

GAME BIRDS

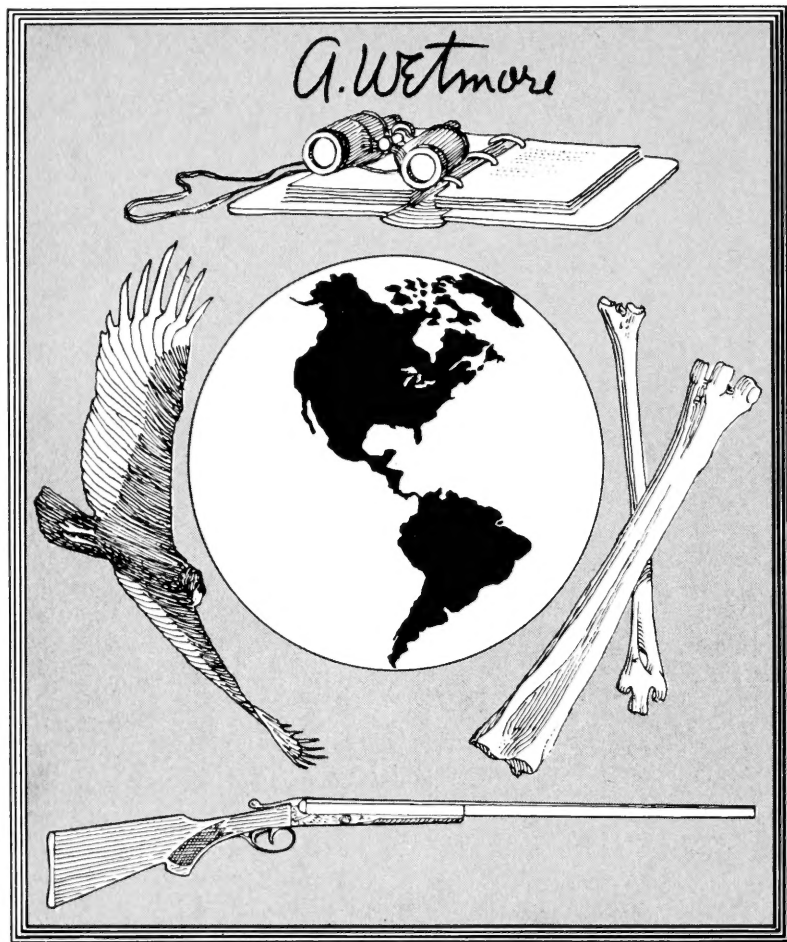


AT HOME

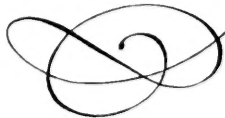
BY

THEODORE S. VAN DYKE

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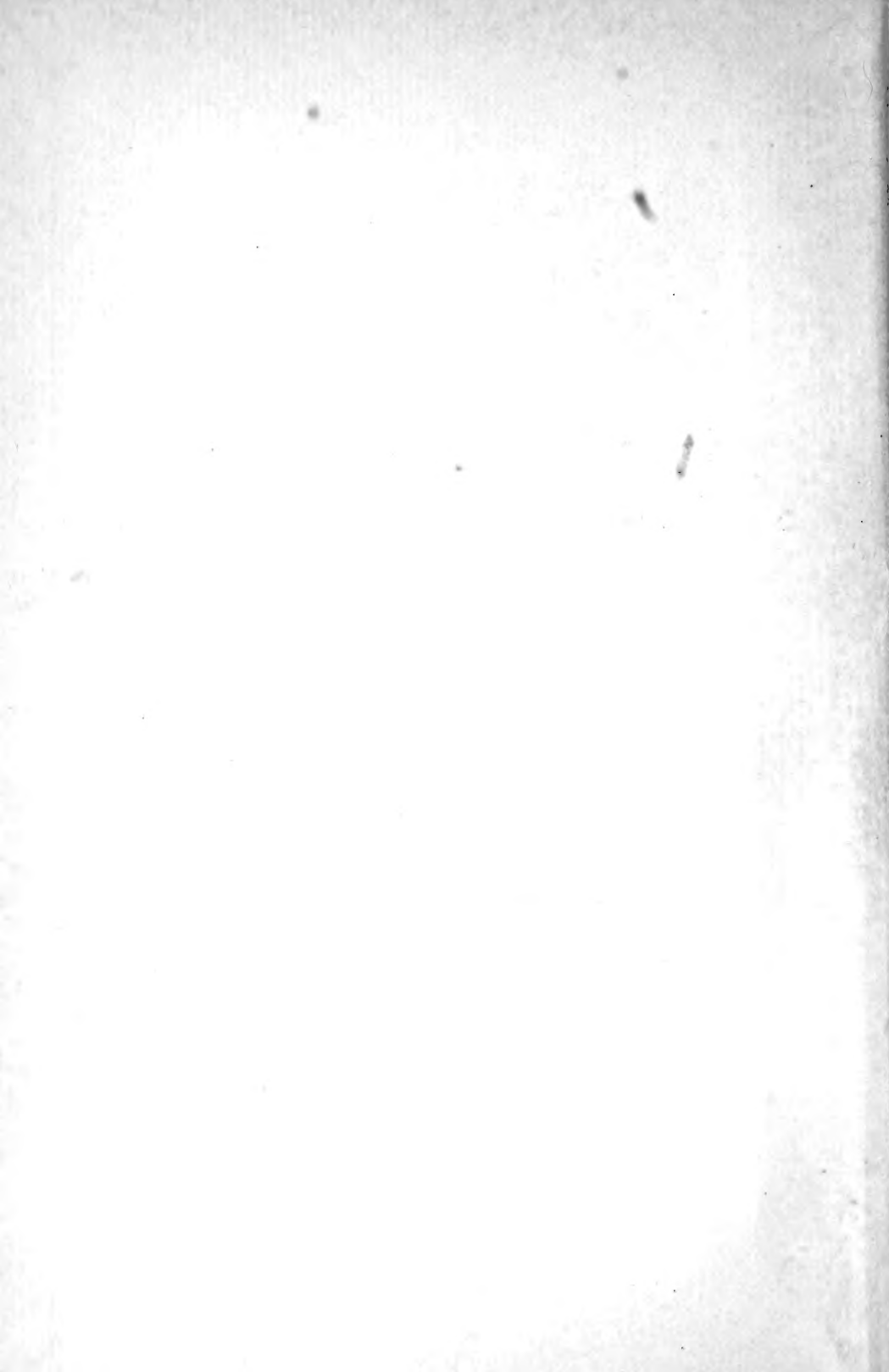
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GAME-BIRDS
AT HOME.

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Birds

GAME BIRDS AT HOME,

BY THEODORE S. VAN DYKE ^[strong]
AUTHOR OF "THE STILL HUNTER";
"SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA"; ETC.



NEW-YORK: FORDS, HOWARD,
AND HULBERT  1895

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PREFACE.

TO the majority of sportsmen love of nature is the principal element in the love of hunting. The pleasure of exercising skill in the finding and capture of game is really secondary to this, and still more subordinate is the flavor or size of the game. Thousands enjoy a stroll with the dog, out of season, almost as well as the real hunt.

To please such, a book should be made up of selected charms of the field.

These are, first and foremost, the nature of the game, its action and behavior. The mere form or size is of no more consequence than the flavor. Why the action of certain birds will give man more delight than that of others is one of nature's secrets. We can only say it is charming; and describe it as we know it.

Besides its own fascination, this action must be such as to require a high degree of skill in man or dog, and generally in both, to effect capture. Yet, though game must occasionally drop to gratify man's inborn love of exercising skill, there must be *no murder*.

Then, too, the stage of action must be the home of the bird,—that natural scenery the sportsman loves so well to roam without a gun. And this must be depicted true in color to its place and season.

Small room for mistake is left me on these points, after forty years of play with the gun and eighteen years of writing for the sportsmen of America. Chiefly for them this book is written, and that rather to touch certain tender chords of memory than to convey information; although the lover of nature who is not yet an expert huntsman may, I trust, find some hints of experience not altogether without value to him.

As to pictorial illustration, it is a sound rule of art that a picture must explain itself: one that requires exposition, or wandering of the eye to connect leading features, is generally a

bore. But when you apply this rule to a picture of field-sports—especially with small game, limit the action to a narrow background, and against this group the actors so clearly that every one must understand it at a glance, you have portrayed rank murder. Though easy killing occasionally happens, it is a matter always of regret, not of pride; a parade of it is simply disgusting. Fine drawing of shiny guns, fancy leggings, and other fashionable “toggery” on the killer behind the gun, help this kind of “art” like a red rosette on the tail of the prize ox falling beneath the sledge at the shambles. Even a butcher would be disgusted with a painting of a lamb bleeding on the block; and the more perfect the dripping blood, the more damnable the outrage upon art in the selection of such a subject.

A picture that should even touch the field that charms—with its wide range, its varied features and colors, and its almost invisible game—would be more of a map than a picture. The rules of art cannot be safely violated. Neither can the rules of the sportsman’s taste: and *Positively no murder* is the first of these. I have

tried to reconcile these conflicting elements, but have not yet succeeded to my own satisfaction. As this is not the Blood-Snuffer's Manual, I illustrate with facts, in words. For most of my readers this will be clear enough.

LOS ANGELES, CAL., May, 1895.

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GAME-BIRDS AT HOME.

I.

BOB WHITE.

CRIMSON stars the gum-tree's glossy green, the speckled breast of the young robin is turning reddish brown, chips of nutshells begin to carpet the ground beneath the lofty hickory, and a vague yearning steals over the sportsman. Strange yet tender feeling, unlike anything else in the human breast,—and how early it comes! The massive green of the timbered hill is yet untinged with gold, and the blue gentian has scarcely unfolded its fringed petals, while down by the brook the chelone is just opening its hood of pinkish white. From the slender spikes of the linaria still hang racemes of softest

blue; amid the down of the thistle yet gleam the yellow and black of the goldfinch, and the hare still makes his form in the woods instead of going to the open. Little sign of autumn; yet that strange feeling deepens by the day.

Anon the bobolink in somber suit chirps sad farewell above our heads, russet and gold steal over the oaks, red lights the fading green of the maple, and a change comes over the old dog. No longer does he tap out a lazy welcome on the floor with his tail at your approach, but springs to his feet and with sparkling eye tries to fathom your intentions.

A few more days, and from the edge of the timber, where the sweet berries of the viburnum are darkening among its reddening leaves, comes a *Cloi-ee—ee, cloi-ee—ee, cloi-ee—ee, cloi-ee—ee* that sets your soul ablaze. How different from the “Bob White” that so lately rang across the harvest-field, yet how gentle and penetrating this autumn call of the quail! He who has never felt its sweet power when the hills are arrayed in crimson and gold and a mellower sunlight falls from on high has missed the strangest emotion of the human breast. And strong must be the

chains of business to hold one when the pearly scales of the everlasting rustle in the fall winds and the persimmon is reddening among its half-bare branches, when the jingling note of the jay in the russet of the white oak is nearly all that remains of the late music of the woods, and the crimson of the cardinal grosbeak the last flash of brilliant life.

What bright oases on the desert of existence were those mornings when the hoar-frost sparkled on the buckwheat-stubble with the dogs in rolling canter sniffing the bracing air! The squeal of the highholder or mournful piping of the robin, the flitting gray of some belated song-sparrow, the tender twittering of waxwings flirting their golden edgings and long topknots in the dark cedar, and the dull *Chuck* of some lone blackbird hastening south above our heads, all cast a saddening influence around the dying year. Yet we never felt so full of gladsome life, hearts never beat with higher expectations, and dogs never showed more sparkling eyes. We knew the shortest stubble could hold dozens of the dear little quails within a few feet of us, and only the keen nose of the dog could tell us of their

presence. The dogs, too, knew our inability and felt proud of our reliance on them. And when at last they settled to unwavering firmness and from before them rose lines of brown mingled with white and ashy blue and spots of black, with a haze on either side made by whizzing wings, all spinning at tremendous speed for the timber, it mattered little whether we had a gun or not. Many a mile, before the law permitted shooting, have I roamed without a gun to see that sight, and many a mile would I go to-day to see it once more.

There was deep satisfaction, too, in being the victim of that trick of Bob's, withholding scent. Whether he did it voluntarily or not was all the same; and when we had tramped and re-tramped the exact spot on which we saw a dozen birds alight, and the noses lately so keen had swept almost every inch of it without finding more than a bird or two and perhaps none, our disappointment was mingled with pleasure in having a genius to cope with. And there was no half-hour more pleasant than that we spent whistling an occasional imitation of his soft autumn call and waiting for him to move.

And what delightful anticipation when the tender *Cloi-ee—ee, cloi-ee—ee, cloi-ee—ee* came in plaintive tones from where the witch-hazel was putting forth its long golden petals, and another answered from where the red berries of the wintergreen were still shining among its ever-green leaves; and another chimed in where the scarlet arils of the bittersweet were blazing in the tangled brake, and from the bunch of briers almost beside you and the clumps of whitening grass in front came from another, another, and another little throat the same sweet note!

How close they lay, and what short flights they made, before persecution changed the habits of these charming birds! Yet even then how hard to get! Do you remember, when the dog stood over a clump of dead grass with nose almost perpendicular, how often you had to kick in it before anything would move? And when out it came, and the dog made a vain snap at its tail, and it curled over your head and vanished among the dense green of the cat-brier before you could turn around, and curiosity and reproach were mingled in the deep dark eye the dear old dog turned for a moment upon you,

you felt very small. Yet you felt consolation in being victimized by such a smart bird, and went on to look for another with more love than ever. And when again you found the dog in icy rigidity where the woolly tails of the clematis made a haze in the thicket of wild plum by the brookside, and through the dense tangle of twigs and still clinging leaves two brown streaks shot from before him and you had to drop on one knee to get a full sight of them and have your gun clear of the brush,—who would suppose that anything but disappointment could be your portion again? Ah! when along the gun you caught a glimpse of buzzing white where the mottled breast was wheeling through an opening, and dimly saw a puff of feathers mingle with the shower of dead leaves and twigs, yet had no time to mark results, but turned the gun into the mass of cover in which the other bird had already vanished, and sent another charge of shot a foot or two ahead of the last place where you saw it—what sweet uncertainty was that! You fancied you heard each time a faint thump on the ground, but fancy had toyed too often with your hopes. And when the dog drew and picked up some-

thing from near where the first one should have fallen, how your heart swelled with pride! But when he vanished in the direction the other bird had taken, and the pattering of his feet on the dead leaves slowly ceased, and for a moment all was still, and then in joyous gallop he returned with a dead bird and laid it in your hand, you felt you had not lived in vain. Foolish feelings, perhaps; but the best of our race have yielded to their soft sway, and dear little Bob White has brought more rest to the business-wearied soul, more new life to tired humanity, than nearly all other American game combined. In his sweet presence you feel a contempt for "trophies," for game that some Indian has to call up to you, or a guide row you up to. Mere trash is all game too big to handle, beside this little beauty that fills but a corner of your pocket.

On no other bird does the sportsman's best companion so delight his soul with noble work. Years cannot blot the memory of the long trail old Don made on that November morning when the covey you had found on the stubble and driven into the wood had become too widely scattered for farther hunting. About the time you had

given up hope of finding any more birds, the dog suddenly seemed weary. His legs dragged and settled to a pace suitable for a snail's funeral. On he went, with young Frank waddling solemnly along in the rear as if an old hand at the business. Rod after rod Don crept, sneaking under fallen logs, winding cautiously around tree-tops, crawling through cat-briers, sniffing the air gingerly with twitching nostrils; Frank following with funereal tread: but neither pointing. On they go one hundred yards, then fifty more with pace becoming slower; but still they do not stop. Don's pace settles to a crawl, with the wavy motion of his tail almost ceasing, yet on he goes, and Frank, so well born that he scarcely needs breaking, creeps thievishly along, full thirty feet in the rear.

From a bunch of briers a few feet from Don's nose a hare scatters the dry leaves with rapid foot. Chasing a hare was the only weakness of that good old dog, and no amount of thrashing or failures to catch a hare ever taught him the inexpediency of the pursuit. But now with contemptuous glance at the bit of flickering wool he goes straight on. Down in the shade, along

a little spring run, he winds more and more slowly where the horsetails stand tall and gray and the bracken-ferns are rusty and red. Suddenly he comes to a dead stop, settling low like a crouching cat, with tail quivering at the tip and nose pointed at a clump of ferns a few feet ahead. From the ferns a brown haze of buff and rose-wood colors tipped with a long bill whirls spirally upward through the tree-tops with whistling wing, but not a feather accompanies the little shower of twigs and dead leaves your shot brings down.

A long trail, wasn't it? But who ever knew a woodcock run that far?

Old Don answers by going slowly on again, young Frank prowling along with the gravity of a sphinx. Down a long slope, over the bright green leaves and shining red berries of the partridge-berry, now with majestic march that shows sublime confidence in the outcome, now with the slow caution of a circus elephant walking over his keeper, now with a bit of wavering that shows the game far ahead, but still with no lack of faith, old Don leads, with Frank still creeping in the rear.

And at last Don almost stops, and with nose upraised and slowly oscillating tail sniffs tenderly in the direction of a fallen tree-top a few yards off, then, moving two or three half-steps with extreme caution, settles into a statue, with eyes intently fixed on the ground at the bottom of the tree-top.

B—*bbbbbbbbbbbbbbbb* roars suddenly from the tangle of briars around the tree-top, and a ruffed grouse, scattering the dry leaves at the first burst of obstreperous wing, roars like a rocket upward. But, as his fanlike tail with its brown and gray and bars of jet fades amid the crowding twigs and leaves that still cling to the white-oak, *Bang* goes the gun aimed quickly a yard or more ahead of the last glimpse of brown, and down through crashing leaves and crackling twigs whirls something with a thump to earth.

Wonderfully well done, wasn't it? But was it not also a very long trail for a ruffed grouse? Ah! Wait: Don's actions tell the story, for he resumes the grave tread of a moment ago, and on he goes right past the fallen grouse, noticing it only with a sniff, while Frank stops a moment and, looking alternately from you to

Don, finally brings it to you and then resumes his place in the procession.

Fifty yards more and Don stops, tosses up his nose a few times with dainty sniffs of the breeze, looks around at you with a tremendous mingling of importance and satisfaction, and then waddles slowly on again. A few yards more and he stops as if carved of stone. Then his tail begins to waver, he raises his nose again, then, creeping a few feet, he stops at the crest of a little knoll, and from the patches of briars on the other side comes at last, on your approach, that burst of buzzing quail-wings that you have so longed to hear.

The habits of Bob White in the West differ a little from those of his brethren on the Atlantic shores, but he is still the same lovely bird. After he recovers from his crazy spell in the first days of Indian Summer, when he gathers in droves, runs into town, and sometimes bumps his head against some building in his swift flight, he separates again into coveys; and though he rarely lies so closely as in the East, he makes fine shooting. The hedges of Osage orange used to be his favorite hiding-place on the prairie. With the dog to the leeward, two persons could have

fine shooting, one on each side of the hedge. Quick work was needed when out from the thorny mass the bird came whizzing in full headway. Like a flash he was fading amid the tall gray stalks of the corn still standing dense and close to the hedge. Quick as thought had to be your aim if you wanted to see him whirl down amid the yellow pumpkins, for if he once vanished in that corn he was no more for you that day.

Nor was it so easy when out on the open prairie-side he came curling, with the sunlight dancing on his mottled breast of black and white, his little blue tail outspread, and the soft rosewood hues of his back in plain sight, wheeled around you perhaps and started down the hedge again. On that gigantic background it was easy to underestimate the speed and distance of the fleeting beauty, and just behind him the tall rosin-weed often bowed its still golden head and sank to earth at the report of your first barrel, while the second scattered some of the lingering sunflowers and brought perhaps a feather from the little blue tail, the loss of which only made its owner seem to vanish more swiftly.

Where the prairie merges into timber in a line of rolling hills well covered with hazel this bird is most at home when the frost has tattered the proud banners of the hills. Down in the little swale where the rich pink of the rose mallow but lately glowed, and the faded petals still cling to the gray stem, the bevy, shaded by the hazel from the winds, lies basking in the sun. A gay whirl and roar they make as they spin away among the dead stalks from which the deep purple of the petalostemon so lately beamed, or vanish in the haze made by the numerous buds of the hazel. Then in the long, dead grass that twines about the hazel-roots they lie almost like stones, taxing the dogs' keenest nose to find them. And though mostly open shooting over the top of the brush, it is none too easy to clip the buzzing wing that often twists and dodges long enough to confuse you, or comes out of the brush far enough away to make quick work necessary and then, laughing at your slowness, spins down the prairie gale at a pace that leaves your shot behind again.

In Minnesota and Wisconsin, after his little fit of wandering in large droves is over, Bob

White hangs about the outskirts of the grove of scrub white-oak that holds its leaves all winter. For this he will often make all speed, leaving the hazel where he has been sunning himself to such birds as like it. Whether the bevy flies over it, into it, or under it, you may find some of the birds ensconced in the thick leaves. Perhaps you know something of shooting, but you are not fully educated until you have tried to connect your line of sight over the gun with a brown flash through almost exactly the same color. Vastly is the difficulty increased by the downward curve of the line when the bird is in the top of a tree and darts through an opening below. At other times it shoots straight upward long enough to lead you to think you have caught its direction, and then, having cleared the top of the brush, it scuds away on a horizontal line that is gone glimmering among the dream of things that should be, before you can shift your gun to it.

Little better may you fare when among the dead leaves and grass along the ground the bird lies hiding scarcely a yard from the nose of the statue into which the dog has suddenly turned.

Drop on one knee as quickly as you will, the buzzing brown often fades into the russet canopy before you can possibly turn the gun upon it. Only the eye of faith can serve you now, and there must be no dust in that. In such cover a double shot is generally impossible, and by the time you have made a few single shots you will say you have found about the hardest shooting on earth.

In the West the sportsman becomes better acquainted with Bob White out of shooting season than in the East. In the East his summer call of "Bob White" ringing over the harvest fields and an occasional glimpse of his plump little figure as he sits upon some distant fence is about all you get of him, unless you do as I have often done—hide well in the grass and call him to you by the call of the hen, and see him play around you in astonishment. But in the prairie states he used to be a common sight along the roads, and many a time the little brood rose with a soft whiz from in front of the horses as you drove along. Often when the ferns and grass of the prairie were starred with the soft gold of the lady-slipper, while the mild

purple of the sabbatia toned down the brilliant yellow of the sunflowers, and you advanced to the stiff-set dog expecting to see the pinnated grouse burst from before him, the anxious mother quail fluttered up with the tender notes that told of little ones in the grass. And sometimes the white-throated father of the family helped the mother play lame while the little downy brood hid in the depths of the grass where neither dog nor man could find one of them.

Often, too, when the deep violet of the ver-
nonia was fading on its tall stalk and the last of
the morning-glories closing, and you were certain
that the dog had one of those wild grouse that
had flown so far and you had marked so closely,
a bevy of quail rose before you with a roar of
full-grown wings almost equal to that of the
grouse. And in the timbered hills where the
prairies of the upper Mississippi break into the
valley of the great river, Bob White would burst
from before the dog in the swales of fern or be-
neath the yellowing birches when you were most
certain that he had a ruffed grouse. Yet you
felt no disappointment, and plunged through the

thickets of crab-apple after them, scratched your way through the scrub-oak, tore through briars, and toiled up the hillside as eagerly as you would for the largest of game.

Alas, the days that are no more! Time plies his whizzing wing, and already dear Bob is with many older sportsmen but a memory of the past. But what a tender memory it is! As many a day we hunted him without a gun, and felt rewarded for miles of travel with the sound of his buzzing wing, so now we have to hunt in memory's field, and in the recollection of his winsome ways find more pleasure than in the actual pursuit of what the world deems nobler game. Farewell, dear Bob; for me, at least, thou hast made life worth the living; and when in the Happy Hunting-grounds my eyes open to the morning light, of all the bright company I there shall hope to see, to thee, dear Bob, the first of all, they'll turn; yes, first of all to thee.

II.

THE WOODCOCK.

THOUGH Bob White has been a more familiar spirit because he spent the whole year with us and had more sides to his lovely nature, there is no bird I have walked so far to see as the woodcock in his own wild home. What gave such charm to this frail being I never knew; but it was not his fine flavor, or even the satisfaction of shooting him, for I have hunted the woodcock almost as much without a gun as with one. Before the pure white of the blood-root illumined the sodden leaves, almost before the purling note of the bluebird was heard in the open, or the drum of the ruffed grouse sounded again in the laurel brake, I used to roam with the dog only the southern slopes along the spring runs and the warm open bogs, to renew acquaintance with this bird on his return from the South. Where

the snowy racemes of the shad-bush lit up the still leafless thickets, what a thrill those little holes in the mud made by the woodcock's bill sent through my soul! How I hunted often in vain by day to find the bird that made them, and went there again in the evening to see him tower twittering into the evening sky, and hear him sing his only song, the song of springtime and love!

And when the snowy involucre of the dogwood lit up the darkening halls of the woods, and the liquid tones of the wood-thrush made the falling of night so sweet, long have I lingered around the place where I knew there was a woodcock's nest. Many a time after I had found the sitting bird have I crawled softly up on hands and knees to see the beam of that dark liquid eye that has no equal elsewhere on earth. How I watched for the little ones to come, and reached the place early in the morning to see the old mother rise with feeble wing, flutter but a few feet, and then limp along the grass! How I searched beneath every leaf and bit of grass until I found one of the little downy things, felt more happy than if I had shot an elephant, and took more pleasure

in seeing it run away, while the dog eyed it with quizzical look, than I would in shooting at it two or three months later! And day after day I returned to see them until the azalea began to unfold its pink upon the hills, and the fragrance of the magnolia to flood the swamps where its pure white shone, until the scarlet tanager flamed in the green of the maple, and the rich hues of the redstart illumined the shades of the hickory.

Soon now my little friends became as hard to find as the yellow-breasted chat, whose rich voice seemed never mute in the depths of the thicket. In the damp ground along the brook, where the little "teter" snipe glided so softly about, and the perfume of the muskrat rose on the evening air, I could find where their little bills had bored for worms, and occasionally late in the evening could start the mother along some boggy ground by the water; but where were the young ones?

And when the carol of the robin was dying away in the orchard, the music of the thrush waning upon the elm, and the song of the cat-bird growing feebler in the hedge, how easy it was to find my little friends again, and how swift they were upon the wing, though not of full size!

Then, when the air began to be fragrant with dittany and balm, and the melancholy monotone of the cuckoo and the plaintive squeak of the peewee made most of the music of the woods, what lovelier sight than that haze of rosewood colors circling upward through the shade with whistling wing, and winding out of an opening so swiftly that eye and hand were rarely quick enough to catch it? All that held this bird was enchanted ground at this time of year. What mattered musquitoes, or steaming heat, or cobwebs across every opening in the woods, as long as there was a bit of damp ground in the dry spell of summer? And cheerfully we floundered through sticky mud and calamus and cat-tails to see that long bill clear their tops once more, and wheel away for the bank of willows in whose depths it would surely fade unless both hand and eye were quick as well as true.

Later on the meadows were aflame with the butterfly-weed, and the rose-mallow tinged the marshes with soft pink; the towering bobolink no longer poured a flood of song, but clamorous blackbirds began to gather into flocks. Then what a prize a single woodcock often seemed,

and how patiently we beat every foot of wet ground in the marshes, and explored every muddy place the dry weather had left in the woods, or the damp spots of some low cornfield where the green leaves hung yet uncurled by drouth! How we wondered where the woodcock had gone, and where lived the few that were left! The mystery deepened love, and miles were nothing for one glimpse of that whistling wing.

Yet very tame seemed all this beside the day when, after weeks of absence, the woodcock returned full-feathered from the molt. The song of the oriole had ceased in the woods; little creepers stole no more along the limbs, hunting for slugs on the green leaves; hushed was the sprightly twittering of the wren in the thicket; and the mournful cooing of the dove was heard no more in the oak. The crimson of sumac and dogwood warmed the rich hues of the maples, and beside the yellowing beech the fox-grapes hung blue and fragrant among leaves of russet and gold. The red sun struggled down through smoky air, filling with dreamy softness the spangled hillsides and sapling-groves where the returning wanderer was to be welcomed from the

North. Along the little stream where the water-cress was still green and the jewel-weed struggled yet for life, those fine holes bored in the mud by the long bill sent again that peculiar thrill through the soul. And when the pattering of the dog's feet ceased, and you found him standing rigid where the sunlight filtered through half-bare saplings, you felt repaid for your toil. But before you could get half-way to the dog, the brown would rise with sharper whistle of swifter wings than those of summer, and, disdainful of the fine course you had selected for its flight, wheel suddenly behind the russet leaves that still clung to a white-oak, through which your first barrel spouted vain smoke, and then as suddenly whirl around the golden crown of a chestnut before you could kindle the fire in your second barrel. And you felt glad though mad, happy though disappointed.

In the West the woodcock is the same lovely and mysterious bird he is in the East, though he nowhere makes such autumn shooting as he once made on the Atlantic coast. In some places he vanishes for the season about the middle of August; in others, as on the upper Mississippi,

he stays through the molting period and is easily found, when so hard to find in the East. In the bottoms of most of the western rivers, especially the Illinois, woodcock were once very abundant. When the scarlet of the cardinal-flower began to blaze along the wet banks, and the little grass of Parnassus to uplift its creamy petals along the marshes, the whistling wing could be heard almost anywhere in the bottoms. Where the soft blue trumpets of the mimulus were reflected in sluggish water he dodged away in a twinkling into the grove of willow that lined it; from the deep shades of the thickets he flashed up into the canopy of green; from the serried spears of cat-tails and rushes he sprung at midday as well as in the evening; and even from the open edges of the ponds where the receding waters had stranded the bright blue spikes of the pickerel-weed he circled over the adjoining trees.

But the best shooting, combining ease of travel with attractive surroundings and healthy air, was on the bottoms of the upper Mississippi before so much of the timber was cut away, and when the sloughs were clear instead of muddy and full of sawdust. When the canoe left the river, it

entered a new world as the paddle sent it gliding among fallen trees, around sharp elbows, and through swirling eddies. Amid strange fragrance from a million flowers, amid the hum of bees, gay dragon-flies, and rattling locusts, we wound along banks covered with long grass. Under masses of green and white from climbing vines we paddled, under the waving arms of giant elms and the storm-scarred limbs of aged cottonwoods still reaching skyward in defiance of time, by little open bays where towered the arrowy shafts of the wild rice, and blackbirds rose in roaring flocks, and the wood-duck with dolorous *Wee-wee-wee-wee* sought safety in the air, while the little yellow brood went flapping to the reeds for shelter. All seemed so full of life: the broad head of the maple brightly pictured in the still water over which the canoe was gliding; the gray squirrel, with bushy tail outspread, taking his midday rest; the wild pigeon, like an arrow feathered with white and gray, hissing with speed through the openings; dark shining turtles slipping with soft splash from the driftwood; little nut-hatches stealing along the limbs above and reaching down to pick off slugs; and the king-

fisher springing his noisy rattle on the dead limb or darting into the water.

Woodcock were plenty here, for feeding-grounds were everywhere, while on much of the dry ridges was the best kind of cover. One place was almost as good as another. Where the deep blue of the lobelia was nodding over some damp shore, a bird was as apt to spring at midday as in the solemn shade of the swamp-maples and oaks, where grass could hardly struggle through the gloom. One might be in the long grass that around some fallen tree-top on the higher ground wound upward to the light through the garlands of white and green the wild cucumber wove over the dead limbs. And out from behind it he might skim low and wheel around the next tree so quickly that all you would know of the bird's presence would be the whistle of its wings.

Often the rustling of the dog would cease before we had moored the boat, and we would find him but a few yards away, with nose projecting from the reeds along some muddy shore. Where the red flowers of the knot-grass nodded over the snowy petals of the water-lily left by the receding water we might see, scarce a yard

from the dog's nose, sitting on the mud, the bird we had come to find. Perhaps fresh mud was on his bill from the numerous small holes around him where he had been breakfasting late. His strangely-shaped head was drawn back until its rich colors blended with the rosewood hues of the back, and the deep, tender eye was quizzing us with sublime indifference to the dog. And when with spiral twist he whirled into the bank of leaves over our heads before we could turn around, and nothing but leaves and dead sticks responded to the fierce volley we opened upon him, we still felt glad we had not shot at him on the ground.

Again, when we would miss the dog, we might find him only by the quivering tip of his tail projecting from a thick mat of reeds beside some heavy timber into which the brown wings would fade in speed that left us no time to take aim. Yet we followed the line with memory's eye, and fancied there was a gentle fall of something soft amid the leaves and twigs that followed the shot. And sometimes we found our dog in a dense clump of saplings, with one forefoot on a fallen log he was about to cross when he caught the

scent, and standing as solid as the log itself. Once with soft twitter a cock rose a few feet in air as we came up, and made so sudden a turn there was no time to fire. Not thirty feet from where it rose it alighted on the ground, and with drooping wings and tail erect strutted along for several yards like a turkey-gobbler, with the dog pacing solemnly behind it at a safe distance, surprised at this peculiar action, which is so rare that many sportsmen and many dogs have never seen it.

Two or three hours on pleasant days would generally give one all the shooting a reasonable being should want. It grew better toward evening, and the homeward trip was ever a pleasure. The night-heron flapped his solemn way in the air above, and the deep *Too-hoo* of the great owl resounded through the darkening green that lined the slough. The smooth surface of the river glimmered long after sunset, with crimson and gold reflected from the fleecy clouds above. Far up and down the Minnesota side the bluffs lay darkly blue, while on the Wisconsin side they held a long, lingering trace of pink as if unwilling to let go of day. Long pickerel shone as they

threw themselves in air and sank with a splash into the water; night-hawks by the score pitched here and there over the water; bands of ducks went hissing by; and from both shores rolled across the waters the rich but mournful voice of the whippoorwill.

Woodcock-shooting on these bottom-lands at high water is the very climax of shooting with the shot-gun. In most sections heavy rains or floods scatter woodcock and make them harder to find. But on the upper Mississippi it is the reverse, as the birds never go in numbers to any timber but that in the bottoms. When there is a heavy flood, about the time the birds are the most plenty and about four fifths of the bottoms are submerged, leaving the remainder a network of islands and peninsulas, among which you may paddle anywhere with a light boat, the birds are concentrated on the dry spots. Half the time the dog does not await the landing of the skiff, but with head reaching over the bow, and tip of tail quivering almost in your face, he stands rigid as you could wish before the keel scrapes the ground. Sometimes he springs but half-way out, stopping with fore legs in the water and hind legs

in the boat; and sometimes he springs from it, but stands anchored in his tracks where he strikes the water. And birds are often springing before he leaves the boat.

Before you have firm anchorage for your feet three or four woodcock may spring from the grass and driftwood on the shore, and start on varied curves for as many points of the compass. When you reach the land you can hardly make the dog move ahead, and about the time you think him too cautious he comes to a sudden stop. Two brown twittering lines wheel right and left in front of him; but when with extra quickness you send one to earth and the other to the water, and you think the dog ought to be proud of your work, he merely turns his nose, first to the right, then to the left, then to the right again. Before you can take a step ahead, or even load your gun, away whistles a cock on the right, another on the left, and another from in front, with two or three more curling out of some grass-covered drift ahead; and, before you or the dog can reach either of the two that fell, half a dozen more are twisting in as many directions. And so you may go on from island to island, with the dog not

even walking, but merely crawling about and every few minutes stiffening into a point.

The birds, however, are now wilder than usual, and seeing dozens by no means implies a shower of woodcock. Many rise far ahead of the dog, and before you can come within thirty yards of him. Many lie in the edge of the timber, and wheel away upward while you are inside, or curl around the outer edge. Some twist upward through the tree-tops and then spin away on a straight line; some whisk away so near the ground, the brown line of their flight is hard to distinguish amid the grass and flowers; others bustle out of sight in a twinkling through some dense thicket; while of others you see nothing and only hear the mellow whistle of their wing-feathers.

Who could help miss under such circumstances? Here goes a bird across an open space only twenty-five yards away. Clearly you see the rich brown robes, and the iron rib of the gun seems pointing just the right distance ahead of the long bill. How cool you feel, and what expectation is crowded into one short moment! You pull the trigger, and the brown whistles on

without wavering or shedding a feather. What wonder? What nerves would not flutter when a fresh bird bustles out of the grass as you start to pick up a fallen one and, killing the new one, see the dog point still another before he or you can reach either of the two that have fallen, and then have a couple more spring right and left before you can reach the dog? The finger will sometimes betray one and pull the trigger, when the eye plainly sees the gun is not pointing right, and sometimes it will tremble and balk upon the trigger and disobey the will to pull at the right time. Often, when a quick shot is necessary, the gun fails to come to the right place when first raised; there is no time to shift it, and it is too late to recall the order from the brain to the finger. And often when tossed up at a crossing bird it comes directly on the mark instead of ahead, and the temptation to pull the trigger without shifting the gun ahead is irresistible. And often the gun strikes an unseen branch, or, when wheeling suddenly with loaded pockets, one is thrown out of balance and cannot recover in time. These and a dozen other causes, above all that mysterious "bad spell" which often

attacks the best shots, make it impossible for any one to shoot without many a miss. Thanks to human infirmity that it is so! Were shooting as easy as often pictured, the pleasure of the gun would be gone.

III.

THE RUFFED GROUSE.

WHO can forget the feelings with which he first heard the mysterious drum of the ruffed grouse throb through the bursting woods of spring, or later from the dark mountain-side where the soft pink and white of the rhododendron light up the dark jungle of its leaves, or where the leaves are falling through the haze of Indian Summer, or, as sometimes heard even in the noon of night, in the depths of the great forest? And who ever failed to love him from the moment he first caught a glimpse of his fanlike tail as the graceful bird flashed amid a maze of crimson and gold, or pierced like a shaft of light the green tangle of the cat-brier swamp? And who does not feel that he has lived when, after many vain shots, he sees the brown wings come whirling out of the leaves through which

they were roaring at a speed that has no equal among birds of the woods?

Every place this bird honors with its presence is attractive. Where, in the little glen from which the interlacing heads of the elm and the maple have cut off the sunlight, racemes of little rosy flowers hang from the green leaves of the enchanter's nightshade, where the air is laden with the fragrance of crab-apple and wild plum mingled with soft sweetness from the berries of the viburnum, beneath the dark hemlock where the little red berries of the wintergreen shine in the gloom, or where the scarlet torch of the ginseng lights up the dim corridors of the forest, the sportsman loves ever to linger.

Some unseen spirit captures the old dog, and his canter settles to a slow trot when he enters the ground where this grouse is likely to be. How impressive the patter of his feet on the dead leaves, and the occasional glimpse you catch of him slowly moving through the twigs! And what a moment is that when you hear a fainter rustling and see him moving still more slowly, with more slowly-waving tail! You know he must stop on the outer edge of the circle of cer-

tainty and not try to catch the scent too warm, or a roar of wings and distant flash of brown, too short to shoot at, will be all you see or hear. But right well an old dog knows his business, and you find him perhaps rigid beside a log or little brook he dares not cross. And then, how are you to get a shot? The maple is flaming beside the pale gold of the birch, and the bright red of the dogwood vies with the russet of the oak in barring the path of your vision. The scarlet of the cockspur-thorn yet robes its matted arms, and the yellow leaves of the aspen tremble on its white trunk. How in such a maze of color do you expect to catch that glimpse of white and brown that for an instant only will mark the path of a bird to which all thickets are as smooth a path as the blue of space to the sunbeam?

Before you come within twenty feet of your dog there is a heavy *Bbbbbbbbbbbbbbb* some ten yards ahead of him, a whisk of brown, a scattering of dry leaves beneath it. In a twinkling you drop on one knee and toss the gun to your shoulder.

And is that all?

Well, is not that worth coming to see? One who does not feel that little toil repaid with even a glimpse of this royal game would not appreciate closer acquaintance.

You are in heavier cover than is necessary now. When the autumn rains have tattered the drapery of these thickets you may see something long enough to shoot at it, but now you had better go where it is more open. Let us leave this heavy cover and cross this meadow where the bluejoint waves yet green and above the falling clover the tender purple of the calopogon nods. Where under arcades of alder the swift brook gurgles through grassy banks you shall find the groves of plum and thorn more open.

Bub—bub—bub—bub—bubbubbubbbbbbbbbbb sounds already from the distant thicket, for here upon the upper Mississippi the ruffed grouse drums often in the warm days of fall, and its strange beat quickens your pace.

Scarcely does the dog reach the outer edge of the thicket when he seems suddenly weary, his legs drag, and his tail becomes straighter. He pauses for a moment beneath the crimson of the sumac, and then with delicate sniffs of upraised

nose moves a few feet and comes to a full stop. There is a heavy *Bbbbbbbbbbbb* in the thicket as you approach the dog, and a broad white breast with wide dashes of jet surrounded by a soft haze of brown wings in rapid stroke mounts into the sunlight above the thicket. Where a prettier mark than the outspread tail it turns to you as it wheels with its bands of brown and black and its tender shades of gray, steering the majestic bird on its swift-winding way? And what a strange mixture of exultation and pride with regret you feel when out of a cloud of feathers it descends at the report of your gun to the spangled covert below!

But there is no time to indulge in feelings, for at the report of your gun out comes another roaring mark with little topknot erect on outstretched head, black ruffs laid back, and aimed for the thicket you left but a moment ago. Plain open sailing; and how confident you feel as you raise the gun! Beware, beware! Do you not see the white scales of the immortelles tremble, and even the purple corolla of the iron-weed bow in the breeze made by the resounding wings of the swift rover as it skims their tops? Hold far

ahead, for all too deceptive is that graceful speed.

At the sound of your first barrel a tail-feather comes whiffing down into the glowing top of a goldenrod, but only the faster does the grouse dash the sunshine from its obstreperous wing. *Bang* goes the second barrel, aimed farther ahead, but not a plume of the outspread fan is folded, the graceful head seems only stretched out a little farther, the black ruffs glisten but the more. In a moment the whole is but a haze of brown above which two curving wings are suddenly set, while it plunges into the densest part of the thicket as easily as a meteor into the night.

Few of those who love this bird have seen him before he has left his mother's side to roam alone the mountain's breast or the tangled glen. For his cradle is deep in the heart of summer's wealth, and few are the eyes that can follow him into the dark brake or the shaggy robe of the mountain until frosts have rent the gay canopy and scattered the fragments to the ground. But in the bluffs of the upper Mississippi this grouse was easily found in summer, especially after the coveys were big enough to fly, and they used

often to make fine shooting before any hues of death had touched the timber that studded the hills. These bluffs were about four hundred feet above the slope of the bottom-lands and benches at their feet, and not too steep for hunting. About half-way up their sides, and in the heads of the gulches that cut them in all directions, was the home of this grouse. Often he went to the top where a stubble bordered the timber at the head of a ravine; and many a time, in the cool evening of August or September, when we thought the dog was pointing the pinnated grouse for which we were hunting, a full-grown covey of the ruffed grouse has sprung on uproarious wing and vanished in the shade of the oaks and birches. On hot days it was not uncommon to find the pinnated grouse half-way down the bluffs, seeking the shade of their steep sides, and often the two kinds of grouse were so mixed that either might spring before the dog. Once in a while Bob White lent his charming company, and until the bird rose you could not tell on what the dog was pointing. In the oak openings on the bench-lands of the Wisconsin rivers this same mixture

might often be seen in September and even later, but nowhere else have I known it.

My first hunt on these bluffs was in August, 1867. From near the foot of the bluffs where the maple and oak saplings began to encroach upon the older timber of the hills to near the top where from its white staff the birch was flying its banner of brilliant green, two dogs were racing to and fro. We soon came to a ravine where the ferns and prairie-grass were ranker and the shade deeper. Jack, the elder dog, at once started up the leeward side of the ravine on a cautious trot. This soon subsided to a walk as he caught the breeze that played across the hollow. Quietly he moved along, hidden in the ferns' deep green except his upraised nose and the line of his back and tail. Through the golden wealth of the lady-slipper he kept slowly on until his legs began to stiffen and his tail to lose its oscillation. And as he stopped there was a burst of brown from the ferns some ten yards ahead of him.

Bang, whang, went my gun and my friend's gun almost together; a feather parted from the outspread fan behind the boisterous wings, and in a second more it had faded behind the trees.

Bbbbbb went another from almost the same place before the first bird was out of sight—only a trifle smaller, but quite as swift of wing. *Bang* went the second barrel of both guns exactly together, and a cloud of feathers puffed from the bird which came whirling downward, while with huge hubbub seven or eight more birds rose curling, darting, and whizzing from the ferns in all directions.

But Jack seemed to have little anxiety about the birds that had fallen, and after moving carefully a few feet stopped again, with the other dog, named Frank, on the other side of the ravine watching him, with legs almost as firm, and tail but slightly waving. Right well Jack seemed to know that all the flock had not risen; for it was a common trick in those days for part of the flock to trust to hiding even after the old one and most of the young ones had flown. Jack swung off a few feet to get in the direct line of the scent again, and then with nose high, in air and body sunk in the grass he came to a standstill. From the ferns some thirty feet ahead three grouse started in different directions. One had scarcely aired his wings when he went whirl-

ing into the green below; another changed his course at the report of another barrel and mounted skyward through the tree-tops; the third seemed to leave a hole in space with another barrel flaming vainly into the empty hole; while the bird that had mounted above the trees poised for a second on high, then closed his wings and descended with a heavy bump to earth.

The fallen birds retrieved, we went to find the scattered members of the flock. Some three hundred yards we wandered through checkered shades when Frank began to dawdle in his pace. He sniffed inquiringly at the breeze that played along the hillside. To us it was laden only with the fragrance of ferns and clover, wild buckwheat and peas, with late wild-rose and mint, but the dog smelt something more, for suddenly he stopped, and at the same instant a bird broke the green cover some fifteen yards ahead of him. Two charges of shot shivered the tremulous green of the birch behind which it disappeared, the air throbbed no more beneath its wings, a nebula of fine feathers drifted into sight.

Up and down the hill both dogs were again soon beating the ground. In about five minutes

Jack, coming down the hill on a gentle canter, dropped as suddenly as if shot and lay with only the tip of his nose above the grass. As we came up, a grouse started like a rocket from a yard ahead of him and whizzed upward as if bound for the stars. My friend's first barrel abbreviated the broad tail, and he caught the body with the second as, high among the branches of an aged oak, it was speeding its bobtailed career. As it fell another bustled out of almost the very spot from which the last one rose, and cleft the breeze so fast that the shot from my gun was held back by the air-waves from its rapid wings. (At least that was my theory then, and if good enough for me it is good enough for any reader. It doesn't do to be too particular about some things.)

Some ten minutes passed, and we found Frank standing like a rock in the head of a ravine, with Jack some thirty yards away, indorsing with his most statuesque attitude Frank's draft on our confidence. The aspen was trembling above him, the ferns gently swaying in the breeze around his nose, the blackberries and raspberries were still bright on the bushes in the deep shade, but other sign of life was none. We threw in stones,

but nothing moved. We then tried to make one of the dogs flush the game, but neither would move an inch. At the risk of losing a shot I went in, for the ravine was steep-sided and deep. A few feet ahead of the dog I slipped and fell, and in a twinkling the air above seemed alive with spinning lines of white and whizzing belts of black and brown mixed in a whirl that made the air tremble even more than my companion's gun that was spouting fire over my head. I sprung to my feet too late to catch the fire of his second barrel in my ear, but just in time to see two grouse vanishing through two distant openings in the heavy foliage. Both were almost out of shot, and to catch either at the speed it was going called for marvelous quickness. How I unloaded a barrel of my gun at each before I had fairly caught my feet is a question on which I have ever remained in blissful ignorance. And you, dear reader, must remain in blissful ignorance of the results, for as a matter of pure business I cannot afford to imperil my reputation for veracity by telling you.

The grouse were soon so scattered that we went in search of a new flock, which was then

cheaper than hunting birds too widely dispersed. So we moved along several hundred yards and came to a little valley. Near its head the oaks stood larger and closer than before, the ferns were longer, brighter, and greener, the birches taller and thicker, and so were the maples and aspens that were crowding them aside. A soft flavor of wild honey and thyme with dittany and mint breathed through the cool shades, and everything seemed to hint strongly of ruffed grouse. So strongly did the spirit of the place whisper "grouse" that Jack was on a half-point from the start, just as many a good old dog changes his pace the instant he enters a damp dark swamp where everything breathes the magic word "woodcock." And even Frank seemed enthralled by the deep shade and threaded the bowers of birch and beds of fern with more than usual care.

But vainly the dogs sneaked and sniffed here and there. The birds seemed playing the trick of all game in ignoring the fine places you select for it, and preferring to make its own selection. Lower down the little valley were thickets of crab-apple and wild plum with hazel, viburnum,

and hawthorn; and knowing the grouse range low as well as high along these hills, we went there. In the dense green the dogs soon disappeared; nothing but the light rustling of their feet remained, and in a few minutes even that ceased.

Leaving my friend on the outside where he would be apt to get a shot I went inside the thicket. There was one dog with tail and nose nearly parallel, as he had thrown himself into the shape of a bow with sudden whirl, and the other stood a few yards behind with the solemnity of a tombstone on a winter night. Before I could reach the foremost dog there was a bewildering racket of wings, and a dozen big birds went darkling through the green or wheeling out of the top. Quickly as I had killed the last two birds—confound it! I didn't mean to let that out—well, that quickly I dropped on one knee and sent a charge of shot through the leaves where a fanlike tail was vanishing on a sharp curve. The mainspring must have been tired with the last effort, for the hammer was slow in falling and the shot rather slow about reaching the game. But dimly through an opening I

could see my friend on the hillside with half a dozen grouse driving swiftly toward him. One shot past him like an arrow feathered with white and brown, gone before he could raise his gun; another at the report of his first barrel went spinning by with unruffled feather, with the rest roaring beside him and over him, while he stood shifting his gun from one to the other, and finally emptied it with great success into a patch of sunshine among the trees after it had closed over the last wide-spread tail.

Probably the deepest love one acquires for this bird is in threading the depths of the forest in still-hunting. A more charming companion than the grouse there makes it is hard to find. On the warm still days of autumn, when you have to move with great caution on account of the dry leaves and twigs making so much noise to alarm deer, this lovely bird is often around you from morning till night. If careful you may often see him, mounted on a log or low limb or even on the ground, beat that mysterious drum that sends so strange a thrill through the sportsman, and makes so many wonder how it is done. And when at dawn you thread the long colonnades of

gray trunks before even the squirrel comes out to play, or the bluejay tunes his jingling pipe, or the dark form of the raven wheels above the trees, the grouse may spread his tail along your path and scatter the dry leaves beneath his reverberating wings. Where the wild cherry and choke-berry line the little boggy flat, where the cubs have rolled down the ferns, and the old mother bear has turned over the fallen log for grubs, you may see your friend mount on defiant wing and wind swiftly out of sight among the dense wealth of basswoods and maples. Often when you are sitting on the sunny side of some fallen log where the spikenard spreads its broad umbels of spicy black berries, or watching for some imaginary buck beside some runway where the trailing arbutus keeps the ground green with its ever-bright leaves, the grouse may come walking beside you, in all the majesty of its pure innocence, if you keep perfectly still.

Dull seem the woods without this happy soul. When dank and sodden from the storm, and a cheerless wind sighs through the boughs, the scores of grouse that on the last warm day so enlivened the forest are suddenly gone, and very

lonely are the woods. And when the witch-hazel's curious petals of gold have closed the floral procession of the year, and the scarlet head of the mountain ash is turning pale, when the crimson and white of the woodpecker flash no more in wavy flight, and the barking of the squirrel is seldom heard, then this bird yet remains the still-hunter's companion. And after the woods are robed in purest white, and the bushy-footed hare has turned his coat to suit the fashion, when trees snap with frost, and the porcupine, rolled in a fuzzy ball, rides out the storm in the top of some giant elm, the grouse is still there, though you may see him only as he bursts from the snow almost beneath your feet and, dashing the glittering flakes from resounding wing, mounts gayly into the sunshine on his way to some distant tree-top.

IV.

THE PINNATED GROUSE.

No bird ever lent greater charm to its surroundings than the pinnated grouse to the prairie. He has been to it more than Bob White to the frosty stubble, or the woodcock to the tangled brake. Without him it is no more the prairie, but only a dismal waste. No sound ever wakes more tender feelings than the far-reaching “*Woo—woo—woo—woo—woo*” swelling from the distant knoll before the soft blue of the liverwort beams beside the fading snow-bank in the timber, or the clatonia lights the darkness of the burnt prairie. No bird has so thrilled the novice as the full-grown grouse roaring out of the grass almost at his feet, or caused him such infinite amazement when in sublime confidence he pulled the trigger. And when the ducks have left the frozen slough, the quail gone to the bottoms,

the sand-hill crane no longer dots the plain, and the *Honk* of the goose has died away in the south, then the grouse is about the only companion left the dweller on the prairie. Whether sweeping in large flocks across the plain, now on sailing pinions, now with wavering stroke of wing, or on frosty mornings sitting quietly upon the fence, or in colder weather studding the bare branches of the timber, this bird is ever the brightest light of the great solitude. Our children's children may yet hear the mellow twitter of the woodcock's wing as he whirls upward through the somber shade, over the harvest-field may hear the flutelike call of Bob White, and in the darksome brake yet see the ruffed grouse spread his banded tail; but few shall see the pinnated grouse, except as rare specimens. For it is a bird that increases with the first stage of civilization, pauses at the second, and fades forever with the third.

Many have seen the pinnated grouse only where immense cornfields or long slough-grass make the hunting difficult, where the weather is intensely hot with no shade heavier than that of a rosin-weed. Many have hunted them only when

the young were too small. But in September, when the young can hardly be told from the old ones, a hunt on the breezy hills of the upper Mississippi—once covered with parks of oak, open enough for comfortable driving with a wagon, yet dense enough for good shade—was something vastly different.

“Prince smells something already,” said the Squire, as the dog rose in the wagon and, extending head and neck over the wheel, began to sniff the breeze with upraised nose, while his tail swayed with gentle motion.

We had come up one of the long ravines that lead from the bottom-lands of the upper Mississippi to the prairie nearly five hundred feet above, and had reached what is really the level of Minnesota, instead of the top of a sharp ridge as the edge of the prairie appears from the river. As the wagon stopped, the dog sprung to the ground without awaiting orders. For a moment he paused, then on a slow walk went a hundred yards or so along a gentle swell, then broke into a trot and from that into a gallop, crossing at right angles the line of his former course as if the scent had become weakened and he was trying

to catch it again in full intensity. Suddenly he wheeled half about and stopped a moment, with a slight motion of his tail, then as suddenly started off on a walk, but more cautiously than before.

As we tied the horses to a tree two other wagons belonging to the party drove up, containing some ladies and two tyros. Another dog was let loose, and in a moment more he was pacing solemnly along in the rear of Prince, and looking about as wise.

Where deep-toned pink from the belated prairie-rose nodded over green beds of fern the dogs slowly crawled, and soon came to a halt a few feet from a fallen tree-top. From the trailing clusters with which the wild pea had festooned the dead branches Bob White and his wife with a dozen little ones rose in chirping and twittering lines of gray and brown, curling away in all directions. Then over another swell the dogs snaked their way through waving prairie-grass dotted with golden moccasin-flowers. On top of this swell Prince paused as if to survey the landscape. Toward the west rolled a mighty undulation of velvet green cut with ravines

nearly five hundred feet deep, some darkly blue with deep shade, others filled with luminous haze. With an air of profound wisdom, as if he had taken the gauge of the whole situation, Prince looked around at the party, then down the slope into a swale where the white-fringed corolla of the silene and the red lips of the snapdragon kissed amid waving sunflowers, he went almost out of sight, with the other dog following. Up another slope he went with slower and slower step among the tender blue of wild flax, and on the top of the next ridge paused again to survey the world. Along the hills the shining leaves of the white birch were trembling on its white staff, black oaks stood massed in ranks of green in the heads of the gulches, on the points of the ridges crags of sandstone like old-time castles hung over the valleys, and miles away across the great bottom of the Mississippi the Wisconsin bluffs lay softly green in the clear air, with golden stubbles creeping up their sides or gleaming amid the timber that fringed their tops. But there was no sign or sound of the game we had come for, only the jingling notes of the jay as his blue finery flashed among the deep green above us,

the sleepy bark of the gray squirrel stretched on some big limb, the red and white of the woodpecker as he rose and dipped in wavy flight, or lines of bluish gray where wild pigeons shot through the openings. Prince seemed to think there was something, though by the intent gaze he kept upon the landscape at large he showed himself uncertain of the exact location of it. After inspecting the scene a few moments with slowly-waving tail, he licked his chops with an air of great satisfaction and moved slowly on. Then he swung off to the right a bit and then to the left with nose high upraised, then came to a sudden stop and set his tail and upraised foreleg as if never to be moved again. Behind him a few paces stood the other dog, equally motionless and showing by his wild stare that he smelt the game himself.

Game was so plenty in the early days of Minnesota that courtesy was cheap. It was also more fun to see a tyro perform than to shoot a bird yourself, especially when it was apt to be the old bird which no one wanted. So the two strangers, neither of whom had ever seen a "chicken" or seen a dog point, were told to go

ahead and take first shot and by all means to keep cool. The last advice was given to upset their nerves.

To the dog they went with trembling hands, one alternately scratching his nose and adjusting his hat, the other trying to walk and hold the butt of the gun to his shoulder, to be ready. But nothing rose, and ahead of the dog they went, tyro number one raising his gun to his shoulder also, so as not to be left in the lurch by the superior quickness of number two. Five paces ahead of the dog they walked, but nothing moved and the dogs remained like statues. Number two had to take down his gun to scratch his eye and adjust his collar, while the other had to button his coat so as to get the tails out of the way of action, and try both hammers of his gun to be sure they were cocked.

Bbbbbbbbbbbbbbb sprung a whirl of brown and gray from the tangle of fern and grass, almost at the feet of one of the strangers. It seemed as easy to hit as an elephant tumbling up hill, and with great apparent calmness he pointed the gun full at the middle of the bird's back. The bird was almost suffocated in a vile eruption

of cheap powder, but out of the smoke it came with unruffled feather. The amazement of the shooter was equaled only by that of his comrade, who attempted a second later to show him how such things should be done. The purple head of a petalostemon bowed beneath his fire, but the bird mounted the air above it with throbbing wing that seemed all the stronger. *Bang* went the second barrel of number one, tunneling the smoke as the second barrel of number two poured destruction into the heart of a flourishing caterpillar's nest on a scrub-oak which the intended victim had just passed.

All this in about three seconds. Yet before this short time passed a *Kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk* sounded amid the tempest of flame as two more birds, only a trifle smaller than the first, but with beat of wing quite as heavy, broke cover almost beneath the dogs' noses, followed by two more about the time they were fairly under way. As two guns in the rear of the party rang out, the first two birds that rose together went whirling out of a cloud of feathers; and into the ferns from which they rose the second two sank at the report of two more barrels, while the first one

that rose, the old mother of the covey, went sailing away over a ravine, unshot at. As the second pair of birds turned over in air, another grouse rose from almost the same place as the last one, followed by three more before it had fairly cleared the grass. And two of these wilted in mid-air as two more guns flamed in the rear, while the other two birds with triumphant beat of wing went away unscathed amid the uproar of two more barrels.

Motionless and serene Prince stood amid the racket, for that mysterious power of a dog's nose that tells him whether all the birds have risen told him that some yet remained hidden in the spangled covert before him. And it was but a moment more when *Kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk* went another from a few feet before him, mounted the sunlight in a curve of whizzing gray, sailed away through the open timber, and settled on a ridge some three hundred yards away.

Yet Prince and Doc, the dog behind him, stood like statues, and away flew another grouse unshot at; for every gun was now empty, with its owner straining every nerve to get it loaded. With the muzzle-loader has gone an interesting

feature of the field; for he who has never stood hastening to load one with a bird or two rising at each stroke of the ramrod, and got the first cap on just as the last bird was comfortably out of reach, has missed a peculiar phase of existence. By the time the first gun was ready seven more birds had risen in front of the dogs and settled in the grass two or three hundred yards away. Then Prince relaxed his rigid limbs and, after two or three sniffs at the place from which the birds had risen, went to find the fallen ones.

Not more than once or twice had the dogs quartered the ground where the birds alighted that had escaped, when Doc wheeled suddenly and crouched low. In the gold bloom of the moneywort the tip of his tail trembled with his efforts to hold it still, while his head and nose were almost lost in a dense mat of fern and grass. Prince, coming down the slope to investigate—for he had no confidence in other dogs, and never “backed” anything but his own nose—stopped about half-way and dropped almost flat upon the ground, with glistening eyes turned toward a bunch of grass.

A greenhorn was now detailed to each dog,

with instructions to keep very cool and be sure not to fire before he was ready. One stepped ahead of Prince; yet nothing moved but the dog, and he moved only half a step and stared more wildly than ever into the grass. The tenderfoot, after scratching one ear, setting back his hat, buttoning his coat, feeling of the gun-hammers, clearing his right eye, and easing the tension of his collar, took another step ahead of the dog. Yet again nothing moved but the dog, and he moved two steps ahead and stood over a clump of bluejoint, looking down into it with quivering tail. The tenderfoot pulled up one sleeve of his coat and shook a reef out of the other so as to have his arms free for action, and, giving another rub to his nose and another wipe at his eye, pushed the grass aside with his foot. Out hustled a big grouse almost from between the fore legs of the dog. Prince could not resist the temptation to snap at it, with the usual result of being just three and a half inches too far behind. At the sound of its wings another bird rose a few feet farther on, followed by the one that Doc was pointing. In the immediate rear of the first bird tenderfoot number one exploded a mine of

country-store powder, but the game being ahead of it escaped asphyxiation, while number two got in his fire a little farther ahead of another bird, which succumbed at once.

Again the dogs careered for a few minutes among the lavender of the panicked aster that was waving in the cool breeze, startling the prairie song-sparrow that on the purple head of the iron-weed was still singing his summer song, and almost before we knew it each dog had stopped firm as a rock by a bunch of ferns. Again the greenhorns were sent ahead to take first shot, and the one who had made the last successful shot stepped smiling up to Prince. From a maze of purple and gold, where the golden-rod and cone-flower were springing to keep up the procession of blossoms that illumine these prairies so much of the year, burst a haze of gray and brown so big it seemed impossible to miss. At less than ten feet the first barrel of the tender-foot roared into the very middle, as it seemed, of the brown cloud. But the bird was headed for the strong western breeze, which it was already splitting so fast that the pot-metaled gun could not reach it, and on it went with the second bar-

rel of number one and the first barrel of number two bellowing in its rear, along with another gun or two from behind: and down it came. Each one of the tenderfeet swore he killed it, and as no one but the other tenderfoot disputed it both were happy.

A combined picnic and hunting-party is generally a heartless hoax. But years ago on these grounds such things were a great success and very common. Game enough for lunch and for the whole party to divide in the evening, with a goodly share to each, was an absolute certainty; and as a wagon could be driven anywhere over the bluffs, the amount of work was trifling. As we had birds enough for lunch, we stopped shooting for the middle of the day, as we could begin again at four o'clock with a certainty of enough birds to take home.

Under a large oak that overlooked the broad valley of the Mississippi we sat down to rest. On every side the deep ravines that furrowed these bluffs when the great glacier of the North relaxed its grip were still robed in the hues of summer, the whole a couch of green velvet on which peace lay sleeping. At the bottom of a

deep valley the waters of the Zumbro wound their swift way to the Mississippi through hills blue with soft intensity of shade, or golden with the brightness of the sunlight that slept upon them, while the rosy haze poured into the deeper valley, cast a dreamy air over the green thickets that bowed to their shadows in the clear river. Here rolled the stream in shining curves through groves of sycamore, maple, and willow, and there it was joined by a silvery thread that shimmered through meadows deeply green with blue-joint and flag, spangled with the gold of the autumn dandelion, and tempered with the tender purple of the *Arethusa*. Still another brook glistened through groves of wild plum, crab-apple, and hawthorn, and thickets of bright hazel and dark green viburnum, from which we could faintly hear the drum of the ruffed grouse, and then it was lost under arcades of alder, and willow in whose shades fancy could almost see the flash of the trout. Miles away in the south, shining as a meteor's trail, the Mississippi vanished in a haze of green and gold where the timber and stubbles on its bluffs blended in the dancing heat on the horizon. There, too, peace lay

sleeping, and on the timbered islands that divided its winding path, and on the broad belts of timber beside its course, dotted with many a glimmering lake. And even on the great gleaming bars of sand peace gently brooded, and in the curves of deep shade where the mighty stream swept close to the gigantic cottonwoods along the shore. Rafts of lumber covering acres of space, and the steamer trailing her sooty banner against the sky, were about the only signs of man that marred the fair scene.

Where the white gentian of the prairie was smiling beside the soft purple of the sabbatia, and the air was redolent of basil and thyme, amid the hum of the wild bee and the whistle of the wings of the dove as he shot through the air above us, a cloth was spread, and on it a lunch fit for the gods. Then after two hours of eating, smoking, dozing, and swapping of hunter's truths, we started, in the cool of the afternoon, for birds to take home.

Not many hundred yards had we gone when Doc suddenly stopped and pointed long enough to empty the wagon of every man that had a gun. Then off he went on a half-trot which quickly

settled to a walk, the walk to a crawl, and the crawl to a firm point. Ten, twenty, almost forty yards we walked ahead of him without anything moving, yet he refused to budge. Just as some one intimated that he was fibbing, an old hen-grouse burst from almost beneath the feet of one of the novices. Two full-grown young ones followed with a *Kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk-kuk* on the right, two more on the left, then two or three in front, and then two or three more on each side.

No such thing as first shot for any one, then! Courtesy was whistled down the wind and guns spouted fire overhead, across noses and alongside of ears; for at this time of the day love of nature is liable to be tempered with considerations of the larder. In about seven seconds seven grouse lay in a semicircle, while five or six more vanished over a rise beyond, as Doc came trotting up with wagging tail and looking the most satisfied of the party.

As we went to find the birds that had escaped this last cannonade we discovered Prince some four hundred yards away, on the edge of the prairie-grass and motionless as the Sphinx, gazing vacantly out upon a stubble. As we came up

he moved slowly ahead, stopping every few feet and sniffing delicately at the breeze now coming cool and fresh and carrying scent a long way. More than half across a forty-acre stubble he led us, and then refused to go farther. Full forty yards ahead of him we went, when a big grouse bustled out of the stubble and skimmed away unshot at.

“An old cock,” said some one, as nothing more rose. But Prince still kept his point, and just as we began to doubt him two young grouse rose from near the center of the party and in front of one of the strangers, who was looking down at the very spot from which they rose. He singed the tail-feathers of one with his first, and my ear still rings from the report of his second barrel. At the reports more birds bounced out all around, some even behind us, on which some of the party must almost have trodden, and for a few seconds confusion reigned supreme.

V.

THE SHARP-TAILED GROUSE.

SWIFT little streams, pure as the drip from an iceberg, sunk in banks of tangled grass, from the depths of which the gleam of the darting trout wakes precious memories, wind among alders interlacing into arcades above them, and through groves of plum, viburnum, and hazel from which sounds the occasional drumming of the ruffed grouse. On each side open prairie rolls in grass and ferns, starred with the gold of the lady-slipper, toned down with the soft pink of the phlox and the blue of the lupin. Rising from this are long swells dotted with oaks that stand like trees in some ancient apple-orchard. Brightly green the white birch nods up on the scene from the surrounding ridges, and miles away the eye can sweep to where the maple and aspen rise in tier upon tier along the sides of the higher bluffs.

Mile after mile of prairie stretches away upon their backs, and around their feet lie pockets and benches of smooth land on which oak openings stretch their orchardlike expanse; the whole so suggestive of grouse, quail, deer, squirrels, and hares, with elk, antelope, buffalo, and bears, that one can hardly wait for daylight. Where do you find such a combination as this? Nowhere now, I fear; but time was when the western part of Wisconsin could in places show the prettiest combination of prairie and meadow with upland, bluff and brooks, timber, game and fish, the Creator ever made.

The rose-blossom business has spoiled it, but it is not many years since much of it lay in all its native beauty; and though the elk and the antelope had gone with the buffalo to where the white man was scarcer, the other wild tenants of the hills and dales were about as plenty as ever.

In the early days of Minnesota the sharp-tailed grouse was the prevailing variety, giving place, as the country was settled, to the pinnated grouse; but in the eastern part of Buffalo County, Wisconsin, the sharp-tail remained in abundance long after settlement had reached the stage that

had driven it from Minnesota. It became much wilder than the common grouse, however, and when the coveys were packing into large flocks there was a period of two or three weeks before they became too wild to lie to a dog, when it taxed all the skill of both dog and master to secure a shot before the snowy tails were out of reach. There were times when we sighed for something more difficult than the pinnated grouse-shooting of Minnesota, though that was hard enough at times. When we sighed we generally made a trip to this part of Wisconsin, and our prayers for something wild and swift were always fondly answered.

Gayly the dog raced over the prairie and, fresh from a bath in the singing brook against the breeze of a cool September morning, dove through grass and ferns and cantered over the swells. He knew the game right well, and, at a pace that would have astonished an eastern dog-trainer, scattered the lavender rays of the aster and bounded over the purpling boneset. Half a mile ahead, and as far on each side of our course, he galloped over the prairie, when, on a long beat, he suddenly wheeled and dropped flat, as a

big bird rose from the grass thirty yards on one side and vanished over the next swell. But no dog moved, and we could see the top of his head above the grass, and the outline of the nose pointed toward the place from which the bird had risen.

As we came beside him he looked at us with wistful glance, then licked his chaps and stared ahead, vacantly but earnestly. We moved a little ahead of him, but he declined to rise, and there was no change on his countenance except an air of deeper certainty. With sudden roar a huddle of light-brown backs and snowy underwear burst from the ferns thirty yards ahead, aimed for Minnesota, and went upward and onward at a rate of speed surpassed only by the ruffed grouse, and not very much by him. There was not a twinkling to be lost, and both guns cracked together. The bird in front of my companion's gun went down in a flutter of white. As the reader has lived twenty-five years without knowing what became of the one the writer shot at, it is possible he may survive the rest of his allotted time in the bliss of equal ignorance.

Bbbbbbbbbbbbbbb went a dozen more before the

fallen one had reached the ground. Again two barrels barked almost together, and two big birds went whirling over; for we shot very good guns then, even if they were muzzle-loaders, and fed them all they could stagger under, as no close or easy shots could be expected with these birds so late in the season. Before the two stricken ones had fallen with heavy bump into the grass, twenty or thirty more birds rose with a vast flutter of white feathers and, massing up like a charge of grape, shot away over the prairie on the course taken by the other birds that had risen. Three hundred yards they went; set their wings and rode swiftly down the breeze, as if to alight; then suddenly with rapid stroke they rose again, then skimmed low along the horizon, then changed to quick beat of wing that carried them up a little, then with whiffing stroke of wing sped on again until nearly a mile away they sailed with majestic sweep over a low ridge.

A mile was nothing to walk for another shot at such game, and we soon reached the crest of the ridge over which the birds had disappeared. Spreading away on the other side was a long

slope of heavy prairie-grass mixed with ferns and flowers, making the best of cover to induce the birds to lie. Even as we looked upon it the slow swing of the dog's tail ceased and his eyes began to look serious. He raised his head and smelt the air with deep satisfaction. Then looking around at us for an instant, he started on at a slow pace. A hundred yards he went, with tail becoming slower and slower in its oscillation and legs more and more draggy. Another fifty yards he went, then stood for a moment with nose upraised to the cool western breeze. Expecting the birds to lie close after such a long flight and in such long cover, we moved up to the dog. But all was silent except great sheets of wild pigeons, from the vast roost on the Chipewa bottoms, that made the air hiss as they darkened the sky above us. After standing a moment the dog broke his point, went slowly ahead for another hundred yards, and there he gradually settled to a point more rigid than the last, with certainty in every wrinkle of his nose.

We went to where we thought the birds were hidden, but nothing moved. Had it been two weeks earlier they might have been lying in the

grass at our feet, with feathers tightly pressed, light brown heads drawn in, and beadlike eyes fixed upon us, yet so closely hidden that no mortal could see them though looking directly down upon them. Now they might be fifty yards away; but they were somewhere near, for the firm mouth of the dog and his wildly-staring eye showed he was not mistaken. So on we moved, with guns ready for the quickest work.

Twenty yards ahead of the dog we went when, thirty yards beyond us and on no feebly-fluttering wing, but more like the start of a rocket, a big bird bounced out of the grass, and, as we threw our guns to our shoulders, two more grouse burst from near the same place. Flame leaped at the path of the first bird, but on he went at redoubled speed; flame followed flame, and the whizzing line of white plunged wabbling to the grass. The nether garments of another bird sent out a puff of white at the report of another barrel, but the owner sped on as if the lighter for their loss. A third, mounting high on exultant wing and well out of ordinary range, turned over at the crack of another barrel and

fell with a bump into the grass, while the first one, gliding far across the prairie with wondrous speed, suddenly rose in air and, setting both wings, slid down the wind, stone-dead.

The dog moved not a muscle. Right well we knew what that meant, and hastened to reload. But before the guns were half loaded *Bbbbbbbbbbbbbbb* went three more grouse, like snowballs from a cannon, out of sight over the next swell; and, just as we got the caps half on, more burst with obstreperous wing from about the same spot and went like happiness away. And still the dog, gently sniffing the cool, strong breeze, stood like a rock.

Just as we concluded there must be more lying near the same place, a dozen with tumultuous uproar broke from the cover, some curling around on the side, some spinning straight away, all rising and all going, O how swiftly! while the guns belched lurid lightning amid the white birches and aspens.

What? Did we get any? Send stamp for my companion's address. Perhaps he will tell you.

And still the dog did not move. He merely turned his nose a little on one side while we

hammered the loads into the guns as fast as gravity would allow us to raise the ramrods.

Bbbbbbb—*bang* went a bird and a gun almost together, and *Bbbbbbbbbb* went half a dozen more as the first one fell into the grass. *Bang-k-bang* went three more shots, and two birds sank like lead, while four with uproarious wing and inviolate raiment rent the rising breeze, and before our empty guns three more rose and hastened on to keep them company.

And now the dog broke his point. That mysterious power that tells a dog the difference between the scent of a live bird and a dead one is nothing to the delicacy that tells him at once when all the hidden birds have risen, though scent must certainly remain in the grass a minute or two. But up he came at once, on a slow trot that showed he knew what he was about, and straight he went for the dead ones.

The fallen birds retrieved, the dog went cantering gayly toward the place where the scattered birds had gone, for it paid to follow them a long way, and on their track was as good a place as any other to find a new flock. Here he suddenly wheeled, marched a few paces up

wind with high-raised nose and inquiring sniff of the breeze, then, suddenly giving it up, galloped on again. He had gone scarcely three hundred yards beyond the place where the last bird rose, when he suddenly slackened speed and, like a cat sneaking for the best position from which to spring, he swung around to the full play of the breeze, then, crouching low, crept a few paces ahead and settled to a statuesque position.

As we went to him there was a roar and a flash of white some sixty yards ahead, but both guns thundered and the white fell into the ferns before it had fairly cleared the nodding gold of the sunflowers. Before we could exchange congratulations there was another burst of white ten yards beyond the last, another simultaneous roar of two barrels, another whirl of white and brown into the ferns. I do not guarantee these distances, because in these days, when so many busybodies are measuring everything instead of guessing in the good old way, it doesn't take as many yards to make a long shot as it used to. Each one declaring that the other had killed both birds (well knowing the compliment would

be returned and that his own private indorsement of it was all that was needed to make it certain), we loaded and moved on. It was plain that some of the main flock had gone farther than those we had scattered a few minutes before, and there might be a dozen or more ahead of us.

So thought the dog; for, after careful investigation of the breeze, he straightened out his tail, and, as we stopped, two more grouse rose from about the place where the last one fell. *Bang, whang, k-bang* went all four barrels before the game had fairly cleared the top of the ferns. Each seemed trying to shoot quicker than the other, so as to have no doubt about the results this time. And there were no doubts.

In the shade of some alders along a sparkling brook we spent the noon at lunch, finishing on the luscious red and yellow wild plums of this country, and lay there talking quite awhile afterward before noticing that the dog was missing. The longest blasts of the whistle brought nothing for some time, when the dog suddenly appeared on the crest of the next ridge. For a moment he stood looking coolly at us with slowly-waving tail, then deliberately turned and

vanished over the ridge. We went to the top, and some four hundred yards down a gentle slope we saw the dog's head and back above the grass. He looked around to see if we were coming, and then moved slowly on some thirty yards. We walked a few yards ahead of him, when forty yards farther on some thirty grouse—two coveys evidently united—rose with riotous hubbub. One bird went bouncing into the grass at the sound of the guns, and another shook some snowy down from its tail and went whizzing away after its companions. The whole flock flew over half a mile and settled in a patch of long slough-grass. There was but little over an acre in the piece, and the grass was about waist-high. It was likely the birds would lie very close in this, but they were so wild that no chances could be taken; and as we had come twenty-five miles for this shooting, we determined to make the best of it, especially as the birds would in a few days be too wild to hunt with a dog at all.

As we swung to the leeward two hundred yards from the grass, the cool, strong breeze blowing over it brought the dog to a halt. Fifty

yards nearer we went, with the dog slowly following. Fifty more, and the dog followed more slowly. Fifty more, and he hesitated long before moving up to us. Another twenty yards brought him to a point which he refused to break in spite of all urging. When we reached the edge of the grass without anything rising, the dog moved slowly up. We went some twenty feet into it before a bird burst from the tangle of grass, almost at the feet of my companion, and went curling around over the dog, falling in a fluttering racket of white and brown almost upon him. But the dog paid no attention to it. For the next half-hour the dog did little but crawl and lie down. Though the birds went like bullets when they rose, before that they lay like stones in the long grass at this time of day, depending on hiding more than on their wings. Half the time, when the dog was told to go on after we had finished loading, he did nothing but turn his head to one side or the other, and several times he did this without rising to his feet from where he had lain down at the report of the gun. Several birds had fallen before we could pick up a dead one, and even then we

could not make the dog go ahead to retrieve. He would only back out and swing around to leeward to pick up those that had fallen on the sides. And then he would swing back before entering the center again.

The twentieth century will sneer at the nineteenth as we do at the eighteenth. But I am satisfied that my lot was cast in the nineteenth. It is good enough for me.

VI.

DAYS AMONG THE DUCKS. THE EVENING FLIGHT.

ALONG the bottom-lands of the Illinois River the flag was fading and tints of gray were beginning to creep over the stately head of the cat-tail, the scarlet plume of the cardinal-flower was drooping, while the arms of the cottonwood above it were shedding yellowing leaves into the smooth waters, when, toward the middle of an afternoon in 1864, with a light boat and a companion, I was winding up one of the sloughs that lead from the river into the bottoms. Along the muddy shores Wilson's snipe was lounging with easy grace, probing the soft mud, or squatting in some little bunch of grass and waiting for the boat to come within a few feet before springing into his erratic flight. His long bill and peculiar head, large lustrous eyes and gamy hues, made never a more pretty picture than when mirrored

in the still water as he rose in flight or trotted along the water's edge as unconcerned as if he knew we were after larger game. Dozens of yellow-legged snipe marched along the shore, or rose into dignified flight, when we came too near, and flew a few yards up stream to alight and look at us again. Golden plover in large flocks swept along the bars, and small snipe of many kinds whisked about in numbers now almost incredible. It was plain that such game was not shot at; and equally plain that the plumage-hunter for bonnets had not yet arrived, for snowy egrets flapped lazily from the trees as we came too near, while big herons, and bitterns in blue and brown, hardly took the trouble to rise as we passed them within easy pistol-range.

The frosts had been early in the great breeding-grounds of the north, and in the upper sky long lines of ducks were headed for the south. Squealing and quacking at every turn in the slough rose wood-ducks, mallards, teal, and other ducks, often wheeling around or whizzing over us in a most tempting manner. But my companion, who was an old hand, told me to let them all go, as better things were in store.

A mile or so from the river the slough ran into an open marsh at the foot of Senachwine Lake, and from the side sloughs and ponds rose huge flocks of mallards so close that the burnished green of their necks and heads, the glistening bands of blue upon their wings, and the delicate curls of shining green upon their rumps were as clear as the white bands on their tails. But we let them go, as it is not always wise to shoot at ducks when you drive them out of a place, and my friend said this was nothing to what I would see before dark, and told me to save all my ammunition for the evening flight. He then placed me on a tongue of land running into a shallow pond, and directed me to hide well in the reeds, while he went to another point some two hundred yards away.

As it was my first introduction to ducks I meant to follow his advice, though there were ducks enough in sight to satisfy any one. Along the sky streamed lines of dark dots, while from over the reeds and the timber in all directions came small bunches, big flocks, and single ducks. Scarcely was I well hidden in the reeds when a wood-duck, resplendent in carmine and purple,

with beamy chestnut and velvety black, came whizzing past from the right. My friend was not yet a hundred yards away, and I thought it a good opportunity to show him how I could shoot. As I whirled the gun toward the game, a blue-winged teal, bound to reach Louisiana before dark, came hissing from the opposite direction, and must have been ten feet past the wood-duck by the time the first barrel went off. How I jerked that gun back again toward the teal without breaking the stock I don't know to this day. But it was one of those rare opportunities to try the most difficult of all shots that are irresistibly tempting. One is foolish to attempt such a shot where any one can see him; for the second bird is almost certain to be fifty yards or more beyond the place where you fire at the first bird before you can possibly reverse the motion of the gun and throw it far enough to the other side. In both cases the aim must be taken and the trigger pulled with the quickness of thought, for the slightest delay or failure to cover the second bird with the center of the charge is almost certain to be fatal to success.

In a few minutes a big mallard came along

with lazy stroke of wing, wagging his long green neck and head up and down as if looking for a comfortable place to alight and suspecting no dan—

“But hold on. How about those other two ducks?”

Perdition seize your curiosity! What difference does it make now, after so many years? But if you will insist, I suppose I must tell. I had a little hatchet once, myself, and it worked just as well on the corner of a new barn as on cherry-trees. One day when an ancestor appeared on the scene of my labors I thought I would make a record that would dull the luster of that of Washington. But when the said ancestor stooped to cut a hickory sprout, my thinker slipped an eccentric and ditched the train of thought in a misapprehension of fact. The readjustment of my moral machinery that took place in the next ninety-one seconds was so complete that it has never since jumped a cog. Therefore, impertinent reader, if you will insist, you shall have the truth. I got them both.

Well, that mallard was so big, plump, and easy in flight, along the gun I so plainly saw the light

dance on his burnished head that it seemed unnecessary to aim very far ahead of him. Had the sun dropped from heaven I could hardly have been more surprised than I was to see that duck bound skyward with thumping wings at the report of the gun.

But there was little time to reflect on the cause of the miss, for another wood-duck came glistening over the sunlit reeds. I aimed at what seemed the right spot ahead of him and, with more confidence than ever, pulled the trigger. Yet at the sound of each barrel every shining feather sailed along as smoothly as gossamer thread on the evening breeze.

Scarcely had I loaded, when like a charge of cavalry in bright uniform, with long green necks, and heads gleaming like so many couched lances, a flock of mallards streamed along the water in front of me. Though I could see four or five heads in line as I pulled the trigger, but one duck fell; and as the rest, unharmed, climbed the air with throbbing wings and I fired again at one of the leaders, he parted from the flock with wavering flight, hung high in air for a second, then, folding his wings, descended with a splash

into the reeds on the other side of the pond where it would not pay to lose time in looking for him.

It soon became painfully evident that the nice little gun that had cost so many guineas in London and had such genuine platinum "vents" in the breech—I had tested them with all the acids then obtainable—was a failure for this kind of game, although I had done fine work with it in the heavy brush of the Atlantic coast. And my feelings were not soothed by the dull *wop* that followed almost every roar of my companion's gun, no larger than mine and a cheap botch of American pig iron.

While I was gazing into the blank caused by despondency, two blue-winged teal shot across the void, one about four feet ahead of the other. I tossed the gun ahead of the foremost bird at about the same distance I had been used to shooting ahead of quails and woodcock in brush, and pulled the trigger. The rear duck skipped with a splash over the water stone dead, while the one at which I had aimed sped across the reeds with unruffled feather. I had fallen into the common error of the tyro in duck-shooting of

underestimating the speed of a duck, and consequently the distance necessary to hold ahead of it. Where I whirled the gun in from behind, as on the first two ducks, I generally hit it, for the motion of the line of sight is faster than that of the birds. The line of fire is ahead of where it actually seems, on account of the time lost in pulling the trigger and the escape of the shot, during which the muzzle of the gun is moving past the line of the game. But it took me long to hold far enough ahead, as well as to learn that I was using too much shot and too little powder for birds as tough as ducks.

As Phœbus entered the home-stretch and his glowing chariot neared the gate of gilded clouds, the number of ducks increased by the minute. Most of those hitherto flying were ducks spending the day in the adjacent sloughs and ponds. But now the host that had been feeding in the great cornfields of the prairie began to pour into roost, while the vast army of wild fowl bound farther south came marching down the sky. Long lines came widening out and sliding down, and out of the horizon rose dense bunches, hanging for a moment in the rosy sky then bearing

down upon me. Over the bluffs on the west where the land rolled into the vast expanse of the prairie they came, no longer single spies but in battalions, and swifter than the wind itself thousands came riding the last beams of the sinking sun. The sky above was dotted with converging strings or wedge-shaped masses from which fell the sonorous *Honk* of the Canada goose or the clamorous cackle of brant. And in all directions single ducks, ducks in pairs and in small bunches, were darting and whizzing. Wilson's snipe was pitching about in tortuous flight, plover drifted by with tender whistle, blue herons, bitterns, and snowy egrets with long necks doubled up and legs outstretched, flapped solemnly across the scene, while yellowlegs and sandpipers filled in the openings.

A wild and wondrous scene this "evening flight," and quite incredible to-day the numbers in which the water-fowl once thronged at night-fall the choice resorts of the West. Yet what I had so far seen was but the advance-guard of an army whose numbers were beyond conception.

When I shot the last of the two blue-winged

teal instead of the foremost at which I had aimed, I thought I had discovered the secret of missing, and that my skill as a quick shot in brush would quickly tell again, as on the two ducks coming from opposite directions. But the nerves that felt only a slight tremor when the ruffed grouse burst roaring from the shady thicket now quaked beneath the storm that suddenly broke from every point of the compass. I found myself the converging point of innumerable dark lines, bunches, and strings rushing toward me at different rates of speed, but even the slowest fearfully fast. There I stood bothering with a muzzle-loader, my head aching from the recoil of the heavy charges I was vainly pouring into it, registering on high countless vows to hold a rod or two ahead of the next duck, yet shooting but a few inches ahead before I could think of what I was about, only to see the game whiz away upward unharmed, and the sky again darken around me with hissing wings before I could even pour the powder into the gun.

Little knowing how he was harrowing my feelings, my friend now called out:

“Let everything go but mallards, and be sure

and land them close to your feet. They are just beginning to come."

"Just beginning! What will the end be? Already they care nothing for the sight of man or gun, and sheer but little from the spouting flame," I thought.

On the sky the light was shattered into a thousand tints, with everything above the horizon in clear outline, while over all below rested a pallid glow that intensified brilliant colors, but threw a weird gloom over somber shades. From the departed sun rosy light radiated into the zenith, while the upper sky on the east was changed by the contrast into pale gold tinged with faded green. North and south the blue shaded into delicate olive tints, shifting into orange toward the center of the great dome. On the east lay castles of rich umber fringed with crimson fire; on the west rolled banks of coppery gold and fleecy streams of lemon-colored vapor. Over this stage now poured a troop of actors that made the wonders of the last few minutes seem a puppet-show.

Hitherto the ducks coming in to roost had come from near the level of the horizon. But

now with rushing, tearing sound, as if rending with speed the canopy of heaven, down they came out of the face of night. Dense masses of blue-bills, with wings set in rigid curves, came winding swiftly down, with long lines of mallards whose stiffened wings made the air hiss beneath them. On long inclines and sweeping curves sprigtails and other large ducks rode down the darkening air, while, swift and straight as flights of falling arrows, blue-winged teal fell from the sky,—and green-wings shot by in volleys or pounced upon the scene with the rush of a hungry hawk. Geese in untold numbers went trooping past, but most of them kept high in the sky until over some of the larger lakes, then lengthening their dark lines, descended slowly in long spiral curves. White-fronted geese, too, dotted the western and northern skies, marched with faster wing and more clamorous throats until over the edge of the larger ponds, then, in solemn silence slowly sailing for a few hundred feet, suddenly resumed their cackle and, whirling, pitching, tumbling, and gyrating, every bird with a different twist, down they went to the water as fast as gravity could take them.

Myriads of water-fowl traveling from the north swept by without slackening a wing. Black in the falling night the head and neck of the mallard were outstretched for another hundred miles before stopping. "Darkly painted on the crimson sky," the forked rudder of the sprigtail was set for warmer regions. From where dark lines of widgeon were streaming came down a plaintive whistle that plainly said Good-bye. Far above all these and still bathed in rosy light were floating southward as softly as flecks of down long strings of sandhill cranes, sending down through a mile or two of air their strangely penetrating notes. And even above these, with swifter flight and more rapid stroke of wing than seemed possible for birds so large, snowy swans rode the sunlight of the upper air.

Yet of the game that descended there was more than enough for me. With trembling hand I poured my last charge of powder into the heated gun and raised it at a flock of mallards gliding swiftly toward me with every long neck aimed at my devoted head. *Whccccccccoooooo* shot a volley of green-wings between the mallards and the gun. *Kssssssssss* came a mob of blue-wings

by my head as I shifted the gun toward the green wings. And *Bbbbbbbbbbbbbbb* came a score of mallards along the reeds behind me as, befuddled with the whirl and uproar, I shifted the gun to the blue-wings. When I wheeled toward these last mallards, after making a half-shift of the gun toward the blue-wings, they saw me and, belaboring the air with heavy strokes, swung upward; and as I turned the gun upon them, a brigade of blue-bills with hissing wings rent the air between us, while behind me I heard the air throb again with the wings of a regiment of mallards. The gun wobbled from the second mallards to the blue-bills, and then around to the last mallards, and finally illuminated the darkness just over my head that the mallards had filled when I raised it.

VII.

DAYS ON THE ILLINOIS.

LIKE the bottoms of other Western rivers those of the Illinois were once a great place for camping. However cold the night we needed little tent, and that only to shed possible rain; for driftwood was everywhere, and piled high in front it filled the open tent with light and comfort, while the glare shot across the river until the dead cottonwoods on the other side looked like imploring ghosts reaching their arms heavenward. Often by its light we could see the white collars on the geese drifting through the night above, and plainly distinguish the glossy head of the mallard as he swept the tree-tops. All worldly cares went whirling skyward in the vortex of flame and sparks, and on the dark rotunda around it fancy hung many a bright picture of the kind the sportsman alone can see.

Lulled to sleep by the cackle of flying brant, the quack of mallards in the pond near by, the deep *To-whoooo* of the great owl in the tree beside us, the *Scaipe* of wandering snipe, the far-reaching *Grrrrrrroooooo* of sandhill cranes traveling in the dome of night, and the shrill quavering cry of the raccoon in the timber behind us, we rose at daybreak for the morning flight of water-fowl. Though this generally lacked the bewildering intensity of the evening flight, there was yet enough rush and bustle to upset a highly respectable equilibrium.

Perhaps a lone mallard opens the ball. Slowly winging his way out of the circle of gray, he crosses the sky in dim outline above you. It is so dark there seems little danger of his seeing you; but his wings begin to thump the air with extra force as he climbs rapidly out of danger. He is not quite quick enough, though, and at the report of your gun his neck doubles up and down he comes. On the instant the air throbs beneath ten thousand wings, and a wild medley of energetic quacks, dolorous squeals, melodious honks, and discordant cackles resounds from far and near as the myriads of ducks, geese, and

brant that have been roosting in the ponds near by rise into flight.

Into a hundred divisions breaks the vast horde of water-fowl, each division circling skyward or streaming over your head without seeming to know or care whence came the shot that alarmed them. As the flame again darts upward from your gun and two or three dark bodies come whirling downward, the circle of sky overhead is for a moment cleared, while around its margins thousands of wings belabor the air until you can almost feel the earth tremble. But in a few seconds more the space above you is again thronged with rushing wings.

Beware how you waste your fire on this flock of teal rising out of the morning's gray, for just behind them the strong wings of a heavy flock of mallards are pounding the air. Beware, too, how you waste your fire even on the mallards, for on the right, and thrillingly near, the Canada goose winds his mellow horn. But how can one reason calmly when the hissing wings of a flock of sprig-tails are heard before one's premises are thought of, and his conclusion is rudely interrupted by a

dark line of blue-bills pouring out of what is left of the night?

The flight generally increases with every new beam of light that struggles through the misty morning. No longer the wild-fowl pounce upon you from the sky as in the evening flight, nor do they come out of the north more than from any other direction. From every point they stream, with less uproar but more majestic march. Over the cat-tails around you they pour in dark masses, long wedge-shaped strings or crescent lines at tremendous speed, while single ducks in all directions hammer seventy miles an hour out of the rising breeze.

When dawn has fairly set in, the ducks travel higher and farther off, though the flight may continue strong and steady for an hour or considerably more. The gun must now be loaded as heavily as your shoulder will permit, and held farther ahead of crossing shots. As a flock of mallards makes the air sing, so near that you can plainly mark the shading of their gray bellies and see the light of the coming sun shine on the burnished green, it seems as if you had only to aim at the tip of the bill. But to your surprise

the bird you thus fire at towers with thumping wings, while his comrades climb the airy stairs behind him without sending even a feather to comfort you. And beware how you let this flock of blue-bills get too nearly over your head before you fire. Like dark spirits from the underworld they come up out of the circle of reeds straight for your head—their wings hazy with speed. You correct your last mistake by shifting the gun ahead until the leader disappears behind the barrels. All very well; but you have lost a valuable second, and the birds are so nearly over your head when you fire that, though the leader whirls over dead, he falls on a long slanting line into the reeds, so far behind that you will lose several good shots in trying to find him.

Of course there are days on the best grounds and in the best duck season when neither the evening nor the morning flight is very good, though water-fowl throng the lakes and sloughs. At such times, when they move at all it is more over the water than over the adjacent land, where one can hide well enough for a good shot. It is difficult to tell what is a good duck day. But on a bad one, a big box or barrel sunk to the edge

of the water in some of the large shallow ponds of the river-bottoms, and fringed around the edges with reeds, often afforded rare sport. Often flocks of mallards would skim the water until the green necks shone within ten yards of the barrel, and then as you rose to shoot there was a sparkling mixture of blue bars flashing on wings, glistening breasts of chestnut, white-banded tails with curls of burnished green, of red legs and beaded eyes, whirling upward with wild quacking. There, too, you could see the geese wind slowly out of the blue until near the water, and then with silent wing, and every musical throat suddenly hushed, drift softly along a few feet above the surface until you could hear the soft hiss of their sailing wings and see their black eyes sparkle but a few yards from you. And as you rose and looked along the gun, such pounding of sheering wings, such confusion of white collars on black necks, of gray wings and swarthy feet, would crowd upon your eye as was worth waiting long to see.

Though ducks in the West do not generally come to decoys in autumn as well as in spring, there were many days when they would come

fairly well, especially the teal, wood-ducks, and blue-bills. Sometimes during the middle of the day, when the birds were flying too high for good pass shooting, we pulled the boat into a blind of reeds or willows and set out some decoys. It was a nice way to wile away the middle of the day and eat a lunch in comfort, for there was rarely danger of being too violently interrupted, most of the ducks ignoring decoys at this season. But often a bite that would otherwise have reached the crust of a piece of pie, so as to leave nothing more necessary for the next bite than doubling the two remaining triangles together, had its bud of promise rudely nipped by the sudden hiss of descending wings, when all the sky seemed clear around us. And again a promising scratch of a match was blighted and the pipe dropped in the bottom of the boat because of a regiment of ducks swinging around the bend on silent wing and almost touching the water about the decoys before we saw them. Sometimes when we were unusually busy with the lunch, or dozing afterward, with sky serene and nothing moving, a sudden splash among the decoys would make us jump for our guns, which

we would generally manage to raise about the time the last duck was a little too far. Often Wilson's snipe came trotting along the boggy strip of shore beyond the reeds, and if we kept perfectly still we could see the little beauty probe the mud, pull out worms and sling them down his marvelous throat, that no bottomless pit can rival in capacity. Then he would stand a few moments with a look of sublime content in his deep dark eye, and perhaps squat awhile in some little tuft of grass, though he generally wore a restless foot and seemed to like change quite well.

Amusement on the bottoms of the Illinois, many years ago, was by no means limited to the days when the winged myriads were pouring from the North. Hot, malarious, and mosquito-ridden though it was, summer left many a duck behind to breed, instead of following the main army to the North. When the tender blue of the iris began to fade on the stalks of green that fringed the ponds of the bottoms, the old duck led out some little scraps of yellow down that floated on the water as softly as the shadows of the summer clouds. While the old one sought

safety on high when we came too near, the little ones went under in a flash. Standing up in the boat I could plainly see the golden line they made in the water, and the stream of fine bubbles rising from their course. Often I was near enough to see them kick lustily out behind with their little feet, and marvelous time they would make, rising for a moment to catch breath, and then darting quickly under, until where the purple petals of the water-target were brightening above its leaves they vanished in the darkening water.

Huge pickerel furrowed the water ahead of the boat as it rode the ponds and sloughs, and threw themselves often out of water in a shining curve in the rush for some minnow on the surface. By standing up in the boat in some of the deeper sloughs scores of bass could be seen lying in the depths with little apparent concern, though darting away like light at the first motion that indicated danger. At night the jack-light in the head of the boat revealed a strange population of buffalo-fish, sheepshead, and other varieties, with great pickerel and stupendous catfish worth going far to see.

From the margins of the sloughs that everywhere threaded the dense groves of sycamore, cottonwood, and willow, the woodcock sprung in summer with that mellow whistle of the wing-feathers that brings the gun whirling from the shoulder. And from the islands where the yellow spike of the golden club and the bright red of the polygonum illumined the shades of vines that clambered over piles of drift, he came twisting out in that spiral line of brown that so quickly finds the dense foliage above.

Life was so abundant in these bottoms at this time that one need not be lonely even when only rowing about the sloughs from curiosity. The wings of the dove whistled on every breeze, and blackbirds in legions rose roaring from the green ranks of the reeds. Hundreds were mirrored in the water as they passed over it or sat in strings upon the overhanging branches. Some in burnished purple and bronze, some with red-barred wings, and others with golden throats, they were everywhere from morning until night, and as tame as snowbirds on a winter morning. In the depths of the timber, where the hunter or fisherman rarely penetrated, the heavy rattle of the

great pileated woodpecker could be heard, and with care you might get a glimpse of his scarlet head and big black body. For even this early, and though never shot at, he was a wild and wary bird, whose habits made him peculiarly attractive, though you did not care to kill him. The common red-headed woodpecker was on almost every tree old enough to have dead limbs, and his cheerful squeal echoed everywhere in alternation with his rattling bill. Among the tree-tops flashed his brilliant contrast of white, black, and red, and here and there it was mingled with the gold of the high-holder glimmering amid the green. Little woodpeckers in gray jackets with crests of carmine, fringes of red, and bands of black and white, squeaked and flitted here and there, hopped up and down the trunks with equal ease, and hitched themselves about with tail and claws as easily as the nut-hatches and creepers. Everywhere above the water could be heard the noisy kingfisher's rattle, on many a limb that overhung the water gleamed his crested head, and along the still waters of the sloughs you could see his blue coat disappear in the water with a splash, and a fish shine in his

bill as he reappeared. Silent, on one leg, the heron stood on many a bar, and around the edge of many a pond shone the snowy plumage of the egret, whose callow brood was beginning to chatter in the top of some lofty sycamore. Thrushes were melodious in the shades, with kinglets and song-sparrows twittering in the more open places. Near the timbered bluffs that sometimes came to the river, the bark of the gray squirrel was a common sound, and the fluffy yellow of the fox-squirrel outstretched on some big limb a common sight.

And when along the moist banks the azure bloom of the mimulus began to help out the brilliant blue of the lobelia, and the wild cucumber to festoon the piles of drift, then, at almost every turn in the sloughs, young ducks, nearly large enough to shoot, went flapping along the water, scudding into the grass and reeds, or squealing into the air from almost every sand-bar. Along the river they were strung like beads on the stranded logs, and almost everywhere in the long grass and reeds were so many hiding at your approach, instead of taking wing, that any kind of a dog that would retrieve would bring

joy to the heart of the meat-hunter without the expense of burning powder. Soon along the bars the plover began to whistle, and before the rose-colored flowers of the water-plaintain began to droop, the shrill call of the yellowleg mingled with the plaintive notes of the kildeer. And before the white petals of the arrowhead had ceased to nod along the pools, Wilson's snipe was again trotting on the shore, and soon it needed but a few cold nights in the far North to bring down the vanguard of the great quacking hordes that would once more make your nerves tremble at the sinking of the sun.

VIII.

THE WILD GOOSE.

MANY who have never made his acquaintance think the goose is not a game bird. But one need not know him very well to feel that he is quite worthy of his fire. Few birds are better judges of the range of a gun, few eyes much quicker than his to detect any suspicious motion and see through a flimsy blind. Nor are there many sounds that awake more tender thoughts than the deep-toned *Honk*, whether falling afar from the sky as the goose floats away south in disdain of all your quarter of the universe, or sounding clear and penetrating above your tent as he passes in the dead of night, or rolling toward every corner of the sky as the flock sheers, whirls, and rises when you move in the pit or blind.

The wild goose has been widely distributed

from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and has made abundant sport in every State of the Union. But nowhere has he been so plenty, spent so long a portion of the year, and made such varied shooting as in California. Before the plains and slopes of the southern part became so covered with vineyards, orchards, and fine homes, it was the favorite winter home of myriads of geese. They dotted the spangled green of most of the larger plains, and in many places made the finest and easiest shooting. Though fair shooting yet remains in places, nothing can give any idea of the hordes of geese that from the North once poured down to winter in this sunny land. Snow-geese, generally called "white brant," were almost always in sight. Like lines of cloud they streamed along the breast of the distant mountain, stood like sheets of snow upon the green of the rolling plain, or upon the waters of the lagoon floated as lightly as the reflection beside them of the snowy peaks.

The clanging cackle of the white-fronted goose, commonly called "gray brant" or sometimes "black brant" to distinguish it from the "white brant," was as common as the warbling of the

linnet. Above the larger lagoons, between ten and twelve o'clock dozens of flocks could be seen coming in from the distant plains, and descending to the water in their peculiar manner. Circling in air perhaps two or three times, then massing silently in orderly array, they sail to a point over the water, setting their wings and poising for a second; then every throat, tuned to concert pitch, opens at once. Then, sometimes dozens at once, they dive, tumble, whirl, gyrate, and turn somersault downwards, a thousand feet perhaps, to the surface of the water. Then catching themselves, and closing in long and orderly line, with motionless wing and silent throat they sail for many a rod just above the surface, and finally settle into the water as softly as so many flakes of snow.

Morning and evening, over almost every horizon, lines of dark dots rose into the sky, and from them floated far over the land, softened by distance to wondrous sweetness, the *Honk* of the Canada goose. Where the deep pink of the clatonia smiled over the dense green of the springing clover stood long lines of gray bodies with black heads and white-collared throats.

And on the knolls where the mild blue-bells paled the orange fire of the poppies, bunch after bunch of geese stood basking in the sun of mid-day. But whether standing in silent dignity or waddling about to feed on the fernlike leaves of the alfileria, whose little pinkish stars lit up the greensward, the goose was watching for danger with that keen eye that makes him so respected by those who know him.

All lovers of the field learn that plenty of game does not imply plenty of shooting, any more than plenty of shooting implies plethora of game-pockets. And nowhere have I seen this truth more apparent than when one could often see from the window more game than can now be seen in a day's hunt. Although quite simple compared with the devices now necessary to insure a near acquaintance with the wary goose, many tricks were needed even then. It required no pits in the ground or decoys to lure the birds, but it was still necessary to be well hidden when lying in wait along their line of flight. Often you could hide in the shade of the heteromeles that rose ten or twelve feet in ever-living green, starred with a thousand scarlet berries as bright

as those of the mountain ash. Where this failed, the evergreen head of the common sumac was good enough, and often a bunch of scrubby live-oak or even ramiria or sage would do. Or there would be a little cut or shallow gully in which one could lie amid the pink-veined white of the nodding cowslip and the fragrance of golden violets.

Well concealed on a good line of flight at the proper time of day, one had rarely long to await the game. Heralded by a mellow *Honk*, an outstretched string of dark dots came swiftly toward you, growing rapidly larger as the line widened out; for the goose, though seeming a slow flier, because so large, is really a bird of rapid flight. On they came, with their *Honk* sounding clearer and deeper, until you could hardly resist the temptation to look around the side of the bush or through its top to see if the game were near enough. When the liquid notes sounded near, it was so natural to grasp the gun a little tighter and shift it just a little, to have it in the right position for quick and certain work when the supreme moment should arrive. But lack of patience was often one's undoing even when the

geese were very tame; for when you saw the dark line, with heavy *Wiff, wiff, wiff, wiff, wiff* of wing and *Honk-onk k-wonk onk konk k-wonk* of outstretched throat, swing off just enough to carry the nearest bird safely beyond all reach of the threatened danger, you realized that there are some things in hunting that always repay their cost, and the foremost thereof is patience.

No time for vain regrets, for where the green of the plain joins the blue of the sky another line is rising into view, and the clarion-calls from the center and either end converge as if the whole line were aimed directly at you. And now, whether sitting in a bush or lying on the ground, keep perfectly still. To know when the birds are near enough to shoot at, depend only on the sound of wings above, or upon the metallic ring the *Honk* will have when the game is so nearly over you that it is impossible for it to escape your fire. And beware how you decide this latter point; for there is no bird of its size that can turn with more provoking ease than the Canada goose, even when very close and coming swiftly toward you.

Along the sky the line comes widening out, the mellow *Honk* deeper and clearer, and you crouch behind the bush, not daring to show your face or move, while fancy pictures the manner of their coming, and sees the birds settle lower toward the earth as they approach. And soon you think you can hear them set their big wings and slide down the air with their long dark necks and white throats almost over you. But not yet, not yet! Now is the critical time, the time when more shots are thrown away than at any other. For if you rise a moment too soon, you shall see the line turned away and just comfortably out of reach. Wait a moment more, and you may hear the tips of broad wing-feathers softly fanning the air above, and feel a stranger depth in the trumpet-tone that stirs a tumult in your blood. And seldom shall you have seen such excitement condensed into so short a space as when you rise to see the air filled with big thumping wings sheering upward and outward amid an uproarious *Ho-nk-onk-wonk-onk wonk*; while at the report of your first barrel a whirl of gray strikes the flowery green, and at the report

of your second another long neck droops, two more big wings are folded.

Strange sights might formerly be seen upon these plains, and once I saw a touching instance of brotherly love. A goose fell behind a flock into which my companion had fired, settling lower with slower stroke of wing. Two other geese fell back and, coming to the side of the wounded one, seemed trying to cheer and sustain him. Yet slower became his stroke of wing and lower he settled, with his companions clinging to the last hope of helping him. But from above a broad dark line shot downward on a long incline, aimed directly at the failing goose. With melancholy *Wonk* his two friends steered away, leaving him to the eagle against which it was useless to try to protect him. Right above the goose the broad line turned and shot away on high; for the eagle had missed his stroke and, with quick turn of wings, glanced far upward with his momentum. Then catching himself in air he turned again and, shooting swiftly down, reached the victim as it was settling into the grass.

On these grounds fine sport could once be had with a rifle. Care was needed to make the first

shot tell, for even when quite tame the Canada goose displays a shocking lack of patience when a gentleman attempts to find his distance by trial. He has also a very impolite way of carrying with him, even in the most compact flock, a vast amount of circumambient space that hungers for lead in a manner quite amazing. *Zip—zeeooooooo* goes the ball, glancing from the very center of the flock, with the *Wiff wiff wiff wiff wiff* of heavy wings throbbing on your ear, and a medley of white, black, and gray rising into the sky without leaving a feather on the green. But if you have gauged the distance rightly and held the sights of the rifle closely on the center of a single goose, you may hear perhaps a dull *thup*, and, as the rest of the flock starts skyward on reverberating wing, you may see a gray body stretched on the sod as if smitten with a thunderbolt hissing hot from the hand of Jove.

Better than wandering over the plain in search of shots is to sit behind a bush or tree that nods on the bank of some pond where geese spend the day. If convenient, have sticks in the water at different points, and have the rifle-sights adjusted to them by trial before the geese begin to come

in. Grass or reeds in the water will often do, and if the pond is not too large you may approximate the range by firing at the blank water. The bright winter morning is scarcely half gone when, above the hills that loom hazily green in the warm sun, dark dotted lines begin to rise and the silvery *Honk* rings along the blue vault. Instead of pitching and tumbling like the white-fronted goose, the Canada geese often drift slowly down sometimes two thousand feet or more on a slope two or three miles long, almost without moving a wing. As they near the surface of the water and spread their wings on a plane parallel to its glassy face every throat for a moment is hushed, and they sweep majestically but softly along as if air were buoyant as water. Then with sudden stroke of wing they turn themselves half erect until their underwear is brightly pictured in the mirror beneath and the white collars shine on their outstretched necks, with heavy splash settle into the water, and in a moment all is still.

Wop goes the ball against the water, and *whe-eeeeoooo* it sings on high after glancing from its surface. Instantly follows the roar of heavy

wings mingled with many a *Honk—onk—honk—k-wonk*, and upward swings the flock, leaving the smooth water unmarred by even a floating feather. Many such a miss will you score with the rifle unless you have many guides to the distance scattered over the pond; but there is often more satisfaction in seeing the ball strike the water an inch, perhaps, over the back of the goose at which you aimed than in killing one with the shot-gun.

For the most condensed excitement, driving into a flock of geese with a fast team, a good driver, and a light wagon always wore the laurel. It could be done only in the days when the game had not learned to fear a wagon much, and even then only with a strong breeze and the ground good. There were plenty of places where the ground was smooth enough for the most rapid pace, and plenty of mustangs that could fly over badger and coyote holes as easily and safely as the rising sun over the valleys.

Imagine nearly an acre of the plain half covered with geese whose black heads and white throats rise in tier upon tier until they look like a small army. They have done feeding, and are

sunning themselves until ready to start for the pond on which they will spend the warm hours of midday floating on the water. Geese rise against the wind, and, although rapid flyers when once under way, are slow in starting. If we dash upon them from the windward side, every second they lose in getting under way will carry the wagon ten or fifteen yards nearer, and as they will try to rise against the wind they will lose several seconds in the breeze now blowing.

The mustangs are urged into a fair trot on a line that will carry us a hundred yards or more to the windward of the geese. Don't look at the birds, nor intimate that you know of their existence or would give a cent for the whole flock if you did. But let every gun be where it can be quickly handled, and let the driver have his whip in the same condition. And let each man keep his wits equally well in hand.

The wagon rolls along until nearly opposite the geese. Then it is suddenly wheeled, the horses are lifted with a quick undercut of the whip and in a second are in wild career directly toward the geese. The soft pink of the painted-cup and the creamy heads of the buttercups fly

beneath the bouncing wheels, the ground-squirrel, in full run for his hole, skips over the burrowing-owl's head, and the chaparral-cock, distrusting his nimble legs in such emergency, breaks into reluctant flight, while the geese begin to waddle and crane their necks to see what the racket is about. They are used to horses and even wagons, but not to such a runaway pace. By the time the wagon is within seventy yards of them they suspect something is the matter. By the time it has bounced over the next twenty they are sure of it. In another moment, with many a *Honk-onk-wonk*, they are in the air.

But as they can rarely resist the habit of rising toward the wind,—the side from which we are descending upon them,—a moment is lost during which the wagon covers another twenty yards. There is nothing left the game but to whirl over backward, out sideways and upwards. But by the time they discover their mistake and try to rectify it another moment is lost. Before you know it you are perhaps under the very middle of a wildly flapping and climbing medley of dark gray wings and screaming throats outstretched towards all the points of the compass.

If not very careful you may be too late to shoot. Vain is any thought of stopping the wagon to allow you to take aim. The driver could not stop it in time if he would: and he will have his hands full to stop it in time to save your bones anyway, for the horses are in runaway speed. You must hold yourself in place and shoot as best you can before too near the center of the flock. You must be a good shot from a running horse or wagon, and quite able to keep your balance, mental as well as physical. Amid a general *slam-bang-rattle-ty-bang* you toss the gun to your shoulder, catch a glimpse of the end in line with something like revolving gray, and pull the trigger. For a second it seems as if the universe were whirling around you as one of the great birds falls with heavy thump on the back of one of the horses, with another gyrating almost into the wagon, while hundreds more are climbing with clamorous throats toward the dome of heaven as you rush on beneath at a pace that is quite alarming.

IX.

THE AMERICAN CRANES.

By many the sand-hill crane and the whooping crane are confounded with herons and bitterns. But neither kind has anything in common with them except some resemblance in shape. Where they can get plenty of grain or grass the cranes seem to touch nothing else. When fattened on wheat, barley, corn, or cotton-seed, or even on good grass, either can be sure of the sincere regards of any epicure.

As game-birds they command the unbounded respect of all who know them. In keenness of sight no bird but the turkey and the whooping crane equals the common sand-hill; in knowledge of the range of a gun or rifle he is equaled only by the whooping-crane, and there is reason to think he is gifted with ears almost as keen as those of the deer. Like all other game these

birds may in some spots or at some times be found tamer than usual. But such are the rare exception, and they will generally try the utmost caution of the sportsman; while the whooping-crane is perhaps the last of all the game of America, feathered or furred, that one who knows him would contract to furnish a specimen of within a given time.

The mellow call of Bob White is heard no more upon the prairie, and the silvery tones of the upland plover die away in the far south before the sand-hill comes. He comes when the burnished green of the mallard's head shines in the prairie-slough, when the deep-toned *Honk* of the Canada goose is heard on high, and the pinnated grouse in bands of hundreds sweep for miles at a single flight over the rolling expanse. The best shooting is from pits on stubbles, and in the great fields of corn that follow the first settlement of the prairie. It is generally too difficult to approach the birds, for on open plain it is useless to try to crawl within range, and even when they alight along some slough it is quite difficult to get within sure rifle-range, even under cover of slough-grass. The crane is no

believer in the rose business, and as soon as the desert begins to blossom he is done with it forever.

On the Pacific coast the sand-hill crane was once very abundant. Stupendous flocks dotted the plains and slopes in winter. Far and wide where the sunlight played upon a thousand shades of green they stood upon the rising knolls, now blue, now almost white, according to the play of light, but always watching for danger. By night their rolling notes fell from the stars with unearthly vibration, and by day, with broad wings and long necks outstretched, they floated across the blue dome with such easy grace and so high above all other birds that they seemed to belong rather to heaven than earth.

Some of the finest shooting here used to be in San José Del Valle, an old Mexican grant of fifty thousand acres lying three thousand feet above the sea and about sixty miles northeast of San Diego.

It was about half open valley and half rolling slope, partly covered with thin chemisal mixed with juniper and bush live-oak, but on the more level portions was plenty of grass with large

lagoons, that made this rancho a favorite winter home of water-fowl and cranes. On the south, two thousand feet higher, towered Mount Volcan, golden on the ridges with the wild oats and grass of the last season, blue along the sides with dense chaparral, and darkly green upon the top with pine, live-oak, and silver fir. On the northwest Mount Palomar rose still higher, in a long ridge clad in cedar, pine, fir, and oak, above heaving swells of blue and gold; on the west Mesa Grande rose in a terrace of green on which the live-oaks bowed like the trees in some old apple-orchard; and on the east the tall Coyote Mountains, robed in chaparral with occasional parks of live-oaks in some little basin, or grove of sycamore around a spring, looked down from six thousand feet upon the scene.

Over such a horizon-line, heralded by their penetrating tremolo, huge flocks of cranes set their wings, and in long lines, bluish gray against the somber background of cedar and fir that filled the heads and sides of the great gulches of the mountains, drifted slowly down toward you. And when they had settled to where the blue chaparral formed the background,

and those wild tones rang clearer and more searching, you grasped the gun with tighter grip though the game was still a mile or two away. No other bird has so much pomp and circumstance about its movements; and when, instead of coming directly down, the cranes swept around the amphitheater in miles of spiral, while the long *Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrooooo*, growing ever nearer and more penetrating, was answered by more cranes over the mountain-tops, you felt very much as you felt when first you heard the hounds open in full cry and the ringing racket came ever louder toward the runway where you were stationed.

Well hidden in the grass or reeds on the line of flight, you had not long to wait, in the morning or evening, before some of the numerous flocks were bearing down upon you. Then if you could resist the temptation to twist your head, or to shift the gun to get it into better position, and could lie perfectly still until you hear the broad wings winnow the air above, you might with each barrel of your gun send one of these huge birds whirling to earth in a huddle of long legs, necks, and outstretched wings that

looked sometimes as if the whole sky were falling on you.

When the *Grrrrrrrrrrrrrrroooo* came thick and fast at night and you could see the tops of the mountains shining in robes of snow over which the pine, fir, and cedar in long lines stood guard, the moon full-orbed looking down from a sky of peerless purity, with cranes glimmering like spirits among the twinkling stars, it were strange if you did not go to where they were visible. But even then great care had to be taken, for the sand-hill crane can see any unusual thing at night farther than almost any other bird, and takes no chances when judging of the range of a gun. Even at night the surest way, if you have no pit or good cover in which to hide, is to lie upon the ground, in some hollow if possible, face downward and with the gun beneath you and so hidden that no light can shine from it. Few moments are more exciting than those spent in such a position, with the wild chorus trilled by a score of throats growing nearer and clearer by the moment, while you dare not look even out of the corner of your eye. With every resounding note you tighten your grasp upon the gun and

listen more intently for the sound of wings from which to determine the proper time to spring to your feet. No easy thing to contain yourself when those piercing tones reverberate within a hundred yards! But when you hear the soft fanning of the air above, and jump as you never jumped before, the troupe of actors that throngs the moonlit stage is worth coming far to see. Scores of birds larger than geese, pouring a flood of the most far-reaching sound that rolls from living throat, are wheeling and sheering across the starry night, with the moonlight glancing from many a dagger-beak and many a waving wing. And then if you have your nerve with you, one comes whirling down almost upon your head at the report of the first barrel, and as the flame spouts upward from the second another parts from the rest of the flock as they vanish darkling into the night.

Nowhere have I seen the two cranes so abundant and tame as on the great desert of northern Mexico known as Bolson de Mapimi. In the northeastern corner of the state of Durango are thousands of acres of this, in corn and cotton, irrigated from the river Nases. North and east

vast plains stretch hundreds of miles, and on the west high into the sky rise ragged mountains. When I was first there the sound of a gun was almost unheard on this wide area, and the sand-hill crane, fat and lazy on cottonseed and corn, swung here and there across the scene with an easy grace that gave little indication of how sharp he could be when "wanted." Along the horizon his tribe streamed in thousands, now almost white against the background of bare mountains, now bluish where they sailed low along the top of the corn or cotton so that the sun could play upon their backs, now dark where the course lay across the sky that here smiles the winter through.

Here too, in greater numbers than I have ever seen elsewhere, was the whooping-crane, beside which the common sand-hill, with all his sharpness, is but a gosling. Though sometimes found in company with the sand-hill, the whooping-crane is generally contented with himself and keeps clear of all entangling alliances. He usually avoids the sand-hill, as if he did not think him smart enough to associate with. Larger than the other by some eight or ten inches in

extent of wing and six or eight inches in length, of snowy whiteness that rivals that of the swan except where several inches of black tip the broad wings, the whooping-crane when floating in the bright sunlight of the winter here is the most graceful of all large American game-birds.

Circling much of the time so far in the zenith that he seems but a bit of down, and sending through miles of air a note both wild and strange, but ringing as the blast of a silver horn, it seems almost a hopeless task to get a shot at one. I had shot them before with the rifle, but to get within shot-gun range had always been too great a problem for all the care I could exert. But they, too, have the common infirmity, and in the afternoon came winding down out of the sky in leagues of spiral, and in the evening and morning were drifting along the corn and cotton and settling into the fields to feed wherever it seemed safe.

One morning they were flying low over some corn into which the water from the ditch had been lately turned; the cranes and water-fowl being crazy about the fields that are lately wet. The stalks stood dense and tall, as they generally

are on irrigated land, and on a bit of the driest ground I made a bed of corn-stalks. Upon this I stretched face downward with the gun beneath me, coat-collar turned up and cap drawn back so as to conceal neck and hair, and had a peon cover me with corn-stalks and leave me to myself and patience.

How easy it seems to talk of patience! Nothing was harder to exercise. Hardly had the sound of the peon's feet ceased, than the wings of big mallards were pounding the air so close that the whistling of the tips of their wing-feathers was plain. Scarcely were these past, when the soft hiss of the sailing wings of canvas-backs in easy flight took their place, as in unsuspecting serenity of soul they came lazily in to alight. Then sounded the wings of a huge bunch of sprig-tails settling into a pool of water in the corn close beside me, while the canvas-backs alighted on some dry ground about equally near and began hunting for corn that had been shelled in husking. Hard, too, was the temptation when the stiff set wings of large bunches of blue-bills rent the air with sharp hiss as they descended. And almost equally hard to look

Like hours seemed the few minutes I had to await the coming of the makers of that strange sound, and when at last my straining ear caught the soft winnowing of the air in front and a little on one side, slower too and softer than that of the sand-hill's wing, I could scarcely contain myself for the instant necessary to let them come so close that they could not sheer out of the way when I rose. I stood it for another second, and then as the sound came clearer just over me I sprang as never before.

Scarce thirty feet above, the air was filled with white birds as large as swans, with necks as long, and broader and whiter wings barred on the ends with jet, climbing heavenward and sheering for all points of the compass at the same time, while the sun shone on soft carmine heads and dark green bills like gleaming swords, from which poured a volley of sound like the mingling of a score of bugles. It seemed wicked to spoil anything so rare and so beautiful as that sight; but if I had had time to think, I could have consoled myself with the reflection that it is scarcely once in a lifetime that one gets a chance to make a double shot on this wild thing, and rare enough

is it to get a single shot. At the report of the first barrel one with folded wings and drooping neck turned its course into a downward plunge, and with the second another relaxed its hold on the warm sunlight and, with legs outstretched below, long neck, and bill pointing skyward, and extended wings nearly joined at the tips above, descended in a revolving whirl of white, black, and carmine.

X.

DAYS AMONG THE PLOVER.

NEXT to Wilson's snipe no small bird has such attraction for the sportsman as the upland plover. It seems but yesterday its strange call first fell upon my childish ear, and made me stop and scan the horizon long before discovering far on high this little wisp of life speeding across the dome of blue as if a messenger of Jove.

In the Western States the upland plover a few years ago was so tame there was no pleasure in hunting it. But on the Atlantic coast, as far back as 1855, it was the wildest of all wild things. Few birds were more sought, and for few were as many miles so willingly traversed.

When the bugloss spread its blue across the pastures, and the air was redolent of mint; when the mutterings of thunder were over, and silvery clouds hung low along the horizon; when a softer

stillness lingered in the groves, and a milder radiance played along the hills—do you not remember those days? Can you forget how something like the whisper of an angel in a silver flute struck a strange chord within, and, while you stood wondering whether it fell from the sky or came from below the horizon's verge, you saw a little scrap of gray whisking from the grass, far out of reach, and aimed for the stars? And then louder, clearer, yet even softer than before, fell again that strange ripple of sound that puts to shame the wonders of acoustics, beside which ventriloquism is ridiculous and whispering-galleries contemptible. So near it seemed in its liquid purity that you expected to see another bird rising from the grass within easy shot; and as you saw nothing, there came, more tender yet, even clearer and nearer than before, another pearly triplet of tone, as if another bird had risen at your feet. Can so much energy be lodged in that bit of frail machinery, that under the edge of yon distant cloud seems to need all its power to maintain its velocity? How can sound so light be so far-reaching, or tone so sweet traverse space like the thunderbolt with so little loss of

power? So I used to wonder; yet it made me love the little bird the more. I loved the young robin whose spotted breast was turning red, the bobolink whose bubbling joy was almost hushed in the meadow, the doves that from the stubbles rose with whistling wing, the highholders pitching from one wild cherry-tree to another, and the young meadow-lark, whose breast of jet and gold was now nearly as bright as that of his father. All these for me in boyish days were game, but I lost almost all interest in them when I saw that little film of gray trailing over the late summer sky, and caught those pearls of sound that only one little throat can string.

When about sixteen I started from the house for a short stroll before dinner, and took my gun along with only the two loads that were in it, expecting to see but a lark or highholder at best. Nearly a mile from the house I left the road and turned into an old pasture to look for blackberries. I strolled along where the white and blue of the morning-glory were twining over the gold of the cinquefoil, when suddenly I heard a triplet of melody so soft it seemed to fall through a mile of air. As I looked toward the vault of

heaven, expecting to see a little speck among the clouds, a bit of gray flitting over some corn beyond a fence scarce twenty yards away caught my eye. Quickly the gun was whirled from my shoulder toward it, and when the smoke cleared nothing was there but the corn waving darkly green.

As if rebounding from heaven, that sweet call echoed **and** re-echoed as I crossed the fence, and half a dozen more scraps of gray started from the corn. I landed from the fence in time to stop the last one, and might have done so but for the reflection that there was but one load in the gun and no ammunition in my pocket. So anxious was I that I fired a little too quickly, and above the edge of the smoke the bird went sailing skyward. But disappointment vanished as I saw one of the first birds settle into the corn some three hundred yards away, with two more wheeling around to follow him. Three corn-fields joined here, making one large piece a little over waist-high. The birds were probably young ones bred in the adjoining fields, and had gone into the corn to escape the heat, and there were doubtless more there.

So I reasoned as I flew across the fields for more ammunition. The scarlet of the catch-fly and the opening bloom of the golden-rod seemed a stream of fireworks from my speed, and it was but a few minutes before I was returning out of breath.

Only a few steps beyond where I had picked up my first bird, a faint haze of gray mottled with brown and black rose out of the corn with that mysterious note that always raised havoc in my young nerves. It brought my gun so quickly to my shoulder that before I knew it off it went. So did the gray, speeding away upward, and joined farther on by two new lines of gray amid a full chorus of strange melody. Where is another such moment as when you glance along the gun and see for a twinkling that you have raised it on the exact spot where it should be? In a second more I saw the gray clear-cut against the distant sky and in exact line with the gun. It vanished for an instant in the smoke of my second barrel, to appear below in a soft whirl of gray, white, and brown gyrating to earth, while its two companions sped away on high, their

notes falling louder and sweeter as they fringed the clouds.

As I reloaded all was silent except the song-sparrow warbling in the fragrant sassafras, or the wren twittering his late piece in the blackberry-bushes; but before I had gone far there was another wild yet tender triplet of sound somewhere on land or sky, and I swung the gun half around the horizon before I discovered two plover clearing the top of the corn scarce twenty-five yards away. A double shot at the upland plover was a thing we scarcely dared dream of. And a double shot at anything was not easy for a boy of my age in those days. We were not born of flame, swaddled with powder-smoke, and tutored by thunder as many "professionals" are to-day. We never shot at anything but game, for ammunition cost money, and the loading, and especially the cleaning, of a muzzle-loader bore a painful resemblance to work. Nor did we see the vast importance of making machines of ourselves, or we should have been better shots. But here the chance for a double shot on this wild bird stared me in the face with dazzling certainty. Too often has such delightful assurance upset the

repose of soul necessary to utilize the opportunity. But not this time; for scarcely did the first bird sink into the green at the report of the first barrel than the gun was turned upon the second careering upward, as if bound for some other sphere. In line with the two barrels, the gray glimmered for an instant, and then, as I pulled the trigger, it folded its wings and fell.

Congratulating myself on that shot, and stooping low, I moved down the rows of corn again, little thinking how soon I was to make another "handsome double." Before I had gone a hundred yards another plover cleared the corn within easy reach. It took me so by surprise that the first barrel wrecked the hopes of a promising pumpkin on the ground below it, and the second ventilated the waving corn-leaves on one side of it, while the bird climbed the summer breeze with never a feather marred, and on the wings of its silvery song bore away toward the zenith.

There was still plenty of corn left, and on I went to repair my shattered pride. I had scarcely gone fifty yards before two plover rose. They were a little far, but I turned the first one over and fringed the leaves of the corn around

the second; and hardly had I gone a hundred feet beyond where the first one fell, when, to my astonishment, three more birds rose at about twenty-five yards. In less than an hour from the time I crossed the fence I had sixteen plover, all well-grown birds and in fine condition.

As suddenly as it began, the shooting stopped. It was too good to last. Here and there across the sky and along the horizon's farthest rim a thread of gray was winding out of sight, while, from no one could tell where, came that soft, searching sound that seemed never so sweet as when all hope of another shot was gone. But no more gray rose above that corn, and vainly on the next day did I tramp it until it needed re-hoeing to insure half a crop. The birds were once more themselves, and my luck was one of those accidents of the field that seldom befall.

Golden plover made themselves attractive by filling a serious gap in the shooting of the year. They used to visit the plowed fields far back from the Atlantic coast, and furnish fine sport where now no wing is seen or whistle heard. The mellow twitter of the woodcock had died away in the swamp, while the sharper whistle of

his full-feathered wing was not yet heard in the yellowing grove. Bob White was still too small, as well as too hard to see, and the hare had not yet left the thickets and made his form in the toadflax or the reddening dewberry-bushes of the open. Nor was the whizzing wing of the wild duck yet seen along the shore, nor the scaipe of the snipe yet heard in the meadow, nor the ruffed grouse yet ready in the tangled brake. This plover was known inland for only about three or four weeks of the year. The fringed gentian had not yet closed its blue, sorrel continued to tinge the slopes, and the vervain was fading but little, when he came to visit the freshly-plowed fields of autumn. He seemed to come from the coast, for it was only during heavy easterly storms that he came in any numbers. Up in the garret of the old farm-house, among the spinning-wheels and the wasps, we used to flatten our noses against the dusty window-panes where the rain was driving hard, and watch the coming of the birds.

High in air they came at first, sometimes in crescent lines with the horns turned forward, sometimes in crescents with the horns turned

backward. Over the rim of the woods where the chestnut and beech were yellowing, and the gum-tree was firing the lingering green, the birds rose and dipped, scattered and massed, and rode down the storm to the plowed fields which were their favorite feeding-ground at this time.

This plover came with soft trilling whistle rippling from his throat, whether swinging high over the hilltop where crimson tints were creeping over the maple, or fanning the air with wings tremulous with speed above the fragrant buckwheat fields, or skimming low along the corn where the pumpkin was yellowing among the rows.

We made our blinds in some dark cedar-bush, or where the woolly tails of the clematis were whitening over some reddening clump of briers, or the crimson of the sumac was nodding over the bright purple of the aster. Nothing very scientific was needed, and a bunch of corn-stalks or tumble-weeds often served us well. Good imitations of the plover for decoys could then be bought in New York, and we often helped out the stock with dead birds propped with sticks. Then came the whistle—a common one with a

dried pea rattling below the air-vent, but making a very good imitation of the plover's call.

Sometimes a flock three or four hundred yards away would swerve and come for the decoys almost at the first sound of the whistle, answering it with their tender notes, often so many at once they seemed the tremolo of some distant organ. When the birds massed in air and set their wings to slide down to the decoys, then was the critical time with a young shot. Sometimes I could not wait, but fired prematurely only to see the flock sheer and rise. Sometimes in my excitement I could not get what seemed good enough aim until they were too far past. And sometimes my finger would balk on the trigger and refuse to pull when I had good aim. My nerves were not helped by the fact that half a dozen farmer's brats were lying around the same field with as many relics of the Revolution, and liable to spoil a good shot for me at any moment by shooting clear across the field. The village parson, too, was out with his old musket that had not been fired since he shot his annual rabbit in the rail-heap back of the house the winter before, and, as every gun was then supposed to "kill at a

hundred yards," he was liable to shoot at my flock if I did not hurry.

How pretty this plover looks in its soft combinations of brown, black, gray, and white, black feet and bill, and white stripe over the eye! And pretty when it wheels and the light flashes on its glossy back dotted with gold, and its brownish tail barred with gray. What wonder we sometimes hastened out before the storm had cleared, and shivered in the wet grass to see this little visitor spin around the fields! But when the purple of the lingering meadow-beauty and the soft blue of the lobelia brighten beneath sunlight from a clear sky, you need no longer watch for specks on the horizon or over the woods where the butternut is turning a golden hue beside the reddening persimmon. For low down they now come over the hedgerows, as if they would alight upon the crimson masses of the woodbine that entwine the old cedar posts. And over the fence on the other side of the field comes another line of little dark bodies with hazy wings quivering on each side. Now there is the crack of a gun from among the red berries of a clump of wild rose, three birds come whirling over

toearth, and the rest radiate for a moment like a fan, then, grouping in a black mass, spin away toward the next field. But not long need envy gnaw your soul over the success of that rustic lout, for over the corn not far away another line of dark dots is bearing down upon you with soft trill answering your whistle. Well away from the other guns it swings, and, stringing out in crescent line with one end toward you, sails swiftly down toward your decoys. A whirl, a flutter, and a medley of white and black and brown and golden dots follows the report of the first barrel, and as the birds rise and sheer off they close for an instant into a dense cloud, from which, at the sound of the second barrel, it almost rains plover.

XI.

THE QUAILS OF CALIFORNIA.

QUITE as interesting as any of the peculiarities of the valley quail of California is the way he can bother not only the novice, but the experienced shot from the East who first attempts to interview him.

In December, 1882, a gentleman named Jones called on me; a strong man he was, and a good shot. He wanted to know where all those quails were that I had been writing about. I was always ready for a hunt in those days, and soon took him to where we saw dark blue dots scudding about the green the recent rains had spread over the bottom of a little valley, and darting here and there among the bushes at the foot of the slopes.

Mr. Jones, who had been loud in his praises of what I had written, showed at once that he

had never read a line of it—a painful experience that many an author has to go through. Instead of advancing on the flock as fast as possible with his dog at heel so as to keep him fresh, he began to sneak slowly for a sure shot when the quail rose. And he sent the dog ahead when he already knew where the game was, whereas, on account of the scarcity of water and the hot, dry air of early winter days in the south which soon spoil the scent of the best ones, a dog should never be used either to point or retrieve these birds when you can as well do it yourself.

The dog drew to a pretty point on the birds over a hundred yards away. But it was exactly what you don't want for these quails. A dog as steady as one should be for all Eastern game will be nowhere in a stern-chase after these little chaps, and a stern-chase is the only kind you get. Though the dog was pointing by scent, most of the flock was in plain view. It was composed of dozens of coveys, and scattered along the base of the hill for seventy yards or more. Between the low bushes dark lines of five to ten birds, one behind the other, were winding up the hill. Here and there the lines

would stop, form little bunches for a few seconds, and then move on again. Everywhere went single birds, bobbing their heads, dodging and zigzagging about, stopping occasionally to take a look at us, then running on again. Here and there one hopped upon a stone and sent forth a ringing *Whit—whit—whit*; while others, gathering in little squads, kept up a low, muffled *Wook—wook—wook—wook—ook-wookook—wook—ook*. But all the time the general movement of the flock up the hill was just a trifle faster than that of Mr. Jones on the level ground. By the time he had reached the foot of the hill where he first saw them, the birds were about half-way up, and the hill was some four hundred feet high. There they were, scudding about or trailing in lines, with the *Whit—whit—whit—whit* and *Wook—wook—wook—wook* sounding plainly as before.

Jones started up the hill, with his dog pointing all the way and moving up as his master went ahead of him; but, as before, Jones seemed to think he would get nearer by going slowly so as not to frighten the game. He reached the place where the birds had been, about the time

they reached the top of the hill, a safe distance above him. Not at all discouraged, he went on again, thinking if they passed over the top of the ridge he would have a good chance to get close without their seeing him. So with head down and gun ready, he sneaked up to the crest of the ridge and looked over. From nearly half-way down the other slope came the *Whit—whit—whit* and *Wook—wook—wook* again, apparently about ten yards farther off than they had yet been.

Jones suddenly saw several dark little bodies huddled in an open space some forty yards or more—it is generally more—down the hill. A good shot, he had started out with the intention of shooting only at birds on the wing. But the most violent scruples against “a pot-shot” on this bird are often removed by less than four hundred feet of climbing and ninety degrees of the thermometer. Therefore I was not surprised to see Jones (who had been very free in his denunciation of pot-shooters) fire into this bunch of birds. The result was the roar of hundreds of wings and hundreds of lines of whizzing and buzzing blue above the brush on the

hillside below. Into the thickest part of the flock rang the second barrel of Jones's gun, with the general result of firing into a flock at large instead of selecting a single bird. No bird can so tempt one to break this good rule as this quail can, and no other is so sure to leave one without a feather for reward.

Jones looked for a moment at the space the birds had occupied when he fired at them, then at me, and then at the dog, maintaining the while that discreet silence which often covers the deepest surprise; then with a smile born of confidence he went down the hill to where the birds were when he fired at them on the ground. The dog cantered around, jumped over the bushes, snuffed here and there in great style for a few minutes, and then retired to the shade of a sumac.

Meanwhile the flock had sailed across a little ravine and alighted about half-way up the side of the hill on the other side. The quails scattered over about an acre of ground, but in dark lines and little squads they could be seen running together again with *Whit—whit—whit*, *Wook—wook—wook* sounding from a hundred

throats and mingled with their assembling-call like *Ka—loi—o*, then like *Ohio*, then like *K—woik—uh*, *kuh—woik—uh*, and various other combinations. But all this time they were increasing the amount of up-hill between them and Jones.

Jones reached the place where they had settled on the ground. The dog was not half so gay as at the last place where they had alighted; and although he drew in good style and came to a half point, he had one eye on a green heteromyles. When told to hie on, he hied to the shade of that bush, from which, with tongue hanging out, he surveyed his master with something akin to indifference. Just then from a bunch of chemisal to the left of Jones a whizzing line of slate-blue, white, and cinnamon rose with sharp *Chirp—chirp—chirp—chirp* that had a metallic ring of defiance never heard from any other bird. Jones whirled his gun from his shoulder and made an elegant shot at the space the bird vacated as he pulled the trigger. Quick as a flash he fired the other barrel at about the right distance ahead of the bird which was by no means out of reach. The bird went on without

the parting of a feather. There was a heavy roar of wings again up the hill, and three more birds rose around Jones, at which he pointed the empty gun with great coolness and remarked!

“Confound your impudence: I’ll get on to you next time.”

By the time Jones reached the top of the hill the birds were sounding their alarm-call sixty or eighty yards down the slope on the other side. I now told him he was not going fast enough instead of too fast, and that the birds would run away from him all day at that pace. The dog seemed to care little what was the matter, and took more interest in the shade of a handsome live-oak that was nodding over the ridge than in the birds or the movements of his master. Jones, too, looked as if he did not relish the idea of going any faster, for he was loaded down with all sorts of clumsy nonsense when one should wear the lightest dress for a race with these brilliant runners. Still he thought the advice good, and started on a run down the hill. Before he knew it the whole flock rose within twenty-five yards in a big roaring sheet of dark blue. He

caught himself in time to send a bird whirling downward with each barrel.

He then waited in good style for the dog to come and find the fallen birds. But the dog merely snuffed at a feather with a temporary fit of energy, looked around a bit, and began to think about shade again. He was worthless for want of water and being allowed to run too much in hot, dry air before he was actually needed.

The first bird Jones soon gave up, as in his haste he had forgotten to mark it. The second one he had marked; but when he went where he was sure it fell, all bushes looked alike and there was not a feather to reward his patience. By the time he had concluded he could not find them and had exhausted his vocabulary on the dog, the rest of the flock was almost at the crest of the next slope. Some birds are almost always left hiding at every place where a flock has risen, and two burst here from the cover near his feet with a saucy *Chirp—chirp—chirp*. There was a quick slam-bang of both barrels of his gun, and both birds went whizzing unharmed across the ravine that lay between Jones and the next slope.

Jones made some remarks about California and its quails, and started over the ravine after the main flock. Fifty yards up the hill a quail rose from the spot where the flock had alighted the last time, and, curling around Jones's head, came backward toward me. At the report of his gun there was a puff of feathers from the bird and it went whirling down. When Jones reached the spot where it fell he found feathers, but neither he nor the dog could find any bird. There was a trail of feathers down a steep slope, and this Jones and the dog followed, the eyes of the master being about as good as the nose of the dog. Some distance below Jones heard something flutter. He went hastily to the place, and found some feathers. It was on the edge of a sharp gully, and he concluded the bird was at the bottom. He sent the dog down, but no bird returned with him. He then went down himself, and in a few minutes, by the aid of some bushes, he came scrambling out of the gully, hot and tired, and no bird returning with him. Meanwhile he was at the foot of the hill again, and the flock was probably over the top and moving faster than ever.

“You don’t understand them. You could have got fifty single shots in going this far. But I will show you something better,” I said.

Quarter of a mile away and some three hundred feet below us lay a long, narrow little valley, partly filled with clumps of prickly-pear from five to fifteen feet across and from three to eight feet high, lying between low hills quite bare of cover for some distance. We could see dark dots moving swiftly over the patches of green grass in the openings, and the soft call the quail gives when not alarmed came to us on the breeze.

Jones was horrified at my suggesting a hunt in that stuff, as most novices give up the quails at once when they fly to such cover. But it is often the best of ground, as the birds will not leave it when surrounded by bare hills, but will fly to and fro in it all day. That is, they once did so. There was always plenty of bare ground between the clumps of the cactus for good walking, and to land the birds on it doubled the skill required to make a good bag.

Even before we had entered the ground we heard the sharp *Whit—whit—whit—whit* of

alarm, and down the winding openings saw a dozen or more dark lines winding amid the thorny green. I quickened the pace, and suddenly a quail rose with short and intermitting stroke of wing, as if only climbing higher for better inspection. Never a prettier shot; but Jones, excited by running, fired as he stopped. The bird went whizzing on, followed by a sheet of roaring blue, into the thickest of which Jones poured his second barrel. The air was filled with feathers, and half a dozen quail were fluttering about among the roots in the center of one of the thickest clumps of cactus, where he would never get one of them.

As fast as I could run I followed after the flock, which had flown only about one hundred yards. As they rose I fired into the air above them, wanting only to scare them and not lose time at this stage by picking up. At this the flock broke some and scattered, but still I kept after them, and as most of them rose again I fired the other barrel in air. This scattered them over a space some two hundred yards long in the cactus, and all their noise ceased.

Jones came up looking intensely disgusted.

Of all the quail he had seen he had not yet one in hand, and he thought the prospects slimmer than ever. His dog seemed of the same opinion, and looked at the fearful array of needles on the prickly-pear with as much contempt for my judgment in selecting hunting-ground as did his master. But as we moved along the winding avenues amid the grim shrubbery, birds by the dozen came whizzing and chirping from out its shaggy arms. Some scrambled up with wonderful speed of foot along the thorny limbs before taking wing, while others came darting out under full headway. Some curled over our heads, others shot out on the opposite side, rising into sight for a twinkling in a dark blue curve, while others on foot darted along the ground to the next clump of cactus.

There was no waiting for a shot. At almost every step there was a whiz on one side, a buzz on the other, and a *Chirp—chirp—chirp* ahead or behind, and the report of a gun was followed by a dozen blue lines curving and twisting perhaps out of the same cactus from which half a dozen had risen but a moment before. Jones did not know whether he was on foot or in a

balloon. His gun rattled as fast as he could load it, and occasionally a stricken bird went whirling into the cactus, or, if it landed on the open ground, it fell generally but half killed, and in a twinkling was in the nearest bunch of cactus, safe from dog or master.

In fifteen minutes the climax of this was reached and the roar and confusion were suddenly gone. So were the birds, especially those that Jones thought should have been in his pocket. He had but three when he should have bagged at least fifteen in single shots. But the shooting was by no means over. It had only settled down. For two hours or more we traversed the open places of that strange covert, and from the thickest and most threatening parts came bird after bird as we passed and re-passed them again, again and again. Never does the valley quail show to better advantage than when he bursts from the outer edge of this stuff and goes around you to enter it again. Through the bluish haze of his rapid wings you see the mottled breast of white and dark with cinnamon shadings, the little bluish neck and black-and-white head outstretched full length,

and the long, dark plume bent backward by speed. He looks too pretty to shoot as he cleaves the warm sunlight, or, setting his little wings, glides into the thickest mass of the thorny cactus.

In a few days Jones learned the dark and devious ways of the valley quail and became quite an expert on them, though he never found them as easy shooting as if they would lie to a dog like Bob White. After an absence of ten years he returned again to California. After quite a hunt, in which he missed the welcome call of the quail he had before heard in almost every little valley and on every hillside, he heard a muffled roar of wings. After losing a minute in locating the sound, he saw well up the hillside only some thirty birds, spread out in line like a fan aimed for nearly half the horizon and just clearing the top of the ridge. Shooting to scatter them would be ridiculous, for they were already as well scattered as they could be. That flock was not going to bother him by running together again before he could reach it. So he scrambled up hill with legs nimble with expectation and over the ridge, expecting to find the birds hiding

in the brush just over its top. He went down the other side and along it for some space, but nothing rose, and there was nothing calling anywhere along that hillside or in the gulch at its foot or on the other side. Before he reached the bottom of the slope there was a buzzing sound a hundred yards away on the other side, and a dark blue line went around a little point of brush. Jones scrambled across; and just as he was nearing the edge of the gully between the slopes he heard the buzz of more wings. An extra jump landed him on the level ground, but the three quails that had made the noise were out of reach by the time he brought the gun to his shoulder.

He pressed on faster, and after going about a hundred yards a quail sprung at about thirty yards. Had it risen from the point of a dog he could have caught it with the first barrel, for his gun was a good one and well loaded. But taking him unawares, this bird was too swift, and by the time the shot arrived it had scattered enough to let the bird through with the loss of only a tail-feather. Remembering the birds had crossed the preceding ridge in a line well

strung out, Jones beat to the right of where the last bird had risen. He found nothing, and had just turned around to beat the other side, when there was a buzz of wings behind him, and he wheeled in time to see a blue curve cross the ridge behind a bush. A snap-shot at the bush as the bird disappeared behind it brought a feather or two sailing back on the air, but the most careful search, aided by the nose of a good dog, failed to find any bird.

So far the dog had been unable to get close enough to point a bird, and Jones now thought that after so much shooting the quails would lie more closely, as they did in days of yore. So he went to where the right wing of the main flock should have alighted after first rising. All this side of the hill he beat quite thoroughly, without the dog making any signs of smelling anything. He was about to quit when he heard a distant buzz, and up the hill, from a lot of rocks and brush in the head of a steep gulch, saw three or four quail wind over the top of the ridge. He thought there must be more in that place, and went hastily there. The dog snuffed around in good style and drew finely, but that was all.

Jones then concluded to go over the ridge, thinking the last birds would not fly far. He and the dog bushwacked the whole of the next slope without hearing the buzz of a wing. He then thought he would leave this flock and try to find a larger one on better ground. Just as he turned around to go there was a distant buzz, and away to the right two or three birds were sailing up a hill. Whereupon Jones concluded that the business would have to be learned anew. In which he was most eminently correct, for the valley quail of California has kept better pace with improvements in guns and learned more from his persecutors than any other thing that lives.

Jones decided to try the large two-plumed quail of the mountains. But he soon found the cheap breechloader and the game-butcher had penetrated the deepest shades even there, and that this quail had learned something. He heard no more the tender *Ch—ch—ch—ch—ch—cheeeeah—cheeah* or the silvery *Cloi—cloi—cloi* that used to ring along the morning hills. He found, as with the valley quail, that a dog was more useful than before to find the flock at first, but of

little use after the birds were scattered. When his dog first came to a point in some dense brush through which a whiz of blue went so swiftly that he had no time to look along the barrel of his gun, but, after a quick shot, dimly saw the blue whirl over, he felt proud. Yet he was sadly astray when he thought he was to get many more shots, even as hard as that. Vainly the dog drew among the heavy manzanita on the hill or in the deep masses of ferns and horse-tails in the gulch. The more Jones expected a rise out of the next bush the more he did not see it. Far ahead he could occasionally see a dark speck scud across some opening ahead of the slowly-crawling dog, but not a wing beat the air near enough to shoot at.

Jones then quickened his pace, but found it took much faster traveling than before to keep up with the birds. By the time he had scrambled up hill among the brush fast enough to force a quail into flight, he was so out of breath and in such an awkward position that he could not hit anything even if close enough for certainty. And when he did hit a quail, it was

generally at such a distance that it was not killed instantly, and fluttered so far down the steep hillside before stopping that, by the time he and the dog had found it, it took as much work to find the rest of the flock as at first.

XII.

WILSON'S SNIPE.

FEW birds kindle so quick a fire in the sportsman's bosom as this little rover, whether rising from the meadow at the breaking of spring or heard high in the evening sky when in autumn he arrives from the North. Whether you call him jack-snipe or English snipe or by his real name, Wilson's snipe, he has ever a strange attraction. Much of this is in the defiant manner and seeming consciousness of superiority, qualities which lend so much charm to the valley quail of California. This snipe is just keen enough to require the constant polishing of one's wits and eyes, yet not so wild as to make his capture too difficult. When woodcock, quail, or grouse hide, it is with the hope that you will not discover them: and without a good dog, well trained, you rarely will. But this snipe deliberately awaits your coming. When he squats, he

seems to know you are coming close enough to compel him to rise, and seems to take pleasure in giving you an opportunity to shoot at him. Then he lies just close enough to tempt you, expecting to escape by superior quickness and twisting flight.

As the first game of spring in many places, this bird fills an aching void in many a breast. Do you remember the day the frost first relaxed its grip upon the meadow? Loud howled the wind of March, and scowled the leaden sky, yet you plunged through mud and jumped the foaming ditch as lightly as on a June morning. Not yet had the frog broken the silence left in winter's wake; no liquid note around the old box in the garden where the blue-bird makes his yearly home; no sound from the purple grackles in the bunch of pines upon the hill; no dots upon the sky where the wild duck should be hastening home from the South. Yet here you tramp through a remnant of snow, and there you twist your feet loose from devouring mud, looking happy and expectant. And the dog dashes through cold water and flounders through half-frozen slush, while the chilly wind whistles over

his wet coat ; yet he wags his tail, and looks as if he would not go back to the fire even if you should. Many the acres of dreary dead grass and chilly, sour slop through which you tear and splash your way, with never a sight or sound of life but the dark line and dismal caw of the winter's crow across the sky. Yet on you go, though your fingers are numb ; and on goes the dog, though never was a day more hard upon one.

Suddenly the dog goes more slowly ; you hasten along toward him. Yes, he is actually drawing to a point. And before you are very near him, and before he settles to rigid certainty, a sharp *Scaipe* breaks upon your anxious ear, and from the dead grass some twenty yards ahead of the dog there mounts a bit of gray, seeming almost too small to shoot at. With a quick twist, about the moment you pull the trigger, the gray tacks away on a new line, leaving your shot whizzing along on the old one ; and as you whirl the second barrel around and pull the trigger before he has time to twist again, he is just far enough to ride untouched through one of the openings between the shot that the best gun will leave at this distance.

The snipe seems to know just how to do it, and actually tempts you to another trial. Is anything more ravishing than the way he now plays with you? Rejoicing in the breeze and cleaving the swiftest gale faster than any other thing that lives, the gay wanderer spins up wind for a while, and then darts skyward as if on a visit to the stars. Changing its mind as quickly as the lightning, it darts now on one tack, then on another, when, wheeling in long circling sweep, back it comes like a boomerang. A few more zigzag courses, as if to warn you against being over-confident of its return, then up darts the gray again, with sudden whirl falls into a spiral line and, with sharp bill toward earth, down it comes, pitches around backward, and alights within two hundred yards, perhaps, of the place where you last shot at it. Do you remember how many times you chased that bird around eighty acres of desolate bog before you finally got within reach of him? And do you remember how large you felt when his audacity finally failed and he gyrated into the mud? In the gun-store where you showed that night the first snipe of the season you were the hero of the hour,

and felt more proud of that little bird than many a man does over a moose. Why it is, no man can tell. And how much would he gain if he could?

There are those who say this snipe is comparatively easy to hit when once you have learned the secret of its flight. But who learns it until with the old dog he hunts only in dreams before the fire? Although generally found on open ground, this bird does not confine himself to it, and in any sort of cover he can make it highly interesting for the quickest and surest shots. Do you not remember how, amid the wild rice left by the receding water, you heard the defiant *Scaipe* so hard to locate in time, and caught sight of the gray just as it vanished on a new tack through the tall stalks? That was not so easy to hit, was it? How about the time you poured vain thunder through the cat-tails around the muddy shore from which the snipe had just sprung, and above the edge of the smoke saw the intended victim careering aloft in a direction entirely different from the one on which it started? Did you ever, on the boggy meadow partly covered with brush higher than your head, see this

bird spring from behind a bush just thin enough to give a glimpse of gray, and then twist so quickly that your finger could not resist in time the impulse to pull off the gun on the old line? And what did you think when the next one rose on open ground and in a twinkling whipped behind such a bush, with the flame streaming, as you thought, across its path, yet over the top of the bush it rose triumphant against the blue sky at a rate of speed that left the shot from your second barrel behind it?

The best shooting I have ever seen on this bird was in 1864 on the shores of Senachwine Lake in Illinois. The water was slowly receding after an early autumn rise, leaving along the water's edge a strip some twenty feet wide, in the right stage of moisture to make plenty of worms for this ravenous little feeder, while the grass that followed the falling water made him the best of cover. On the upper edge of this the ground was dry enough for good walking. The numbers of snipe concentrated on that strip, which was several miles long, seem now quite incredible. But there was then only one person in Marshall County who ever shot at them, and he but little.

All game was there valued by the thump it made on striking ground. With no dog and no more labor than in an after-dinner stroll, I have shot snipe on that ground about as fast as I could load the gun and pick up the birds. Waiting for a shot was the last thing that troubled me, for there seemed at times a bird to every square yard, and there were few days for six weeks when a bird would not spring within shot at almost every step I took ahead. Most of them curled around sideways over the water when I was walking down wind, though the ground was so open on the land side that there was little trouble in retrieving those that fell there. But there was no need of walking down wind, for there were enough straight-away shots within easy range. About the only question involved was, like that of duck-shooting, to land the birds where it would not take too long to retrieve them, and let all shots go that would not accomplish this.

Like the woodcock this snipe defies the pot-shooter, while almost all other game-birds at times present the fairest of chances for the rank-est of murder. But on this ground occurred a piece of pot-shooting on these snipe so remark-

able that, incredible as it will seem, I must tell it.

One of my dearest hunting-companions there had long looked with pitying eye on my depravity in shooting so small a bird as Wilson's snipe. But once about mid-day, when ducks were slow in coming and he was tired of smoking, he left me for a while. I soon heard him shoot about a quarter of a mile away, and within the next thirty minutes he shot about a dozen times at the same place. In considerably less than an hour from the time he left he tossed me a bunch of snipe, remarking, with all the coolness imaginable, "I thought I would have to show you how to do it." I was astounded to find twenty-seven snipe in the bunch, and all still warm. There was no one about from whom he could have got them. There were indeed times when one could average a shot a minute with a breech-loader for several minutes. But my friend was using a muzzle-loader. Allowing for instantaneous loading and no missing, how did he pick them up in that time? He sat and smoked long in silence, eyeing me through the smoke and treating the performance as a matter of course for him. I

dared not play the greenhorn by asking. Finally he took pity on me and said:

“Hanged if I didn’t sit down behind a bush and pot ’em all in one spot, sometimes three or four at a shot.”

I went to see the place. There was an opening four or five feet wide, formed by an old low-water road and cattle-paths. This was bare of grass or cover, and ran through the strip of grass along the lake in which the birds were so plenty. Across this opening snipe were trotting in twos, threes, and even fours, as well as singly, and the feathers on the ground told the story. I believe one could have shot snipe there all that afternoon at about the same rate.

Another most singular kind of shooting I once had on this bird was in Mexico. Few parts of the United States ever afford the right conditions for it. Along a line of sloughs with very flat margins the grass was nibbled very close by the hungry cattle, it being winter, the dry time of the year. Over it snipe wild as hawks were trotting, but all out of range. At from sixty to a hundred yards many of them would squat and hide in what little cover the gray grass-stumps

afforded; but when I got within twenty-five or thirty yards they whirled away on high, and after triangulating the skies for a while concluded that the old place was safe enough, and came pitching swiftly down to alight within a few rods, perhaps, of the place where started. They made fine shooting with the shot-gun, but I had with me a rifle of small caliber, shooting a sharp-pointed ball that tore birds no more than shot, and I soon found there was even more fun in shooting them with that than with shot.

One used only to the target might think it an easy matter to hit a snipe at twenty-five or thirty paces. But your target is always at the same distance and in the same position of light. It is also clear and well defined. These snipe made, moreover, the very finest marks at which I ever shot; and so extreme was the accuracy required, I had to clean the rifle with water every few shots. The head of a squirrel in the highest tree, or that of a ruffed grouse motionless in the dark shade of a pine, the faintest shade of gray or brown that ever marked a deer in dense and distant covert, were no finer marks than these little birds at twenty-five yards. Squatting close to the

ground, they showed but half an inch, at best, of faint gray or brown above the neutral tints of the faded grass-stumps. Why they were so wild I could not divine; but it was only by moving very slowly and using the keenest of eyesight, trained from boyhood on game, that the little brown or gray line could be distinguished from the thousand bits of dead wood, scraps of dried manure, dead leaves, and other things of the same color and size. And when the game was located to a certainty, and fancy could make out the long bill lying ahead of the faint line of gray or brown, to distinguish the color through the sights of the rifle and hold them on the center with that exactness that the rifle demands for success on such fine marks called for the fineness of sight and steadiness of nerve that can be kept in order only by constant practice. Any attempt to get close enough for certainty was quite sure to result in a *Scaipe*, and a darting line of gray that no one is fool enough to shoot at with a rifle if he knows anything about it. Yet that very thing made the shooting most delightful; and though I could have got far more game with the shot-gun, I used nothing but the little rifle after the first day.

For abundance of birds with comparative ease in hunting, the boggy meadows of California are now hard to excel. The best shooting, too, is in midwinter, when there is little to hunt in the Eastern States. Much of the ground, especially in the South, is hard enough to drive over with a wagon and walk over with no difficulty, while it is still wet enough to furnish abundant food for this hungry little tramp. Sometimes on the warm still days of midwinter it is one continual *Scaipe, scaipe, scaipe*, on such ground, and a dozen or more of the little gray cruisers are in the air at once. Here one spins away on a line so straight and long that he seems bound for yonder mountain whose snowy top rises in hoary majesty above long lines of fleecy cloud that along its breast look dark by the contrast. Another, after starting for several different quarters of the universe in as many seconds, concludes the climate right here is good enough, and whirls around backward and pitches into the edge of the tall marsh-grass beside the slope where the bluebells are blowing. Another starts off as though he would cross the sea that lies afar in undimpled blue beneath the soft bright sky;

then away he wheels for the broad reach of plain on whose carpet of green rolling in so many shades the little plover is trotting and the wild goose is bathing in the sun; then off he goes for the hills, where the dark green of the manzanita is brightening into new life and the tall shaft of the yucca opening at the top into its great panicle of greenish white. But no, this doesn't suit him, and he whirls away for the lagoon, where the burnished green of the mallard's head is shining, where the white of the canvas-back gleams on the open water, and the little cinnamon teal is drifting along the edges. Here in the dense ranks of the rushes that stand yet green in winter's noon, where the voice of the king-rail rings along the shore and the red wings and yellow throats of hosts of blackbirds flash amid the cat-tails, he will surely alight, for the shores are muddy and there is both food and safety. But no, he rejoices in the storm, and fain would ride again the whirlwind of your fire, and back he comes on a long tack, and with his peculiar corkscrew spiral down he darts out of the blue and settles perhaps right in your course, scarcely a hundred and fifty yards away. Per-

haps also he doesn't, for he has of late learned much about improvements in guns.

Here, too, he is often found on spots of wet ground so small that in the East it would be quite absurd to look for snipe of any kind. Where in some little spring run the watercress darkens the bubbling water with its rank green, and the wild celery, sprawling over the edges, makes the air fragrant with its rich odor, this little roaming beauty may rise when you least expect it. Where on the big plain the rising of some subterranean water has made a little wet spot of a few yards square, the only moisture perhaps in miles, there, among the few tules that rear their arrowy shafts of green, he may be often found; and even thousands of feet above the sea where a green meadow is sunk into the mountain's back, or a spring bog shines near its crest, there, too, this little darling is often found at home.

XIII.

SALT-WATER BIRDS.

TO many the shooting along the shores of inlets from the ocean is even more attractive than that of the uplands, and I must confess that the smell of salt water stirs in me some very delightful recollections. Probably the largest assortment and quantity of "shore birds," or "bay birds" as they are commonly called, are now on the Pacific coast, where they are not yet appreciated as they will be later.

At the mouth of the Colorado River and the adjacent shores of the Gulf of California the waders are more abundant than I have ever seen them elsewhere, and it is doubtful if any part of the United States can now show the quantity and variety there to be seen almost any day in the winter. The shores are long and low, protected from heavy surf by miles of shallow water,

so that almost any flat-bottomed boat can with safety coast miles of this open sea. Over the water rings the clear call of the curlew, and in its shallow edge you may see his buff coat as he wades about and plies his sickle-shaped bill. Beside him, with bill as long, but curved the other way as if meant to feed on manna from Heaven, the avocet in snowy coat and wings of jet stands fat and happy. On almost every square rod of the shore the mottled colors of the willet blend into gray, and beside him plays the same yellow-leg that on the bars of some of the Atlantic streams has stirred such tumult in so many boyish souls. In sober gray the sanderling trots along the mud-flats, and flashes of white and black come from where sandpipers whisk and whirl about as if little time were allowed them to get anywhere. Here a trim bill and gamy tints make the phalarope seem of finer blood than the rest, and there the dowitcher with longer bill, more slender head, and richer colored breast airs himself as if the finest gentleman in the crowd. Among them is an occasional gleam from the bright black and white of the oyster-catcher, whose shorter bill

and stouter body make him seem a bit out of place among the trim figures of his companions. Even the turn-stone seems a trifle lonely for the same reason, though his pure jet and snowy white with slight tinges of reddish brown show the shore bird beyond mistake. Among these the stilt's lithe figure moves with dignity on its long legs, and over them with tender whistle plover whiz until in places every foot of the shore seems alive at the ebbing of the tide. The birds are harder then to reach than at flood-tide, when out on the grassy flats and hugging the dry shores; but to see life as now rarely seen elsewhere, ebb-tide on these flats is the time.

Of birds that love the sounding shore the black brant of the Pacific coast is prince. This is not the sea-brant of the Atlantic coast, but *bernicula nigricans*, an entirely different bird, and the finest and most gamy of American water-fowl. It is found in great abundance on the upper Pacific coast, breeding far in the northern wilds. Those that come far south in winter are very particular. Most all the bays and inlets of the California coast they skip en-

tirely until they reach San Diego Bay. In that and in False Bay three miles north of it they once blackened hundreds of acres of water at a time. Then everything is skipped again for almost two hundred miles, when the Bay of San Quentin is found full of them. This brant migrates only at night and over the sea. It despises the land, and will not even cross a small point unless it is very far around. Occasionally at low tide one may be waddling on the mud-flats, but the vast majority never leave the salt water.

A few years ago these California coast bays were alive with life that made the soft winter days spent upon them with a boat a charming recreation. Singly and in flocks pelicans, both white and gray, flapped heavily by, now in a spiral line plunging into the water, then sitting lazily on the surface a moment to swallow the captured fish, then rising again in air to repeat the performance. With lazy wing large white gulls wheeled around your head; with still slower wing large gray ones lounged in the sunny air, small white ones bustled about, and smaller gray ones displayed still more energy. The merganser and the cormorant

drifted on the smooth water, while divers of all sizes rose and sank or floated in it with only neck or head above the surface. Many were so tame that, standing up in the boat when the water was still, you could see them dart around below and snap little fish with forward or side-wise stroke of the long neck and sharp bill with a dexterity quite incredible in such a resisting force as water. Here, swiftly descending from on high, the snowy tern broke the water with a splash; there fish-ducks and butter-balls skimmed the surface with whistling wing, while teal, mallards, and canvas-backs dotted it far and near. But among them you would look in vain for a black brant, for they are very aristocratic and rarely associate with the common herd of water-fowl. Far out from the shore, however, you could see thousands of dark dots on the bright sheen of the water, some looming above it in a faint mirage, black above and white beneath, and from their direction you might hear a babel that comes from no other living throats. But little would you gain by rowing toward them. Years ago they were far too wary to approach. One had to wait until they began

to fly; and fly they would not until ebbing of the tide.

The decoys well set, ensconced in a good blind along some point, we have not long to wait. At the turning of the tide "bay birds" begin to move. First come the curlew in large flocks, with buff vests and brown coats shining alternately in the sun as they pitch and twist in their flight. With long curved bills they come almost directly toward us, their penetrating call ringing clear and full along the shore. No prettier chance to gather in a few; and there is no danger of disturbing any brant, for they have not begun to fly. Here comes a mob of willet, varying through all shades of gray as changing light plays upon them. And here you may have a cross-fire on a volley of plover from the other direction. And with another barrel you might send whirling into the water a stilt that comes along unsuspecting of danger.

But it is soon time to let all these go, for over the low ridge of sand where the froth of the breakers is tossed against the blue of the sky a long dark line rises. Lengthening, sinking, and shortening, then rising and lengthening again,

the line comes swiftly on, changing fast into a string of black beads. Beside each bead a flickering motion becomes plain, and this soon changes into the rapid beat of dusky wings.

Swiftly the line advances, the scores of birds that compose it growing larger and darker by the instant, yet they ride the warm air as lightly as a flight of arrows. Though a little larger than mallard ducks, the flight of these brant appears less labored by contrast, and their wings seem to quiver with speed instead of beating the air. Soon each bird is a revolving maze of black and white, and then they set their wings and glide smoothly downward, almost grazing the water some twenty yards beyond our decoys, and showing a broad skirt of white below the swarthy breast, and a snowy collar around a long jet-black neck. With a hoarse *Wa—ook, wa—ook, wa—ook, wa—ook* from a score of throats, the flock sweeps past our decoys in even line. Keep perfectly still, for they are too far to shoot and they may return. On they go some fifty yards, when the line lengthens and rises in a long string with black wings and backs glistening in the bright sun.

Several hundred yards they go, when the line swings with wondrous precision, and back it comes, headed directly toward us. Make not a motion, and keep as low as possible, for few birds of their size can sheer off with the speed of these at the slightest suspicion of danger. The ends of the line fold back, and it bears off a bit as it changes into a wedge-shaped mass. For a moment each dark wing fans the air with rapid stroke, then as quickly each is set in rigid curve, the air begins to hiss beneath their descending speed, and they turn themselves upward and set their wings forward to alight. But suddenly a raucous *Wa—ook* bursts from a dozen throats, and in a twinkling the orderly array of descending black turns into a huddle of white and jet as with rapid stroke of wing the whole flock wheels skyward and outward.

Quick they are, but not quite quick enough to escape a quick shot. For as the first barrel of one gun spouts fire over the water, the last bird folds its black wings, droops its dark neck, and down through the soft sunlight it sinks with a splash into the bay. Before the smooth surface breaks beneath its weight a shining whirl of

white and black follows it at the report of a second barrel. A third barrel rings over the bay; another brant halts in its course and sinks with heavily laboring wing nearly to the water, twists sidewise with a jerk as a fourth barrel bellows into the confusion, then seaward it stretches its white-collared, neck and, skimming the water, fades away in a rapid alternation of black and white.

Before the last flock is out of sight another dark line rises over the sand-spit where the surf is grumbling. The brant we first saw in the bay were but a small portion of all that frequent it. Most of them are out at sea during the flow of the tide, feeding in the beds of kelp, and at the ebb they return. Now rising, now lowering, but swift and straight in a long wedge-shaped column, the black ranks come on. Down the center of the bight where our blind is placed they fly until within some four hundred yards, when the head of the column turns a little, and directly toward the decoys the whole mass bends its way. The air sings beneath their stiffening wings, then comes the sharp, rushing sound as the birds set them to alight, then the splash of

water as the lower ones settle among the decoys. As we rise in the blind the whole mass is turned into a laboring turmoil of black and white, with *Wa—ook, wa—ook, wa—ook* clanging from a hundred white-collared throats. Four barrels flame from the blind, and three brant sink with sullen splash. Two more lag behind their fast-retreating comrades, one gradually rising and overtaking them, the other settling lower and lower, until, cleaving a long furrow in the smooth surface of the bay, it floats dead nearly a half-mile away.

Beyond where the curlew are flitting along the wet shore, and the gull is winding his airy way; beyond where the snipe are whisking over the blue waters, and the ever-hungry pelican with heavy plunge is shivering the smooth mirror beneath, our eyes are again fixed in deep expectation. What countless hordes of the nobility of water-fowl have streamed over that sand-spit in the ages gone! And how long before the whole winter shall pass with never a dark-dotted line rising into the blue sky beyond it!

But a soft winnowing of the air behind disturbs our reflections and reminds us it is not

from the sea alone that these birds come. Too late the discovery, for quick as the shying of the swiftest duck is the wheeling of this active little goose. *Wa—ook, wa—ook, wa—ook* resounds from amid the *wiff, wiff, wiff* of sheering pinions, and before the guns can be turned upon them the brant are out of reach. Vainly the fire streams toward them; not a twitch in the black ranks; not a dusky feather parts its hold.

And now the armies of brant are gathering in earnest, for the tide is half out and the time for the grand march come. Thus far we have seen only the skirmish-line. But now they are coming in battalions. Some are in long lines, point foremost, some in wedge-shaped masses, others in crescent lines, others in converging strings. Vainly you seek the motive for this activity. The brant are not feeding, nor on the way to feed. This particular stage of the tide seems no better adapted to wing exercise than any other stage, and yet nearly every brant in the land is in motion. Still, they relax no caution, and unless all is quiet in the blind it is vain to expect a close shot. And the majority of the flocks aim for the decoys, and if not disturbed will

settle among them. Though all the brant now want to fly and seem to have a strange aversion to the water, no sooner do they see the decoys than down they glide toward them—the best illustration of the adage, “One fool makes many.”

And so flock after flock sets its wings and goes hissing down to the decoys in perfect array and swiftly as a swooping hawk, until the first broadside is poured into the swarthy line, and the second into the throbbing whirl of white and black into which the orderly ranks are instantly changed.

None of the winged myriads from the North defy the hunter's fire like this dark wanderer from home. Sometimes two or three birds go splashing below as a broadside opens upon a flock, but more often only one comes down, while another perhaps careens a little and lags behind a few moments, then rights himself and overtakes his comrades or settles slowly into the far-distant water. Here comes a flock so glossy, as the sun shines from their beating wings and white skirts, that they seem within easy reach; yet at the roar of the guns the line merely

lengthens, swerves and rises, and not even a feather comes whiffing down. Here comes another flock so close that we see the dark vests and snowy underclothes pictured in the smooth water between them and us. In abiding confidence we open a full battery upon them, yet the only result is a whirl of white and black, a clamor of hoarse throats, and increased speed in the departing line.

XIV.

THE WILD TURKEY.

To become expert in hunting the wild turkey one must be almost raised upon its range. On nearly all other game one can have some success with limited experience if he be a natural hunter and a good shot, and can keep cool. But these qualities are not enough for success with the turkey. One may indeed catch him napping at long intervals. But this is too unreliable. One may also get a shot by putting one's self absolutely under some backwoods guide who calls the turkey to him. But this is like shooting a moose that an Indian has called to you, or a deer that some guide rows you to in the water. This is doing the dirty work while some one else does the noble part of the business. Something in my nature always made me rebel against pulling the trigger for any one else. It was probably

meanness, but if I could not find game myself I did not want it.

Thus, not being "native, and to the manner born," I never became a genuine turkey-hunter; and, hunting alone, never had the success I have had with other game. But I have felt enough bounding of the pulse in the deep woods to teach me that the noblest of all American game is the turkey.

When in the morning of early spring the roll of the old gobbler breaks upon your ear from the distant timber along the river-bottom or the mountain-side, your sleep is done. The tender *Boo—woo—woo* of the pinnated grouse, the mellow *Bob white* of the quail, or the sweet *Ril—wil—lil* of the upland plover all send their peculiar thrill through your breast, yet they lull you to sleep again. But when the wild gobble of the old bird rings upon your ear from afar, nothing can hold you in bed. Nor need any one tell you it is useless to try to sneak close enough for a shot at him. You are as determined to try it as to run after a deer that has been started.

With keen eye scanning every spot and motion in the woods far ahead, you move with cautious

step, and hope mounting ever higher as the gobbler's defiance sounds nearer. The squirrel, as from tree to tree he flings his graceful form above your path, seems contemptible now; and the raccoon, stretched upon some big limb to catch the first beams of the rising sun, you hardly deem worthy of a glance. Little more does the ruffed grouse attract your attention as he dashes the morning dew from the whitening plum-tree, or the woodcock whirling out from among the strange leaves of the pitcher-plant.

Again he gobbles; yes, it is plainly closer, but still far away: and "far away" in the woods is much longer than in the open. On you sneak where the wild grape is opening its little clusters of flowers; over the fallen log where the woodbine is twining its soft green you step with extra care; and under the spreading dogwood whose pure white involucre cover its leaves like snow, you stop to listen. It suddenly occurs to you that it is some time since the last gobble rang over the tree-tops. All of a sudden the woods seem very lonesome without that gobbling. A vast solitude is about you, which you just begin to realize as the dreadful suspicion creeps to

your soul that the gobbler is himself going to take a hand in the morning's program. The heavy reveille of the big pileated woodpecker on the storm-scarred head of some patriarch of the forest only intensifies this loneliness, and the far-off tinkle of the bell on some settler's cow—the only sound of man that mars the silence of the virgin forest—makes it still more lonely, as the painful truth steals upon you that you are mightily alone.

Late in summer, when the young are almost full grown and you can hunt turkeys with a dog, what a thrill fresh scratchings sent through you, and how you studied the tracks the big birds had left in the moist earth! Fragrance from clusters of purpling fox-grapes made the woods more suggestive of game than ever, and the jar of leaves beneath the spring of the squirrel brought the gun with convulsive jerk half off your shoulder. Do you remember how, down in the edge of the dark timber of the river-bottom where ivy was reddening over the moss-covered stump, and trumpet-vines yellowing over the leaning basswood, everything whispered of—turkey? And what a moment was that when

in the distance you heard a faint *Putt—puttputt*, and the sound of heavy wings in flight, and ran dashing through dense ranks of beggar-ticks and dodging around cat-briers in vain hope of a shot! If you had been still you might have had a shot at one or more of them afterward, but your rush and racket put that out of the question within any reasonable time. Still, you enjoyed it all the same and murmured something about its being better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Which many a one has indorsed.

A great day was that when, after practicing on different kinds of turkey-call, you went out to try them. The wing-bone you found to need too much practice and coolness. It was more easy than the rest to make a false note on, and as you were sure to be nervous at the first trial it was not safe to rely on it. For the same reasons you abandoned trying to call with your throat; and the green leaf and piece of thin rubber in the mouth were equally unsafe. The bit of cow-horn with a wooden plug and a nail in it to be scraped on a whetstone came nearer the requirements of a tyro; but the little wooden box with projecting edge to be scraped on the

stock or barrel of the gun seemed the most convenient, and after a few trials of it you could almost see a whole flock of turkeys marching upon your blind.

The great day came, and you scattered a flock. Little trouble to do that, provided you could find them and did not walk so slowly as to let them run away from you. You made a blind beside a fallen log under the shadow of big gray toadstools, drew over it the yellowing garlands of the bitter-sweet and the reddening branches of the young maple, and sat down to try the call. How nicely it worked, and how steady your nerves! What mighty expectations fired your burning heart! Few days in life like these; few minutes in the day!

It suddenly strikes you that nothing in the turkey line is coming. A gray squirrel descends a big tree but a few feet from you and, with head downwards and tail flirting, speaks his little piece with explosive emphasis, as if ordering you out of his kingdom; but in vain you scan the dim aisles of the forest for the bobbing head of a turkey, and vainly you listen for the plaintive yelp of the old hen. Surely you have not called

too often or too loud. You have been duly warned about that, and you think you have the lesson. Like many another lesson, it is easy until you come to apply it. But you believe you are right, and on you go. The chewink trots around you with mincing tread, scratches up dead leaves, and with sorrowful tone, as if conscious he soon must go, replies with his little two-notes to the piping of the robin, whose shrill treble has such a different tone from the carol of spring. Suddenly there is a faint rustling of dead leaves on the right, and a ruffed grouse comes walking gracefully along, as if all the world were his for the day. Another, and another, and nearly a dozen more but a trifle smaller follow a few yards in front of you. Here one scratches in the leaves; there one mounts another fallen log; here comes another toward you as if he would enter your blind; one stops and preens his feathers, and three or four more flutter into a thorn-apple to see if the fruit is yet ripe. What graceful birds, as they wheel and circle with swelling breasts all mottled with snow and jet alternating with the rich rosewood and mahogany colors of their backs and wings! Two or three at

a shot you could kill if you wished. But you let them all go, for you are after turkeys to-day.

A few more scrapes of the little box emit plaintive yelps, soft and low yet penetrating. They seem right to your ears, and—scarcely dare you believe it, but—something very much like them follows in the distance, too long after for an echo, yet so soon after that it must be in answer to the call. Careful now! The birds are young and not over-sharp, but still you must not grow too confident or you may make a fatal slip. After a proper time you give two or three more careful calls, and your hair almost lifts your hat off as the reply sounds unmistakably nearer. The critical time is at hand when the temptation to call too quickly, too often, too loud, or to make a false note through nervousness, will often overcome one, and *Putt—putt—putt* in the distance is all you will again hear of your game. And you may not have that little satisfaction, but may sit and call to the woods and rills until the inner man begins to rebel.

Soon the reply comes so alarmingly near that it is time to get the gun ready, so that it will not have to be moved after the game comes in

sight, for the slightest flash of light from it, even with no sun shining on it, may make the game vanish before the quickest shot could catch it. And now the utmost caution with the call is needed, for there is little distance to soften your mistakes. Your fingers, too, are trembling: but there is no disgrace about that; for the man who cannot get nervous in the presence of noble game is but a butcher and not a sportsman. Tenderly you scrape the raised edge of the little box against the gun, and get ready to touch the trigger. Soon there is an answer, and your heart beats as never before, for you realize it is so close that it will not be safe to answer it. The dog knows it too, for now he lies still as death beside you. He trembles, and the twitching at his nose shows he would whine with anxiety if he were not too well broken.

Suddenly your straining eyes detect something moving in the edge of the underbrush beyond the little open space in front of your blind, and in a moment more out steps a dark bird that to your startled fancy seems as large as an ostrich. He is not fifty yards away; there is no time to gauge his size, or speculate on his coming closer.

Bang goes the gun, and you almost tear your eyes out breaking from the blind as you hear a beat of heavy wings which is not that of flight. In a moment man, dog, and turkey are tumbling about in a heap, and you have the bird by the neck. Only a young one, small and not over-fat; but still a turkey, as really as if he weighed a ton.

And don't allow your triumph to be marred by the reflection that you might not have called him so easily if he had been a little larger.

The wildest of game is sometimes off guard, and the rankest blockhead may have luck enough to make him think himself a born hunter. It is very seldom that the wild turkey is thus found off watch, but I once caught a full drove of them napping, in a way allowed few mortal men.

It was a little after dawn, in November 1864, when, with several companions, I crossed the Illinois River for a deer-drive in the timbered bluffs on the east side. There were then many miles of heavy timber with scarcely a settler, for plenty of the best prairie lay yet untaken. The first snow of the season had fallen during the night, and lay some two inches deep on the

ground. Mallards and sprig-tails, widgeons, gadwells, and blue-bills, with teal by the thousand, whizzed southward over our heads as we crossed the rope ferry; and dark lines in the zenith headed in the same direction, from which fell the clarion tones of the goose and the reverberating tremolo of the sand-hill crane, told that they too thought it time to be looking up winter quarters. With our old-fashioned muzzle-loaders, loaded with Ely's wire buckshot cartridges,—which could always be relied on to go like a bullet when you wanted them to scatter, and to break at the muzzle when you wanted them to hold together, but which in the long-run were better than loose buckshot,—we were soon upon the bluffs. Nearly all the leaves had fallen except the brown foliage of the white oaks; the woods, though quite open, looked wild, but there was no sign of life except big yellow fox-squirrels and gray squirrels scampering over the ground, dodging around some trunk or hiding in some crotch, while the melancholy jingle of the jay was about the only sign of bird-life.

But before I with one-companion had gone a mile, tracks of the wild turkey began to appear

in great numbers; and as they were then quite plenty here, and as the walking was soft, we stopped talking and slipped along quietly. We had faint hope and no expectation; but as it was on the way to our stands for the deer-drive, we thought we might as well make the best of what faint chance there was. The number of tracks rapidly increased, and it became plain that not a flock but a large drove was feeding ahead of us. We sped along on half tiptoe, with guns ready, and suddenly the silence of the woods was broken as we came to the edge of a little ravine by such a roar of wings as was rarely heard there even in those days, and probably never now in that State. From the bottom of the ravine, not over twenty feet deep and not ten yards distant, thirty or forty full-grown turkeys, each seeming as big as an open umbrella, were in the air at once exactly like a flock of quails, and mounting with a velocity and ease quite incredible to those who have seen only the domestic turkey fly up to roost. Before such a dress parade all other sights of the hills and woods seem ridiculous. I would go farther without a gun to see it once more than to see the biggest moose that ever

Indian called and with the best rifle in hand that ever white man made. The finest buck that ever dashed the snow from the brush as he leaped the big hurdles of a windfall is a "chump show" beside it, and the sheen of those brilliant wings and backs, as seen in memory alone, is far more pleasant after the lapse of thirty years than a wall full of the finest "trophies" that elk or big-horn ever bore. The beamy chestnut and glistening black and bronze, the red of dewlaps and wattles with the dark fringes on the gobbler's breasts, all shone before our rising guns like the splendors of some warrior host in full charge upon us.

My companion was an old hunter, and the best shot in Marshall County. For twenty-two I was as good a brush-shot as old New Jersey generally graduates from her cat-brier swamps, though not as cool and steady under all circumstances as my companion. But then it did not need much skill to take in at least four. The broad tails outspread like huge fans, and the great flapping wings made such big marks it was impossible to miss them with even a pistol; while the buckshot in the wire cages of the cartridges

were surely big enough to kill. Within brickbat-range three grand birds were scattering leaves and snow in the wake of their mighty wings, and so close together that only about an inch of space appeared between them. Unable to resist the temptation to play the pig, I whirled the gun upon this central point and fired, and, without waiting for the rising of the smoke to show the result, turned the other barrel on a big gobbler that was wheeling to my side with his long beard flat against his breast with speed. My companion picked out a single bird for each barrel, and both the first and second barrels of the two guns woke the echoes of the hills together, neither being wasted on the same bird.

Like rockets the rest of the flock towered over the trees or wound among the tops, some spinning away on straight lines, others rising more as if they still wanted us to see them. One great gobbler swayed the head of a trim basswood several feet out of perpendicular as he lit in its top some three hundred yards away, and another brightened with his presence the somber top of a white oak a little farther on. But the rest faded over the distant trees like a beautiful

dream, and the roar of their wings died away like the last strain of some soul-touching song.

“How many dropped?”

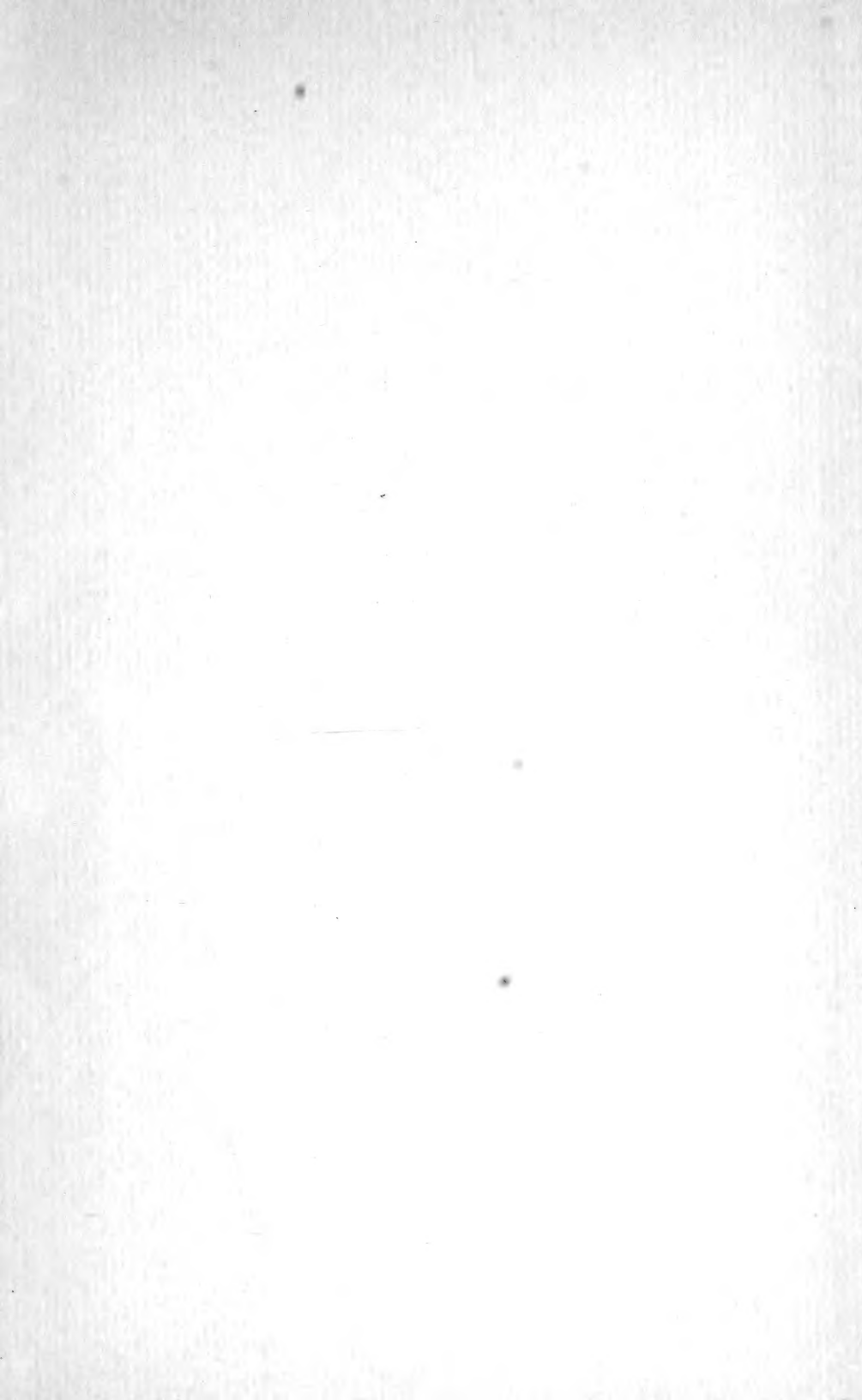
As Prometheus observed to Io,

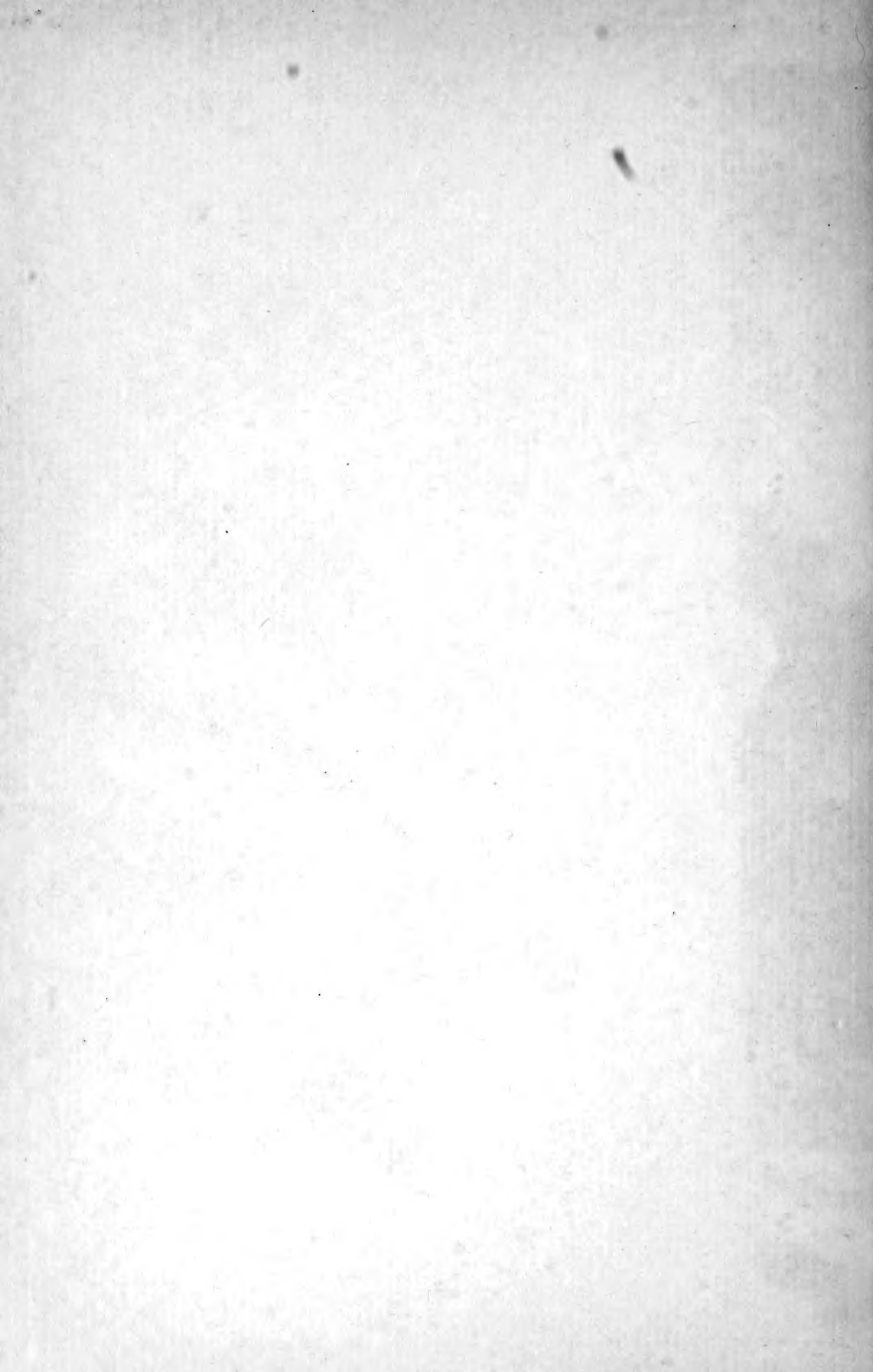
τὸ μὴ μαθεῖν σοι χρεῖσσον ἢ μαθεῖν ταδε.

He was too much of a gentleman to tell her it was none of her business.

THE END.









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