

George Burnett's Secret

by John Mark Capps

"MARTHA, my dear. May I help you?"

"You may leave off and do something profitable this morning, husband. Do not droop about the kitchen to puzzle me uselessly, inquire after this evening's supper, or quiz me on the weather. I'm busy."

"And diligent."

"If there're no swinish duties to attend to, why don't you take your gun and shoot some birds? You seem to like doing that."

He could say neither yes nor no, so he said nothing. Not feeling specially encouraged, he went to their cabin, retrieved his hat, horn, satchel, and gun, and set out up the Loyalsock trail. He half-hearted thought of walking to Asylum to invite the Viscount to hunt with him, but there and back would take all day. His mind was full of the little distresses of life, and he rather hoped that his brain would be entirely emptied up in the woods.

On the trail he passed through one of the upper fields. He saw a few hatted heads above the tall, feathery hay, and knew that naked men were at work with sickles taking down the season's crop and converting it to haystacks. He saw Lovell and waved. "Good morning, Bob! You are the father of fodder to-day."

The nude and suntanned Lovell laughed as he stepped out of the rows onto the trail, his arms full of hay. "And a good one to thee, Brother George. We'll have the hay all in tomorrow, perhaps. Nearer, rather than fodder."

"We'll send across the river to August's folk to arrange something to our mutual interest. Meanwhile, will you not put on trousers and have dinner with us tonight?"

Lovell thought a moment. "No, Mary does not expect me down for a week or two, after harvest is in and the fall planting done. While the sun lasts, my new brothers and I will work industriously up here, and be free of society and clothing alike."

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“We miss you, downhill.”

“I’ll be back soon enough, and I promise not to leave the fireside all winter. Now back to work go I.”

“And back to the chase go I.” Burnett tipped his hat and set off uphill for the high woods and glades above.

Still, almost silent. Leaves crunched softly underfoot, dewy grass made his boots wet. Nearby birdsong, but not that of birds worth shooting. “Fair is fowl, and fowl is fair.” Morning was for turkeys, and he knew how to hunt these birds in the tall meadow grass, to circle the gobbling rather than run at it, to confuse them by throwing pebbles ahead, to aim up and ahead of them as they took flight. Four hours later he had four wild turkeys slung on his back, and he had loaded his gun one last time. A satisfactory shoot.

He was lucky to have the one load left. As he was walking down the trail, he was startled by a feral pig, a boar with huge tusks that charged him. He managed to unlimber his gun and fire just in time, hitting the boar with birdshot square in the face, killing him. The body fell at his feet, and he was horrified by what he had done. He had come to think of pigs as domestic animals, as his friends, and never thought to harm one. Each of his pigs had names, natures, dispositions, personal histories and foibles. When any of his pigs had to be slaughtered at home, it was Shadrach Weeks or Justus Warren who did the disagreeable task; he could never have brought himself to commit porcicide. He watched the boar’s head drip red gore on the ground, and wept a little for the poor thing. “That is one bloody great pig. Never saw no wild pigs in America before. So what do you know, George Burnett?”

Still, it was pork, and something else to show for his day’s hunt. He even fancied his reputation as a hunter would be enhanced by this kill, even if he in private grieved at it. If there are no lions in Pennsylvania, then you must be the lion.

The boar weighed over forty pounds, and he wondered how he was going to carry both it and his turkeys the few but long miles home. Nothing to do but lift and carry, lift and carry. Back into it, there you go.

Must look like an old beggar with a bundle on his back, he thought, trudging downhill and nearly stumbling on rocks in the trail. Just as he was telling himself that he'd have a story to tell that night and no mistake, there happened more story. Before him, on the trail, were two black bear cubs, up on their hind feet and sniffing the air. He knew they smelled him and his burden. He also knew that their mother would not be far, and that he was now out of powder and shot.

She was not far. His heart beat fast, his breath caught in his throat, as he heard the clawed feet scuff the dust behind him, and then the maternal growl. Slowly, he turned. Mother Bear was a score of yards up the trail where he had just been. She was huge, her black fur bristling, yet her eyes seemed not angry but wide and impassive. She advanced upon the scent that was between her and her cubs. She then saw him, and reared up on her hind legs, growling in threat.

If only I were a boar, he thought, and then without thinking removed the pig carcass from his shoulder and swung it around him, going in a circle. The bear then was quiet, puzzled by the incongruous sights and smells. Then he let the pig go, and it flew through the air. "Pigs can fly!" Now the bloody boar now lay before the bear. "There, I've given you a pig I killed. Are you happy, now?"

Mother Bear got down on all fours and walked over to the dead pig, and sniffed it in question. Meanwhile he slowly stepped backwards from the trail, away from both her and the cubs, shaking in fear and in exhilaration. The bear looked up right at him, and roared.

He roared back at her, shaking his empty gun in his right hand, waving his left hand in the air. "I am George Burnett, esquire, late of Balliol College, Oxford! I am a hunter, a killer of pigs! I do not fear you, bear; take the pig and be content!"

To his amazement, the bear was startled. She moved to lope away, but not before taking the boar in her jaws, holding it as if it were only an apple. The cubs ran after their mother, and in mere moments no ursine Pennsylvanians were anywhere to be seen.

He roared again. It felt good.

"You had a good morning up on the ridge," Mary Lovell said as he came back home, "to judge from these turkeys. Quite a load to-day! Did you see my husband?"

"He is hale and healthy. He will be down for the season next week."

Mary smiled. "You had best hand your quarry to your wife, sir."

Still in the kitchen, Martha noticed something different, but could not quite tell what it was. "Oh, more birds."

"Turkeys, Martha. Good meat upon them all."

"Thank you—George." She looked at him more closely. "What's with you, to-day?"

"I'm a lucky man, Martha," he said. "I know what I am. I'm a pig man. A swineherd. I know I'm not a philosopher, or revolutionary, or postman, or anything so exalted. I take care of pigs. I like the work, and I'm good at it. Many men never find out what they are. If I had never found Pantisocracy, I would have been one of them who don't know what they are. I never knew until I came here. I'm satisfied, and perfectly content. I'm lucky."

Martha did not contradict him, but instead looked at him and smiled. "I think I'll take one of your turkeys and make pies for tomorrow," she said. "The others we can smoke, or roast. Maybe roast with onions, or tatties."

Her voice was the most perfect thing in the world. "I'm agreeable."

He never told anyone about the bear.

