



DEER

A STORY

By Alvah C. Bessie

THE season opened with torrential rain that slanted down the east wall of the valley and, crossing the flats in a solid mass, fell for twenty-four hours on the Tapleys' house. It was surprisingly warm for the middle of November; there was even thunder (*thunder in November, green winter*) rolling behind the valley walls from south to north and re-echoing for minutes after it had passed. The road down past the house was a swift river of interweaving streams that carried off the surface gravel and ate deep ruts in the roadbed, like an acid.

All that first night the rain drummed on the worn shingles and hissed off the pitched roof onto the tangle of dead nasturtiums that bordered the house. They sat in the living-room watching dark wet spots form on the ceiling and spread up and down the room, and they listened to the howl of the swollen stream below the house. But after they had gone to bed, trying to lull their empty stomachs with sleep, the rain held off and frost came and when they looked out late the next morning (one less meal to worry about) they saw that the dry grass was white and the windows were frosted in intricate whorled patterns.

All that morning they lay about the house indulging their persistent lethargy, avoiding activity lest it bring on the imperious nausea that had become so frequent

in the past few weeks. Anna sat at the window and scraped at the frost-patterns with her scissors, peering down across the meadow toward the heavy stand of spruce on the hillside. "I wish I could see a deer," she said.

"You may see one before you expect to." She turned to him with a smile, saying, "You're not really going hunting today?" He nodded.

"Is Clem coming?"

"He said he would—" Irritated by her smile, he cried, "Why do you think I borrowed the old man's rifle?"

"You wouldn't shoot a fly."

"Self-preservation," he laughed.

"For an educated man, that's a pretty trite remark."

He sighed. "My dear," he said, "if I told you there were more important things in life than its irremediable aspects—money, food and work (of course there's love) you would answer—"

"—what I always have."

"To wit?"

"To wit: that we have no money, that we have no food, that you prefer not to work."

"True." He sat beside her and grasped her hands in his own, feeling a sudden urge toward her body, a sweet flux of love and pity for her that demanded closer contact, if only to hold her hand. "You have chosen," he said, "to become my wife—do I flatter myself when I say *not* for the little money I had, and in spite of the fact that I never worked when I had it?"

She bowed her head, powerless to answer and feeling a perfect fool for having spoken. As she saw it, it mattered little whether he worked or not, what he was or what he might become. (She felt there was nothing he might not achieve if he felt it worth the trouble.) She asked nothing but to be herself with him; to feel him at her side. Yet, "Money—" she said, and paused.

"We haven't got it. What does it matter where it went? More will come. . . ."

"From heaven, no doubt," she said wildly, tears in her eyes.

"From heaven," he said reverently, and kissed her hand.

"I'm awfully stupid, Bert," she said, "but how can it come if you won't work for it?"

"I have faith," he said, "in the power of virtue—Anna!" he said, "I don't know where I'm going, but I feel that I must wait for something that will be revealed to me—something that is growing, like a plant in the dark, something I feel always present wherever I am or whatever I am doing, yet I cannot give it a name." He looked shyly up from her lap and said, "Would you think me a fool if I said that what I feel is . . . love?"

"I love *you*," she said, and was bewildered when he rose with a sigh and said, "My dear, I know. . . ."

They spoke little during lunch, when he devoured the dry potato and the bread and peanut-butter as rapidly as he could. She ate slowly, turning the food carefully in her mouth, extracting its last particle of flavor. Then once more they sat in the living-room, listening to the slow interminable ticking of the clock, waiting for time to pass. During the meal there had been a light flurry of snow, and now she sat by the window once more, looking at it and wondering at the stillness of the earth—watching the snow lie quietly on the cold ground, and thinking of deer moving about, nibbling at the slight buds on the dormant trees. With the season opened yesterday there would already be men in the woods with pieces of red flannel pinned to their caps, moving quietly among the trees, their rifles held ready—and she beheld a vision of thousands of men with scraps of red flannel on their caps, advancing in solid battalions through the brush, moving in one direction, silent as the figures in a dream, bodiless and sinister. From the corner of her eye she could see him handling the old rifle with evident satisfaction, and she pondered the paradox of her husband, Bert Tapley, with a rifle in his hands. Hearing him in conversation, she realized that arguments he thought cogent when stated were, whether he knew it or not, masks for an emotion quite beyond his control; that when he said he did not *believe* in killing anything that lived, merely for the sake of killing it, the statement should have read: I am incapable of killing anything that lives. Yet she had seen him with a target-rifle, noted his absorption in the game, felt, almost as an emanation of some vital heat, the satisfaction he experienced when his bullets reached the mark, the joy he felt that day with the shotgun, when he riddled a thrown tin can before it hit the ground. "I shall put this on the mantelpiece," he declared, holding up the lace-work of twisted metal. And there it stood, over her head, a curious object to find in your living-room. Now, she dreaded the potential explosion that the rifle held within, as he turned it in his hands, polishing the stock with an oily rag, sliding the bolt back and pushing it home. She was impressed by the silence of the weapon as it lay across his knees, knowing that a slight pressure on the trigger might release violent noise, death and resounding horror.

Holding it, he knew that if the combination of circumstances were exactly right, he could pull the trigger, release swift (and really *painless*) death and watch the buck kick in the dead leaves, see the blood issue slowly and finally from the open mouth, flowing between the teeth, his own eyes wide and tight-feeling, satisfaction leaping through his body, and well-being urging him to dance and shout. Now he amused himself by pulling back the bolt (Clem's coming, she said, up the hill) and thinking about the beautiful inevi-



tability of its action, how each time he pulled back the bolt the cartridge in the chamber leaped out and away from the rifle, how every time he pressed it forward (*a toy, you know, a toy*) the spring of the magazine threw up another shell and the bolt thrust it perfectly home. To his particular type of mind this mechanism presented an analogy of inevitability—things were, hence they were meant to be. He ignored the corollaries, the interminable arguments that might be deduced from such a lopsided assumption; at the moment, he chose to ignore them. Meat moved through the forest on four legs; meat was lacking in his home: what more perfect, more true or beautiful than that he, with a machine invented by men like himself, should procure that meat, outwitting the outmoded plans of life, leaping the æons from the beginning of time down to this particular time, when he would walk, rifle in hand—He held the rifle to his shoulder (*a toy*) until Anna turned in her chair and said "Put that thing down before you shoot yourself, you big kid." Then, suddenly ill, he laid the rifle across his knees, thinking of the raw red meat that would hang in the shed from the cross-beam, and the smell of its blood, that would thicken their own blood and replenish the depleted juices of their bodies. He shuddered and stood the rifle in the corner.

There were steps on the porch and Clem Fell stuck his head in the door. "Hi there!" he said, "you all ready fer them side-hill grumpers? I'd a ben here t' wake you at four A.M. this mornin' only last night there come a job o' work t' do this mornin' an' I thought I might earn a honest penny."

"Hello, Clem," Anna said.

"How *do* you do, Mrs. Tapley?" Fell said. "Now won't you be proud o' this man o' yo'rn w'en he comes home t'night with a quarter o' vinizen t' hang in the shed?"

"I'd have to see it first," she said. "You know, in all the time we've been living in the country, I've never seen a deer."

Till the path narrowed down they walked side by side, their guns resting in the crook of their left arms,



fingers on safeties. It was noisy. The frost that came after the night's rain had touched the bed of dead leaves and they lay in curled masses that crackled like crushed glass under foot. "Bad business, bad business," Clem said, "might 's well of stayed t' home." Tapley tightened his grip on the stock and smiled, enjoying the futility of being constantly alert when there was no need, his mind reverting to its childhood and pursuing imaginary Indians, tracking noiselessly as possible through a trackless wilderness infested by lions, tigers, wildcat, dinosaurs. He glanced from left to right, seeing dark forms moving among the trees, soundlessly following.

They sat on a fallen log and lit cigarettes. "Wouldn't smoke ef I 'spected t' see anything," Clem said. "They can smell it?" Clem grunted. "They c'n smell a man in their sleep," he said, "but they're damn nosey too—'ll let you come within a rod an' stand lookin' at you. You move an' they move an' you stop an' they stop. Keep it up all day long. Last buck I shot," he said, looking up at the trees, "twelve-pointer he was, was standin' still as a stump, but I wa'n't takin' no chances; I put the lead right to 'm an' he busted away through the trees head over tea-kittle. Two hours I follered that feller—c'd see 'm ahead o' me an' the blood was somethin' fierce . . . ripped him right up the under-side an' his guts spilled out." "Could he run far that way?" Tapley said, looking at the ground. "I'm tellin' you," Clem said, "I follered him fer two hours, not two rods behin'—c'd see 'm cross over the hillside, trippin' in his guts an' gettin' up."

"Let's go," Bert said, crushing the cigarette on the wet bark. They followed the trail in silence for some time and when they reached fresh tracks neither was surprised.

"They're fresh all right; not a half-hour old," Fell said. "Listen, young feller," he said. "C'n I trust you t' foller instructions—" He pointed, "There's a chicken-hawk!" he said. "Red-tailed," Tapley mumbled. "Eh?" Clem said, "I be'n't as sharp t' hear 's I used to." "Red-tailed hawk," Tapley said apologetically, "all you country guys can't tell one hawk from another." "I can't exackly see the color of his *tail*," Clem

said, "but ef I c'd put some salt on it, or mebbe some lead, mebbe I c'd tell better." "Most hawks are harmless," Tapley said. "I *know* they be." "But that wouldn't prevent you from taking a shot at it, would it?" Bert smiled. "Hell no!" "What for?" "F'r the hell of it."

Under his breath Tapley said, "That's what's wrong." "Huh?" Fell said. "Well—listen, I'm goin' to cut round in a circle an' set down on that deer's trail—this is one o' their reg'lar trails an' it comes out at the foot o' Milburn's sugar-lot. I'll be settin' there w'en you come 'long. Take it slow an' easy an' foller this trail up an' ef you see somethin' put the lead right to it an' don't look too sharp w'ether it's got horns or no." He grinned. "Oke," Tapley said, and watched him out of sight through the second-growth stuff and over the low hillside.

For a short time he walked cautiously along, leaping from hard bare clump to clump, feeling his body move inside his clothes. He glanced right and left and occasionally stopped to listen, turning his head and staring straight into the spruces about him till he realized that he was seeing nothing, that his fixed glare was focussed beyond the trees, on a series of images that existed only in his own mind. He laughed; then he bit his lip and before his inner eye he could see the buck watching him intently, curiously, and he could feel the muscles of his arm tighten, the gun rise to his shoulder, and he took a short bead and let drive. Meat, fresh meat in the shed . . . Anna.

There was a light wind but it was in his face, so he moved along, picking his way along the sides of the worn trail, where there were less leaves and the ground rose slightly. That's what's wrong. Huh? I mean, why shoot something just for the sake of killing it? Why the hell not? Can't you see, can't you feel? You crazy? B'Jesus, Bert, you mus' be plumb crazy . . . all the folks 'round here'bouts says you mus' be off y'r nut the way you don' fish an' you don' hunt an' there ain't nobody ever seen you do a tap o' work an' w'ere does the money come from they says. . . .

He stopped to listen—the wind was sharp on his face and there was the smell of frost and more snow, and through the trees he could see the lavender autumn hills and at his feet were last year's dead weed-stalks and dry moss.

You cannot argue with a man like that; you might as well argue with a tree. What for? F'r the hell of it. He could feel his cold toes moving inside the boots, and he contracted them, felt them grip the soles. That's exactly what's wrong; ethically wrong. Huh? I get ya, Bert, you speak of ethics, Bert, an' ya don't know w'at y're talkin' about. How so, Clem? Because, Bert, there is something deeper involved here than you are reckonin' with. I don't know, Clem; all I know is that, to me, mind you, to me—he watched a squirrel scale a tree and

sit erect on a limb to watch him pass—the root of the problem is this: everything that is alive has, by virtue of the fact that it *is* alive, the right to continue living. *Do you eat meat, do you? Ah there!*

Something brought him up dead in the trail and his eyes resumed a focus ahead of him, staring at nothing. He stood, hearing the crackling of the frozen needles underfoot, the moaning of two boughs against each other, the bark of a crow in the west. . . . The short autumn day would soon be done. He walked on. Anna is hungry.

Now Bert, I grant you all that; but you'll have to grant me this—I don't like to kill; yet knowing that, I practically force myself to do it—Do you need meat? are you hungry, Clem? *Specious, specious!* No. Well then? *Aha!* That's not the point, Bert, the point is that I recognize in my disinclination to kill, a—call it a trait, that, if followed to its logical conclusion would mean death—You exaggerate, Clem.—actual, physical death for the race. It's weak, it's a disease, I recognize it for a disease in myself, so I combat it. It's the direct result of this damned Christian training, turn-the-other-cheek-love-your-neighbor stuff—it's back of the no-more-war agitation, the charity racket, the belly-aching for more and better anæsthetics, the average man's ambition to found a free hospital for the poor before he dies. . . .

Not fifty feet ahead he saw the buck, its antlers spread like an autumn bush in the path, its wet eyes watching him. Buck fever, he thought, and said to himself, No—this must not be passive, this must be an act of faith; he lifted the rifle slowly, thinking Anna is hungry, saw the buck lift its head and listen, then, as though he were not within a thousand miles, it lowered its head and nibbled the dry moss, scraping with its hoof. He drew the bead down finer and finer (*defenceless!*) till the sights were in a dead line with the heart (*death!*) and along the sights he watched, following the animal as it moved slowly along, grazing. There was no sound, the wind died down and his feet were set solidly in the dry grass, rooted like stone. One, two, three. The buck started and lifted its head, saw him and froze where it stood, gazing with great soft eyes, its antlers spread once more as though for centuries they had sprung from that very spot. "Bang!" he said softly, and the beast whirled. He dropped the gun and jumped in the air, flailing his arms and shouting silently, his face contorted with rage and irrepressible excitement. He picked up a stick and flung it, watched the white undertail flapping, magnified till it looked a yard long, through the brush, off the trail and into the east. Then he picked up the gun and strolled slowly and deliberately along, watching to right and left and occasionally stopping to listen. . . .

"Stick 'em up!" a voice said, and Clem rose from the side of the path, his gun extended dramatically, his false teeth protruding from his mouth. "See anything?" he said. "Nothing at all; yet all that is I see." "You're a card," Clem said, "you're the comicallest jigger I ever see." They lit cigarettes and shivered in the failing light.

"This is a good crossin' place," Clem said. "We'll set here aw'ile till it gets dark an' mebbe we'll bring some-thing home t' put in the pot." The wind had sprung up again and they pulled up the collars of their jackets, sitting with their hands in their pockets, their rifles across their knees, shivering. The hills faded from pale lavender to deep purple, and there was a green tinge in the eastern sky. "What's that?" Bert said. "Sounds like a dog barking."

"Geese."

They stared into the east and soon they could see the flock flying south in loose echelon formation, low over the darkening earth. "I'd have sworn that was a dog," Tapley said. "A hell of a cold night to be travelling." "They'll settle," Clem said, "first open water they hit—w'at the hell are you doin'!" he cried, his mouth hung open, his large eyes protruding from their sockets.

"Something to put in the pot," Tapley said.

"You dumb fool, you couldn't hit one o' them geese at that distance t' save y'r fool neck."

"Nothing like trying," Bert said, and pressed the trigger, exulting in the flash of light in the deepening dusk and the deafening roar that followed. "Let's go home," he said.

All the way down the hard-rutted road Clem said nothing, glanced at Bert Tapley from time to time out of the corner of his eye, and deliberately spat his tobacco-juice in the road, scuffing it in with the sole of his shoe. "Come in and smoke a cigarette," Bert said. "Naw," said Clem, "I'll have to be f'oggin' my li'l jacket down the road or my missus 'll have my ears." "Better luck next time," Tapley said; "I wasn't much help to you, I guess." "You shore got some dumbest funny notions," Clem said, "them ca'tridges costs seven cents apiece."

He found Anna sitting by the window, looking down at the stand of spruce, and suddenly he was ashamed.

"See a deer?" he said.

She turned with a smile and said, "Did you?"

"Yes."

"I thought I heard a shot," she said, "and I wondered whether you'd finally managed to shoot yourself."

"It was Clem," he said, "he missed."

"I'm glad." With astonishment he saw that her eyes were wet, and he moved to take her in his arms. "My dear," he said, stroking her hair, "I *do* love you—you know I really do . . ."

What Bryan Did to America

By J. C. Long

*The Second of the SCRIBNER'S MAGAZINE Biographies of Men
Who Have Influenced the Modern World*

THE last reel of the Bryan super-serial should be cut, perhaps the last several reels. Preserve the early sequences which made such an impress on a growing America and influenced its institutions even to the present time. In the concluding episodes there is too much footage and too little important action. The star has grown old and has lost his public. He gropes and fumbles with scenes which are outmoded. What have the Dayton trial, real-estate barking, and the professional uplifter to do with the young man of '96 who streaked like a meteor across the Western sky! Bryan's personal tragedy was that he lived too long.



A silvery voice assisted his power to arrest and enchant millions of voters, and Thomas Beer has summed him up as that "incarnate drum." Yet there have been many of the *bel canto* school of politics, many who aroused heated opposition, who have made but a minor impression on their times. There is something further to the story of a man who three times headed a major party as its Presidential nominee, who dictated the policies of that party for many years, and lived to see

much of his intention written into the nation's laws.

It is an opportune season to examine Mr. Bryan and what he did to America, because for the first time since his emergence, America finds itself amid conditions similar to the days of his rising. In the early 1890's 11,000 farms had been foreclosed in Kansas and in some counties 90 per cent of the land was in the hands of loan companies. The situation bore a close relation to the present, wherein President Roosevelt writes, "I seek an end to the threatened loss of homes and productive capacity now faced by hundreds of thousands of American farm families."

In the early 1890's the country was prostrate after a period of continued deflation. Commodity prices were at new low levels. Banks were failing by the hundreds and savings banks had placed a stoppage on withdrawal of deposits. The parallel with these times is obvious. There was, however, a difference. During the nineteenth century, the *laissez-faire* doctrine had prevailed. Untrammelled individualism had served to develop the country, and the occasional flare-ups of social criticism were directed against specific ills. The mass of the people lacked leadership or even self-consciousness. Then came Bryan out of the West with a philosophy and a determination to give cohesiveness, purpose, and power to the public will.

He was the first of the modern prophets. He has long

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The story of Bryan and his charge through American history is a folk-drama, essentially native to our soil. He became a national figure in the early 1890's at the very hour when the frontier had ceased to exist, when the people for the first time were obliged to find and claim their destiny within the limits of the country as it stood, without the release and opportunity of new territory.

He was a force. In 1896, Mark Hanna, the Republican chieftain, levied on all the banks of the country a charge of one-quarter of one per cent of their capital and raised a fund of \$3,500,000 to stop the course of this political tornado.

He was hated. *The New York Tribune* in '96 compared him to Benedict Arnold, Aaron Burr, and Jefferson Davis, with the conclusion that "he was the rival of them all in deliberate wickedness and treason to the Republic." When he turned the tide of the Baltimore Convention toward Woodrow Wilson in 1912 a hysterical delegate screamed, "I will give \$25,000 to any one who will kill him."

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