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The Trophy

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THE TROPHY

Bill Strong

The crack of a screen door slamming shut rolled over the valley and was swallowed up by the tree-covered hillsides. A man had emerged from a small cabin which huddled near the base of a hill. The cabin was ringed on three sides by a stand of tall pine trees and faced toward a meadow-like clearing from which the fog was just now departing. The dampness and cold of the early morning caused the man to shudder involuntarily, then he threw back his shoulders and breathed deeply of the crisp, cool air.

Jason Woodruff was feeling very much the rugged individualist this morning. "Ah . . . this is the way to live," he said aloud and formed in his mind the picture he would describe at the club. He savored the feeling of power which came over him as he stood alone in the morning quiet. Standing on the porch of the cabin, arms folded over his chest, rifle held under his arm pointing downward, clad in the red wool of the hunter he looked like the man of distinction in a whiskey ad.

Only a slight paunch, now concealed by the heavy wool hunting jacket, and a hint of grey around the temples gave evidence of Jason's fifty years. The huge frame and strong hands which presided so ably over the conference table looked equally competent in the role of the hunter.

He paused long in his contemplation of the countryside. His gaze took in every detail which he etched in his mind, forming the eloquent phrases he would use back in the city. His fancy wandered and he could see the admiration in the eyes of his young secretary as he described the adventure.

A rustling in the woods to his left caught his attention and he glanced in time to see a cotton-tail rabbit bound from the woods and disappear in the tangled underbrush bordering the field. Stepping down from the porch, Jason thought to himself that the rabbit had nothing to fear from him, he was after bigger game. As he had told the boys at the club, he'd settle for nothing less than the biggest buck in the woods this trip. He could imagine the head and polished antlers of the deer mounted over the fireplace in his den.

He walked slowly along the edge of the field, crunching the fallen leaves underfoot and skirting the brambles which caught at his wool trousers. The frost, leaving the ground, made the going difficult and several times as he climbed the hill his foot slipped and he grabbed at the brambles to catch himself.

The sting of the thorns ripping into his palms infuriated him and suddenly the good feeling of the morning was gone. "Damn it, someone ought to get those things out of here." Jason swore as the frost-smooth earth kept slipping from under him. Twice more he was thrown to
one knee, forced to drop his rifle, and catch at the thorny underbrush to retain his balance.

Reaching the top of the hill, he paused, breathing heavily from exertion. He cleaned the mud and litter from his rifle and brushed the dirt from his knees. He lit a cigarette and as he smoked and rested, some of the feeling which had held him earlier, returned. As he looked down the path he had just taken, he felt proud and was moved to mutter, “By God, the old boy does all right yet.”

Crushing the cigarette underfoot he started out again in the direction of the cedar swamp. The deer, he knew, had spent the night deep in the swamp and would be moving about soon, looking for food.

The sun had pulled itself over the rim of the hills and was spilling light and warmth over the woodland. Patches of white frost remained on the ground only in spots where the trees clustered together and the thick pine foliage overhead blocked the sun. The ground was fairly level and carpeted with decaying leaves and broken twigs. Only an occasional fallen tree blocked Jason’s progress. These he vaulted easily and grinned in self-appreciation.

As he marched along he couldn’t help feeling that it was nice to be alone. First time in years that he had really been by himself and it felt good. Of course there had been four of them originally planning the trip, but that was before the big change.

Back in June he and Fred Peters had been talking over lunch and Fred had said, “Say, Jake, why don’t you and I and a couple of the boys get together this fall for some hunting? Few days away from civilization will do us all good.”

“Good idea, Fred,” he had said. “Let’s plan on it.”

At the time Jason felt sure that by fall he would have full control of the company and that Fred, as well as many others of the ‘old guard’ would be out. ‘Course he’d been running the company for years even though not fully in control of it. That was all changed now. He had bought up a lot of the outstanding stock and the board of directors was in his pocket. By God, he thought, it’s been a damn good year. I deserve a little time to myself.

He was entering the woods that bordered the swamp now. The woods ran up a hill and from a vantage point on the hill he could watch the edge of the swamp that opened onto a broad field. If the deer should leave the swamp in search of water or a salt lick, he figured they would have to pass right in front of him. It was dark in the woods and damp. The coolness caused him to hunch his shoulders under the jacket and he pulled up the collar, buttoning the top flap. The earth was springy with a soft covering of pine needles and where the frost remained the footing was slippery. More than once his boots slipped on the slick whiteness and he clawed wildly at the air to keep upright. “Damn frost anyway,” he growled, “be a damn sight better if we had a little snow for tracking.”

Reaching the top of the hill he walked along the edge looking for a likely spot to hole up. About fifty yards from the edge of the swamp a group of boulders were clustered around a small clump of trees which clung to the hillside. From here he had a clear view of
the deer runs leading from the swamp and was close enough to get off an accurate shot. The wind, which had been blowing against him as he climbed the hill, had shifted slightly but was still coming from the direction of the swamp and blowing toward him. Thank God for that, he thought, at least I’ll see him before he smells me.

Squeezing himself down among the rocks, out of the wind, he considered lighting a cigarette but decided against it. Nothing to do now, he knew, but to wait. Be a helluva lot better if there were a couple of men to enter the swamp from the rear and beat the brush, scaring the deer out. Well, he had invited them anyway but if they wanted to hold a grudge and be damn pigheads it wasn’t his fault.

He had called Fred on Friday after thinking about it all day. Sitting in his spacious, oak panelled office, he had reached for the phone a hundred times; finally towards late afternoon he had called Fred’s number. Never let it be said that Jason Woodruff backs out on his friends, he said to himself.

On the other end of the line the phone buzzed and the receiver was taken off the hook.

“Fred? Say, Fred, how’s tricks, boy?”

“This is Jason—ah—ah—Jake, you know. Say, how about that hunting trip we talked about?”

“Hello, Jason,” a voice answered coolly. “No thanks, I don’t think I can make it this year.”

“Fred, hold on a minute, I’ve been wanting to talk to you about what happened, with the company I mean.” The voice at the other end remained silent, so Jason continued, “You know how it is, a fellow’s got to do what he thinks is best for the company, can’t stop progress you know.” Here Jason chuckled, a low, confidential laugh designed to indicate mutual understanding. It fell flat, still no answer from the other end of the wire.

“You might be interested to know that the latest sales figures show we’re leading the field in total volume since I took . . . that is, since the personnel change. Leading the field, how do you like that?”

“That’s swell, Jason, glad to hear it.”

“Sure you won’t change your mind, about the hunting trip I mean?”

“Can’t make it this year, Jason, but thanks for asking.”

“Well O.K. if you’re sure you can’t make it. Take it easy then, and say, we’ll have to get together for lunch some time.”

“Sure, let’s do that, so long.”

After Fred had hung up, Jason sat for a moment reflecting on the conversation. Sounded like Fred was blaming him for his own lack of ambition. Well, he thought philosophically, that’s how it goes in this business, some people are easily stopped and others forge ahead.

The cramped position he had assumed and the cold which had penetrated his clothing brought Jason out of his meditation. He shivered and scanned the brush bordering the swamp for any sign of movement. There was none. He decided to have that cigarette after all and fished one out of a badly crumpled pack. If it took the whole damn day to wait out the deer, then by God that’s just what he’d do.
And wait all night too, if it were necessary. Reaching into the inside pocket of his jacket he pulled out a leather bound flask, unscrewed the top and lifted it to his lips. The liquor burned his throat and a warm glow settled in his stomach. Just what the doctor ordered, he thought, fastening the cover and returning the flask to his pocket.

He found himself wishing Bill Allen had come along. There's a man who appreciates good liquor, he thought. Bill had been president of the company at the time of the reshuffling and had chosen retirement over demotion. The bitterness had been plain in his voice when Jason called.

"Hell no, Jake, I don't want to go hunting. Get some of those 'bright young men' of yours to go along."

"Now wait a minute, Bill, no reason we can't be friends. A few days in the woods will give us a chance to talk things over."

"We talked everything over last time. If you had wanted to come into the company, all you had to do was come and tell me. We would have been glad to have you, there was no need to go sneaking around on the outside."

Jason chose to ignore the subject. "Bill, you were working too hard, time you stepped down and let the young fellas do the work. Remember, there's always a seat on the board of directors waiting for you."

"I don't want to sit with the damn directors and I don't care to go hunting either, but don't let me stop you, Jake. So long."

Hell no, he won't stop me, Jason thought, there's nothing on this earth can stop Jason Woodruff when his dander's up.

The morning wore on slowly, the passage of time being marked only by the sun's slow movement until finally it hung directly overhead, white and heatless. An occasional movement in the brush startled Jason out of his thoughts but it was only a rabbit darting about searching for food. Deep in the swamp a bird sounded a long, wavering cry, powerful in contrast to the sparrows and chickadees which chattered overhead. Once a porcupine ambled out of the swamp and disappeared in a clump of trees by the field's edge. Jason discovered another in the limbs of a tree overhead and amused himself by annoying it.

There still was no movement in the swamp and Jason pulled out another cigarette. Placing it in his mouth he reached for a match, the next moment the matches were dropping to the ground, the cigarette hanging lifeless from his lips. Where a moment before the field had been empty, three lithe, brown animals now pawed the earth at the swamp's edge. Their heads jerked nervously from side to side and their ears were pointed straight up as if listening expectantly for some signal. Jason held himself rigid, scarcely daring to breathe, he searched frantically for some sign of horns on the animals' heads. There were none. Two does and a fawn he decided. In the field all movement had ceased, only an occasional jerking of the ears marred the animal's statue-like appearance. They remained like this for what seemed to Jason hours. Suddenly the tableau was broken. As if the all-clear had been sounded the deer had suddenly relaxed and were now gazing in the direction from which they had come.
Jason’s gaze shifted from the deer to the dark, shadowy opening in the swamp and was held there, as if by some will other than his own. He was no longer conscious of the cold. The palms of his hands, pressed tightly against his rifle, were moist with sweat.

Jason’s eyes widened and he felt the breath catch in his throat. What he had taken, at first glance, to be wind-tossed branches had revealed themselves to be a magnificent set of antlers crowning the head of the largest, most venerable animal he had ever seen. Like a proud and majestic monarch the animal came slowly out of the woods. Its splendid head was held erect, the antlers brushing the sky. To Jason’s fascinated gaze it was the most wonderful spectacle ever witnessed. The animal was as big as any Jason had ever heard of, weighing easily some two hundred and fifty pounds. The huge rack of horns, worn so proudly, gave evidence of the deer’s great age.

Jason fought to shake off the fascination which had held him spellbound. His thumb released the safety catch of the rifle and with that act he became his old self again, cool and calculating. Cautiously he edged the rifle out in front of him. Laying his cheek against the stock, he aimed at the animal’s chest. The first shot sent the buck crashing to its knees and then over on its side. Almost immediately it was up and three quick leaps had carried it into the refuge of the swamp.

The crack of the rifle had sent the rest of the herd scrambling back into the woods and the field was empty as Jason came running and sliding down the hill. He followed a trail of blood-spattered leaves leading to the cool interior of the swamp. Half running and half walking he was almost on the fallen animal before he discovered him. Using its last ounce of endurance, the deer had bounded over a knoll and collapsed where it had landed, lying now on its side in the midst of a brush pile. The deer fought to raise itself and then fell back, its eyes rolling to stare up at Jason. The antlers had become entwined in the brush preventing any movement of the head and the long, sinewy neck was grotesquely stretched, making taut the smooth, brown skin which rippled with each gasp for breath.

A look of utter abhorrence clouded Jason’s features. He was embarrassed and revolted by the deer’s death throes but could not force himself to look away. He tried to raise the rifle to his shoulders but his arms wouldn’t move. They hung lifelessly by his side; the rifle slipped from his grasp and clattered to the ground. Slowly, Jason lowered himself to the ground close by the deer’s side. Never for an instant did his eyes leave those of the dying beast.

The hole in the deer’s chest did not seem large enough for death to enter. From it, small intermittent trickles of blood marked each heaving of the chest.

Jason was not aware that the deer had ceased struggling. He stared fixedly at the dethroned monarch, his mind whirling, grasping for a solution. For one wild moment he thought of covering the wound, then everything would be as it had been. Legs crossed in front of him, head and shoulders bent, he sat beside the stiffening animal, rocking slowly from side to side.
From high above, the last leaves were severed from their mooring and came drifting aimlessly down. A rising wind whistled through the trees bringing with it the first snow. The drifting leaves settled upon the dead beast, forming a multi-colored shroud. Still Jason sat, rocking endlessly from side to side.

In the west the blood-red sun was drawn slowly but firmly below the edge of the earth.

OF WHEN AND WHY FOR

Flesh picked grey flecks
And collared them in pink.

In the beginning of when and why for
The blood moon will closet light
And fade it to a grey ember.

Nine choirs of sky will break
Brittle flames and char my thighs.
I did not serve of when and why for.

The world-spewed splinters
Crumble into pulp
Preparing white beds.
I did not serve of when and why for.

And over my fired flesh
And the nine choirs
And white beds
A flaked firefall
Spit the song of when and why for.

Pete Green