

Williams, J.D.

"Good hunting"

(1916)

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Here snipe and other shore birds of a dozen varieties appear in their appointed seasons.—Page 525.

“GOOD HUNTING”

By Jesse Lynch Williams

ILLUSTRATIONS BY A. B. FROST

AT the delectable old country-seat where I am invited for shooting in November, there are no beaters to drive half-tame birds out of well-planted coverts; no skirmish line of “sportsmen” deployed upon portable stools and appropriately dressed in brave English checks; no obsequious servants to load and hand

us guns; no gallery of women to applaud our skill.

We work for our shots, my host and I and our two congenial friends, the dogs—his idealistic young pointer, my philosophic old setter. We start out at frosty dawn and tramp all day through the russet and red of the autumn woods

and fields, wading across luscious-smelling swamps, breaking through cat-brier thickets which tattoo our legs and would make English tweeds retire in shame to the rag-bag. There are no game carts to bear home the trophies of carnage, no game-keepers—and for that matter there is sometimes but little game.

Yet I wonder if any of my fellow lovers of the most ancient and the most royal of sports is lucky enough to have a better time with a truer sportsman in a more delightful corner of the country than has been my portion almost every season since my host and I were boys together at college shooting clay pigeons on the gun club.

I

EXCEPT to those who kill to live, or live to kill, the game bag can no more gauge the joy of shooting than money-bags the success of life. Indeed, I know sportsmen, good shots at that, who say they find more contentment in the lean bag than in the full one, basing this doctrine not upon the grim philosophy of the Stoics, but upon sound Sybaritic principles of pleasure. More than enough for a feast dulls the fine edge of appreciation in the shooting of game as well as in the eating thereof.

For my part, except when on the Western plains, I've seldom had enough of either! But I agree that to get the keenest zest out of shooting I must not only work but wait for my shots. As a mere matter of skill, it is more of a feat, of course, to execute a right and left on driven pheasants rocketing overhead than to score a double on "straight-away" quail flushed over dogs. But, for one thing, you miss the fun of the dogs. And so do the dogs, God bless them. If the object of shooting in the field is simply to test your skill, why take the trouble to go into the field? You may get muddy and tear your clothes. Why not slaughter live pigeons at the trap and be done with it?

Not that we are of that modern breed of sportsmen who pursue game with the camera. We were trained in the old school. We have not learned to interest ourselves in the introspection of birdies

and bunnies, nor to be thrilled by the left hind footprint of the skunk. We are still so incompletely evolved from savage ancestry as to love the chase more than most of the joys of life—and for this I offer no apology and ask no palliation. I suppose we might try to tell you (and ourselves) that we carry several pounds of steel and lead all day through bush and bog until utterly exhausted, all for the beneficent purpose of bestowing a swift and painless death upon quail and woodcock which in the ordinary course of nature would meet a violent or a lingering end. That is one of the familiar sophistries of sport, and sport is one of civilization's compromises with barbarism. There is still a good deal of the savage left in all of us, including those who will not admit it, and it might crop out in ways more harmful to society, less beneficial to the individual. (It has been known to happen.) Some men, perhaps, do not need a safety-valve in order to remain social. Others do.

But with equal candor I can say that although some seasons bring us "big days" down there on the old place, days of barbaric delight which stand out in recollection like a crimson swastika on a white blanket, yet there have been still other days, failures according to the game book in the hall, which stand out like pure gold against the fading weave of happy memories.

Good shooting, in fine, can help make a good day's sport, but poor shooting cannot mar it, provided time, place, and companionship be perfect. . . . So there may be hope for our descendants!

II

To drain the quintessence of enjoyment from a shooting trip you should time it to come at the end of a long sentence of hard labor. It should loom up ahead of you as something to work for, to live for; a goal toward which you are struggling like a long-distance runner. Then with your holiday comes the voluptuous peace of an athlete breaking training. "Toil that is o'er is sweet," but it is so much sweeter if followed by active indulgence in your favorite form of play than by passive loafing, which kills so many vacations.

And yet more important than all else, I



We carefully work down the length of the hedge, putting up singles and doubles.—Page 524.

think, is the choice of your playmate. How many lifelong friendships have started over guns or the talk of shooting! How many congenial brothers, from all over the world, are discovered by members of the freemasonry of sport! Wherever found, in the smoking-rooms of clubs, steamers, or sleeping-cars, and whatever their station of life—for the true democracy of outdoors is too robust for artificial distinctions—they nearly always turn out to be real people, likable, reliable fellows, the sort instinctively trusted by women, adored by children, and abjectly worshipped by dogs. Their faults may sometimes be those of conviviality or recklessness, but of cupidity or smallness rarely.

My friend Billy and I first met in a cloud of powder smoke. For there were clouds in those days: our youthful cannonading at the traps began before smokeless powder came into general use. And since he first invited me, in Professor Woodrow Wilson's class-room, to shoot quail and ducks with him on a Thanksgiving holiday, two generations of dogs have matured from yapping puppyhood, retired to the dignified leisure of the fire-side, and, alas! have slipped away to the happy hunting-ground. Gawky young saplings have grown into self-centred trees with self-respecting branches. Certain well-remembered scenes of hot fusillades in the past have been changed by

time from "ideal cover" into underbrush too thick to shoot in; while other nooks and corners, once commonplace, are now in their turn acquiring the look of those thrillingly correct backgrounds to A. B. Frost's shooting-pictures.

We've been at it so long, indeed, that we work together as a team as well as any pair of dogs we've ever shot over—better, in some respects, for we aren't jealous of each other's successes, as they often are; we don't try to bluff about our failures, as they have been known to do. And when the day's sport is over and all four of us are taking our well-earned rest by the fire, the dogs sometimes snarl and have to be separated; we, as it happens, have never yet fought—even over politics or religion, though we differ in both sufficiently to make conversation. And so, since time and occupations now allow us to meet but rarely during the rest of the year, the annual oiling up of guns means more than companionable indulgence in our favorite sport. It means the reunion of two old friends who know each other's ways and like them.

As for the place where I enjoy these blessings, doubtless it was not designed originally for a game preserve, but it would be hard to find a better location for one within such easy reach of town. The broad acres, remote from the railroad, inconvenient for poachers, and completely hidden from the highway by several miles of woods, lie tucked away upon a sunny, sequestered neck of land between a small river, in which there are sometimes trout in the spring, and a great bay, in which there are always ducks in the fall. The land is no longer used for farming, and one might suppose it had been laid out expressly for quail, as we in the North incorrectly term the Bob White, known as partridge in the South and recognized as the king of American game-birds in all sections. Each of the many fields is enclosed, not by fences (which are more or less dangerous to climb with a loaded gun, and a nuisance in any case), but by deep borders of trees of ancient planting, like the bauks of English estates. These, locally called "hedges," though that has always seemed to me a frivolous term for such dignified oaks, make perfect cover. When the dogs locate a covey in the open

and we have flushed and shot at the birds on the rise, they scatter, after the manner of quail, for the nearest hedge, but, also after the manner of quail, they seldom fly beyond the first one they come to. So, bidding the dogs keep close, we carefully work down the length of the hedge, putting up singles and doubles. The undergrowth is thick enough to make the birds lie close, and the trees are not too thick for shooting. But you must shoot quick. It makes a good sporting chance.

After a day or two of this our legs give out, for after all ours are only human legs, and we have but two apiece. Of late years we have observed—with amusement, if not with alarm—a growing tendency to take the car when going "down neck" to "Injun Point," "Little Boat Place," "Big Boat Place," or any of the remote portions of the estate. Indeed, as there are usually openings through the hedges, and all of the fields are level and most of them unploughed, we sometimes stay in the car, plunging and bumping about through the long grass, until the dogs strike a scent. Then we jump out, shouting "steady" and "careful," flush the covey and follow where they lead. It is something like the method of shooting quail in the South, only there it is done on horseback. Cross-country riding by motor is, so far as I know, a new sport of our own invention.

When we have had enough quail-shooting, or even before that point is reached, we chain up the dogs, by this time also fagged, and, arising before dawn, set sail by starlight in a "scooter," laden with duck decoys, for one of the low-lying points which the salt meadows thrust like fingers into the bay. There, luxuriously resting at full length upon the soft mud and sedge, with rubber blankets and hip-boots intervening for our comfort, we listen to the soporific breezes in the rushes, or to each other's ideas for correcting the universe—which also, at times, has a soporific effect—until a bunch of broadbill, redhead, or black ducks comes hurtling in over the decoys. Then we neglect the rest of the universe entirely.

That, of course, is just what we are there for—to forget. No other means, as the late President Cleveland used to



Putting out decoys.

Set sail by starlight in a "scooter," laden with duck decoys.—Page 524.

say, is quite so successful for the purpose as shooting. Such is a man's absorption that frequently one of us asks the other, seated scarcely a yard away, "Did you shoot, too?"

A mile of the outer beach across the bay belongs to the estate, and here snipe and other shore birds of a dozen varieties appear in their appointed seasons. In the woods near the house ruffed grouse are found—infrequently enough to be appreciated. And down in the rich black loam of the river banks, under low-lying alders, hides the elusive woodcock, often in considerable numbers, though when to

hunt and where to find that most mysterious and beautiful of all our American birds is usually a different matter. Occasionally even deer are seen in the woods, though no attempt is made to shoot them.

That is a goodly variety of game for a country place within three hours of New York by rail, just a pleasant afternoon's run by motor over roads famous for smoothness. Nor is this place stocked with game, except occasionally in the case of quail, when the winters have been too severe or the foxes and owls too prolific for the coveys to survive.

III

BUT, for my part, an annual pilgrimage to the scene of these delights would be a gratifying privilege, even without the felicity of friendship or the fun of shooting: An ancestral homestead, built half a century or so before the Revolution and occupied by the direct descendants of the builder for at least a part of every year

the land, so the story goes, on a gambling debt from a neighbor whose descendants, as it happens, are neighbors to this day. The latter still have on fading parchment the original grant for the whole tract from the royal William and Mary. "He remained an exile from his estate for seven years," a local historian writes of William the Signer. "The devastations committed on his property were very great." But



In the woods near the house ruffed grouse are found.—Page 525.

since—except when the British occupied it, the family having fled for safety to a neighboring State. The William of that generation (for I suppose he would resent being called Billy as much as his present namesake would object to being called William) was too entirely well known and hated by the English to take any risks for his household, having already taken quite enough for himself by signing the Declaration of Independence and raising a regiment which he was now leading as a general in the field—a grim, determined William, judging from the portrait which hangs in the hall over the sword he fought with and the pen he also risked his life with—in order, I suppose, that his descendant and I might kill quail. . . . Well, William immortalized himself as a patriot, but I'd rather go shooting with Billy.

William was of the fourth generation back from the present, and third down from the original ancestor who acquired

fortunately, although the family silver, so carefully concealed, was never recovered, the old house itself, for it was old at the time of the Revolution, was not destroyed. With an added wing or two, in keeping with the rest, it remains to this day as it was then, a serene and dignified expression of early Colonial simplicity—long and low and lovable, well-proportioned rooms and many of them, low-ceiled, party-raftered, and with twenty-four small panes in each of the many old windows.

Gleaming white against the dark protecting woods to the north, nestling close to the ancestral sod, and caressed by an enormous linden-tree which towers high above the sturdy chimneys, the house smiles upon a wide expanse of velvet lawn, level as a billiard-table and undefiled by flower-beds or bushes. This is bound at a restful distance by a noble oak frame, also of ancestral planting. It is a mile or more to the water, and two vistas have been

cut through the trees to catch the gleam of the silver bay and—beyond the tawny dunes of the outer beach—the crisp blue band of the thrilling sea.

It is a stalwart old house, constructed in days before American builders were given to putting on Georgian airs and graces. The plain clapboard exterior suggests that tranquil disdain of decoration which our best modern architects now display in some of their chaste domestic exteriors—certain of Charles Platt’s, for example—as if quietly aware of being exquisitely correct in line and proportion but aristocratically oblivious to whether you know it or

not. Out of sight, but not many miles down the coast, numerous smart country homes rear their conspicuous heads, each looking just as expensive as it can, or, if it can’t, then self-consciously “artistic.” The summer crowds rushing by on the train to the resorts of fashion would never guess, from the desolate little station bearing its name, the existence of this venerable estate hidden by its thick wall of woods, far removed from the highways infested by screeching motors, meditating on the past in unmolested seclusion.

Up in the garret are rough hide trunks, studded with brass nails, containing flow-



Down in the rich black loam of the river banks hides the elusive woodcock.—Page 525.

ered waistcoats, poke bonnets, mob caps. Under the stout hewn rafters are hand-made chests and home-made casks, gathering dust. In dark corners lie candle-moulds, spoon-moulds, and quaint cushioned saddles—all waiting patiently. . . .

As in other old houses diamond scratchings may be found on some of the old wrinkled window-panes. Now, the general had two beautiful daughters, who were asked in marriage, so the family tradition runs, by two swains who later in the course of human events became Presidents of these United States, but, if I may quote one of his great-great-granddaughters, the humorous annalist of the present generation, "Unmindful of the laments of collateral posterity the daughters rejected them for the superior charms of an army surgeon and a gallant colonel." Perhaps it was one of these belles who, either before or after her great decision, felt impelled to express her views of the world upon the window of her boudoir—"Life is a blank." Whatever may have been the cause, the results were curious, for the diamond slipped upon the glass, the "l" in "blank" became an "e" and the "k" declined to become at all. So "Life is a bean" remains to this day the message the fascinating lady left to collateral posterity and to its numerous house-parties; thus showing that even in the good old times of soft sighs and subtle swoonings, of lace frills and silver snuff-boxes, ironic reality had a mischievous trick of touching high romance with low comedy.

Out in the shadowed garden, recently restored, is the same path once trod by this ennuied lady's dainty slipper when she ventured forth to gather what were then called "posies." Down the lane are the same oaks beneath which the beaux and belles of those days strolled and courted. Young people stroll there still at times; only now they wear linen or duck dresses, and knickerbockers or flannels. And it is highly improbable that their dialogue is adorned with such long and complicated compliments as in those days. Otherwise it is not so vastly different, I fancy—more stately then, less artificial now.

Meanwhile, in any case, the oaks themselves have grown more stately than ever, and the garden path once merely bordered

with box is now completely canopied by it from end to end. . . . So, after all, there are advantages in belonging to the present generation even for purposes of romance and picturesqueness. Older generations cannot enjoy the tone of time which they create for those who follow after. The glamour of their day did not exist for them. A dull, prosaic age they doubtless considered it (witness "Life is a bean") until, peradventure, they took a certain never-to-be-forgotten stroll down the lane or through the box. Then it did not matter. For there are older things than oaks, and more beautiful than gardens.

IV

My first expedition to this entrancing spot had the added delight of a memorable surprise. Though I had occasion later to learn how much he loved it, my shooting pal had told me nothing about his country home except to say that it was "an old farm-house—pretty plain," and to hope that I would not mind! Now, even in those youthful days old houses were a passion with me, and so, at the end of our long, cold drive by night past an Indian reservation and through what seemed an interminable forest, when I found what kind of "an old farm-house" it was, it was love at first sight for me. Here were broad fireplaces built before the nation was founded, with full-length logs blazing cheerily in them; bewildering passages with unexpected steps leading up into one room, down into another; whimsical doors with latches which would not stay latched; antique furniture which had not come from shops; grandfather clocks placed there by grandfathers; and an ancient gun-room with long fowling-pieces left there by previous generations of sportsmen—almost everything, in fact, orthodox old houses ought to have, except, to be truthful at the risk of seeming to be carping, there were no ghosts. Clinging to it all, from cellar to garret, was that wondrous, that delicious odor of antiquity, so suggestive of life and its changes, so eloquent of death which does not change.

As it happened, good shooting in good company over good dogs, combined with bachelor hall in an old country-house,



But, oh, the fun of those early morning starts!—Page 530.

mellow and remote, was a thing I had fondly dreamed and doubtless written about. But it is such a rare joy, even in youth, when life obligingly comes true to fiction. It proved too much for me. Despite the deplorable lack of a ghost, I could not sleep that night.

But for that matter neither did my host, and he had lived there all his life and his ancestors before him. The next morning, when with chattering teeth he came to wake me at chilly dawn, he explained

that he never could sleep the first night before shooting. Well, even to this day, though the years have brought us deeper joys than good hunting and keener sorrows than bad weather, we are usually too excited to sleep much on the eve of shooting. He, it seems, is continually startled by the old horror of not waking until noon and I by the tantalizing nightmare of a shell stuck in my gun while a thousand birds are describing graceful parabolas about my head.



“He’s got ‘em—come up!”—Page 531.

And to this day we still arise at an unearthly hour, like children on Christmas. This, of course, is quite unnecessary, unless we are going out on the bay after ducks, for quail are hard to find in the early hours, before they leave the woods to forage, and we are sure to get soaking wet in the long grass at dewy dawn and to be tired out before sunset in any case.

But, oh, the fun of those early morning starts! The hurried dressing by candlelight; the dark, stark silence of the sen-

tient old house; the startling creak of the stairs, the surprising unconcern of the preoccupied clock in the hall, ticking loudly, tocking deliberately. And then the dazzling light and the welcome roar of the crackling fire in the dining-room; the even more welcome smell of the coffee bubbling on the old black crane; the hurried breakfast devoured with boy-like talk and laughter. And finally, lighting a pipe, “sweetest at dawn,” and taking up our glistening guns, we carefully tiptoe out of the side door—having by this time, to be

sure, thoroughly awakened the rest of the household.

But we're off at last! the long-awaited moment! Across the frosted lawn comes the cool, sweet breath of the woods. Above the clear-cut rim of the sea comes the inquiring sun. And from far out on the bay comes a muffled “thrumpl!”—some one is shooting ducks. We slip shells into our guns. We close the breach with a low clang that is music to our ears and to the dogs'. They are unleashed now, they race like mad across the whitened grass, then back again to us to make sure that it is all true—are we really going shooting together again? We are! We are! They leap and dance and lick our faces. They bark and whine and bump their silly old heads against our gun-barrels. For they too have been waiting and longing for this moment, understanding all the preparations, crying for joy at the sight of faded shooting-coats, springing to their feet at every movement of their gods. . . .

Perhaps we fail to strike the scent in “Great Lot,” in “Ballroom Lot,” or the “Lot Before the Door.” Maybe even “Lucky Lot” fails us, though that used always to be a sure place to find a covey or two, as the name suggests—our own name, which in turn may be handed down and accepted unquestioningly by later generations like the many other local names with no other authority than custom. Possibly we find it necessary to work far out through “Muddy Bars” and beyond “Lun's Orchard” to the sweet-smelling cover among the bayberries down by the water.

The sun is getting high. It is nine o'clock. It seems like noon. Sweaters have become a nuisance. The dogs have lost their first enthusiasm. . . . Then suddenly—it is always when least expected—one of them, ranging casually by a clump of stunted bushes, stops abruptly as if instantaneously petrified. It is a most complete stop. His head was slightly turned to one side; it remains so. His tail is straight out behind. His eyes are

fixed and glassy. His nostrils are twitching.

“He's got 'em—come up!” We both run forward, the shells in our pockets rattling. Thirst and fatigue are forgotten now.

The other dog has seen, heard, and straightway understands. He too comes up, but more cautiously. Watch him putting down one foot at a time gingerly, “backing up” his friend splendidly—until he too winds the birds, crouches suddenly, and stands as if frozen to the spot. It is a beautiful sight. Beyond, the brown fields fall away to the blue water. The dogs are silhouetted against it. There's a white sail out there.

“Be ready—they're lying close.”

Our voices are high and tremulous.

“They'll turn and make for the woods—look out for a cross shot.”

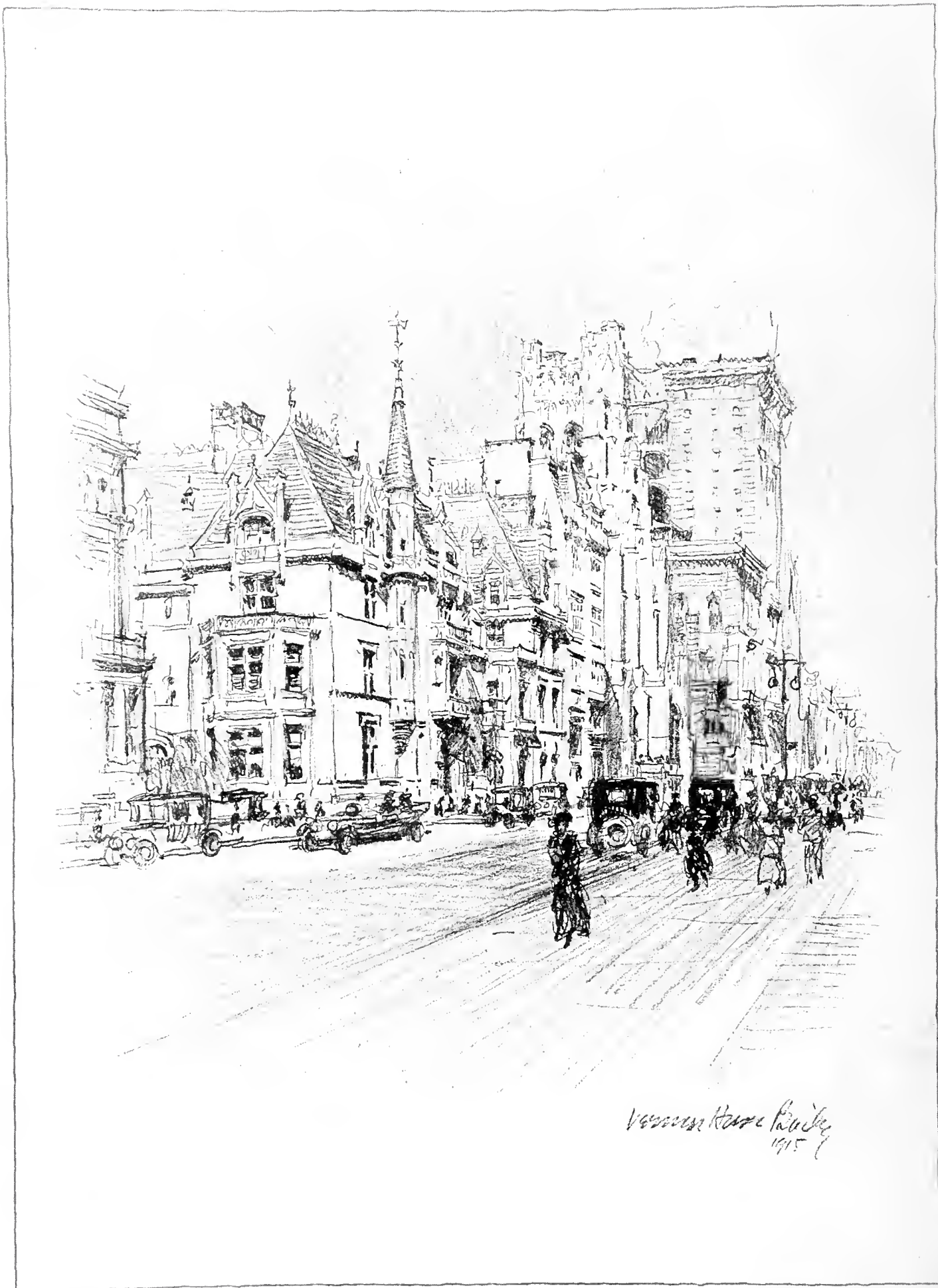
We take a step nearer. Though we cannot see the birds it is now a moral certainty that there is a covey of quail here within a few feet of us. And it is bound to rise in a second or two with a furious whirl of wings which always alarms the novice and frequently confuses even veterans like ourselves. We stand with guns poised, our hearts thumping like trip-hammers. The dogs are trembling, but they are holding the point stanchly.

With no premonitory sound or movement there is a sudden roar, a speckled brown geyser has gushed up out of the grass at our feet, and a dozen quail are in the air at once, scudding at high speed for the woods, while we, remembering or neglecting to “follow through” with our cross shots, empty our guns after them.

V

How many did we bag?

We each scored a right and left, perhaps. Perhaps we both made double misses. Four birds or none, it doesn't matter much. Every care in the world was forgotten for the moment, and we have a picture to remember through the long days in town.



Vanderbilt residences.

St. Thomas's Church. University Club.

Hotel Gotham.

TWO NEW YORK SKETCHES

A bit of Fifth Avenue above 52d Street, harmonious in effect, combining residences and a business building. Just beyond is St. Thomas's Church, the University Club, and Hotel Gotham. This section has the effect of being finished although New York is constantly changing in appearance.

Gaylord Bros.

Makers

Syracuse, N. Y

PAT. JAN. 21, 1908

