

The Hunter Who Drew His Birds · Ai Qing

It happened there was a man who wanted to be a hunter. He sought out a hunter and asked him to become his teacher, explaining: "A man should have a trade. Of several professions I fell to considering, I figured I'd like hunting best. I think I'd enjoy tramping around in the woods, shooting any bird I want to."

The hunter looked over the young fellow's gun and found it was a pretty good one, and the fellow seemed determined to learn. So to begin with, the hunter instructed him in the habits and temperaments of a great variety of birds, and demonstrated how to aim and shoot the gun. Finally, he ordered his pupil to go out and practice shooting at every sort of bird.

The man thought this was all he had to know, and went directly into the forest with his gun. But to his dismay, he found that the birds invariably flew away before he had a chance even to raise his gun.

Returning to the hunter, he said: "You know, birds are awfully clever and alert little things. They see me before I see them. By the time I get the gun to my shoulder, they're gone."

"Did you suppose you were going after birds that couldn't fly?" his teacher asked.

"Well, no," said the man. "But now that you mention it, when I'm out hunting it would be just wonderful if the birds didn't fly away like that."

"That's not so hard to manage," said the hunter. "Go home, get a thick piece of paper, and draw a bird on it. Then tack the paper onto a tree. That's one bird that won't fly away."

The man went home and did just as the hunter had told him. But he found, after shooting at it a while, that he was still quite unable to hit the bird. He went back to the hunter and said: "Well, I did everything you told me, but I just couldn't make a hole in the bird." The hunter asked him why not, and he considered the question. "Maybe I drew the bird too small," he offered. "Or I could have been shooting from too far away."

The hunter gave a little thought to the matter and then said: "I'm

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truly impressed by your determination to succeed. You go home now and hang another piece of paper on the same tree, a bigger piece than last time. Then shoot at it. This time you ought to do a little better."

The man asked a little anxiously, "You want me to shoot from the same distance away?"

"Whatever you decide," said the hunter.

"How about the bird?" asked the man. "Shall I draw the bird again?"

"No," the hunter replied.

The man forced a smile. "You want me to shoot at a plain old piece of paper?"

The hunter explained: "What I want you to do is just shoot at that piece of paper till you've put some holes in it. When you're done, you draw a bird around every hole you've made. You draw as many birds as you have holes. If you do it this way, you're bound to be a success."