January 23, 1995

Mr. Slaton White
Field & Stream
2 Park Avenue
New York, NY 10016

Dear Slaton:

Here's the story we discussed, revised to change the dog's name from Huckleberry to Xenophon. There are a couple of other dinky changes to make the new name fit in.

I like Xeno. Conjures up the first major work on hunting dogs (as explained in the story). Good crisp call name, too. I might even make this story retroactively accurate with my next male pointer.

But if you prefer, we could used plain old Tom, which (as a Mark Twain fan) I also plan to use some day.

Yours,

Enclosed:
"The News from Mt. Olympus" -- Revised 1/23/95
Diskette

About 1780 words

Datus Proper
1085 Hamilton Road
Belgrade, MT 59714
(406) 388-3345

THE NEWS FROM MT. OLYMPUS[1]

You never know where a pheasant may lead you.

Saturday's pheasant sneaked out of a woody bottom, slithered through scraggly alfalfa right in front of me, and ran up a grassy knob in the distance. I caught no glimpse of the bird, mind you, but my dog followed it out of the brush and showed me what was going on. Xenophon's nose was not high in the air, as it would have been for a hot trail, but he was not puzzling out stale scent either. I guessed that our quarry had a hundred-yard lead.

Long before I could climb the knob, Xeno had disappeared over its top, dark-brown wiggle in field faded yellow. On my right flank was David King, making better time than me -- partly because he had enough sense to skirt the hill. David is in good shape, too. He is a physician who limits himself to sixteen hours of work a day, unless a patient gets sick, and keeps in shape by aerobic exercise -- chasing pheasants, preferably. With David around I push myself a little harder, because he knows the difference between a red face and an emergency-room case.

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1. Text revised to change dog's name.

From the top of the knob, I could hear Xeno -- just barely -- from where he was standing on point. He had followed his bird down the far side of the hill, across a dirt lane, and up the steep side of a bench.

Pheasant-trailing, you see, is a very old sport adapted to changed conditions. We have no wild boars in my part of the world, but the feeling is the same and the pheasants taste better. The main problem is that my dog cannot tell us where he is holding game at bay, so we hang a beeper around his neck and pretend that it is a horn blowing the assembly call. The more things change, the more they stay the same.

In the days when gods and humans hunted together, boars caused devastation -- even on Mount Olympus -- and killed some of the mortal men called in to help. Xenophon chases pheasants in the heroic manner and expects David and me to do our duty too. It's good to have a dog like this, once in a lifetime. I am not sure that I could survive another.

David trotted up the bench and then kept moving till he and Xeno blocked the bird's escape on the far side. I sneaked in on the near corner of the triangle.

What happened next was the most colorful part of life since the fireworks on July 4 -- the part when they played the Star-Spangled Banner and we all leaped to attention. From tan grass burst a fluster of red and green, gorgeous and almost within reach. It was an optical illusion staged to make a fast bird look slow for just long enough to throw my timing off. I

jerked into action, fired too soon, then aimed with excruciating precision and missed a second shot at very long range, which was how I learned that the cock was moving right along.

David tried too hard with his first shot, like me, but swung through with his second barrel. I knew that the pheasant had lost its bet even before the puff of feathers. This game is all in the head.

There is, however, one part beyond my ken. Why did that rooster sit tight when Xeno circled it? Perhaps it paused to gather its breath for flight, discovered that the predator on its trail had stopped too, and found stasis less risky than movement. Or perhaps the bird simply gave up, like the Trojan warrior who threw himself at Achilles' feet. Of all mythic heroes, Achilles was the most intense, and he did not relent. Neither did Xenophon.

David and I had often seen the same pattern in old cocks: The farther one runs, the more likely it is to hold tight at the end of the trail. Dog and prey reach some kind of understanding -- a fatal entente.

Xeno brought me the trophy and I laid it out on the grass, feathers glowing, long tail slightly curved from crouching in cramped quarters. David and I flopped beside our quarry.

"Nothing else could make me work that hard," David said.

We humans would have given our hearts more time to stop pounding, but Xenophon held his nose high, caught a message on the breeze, and started off, moving his head from side to side

with a new thread of scent. We tried to keep up.

Runners

Our method may strike you as the hard way to get a pheasant dinner. Bear in mind, however, that the roosters we chase are utterly wild and hard to find. It would be a thrill to see birds rising in waves from the fields where such things happen, but I am not complaining and have heard no gripes from David King, except that he could use more time off. There is always a place for us to stretch legs and lungs, always a fast dog slicing arcs from sunlit hillsides. There just isn't much shooting.

Ours, then, is a method for scarce pheasants. It would not make sense to follow a rooster up Mount Olympus if the flatlands below were full of others.

Before Xenophon, I had a notion that some pheasants, at least, simply hid as hunters approached. It was an idea that came from sporting prints of dogs on point. They would be in whatever pose was fashionable at the time -- standing tall or crouching, tails high or low -- looking statuesque, anyhow. The birds would be painted in front of the dogs' noses, equally immobile.

In fact, however, wild pheasants are moving targets, whether on the ground or in the air. You might catch one on its roost early in the morning or during a winter storm, but most adult birds sit only after they have tried everything else first, and then only if the ground-cover is good enough to conceal them.

In smaller fields, you can follow the runners at a human

pace, pushing them toward an edge where they will have to flush. Hunting is often organized around edges -- but experienced roosters avoid them if possible, and habitat today may be extensive. Over the last decade, the Conservation Reserve Program has set aside 36 million acres of cropland, much of it in large pieces.

Remember when you watched a pup running wild and flushing pheasants far ahead? There were more birds in the field than you expected, weren't there? What if Buster could have held them?

<u>You can't catch a pheasant.</u>

Of course, you could hold your dog to a human pace -- but if you do, an experienced pheasant will get farther and farther ahead of you. On occasions when David and I have chased wing-tipped roosters over bare fields, they have run at about twice our speed. Fortunately, the dog is twice as fast again. I don't know the speeds in miles per hour, but they vary with conditions anyhow. The ratio stays about the same at 1:2:4 for human:pheasant:dog.

In those figures is the reason for a dog that trails at high speed and holds a bird till you catch up. The principle is the same for all species from quail on up. Pheasants just happen to run fastest and farthest before they hold.

The advantages of the trail-and-point method are obvious, for us humans. The canine side of the deal, however, is harder to understand. Why should a dog contribute so much of the team's

skill and strength, then hold the pheasant for you? Why should he want to hunt till he collapses in your arms after his last, pain-relieving injection? The answer, I think, is that there is no deal, for the dog. He sees himself as part of you, and you as part of him. He merges.

I am a pack-hunter too, but I lack the courage to merge. I am better than my dog at conceptual thinking, and it is hard to be heroic when you understand consequences. I worry about the Fates cutting my thread when David King is not around. I wonder if Xeno would know enough to howl.

Becoming A Hero

Dog and human had already been working together for ages when the original Xenophon, a Greek General, wrote about the chase some 2,400 years ago. Since then the good old genes have been passed on to some dogs in every generation, surviving wars, pestilence, canine beauty contests, and modern field trials.

My Xeno is a German shorthaired pointer from a field-trial line, but he became what field-trial contestants deplore -- a dog that thinks for himself. He had to be trusted, because we humans could not move fast enough to overtake the pheasant.

Trailing came instinctively to Xeno, when he was a pup, but judgment had to be learned -- one lesson at a time. How hard could you push a rooster? How wide a loop should you run to cut it off? How close should you get for the point? How soon should you resume trailing if the bird sneaks out?

All this may sound too much like human reasoning, for those who do not accept that dogs have a kind of consciousness. Whatever the explanation, Xeno did teach himself to stand and deliver -- though of course there were failures. The ground-cover might be too thin, the pheasant too spooky, or the pup too bold. Caution was the hardest of the lessons.

Xenophon's faults, however, are shared by his humans, and we have been no faster to learn. We show too much zeal in an enterprise that is not listed on the stock exchange. We exhaust our lives' energies chasing risky propositions.

Xeno's virtues, on the other hand, are his own, and they stand out more clearly as his muzzle grows gray. David and I may see grass move as a bird passes through but the vision is fleeting, like a breath of wind on calm water. To stay with the trail, we must free our spirits to run on four legs. Dog looks back, urges us to keep the faith. His courage pulls us along. Head without heart cannot amount to much, but together they add up to a pure and shining passion.

In the days when it mattered more, Artemis was both goddess of the hunt and protector of wildlife (head of the Olympic Fish & Wildlife Service, you might say). On the assumption that she still keeps up with her reading, there is a favor to ask of her. If there are pheasants in the Elysian Fields -- and we know you wouldn't settle for less, Ma'am -- may we please bring Xenophon along?

[SIDEBAR (optional)]

[pick a dog that can trail -- and let him do it.]

If I am granted a turn in the Elysian Fields, let my dog be waiting for me where the trail begins. We will disappear into the grass as two hunters and return as one, hero at last.

My sole virtue, as a puppy-trainer, was that I discouraged Huckleberry from the wrong game. Like his wild ancestors, he could trail in any mode -- hot scent, cold scent, or sight. I watched him outrun a fox, on one occasion, and a white-tailed deer on another. Today, however, he sticks to game with feathers on it.

The trail is often patchy, harder to follow than the scent left by those forbidden rabbits and raccoons and such.

We are sharp-spurred old roosters, by now, too stringy to fry.

and it is true that game thrives in edgy places, including the borders of David King's vegetable garden. But pheasants need no borders. They need food, shelter, and water, and find all three in some broad fields.

Your dog runs in the wind as he runs in your dreams. He is a courier with the news from Mt. Olympus. He finds immortal game after an Apollonian pursuit.

The gods and goddesses on Mt. Olympus relied on dogs, just like the mortals below the clouds.

For the human side, the advantages of this arrangement are obvious. The dog can trail and hold game in fields that most

hunters have considered unproductive. Over the last decade, [] millions [] of acres of such habitat has been planted under the Conservation Reserve Program.

trail may be is a squiggle of lines and gaps, but it is

Thoreau wrote that "The dog is the tamed wolf, as the villager is the tamed savage."

Of one thing I feel sure: Huck does not track, in the literal sense of following footprints. Tracking is what we humans do. It is a visual skill, unreliable except in fresh snow. A pheasant can hide its tracks, but the scent-trail is almost always there.

We have splendid hunting. There just isn't much shooting.

We must become Huckleberry.

The pup's ability to trail turned out to be a gift from the gods.

We must be as big as our dog.

whence came the sound of a hunting horn calling us to game at bay.

The answers required judgment, not instinct.

following a sneaky little scent as it wound under alfalfa, over puddles, and across gravel.

By the time he was seven months old, he could stay with the only rooster in a wide afternoon. The hard part was judgment, which came

Version w/ dog named Huck

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the name-change version.

the original

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In the days when it mattered more, Artemis was both goddess of the hunt and protector of wildlife (head of the Olympic Fish & Wildlife Service, you might say). On the assumption that she still keeps up with her reading, there is a favor to ask of her. If there are pheasants in the Elysian Fields -- and we know you wouldn't settle for less, Ma'am -- may we please bring Huckleberry along?

May have sent this too you before Hercles' name changed to Xenophon. Wish I'd had a little more space for this one.

About 1780 words

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You dogged his footsteps!

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He was "going to the game" - farther & farther until he found scent

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Game & Fish (or Wildlife) Management

I think a lot of NE Montana is reverting over past 30 yrs & have gone there

A PLACE OF OUR OWN

There's a lot to do on 60 acres.

Wildlife uses all of our farm, fanning out from a marshy core that has survived without much change, over the years since Lewis and Clark passed through, simply because it is too wet to plow and too brushy for cattle. You can sit in the shade of a cottonwood and watch whatever show is playing. Yesterday the actors were baby teal skittering after midges, sandhill cranes dancing, and sora rails practicing their ventriloquist act.

Immersion in nature is the best part of this place. It's not paradise, mind you -- not when you learn the problems -- and sixty acres are hardly enough to give me or my dogs a run. None of us are complaining, though. We've all done time on pavement, and this is better.

<u>Getting particular</u>

When you add water to a piece of Montana, you bring to the surface a curious, post-glacial fertility. We dug a deep pond,

and it works. Painted turtles crawl up on the banks for what must be their mating season (though it's hard to be sure, with a turtle) and diving ducks drop in on their way to Canada. Just once a loon called while we were having breakfast and got me so stirred up that I spilled tea on my jeans.

The problem with still water, in this climate, is that ice keeps birds and mammals away for three or four months. Trout in the pond may run short of oxygen, too. Meanwhile the spring creek remains open, a winding corridor with riffles and pools and deep dark holes where a monster could hide.

Here in the family, we began calling it Humility Creek -- not so much a philosophical statement as a reflection on the eyes of fly-fishers slinking homeward. The brown trout at least had the courtesy to feed discreetly, but the rainbows got you talking to yourself. They would lie in mid-stream, taking every mayfly that came by, except for the one with a hook in it.

Research was in order. We began marking each trout we could land by clipping its adipose fin, then releasing it and trying to catch it again. What we found was embarrassing: These fish learn faster than us humans. With occasional exceptions, trout in Humility Creek do not fall for a fly twice in the same year.

Somewhere along the banks, however, there is usually a better fisherman. The heron moves in geologic time. I cannot keep up with its slowness. My attention wanders. But when I look again, the great gangly bird has a squirming rainbow in its beak.

Heron is the teacher. He does not fish on general principles

and neither do you, his student -- not unless you want a humility lesson. You sneak up on one particular trout till you can see its spots. You figure out that it is taking sulfur duns in the surface film, and then you offer the fly it expects to see. You watch first and cast later.

The same is true for every other problem on the place, too. You don't just do something. You stand there. But you keep your eyes open, like the great blue heron.

Learning to See

Take our lazy-man's lawn, for example. After an adjoining field burned, we developed a keen interest in the fire-break around our house, and from there one thing led to another. The white-tailed deer -- supposedly browsers -- spent winter nights cropping the grass. In return they left genuine organic fertilizer pellets, which revived growth early in spring. And that ring of green lawn turned into a circus.

The opening act was a snipe (presumably female) who trundled over the short grass, pursued by others (presumably male) who acted like jerks. She pretended to ignore them. At about the same time, several killdeers appointed themselves night watchmen, and a pair of spotted sandpipers hatched young so tiny that they could barely navigate through the dandelions. The harrier took an interest in the chicks but I shooed him off. her?

Conclusion: One weedy lawn per sixty acres creates an edge-effect, attracting wildlife. It is not a problem and does

not need fixing.

But you seldom get so lucky. A farm is, by definition, an ecology altered to feed humans, and you have to remember where you fit in the food chain. You don't take possession, exactly, but you take responsibility. am Indians knew they were stewards

There are stories -- some accurate -- about folks who love the pretty purple flowers on their construction site. And no wonder. Knapweed is the most carefree ground-cover there is, short of the plastic stuff in stadiums. With knapweed, you needn't worry about harriers eating sandpipers. There are no sandpipers. There isn't much wildlife of any kind.

Our backpack sprayer controls knapweed and other noxious Eurasian plants, but it's a never-ending job. The trick is to work up a warlike mood. Our teenager would be good at spot-spraying if he weren't busy at his computer, zapping aliens from outer space. I'm stuck with the kind here on the ground.

Managing mud

The spring creek has also been labor-intensive. Most of the willows along its course are gone now, and all of the native grayling. They lost their cool, deep habitat when cattle knocked down the banks and widened the channel.

Experiments taught us a method of restoration that works in this particular creek. With cheap boards and bailing-wire, you build wing dams -- planks angling downstream across part of the channel. Silt settles out below the wings and watercress

stabilizes the accretion. There are no floods to scour the deposits, so the process repeats year after year. Eventually a vegetated point protrudes into the stream, forming a pool.

If an impartial professor were passing out grades for mud-management, our stream improvements might deserve a B. Maybe even a B+, considering the low cost. In real life, the trout let us know how we're doing -- and they show up whenever a new pool offers shelter from the heron. If you build it, they will come.

Farther down the food chain, life is exuberant. We were watering trees from the creek when we noticed squadrons of Baetis nymphs in our buckets. The name mattered because it meant that the tiny animals were not just bugs. They were beautiful, and they depended on us. We put them back in the stream.

When you find yourself scooping hundreds of mayfly nymphs by accident, it comes as no surprise that the trout are fat. The spring creek's new, sunlit bed may be producing more fish-food than in primitive times. Indeed, the whole farm seems to have more life per acre than the wilderness areas where we fish and hunt. For quantity of fauna from warblers to eagles, this place gets an A.

← Nice. Rufs of Aldo Leopold and his Sand County.

Innocence lost

The original ecology, however, can never be restored. None of the trout now present are native to the watershed. Neither are the white-tailed deer, who are hard on vegetation, nor the raccoons, who raid ground-nesting birds. The bluegrass on the

banks is an exotic that took hold because it could tolerate heavy grazing. The pheasants are from China. And come to think of it, my wife is Irish.

In the days of Lewis and Clark, large predators would have controlled populations of both smaller predators and big game. Today, the large predators are in this valley are us -- the humans -- and we come equipped with wide-angle lenses. We see woods and fields as islands of tranquility in an ugly urban world. When you zoom in, however, nature is not peaceful and certainly not stable. The white-tailed deer, for example, have outgrown their food supply.

Late on a November afternoon, there comes an opportunity to prune the herd selectively. Deer feed in an open field and I sneak to its edge through brush, reversing the normal habitat of hunter and whitetail. There is time to pick a doe without fawns -- probably one who lost this year's twins but will breed again soon. A bipod keeps the cross-hairs steady on her heart. For some quaint masculine reason I don't want to do this, but she is plump, for a deer, and she will taste better than one of us raunchy old bucks.

Give me a C for management of deer. They are still browsing back the buffaloberry brush, but at least the herd has not built up to a bust.

With ducks, make the grade a D. When I looked up from work just now, the creek was full of green heads, yellow beaks, and wiggles -- mallard drakes in courtship display. Another drake has

just dropped in, wings cupped, orange feet down as if landing in decoys. What concerns me (and the bachelor drakes) is that only one hen has shown up for the party.

I think I know why the hens are scarce. My steady old dog helps me with an annual, informal census, and finding nests is a cinch for him. It may be equally easy for the skunks -- who won't stop on point.

Some good-sized broods nevertheless hatch and reach the stream, where I see Ms. Mallard with eleven fuzzy ducklings the first day, then nine, six, five, three.

The problem is habitat. It favors small predators over prey in ways that cannot be changed much, in a valley with ever more people. More houses produce more roving cats, more fragmented cover for the magpies, and more trees for the great horned owls. It all looks nice, though -- unless you're a duck.

Biologists' studies confirm that ducks are having trouble staying ahead of predation. Trappers could help to even the balance, but low fur prices provide little incentive.

Costs and benefits

We are aiming for the ecology of an old-fashioned farm with small fields, hedgerows, marshes, and trees -- not the best of all possible worlds, but the best available.

Our hay field is in a mixture of alfalfa and grass, which is good for a brood of pheasants but must not be cut before they are off the nest. The other field is in barley, which the deer will

eat if it is left standing too long. When harvested, however, some grain spills on the ground for ducks, pheasants, cranes, geese, and passerine birds.

There are costs. Alfalfa harvested late can lose value, and a field of barley left in stubble is harder to work when spring comes around. You give up a little of the income from other crops to produce wildlife. In economic terms, game is a crop too.

When you hunt or fish, on the other hand, game becomes "God's meat" (Aldo Leopold's term). Your investment was economic; your returns come in a different currency.

Psychic rewards are hard to measure, but perhaps the marketplace shows a way. Diversity outsells monoculture. Land with both wildlife and crops goes for a higher price than a "clean" field. The difference, I suppose, shows how much people like to live with wild things.

Maybe something in us is wild, too.

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