an argument. I was just curious." And I clamped my chattering teeth together and stared at a dark spot I had glimpsed swinging toward us through the storm. It was so low I thought at first it must be a man. And before I had time to warn Hank it was on us—a flock of a dozen geese flying so low they almost brushed the marsh! Before I could raise my gun they were passing, some thirty feet to the right. Now, Hank had picked that particular time to stand in the

middle of the blind and gaze at the bay. To him, the first indication that something was happening came when I flounced around and upended both of us on the lee side of the blind. That flimsy construction wasn't erected to withstand a double assault, and it promptly collapsed. Hank had seen the geese, though, and amid the tangled rushes and general wreckage we proceeded to lay down what we hoped would be a withering fire, and despite the small size of our shot and the distance the geese had traveled during the confusion, it did look as if we had withered one old gander. The last one in the bunch began to lose speed and altitude, and just before the storm blotted him out he was flopping along only a few inches above the whitecaps.

WE SCRAMBLED UP and stood five or six minutes straining our eyes through the wall of snow, but it seemed the storm had conspired with that old goose and blew in harder than ever, hiding everything beyond a hundred and fifty yards of our wrecked blind.

Just then a bunch of black ducks sailed by and we both clicked on empty shells. After a series of concerted "damns" we reloaded and examined the bay again. "Well," Hank finally said, "we've got to get that gander."

I looked at him in amazement. "Hank," I spoke as quietly as I could, "once that skiff gets beyond the protection of the marsh it'll blow clear over to the Delaware side!"

"No," Hank was thoughtful, "the water is shallow out there. A boat can be poled through it. I don't believe it will blow away." He thought the problem over a couple of minutes. "I don't believe it will," he repeated.

"Well," I said, "I know how it is. A goose is a rare thing in this section and you hate to lose him. And since it's your idea, I think you're the man to get the gander."

We dug the boat out of the snow and while I stood by to yell and shoot, and generally act as a fog-horn in case he should lose sight of the shore, Hank the Viking put out to sea.

About two hundred yards out he turned at right angles with the shore and started poling along with more enthusiasm than progress. Between flurries of snow, I was able to follow his progress, and it was evident a race was going on out there. It was also evident that Hank was running a very poor second, for he suddenly threw the pole in the boat and began shooting. That's one way to win a race...or so you'd think. However, after

two or three minutes he finally put the gun down, poled a few yards through the whitecaps, and picked up his victim.

Fifteen minutes later he was back on shore.

“That gander must have been doing a rare piece of maneuvering.” I greeted him. “You did a darn fine job of shooting up the bay!”

“Now listen,” Hank snorted between chattering teeth, “don’t stretch my temper. Every time that cussed boat went up the gander went down. An now I’m going home. I got the goose and ducks. You get the decoys. The wind still cut like a knife and my ears were still frozen, but somehow, after seeing Hank out there chasing that goose, I didn’t feel like I was getting such a raw deal after all.

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