

A DROP OF EXPERIENCE

by Karl A. Belser

A Fictional Story
English III G
Period IV
Campbell Union High School
13 November 1955

I live in a rural city which Santa Clara Valley imitates to some degree. When I say rural city, I mean the agricultural district of the valley, or what's left of it with the ever-growing subdivisions squeezing between the remaining orchards, forming a semi-city. I live with my parents at the southern end of this valley in a ranch type house. The acre lot is crisscrossed by rows of walnut trees; the house at the front.¹

It was the summer of 1952 when I was 12, but at the time I considered myself quite grown. My birthday had been just yesterday and I had received the thing I had wanted most for many years. My favorite uncle gave me a pump action 0.22 rifle with a rich black-walnut stock.² It seemed funny that I should get it from him because he and

¹ Karl lived at 660 (later 960) Dry Creek Road on a 1-acre walnut orchard from 1951 to the time he left home. The house was about a tenth of a mile from what is now Bascom Avenue.

² Karl received a Stevens 0.22 rifle from his father at 12. He dropped the gun in a bike accident, broke the original cherry wood stock, and carved a new one from a thick black walnut board that he bought for \$5 from the Campbell High School wood shop.

my mother didn't get along too well. I guess he gave it to me because he knew that because she didn't like guns I would never get one from her.³

No matter, I got the gun. It was a beautiful rifle with a hexagonal barrel of gleaming blue steel, tapered smaller toward the front. This gun shot the 0.22 special shells that made it more powerful than an ordinary 0.22 rifle. I was tremendously excited about my unexpected good fortune and all I could think of was when I could go shooting.

My parents weren't the least bit interested in guns or any sports pertaining to them and weren't too happy about me even having a gun at all. So every time I brought up the issue of shooting they would think up some fantastic excuse that couldn't fool anyone, not even me.

They would say something to the effect ---- Sorry son, but I've got an important date to go golfing with the boys this afternoon. Maybe we could work something in next Saturday ---- or on the next Saturday ---- Your father has to speak at our Stitch, Stab and Gossip Sewing Club next Saturday, so don't pester him if you want to go to the show Friday night.

³ Karl's father gave the rifle to Karl over his Karl's mother's protests. Karl's Uncle Arnie, the only uncle he knew, would have never give him a gun or anything else. This comment apparently indicates a wish regarding Karl's uncle.

By about this time I was disappointed because my parents were practically waving a flag around saying ---- "Now you've got that gun, what are you going to do with it?" They didn't say it in so many words but that was the impression of their attitude.

This was a challenge and I was determined not to resign without some attempt. That set the wheels of my mind spinning to find a solution, some idea which would enable me to go shooting near to home, yet safe and secure.

I figured that this problem would take a lot of thought so I went to my favorite spot about 100 yards from the house and concentrated on the problem. This spot was beneath the cool and natural shelter of an old knurled oak towering majestically overhead.⁴ There one could lie in the pool of tall green grass and relax out of sight of everyone. This spot still retained the natural and individual look, which the orchards around it had.⁵ After about a half hour of miscellaneous thinking I was struck by an idea that renewed my hopes, and what's more it made some sort of sense.

⁴ Karl's parents never did take him shooting, and his favorite spot was under a large black walnut tree in the back corner of the lot near the irrigation ditch. The ground was never plowed near this tree.

⁵ The other side of the ditch was a large cherry orchard and the only sounds were from trucks that traveled the San Jose - Los Gatos Road (now Bascom Avenue).

I was still thinking about the idea some fifteen minutes later as I headed for the house over the thick clods of freshly plowed earth when I met a friend, Lou Harper, a tall well-built boy swaggering across the orchard toward me. I guess he was taking a short cut home.⁶

"Hi Lou," I said in a half-hearted tone.

"You sick 'r somethin'? You don't sound all here." Lou said curiously.

"Oh, I was just thinkin' about a crazy idea I got for shooting my gun around here," I answered as I came out of my trance and jammed my hands in my Levis with a jerky motion.

"Well, let's hear it. If you're that deep it must be tremendous, 'n' besides that's a question I've been brooding about for a long time," Lou said propping himself in a hunched position against one of the tree trunks waiting for an answer.

"I don't know how good it is but you asked for it. Maybe we can try it out tomorrow if it rings true."

"OK Shoot."

"Yu know the irrigation ditch that runs along the back of your place? Well anyway about 500 yards up that ditch

⁶ This boy was probably Chuck Kaffer, Karl's next-door neighbor. Karl, Chuck and his brothers used to go to school through the cherry orchard across the ditch. However, Chuck was not actually part of this story. See the story Reverence for Life in Karl's memoirs.

there is a real crooked section with lots of trees, vines 'n' junk growin' all over the ditch, top 'n' bottom. We could hack out the stuff on the bottom 'n' leave the stuff on the top. Then go shooting there completely hidden from everyone and not a chance for doing damage because the bends an' walls 'll catch all the slugs."

"Man, that's a lot of work. Why don't you just get your parents t' take you out, it a lot easier?"

"Look, if I could get my parents to take me out I wouldn't need to do it, but they won't. Since they don't, here I am, so how about taking a crack at it with me?"

"OK. I see what y' mean. When do you want to get started?" Lou said, standing up and rubbing his back where it had rested against the tree.

"Fine! I'll meet you out there by that big old tree at about 2:00 tomorrow. It's getting late, so I think I'll beat it," I said heading off again.

"2 right 0", I'll see y'," Lou called after me as he started off.

In the heat of the next afternoon we met again in our prearranged rendezvous, in the shade of the gnarled oak. Lou sat against the tree and was gazing down his gun barrel as I approached him. AS a matter of fact he was so taken

up with the rifling inside that I got on the other side of the tree without him even knowing it. Quickly I slipped a shell into my gun and silently cocked it and, just to give Lou a thrill, I fired into the ground, giving a sharp crack.

At this, Lou jumped like he sat on a tack and yelled "Cripes! What 'r y' trying t' do t' me? I'll do the same for you sometime when you're looking down your barrel."

"Man, I couldn't just stand there and let you get bored with life, 'n' besides a little thrill never did bother you," I said, coming around the tree with some sort of odd smirk on my face 'cuz I couldn't hold it back. Then with a sharp click I sent the hot shell flying behind me.

"It's too hot to fool around so let's get down to business," Lou said, wiping the partial hot and cold sweat off his head and flopping down on the cool grass just where I thought I was going to sit.

"Yes, it is kind of hot, isn't? Well, it will be cooler down in the ditch," I said, sitting down next to Lou. I leaned my gun against the tree and my shoulder.

"I hope so. By the way, did you bring somethin' to cut with? That brush is really thick and I clean forgot," Lou said looking cautiously down his barrel again.

"Darn, I forgot to. I'll be back in a minute." I jumped to my feet and beat it for the house out in the blazing sun.

I returned a couple of minutes later with a pair of pruning shears.

"Come on, let's go," said Lou, who was already on his feet, gun in hand.

I grabbed my rifle, flipped it in the crotch (crook) of my arm and followed Lou through the orchard behind our property. When we got to the ditch we were sweaty so we jumped in the ditch and paused a second to wipe off our hands and arms. Continuing again, we reached the spot we planned to make our shooting range. It was badly overgrown so we hacked through it and began to hollow out a 50-foot section that was like a tunnel of bushes and vines.⁷

This was no easy job but at last we finished and we had now a sort of room with a brush roof in which we sat, leaning all tuckered out against the wooden walls of the ditch to relax.

⁷ There was not brush in the ditch because it was maintained and used for orchard irrigation. Further, the portion behind Karl's property was straight. However, the bottom of the ditch, at least in this section, was cement and the bullets bounced off this cement in the real incident, which did bring a lot of neighbors.

"Well, I don't know about you but I'm going to go home and cool off. And, besides we haven't got any targets here," Lou said drowsily.

"I'm with y' there. I'm itching all over from this doggone brush. Let's meet here tomorrow morning and I'll bring along some boxes and make a few targets." I jumped out of the ditch as soon as I was away from the bushes and pulled my rifle up after me. Lou followed and did the same, but on the other side of the ditch.

"What time 'll we meet here in the morning?" Lou asked.

"Oh, let's see. How about 10:00, if that's OK with you."

"Sure. How about taking a couple of shots before we leave? It seems a shame not to take just a few," Lou said, slipping a clip of shells into his rifle and pumping one into the chamber.

"OK," I said, doing the same.

"I bet I can hit that knot down there," said Lou, firing about 4 or 5 times in succession.

"Missed! Let me show you how a pro does it." Then a series of uneven cracks showed my talent for missing, too. "Well, that's hopeless. I'll see you tomorrow."

I trudged home lugged my gun, shears and all. The day had been hot but profitable.

The next morning was decidedly cooler when I headed for the ditch again. As I approached I heard a few muffled shots and occasionally I saw the glint of a shell over the edge of the ditch when it was discharged. Lou was really blasting away at something so I hurried up my pace for my curiosity.

"What say, man," I said, popping over the top of the ditch and over Lou, who crouched with his gun over his shoulder, hanging slightly down now that he was looking at me. "Don't use up all your ammo before I have challenged you to a match," I said, jumping in the ditch, yanking my rifle after me. I inserted the clip and kicked a shell into the chamber.

"Where are the boxes? That's all we need yet," Lou said.

"They're up on top. Grab 'em, will y'." And in a minute we were all set up for action.

The box jumped as our aim improved and we moved it down the ditch to make the shots harder. We had been at this but a few minutes when there was the harmonic whine of ricocheting bullets cutting through the quiet.

"What the heck's that?" I said, quite puzzled at the sound.

"That's nothing to worry about. It's just a couple of ricocheting bullets," Lou said, not stopping his fire.

"Are you sure? Oh what the Hell, we'll not get caught anyway," I said hammering some of the empty shells into the side of the ditch with a rock.

"Op, I guess I'll have to put those down as famous last words. Look who's comin'. Your dad. I thought he was at work today," I said with a little gasp.

"That's what I thought, too. Let's ditch, but where can we go?"

"Shut up a second and stay hidden or he'll see us. Our only chance is to hope he doesn't see us."

We both held our breath for several minutes and stayed quiet. Just when we thought Lou's dad had gone, Lou said something and his dad poked his head over the edge of the ditch and spotted us.

"That did it!" I said.

"Hey, what are y' doin' down there? Someone has been lobbing bullets over my way from around here. Come out of there," Lou's dad said sizing up the situation.

In a minute Lou's dad knew what was going on and we had had it. I figured that, at least, we hadn't done any

real damage or there would be a mob out there by now, so I didn't feel too bad, but I felt mighty ashamed. One thing that would probably happen, I felt sure, was that my parents would see the error in the way they had acted toward my gun. When I reached home, my parents had already found out what I had done. I could tell this when I entered the house.

In the immediate future I felt that I would have to figure out another way of sitting, and from that time on my gun has been a beautiful decoration hanging over the fireplace.⁸

The End --- !

(This story was written when Karl Belser was 15 and then edited by Karl Belser 50 years later when he was 65. The story is a fictional account of a real incident that was described in Karl's memoirs in the story "Reverence For Life". Footnotes have been added to add detail about the true facts.)

⁸ Karl got his rifle confiscated for a while, and later went often to the Santa Clara County Sheriff's shooting range off of Bernal road.