

# FLASH IN THE PAN

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The winter of 1902-03 was bitterly cold in Oulu. Up here in the north of Finland, it was nothing new, but there was more snow than usual. The Gulf of Bothnia froze early, and by November it was already possible for horses and sleighs to cross to Sweden across thick ice. As I gazed out from a vantage point high above the squatting wooden town, from my classroom's fourth floor window, I could see snow-capped one-floor houses as far as the eye could reach and every one of them was spouting a thick plume of smoke.

When I stood there rigid in my starched collar, my pupils studying in silence behind me, I had not a worry in the world. Having toiled for four years in the Kajaani Teacher Seminary, I had graduated with very good marks, and even if there were twelve applicants for the biology and geography teacher at the Oulu Lyceum, I knew I would get it. I did, and my first year at the Lyceum was running very nicely. I had made myself a reputation as a stern but fair teacher in just a few months, and I had come to learn it was much to the liking of the Headmaster, the venerable A. E. Fromm. He was legendary for his focus on discipline, and I was only too happy to oblige.

I was after something more than just the favour of the Headmaster. It so happened he had a daughter, Annina, who was truly the flower of Oulu. All eligible bachelors within a hundred miles were after her, and I was facing some stern competition. A wealthy merchant, a well-known sea captain, even an Artillery Major of the garrison were all known to be on her dance card. Still, I had a plan, and I was about to put it into action.

During last summer, the male capercaillie we had in the biology class had gone rancid. Due to botched taxidermy, it had taken on a distinct smell of decay, and when school started, the Headmaster himself had sent it on its last flight, into the rubbish pile. It was his pride and joy, one of the largest ever shot and stuffed, and its plumage had been flawless. Nevertheless, the collection was now missing one key animal.

As a farm boy, I was a hunter through and through. My father gave me my first shotgun when I was twelve, and I brought home game from almost every trip I took to the woods. By fifteen I was shooting elk, and during my years in the Seminary, I even shot a wolverine that passed too close to me. So, now that Headmaster Fromm was pining for a new capercaillie to crown his immaculate collection, I had my sights on it already.

Early in January, I had begun to ask around for the mating grounds of the forest birds. The locals were not too eager to divulge their secrets to a newcomer. Still, with the trips I took into the forests surrounding the town, and information gained from a hunter who was very fond of beer, I had a fair idea where to go when the mating game commenced.

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This Saturday in March I surprised Class VII C when I told them they could leave half an hour

early, at 11.30, as I had something to do. As soon as they had sneaked out of the school, I did the same, and went home. I had lunch and then, gathering my gun, the backpack I had prepared beforehand, and skis, I slipped out into Church Street. Dodging the people on the sidewalk, I ventured north and crossed the Oulujoki River at the Tuira bridges. Then, following the river, I turned southeast and skied into the forest.

I had six hours of daylight left and I made the most of it. By nightfall, I had covered enough distance to be deep within the wilderness, where I no longer heard dogs bark or saw the smoke from hearths. This was how I liked to be, resolute and confident, on my own. I prepared to leave the big river, and I looked at it as it lay dormant, tamed by a thick crust of ice and snow, with the black, swirling water visible only in the strongest of eddies. I took a left turn and headed north through a wide marshland, which would be impassable in summer, but now provided a straight route to my destination.

At the other side of the open area I stopped to put up my lean-to. I collected firewood to last me the night and lit a fire. With my reindeer pelts on fir tree branches and extra woollen clothing, I was soon cosy and warm, and I had a lumberjack's dinner in the deepening dark forest. I turned in at nine, intending to wake up at three in the morning.

I always had a strong internal clock, and at ten minutes past three, I woke up. I packed my things and set out east for the final leg of the journey. If my informant was correct, there'd be a small peat bog, almost circular in shape, and it would be packed with capercaillies mad with mating-fever. I skied slowly, and the thick soft snow enabled me to approach the site without sound, and I was careful not to touch the stunted pines whose brittle branches would have snapped off sounds like rifle shots.

As I made my way, I was well and truly amazed to come across a fresh ski trail. The other skier had come from my right and made his way straight towards my destination. This was a source of much irritation to me. I had thought I was far enough from anybody to have the entire show for myself. Not only had someone skied in, he had pulled a sleigh behind him. This probably meant he was aiming to stay in the bush for some time, and could well be a professional. Nevertheless, I pushed on. Maybe there'd be enough birds to share.

Half an hour later I caught my first glimpse of the bog I'd aimed for. At the same moment I saw the other skier. He had taken down a couple of small fir trees and put together a blind for himself at the forest edge. Soon I was close enough to see his sleigh and the skis, but he hadn't noticed me yet. I stopped to take in the big picture, and then I pulled out my field glasses.

About two hundred meters from me, dozens of capercaillies were involved in their fiery mating dance. Males competed by visual displays and head-on attacks at rival suitors, while the brown females circled the battlegrounds looking distinctly unimpressed. New birds flew in and landed straight in the foray, and wily younger cocks tried their luck with females far enough from the old masters. They were too busy fighting for the top spot to notice anyway. I felt lucky having

found the place, yet the presence of a competitor irked me. I inched closer to him.

I could see no guns. Instead, it appeared the man was lying prone with a wooden box in front of him, on a low tripod. As I went to his side, I could see it was actually a camera. I had never seen such a lens on any camera, though. It protruded from the front of the dark lacquered box, as long as a walking stick but thick as my arm, and it was made of brass. The man had his head under the canvas, but he heard me coming. He slowly backed out from his camera and signalled me to get down to him.

“Hello! Quite a show, eh?” he whispered to me.

“It is indeed,” I whispered back.

He held out his hand from the ground, and said with a low, resonant voice, “Van Helsing, Jacob Van Helsing, photographer. Nice to make your acquaintance. Here, let me give you my card.”

“Juho Koskela, teacher, glad to meet you too.” I pocketed the card. I had heard of him; people were talking about his talent and thronged to his studio.

The formalities thus out of the way, I started to prepare my gun, while he inched back to his camera. Then he motioned for me to kneel, and as I looked, he pulled up the canvas and showed me the view on the glass. I was completely amazed. His camera was able to show the birds as big as my fist on the matte glass, even if they were far away. I took my binoculars and had a look, and my image was not as detailed as his camera was able to show.

“What an instrument you have,” I hissed.

“It is quite good. Took me years to make, but now it gets me great pictures,” he answered.

“But surely you can’t catch the moving bird? You must find one that stays put and then hope it doesn’t take flight while you expose?”

“I’ve dabbled in the chemicals too. My pictures come out razor-sharp every time. I have the fastest camera in the world.”

I can’t tell whether it was my annoyance at him being there in the first place or his supreme confidence in the camera, but I snapped at him: “Still, you can’t go home and eat the bird.” I wanted to take a shot at the birds but they were very far away, much beyond my reliable range. I prepared to move around the bog to approach them from the side.

“I say! Your rifle looks mighty fine too, a Winchester isn’t it?” he said, taking me by surprise. Not many people would recognize my pride and joy.

“Well yes, this is a .22 Winchester. My uncle gave it to me when he decided he was too old to hunt. He only shot it a few times.”

"I bet you can hit any of those birds with a gun like that," he said, squinting as if taking aim.

"Not from here I can't, they're too far. I'll try from the side. Anyway, nice meeting you," I whispered and began to leave.

Van Helsing signalled me to wait a second, moving his camera a bit. "Would that capercaillie cock be what you are looking for?" he said, and told me to take a peek. On the camera glass plate was the proudest bird I'd ever seen. Upside-down of course, but even so, I could tell it was truly a magnificent specimen. I took a look with my own eyes but could not see it. Van Helsing pointed at the glass again.

As I looked, the bird took flight and left the camera glass. I shrugged, but then Van Helsing pointed to a tree to our front left. There, sitting on a barren birch branch, was the capercaillie. It strutted its tail feathers and spread its wings, and acted as the king of the heap would in general. I let out a sigh. "To catch that bird would truly make my dreams come true," I said, much more to myself than to Van Helsing.

"Try it."

"No, it is too far, and when I try to ski there, he'll see me and fly away before I reach the range."

"What would be your range?" he asked.

"A hundred meters, one-twenty at the utmost. There's little wind now. But that bird is a good two hundred meters away."

Van Helsing looked into his camera and pointed it to the bird. Then he moved the camera to point further left, and as I watched, the great bird took flight and fluttered to a closer tree. I watched as it circled a bit, then settled to the top of a fir, maybe a hundred and thirty meters from us. I couldn't believe my eyes, but it was now at the extreme end of any shot I'd ever tried.

"Have a go."

"I'm afraid I'd miss, or wing it from this distance. To kill it would take a perfect shot at this range."

"I didn't think you'd be a man to shy away from a challenge," Van Helsing said.

"I am acting out of respect to the bird, not because I wouldn't like a challenge," I answered.

"What if we put on a little bet? If you kill that bird from this distance, I'll take your portrait for free in my studio."

"And if I lose?"

"You buy me dinner at the Temperance Society House."

That sounded like a challenge worth trying. Portraits would cost five times more than a dinner. Besides, I'd sometimes got lucky with a long shot. I weighed the issue for a moment, then said, "Done." And at the same time I wondered about the bird I was about to shoot – why did it come closer?

Van Helsing looked on as I loaded a single round in my rifle chamber and prepared the shot. I lined up the bird in my sights, then lifted the barrel to accommodate for the drop. At this range, the drop would be something like 25 cm. I breathed slow and deep allowing my aim to set. I said a little prayer in my mind, but right at that moment the bird fluttered its wings and moved sideways on its perch. I put down my rifle.

"That won't help you this time, believe me," my new friend said. I had to lower the gun when I heard his soft voice. Was he as religious as myself, and would he have said a prayer in his head in such a situation – or what was he doing with my thoughts?

I took aim again, just as carefully as before. I could feel Van Helsing's gaze in my face when I slowly squeezed the trigger. The shot rang out and echoed from the frozen forest. All the capercaillie fled in terror, and the bog seemed to come alive with wings and lift itself off the frozen ground. The only bird that stayed put was the majestic old cock I'd shot at. It turned its head, opened its wings as if to fly away, then folded them, and fell from the tree top, bouncing off it as it dropped to the ground.

"Bravooooo!" said Van Helsing. "*Ein Meisterschuss!*"

I was transfixed with surprise. I never thought I'd pull this off. I put on my skis and began to ski to the bird, snow bursting into the air in white clouds from my rush. It only took me a minute to get to the fir at which the bird lay motionless. I looked at him and saw the last of life leave its eyes. It opened and closed its beak once, and then it was dead. I picked him up from the snow and began to turn back, but something made me look over my shoulder.

The snow was pristine except for one black feather in the dent he made when he fell; there was not a single drop of blood.

I returned to Van Helsing. "Congratulations," he said. "Pop into the studio any time and I'll make good on my bet. Oh, do bring something for props – the gun maybe?" I shook his outstretched hand. It was so cold out the bird was already beginning to freeze, and by the time I was ready to turn back to go home, it was solid. I had no need to prepare it like I would have in warmer times. I hung it on my backpack and took my leave from Van Helsing, who remained for a few images. He waved to me when I turned back to look at him, and then I put on full steam to reach home.

I was back in eight and a half hours. It's always quicker when you're coming home, but I put in quite an effort, because I wanted to get the bird to the taxidermist as soon as possible. I wasn't going to a second-rate hack – this bird would be in the capable hands of Johan Kronblom, who

stuffed the magnificent moose in Oulu's City Museum, and the twenty-kilo salmon sent to the Czar for his birthday as a gift from the Oulu Chamber of Commerce. It'd cost me an arm and a leg, but I was hoping for a great reward.

As I took off my skis and walked down Church Street, I happened to go by Van Helsing's studio. When I'd passed the window, I had to turn around and go back. I was surprised to see Van Helsing inside the shop, in the process of taking a picture of three children and their mother. He was dressed in his Sunday clothes, hard collar and the works, nothing like the grey serge we both wore in the forest. I shook my head – a master skier as well, and I thought I'd taken the straight route.

I delivered the bird to Kronblom's workshop, and we agreed on the stance. Full mating dance strut it'd be, and he was to be mounted on a sizable piece of wood. I arranged to pay him at pickup. Then, I went home, very tired, but very enthusiastic. Even with my triumphant shot, Van Helsing's quick return was my last thought before falling asleep.

Three weeks later, when I collected the capercaillie from the taxidermist, I was very impressed with the result. The bird had been restored, nay, brought back to life perfectly. I looked him in the eye and could see him as he was when he ruled the bog. He looked as if he was poised to pick off my eye.

"Magnificent bird. It was a real honour to prepare him. I must also congratulate you – not many cocks have such plumage. There is one odd thing, though," Mr Kronblom said, holding the bird in the air. "I could not find the entry wound, or exit wound for that matter."

I tried to laugh it off. "I must have hit the tree and he died of fright!"

Mr Kronblom did not smile. "I do not believe I'd miss an entry wound. Besides, I did find the bullet, inside the heart." He presented me with a .22 bullet which looked like it had left the factory yesterday. I shivered.

"It's getting late, must be off." I paid Mr Kronblom, thanked him profusely, and left. Once in the street I thought again of Van Helsing. Surely the bird was the best possible prop for my portrait, before I delivered it to the household of Headmaster Fromm. I almost ran home, collected my Winchester and a bandolier of cartridges, and hurried out to the studio.

Van Helsing was present - I could tell by the lights in his house - and when I was just about to knock on his door, it flung open. "Ah! Teacher Koskela, and the vanquished king of the bog! I was hoping you'd get the idea of bringing the bird, and I do admire your rifle – they make for a good portrait. Please step down this corridor and into my studio! I'll join you in a moment."

I walked down the long and dim corridor towards a room with a velvet canvas as its door. Van Helsing had put up framed pictures along the walls, and I could tell he was good. Children, adults, families, weddings, funerals – he had shot everything with great skill. One picture in particular caught my eye in the corridor. It was one of Mr Berg, a local celebrity. He was a master

accordionist and bandleader, and he'd been missing for six months. Police had no idea what had come over him.

In the picture Mr Berg sat on a stool with his accordion in his lap, playing it. He appeared to be smiling, but something in his expression was wrong. I looked at the image for a long time, and at last I got it: he looked surprised. I went on down the corridor into the sizable, dimly-lit studio. It was well equipped to say the least, many cameras, lenses on tables, stacks of photographic paper, and again, walls full of finished portraits.

I looked at Van Helsing's luggage, which was arranged alongside the back wall. This man had been everywhere, judging by the stickers – Berlin, London, Paris, Rome, even New York and Chicago. I wondered briefly why would such a cosmopolitan figure descend into such a backwoods town as Oulu, but then thought, maybe he wanted to be incognito and work his craft without publicity.

There were also lots of objects to use as props in pictures, such as a piano, skis and poles, a bicycle etcetera, as well as a set of backdrops hanging from the ceiling. I had a feeling Van Helsing anticipated my arrival as the one showing was a wintery landscape. In the corner was an accordion, very much like the one I'd seen in Mr Berg's portrait.

"Right! Let's get down to business, shall we," said Van Helsing who'd arrived behind me while I wondered. I shivered for no apparent reason. Van Helsing put my bird on a table and took my rifle, and settled me down on a high stool in front of the backdrop canvas. "Put your leg like this... and then, turn your shoulders towards the camera, like so... very good! Now, let me put the bird on this support here so it's beside you... perfect. Then the rifle..."

I knew I was in the hands of a professional and let him handle it all. Besides, I was still mighty proud of my capercaillie and the gun as well, and was looking forward to a print of the image I could offer to my heart's delight. As soon as I had delivered the bird to Headmaster Fromm, I was going to ask Annina out on a proper date and at the same time hand her a signed picture. Oh, how she'd love it!

Van Helsing set up his biggest camera a couple of meters in front of me. Then he prepared it, adjusting the focus with a tape measure and so on. He muttered to himself all the time, but I was unable to understand what he said. Van Helsing picked up a tray and poured some powdery substance in it. He attached the tray to a handle above the camera. When everything was ready, he went behind the camera and said, "Let's see the huntsman's best pose!"

I straightened myself just one more inch and looked at the camera. Van Helsing framed the picture with his outstretched hands once more, then disappeared under the canvas. As soon as he did, I was amazed to see a bulge, a definite protrusion, appear in the canvas. It was as if his forehead wasn't smooth. A surprised sound emerged from my lips, and Van Helsing appeared again.

“Yes?” he said. His bald head was smooth as a billiard ball.

I shook my head and said, “Nothing, sorry. I thought I was about to sneeze.”

Van Helsing smiled and went back in. “Let’s pose again, shall we?”

I did, but as soon as I thought I was at my handsomest, I saw not one but two bulges appear, like horns. I started to open my mouth, but before I could, the flash went off. A godalmighty white-hot flood of light, a veritable lightning appeared, and as soon as its image embedded itself in my retina, I saw the camera dissolve and the very image of the Devil standing behind it. The cloud of gas from the explosion reached me, and before my mind went blank and I ceased to be, I smelled sulphur.

When I came to, the first thing I sensed was a flat, oppressive weight on me. I could not breathe. I was on my back, looking at the ceiling, and something was pinning me down. Almost right away after that I felt myself lifted off the table and moving in the air. I was happy to see Van Helsing at first, but then, in a second, I understood. I was framed under a glass, and in the process of being hung on the wall. As I watched helplessly, Van Helsing took my beautiful capercaillie and settled it on top of a wardrobe so it faced me across the room. Then he took my Winchester and hung it on the wall above the accordion on the floor.

And then he left and turned off the lights.