

THE GLORIOUS TWELFTH

Is it OK for old men to fantasise?

You see, tomorrow is the 12th of August – The Glorious 12th.

For many years now I have had this fantasy or dream that one year I would attend a shoot on a grouse moor in Scotland on the opening day of the season.

I have been fortunate enough to actually walk over a heather covered moor, and even flushed some grouse from right under my feet. Of course it was out of season and I didn't have a gun, but it did stir quite strongly that desire to do it properly one day.

It may not ever happen for me, but dreams are free, and I can enjoy my fantasy in the privacy of my own home.

In my fantastic dream, I will fly to England, first class of course. I will need to leave quite early as there will be a number of details to attend to on arrival, and I wouldn't like to feel rushed.

My first appointment will be at 73 James St London, the home of the Boss Gun Company. I do not want anything but the best and they have been making best guns for nearly three hundred years. I shall have pre ordered a side by side, 28 inch, side lock gun with a straight stock. It will be waiting for me, but I will need a final fitting and a few days on the practice range. The gun will come in an oak and leather travelling case, and have a range of tools and accessories, and cleaning kit. I am expecting it to cost me around 55000 Sterling for the nice second hand one offered.

My original thought was to buy a new pair, but that all seemed a bit extravagant.

My next stop will be in Saville Row. I could not possibly turn up in my scruffy antipodean clothes. I think a nicely tailored tweed hunting jacket and plus fours in a restrained brown and green plaid would be appropriate, and I will top that off with a deer stalkers cap to match.

I will also need to find some tan Loake's boots to keep my feet warm and dry.

On my arrival in Inverness, I expect I will be met by Hamish, the factor. He manages the shooting estate, and will take me to my accommodation, and make certain I'm provided with all the comforts that a man on a shooting party would expect and enjoy.

On the morning of the 12th, I along with others in the party will be ferried in the Range Rover to the butts on the moor. These are carefully placed to conceal the guns, as we are now called, from the birds. Everyone will be as well dressed as I am. It would be bad form to be not wearing a tie, preferably from a respected regiment or school or perhaps a gentleman's club. There will be handsome Labradors with impeccable manners, standing on the left of their masters. People will have taken their guns from the travelling cases and will now have them slung over their shoulders in canvas and leather gun slips, muzzles pointing down of course. There will be hip flasks and ammo pouches, and the draw for shooting positions. The ghillie, who I expect will be called Dougal or Donal, will help brief us on protocol and how best to succeed. Once in place and prepared, the signal will be given to the beaters, with their

sticks and flags and spaniels to begin. They will work their way over the moor, through the heather and endeavour to present the birds to us, the guns. Some people will be lucky and get a sizable bag. Others will fire a lot of shots for not much reward, and some who may have had an unlucky draw may not get much sport at all.

At the end of the shoot, the bag will be laid out and counted, and all will be recorded in the estate Game Book. A brace of birds will be presented to each of the guns and the rest will remain with the estate.

We will all be taken back to the estate manor house for drinks and the traditional banquet. This will be another grand occasion, and perhaps worthy of a full description at another time.

The problem with fantasies and dreams is that we have to wake up and face reality. The reality is that I will have to wait until the first Saturday in May. I will get out my Japanese made 20 gauge, I will wear my Skellerup, farm gumboots and a Swandri jacket. I will drive myself and a friend, or perhaps take my grandson and his 410, which is definitely worth another story, and I will take my Chesapeake Bay retriever to a farm pond.

I always enjoy an evening shoot best. We get there about 4.30 although we know that it is unlikely there will be any ducks until it is nearly dark at around 6pm.

The pond is quite big. Big enough for 2 or 3 guns to cover safely. It is in a valley floor, and has remnants of native bush down to the water's edge in parts. We will find a sunny spot to sit and wait. We will talk about the cloud formations which we see as the sun sets. We will see the Tui swoop from tree to tree. Flocks of swallows will sweep across the pond surface, catching some of the clouds of insects. Piwakawaka will be aerobically working away a little higher on other insects. From time to time a big fat kereru will flop its way from the forest on one side to a tree on the other. We will talk about the birds and the changing colours and marvel at the beauty of it all, and think how lucky we are.

As dusk approaches, we will hear the morepork give its signal for us to get into our hides. Just before dark, they will come. First of all the gray Teal. Fast and direct, with their squeaky voices and their flash of white when flying. Straight down onto the middle of the pond. We let them stay as they are still protected. Next, the noisy clumsy Paradise ducks will come. 2s 4s and 6s and sometimes big flocks. They do not seem to have any sense of danger. They are not great eating so we do not shoot many. But it gives me a chance to allow my dog to do what she has been bred to do. Her eyes follow every approaching bird, and every shot. When a bird falls she is off, bounding through the rushes and swimming powerfully. For a dedicated wildfowler, it is truly thrilling to see a good retriever working over water.

Just on dark, when there is only a crescent of light in the west, I will feel her start to quiver. Her head will swing round as she follows the sound we have not yet heard. There are mallards circling. There are few more cunning quarry. They will come and go and circle several times until, if we are lucky enough, they will make a pass within range across that narrow patch of light. With a bit of luck, one or two will come down and Islay will be off into the dark before they splash down. She will work a way until she has retrieved everything and will then continue looking for more. She is in her element.

We will collect up our birds and make our way home through the dark. We may have two or three birds, sometimes none, but we will listen to the sounds around us. Birds, possums, dogs in the distance. We will look at the moon and the stars and always the Southern Cross reminding us of who and where we are.

Once home, we will feed the dog and attend to that most essential part of any hunting excursion, anywhere. It is sad and distressing to see a gun which has been put away dirty and damp, and allowed to rust. There is also nothing more evocative of the joys and trials of shooting than the smell on Steven Young's gun oil.

So we go inside. The fire is blazing and food is being prepared. The dog will lie right in front of the fire to dry out. Later she will twitch and whimper as she dreams of more big greenheads to be recovered. We will dismantle our guns and allow them to dry too. I have read several times that they should be "aired" for about exactly the time it takes to pour and slowly drink a glass of good scotch. I have never found any good reason to disagree with that.

So we have the fantasy and the reality. I am happy with both, but one day, maybe, I will make the fantasy the reality.