

THE OLD MAN AND THE BOY

*Along with his first gun came
an education in using it responsibly.*

“**T**his ain’t a very expensive gun,” the Old Man said. “It’s not a handmade gun, and it hasn’t got any fancy engraving on it. But it’ll shoot where you hold her, and if you hold her true she’ll kill what you’re aiming at. Some day when you go to work and get rich, you can take a trip to England and buy yourself a set of matched doubles, or you can get a special job built in this country with a lot of gold bird dogs on it. But for you to learn to shoot with, this is all the gun you need right now.”

It was maybe the most beautiful gun a boy ever had, especially if he was only eight years old at the time and the Old Man had decided he could be trusted with a dangerous firearm. A little 20-gauge, it was only a \$20 gun, but \$20 was a lot of money in those days and you could buy an awful lot with it.

The Old Man stuffed his pipe and stuck it under his mustache, and sort of cocked his big stick-out ears at me, like a setter looking at a rabbit he ain’t supposed to recognize socially.

BY ROBERT C. RUARK
ILLUSTRATIONS BY NORA WILDGEN



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"In a minute," he said, "I aim to whistle up the dogs and let you use this thing the best way you can. But before we go out to the woods I want to tell you one thing: You have got my reputation in your hands right now. Your mother thinks I'm a damned old idiot to give a shirt-tail boy a gun that is just about as tall as the boy is. I told her I'd be personally responsible for you and the gun and the way you use it. I told her that any time a boy is ready to learn about guns is the time he's ready, no matter how young he is, and you can't start too young to learn how to be careful. What you got in your hands is a dangerous weapon. It can kill you, or kill me, or kill a dog. You always got to remember that when the gun is loaded it makes a potential killer out of the man that's handling it. Don't you ever forget it."

I said I wouldn't forget it.

The Old Man put on his hat and whistled for Frank and Sandy. We walked out back of the house where the tame covey was. It was a nice November day, with the sun warm and the breeze not too stiff, and still some gold and red left in the leaves. We came to a fence, a low barbed-wire fence, and I climbed it, holding the gun high up with one hand and gripping the fence post with the other. I was halfway over when the barbed wire sort of caught in the crotch of my pants and the Old Man hollered.

"Whoa!" the Old Man said. "Now, ain't you a silly sight, stuck on a bob-wire fence with a gun waving around in the breeze and one foot in the air and the other foot on a piece of limber wire?"

"I guess I am, at that," I said.

"I'm going to be pretty naggy at you for a while," the Old Man said. "When you do it wrong, I'm going to tell you. I know you haven't loaded the gun yet, and that no matter what happens nobody is going to get shot because you decide to climb a fence with a gun in your hand. But if you make a habit out of it, someday you'll climb one with the loads in the gun and your foot'll slip and the trigger'll catch in the bob-wire and the gun'll go off and shoot you or me or somebody else, and then it'll be too late to be sorry.

"There's a lot of fences around woods and fields," he said. "You'll be crossing fences for the rest of your life. You might as well start now to do it right. When you climb a fence, you lay the gun on the ground, with the safety on, 10 foot away from where you intend to cross the fence. You got the muzzle sticking in the opposite direction from where you're going. After you've crossed the fence you go back and pick up the gun, and look at it to see if the safety is still on. You make a habit of this, too. It don't cost nothing to look once in a while and see if the safety's on."

We walked on for a spell until we hit the corner of the cornfield. Old Sandy, the lemon-and-white setter, was sailing around with his nose in the air, taking the outside edge, and Frank, who was pretty

old and slow, was making some serious game with his nose on the ground. In a minute Sandy got a message and went off at a dead gallop. He pulled up in full stride and froze by a clump of gallberry bushes. Frank picked up a little speed on the trail and headed up to Sandy. He raised his head once and saw Sandy on the point and stood him stiff and pretty. Maybe you've seen prettier pictures. I haven't.

"Can I really shoot it now?" I said.

"Load her up," the Old Man said. "Then walk in, and when the birds get up pick out one and shoot him."

I loaded and walked up to the dogs and slipped off the safety. It made a click that you could hardly hear. But the Old Man heard it.

"Whoa," he said. "Give me the gun."

I was mystified and my feelings were hurt, because it was my gun. The Old Man had given it to me, and now he was taking it away from me. He switched his pipe to the outboard corner of his mustache and walked in behind the dogs. He wasn't looking at the ground where the birds were. He was looking straight ahead of him, with the gun held across his body at a 45-degree angle. The birds got up and the Old Man jumped the gun up. As it came up his thumb flicked the safety off and the gun came smooth up under his chin and he seemed to fire the second it got there. About 25 yards out a bird dropped in a shower of feathers.

"Fetch," the Old Man said, unloading the other shell.

"Why'd you take the gun away from me?" I yelled. I was mad as a wet hen. "Dammit, it's my gun. It ain't your gun."

"You ain't old enough to cuss yet," the Old Man said.

"Cussing is a prerogative for adults. You got to earn the right to cuss, like you got to earn the right to do most things. Cussing is for emphasis. When every other word is a swear word it just gets to be dull and don't mean anything anymore. I'll tell you why I took the gun away from you. You'll never forget it, will you?"

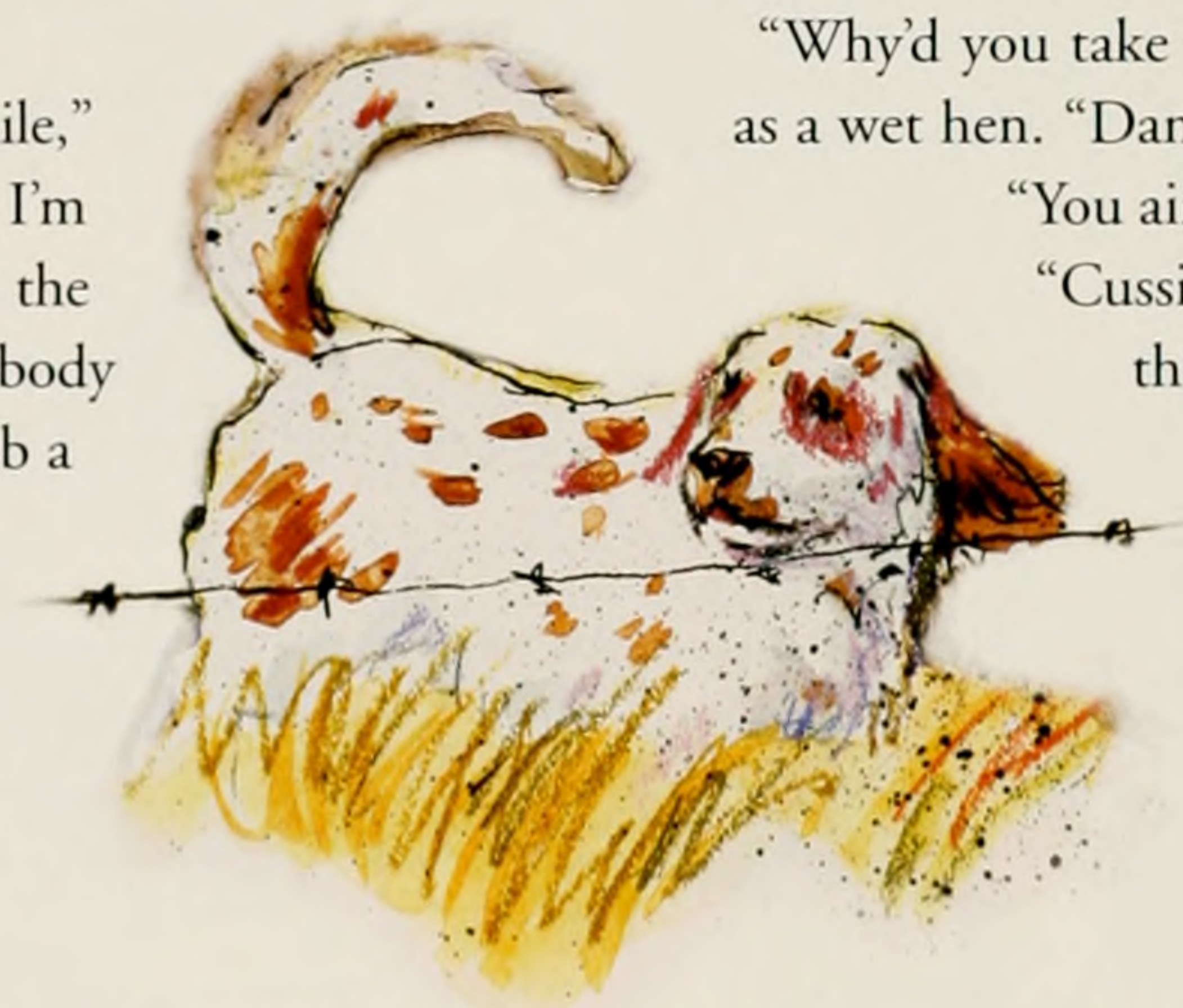
"You bet I won't forget it," I said, still mad and about to cry.... "I don't even know why you took it. What'd I do wrong then?"

"Safety catch," he said. "No reason in the world for a man to go blundering around with the

catch off his gun. You don't know the birds are going to get up where the dog says they are. Maybe they're running on you. So the dog breaks point and you stumble along behind him and fall in a hole or trip over a rock and the gun goes off—blooey."

"You got to take it off some time if you're planning to shoot something," I said.

"Habit is a wonderful thing," the Old Man said. "It's just as easy to form good ones as it is to make bad ones. Once they're made, they stick. There's no earthly use of slipping the safety off a gun until you're



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figuring to shoot it. There's plenty of time to slip it off while she's coming to your shoulder after the birds are up. Shooting a shotgun is all reflexes, anyhow.

"The way you shoot is simply this: You carry her across your body, pointing away from the man you're shooting with. You look straight ahead. When the birds get up, you look at a bird. Then your reflexes work. The gun comes up under your eye, and while it's coming up your thumb slips the safety and your finger goes to the trigger, and when your eye's on the bird and your finger's on the trigger the gun just goes off and the bird drops. It is every bit as simple as that if you start at it right. Try it a few times and snap her dry at a pine cone."

I threw the gun up and snapped. The gun went off with a horrid roar and scared me so bad I dropped it on the ground.

"Uh huh," the Old Man said sarcastically. "I thought you might have enough savvy to check the breech and see if she was loaded before you dry-fired her. If you had, you'd have seen that I slipped the shell back when you weren't looking. You mighta shot me or one of the dogs, just taking things for granted."

That ended the first lesson. I'm a lot older now, of course, but I never forgot the Old Man taking the gun away and then palming that shell and slipping it back in the gun to teach me caution. All the words in the world wouldn't have equaled the object lesson he taught me just by those two or three things. And he said another thing as we went back to the house: "The older you get, the carefuller you'll be. When you're as old as I am, you'll be so scared of a firearm that every young man you know will call you a damned old maid. But damned old maids don't shoot the heads off their friends in duck blinds or fire blind into a bush where a deer walked in and then go pick up their best buddy with a hole in his chest."

We went back to the house and up to the Old Man's room. He stirred up the fire and reached into a closet and brought out a bottle of old corn liquor. He poured himself a half a glassful and sipped at it. He smacked his lips.

"Long as we're on the subject," he said, "when you get bigger, I suppose you'll start to smoke and drink this stuff. Most people do. You might remember that nobody ever got hurt with a gun if he saved his drinking for the fireside after the day's hunt was over, with the guns cleaned and in a rack or in a case. I notice you ain't broken your gun yet, let alone cleaned it, and it's standing in a corner for a child to get ahold of or a dog to knock over. I suggest you clean her now. That way you know there aren't any shells left in her. That way she don't rust. And since you have to break her to clean her, you might as well put her in her case."

Maybe you think the Old Man was cranky, because I did then, but I don't anymore. I've seen just about everything happen with a gun. One fellow I know used to stand like Dan'l Boone with his hands



crossed on the muzzle of his shotgun, and one day something mysterious happened and the gun went off and now he hasn't got any hands anymore, which makes it inconvenient for him.

I've seen drunks messing with "unloaded" guns and the guns go off in the house, sobering everybody up. An automatic went crazy on me in a duck blind one day and fired every shot in its magazine. Habit had the gun pointed away from the other fellow or I'd of shot his head off with a gun that was leaping like a crazy fire hose. I saw a man shoot his foot nearly off with a rifle he thought he'd ejected all the cartridges out of. I saw another man on a deer hunt fire into a bush a buck went into and make a widow out of his best friend's wife....

When I was 11, the Old Man stole my little 20-gauge from me. He grinned sort of evilly and announced that he was an Indian giver in the best and strongest sense. I was puzzled, but not very, because the Old Man was a curious cuss and a kind of devious mover. I went back to my bedroom later, and on the bed was a 16-gauge double with a leather case that had my name on it. There were engravings of quail and dogs in silver on the sides and my name on the silver buttplate.

The Old Man was taking a drink for his nervous stomach when I busted into his room with the new gun clutched in my hands. He grinned over the glass.

"That there's your graduation present," he said. "It's been three years since we started this business, and you ain't shot me, you, or the dogs. I figure it's safe to turn you loose now. But I'll take that one away from you if you get too big for your britches and start waving it around careless."

I'm big enough to cuss now, and I've seen a lot of silly damned fools misusing guns and scaring the daylights out of careful people. But they never had the Old Man for a tutor. Some people ain't as lucky as other people. 🐾