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THE BOY DUCK HUNTERS



"THAD WAS STANDING DIRECTLY IN FRONT OF THE OPENING, WHEN
A HUGE WILDCAT SPRANG OUT OF THE CAVE STRAIGHT AT
HIM."

THE
BOY DUCK HUNTERS

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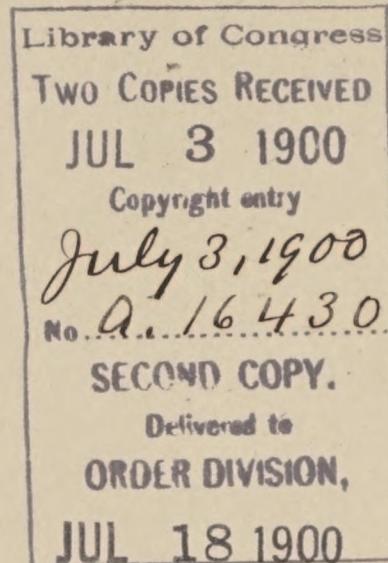
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THE BOY DUCK HUNTERS.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST HUNT.

“DICK, let’s go hunting all by ourselves. What do you say?”

Dick Kingston looked up from his work on a small wagon, one of the wheels of which refused to “track,” and gazed at his brother in amazement.

“Why, Thad Kingston, are you crazy? You know mamma wouldn’t let us go unless papa was here to go with us. Goodness knows I wish she would, though,” he added, gazing wistfully over the Mississippi bottoms at the circling wild fowl.

“How do you know she wouldn’t? Let’s ask her, anyhow,” said Thad, eagerly. “I believe she will. You know papa said the other day that I was getting about old enough to handle a gun. Here I am past twelve and never hunted alone. It is ridiculous,” and Thad straightened up with an injured and important look.

“All right, come on,” cried Dick, and away they raced for the house.

“Mamma, may we go hunting?” they both shouted in one

breath, bursting in the door where Mrs. Kingston sat sewing in the cosy sitting room overlooking the Mississippi and adjoining bottoms.

Their mother looked up quickly from her work at the two boys, as they stood confronting her with sparkling eyes and flushed cheeks.

"Why, children, the idea of you little chaps going hunting without papa. What can you be thinking of? You might shoot yourselves."

"No, we won't, either," said Thad, stoutly. "I know how to handle a gun, 'cause papa said so, and I'll be just as careful as I can be and not point it toward Dick once. Do let us go, there's a good mamma," he added, coaxingly.

"You little wheedlers, what will I do with you?" said Mrs. Kingston, laughing.

"Oh, Thad, come here quick and see this big flock," Dick cried from the window.

Thad ran to his brother's side just in time to catch a last glimpse of a large flock of mallards as they sailed down a gentle incline into a rice pond.

He stood at the window a moment feasting his eyes upon the entrancing sight of the circling wild fowl, his boyish blood aflame with thoughts of what he might do if among them; then, walking over to where his mother sat, said, in a frank, manly way:

"Mamma, if you will let Dick and me go, I will promise to be very careful with the gun, and we will come back before sundown."

Kissing him affectionately, his mother said: "Well, Thad, I have a mind to let you go, although I am afraid papa would not approve of it if he were here. Be very careful and don't let Dick carry the gun; he isn't big enough," she said,

glancing over to the window where the younger boy stood watching the ducks.

"Mamma Kingston, I wish to inform you that I am ten years of age and perfectly able to take care of myself and Thad also, if necessary," said Dick, with mock gravity, giving his mother a hug by way of emphasis.

"There, don't pull my hair all down; get ready and go so you can get home early," laughed his mother. "It is after one o'clock now. I will help you to get ready."

The boys needed no second invitation, and in a twinkling Thad was in the bedroom and came out with his father's muzzle-loader in one hand, and shot-belt and powder-flask in the other.

"Here is fine shot on one side for snipe and coarse shot on the other for ducks," he announced, feeling the pellets through the soft brown leather with the air of an old hunter.

"Oh, shucks, you couldn't hit a jack-snipe in a week unless yon saw one sitting," said Dick, disdainfully.

"I couldn't, eh? I will just show you before we come back what I can do."

Little Dick dreamed how Thad would show what he could do before they returned.

"Mamma, do you know where papa keeps the wads?" inquired Thad, looking in vain for the useful articles.

"They are in the upper right-hand bureau drawer," was the answer from another room.

"Yes, here they are," said Dick, after turning the contents of the drawer bottom side up, boy-like.

Here Mrs. Kingston entered the room with a couple of half-worn but serviceable coats of a neutral colour, which the boys donned; then exchanging their shoes for short, stout rubber boots, and stuffing the wads into their coat pockets, were ready.

"I wish papa was here to go with you," said Mrs. Kingston, as she watched the preparations, half-regretfully.

Mr. Kingston was travelling salesman for a large farm machinery house, and most of his time was necessarily spent upon the road, but every spare moment found him at home with his family on the bluff overlooking the Mississippi River and adjoining bottom lands, where he was either afield with dog and gun or helping Thad and Dick in some boyish project.

He was an ardent sportsman, and wild fowl and jack-snipe had always been his especial delight.

"Call Jack and come on," cried Thad.

Dick went to the door and whistled.

In an instant Jack came bounding toward them, when, catching sight of the gun in Thad's hands, he nearly went wild with joy.

How he did dance and caper around them, wagging his tail, sniffing at the gun, uttering short barks and otherwise giving vent to his delight.

He was a cross from an English setter and a water spaniel, an excellent retriever, and possessed very much more than the ordinary canine intelligence. As Mr. Kingston often remarked, "He knew more than some men."

"Guess I'll load with snipe-shot first," said Thad. "We may run across some jack-snipe before we get to the ducks."

"Be sure and load right, now," said Dick, anxiously, watching with keen interest Thad pour in the powder.

"Oh, I know how. I've watched papa load," said Thad, confidently, as he pushed down the powder wads.

"You want to ram the powder good and hard. You know Tom Lacy said at school that he heard a man say once to ram the powder till the ramrod bounced out of the barrel,"

said Dick, shifting about restlessly, with one eye toward the bottoms.

Thad rammed away vigorously a few moments, and said, as he withdrew the ramrod, "There, I know that is rammed enough."

"But you haven't made the ramrod bounce out yet," said Dick, in alarm.

"I don't care if I haven't, papa don't load that way," said Thad, resolutely, as he poured in the shot.

Thad's remark spiked Dick's guns effectually, as both boys believed that papa did everything right; so Dick held his peace.

"Come on now," said Thad, as he capped the gun and marched off.

Making their way out on the bottoms they were soon skirting the margin of a low, marshy swale, when "scaipe, scaipe," a jack-snipe sprang up almost under Thad's feet, and went dodging, twisting, and corkscrewing away over the meadow.

His flight was so sudden and swift that Thad forgot to shoot until he was out of range.

Inwardly resolving to be ready next time, Thad held the gun cocked in front of him. But a few steps had been traversed when "scaipe, scaipe," went two more within easy range.

Had there been but one, it would have probably heard the report of the gun. As it was, each looked more tempting than the other, and the consequences were, before Thad could decide at which one to shoot, they were both far away.

"What's the matter, Thad, are you asleep?" cried Dick.

"No, I'm not asleep, but I can't hit chain lightning when it is in six different places at once," returned Thad, tartly.

At that moment another snipe flapped from the swale and took a straightaway course from the boys.

Thad's gun sprang to his shoulder instantly, and a sharp report followed a second later.

It was hardly more than a snap-shot, but luckily the charge of shot struck the bird, and it dropped dead.

"Go fetch, Jack."

In an instant Jack was standing over the dead snipe, and, picking it up tenderly, he soon laid it at the boys' feet.

"Well, you can hit a jack-snipe, can't you?" said Dick, in great glee, picking up the snipe and looking at it admiringly.

"Of course I can if they will only give me a show, instead of trying to turn back somersaults the way those other fellows did," replied Thad, proceeding to reload.

A few steps farther and up went another snipe. Bang went the gun, but Thad found that snap-shots did not always count, for the fleet-winged bird kept on its course unharmed.

"Let's go after ducks and let the snipe go," said Dick.

"I'm agreed, ducks are bigger and must be easier to hit. Where will we go?"

"I think we had best try the little round pond that papa goes to so much," Dick answered.

"All right; look, there goes a flock in there now."

The pond spoken of was a small one of a few acres in extent, fringed with wild rice, and a favourite feeding-ground for mallards and teal.

As the boys drew near the pond, they crouched low and stole along softly, to get as near as possible to the feeding birds. As they threaded their way through the grasses and rushes, a chorus of frightened quacks greeted their ears, and the ducks sprang up in all directions. The nearest ones were

within easy range, but the great number bewildered Thad, and before he could single out a bird to shoot at they were well out of range. He finally fired out of sheer desperation, but they were too far away for the charge to be effective, had his aim been correct.

"Don't get rattled, Thad. My, see the ducks, ain't there lots of 'em?"

"Get down, here comes a flock," replied Thad, as half a dozen mallards came sailing in from the bottoms. Making a half circle of the pond, they wheeled, came straight for the boys, and when within twenty-five yards checked their flight, and, extending their yellow feet, hovered over the water a moment before alighting.

Thad could stand the strain no longer, and, throwing the gun to his face, pointed it at the bunch of fluttering wings.

Unluckily, a wayward rush lay across the gun-barrels on a line with the sight, and before he could brush it aside the ducks had caught sight of him and sprang several feet into the air, so that the charge of shot that followed an instant later, passed under them.

"Keep down, here comes more."

Thad almost unconsciously stopped trying to reload, and crouched down in the rushes just as a dozen mallards fluttered above the water a few yards away.

"Oh, dear, look at that mess of ducks, and the gun isn't loaded," said Thad, despairingly, as he gazed helplessly at the big bunch of handsome birds, so near and yet so far.

"That's too bad, ain't it? just our luck," said Dick, in disgust.

The ducks caught a glimpse of the boys, and sprang away out of range.

"I'll just load one barrel at a time, then maybe I can be

ready in time for the next flock," said Thad, as a happy thought struck him.

"Any way to keep a load in the gun," said Dick, impatiently.

Thad loaded as rapidly as possible, and had just placed the cap upon the nipple when four mallards came drifting back from the bottoms anxious to resume their interrupted dinner.

They evidently had a rice claim a few yards from the boys, as they stopped there and hovered over the water a moment as though they wished to be sure it was their claim.

It seemed to Thad, as he looked along the barrel at the closely bunched ducks, that he must kill all of them, and with an inward prayer for good luck this time, he pressed the trigger.

But alas for human hopes!

The clear, tiny crack of the cap echoed over the pond. Only this and nothing more.

The frightened ducks rapidly climbed out of danger, and vanished, probably congratulating themselves upon their narrow escape.

Thad looked at Dick.

Dick looked at Thad.

"What in the world is the matter? why didn't the gun go off?" asked the former.

"I don't know what is the matter with the old gun. I loaded it right, I am sure," replied Thad, greatly perplexed.

"Which barrel did you load?"

"The right, and, by George! I capped the left," said Thad, in disgust, as the truth dawned upon him.

"There is another chance gone," said Dick, mournfully.

"I won't make that mistake again. I'll load both barrels

after this if it takes a week," said Thad, decisively, as he poured out the powder.

"Keep still, here comes two," said Dick, in a whisper, ten minutes later as a pair of mallards came across the bottoms and in another instant were hovering with bowed wings over the water.

As Thad looked along the sights, he saw the big green head and chestnut breast of the drake. Pressing the trigger, a sharp report followed, and the drake, struck fairly with the charge, fell with a splash in the water.

"Go get it, Jack."

Jack bounded forward, and with a few vigorous strokes had the duck in his mouth.

"Gee whiz, ain't he a big one?" said Dick, joyfully, as Jack, his big brown eyes glistening with delight, laid the mallard at their feet, and gave himself a few vigorous shakes to extract the moisture from his shaggy hide.

The boys had not long to wait for another shot.

The original flock, routed out upon their arrival, began returning in pairs, bunches, and singles.

Thad pointed the gun at a pair in front of him, but just as he was about to pull the trigger a bunch crossed between them.

They looked so much more tempting that he let the first pair go and swung the gun toward the last flock. Just then four more dropped into the water within fifty feet of him.

The sight of these was irresistible, and again the direction of the gun was changed to bear upon the ducks sitting on the water.

Their watchful eyes discovered the young hunters before Thad had time to catch aim, and with quacks of affright they sprang into the air.

Making a hasty snap-shot, he got the usual result of young or inexperienced hunters. The ducks were still rising, and the charge of shot passed below them.

"What do you suppose is the reason you don't hit 'em?" inquired Dick, tying a bow-knot in a couple of rushes.

"It must be because I don't shoot where they are," replied Thad, who was just enough vexed by his failure to kill ducks to make a tart reply.

"Oh, is that the reason? I thought it was because you capped the wrong barrel," said Dick, sarcastically.

The wild fowl came dropping in from other lakes, and soon were circling, recrossing, dropping into the water, again springing into the air, to escape from some imaginary foe, until poor Thad was hopelessly bewildered.

"Oh, look here; shoot at these; no, shoot at those over there just lighting; hold on a minute, wait for this flock to light," and Dick squirmed about like a young eel.

"Keep still, wait a moment, till this flock gets close enough. Goodness! isn't there lots of them? There they go. Why don't you shoot at some of them? They are so thick you can't miss."

Thad would pick out some particularly tempting shot, but before he could shoot others would come between. The gun would be pointed in their direction, and another flock would cross and disturb his aim, until the gun was wabbling in half a dozen directions. When he did shoot, it was between two ducks, owing to the uncertainty of his mind.

Thad did not know he was having the same experience older hunters pass through in their boyhood days, if they ever have the good fortune to be in the midst of a heavy flight of wild fowl, before their nerves have steadied down and grown accustomed to almost anything. The flight ceased before

Thad obtained another shot, and for some time no ducks came near the pond.

The boys soon lapsed into the listless, lazy mood that is the cause of so much apparent ill luck among unsophisticated wild fowl shooters, and, instead of being constantly on the alert with eyes and ears, they were gazing abstractedly at the purple haze veiling the horizon in the far distance.

Something caused Dick to look over his shoulder, and there, but little over a gun-shot away, and bearing down upon them like a troop of cavalry, came a fine flock of mallards.

Instantly Dick's right arm, headed by his index finger, shot out toward the oncoming fowl, and, in a shrill, keen voice, he almost shrieked : "Oh, look a'here coming ! Get down ! Get down quick !"

His impromptu yell was supplemented by a frantic dive into the rushes, where he lay, still as a mouse, waiting expectantly to hear the report of the gun.

Of course the wary ducks acknowledged the kindly warning instantly, and, mounting to a higher altitude, swept gracefully away across the bottoms to more congenial feeding-grounds.

Dick remained perfectly motionless for what seemed to him an eternity of time, his youthful fancy conjuring up the number of falling, splashing ducks that would drop from the flock when Thad fired. Four, he decided, would be a fair number if Thad only fired one barrel, and six, if he fired both. Then he fell to wondering why he didn't hear the report of the gun.

Finally he whispered, cautiously :

"Ain't they near enough ?"

"Ain't *what* near enough ?" asked Thad, who was standing upright looking at the scenery.

"That flock of ducks," replied Dick, looking up in surprise.

"I don't see any ducks," said Thad, casually.

This remark caused Dick to straighten up like a bent sapling.

"Where did they go to?" he asked, in amazement.

"Do you mean the flock you scared the life out of when you tumbled into the rushes?"

"I didn't scare them. I just said, 'See the ducks,' and squatted down."

"I should say you did. The yell you let out of you drove all the ducks off the bottoms; even the muskrats have left the pond, and nearly broke their necks running across the bottoms, trying to get away. You must have mashed down a quarter of an acre of rushes when you performed that famous 'squat' act. Even Jack here has been laughing at the way you tore around. Haven't you, Jack?"

Jack tapped the ground lightly two or three times with his tail, in reply, and quietly opened one brown eye, without lifting his nose from his paws, and gazed up at the boys as though trying to repress a smile.

"Oh, pshaw, I don't believe I made much noise," said Dick, laughing at Thad's extravagant remarks, in spite of the chagrin he felt.

"You made racket enough to send that flock clear across the Mississippi," said Thad, impressively, looking vainly for more ducks.

They seemed to have deserted the pond, but finally a flock dropped in, and alighted near the upper end, out of gun-shot.

The boys waited awhile, and then Thad said, "Dick, suppose you go above them and see if they won't fly down this way. Maybe I will get a shot."

"All right," replied Dick, and away he went.

Thad squatted down in the rushes, so the ducks would not see him when they arose, Jack standing patiently beside him.

They waited some time, and Thad was mentally wondering why Dick did not frighten the ducks, when he heard a shrill scream from the direction he had gone.

Thad knew from the tone that it was a scream of terror, and that Dick was in danger.

Ducks were forgotten in an instant, and, springing to his feet, he looked eagerly in the direction from whence the scream had come.

The rushes were too high for him to see, and he at once dashed out on the open meadow, followed by Jack.

Just as the edge of the rushes was reached, another cry from Dick came to his ears, and, looking toward him, he saw a sight that chilled his young blood.

A monstrous eagle was just visible above the rushes, trying to lift something in its talons.

Thad took in the situation at a glance.

An eagle had pounced upon Dick in the rushes, and was doing its best to carry him away.

Many children of Thad's age would have fled and left the boy to his fate, but Thad was made of sterner stuff.

Without hesitating an instant he ran toward his brother, crying, "Fight him, Dick, we are coming."

The noble dog seemed to know his young master was in danger, and bounded toward him with hoarse growls, his hair bristling all over.

Ere Thad was half-way there, Jack reached the scene of conflict and sprang at the huge bird.

The eagle, releasing its hold on Dick, struck the dog a terrific blow with one of its mighty wings.

With a yelp of pain Jack dropped to the ground, half

stunned, and before he could return to the charge the strong, sharp beak darted out with the force of a pick, and struck Jack squarely in the right eye. Quick as a flash the blow was repeated on the other eye, and poor Jack lay writhing on the ground with both eyes torn from their sockets.

The eagle lifted its great body in the air, and started to again attack Dick, when Thad came running up, yelling like an Indian to attract the bird's attention from his victim.

At sight of Thad and the gun, the eagle seemed to think that discretion was the better part of valour, and slowly and sullenly winged its way across the meadow.

"Shoot him, Thad ; he has killed Jack," sobbed Dick, who was nearly paralysed with fright.

Levelling his gun at the slowly rising bird, Thad blazed away.

His nerves were badly unstrung from running and shouting, but, fortunately, part of the charge struck the eagle, breaking one of its wings, and it dropped to the ground.

In an instant it was on its feet and came walking toward the boys, its eyes glaring vengeance.

But Thad's fighting blood was up also. He walked straight toward his adversary until not more than ten yards separated them, and Dick feared he was going to fight it hand to hand ; but Thad had no such intention. The terrible bird had done damage enough without giving it another chance, and levelling his gun at the eagle's head, he fired.

The charge from the strong shooting gun struck the bird fairly, and the great head with its glaring eyes was nearly torn from the body.

When he saw the bird was dead, and could do no further damage, Thad hastened back to where Dick was crying over Jack.

"Are you hurt much, Dick?" he asked, anxiously.

"I don't know, I guess not," sobbed Dick, who was thinking more of Jack's injuries than of his own.

"Let's look," suggested Thad.

The boy's clothing was badly torn, and upon both sides, where the eagle had sunk its sharp talons, several crimson marks were plainly visible; otherwise, excepting the shock to his nerves, Dick was unhurt.

Thad then turned his attention to Jack. The poor faithful fellow was just breathing his last.

The powerful beak had mercifully penetrated the brain, and instead of living, a sightless wreck, Jack's sufferings were soon over.

The boys stood with overflowing eyes until Jack was dead.

No word was spoken, speech was a mockery, in the face of their great grief.

As Dick watched the unfortunate animal's death-struggles, and thought how it was all for his sake, he laid his head upon Thad's shoulder, and sobbed as though his heart would break.

At length, when it was all over, Thad said, in a low voice, as he wiped the moisture from his eyes, "Come, we must go home and tell mamma."

"And leave Jack here?" said Dick, his tears breaking out afresh.

"We will come back and get him," replied Thad, a great sob rising in his throat.

A sorrowful, downcast pair of boys wended their way over the Mississippi bottoms that pleasant, hazy October afternoon.

Circling wild fowl and darting jack-snipe were alike unheeded, and the big mallard carried by Dick afforded little solace for the loss of Jack.

As the boys ascended the bluff and stepped upon the porch of their home, the door opened, and Mr. Kingston came out to meet them.

Giving each a hearty grip of the hand, he said, jokingly :

"Well, boys, I see you have become full-fledged duck hunters while I have been away."

"Yes, sir," replied Thad, with a faint attempt at a smile.

Mr. Kingston noticed their look of deep dejection, and said :

"What is the matter, boys. You look as if you had been to a funeral."

"We have," replied Thad, in a voice so mournful and pathetic that his father opened his eyes and said, quickly :

"What is that? What do you mean? Whose funeral? Where is Jack?"

"Oh, papa, Jack is dead. An eagle killed him," replied Dick, his eyes filling with tears.

"An eagle killed Jack! How did that happen?" said Mr. Kingston, in astonishment, turning to Thad.

"We were in the rushes at the little round pond," said Thad, his lip twitching, "and Dick went above to scare up some ducks. After awhile I heard him scream, and I ran out on the bottoms and saw a big eagle trying to lift him out of the rushes and fly away with him.

"Jack seemed to know what the matter was, and we both ran as fast as we could to help Dick; but Jack got there first and jumped at the eagle, and the eagle let go of Dick and went at Jack, and struck him in both eyes with its beak, and tore his eyes out; then I came up and shot the eagle, and Jack only lived a few minutes."

Mrs. Kingston had come out upon the porch, and stood listening to Thad's recital of their adventure. Womanlike, she was crying softly, and when he had concluded she said :



"THE EAGLE LIFTED ITS GREAT BODY IN THE AIR, AND STARTED
TO AGAIN ATTACK DICK."



"Dear me! and I am to blame for all this. I should not have let the boys go. Come here, Dick, and let me see how badly you are hurt."

"Don't cry, mamma," said Dick, putting his chubby arm around his mother, and trying to look cheerful, "Jack did not suffer long, and I am all right, except a few scratches."

"You and Jack behaved splendidly in the emergency, Thad, and I am proud of you both. If only poor Jack had escaped; but it might have been much worse. We can spare Jack, faithful and true as he was, better than we can Dick. Such a thing will not happen again in a lifetime, perhaps, as eagles are rarely known to attack human beings. This one evidently saw Dick in the rushes, while soaring overheard, and took him for some small animal."

"Did you ever know before of eagles attacking boys?" asked Thad.

"Yes, I have read of it, but was always slow to believe it. Now, however, we know it to be true. You and Dick go in the house and change your clothes, and I will drive down and get Jack's body. We must give him decent burial."

Mr. Kingston hitched up "Uncle John," the family horse, to the light wagon, and drove down the bluff on his mournful quest. In half an hour he returned, and poor Jack, or all that was left of him, was tenderly laid in the back yard.

The following day a grave was dug beneath the spreading branches of a big apple-tree, where Jack was wont to lie on the long, pleasant summer days. A neat pine coffin was made, and the body of the faithful dog consigned to its last resting-place.

To the little band of mourners, it mattered not that Jack was only a dog. To them, especially under the circumstances, their four-footed friend was the embodiment of all

that was faithful and loving, and many times, when the drifting snow piled high above the humble grave, Dick sat by the window overlooking the bottoms, watching the whirling snow-flakes and listening to the tempest's roar, thinking of his brown-eyed Jack and the pleasant hours they had spent together.

For Jack had come to him when a little bright-eyed, mischief-loving puppy,—in the days when he used to carry off and hide Dick's shoes, hat, and every thing else he could lift, and then look unconcernedly innocent when reproached with the theft.

These memories came thronging vividly back to Dick, now that his playmate was dead, and caused him to feel the loss all the more keenly.

CHAPTER II.

TRAPPING.

THE boys did not ask to go shooting again that fall.

Had their first attempt not met with such disastrous consequences, both would have besieged their mother daily for permission to go again, but the tragic death of their four-footed playmate threw a wet blanket over their youthful enthusiasm for a time, and they were content to watch the flight of wild fowl go down the Mississippi, on whistling wing, from their home on the bluff.

Almost before they knew it, the fall, with its storms and sunshine, had glided by. Sharp frosts and biting north winds filled the Mississippi with drifting ice, which a cold snap solidified, and by December the big river was locked fast in the cold embrace of winter.

One bright, crisp morning in December the boys were nosing about a part of the woodshed that was used as a receptacle for odds and ends, looking for some mislaid article, when Dick, reaching down in an old barrel, came up with an old rusty steel trap and chain.

“What is that?” he asked.

“Don’t you know what that is, goosey? It’s a steel trap,” replied Thad, taking it from Dick’s hand.

“How would I know? I never saw one before,” said Dick, diving down in the barrel again.

“Here’s another.”

"See how many there are," said Thad.

Dick kept making journeys to the bottom of the barrel, until he had fished up six traps.

"I wonder whose they are, and how they came here," mused Thad. "Go and see if mamma knows anything about them."

Dick soon returned with the information that their mother knew nothing about them.

"Are these the kind of traps they catch muskrats with, do you suppose?" inquired Dick.

"Yes, they must be," said Thad.

"Are you strong enough to set one?" asked Dick, trying in vain to bend the spring with his hand.

"Course I am, but that ain't the way," replied Thad, contemptuously, taking the trap. "Here is the way." And he set the trap on the floor, and, placing his heel on the spring, bent it down until the jaws dropped apart. Then placing his finger under the jaw, he lifted the pan until the trigger caught in the notch.

"Who showed you how?" asked Dick, admiringly.

"Oh, shucks, I've known how a long time," replied Thad, indifferently.

"Yes, you have, an awful long time," remarked Dick, sarcastically.

"I have, too," replied Thad, indignantly. "Will Daly showed me how last fall once when I was over to his house."

"That is a great while. Nearly two months" — with quiet sarcasm.

"And he told me how they set traps for muskrats, too," said Thad, hurrying over that part of his education, now that Dick had cornered him as to the time.

"How did he know?" asked Dick.

"An old trapper told him over a year ago. There is a slide on every house, and you set the trap on the slide. They're easy; anybody can catch them."

"Ain't there muskrats in those houses down on the bottoms?" inquired Dick.

"Of course, muskrats in every house."

"Why couldn't *we* catch some, now we have the traps?" asked Dick.

Thad looked at Dick a moment and then slapped his leg, joyously.

"Of course we can. Like a simpleton, I never thought of it. Your head is long as a flour barrel, Dick. I know how to set the traps, and we'll catch a lot of muskrats and make some money." And Thad chattered away, sorting over the traps with a radiant face.

"Maybe we can make money enough to buy me a gun," said Dick, eagerly, entering into the idea of the sport with keen ardour.

"When had we better set them?" said Thad.

"To-day is Friday, and we can get out of school early. Why not set them this afternoon?" said Dick, who was impatient to be making money toward buying a gun.

"And papa will be home to-morrow, and maybe he can show us how to skin them. Just what we'll do," nodded Thad, approvingly.

"Come on, its school-time."

The boys were home by half-past three, and lost no time in gathering up their new-found traps, and starting for the bottoms.

Thad stopped at the house long enough to inform his mother what they were going to do, and they were off down the bluff.

"We want six sticks, one for each trap," remarked Thad, taking out his jack-knife.

"What are the sticks for?" asked Dick.

"To keep the muskrats from carrying off the traps, of course," said Thad, cutting off a small limb.

"What do the muskrats want to carry off the traps for? what do they want of them?" inquired Dick, innocently.

"Well, if you ain't the thickest-headed boy I ever saw. If you would stop and think a minute, you wouldn't ask such a fool question," replied Thad, in disgust, trimming off the branches as he walked along.

"When the muskrat gets caught by the leg, it hurts, and he tries to get away, and if the trap ain't fastened he carries it off."

"Oh, I see. I didn't think about it hurting," observed Dick.

"Where are you going to set them?" he asked, a moment later, as they trudged along.

"It don't make any difference where. This end of this long lake, right here, that papa calls Willow Lake, is the nearest," replied Thad, heading for that sheet of water.

"What if there ain't any slides on the houses, what will you do then?" inquired Dick, as they stepped on the ice at the north end, within a short distance of several big rat houses.

This was a poser for Thad, as the only information he possessed about trapping muskrats was to set the traps on the slides. So he made no reply, but inwardly hoped they would find the slides as he had been told.

The ground was bare of snow, and they walked out a few yards to a little clearing in the rushes, where stood a big muskrat house, forcibly reminding one of a pioneer block-house in a clearing in the forest.

Thad was worried somewhat as he approached the big rat house.

What if there should be no slide ; or if there was, it should be so small and insignificant that he wouldn't know where to set the trap ?

He had been telling Dick, in a rather important way, how they set traps on the "slides," when he didn't really know whether a well-ordered muskrat house had such an article of furniture.

If it didn't, he knew very well Dick would give him a big laugh.

Therefore, when he saw a smooth road, about six inches wide, running from the top of the house to the bottom, he instinctively knew it was the wished-for slide, and felt tickled enough to yell outright and jump a ten-rail fence.

But he choked off his jubilant feelings, and merely remarked, in an offhand, casual way, as he threw down the traps :

"There is the slide."

"Do the muskrats slide down there just for fun ?" inquired Dick, as Thad was setting the trap.

"Yep, I suppose so," replied Thad, absently, as he surveyed the smooth, frozen path with a critical eye.

"I guess I'll put the trap about half-way down the slide," he finally observed, suiting the action to the word.

"Now you see we put this sharpened stick through the ring in the end of the chain, and push it into the house," he continued, in a businesslike tone.

But he had no hatchet to drive with, and he discovered that it was not all pie, pushing a stick into a frozen rat house.

Dick, who had been dancing about, keeping warm, suddenly cried, "Wait a minute," and, dashing out on the bot-

toms, returned with a stone half the size of his head, with which Thad succeeded in driving the stick in the frozen rushes.

"I wonder if the muskrats have a piece of board, or slide down on their bellies," remarked Dick, as he watched Thad set the next trap.

Thad laughed. "Belly, of course, where would they get boards?"

"A muskrat has dog-gone queer ideas of fun, to come out of a warm house in the middle of winter, and slide down frozen mud, on his belly," said Dick, in a disgusted voice, as he slapped his chilled fingers on his leg.

"Oh, they're warm-blooded; cold don't bother them," said Thad.

"Say, Thad, how do you suppose the muskrats get out from under the ice, to get on the house and slide?" asked Dick, after they had set the traps and were starting home.

"I don't know. I hadn't thought anything about it," confessed Thad, scratching his head in a puzzled way.

"They must come out some way," continued Dick, "for you can see where they have used the slides."

"Maybe there is a trap-door in the house somewhere," suggested Thad.

"Or maybe they come out along the bank some place," said Dick.

"Well, we'll probably have a rat in every trap in the morning, then we can tell something about it," said Thad, hopefully.

Next morning the boys were possessed with a feverish impatience to visit the traps.

Their father had come home during the night, and after breakfast Thad remarked:

"Whose old steel traps are those out in the wood-house, papa?"

"If there are any traps around, they must be mine. I used to trap a good bit, for muskrat and mink, when I was a boy, but I haven't seen one of my old traps for years. I supposed they were all lost long ago. How many did you find?" said Mr. Kingston.

"Six. And we set every one of 'em for muskrats last evening," interposed Dick, eagerly, his eyes dancing.

"Indeed. Who taught you how to set traps for muskrats?" said Mr. Kingston, in surprise.

"Oh, we found out, didn't we, Thad?" said Dick, wisely, winking at his brother.

"Of course we did," assented Thad; "and, if you have trapped, you can show us how to skin them, can't you?"

"Certainly. I shall be glad to show you; that is, of course, provided you have caught any."

"Oh, we'll have some muskrats all right," said Dick, confidently.

"One in each trap, I figure," said Thad, calmly.

"Shall I go down to the traps with you?" asked Mr. Kingston.

"Just the thing; come on right now," said Dick, impatiently.

"Have you got the hatchet, Thad?" asked Mr. Kingston, as they were starting.

"No, sir; it is in the wood-house. I'll get it," said Thad, going after the desired article.

"Did you have much trouble in cutting into the houses?" asked Mr. Kingston, as they were crossing the bottoms.

The boys looked at each other blankly.

"We didn't cut into the houses," ventured Thad, finally, with a vague feeling that all was not right.

"You didn't!" said his father, in astonishment; "where in the world did you set the traps?"

"On the slides," replied Thad, faintly, with a sinking heart.

Kingston turned away his head, and choked down a laugh.

"I am afraid it won't take long to skin your muskrats, boys," he remarked, as soon as he could control his voice.

At the first house the stick lay on the ice, but the trap was gone.

"We caught a muskrat, and it has carried off the trap," cried Dick, excitedly.

His father smiled, and said, dryly:

"A two-legged rat, I am afraid, Dick."

At each house it was the same. Every trap was missing.

The traps had been set quite closely together, and at one of the houses the stick had been left in, and upon it was pinned a small slip of coarse paper, that caught Kingston's eye.

Something was scrawled upon it with a lead-pencil. Kingston unpinned the paper, and glanced at the writing. A smile spread over his face, and his eyes fairly shone with suppressed laughter, as he thrust the paper in his pocket, and turned to Thad and Dick.

"Your traps have been stolen, boys. This bit of paper explains it. Let us go back to the house, where it is warm and comfortable, and we can talk the matter over."

"What does the paper say, papa?" inquired Dick, whose boy curiosity was aroused.

"I couldn't make it all out, the writing was so bad, and the spelling so poor," replied Mr. Kingston, evasively. "Wait until we get to the house, where it is warm, then we can figure it out. But first, I want to show you how to catch muskrats when it is frozen. See here."

And Kingston took the hatchet, and dexterously cut a hole in the side of a muskrat house, big enough to thrust his arm in.

"Feel in here, Thad, and see how cosy it is," he said, as he withdrew his arm, after exploring the interior of the house.

"Don't be afraid," as he noticed Thad hesitate slightly. "There is nothing in there. The muskrats have all gone over to the neighbours to tell them about this attack on their house."

"Gee! this is a jolly warm house, Dick. Here's a bed as soft as we have," said Thad, exploring around with his arm. "Ouch! that water is cold, though. Guess I wouldn't like to sleep in there. If Dick kicked me out of bed, I would roll in the water," he added, laughing, as his hand came in contact with the icy waters of the run leading from the house.

His father laughed.

"That is their door, where they go out to visit the neighbours, and gossip these short winter days."

"Do they set the traps in the houses?" asked Dick.

"Yes; right in where the rats live. The proper way is to set the trap near the door, where Thad put his hand. Then when the rat is caught, it jumps down in the water to escape, and gets drowned. If it doesn't, the chances are it may twist off its leg, and leave its foot in the trap to tell the story."

"I have caught many a three-legged rat, with the stump of his fourth leg healed over and covered with fur. After setting the trap, they pack this stuff all back in the hole as firmly as possible, so it will not freeze inside," said Mr. Kingston, suiting the action to the word. "There, that is all right. Now, let's go home."

"Isn't there any possible way for the muskrats to get out on the ice?" asked Dick, as they were leaving the lake.

"No; they are as securely locked under the ice as though in an iron chest."

The boys did considerable thinking on the way home.

Kingston walked ahead, and two or three times Dick thought he could see his father's big shoulders shaking with suppressed merriment.

After the trio had thawed out a little around the comfortable sitting-room fire, Dick blurted out:

"Say, papa, we made awful fools of ourselves, didn't we? Let's see what that paper says."

"That's so. I had almost forgotten your note," said his father, his eyes twinkling.

After studying the contents of it a moment, he said:

"It is so dim and greasy, I will make a copy of it, then you can read it."

He copied the document with a pencil, and, handing it to Thad with a broad grin, said:

"Read it aloud to Dick."

Thad took the slip of paper, and, after glancing at it a moment, mounted a chair, cleared his throat, and, making his best bow, read gravely:

"TO MR. DICK KINGSTON:—enny body thaths fulle enuf to set traps on the out sid uv a mushrat hous in the midel uv the wintur hadent ortu hav traps next time set em under a hen its safer

"a frend"

Thad didn't have time to get gracefully off the chair before Dick had him by the leg.

"No, you don't. Lay that trapping fizzle on to me, will you? I'll show you." And they rolled over on the floor, laughing, yelling, and squirming like a couple of cats.

After the boys had laughed themselves out, and assumed

an upright position, as well-behaved boys should, Mr. Kingston straightened his face, and said :

"Well, boys, what do you think about trapping?"

"Hold on, papa," cried Dick, "please don't say 'Well, boys ;' say 'Well, Thad.' He is the head trapper, or head simpleton, whichever you call it. If you want any information on setting traps, ask him."

"Well, Thad," resumed his father, "who told you how to set traps?"

"Will Daly told me last fall. He said they set them on the slides."

"So they do in the fall before it freezes up, only the traps are set at the foot of the slide, under water, but after it freezes the conditions are changed. Then the only way to fix the traps so the rats can get into them is by cutting a hole into the house."

"Yes, sir. I see how it is now; I ought to have had sense enough to see it before," replied Thad.

"I thought it was awful queer if muskrats were fools enough to come out on the ice this cold weather and slide down that frozen mud, but smarty Kingston here claimed they would sooner do it than eat raisin pie (raisin pie was Dick's favourite). Call me thick-headed, will you, 'Thad Kingston, the great muskrat trapper of the Mississippi'?"

"Don't you spend any time worrying about Thad Kingston. He will come out on top," was Thad's rejoinder.

"You musn't be too sure about that. You tried to make me believe that the muskrats came out on top in the winter, and it cost us six traps to find out they didn't," retorted Dick, and Thad subsided.

CHAPTER III.

THAD'S FIRST GUN.

THAD'S and Dick's first attempt at shooting wild fowl awoke to life the inherent love of hunting, born and bred in both.

The unfortunate death of Jack cooled their ardour for a time, but the discovery of their father's old traps again aroused bright visions of sport in the minds of the eager youths.

After their ludicrous attempt at trapping, the boys settled down once more to the routine of school-work, but as the winter wore away they became restless again, and began to talk and plan what they would do in the spring.

During the short time he was at home, Mr. Kingston kept his eyes and ears open, and, being an old sportsman himself, soon saw the drift of their actions.

One day near the close of February, he observed the boys hobnobbing by the window overlooking the Mississippi, and bottoms.

They seemed to be deeply engrossed in discussing some weighty subject, and although their conversation was carried on in too low tones for him to hear much of it, from a word caught now and then, together with their gestures, he was satisfied that they were talking about shooting in the spring.

Without saying a word, their father quietly walked over to

where they were standing, and, taking out his watch, gravely laid his finger on the pulse of each in turn.

Dick eyed this proceeding with considerable curiosity, which gradually got the better of him, and he inquired :

"What are you trying to figure out now? Anything the matter with us?"

"Both rather feverish, Dick," replied his father, putting away his timepiece.

"What kind of a fever?" asked Dick.

"The kind boys generally get in the spring,—hunting fever. Your symptoms are quite pronounced."

The boys looked at each other a moment, and Dick remarked, with a mischievous glance at Thad, "Thad is the party you want to keep your eye on. He has more than a pailful of symptoms, but it don't bother me a bit."

"I should say not. All you talk about is guns and ducks," retorted Thad.

"Well, suppose we own up to it and ask papa's advice. Now, papa, suppose you were a couple of boys, and wanted to go hunting so bad you could taste it; what would you do about it?" said Dick, with a sudden burst of frankness.

"It would depend on circumstances, and how old I was. But first, instead of getting off in a corner and standing around on one leg, whispering and giggling to myself, I would take my father into my confidence and see what he thought about the matter," said Mr. Kingston, with a wink at Thad.

"Well, what does your father think about it?" asked Dick.

"He thinks he would like to have me go, but would prefer to have me wait until he could go with me."

"I am afraid we will be grayheaded and dead before that time comes," said Dick.

"Can't you go with us this spring?" asked Thad.

"I am afraid not. I will be very busy until June, anyhow."

"The ducks will all be gone by that time, won't they?"
Dick inquired, with a long face.

"The spring flight will be over, of course, but it will only be a short time until fall. Then I expect to be able to get away from business more frequently."

"Only a short time!" echoed Dick, with a lugubrious look.
"It seems to me you have queer ideas of a short time."

"Do you think we are too young to go alone, papa?" asked Thad.

"Yes, considering the fact that neither of you has ever had any experience in handling a gun, I do. I am glad you both have a desire to learn to shoot, but I want you to begin right. I don't want you to take your first lessons the way I did."

"How did you learn, papa?" asked Thad.

"I didn't learn, Thad. I just 'grew' into it. I might illustrate the way I learned by telling you an old story that the folks used to tell when I was a boy:

"A preacher was one day riding along the road, when he overtook a boy driving an ox. The beast was unruly and stubborn, and insisted upon having its own way, which fact seemed to be giving the little fellow an endless amount of trouble. The boy's early education in regard to using profane language had evidently been neglected, for he was cursing and swearing like a pirate.

"The minister was, of course, greatly shocked to hear such terrible oaths coming from a small boy, and, after listening a moment, said, reprovingly: 'My lad, your language is awful. Who brought you up?'

"Without turning his head to see who his questioner might be, the boy replied, in a sharp, surly tone:

"'Nobody. I come up a-foot, driving this darned old ox.'

"And that is the way the boys of my day learned to shoot. 'We came up a-foot.' All that we knew, we picked up at odd hours when there was no work that could be trumped up for us to do. The holidays enjoyed by a farmer lad were few and far between, and if he ever expressed a desire to go out in the woods, hunting or fishing, his elders lost no opportunity to solemnly warn him against such shiftless amusements. They generally ended the lecture by pointing with pride to some poor, overworked, thick-headed boy in the community who had never been known to express a desire to do anything but work and earn money. In the narrow, hard-working sphere in which we lived, any inborn love a boy might have for the woods and streams was generally crushed in its infancy, by hard work.

"If a boy should pause in his task to watch a beautiful sunset, listen to the song of a bird, or watch one build its nest, he was held up to the community as an object of ridicule and worthlessness."

"Didn't they want you to ever go hunting or fishing, or have any fun at all?" asked Dick, wonderingly.

"Very few of them did. They wanted a boy to work and help earn money to buy more land. By the time a boy was Thad's age, he was doing a man's work, and, as I said before, any sentiment, love for the woods and streams, birds and flowers, was crushed out of him by humdrum toil. For if the country boy does not possess an almost unconquerable love for nature, in the prosy world in which most of them live, it will dry up just so surely as the spring dries up for lack of summer rain.

"The younger boys," continued Mr. Kingston, "'bugged' potatoes, hoed cabbages, potatoes, etc., ran errands, helped milk the cows, do the chores, and a thousand other things

that were useful in developing the muscles, but left the mind dwarfed and stunted. Perhaps not one family in a dozen had more than one or two books in the house. Not that they couldn't afford to buy books and other reading matter, but they imagined a farmer had no time to read. Then reading was a lazy, shiftless habit, anyhow, according to their ideas, and of course the longer the mind goes without the stimulus of reading, the less it cares for it.

"In fact it was one ceaseless round of toil from the time a boy was old enough to do chores until he was grown."

"I am awful glad I didn't live there," said Dick, with a sigh of relief.

"So am I, Dick, but those people were not obliged to live that way. The majority of them were fairly well-to-do, some of them, comparatively wealthy. They could have had books, music, and other innocent, healthy relaxations for the mind, but they fell in the rut of continuous drudgery, and made of themselves human drudges, instead of being the happiest and most independent people in the world, as they might have been."

"I should thought the boys would have left and gone to some town where it wasn't so dull," said Thad.

"That is just exactly what many of them did do, and that fact has been worrying thinking people for years. The way to stop it has been discussed in all of the magazines and papers in the land. The reason boys leave the farm is because there is too much monotonous drudgery and not enough amusement and relaxation. Young people are naturally fond of society; they want books, papers, music, games, and other amusements. If these things are not furnished them, they will go where they can get them. The trouble with most farmers is that, in their greediness, they get more

land than they can half work properly, and their nose is kept at the grindstone continually. It is a very true saying that ‘all work and no play makes Jack a dull boy.’

“I tell you these things,” continued Mr. Kingston, “that you may know the difficulties country boys of my age were obliged to contend with in acquiring the art of shooting or fishing. In most of the homes there was an old rusty shotgun, musket, or rifle, in the various stages of worthlessness. These were all the weapons we had to learn with.

“Those of us that were permitted to use a gun had no one to teach us the proper charge to use, how to load, shoot, or hunt game. Consequently, we went creeping and crawling around, pot-shooting birds on the ground, in flocks, and the boy that could kill the greatest number of birds at one shot was the best hunter. We did not make an effort toward learning to shoot on the wing for some years after we began to hunt.

“Many parents forbade the younger boys using the gun at all, and, to make sure that the command was obeyed, some went so far as to take the hammers off the guns. The consequences were, some disobedient, headstrong youths, if they could obtain a supply of ammunition, would steal the gun out of the house, and, joined by others of their companions, go hunting with no hammer on the gun.”

“How could they shoot without the hammer?” queried Dick.

“When they found some birds, or other game, one boy would rest the gun upon a log fence or stump, and take aim; when ready to shoot, one of his companions struck the cap with a stone or hammer, and exploded the gun. In addition to the bother and danger of that awkward way of shooting, the boy who owned the gun had the cheerful prospect of

getting a thrashing upon his return home, if he failed to smuggle the gun back into the house without being observed.

"To illustrate another way a gun may be fired without the hammer, I will relate how a friend of mine won his people's consent to go hunting.

"When he was a tow-headed, duck-legged boy about Dick's age, he became strongly imbued with the shooting fever. His people owned a heavy, rusty old musket, and as soon as they discovered this boy knew how to use it, they took off the hammer and hid the ammunition. But the wild pigeons were flying in great numbers, and he was determined to get some of them.

"He obtained a few loads of powder and shot from some place, but could get no caps. The caps used on this musket were just the shape and almost as large as a small plug hat. However, nothing daunted, he obtained a supply of matches, and, pouring his ammunition into bottles, sallied forth.

"He knew of a field, not far from home, where the wild pigeons came to feed at certain hours of the day in great droves, and thither he bent his steps, staggering under the weight of the old musket.

"The field in which the pigeons fed was enclosed by an old rail fence, and surrounded with timber and brush. Cautiously he stole through the woods up to the fence, and peeped through between the rails.

"A short distance from the fence stood an old dead tree, and to his great joy it was full of pigeons. The old musket was quietly poked between the rails, a few grains of fine powder dropped on the nipple, then taking a match he broke off the head and placed it on the nipple also. Being ready now, he took a flat rock from his pocket, aimed at the tree, shut his eyes, and struck the nipple with the rock.



J.W. Kennedy

"A ROAR FOLLOWED THE BLOW, AND THE BOY WAS KICKED FOUR FEET INTO SOME HAZEL BRUSH."

"A roar followed the blow, and the boy was kicked four feet into some hazel brush. Not knowing the proper load for the old gun, and being anxious to secure as many pigeons as possible, he had put in about twice an ordinary charge.

"As he staggered to his feet, bruised and sore, he peered through the fence to see the result of his shot. A number of pigeons were fluttering on the ground, showing his aim had been true and deadly.

"He was just congratulating himself upon the lucky shot, when he was startled by hearing a gruff, familiar voice say:

"'Well, young fellow, pick up your pigeons and come on home.'

"Looking up, he recognised a stalwart uncle, a lake captain, the weight of whose hand he had felt more than once for various youthful offences. Feeling lame and sore from the vigorous kick the old musket had kindly dealt him, he naturally had a delicacy about getting a thrashing on top of it, so he went through the fence like a cat, and stood defiantly on the other side, waiting for hostilities to begin.

"But, much to his surprise, his gruff old uncle did not offer to punish him. Perhaps the difficulties under which the boy was labouring in trying to learn to shoot awakened a feeling of pity in his rough but kind heart.

"At any rate, he assisted his nephew in gathering the dead and wounded pigeons,—a goodly number of them,—walked home with him, found the hidden hammer, placed it on the gun, got the powder-flask and shot-pouch, showed the boy how much ammunition to use in loading the gun, then, turning to his parents, said, gruffly:

"'When that boy wants to go hunting again, you let him go, and let him go right, and not have him trying to shoot with a piece of a gun.'"

"That's the stuff! That's the kind of an uncle to have!" cried Dick.

"Sure pop! I would like to hug him. He understands boys," said Thad.

"Did you hunt alone very much, or was there some other boy to hunt with you?" asked Dick.

"I hunted alone frequently. Sometimes there would be from two to six of us together, and we carried a motley assortment of guns, I can tell you; no two of them alike. Perhaps one boy would be armed with an old single-barrelled shotgun; another, a smooth-bore; another, a double-barrelled shotgun, the stock tied together with strings or wire, where it had been broken years before; still another proudly carried a heavy musket, the stock running the whole length of the barrel, the latter encircled with several big, showy brass rings, an iron ramrod, a hammer weighing nearly a pound, and a stock solid enough to crush the skull of an ox."

"That must have been a queer gun. Did it shoot good?" laughed Dick.

"No; it scattered all over a ten-acre lot at forty yards, like most of the others. I hunted with one of them for several years. You could never depend on killing a bird, even if you aimed right."

"I suppose all kinds of game were very plentiful along these Mississippi bottoms when you were a boy," said Thad.

"Yes; thousands of ducks, geese, snipe, pinnated grouse, or prairie chickens, as you call them, wild pigeons, quail, rabbits, squirrels, wildcats, rattlesnakes, etc."

"The rattlesnakes are not all gone yet. Thad and I killed two, last summer," said Dick.

"Yes; and there are a number of wildcats in the caves and

fissures of the rocks now, but they are seldom seen," replied his father.

"The game we hunted most, though, on account of its great numbers," continued Mr. Kingston, "was duck; and the only way we knew to hunt them was to walk from one lake or pond to another, and peer into it cautiously, until we discovered a flock feeding. Then all was excitement:

"'Oh, look! look! There is a flock!'

"'That's so! Get down! Get down!'

"'Cock your gun!'

"'Let down your hammers!'

"'Shut up, or you'll scare them!'

"'Don't point your gun at my head!'

"These are a sample of the remarks. Then if we were lucky enough not to frighten them with the noise we made, everybody began crawling through the grass, or brush, dragging the guns by the muzzle— Why, what is the matter, Thad?"

For that young gentleman was poking Dick in the ribs, and gently quaking with suppressed laughter, while the latter party was looking uncomfortable and red in the face.

"I beg your pardon, papa, for my rudeness, but I couldn't help it. The remarks you boys made when you saw ducks was about the way Dick acted last fall, the day we were hunting, and I have to laugh when I think of **the** ridiculous figure he cut, by yelling and diving into the rushes head first. He scared a flock clear out of the State," said Thad, sobering up.

"Oh, pshaw!" said Dick, looking warm about the collar, and tossing his head.

"Never mind, Dick, wait sometime until a flock catches Thad unawares, and watch his manœuvres."

"Don't worry, Dick, I forgive you. You didn't know any better," said Thad, his eyes brimming with mischief.

"I'll get even with you sometime, old fellow," replied Dick, shaking his finger at his brother.

"A boy should have some older person with him at first, who knows how to hunt and shoot, to teach him how to load and handle his gun properly. That is the reason I want to go with you at first. And another thing I wish to impress upon your minds. Don't try to steal away hunting alone, without letting me know it, as if I were your enemy. I want you both to consider me your partner in all of your amusements, as well as your work. Tell me about your hunting trips; your hits and misses; where you go, and what you see; your good and bad luck. I will appreciate it, and go with you as often as possible. And don't neglect your studies, or work you may have to do, to go hunting."

"Now I have a proposition to make. If you will refrain from shooting this spring, next fall I will buy Thad a new gun."

"Good! good! That's the talk," cried Thad, springing to his feet, and clapping his hands.

"May I shoot it sometimes?" asked Dick, plaintively.

"Yes; you shall be taught to shoot at the same time, Dick, but to Thad must be entrusted the care of the gun, as I do not think you are quite old enough."

"I think I am pretty old," said Dick, trying so hard to look wise and sedate that his mother laughed.

"You are, but you will be older after awhile," said his father.

"I wish I was twenty," sighed Dick.

"You will make the same wish when you are forty," replied his father, dryly. Continuing, he said:

"I will buy you a gun a year from next fall, Dick. Will that do?"

"Yes, sir, if I can't have one before," said Dick, with so much candour that everybody laughed.

"How does my proposition suit you, boys?"

"All right, papa," was the answer from both.

Then Dick arose, and taking his father by the hand, led him over to where Thad sat, and said, with mock gravity: "This is our new partner, Thad." And Thad extended his hand with a glad smile.

Slowly the long cold winter, with its retinue of glistening snow-banks and biting north winds, wore away.

The ice lay so thick on the Mississippi that the vernal equinox was near at hand before the softening air made any perceptible impression upon its solidity; but the onward march of the seasons could not be stayed, and the reign of the gentle summer queen was near at hand.

Gradually the big white snow-drifts shrunk in size, and acquired a dirty, smoky hue.

The mass of black, rotting ice held stubbornly in the river, loath to leave its winter home, but the fight was in vain.

Slowly but surely the imprisoned river broke its icy fetters, loosening a band here and there, peeping out through its frosty prison, dancing and sparkling with the old blue flash.

A gentle rain, a soft south wind, and the victory was complete.

The forces of Jack Frost were routed, and his reign was over for the season.

Huge masses of honeycombed ice went drifting and grinding down the broad river, now piling high over a barely sub-

merged bar, anon breaking into smaller fragments, through the action of the winds and waves.

Then came the northern flight of wild fowl.

Thad and Dick stood by the window in their cosy little home on the Iowa bluffs overlooking the Mississippi, and watched, with all a boy hunter's eagerness, the flight of ducks and geese stream up the river on their long northern flight.

Through the patterning rain-drops the boys could see the advance guard of pintails, steadily beating their way toward the frozen North on fearless, unwearied pinions.

With glistening eyes they watched the mallards, circling around the wooded lakes and islands, or alighting on the ice cakes in the river and floating along with the current, chattering and calling to their fellows like a bevy of school-girls.

Their first hunt, the preceding autumn, had awakened to life the instinct latent in every healthy boy, and a longing desire took possession of each to try again his skill upon the ducks.

Presently, Dick turned to his brother with a comical look, and said :

"Thad, do you suppose we can ever wait until next fall?"

Thad laughed.

"Of course we can. I am not going to watch them any longer, and then I won't want to go," and he resolutely turned from the window and picked up a book.

Dick reluctantly turned from the window, and, as he looked up, met the laughing brown eyes of his mother.

"Now what are you laughing at, missis?" he asked, walking over to her, with a threatening aspect.

"Oh, nothing, only I was thinking that you might be

studying your geography lesson, since it is raining so you cannot go to school; then you will not have time to bother about the ducks," said Mrs. Kingston, demurely.

Dick complied, but it was hard work keeping his eyes away from the river.

Half an hour later he and Thad were both bending over a map of Iowa, engaged in an animated discussion as to whether Spirit Lake or Storm Lake, in northern Iowa, would be the better place for duck and goose shooting.

How many boy readers have tried to study under similar circumstances?

The pleasant days of spring insensibly melted into the torrid heat of summer, which, in turn, gave place to the cooling breezes of September.

The public school attended by Thad and Dick was in the quiet little village of T ——, nestling at the foot of the bluff, directly on the banks of the Mississippi, a mile distant from their home.

Both boys were eager students, and never missed a day from school, unless by sickness or bad weather, and none stood higher in the various studies than they.

One pleasant Friday afternoon, as they returned from school, Mrs. Kingston said :

"Boys, I expect papa home to-night."

Instantly Thad was all attention.

"I wonder if he will bring my gun. Do you suppose he will, mamma?"

"I don't know for sure, but I shouldn't be surprised if he did," replied his mother, evasively.

"Bully. Mr. Dick Kingston, I am going to have a gun," shouted Thad, giving his brother a playful punch in

the ribs, and scampering out of the house, yelling like an Indian.

"Oh shucks, you make more fuss over that old gun than some folks would over a gold mine," retorted Dick, chasing after him.

"What's a gold mine, compared to a gun? I would sooner have a gun than half a dozen gold mines," replied Thad, with supreme contempt, pausing to inspect the broad bosom of the Mississippi, placidly gliding along beneath them.

"If he does, we will try it to-morrow, won't we?" said Dick, eagerly.

"I rather suspect we will, my son," replied Thad, folding his arms, and looking down at his brother with an air of conscious wisdom.

The following morning the boys came racing down-stairs with eager, expectant faces. A well-known figure sat in the easy chair by the window overlooking the river.

As the boys came trooping into the room, the figure turned, and Mr. Kingston said :

"Good morning, Thad. Good morning, Dick."

"Good morning, papa," shouted both boys together, and then for a minute it was difficult to distinguish man from boy as they climbed over him. A moment later, Dick popped the question to him fairly.

"Did you bring our gun, papa?"

"Our gun!" echoed Mr. Kingston, with mock surprise.
"When did you decide to get a gun?"

"Last spring," replied Dick, promptly.

"Now look here, papa Kingston," he continued, "you and Thad need not try to impose upon me because I am small. I must have an interest in that gun until I get one

of my own. Mustn't I, mamma?" appealing to Mrs. Kingston, who was busily engaged preparing breakfast.

"I guess papa and Thad will give you a few shares of stock in it," she replied, smiling in the direction of the curly head.

"If they don't, they can't even look at my gun when I get it."

Mr. Kingston laughed and disappeared in his bedroom, from whence he emerged a moment later with a light twelve-gauge muzzle-loader.

"Breech-loading shotguns are coming in use of late, but they are very costly yet, and I did not feel able to pay the price necessary to get a good one, so I bought you a muzzle-loader. However, if they prove a success, they will be cheaper in a few years, and then you can get one. There is your gun, my boy, and I hope it will afford you as much pleasure as my first one did me."

"Thank you, papa. I don't know how you felt, but it doesn't seem possible for you to have been much happier than I am," replied Thad, frankly, as he took the treasure with glistening eyes.

No one but a boy near his age can fully understand or appreciate the feeling of adoration with which Thad regarded his first gun.

How he gloated over it; pointed it at every visible object out of the window; cocked and uncocked it; looked carefully at the locks and barrels. He examined every part with the air and wisdom of a critic.

At last he handed it to Dick with the remark:

"Gee whiz, Dick! Won't we have some jolly times with that little beauty?"

Now Dick had been watching his brother go through the

various manœuvres with a slight feeling of jealousy, for the fact gradually came home to him that the gun was for Thad. But the generous, whole-hearted manner in which his brother said "we" took away the sting, and as he handled the treasure, he could only smile and say: "That's what we will, Thad."

CHAPTER IV.

TRYING THE NEW GUN.

"WELL, boys, what is the programme to-day? I suppose I will sit in my favourite chair by the window overlooking the old Mississippi, and read and smoke and enjoy the scenery," said Mr. Kingston, with a twinkle in his eye, as they were finishing breakfast.

"We are very sorry to disturb your dreams of comfort, papa, but business is business. Here Dick and I have been under two hundred pounds pressure since last spring, and when a boy only gets a gun once in thirteen years, it seems as though the event ought to be celebrated at once; hadn't it, Dick?"

"It's *got* to be celebrated, that's all there is about it, and I guess papa knows it as well as we do, for I saw an awful deep wink in the back part of his eye. You come with us, papa, and we'll give you an imitation of a man and two boys trying a new gun," said Dick, passing his plate for another pancake.

"The man will be useful to carry the game, I suppose," said his father with an amused smile.

"Now don't get sarcastic, papa," said Dick, eyeing his father sharply as he sipped his coffee. "He will probably be useful for a whole lot of things, but I don't suppose he will carry much game; he has a more important office to fill."

"What is that?" asked Mr. Kingston, pushing back from the table.

"You are to be preceptor, supreme counsellor, and chief of ordnance," broke in Thad.

"Good boy, just what I was trying to think of," said Dick, gleefully patting his brother on the back so hard that the latter spilled his coffee.

"Please don't be quite so demonstrative; you act like a schoolboy instead of an old hunter," said Thad, trying to look severe.

"Any salary attached to those offices?" asked Mr. Kingston, doing his best to keep from laughing at the boys' antics.

"Certainly. You will receive six hundred dollars' worth of gratitude per year, which added to a thousand dollars' worth of filial affection, and about five hundred dollars' worth of amusement at watching our mistakes, will make you pretty fair wages," said Dick, gravely.

"Quite a seductive salary, but I am afraid it wouldn't buy many groceries."

"You will have to skirmish for the groceries at odd times until Thad and I get big enough to help," said Dick, as Thad made a dive into the bedroom after his gun.

As he emerged with it, he said: "Did you get a powder-flask and shot-pouch, papa?"

Kingston went into the bedroom and came out carrying a bulky package. This he unwrapped and said: "Here is your powder-flask and double shot-pouch, both filled with ammunition; the powder and shot measures are both gauged right for your gun now; here is a canvas hunting hat for each, and here are two pairs of light rubber hunting boots to keep your feet dry, and prevent rheumatism."

"Cracky, I feel like an old hunter already," said Dick, surveying the numerous articles.

"How do your boots fit, Dick?"

"Just right," replied the latter.

"So do mine," said Thad, surveying himself admiringly, as he buckled on his shot-belt.

As they passed out into the yard, Kingston said, "Now let's load; hold your gun away from the body, and nearly perpendicular,—so," and he loaded with the deftness of long practice.

"You do very well, Thad," he remarked, as he watched the latter's slower movements.

"Now cap your gun and carry it at half-cock, always, unless expecting game at any moment, then keep it full-cocked; and when hunting with one or more companions, always remember where they are, and keep your gun pointed away from them. Have either of you noticed many ducks flying?" he asked, as the trio wended their way down the winding road that led to the bottom of the bluff.

"I have seen a good many down toward the lower end of the bottoms, and over on the Illinois side," replied Thad.

"They are all local ducks that have been raised here. If we have time, we may go down and stir them up a bit; the northern teal will come now with the first cool rain."

"We might walk along under the bluff a little way; perhaps we may see a squirrel, and find out how the new gun performs on game. Come on; talk low and make as little noise as possible, and when you see game don't get excited." With these words, Kingston turned and strode along the base of the rocky, ragged bluff.

It was a delightfully cool morning in September. A few trees, always in the vanguard of fashion, were beginning to

doff their summer dress of green, and don the new fall styles of colouring.

Now and then a wanton leaf, having fulfilled its mission, with a whispered good-bye to its fellows, dropped from the parent stem and fluttered slowly to its new resting-place on the grassy carpet, henceforth to be the plaything of idle winds until the drifting snows wrapped it in a fleecy shroud of white.

The ground, sloping sharply up to the base of the rocks, was covered with a scattered growth of trees, among which the hickory, ash, walnut, butternut, maple, and oak predominated.

Thickets of wild plum-trees and hazel brush alternated with open, grassy glades, the turf sodded with short blue-grass, always restful to the eye. Above this sylvan scene towered the Mississippi bluffs, a ragged, irregular mass of rocks, from one to two hundred feet in height, seamed and fissured with the convulsions of the ages. Here and there a little ravine, covered with grass and trees, dropped down from the summit of the bluff, breaking the monotony of the wall of rocks and making a convenient pathway up or down.

The rent and torn condition of the rocks left numerous caves and fissures, that were the secure retreat of numerous wildcats and rattlesnakes, but they were shy and seldom seen.

"Oh, I see one, I see one!" shouted Dick, slapping his hands on his hips, and dashing ahead toward a big hickory-tree.

When Mr. Kingston and Thad arrived under the tree, Dick was eagerly peering up among the leaves.

"Here he is, Thad, I see him; hurry up!" yelled Dick, in a shrill voice.

"Where is he?" asked Thad, coming to his brother's side.

"Right up there; see him?" cried Dick, pointing up in the tree.

"I don't see him," said Thad, after looking a moment.

"Well, I don't either now, but he *was* there; I wonder what could have frightened him," said Dick, in an inquiring tone.

"Stop and think a moment, Dick, and see if you cannot discover the reason," said Mr. Kingston, in a low voice, stepping to the boy's side.

Dick looked up in astonishment, and met his father's serious gaze. Glancing toward Thad, he saw his brother's eyes brimming with merriment. Suddenly a light dawned upon Dick, and his face crimsoned.

"Do you remember my instructions when we started to look for squirrels?" said Mr. Kingston, kindly.

"Yes, sir. You told us to talk low, and not get excited; but I forgot," replied Dick, meekly.

"That is the first lesson you must learn, if you wish to be a successful sportsman. Game of all kinds is easily frightened at any unusual noise, and especially by the sound of the human voice; for that reason you must acquire the habit of always talking in a low voice when out hunting. Your squirrel is on the opposite side of the tree, and it will always keep on the opposite side so long as you make so much noise. Thad, you remain here perfectly motionless, and Dick and I will go around to the other side; then you will get a shot, if there are no holes in the tree."

As they stepped quietly to the other side, Thad's sharp eyes caught sight of a lithe, reddish object creeping around to his side. Quietly raising the gun to his shoulder, he fired.

There was a rattling of twigs and leaves, and a moment later the squirrel struck the ground with a thump.

"First blood for the new gun," said Thad, as he proudly picked up his quarry and handed it to Dick to place in the game-bag.

"Let us walk down to the grove where you gather hickory nuts, and I will show you an easy way to find squirrels," said Mr. Kingston.

A few minutes' walk, and they were in a fine grove, that contained a number of hickory-trees.

Kingston walked up to a large oak, where an old moss-grown log lay a few feet from the base, and, seating himself upon the short velvety sward, motioned the boys to do likewise, saying as he did so, in a low voice: "Let us rest a few minutes."

"What is the use of sitting down here, papa? There isn't a sign of a squirrel," whispered Dick, seating himself by his father's side.

"Sh—don't move!" was the reply, and the trio became motionless as statues.

For perhaps five minutes the solemn, almost weird, stillness of the forest was unbroken, save by the whisper of the leaves or the occasional cry of a bird.

Suddenly a chattering bark was heard, followed by another, and two red squirrels came racing down a big hickory.

A defiant bark came from another tree, then another and another, until it seemed that every tree was full of squirrels.

One daring acrobat leaped to a distant limb, caught gracefully by his fore paws, swung up on the limb, and scampered to the tree.

Another ran out upon the limb of a hickory, and, seating

himself upon his haunches, produced a hickory-nut and gravely began cutting notches in it with his keen teeth, shuffling it about in his paws as a boy would a hot cooky.

In a few moments, six or eight squirrels had been seen or located. Mr. Kingston glanced at Dick out of the corner of his eye.

The boy's face was a study; surprise and astonishment were written upon every lineament. With the natural restlessness of a boy of his age, he could hardly contain himself; perhaps the recent lesson helped somewhat.

Thad was scarcely less surprised than his brother; it was a new sight to him, and he enjoyed it hugely.

Finally Mr. Kingston said, in a low voice: "Mark the trees where they hide; come on."

As they arose to their feet, there was a sudden stillness, then a hurried scampering of red and gray bodies, and our hunters were apparently alone, not a squirrel was in sight.

"You and Dick take that tree where those two disappeared, and I will look into this one to the right. Keep on opposite sides of the tree," said Mr. Kingston, starting off by himself.

The boys took the hint, and surrounded a hickory where two squirrels had disappeared.

In a few moments Thad killed one, and promptly handed the gun to Dick with the remark, "Kill the other one."

Dick laid the foundation of his reputation as a squirrel hunter by killing the other, a big, fat red.

Kingston walked to a tree a few paces distant and soon killed a squirrel. Then he pretended to be deeply engaged in looking for more, but in reality he was observing the boys and the way they acted, for he had purposely sent them to a separate tree.

Pretty soon he saw Dick gesticulating violently, and heard him say to his brother, in an excited voice :

"Hurry up, Thad, and load quick, and kill another ; there are oceans of them."

Thad was somewhat rattled at seeing so many squirrels, and Dick's excitability made him worse. Mr. Kingston, who was quietly taking in the scene unnoticed, saw Thad hurriedly pour in both charges of powder, and follow it with two charges of shot, then pushing down the wads, he was just preparing to place the caps on the nipples when Mr. Kingston stepped to his side.

"Hold on a moment, Thad."

The latter paused with the caps in his hand, and said, in a wondering tone :

"What is the matter, papa?"

"Did you put wads over the powder?" queried his father, throwing down his squirrel.

"Yes, sir. That is, I think I did," said Thad, his confidence beginning to weaken.

"To be sure, let us draw the shot wads, then we can tell."

He took the gun, unscrewed the wormer top, and drew the wads ; then placing the muzzle of the gun in the palm of his hand, he elevated the butt-plate to the zenith, and gave the gun a sharp rap. A handful of powder and shot, nicely mixed, reposed in his hand.

Thad stared at this assortment of ammunition a moment, and looked very cheap and foolish.

"Aha ! I guess somebody else gets excited sometimes," cried Dick, grinning with delight at Thad's mistake.

"You are as much to blame as I," said Thad, indignantly ; "you kept telling me to hurry ; you were so excited you didn't know whether you were standing on your head or your heels."

"I could load that good if I was standing on my head," replied Dick, coolly, as he peered around in the trees.

"Don't let it worry you, Thad; every young shooter has the same experience. I did the same trick many a time, when I first began to shoot. You will gradually work into a regular routine method of loading and never make a mistake."

"He'll have to blunder along and do the best he can till I get my new gun, then I'll teach him how to load properly," remarked Dick, gravely.

"We have squirrels enough; suppose we walk out on the bottoms and see if we can find a blackbird, crow, or duck on which to try the new gun," said Mr. Kingston.

"Let's go down to Long Lake, it's only about half a mile down in the woods, and there are nearly always wood-ducks in there," suggested Thad.

"All right," replied his father, and Dick stowing the squirrels away in the game-bag, they wended their way through the forest.

They had gone perhaps fifty yards, when suddenly, without the slightest warning, a big brown bird flashed from a little thicket, and shot away with the velocity of a rocket.

The boys stood with open mouths, watching its sudden flight, and Thad just had time to say, "What is that?" and Dick to remark in astonishment, "O gee!" when the bird lay fluttering on the ground.

Kingston's gun had sprung from his shoulder with inconceivable swiftness, and checked the bird's mad flight ere it had gone thirty yards.

"What is it, papa?" inquired Thad, as his father quickly reloaded.

"A ruffed grouse," was the reply.

"Hully gee, papa, you're pretty near lightning, ain't you?

How could you think to shoot so quick?" remarked Dick, gazing with open-mouthed awe at his father's dexterous performance.

"A person who has hunted for years gets accustomed to acting very quickly," replied his father, as they walked forward and picked up the grouse.

A short distance farther, Mr. Kingston called attention to a crow sitting on a tree about sixty yards distant.

"Try your gun on that fellow, Thad."

The latter poised his gun and fired, but failed to score, for the crow, giving himself a vigorous shake, flew away with a disgusted caw.

"He acts as though he had run a splinter in his leg," remarked Dick.

"You tickled him a little, Thad; it was a long shot, and they are hard to kill," said Mr. Kingston, as Thad reloaded.

Long Lake, so called, was a long, shallow pond surrounded by quite dense woods, and was a favourite place for the shy, handsome wood-duck, owing to its secluded location and the abundance of acorns along the banks. Our trio of hunters came to the west shore near the north end, and looked cautiously down the long, narrow vista of water.

Near the south end a flock of perhaps a dozen wood-ducks were feeding. Mr. Kingston said:

"You boys walk around through the woods, and if you go quietly, and avoid stepping on dead limbs and sticks, you can walk up behind some big trees standing on the bank and get close enough for a shot. But don't try to crawl on the ground, you are liable to get dirt, sticks or leaves in the muzzle of your gun, and, besides, it is a very undignified way of getting near game. I know many shooters do it. I used to myself; but I have come to the conclusion that if a person

cannot get near enough to game without crawling on his stomach through the dirt and mud, like a snake, he had better hunt some place where he can. I will remain here, and if they fly this way I will get a shot, also. Don't forget what I told you in regard to pointing your gun toward Dick."

"All right, sir," replied Thad, respectfully, and the boys disappeared in the forest.

"I hope we'll kill a lot of 'em, don't you?" said Dick, excitedly, as he trudged along, dodging brush and grape-vines.

"If I get near enough with this new gun, I'll kill some," replied Thad, confidently, as he ducked under a curving grape-vine.

Dick was about to make another remark, when his toe caught under a root and he took a long header down a little sloping, leaf-strewn ravine.

The ground was soft, and he was uninjured, but as he arose and brushed the dirt and leaves from his clothing, he caught sight of a bluejay sitting on a tree near by, and Dick could see just as plainly as he ever saw anything that the impudent bird was laughing at his mishap.

It was hopping about on a limb, first one eye and then the other cocked toward the boys, chattering and chuckling away at a great rate.

It seemed to say :

"You are a great hunter, can't walk on level ground without falling down and running your nose in the mud."

At least, that is what it sounded like to Dick, and, being somewhat irritated by his fall, he picked up a club and hurled it at the offender with the remark : "Skip, you blue piece of impudence, and not be making fun of your betters."

But the bluejay was chuckling and ha-ha-ing away through the woods long before the missile had reached its destination.

The boys reached the lower end of the lake without further mishap, and Thad motioned Dick to remain behind while he walked softly up to the bank, behind a large tree. Cautious, however, as his movements had been, the keen-eared ducks were aware of his approach, and as he reached the shelter of the tree a chorus of frightened squeals greeted his ears as the ducks took wing and flew up the lake.

Thad fired one barrel at them, and just as he did so a wood-duck sprang from the bank in front of him. Thad gave it the remaining barrel, and had the satisfaction of seeing it drop to the water, dead.

"How many did you kill?" shouted Dick, running up to the bank.

"Only one, with the last barrel; the others saw me," replied Thad, walking down the bank to the water's edge.

By this time the ducks had reached the upper end of the lake, and the boys saw two puffs of smoke follow each other in quick succession from the bank. A moment later they saw a double splash on the water, and Dick shouted, "Hurrah for papa, he's got two."

"See if you can wade out to the duck," said Thad.

Dick picked up a short pole and slowly waded out to the floating duck. He was just stooping to pick it up, when he heard a whistle of wings, and, looking up, saw a bunch of wood-ducks over his head.

He shrunk a little in his clothes and waited to hear Thad shoot, but the latter didn't shoot.

Dick looked up and said: "Ain't loaded, I suppose?"

"No," replied Thad, somewhat sheepishly.

"Seems to me you forget a whole lot of things you hadn't ought to," remarked Dick, in a disgusted tone, as he waded ashore with the duck.



BLUE JAYS.

"Let's go up where papa is," said Thad, as soon as he had reloaded. The boys walked along the wooded shore, Thad in advance with the gun under his arm, the muzzle pointing ahead as he had been instructed. They had gone perhaps a third of the distance, when both were startled by a nerve-thrilling twitter as a brown streak sprang up ten feet ahead and darted into the timber.

"Do you know what that was?" asked Thad, looking wisely at his brother.

Dick studied a moment and said, "I'll bet it was a woodcock."

"Right, my child," was the reply, as Thad started on.

"Why didn't you shoot at it?" grinned Dick.

"Because I didn't consider it in my class," retorted Thad, promptly. "I am in the C grade, and that fellow has evidently graduated, by the way it went."

"Pshaw! I believe I could hit one," said Dick, in a spirit of bravado.

"You hit one! A little sawed-off critter like you hit a woodcock!" said Thad, scornfully. "Why, it would be out of sight before you could cock the gun."

"No, it wouldn't; I would cock the gun before it got up," replied Dick, confidently.

"Here, smarty, give me the game-bag, and you take the gun and step ahead. I don't think a person of your talents should be kept in the background on account of age," said Thad, sarcastically, handing the gun to his brother and taking the game-bag.

Now that he was invited to make the test, Dick's confidence began to ooze away, but he was too proud to back down; so taking the gun, he carefully cocked the right barrel

and walked slowly ahead, inwardly hoping no more woodcock would show up.

Thad's sarcastic remark to "try and leave a few for seed" did not tend to help his nerves much, either.

He had not gone ten feet when a brown ball flashed up almost at his feet, made a lightning-like gyration, and shot through the tree-tops with a mocking twitter.

Poor Dick stood motionless, watching with amazement this display of aerial evolutions.

"Why didn't you shoot? That was a nice easy shot," laughed Thad.

Dick was stung by the taunt, but, making no reply, walked slowly ahead.

He had gone about twenty yards when another bunch of brown lightning sprang up and darted away.

That one took a straight-away course for a few yards, and was in sight long enough for Dick's mind to act.

In despair at trying to take aim at such a shifting mark, he pointed the gun somewhere in the direction of the brown streak, and without taking aim, or even placing the gun against his shoulder, pulled the trigger.

It was one of those unaccountable scratch shots that occur at rare intervals to every sportsman.

The woodcock, less than twenty yards distant, was struck fairly with the charge, and dropped to the ground, riddled with shot.

Dick was the proudest and happiest boy in the county, when he ran ahead at breakneck speed and picked up his long-billed quarry.

When Thad came up, looking amazed and beaten at Dick's performance, the latter triumphantly held up the woodcock and grinned.

"I suppose that accidental shot will swell your head so you will have to wear your hat on one of the bumps," remarked Thad.

"That wasn't an accidental shot. I aimed right at him."

"I should say you did; you didn't aim at all. You just pointed the gun in a northwesterly direction, and the woodcock flew through the charge."

"Maybe I did," mused Dick, contemplating the riddled bird. "It looks to me, though, as if the charge flew through the woodcock. But I ain't stuck up over it," he added; "I'll associate with you just the same; of course, when I am talking to old woodcock hunters, you can kind o' keep in the background, but aside from that you may hunt with me just the same."

"Oh, go to bed and give us a rest," was Thad's only rejoinder, as he took the gun and started up the lake.

"Don't you want me to kill any more woodcocks?" queried Dick, following after.

"You couldn't kill another one in a year, and I want you to have something to brag about," was the rejoinder.

Mr. Kingston was sitting on a log when the boys came up, and his first remark was: "Well, boys, what luck?"

"One duck and a woodcock," replied Dick, taking the birds from the bag.

"Ah, this was what you were shooting at along the shore," said Mr. Kingston, picking up the badly shattered woodcock.

"You hit him pretty hard, Thad."

"Oh, I didn't kill him; it was Dick," replied Thad.

"Well, Dick, you must be pretty quick on the trigger to hit a woodcock."

"It was an accidental shot; I couldn't hit another one in a month," replied Dick, trying to look modest.

"You can't tell what you might do. The chances are, though, you would not hit them very often. Why didn't you shoot at that last flock, Thad?"

"The gun wasn't loaded. I didn't suppose there were any more ducks around, so I was in no hurry to reload," replied Thad.

"That is another thing you must acquire the habit of doing. Always reload instantly after shooting either one or both barrels, whether there is game in sight or not; then you are always ready for any emergency. Dozens of times in my younger days I have lost shots at game by not reloading promptly. Perhaps I would be standing upon the bank of a lake as we are, after firing my gun at some ducks. Not seeing any more ducks, I was in no hurry to reload; then of course, if they were in the country, a big bunch of teal would come whizzing by about twenty yards away; then I would hasten to reload, only to discover that I had missed the golden opportunity of the day.

"Again, I have waded out in a little rice pond, and, after jumping and shooting at a pair of mallards, stood looking at the scenery, not dreaming there was another duck within a quarter of a mile; then perhaps another pair that had been sitting in the rice, apparently waiting for me to reload, would spring up and leisurely take their departure, with derisive quacks at my simplicity. I had no one to tell me these things, therefore I was forced to learn them by experience."

"You know more than I ever expect to about shooting," said Dick, with a sigh.

"Oh, no," replied his father, "if you boys keep your eyes and ears open, and your wits about you, and try to learn, you will shoot nearly as well at eighteen as I do; but remember that you cannot learn to be wing shots by pot-hunting."

"What is pot-hunting?" queried Dick.

"A pot-hunter, Dick, never shoots on the wing when he can get a sitting shot. He will crawl for half an hour on his stomach to get near a flock of game birds, and wait another half-hour for them to mass closely together, to get a raking shot into them. He goes out for all the meat he can get, and cares little how he obtains it. He will wipe out a huddled bevy of half-frozen quail with as little compunction as he would sweep a handful of flies off a counter."

"That wouldn't be any fun for a person who can shoot woodcock flying," said Dick, turning to Thad with aggravating gravity.

"No, I suppose not, and about next year woodcock will be too slow; you will want chunks of greased lightning to shoot at," replied Thad.

At that instant Mr. Kingston uttered a low "Sh—don't move," and the trio sat motionless on the log.

The reason was apparent. A pair of wood-ducks were coming rapidly up the lake, and it was too late to gain the shelter of the trees. When they were nearly abreast, Dick wondered why his father did not shoot. After they had passed, he could hardly retain his seat upon the log. At that instant, however, Kingston seemed galvanised into life. The gun, which had been lying across his lap, came to his face as though sent by a steel spring, and like a flash swept after the speeding wild fowl.

There was a double report, and both ducks lay drifting on the surface of the lake.

"That's the time you pretty near forgot to shoot, I guess, papa. They were quite a little closer when they were right opposite," said Dick, chuckling at his father's apparent mistake.

Mr. Kingston smiled, and was about to reply, when they espied a boy coming from the north.

"It is George Ricker, of T——. I wonder what he wants," observed Thad.

"Hello, George, what are you doing here?" he said, as the boy came up.

"I have a telegram for your father," replied young Ricker, handing the message to Mr. Kingston.

The latter tore it open, and, after reading it, said:

"We will have to cut our hunt short, boys. I must take the three o'clock train to C——; my employers wish to see me at once in regard to getting some machinery contracts. Get the ducks out in the lake, Dick, and we will go home."

"Boys," said Mr. Kingston, as they wended their way across the bottoms, "I will not be home until a week from next Saturday. The northern flight of blue-winged teal will probably be here before that time. When they come, go after them and see what you can do with your gun, and let me know how it performs when I return. I think it is safe to trust you with a gun now; you seem to be careful and pretty level-headed."

Just then a crow flapped lazily along about fifty yards away.

"There is a chance to unload your gun, Thad."

Thad fired both barrels, and at the last report the crow started on an incline toward the ground, cawing indignantly, but ere his crowship had descended twenty feet, Mr. Kingston caught him with both barrels, and doubled him up, dead.

"Always unload your gun when you come in from hunting, either by shooting or drawing the charges. This is for

the double purpose of having it ready to clean, and not having a loaded gun in the house."

"If the teal come while you are gone, we will show you how to kill ducks," remarked Dick, as they walked up the hill.

CHAPTER V.

SHOOTING BLUE-WING TEAL.

"HURRAH, Dick, the teal have come!" shouted Thad, the Saturday morning following the one on which he had received the new gun.

"How do you know? Where are they?" inquired Dick, eagerly, coming quickly to his brother's side on the porch overlooking the river and bottoms.

"Look down there," said Thad, pointing out on the bottoms.

Dick looked in the direction indicated, and soon saw several flocks of blue-winged teal flying restlessly up and down the various lakes on the bottoms, their blue wings flashing in the sunlight as they dashed up and down, here and there, anon wheeling sharply across the mowed ground to a distant pond.

"Sure enough, they are here, and lots of them. You know it rained nearly all night, last night, and papa told us they would come with the first cool rain," said Dick, his face lighting up with animation.

"Well, don't let's stand here with our mouths open, like a couple of ninnies, gazing at them; let's get after them," cried Thad, impatiently, dashing into the house.

Dick followed, and a powwow of getting ready ensued that would have aroused enthusiasm in the most phlegmatic sportsman.

Coats, hats, rubber boots, shot-pouch, powder-flask, etc., were donned, and the boys were out of the house in a twinkling.

"Wait a minute till I load the gun," said Thad, suiting the action to the word.

Dick stood with his hands in his pockets, whistling softly, and watched the process of pouring in ammunition, thumping, pounding, etc., with a critical eye.

Finally he remarked, with solemn mien, "Don't make a mistake this time, or I shall have to take charge of the gun myself."

"Don't you worry, just keep quiet, and you will have no occasion to take charge of the gun; come on, now," and away they went.

As they were leaving the yard, Mrs. Kingston came to the door, and said, "Will you get back for dinner, boys?"

"Yes, of course; we will have all the ducks we can carry long before noon," replied Thad, half turning his head, and the boys disappeared down the steep bluff road.

They trudged along in the cool September sunshine, filled with the exuberant joy that comes only to boys of that age.

As they passed out upon the rain-soaked meadows, Dick, who was ever on the alert, cried out, "Jupiter, look at the ducks, just look at them!" at the same time nearly dislocating his arm in trying to point it farther toward a closely massed bunch of a couple of hundred teal, skipping across the bottoms a quarter of a mile distant.

"Yes, and look there, and there," said Thad, with glistening eyes, pointing in the direction of several flocks following the first.

"We've struck it just right to-day, haven't we? Hurry up them sawed-off legs of yours."

Thad was taller than most boys of his age, and, in his eagerness to get to where the ducks were flying, measured nearly a yard at each stride, forcing Dick's short legs to beat a lively tattoo on the spongy ground.

However, with walking and trotting, he managed to keep within talking distance. Presently his active brain evolved a brilliant idea, and he called out, "Say, Thad, let's give papa a surprise."

"How?" inquired Thad, slackening his pace to let Dick come alongside.

"Why, you know papa thinks we can't hit anything flying. Let's show him that some folks don't have to shoot till they are gray-headed before they can hit ducks on the wing. I have an idea that papa was joking us the other day when he told how hard ducks were to kill flying. Maybe he thought we were a couple of young greenhorns, and he would make it appear harder than it really was, so we wouldn't be disappointed."

"I don't believe papa would fool us that way purposely," replied Thad; "but, at the same time, I think he is a little mixed about it being so hard for us to learn to shoot flying. The way I figure it is this: when papa was a boy, guns did not shoot the way they do now, and ammunition was so costly that he used very light loads, and because he couldn't kill much with them he has always thought the fault was his, instead of the gun and ammunition; and he thinks, because it took him a long while to get so he could kill anything with the old pot-metal guns they used in those days, that we will have to go through the same experience now."

After delivering himself of these sage remarks, Thad nodded toward his brother with the air of a person who has solved a difficult problem to his entire satisfaction.

Dick was profoundly impressed with this bit of philosophy, pleasantly so, too, as it removed a large part of the bugbear of learning to shoot on the wing.

"Well, we'll just fool papa, won't we?" he cried, exultantly, shying a bit of turf at a big, melancholy, sad-eyed grasshopper that was clinging to a resinweed, evidently reflecting on the folly of his summer's dissipation.

"Another thing," continued Thad, "I don't believe papa had the least idea that we would ever get a chance to shoot at such big flocks as these; why, I believe I can kill eight or ten at a shot out of a flock as big as that one," and he pointed to a whizzing cloud of blue-wings in the distance.

"You see it's different with you and me learning to shoot flying from what it is with most boys; you know I killed a duck flying, last fall, and one the other day, and you killed a woodcock; and every one of these was single birds, too, mind you, not big flocks like these, so I don't see what's to hinder us from killing ducks right along. The way we have both been shooting so far, it looks as though it wasn't going to be so hard for us to learn to shoot flying as it is for most boys."

"Just what I think exactly, and I don't see what's to hinder us from killing forty or fifty ducks to-day, do you?" said Dick, with emphasis.

"No; in fact I have been thinking, ever since we started, that we would get that many, but I didn't say anything."

"You have?"

"Yes; fifty isn't many in a flight like this; it wouldn't surprise me a bit if we got a good many more than that."

"Jiminy! suppose we should kill a hundred," squealed Dick, excitedly.

"Like as not we can. We'll try, anyhow," replied Thad.

"Gee whittaker! A hundred ducks, think of it! Won't

papa's eyes stick out when he comes home and finds we have killed a hundred ducks in a few hours? Hurrah!"

Here Dick's feelings got the better of him, and he was forced to stop and turn a handspring to work off his surplus energy.

The boys pressed on with feverish impatience, their imagination running riot among the ducks.

Presently Dick broke out again.

"Say, Thad, we can't ever carry a hundred ducks. How in the world will we get them home?"

"That's easy; one of us will go back to the house and get Uncle John and the light wagon, and the other stay here and kill more ducks."

"That's so, I hadn't thought of that; but say, what will we do with so many?"

"Salt 'em down for winter," replied Thad, triumphantly.

"Good; great head you have; and we must tell mamma to keep mum, and when papa comes home we'll make believe we didn't have much luck, and we'll inquire about how to aim, and ask him why he supposed we couldn't hit the big flocks, and kind o' act down in the mouth generally; and then we'll get him out to the wood-shed, and be standing around talking, and one of us will lift the top off the barrel as though he didn't know what was in it and say, 'Hello; what's in here?' Gee! won't papa's eyes open when he sees a barrel of ducks all salted down, ready for winter!"

"Good scheme, just what we'll do," replied Thad, nodding approvingly toward Dick.

Here the latter's imagination rose to such exhilarating heights that he stopped and executed a short war-dance, winding up with a handspring and alighting with a splash in

a tiny pool of water left by the recent rains, throwing little sheets of spray in all directions.

When he again trotted alongside of Thad, he inquired, eagerly :

“Where will we go, Long Lake?”

“No, I think Long Lake is more of a wood-duck lake. Anywhere on the bottoms I guess is good enough, they seem to be flying everywhere; there goes a couple of flocks down Willow Lake now, let’s go there first.”

Willow Lake was merely a long rice-pond, fringed with rushes, and dotted with lily-pads.

It was one of three ponds connected by a narrow, rush-fringed run a few yards in width. This one of the trio of ponds was two or three hundred yards long, and about sixty yards across between the rush line at the widest part, with a ten-yard fringe of rushes along the shore.

About the middle of the lake, on the east shore, grew a clump of willows; hence its name.

“We had better get in those willows. Then we can shoot out over the lake, and the wind will blow the ducks ashore,” said Thad.

“Hully gee! look at that big flock going down the lake. If we were only in the willows now, we could kill a dozen. We’ll show papa how to shoot ducks, won’t we? Oh, there goes another flock.”

“Hurry up, then,” cried Thad, scarcely less excited than his brother.

Both boys took a run for the clump of willows, and dropped into them, panting and exhausted.

“Keep a sharp watch,” said Thad, as soon as he could get his breath.

“Here comes some,” cried Dick, as a large bunch of blue-

winged teal came dashing down the centre of the lake toward them.

"Get ready now," he warned, squirming about in the rushes.

Like most young and inexperienced shooters, Thad began to get his gun into position before the oncoming teal were within fifty yards of abreast of their blind, and by the time the birds were fairly opposite our youthful wild-fowler had followed them so long that his arm ached.

Aiming at the centre of the flock, he pulled the trigger.

At the report, both boys looked eagerly out over the water, fully expecting to see the surface strewn with dead ducks, but the fleet-winged birds dashed on down the lake without leaving one solitary straggler dead or dying to tell a tale of slaughter.

Only the few scattered lily-pads, flapping idly in the light breeze, tipped up their broad, fanlike leaves as though making a grimace at Thad for his poor shooting.

The boys could hardly believe their eyes.

"Why in the world didn't you kill some?" said Dick, in astonishment gazing at the lily leaves out in the middle of the lake, in the vain hope of seeing a dead teal floating upon the water.

"I don't know," replied Thad, greatly perplexed. "I aimed right at the centre of the flock. I thought I was sure of at least half a dozen."

"So did I," said Dick, looking longingly after the vanishing wild fowl.

"Where do you suppose I could have shot?" asked Thad, preparing to reload.

"You was probably afraid the gun would kick, and shut both eyes, and shot about ten feet over them," said Dick,



"AIMING AT THE CENTRE OF THE FLOCK, HE PULLED THE TRIGGER."

kicking his toe against a bunch of rushes, as he shuffled about restlessly, watching Thad pound away at the powder.

"I didn't do any such thing. I saw them just as plainly as I see you," replied Thad, indignantly.

"Well, you missed them just the same. Hurry up and load, and let me try. I see I'll have to kill the ducks. I could have killed a couple out of that flock with a rock."

"Here, take the gun if you are such a great shot; see what you can do," said Thad, handing his brother the reloaded gun.

"Here comes a flock in at the upper end now. Let's see if you can do any better."

A goodly bunch came swiftly down the lake, and Dick began to make great preparations for their reception.

He squirmed around, poked the gun through the tops of the rushes, and took aim at them before they were near the blind.

"Gee, won't I knock 'em!" he whispered, sighting along the barrels at the coming ducks.

"Don't you think you would kill more if the gun was cocked?" said Thad, quietly, as he watched Dick's manœuvres.

The latter raised his head very quickly, and, sure enough, the hammers reposed at the half-cock notch.

With a very sheepish look he cocked both barrels just as the teal went by.

Pointing the gun in the direction of the swiftly moving birds, he pulled both triggers; but, to his great chagrin, he failed to score, and the puzzling wild fowl swept on unharmed.

"There, smarty, now are you satisfied that you can't shoot any better than I can? You thought because you accidentally killed a woodcock flying that you could hit ducks," said Thad, as he took the gun and began to reload.

"Maybe the gun isn't any good. Gee, how it kicked!" said Dick, rubbing his shoulder, and ignoring his brother's remarks.

"The gun's all right, it's us greenhorns not knowing how to shoot," replied Thad, as he pushed down the powder wads and thumped them two or three times vigorously.

"There, she's ready; now I'll see what I can do."

"Down! Get down quick! Here's a million right on top of us," squealed Dick, excitedly, grasping Thad by the arm and dropping into the rushes.

Thad followed suit just as an immense flock of teal, with the soft rustling of myriads of wings, dropped into the water, their plump bodies throwing up tiny showers of spray as they splashed into the lake, the nearest of them not twenty yards from the blind, where they sat gracefully erect and on the alert for possible danger.

"Hully gee! We'll kill a hundred," whispered Dick, shrilly, hardly able to contain himself in the excitement of the moment.

"We won't get over a hundred. I didn't finish loading," replied Thad, grimly.

"Ain't the shot in?"

"No. When you pulled me down, you spilled the first charger full."

"Can't you finish now?" asked Dick, doing his best to hold himself together as he peered through the rushes.

"I don't believe I can. The rushes are so thin they will see us, but I'll try," answered Thad, detaching a charge of shot and pouring it into the right-hand barrel, as he lay upon the grass.

But scores of sharp eyes were watching at all points of the compass, and some of them very quickly discovered suspicious movements among the willows.

Being new arrivals, they were wild and restless, and in a twinkling a note of alarm rippled over the flock like a wave. A few quick, energetic half-turns of their plump bodies, and the whole mass took wing and fled down the lake.

"There they go. Shucks! it's too bad. We'll never get another chance like that as long as we live," said Dick, in a grieved tone, as he watched the rapidly departing teal.

"Too bad, but we can't help it," sighed Thad, as he arose to his feet and proceeded to finish loading.

The boys scanned the bottoms in all directions.

Hardly a moment but a bunch of teal could be seen skipping from one lake to another.

"Suppose we walk around and stretch our legs. Maybe we can find some feeding in another lake and get a sitting shot. There doesn't seem to be any more coming in here just now," said Thad, looking up and down the lake.

This programme suited Dick to a dot. He wanted to be on the move and, incidentally, talking. The natural restlessness of a boy of eleven could ill brook the quiet inactivity of a duck blind.

As they marched across the mowed ground, dotted with haystacks made from the wild bottom grass, Thad caught sight of a bunch of blue-wings dropping below the rushes of a rice-pond just ahead.

Cautiously they stole to the reedy margin, and wormed themselves through the rushes to the clear water, but no ducks were visible.

Then they tramped to another pond.

A flock of teal was there feeding, but the boys, as is usually the case, had grown careless, and the quick ears of the wild fowl detected their footsteps and voices as they crashed heedlessly through the rushes; consequently, when

our young duck hunters arrived at the edge of the clear water, the aggravating sight of a nice bunch of blue-wings just clearing the tops of the rushes on the opposite side met their gaze.

"I believe we make too much noise," remarked Thad, sagely, as he stood watching the disappearing ducks.

"I didn't think we were making any noise," said Dick, innocently, chewing industriously away on a big spear of sweet, juicy swamp grass.

"It don't seem to take much noise to scare ducks," replied Thad.

For several hours the boys tramped around over the bottoms, going from one rice-pond to another, but succeeded in getting no more shots.

Ducks they saw in plenty, mostly blue-winged teal, but the wild fowl had little difficulty in keeping out of range.

Finally, tired with the long tramp, Thad proposed they go back to Willow Lake and rest. Needless to remark, Dick's short legs were tired enough to make him acquiesce readily.

As they approached the clump of willows, being on a little higher ground, they looked up and down the middle of the lake to see if any ducks had dropped in during their absence ; but none were in sight, and the boys tramped wearily in among the willows.

Dick flung himself upon the ground with the remark : "Gee ! but I'm tired ; ain't you ?"

A mighty flutter of wings answered his question, as an army of ducks took wing from the shore of the lake, some of them not twenty feet from the boys.

Thad instinctively cocked the gun, and, raising to his shoulder, pointed it at the vanishing teal, but he was so

badly unnerved by the unexpected appearance of so many ducks that they were far away before he could decide where to shoot; so he stood gazing helplessly after them as they broke up into bunches and scattered over the bottoms.

"Jiminy Crickets! Don't that beat everything?" remarked Dick, as he watched the array of wild fowl with open mouth.

"That's what we missed by not staying here instead of tramping around over the bottoms," replied Thad, in a tone of deep disgust.

"We can't kill ducks. We will have to wait until papa comes home and shows us how," he added, in a disheartened tone.

Poor Thad. The writer of these lines can sympathise with him.

He has tramped and hunted all day faithfully, where wild fowl were flying by thousands, and returned home at eve dragging a tired pair of youthful legs and perhaps one lone duck to show for it.

However, the buoyancy of youth is hard to keep down.

After the boys had rested awhile they felt better.

Dick got up and looked in all directions.

Pretty soon he cried: "Here comes a flock; now see if you can't kill some."

Thad got ready, and as a stringing flock of teal passed, he fired at the thickest of them.

Dick was watching, and he saw, to his utter astonishment, as the gun cracked, a teal tailing along several feet behind the main flock drop to the water with a splash.

"Hurrah! I killed one!" shouted Thad, joyously, as he caught sight of a duck kicking on the water.

"Gee! but that old gun scatters," said Dick, impressively.

"How do you know?" asked Thad.

"Why, you killed a duck fifteen feet behind the flock, flying along all alone," replied Dick.

"I did?" said Thad, incredulously.

"Yes, I know it, because I saw him fall," answered Dick.

"Maybe," he went on, "that is the reason why we didn't kill anything before, the gun scatters so."

Thad shook his head dubiously, as he proceeded to reload.

"It don't seem as though papa would buy that kind of a gun; he is an old hunter, and he said he tried it at a target before he bought it, and it shot all right."

"Well, it *must*," persisted Dick, "or we would have killed some out of those other flocks."

The boys watched the dead teal slowly drifting toward shore for a time, and then, seeing no more ducks, they sat down again.

In a few minutes they heard a splash, and, looking through the scattered rushes, saw a single teal sitting on the water not more than fifteen yards distant.

"Shoot his head off," whispered Dick, forgetting all about the gun scattering.

Thad raised his gun and, taking careful aim at the teal's head, fired. Notwithstanding the murderously close range, the badly frightened fowl picked up its legs and wings, and went skimming down the lake apparently unharmed.

"That settles it; there is no use talking, I tell you something is the matter with that gun," said Dick, decidedly.

"Just as soon as this duck drifts ashore, we will go home. I am plumb discouraged," said Thad, looking ready to cry.

When the teal had drifted to the fringe of rushes, Thad went out to get it. The water was not deep, but, unfortunately, a hidden muskrat run lay across his path, and of course

he stepped into it and sat more or less gracefully down in the chilly water, up to his waist.

"Waugh! It's cold," sputtered Thad, staggering to his feet.

The words were hardly spoken when he missed his footing again, and took another hip bath in the lake.

"What are you trying to do out there? take your Sunday bath? If you are, wait till I go up to the house and get a towel and a cake of soap," Dick called out, facetiously.

"I don't know what you call it, but I know it's awful cold," replied Thad, in a disgusted voice, as he picked up the teal and slowly waded out.

"Papa must get us another dog if we are going to hunt ducks. This isn't any fun," he grumbled, throwing down the duck and surveying his soaked garments ruefully.

"He is going to get another dog," said Dick, as Thad doubled up his leg, and poured a hat full of cold water out of his inverted boot. "I heard him tell mamma he was going to get some kind of a dog,—I think it was a setter,—but I didn't hear him say when he would get it."

"I'm glad he is going to get some kind of a dog, but we will never have another such a dog as old Jack. It's a shame he had to be killed by a nasty old eagle. I'll shoot every one of them I get a chance at," said Thad, with a vengeful look across the bottoms toward the pond that was the scene of their adventure the preceding year.

"We'll call ourselves the 'Eagle Slayers,' won't we?" said Dick, as they hurried home across the meadow.

"If we don't shoot any better than we have at ducks to-day we had better call ourselves the 'Eagle Missers,'" replied Thad, as he let out another link in his long legs.

"Say, Thad, do you suppose the reason we missed so much to-day, was because you didn't make the ramrod bounce out

of the barrel when you rammed the powder?" said Dick, suddenly, as they hurried along.

"No, I don't believe that makes much difference; you noticed papa didn't load that way," replied Thad.

"I didn't know but maybe it might act different with boys," remarked Dick.

"It's probably the boys that act different," observed Thad, sagely, and Dick let his idea go by the board.

"Where is that back load of ducks you were going to bring home?" inquired Mrs. Kingston, as the boys filed into the house about one o'clock.

"Please don't ask questions, but give us our dinner; then we can talk. Is it ready?" said Dick, dropping inertly into the nearest chair, and beginning to divest himself of his hunting clothes.

"Yes, ready and waiting. Why, Thad, you are all wet; how did that happen?" said his mother, as Thad pulled off his boots and exposed his wet socks and pants.

"Oh, Thad was wading around Willow Lake after a duck, and he had a collision with a muskrat run and got throwed twice," said Dick.

"Didn't you get any ducks?" asked Mrs. Kingston, as Thad went to change his clothes.

"Only one teal that Thad scared to death; but don't waste any time, please get us something to eat. I don't believe you know how hungry we are. I'm hollow clear down to my boots."

Mrs. Kingston soon had dinner on the table, and when Thad came down-stairs, in dry clothing, he found Dick seated at the table, heaping his plate with stewed chicken, potatoes, mashed turnips, etc., till it looked like the wreck of a box car.

"Beg your pardon for not waiting, Thad. I tried to, but

my legs brought me right to the table. I suspect they are in league with my stomach," said Dick, filling his mouth with viands.

"Don't mention it; I never saw you when your legs were not in league with your stomach, if there was anything to eat around," replied Thad, seating himself opposite his brother.

"Why did you not get some ducks? I saw a great many flying on the bottoms," asked Mrs. Kingston, as she watched the boys stow away edibles with the keen relish of hungry youths.

"There were thousands of ducks, and if I had taken a pocketful of rocks, I could have killed a nice mess. But you see Thad accidentally killed a duck flying the other day, and it made him so conceited that he imagined he could kill all the ducks on the bottoms, at three or four shots, and when he came to shoot, he discovered that he couldn't hit a flock of windmills. Clear case of swelled head; in fact, he had to wear his hat on one side of his head, going down on the bottoms. But the swelling has all gone down now; his hat came down to his ears, coming back," said Dick, depositing a quarter section of pie on his plate.

"You haven't anything to brag about. Your head has been four sizes too big for you ever since you killed that woodcock," observed Thad.

"Another reason we didn't get any ducks," remarked Dick, "was because Thad's new gun isn't any good; it scatters all over the bottoms."

"I don't know about that," said Thad, who, now that he had rested and refreshed the inner man, did not feel so blue. "It looked that way by the shooting we did; but perhaps it was our fault instead of the gun's. I won't condemn it until papa tries it on ducks."

"If papa can kill ducks with that gun, he is a good one," said Dick, between bites.

"Papa can do a lot of things that we can't," replied Thad, as he preëmpted a big piece of pie.

"Oh, say, Thad, we forgot something!" said Dick, suddenly, dropping his knife and fork, and staring across the table at his brother with a distressed look.

"What's the matter?" asked Thad, alarmed at Dick's look of despair.

"We forgot to go after Uncle John and the light wagon," replied Dick, screwing his features back to their normal shape, and resuming his gastronomical operations.

"That's so," said Thad, looking greatly relieved, "and there is another thing we mustn't forget."

"What's that?"

"Take papa out to the woodshed, and show him that barrel of ducks."

"What are you boys talking about Uncle John and a barrel of ducks for? are you crazy?" inquired their mother, with a perplexed look.

"We are not as crazy now as we were awhile ago. Dick figured out a scheme to fool papa, but it didn't work," replied Thad, grinning across the table at his brother.

"I notice that you fell in with the scheme pretty quick," said Dick.

"Of course; I supposed you knew what you were talking about."

"If you had shot half as good as I figured, the scheme would have panned out all right. From the way you have been bragging about what great things you would do with that new gun, I supposed you could hit something, and I got fooled," was Dick's parting shot.

CHAPTER VI.

FIRST INSTRUCTIONS.

THE following Saturday morning, when the boys came down-stairs, Mr. Kingston's first remark after greeting them was : "Well, boys, was there a good flight of teal, and did you get a chance at them ?"

"Had you better tell him, or shall I ?" inquired Dick, turning to his brother.

"I guess you had better tell him. Your tongue is more glib than mine."

"I guess I had, too. If you talk as wild as you shoot, papa never would find out the truth."

Then turning to his father, who had been a silent auditor of this bit of by-talk, Dick said :

"Yes, sir, the teal came last Saturday morning, and I wish to remark, in Thad's behalf, that most of them have gone again."

"It was lucky for you boys they came Friday night. So you went after them last Saturday ?"

"Yes, sir. That is, Thad did, and I went along to carry the game. You know I have no gun," said Dick, in the meek, resigned tone of one who is bearing a cross.

"How many did you get ?" asked Mr. Kingston, with a faint contraction of the eyelid, suggestive of a wink.

"We got — how many did we get, Thad? You ought to know, you did the shooting."

"Oh, you needn't lay it all on to me, you did a little shooting yourself," retorted Thad.

"We got just one teal, papa," he continued, turning to his father.

"Only one teal. There couldn't have been much of a flight," said Mr. Kingston, in surprise.

"There wasn't a duck less than eight million, was there, Thad?" said Dick, emphatically.

"I don't know how many, but the bottoms were full of them," replied Thad.

"What do you think was the reason for your lack of success?"

"Because Thad's gun isn't any good," replied Dick, sniffing hungrily at the appetising odour wafted in from the kitchen.

"Thad's gun no good? That is strange. It shot all right at a target when I bought it, and it did good work the other day what little we tried it on game. There is something wrong somewhere. While we are waiting for breakfast, tell me how you shot, and where the ducks were, and how far away."

"Why, you see," said Thad, "when we saw how they were flying in the morning, we hurried down on the bottoms, and went to Willow Lake, and got in that bunch of willows so we could have a clear place to shoot over in front of us. The teal came by in flocks of from five to fifty, not more than thirty yards away, and I shot and shot, and Dick shot, but we couldn't hit them."

"Yes, and Thad shot at a teal sitting on the water, not more than twice the length of this room, and he aimed right

at its eye and never touched it; and I say a gun that won't kill a duck that far is no good; and the teal he did kill was tailing along behind the flock about ten feet, so the gun must scatter all over the county," chimed in Dick.

Mr. Kingston looked at the boys a moment and then said, abruptly :

"How are the ducks now? Many flying?"

"Yes, sir. The bottoms and river are full of them the last day or two, since this cold spell," replied Thad.

"Well, I'll tell you what we will do," said Mr. Kingston, his face lighting up with animation. "After breakfast we will get ready and go down on the bottoms. I will use Thad's gun and he can take mine, and we will see if I can kill anything with it. I think I know the cause of your failure to get any more ducks.

"I intended to have given you some instructions the day we were out, but that boy coming with the message caused me to forget it.

"You shot clean over that duck on the water, Thad. Your gun has an elevated rib, and shoots over at a short distance. When you shoot at anything close, remember to aim under a little."

"It was a lucky thing for that teal's health that we didn't know about that the other day, wasn't it?" remarked Thad to Dick.

"It was a lucky thing for the top of his head," rejoined the latter, with a grin.

"The way you manœuvred with those flocks in Willow Lake was this: you saw the ducks coming, put the gun to your shoulder, and deliberately pointed it at the flock before they were near you; you carried the gun along with the

flock until they were passing, then pulled the trigger, aiming right at the centre of the bunch. Is that right?"

"Yes, sir, but how did you know?" said Thad, in astonishment.

"Because I was there long ago, doing the same thing. You couldn't pick out a surer way to miss ducks."

"It is natural for a greenhorn, when he sees game approaching, to begin to get ready,—get the gun to his shoulder and sight along the barrel at the coming birds. Especially is this true of wild fowl shooting on a pass. Then when the ducks are directly in front, an almost exact right angle shot, and one of the most difficult, they fire."

"I thought the time to shoot was when a bird was the nearest to you," said Thad.

"When a bird is within effective range, you don't want it any nearer, as you have a bigger killing circle, and consequently less chance to miss. A right angle shot cuts squarely across the duck's flight, and has the smallest possible killing space.

"To illustrate :

"Here is a duck passing at thirty yards. Suppose thirty inches to be the effective diameter of the charge at that distance; so a flight of thirty inches is all the chance you have to hit the duck.

"Now let it get by, and the charge of shot cuts across its flight diagonally and requires more time for the duck to pass through it.

"The farther you let the duck get past, the sharper the angle, and the longer the bird is in passing through the charge."

As Mr. Kingston talked, he drew with paper and pencil the line of a duck's flight. Then he drew two diverging lines

from the muzzle of the gun at right angles with its flight. Then two more at a sharper angle, and, lastly, two at a very acute angle.

"Do you catch the idea, boys?"

"Yes, sir," was the answer from both.

"Now I will show you where you missed those ducks.

"When they were in front of you and consequently at right angles, you unconsciously stopped the gun, and pressed the trigger.

"The ducks were whizzing along swiftly, and had gone many feet before the shot left the muzzle of the gun. Then, at the distance you were shooting, they went at least three feet more while the charge was travelling from the gun to the ducks; so your charge of shot, instead of going through the flock as you intended, passed way behind it."

"Simple as t-y ty, ain't it? And that is the explanation of your killing that teal so far behind that flock," said Dick.

"Yes, I see it now. What we don't know about shooting ducks flying would fill a pretty big book," replied Thad.

"What papa *does* know would fill a bigger one," said Dick, in admiration of his sire's knowledge.

"I thought a charge of powder and shot was the same as lightning, it was there as soon as it started," said Thad.

"It lacks a good deal of being lightning," replied Mr. Kingston.

"Lightning travels about two hundred thousand miles a second, and a charge of shot about one thousand feet in that time."

"I wish we had had a couple of quarts of lightning the other day instead of powder. We might have singed the tail feathers of some of those ducks," said Dick.

"Always remember this, when shooting at flying birds,"

said Mr. Kingston. "Never point your gun at a bird until ready to shoot. Then press the trigger the instant you see the bird over the barrels."

"And never shoot a right-angle shot at rapidly moving game, if there is a chance to get a shot at an acute angle within killing distance."

"The chances for wounding a bird, instead of killing it, are much greater in a right-angle shot, for the reason I gave you a moment since,—the diameter of the killing circle is so much less."

"The shooter is supposed to have skill enough to throw the charge near the bird, and a charge of shot that would only wound a bird with a few outside pellets, at right angles, would have killed the bird at an acute angle, if thrown with the same skill, on account of the bird having farther to fly to pass through the charge."

Here Mrs. Kingston announced breakfast, and Mr. Kingston said as he arose: "I will finish the lecture on the bottoms."

After breakfast Mr. Kingston stepped outside, and in a few moments the door opened and he walked in, followed by a shaggy-coated setter.

"Here, boys, is another partner I have brought you to share in your hunting trips. He is an English setter, not quite three years old; steady as a clock; a fine retriever on land or water, and thoroughly broken on prairie chicken, woodcock, and quail. He belonged to a friend of mine who is not in a position to hunt much at present, and, upon my telling him that you boys were learning to shoot, he told me to bring this fellow to you as a present, with instructions to be kind to him, and he would be a faithful ally wherever you put him. How do you like the looks of him? does he suit you, Thad?"

"Yes, sieree! To a dot," said Thad, emphatically; "and if he is a woodcock dog, of course he will suit Dick," giving the latter a nudge in the ribs.

"If he will only keep you out of the muskrat holes, and stop your wrestling with the muskrats, he will be all right," returned Dick.

"What is his name?" asked Thad.

"Bruno."

At the sound of his name, the intelligent animal looked up into Mr. Kingston's face and gave two or three responsive wags of his bushy tail, and then looked wistfully at the breakfast-table.

"Beg your pardon, old fellow. Of course you are hungry; want to eat your breakfast first and get acquainted with the boys afterward, don't you? That's sensible; you shall have it at once."

A generous breakfast disposed of, and Bruno quietly reclined upon the floor and watched with grave mien but shining eyes the warlike preparations; for he was not one of your nervous, back-wiggling, restless type of dogs, but a calm, steady, sedate, deep-chested fellow, from whom all nonsense had been eliminated. A sort of canine "Uncle Tom," he lived but to perform his duty to his master, to the best of his ability.

It was a raw day in late October; heavy cold-looking clouds canopied the morning sky and hung like a gray blanket over the landscape. A dreary enough day to most people, but one that sent the blood bounding through the veins of the enthusiastic wild-fowler; for he knew the ducks would be restless and on the wing.

Under the forest-trees the loom of Nature was busily weaving a carpet of mosaics from the circling, eddying leaves.

Butternut and walnut trees, stripped of their foliage, still held bushels of nuts in their naked arms, reminding one, as Thad expressed it, of the picture of the human figure in the school physiology.

"Where are you going, papa?" inquired Thad, as they came out on the bottoms.

"Somewhere along the Willow Lake chain of lakes will be the best place this morning, I think. It is one of the best flyways on the bottoms, and the ducks will be moving to-day, it is so raw and cloudy."

"Why don't you go in that bunch of willows where we went last week?" asked Dick.

"Not a good place, Dick; it is too wide there. Always go to the end of a lake instead of the side."

"Why?" asked Dick.

"Because ducks follow the water. They will dart into a lake and follow it to the head or foot, according to the direction of their flight. If another lake or chain of lakes is beyond, they will generally follow them all. If you stand at the side, they may dart into the lake beyond you, in the direction they are going, and you miss a chance at them. Others may pass you, but close to the other shore, and too far away to shoot; but they all converge at the end of the lake and follow the narrow run to the next lake."

Nearing Willow Lake, ducks could be seen in all directions; some a few feet above the grass or water; some two or three gunshots high; while others were floating along at such an altitude that they appeared as a slender thread of black against the background of gray scudding clouds.

"Let us go in here awhile, until we see where the main flight is," said Mr. Kingston, walking into the rushes a few

yards below the south end of Willow Lake, and along the edge of the narrow run that connected the lakes.

"It is dry here, we can sit on the ground, the rushes are short; it looks as though we would get all varieties of ducks. You can lie here, Bruno. You wanted to get after those jack-snipe pretty bad, didn't you? But you see we were loaded for ducks; good fellow, not to insist upon it," and Kingston gave the intelligent animal a friendly pat on the head.

"Oh, here comes one, papa, get down quick," said Dick, pointing up the lake.

A single mallard drake came swiftly down the run.

Mr. Kingston waited until it was several yards past, then, throwing up his gun, he swung it swiftly after the drake and killed it dead in the air.

"Bruno, go and get your first duck for us," he said, pointing in the direction it had fallen.

As Bruno started obediently after the mallard, Mr. Kingston said: "Dick, let me instruct you and Thad how to act while watching for ducks and geese.

"In the first place, never throw up your arm suddenly and point toward them, as they are sharp-sighted and will notice a quick movement a long distance if looking in your direction.

"If shooting with somebody and you wish to warn them of the approach of game, simply give one low whistle, and utter the one word, "south" or "north," or whatever the direction may be the game is coming from.

"If you chance to be standing in plain view for a few moments and suddenly discover ducks or geese coming, almost within gunshot, don't flop down in your blind, as they will surely see your quick movements.

"Stand perfectly still; don't move a muscle, and frequently they will take you for a stump or some inanimate object and keep coming. Can you remember these things?"

"Yes, sir," replied Thad, while Dick's answer was a low whistle, and the one word, "North."

All looked, and sure enough, a half dozen ducks were coming down the lake.

"Do you want to shoot, Thad?" asked his father.

"You had better try my gun again," was the reply.

The ducks whizzed by one behind the other, and when they were about as far past as the previous mallard, Mr. Kingston threw up his gun.

Both barrels cracked this time, in quick succession, and two ducks left the bunch and tumbled headlong into the run.

"Here comes Bruno with the mallard," said Dick, delightedly, as the dog parted the rushes and walked into the blind, dropping the duck at their feet.

"That fellow has been trained right. See, he carried the duck by the wing instead of the body."

"Good boy, Bruno. There are two more in the same place you may get," said Mr. Kingston, giving his four-footed friend an approving pat on the head.

While Bruno was retrieving the two ducks, Mr. Kingston turned to Dick and said: "Well, Dick, are you satisfied now that Thad's gun is some good?"

"Yes, sir. It was us numskulls not knowing how to shoot," replied the latter, laughing.

"I thought there was a screw loose somewhere, all the time," said Thad.

"You take your gun now and try the next flock," suggested Kingston, handing Thad his gun.

"I'm a little bashful, after seeing such shooting," laughed the latter, as the two exchanged guns.

"Nonsense, my boy. You can't learn until you try," replied his father.

"What kind of ducks are these last two?" asked Dick, as Bruno laid the last one down in the blind.

"Bluebills," replied his father, "although 'cubhead' is the common name, in this section. Here comes a flock, Thad. Don't raise your gun until they pass; then throw it after them, and as you pass the leader, pull the trigger."

The boy did as he was told, as near as possible. At the report of the gun, one of the hindmost birds left the flock and sailed down in a slanting direction on the mowed ground.

"Wing tipped. Can you get him, Bruno?"

The dog had watched the duck go down, and looking up in Mr. Kingston's face with an expression of confidence, started across the run and out over the bottoms.

In a few minutes he came across the run with the duck in his mouth.

Walking into the space of trampled down rushes, he stood expectantly holding the bird in his mouth, and looking up at Mr. Kingston, seemed to say: "It is only wounded; what do you want to do with it?"

"Do you notice he doesn't drop this duck on the ground as he did the others?" said Kingston, taking the bird from the dog's mouth and wringing its neck.

"Why don't he?" inquired Dick.

"Because he knows it is only wounded and might get away. He is a jewel, and you boys are in great luck to get him."

Then turning to Thad, he said: "You stopped your gun

before you pulled the trigger. That is the reason you hit the hind duck with the edge of the charge."

"I don't know; I suppose so," replied the latter, as he finished reloading.

"You cannot expect to catch the knack at first. Your hands and eye have not been trained to work together. That is the first thing you want to learn; get the eye, the trigger finger, and the left arm to working in unison. That is what is called 'a sympathy between the eye and the hand,' and when you have that sympathy fully established, you have the main secret of wing shooting learned. It is more difficult for some to learn than others. You see the eye glances along the level of the rib, while the left arm bears the gun swiftly toward the game, and the instant you see it over the barrel, the trigger-finger must press the trigger instantly and release the charge.

"The greatest difficulty to overcome is the tendency to stop the gun and *then* pull the trigger. This must not be done, as it is the main cause of the numberless misses on angle shots.

"On straightaways, such as you will often get on prairie-chicken, pheasant, jack-snipe, quail, and sometimes on ducks, the gun is simply thrown to the shoulder, elevated to the height of the bird, and the trigger pulled."

A low whistle, and the word, "North" came from Dick.

"Try them again, Thad."

A single bluebill went past them, down the run. Thad's gun came up; a sharp report followed, and the duck went end over end into the water and rushes.

"That was a fine shot. You are learning fast," said Kingston, with a pleased smile.

"Let me try and see if I can stop those gentlemen," said Dick.

"Take my gun and try them," said Thad, handing his brother the gun.

Wild fowl were flying everywhere and they had not long to wait ; a pair of bluebills were espied coming down the run.

"Take your time, Dick. It doesn't take long to throw up your gun and shoot when they get where you want them," said Mr. Kingston, as he saw Dick moving uneasily, and begin to get his gun into position.

Thus admonished, Dick kept himself under control until the ducks were fairly opposite. But as Thad remarked, they had not got by more than six inches, before Dick's gun went up and he smashed away at them.

"You failed to connect that time, Dick," announced Thad, as the ducks went on with increased speed.

"You shot too soon," said Kingston, as Thad was re-loading.

"I know it," replied Dick, in a tone of disgust, "I got in too big a hurry ; but I'll keep at it till I do learn," he added, determinedly.

Ducks kept streaming past every few minutes, and the boys were kept busy, shooting turn about ; for Mr. Kingston let them do most of the shooting. Occasionally he would take a shot, just to show them how it was done, and he rarely failed to kill his bird dead in the air.

Both boys made a great many misses and a few very pretty kills, besides wounding a number. A wounded duck was hailed with delight by Bruno, as it gave him an opportunity to exercise and keep warm, by racing over the bottoms after it.

"Boys," said Mr. Kingston as the flight eased up a little, "there is one kind of a shot that you want to shoot in a peculiar manner."

"What is that?" inquired Thad.

"A low, straight incomer; where they are just above the rushes and coming almost straight at your head. I have discovered that the surest and most satisfactory way to kill them is when they are coming head on, although it is contrary to all rules and traditions governing duck shooting. The reason for shooting them in that position is because they are generally flying very swiftly, and if you wait for them to get past, a single false move, and they are out of range. Also, if you shoot them coming in, they fall almost at your feet and are much easier to retrieve, besides having the pleasure of seeing them turn about fifty somersaults. Remember to hold a little low on them, if your gun shoots high at a short distance. Some shooters cannot get the hang of shooting that way, but I think the trouble is, they shoot over, as the bird is very close; it is almost a dead shot for me."

"I saw a pair come at the head of the lake just a moment ago, and I didn't see them light; I wonder where they are," remarked Dick.

"Here they come on this side, just above the rushes; the shot I have been describing. Keep quiet and I will show you what I mean."

A pair of green-wing teal came swiftly over the rushes, a couple of feet apart, flying neck and neck, like an evenly matched pair of trotters.

The teal were not more than twenty-five yards away, when Kingston's gun cracked twice with such rapidity that the reports almost blended as one, and both teal whirled into the rushes, but a few yards from their feet.

"Gee, but I should say you *were* quick on the trigger; you're quick on both triggers," said Dick, admiringly.

"You will be as quick as I, perhaps quicker, after a few years' practice," was his father's reply, as he rapidly reloaded.

Soon after, Mr. Kingston proposed that they walk around a bit to warm up, and the trio took in several small rice-lakes, one of them being the small lake where poor Jack was killed the previous year.

They routed ducks out in nearly every place they visited, and bagged a mallard, a ringneck, and a pair of gadwells, before they returned to their original stand along the run.

It was almost noon, and the sun was coquetting from behind the clouds, threatening to dispel them entirely.

The flight of wild fowl had eased up, as it generally does near the noon hour, when suddenly the ears of our hunters were greeted by the hissing rush of wings high up in the air.

Mr. Kingston knew the cause instantly, and looking around, he pointed out to the boys, two birds coming over the bottoms, swift as a flash of light.

"Oh, there are two birds flying a race!" cried Dick.

"You are right, Dick, and it is a race for blood, too; no fear of either contestant selling that race," replied his father, grimly.

"What are they?" asked Thad.

"It is a hawk, trying to capture a duck for dinner."

"The hawk is going to get his dinner, sure," said Dick, as he saw the distance rapidly decrease between the birds.

"I don't know about it; it is an even bet whether he does or not," replied Mr. Kingston.

"I don't see how the duck can get away; even if it gets to Willow Lake it won't have time to light and dive, before the hawk has it," remarked Thad, watching the fleeing birds with intense interest.

The hawk was perhaps a hundred feet behind its quarry

when first sighted, and every stroke of its long, powerful wings carried it nearer to the terrified, madly fleeing fowl.

Straight as a bullet, and almost as swift, the duck, frantic with fear, headed for the lake; but such was the hawk's speed that it was not ten feet behind, when the persecuted fowl, without slackening its speed in the least, struck the water like a pile-driver and disappeared from view.

"What do you think now? You noticed it didn't take that duck long to light," observed Mr. Kingston, with a smile.

"It didn't stop to light; it flew right into the water," said Thad, in amazement.

"Jiminy Crickets! I'll bet every bone in that duck's body is mashed," said Dick, in astonishment, as the hawk, skimming the water where its quarry had disappeared, swept upward with a graceful curve, and went on over the Iowa bluffs, apparently as unconcerned as though it had been engaging in a friendly race.

"Don't you worry about that duck's health; it is all right. I have seen the same thing many a time, although the duck doesn't always get away; it all depends on whether it can reach the water in time," replied his father.

While they were talking, the recently pursued duck appeared upon the surface of the water, and seeing the coast clear, swam in to the rushes.

"There is your mashed duck safe and sound," said Kingston, pointing to it.

"How in the world do they stand the terrific shock of striking the water so hard?" asked Thad.

"I suppose it is on the same principle that a man puts his hands together above his head and dives from a height."



BLACK - WINGED HAWK.

"The bill and neck are held rigid and cleave the water like a knife, softening the blow to the body. I have seen them strike the water within fifty feet of me, when a hawk was after them; but if they cannot get to water, the hawk will get them every time.

"The most even race I ever saw was between a hawk and a wild pigeon, years ago. They were two or three hundred yards high, and the air fairly cracked as they went over me. I never knew how the race came out, as they were still going the last I saw of them."

Soon after, the sun dispelled the gray blanket of clouds entirely, adding materially to the comfort of the hunters, but also diminishing the flight of wild fowl by making them less restless and prone to fly.

"Boys," said Mr. Kingston, as they sat basking in the pleasant sunshine, "you mustn't think this kind of shooting is all there is to learn. This is but a small part of it. You will shoot in timber, brush, and tall rushes, where you cannot swing the gun, and you will get every possible angle; you will shoot standing in slippery mud and water; in rain, snow, and sunshine. Under all of these circumstances, it is the man who has the most accurate judgment, and is the quickest on the trigger; who keeps the coolest head in any kind of shooting; who makes his mind up instantly what to do, and does it, that is the best sportsman, and gets the most game, under the same conditions.

"You will get right-angle shots so far away that you will have to shoot at that angle, because the bird would be beyond reach of your gun if you waited for it to get at an acute angle. When you shoot at that angle, always hold far enough ahead to allow for the flight of the bird, even if you do keep the gun moving; the allowance, however, must be

a great deal more if the gun is stopped when you pull the trigger.

"Now, you both have a pretty good idea of what to do; suppose we start back and let Bruno find a few jack-snipe for us, and get home in time for a two o'clock dinner."

"Now you are talking. I could eat a pine board," said Dick, his mouth watering at thoughts of dinner.

Bruno proved himself an old veteran on jack-snipe also. He pointed stanchly, and retrieved only when told.

Mr. Kingston killed five straight, Thad got one out of six, and Dick, two out of the same number of shots.

"Eight jack-snipe, and sixteen ducks," announced Dick, as he counted up the bag.

"That isn't so bad for greenhorns; you boys must have killed over half of them," said Kingston.

"We got nine of the ducks; Thad killed six and I killed three. Say, Thad, there is a chance to try your gun on a robin," said Dick, eagerly, pointing to a redbreast hopping along unconscious of danger.

"Tut, tut, Dick. You wouldn't shoot a robin, would you?" said Mr. Kingston, reproachfully.

"Why not?" asked Dick, in surprise.

"For several reasons. In the first place they are not good for food; if you kill them they are left to rot on the ground. Then, if you shoot them, how can they sing for us in the morning? Suppose, Dick, you lived in a country where the native inhabitants were very small; suppose most of them were fine musicians, and they would come to your home and sit in the garden, and sing and play, and give you a fine concert without costing you a cent; then, after the concert, they would roll up their sleeves, and all pitch in and help work your garden and flower beds: would you take your

gun and creep around and try to shoot them for the pleasure they had given you and your family, and their help in working your garden?"

"No, sir, of course not; I would be a fool to do that," laughed Dick.

"Well, you are living in just such a country now. The birds are the native inhabitants. They sing and give us a fine concert every morning. Afterward, they all work like beavers in the garden and orchard, and among the flowers, gathering insects and worms for breakfast, that destroy the plants, flowers, and fruit."

"I never thought of it in that way," admitted Dick, thoughtfully.

"Neither did I," said Thad, "but papa is right."

"Boys are naturally destructive, I know," went on Mr. Kingston, "they want to shoot everything they see; but I want you boys to promise me not to shoot song-birds, if only for my sake; as you grow older, you will learn to love and protect them as I do."

"I am sorry to say, I have seen men, calling themselves sportsmen, who, when game was scarce, would turn their guns upon song-birds and shoot them 'just for fun' as they termed it. Happily there are but few of that kind of men among old-time hunters; it is done mostly by men who rent or borrow a gun for a day's outing, and who know little or nothing about shooting game; consequently they shoot everything that gets in their way."

CHAPTER VII.

THAD'S FIRST GOOSE.

ALTHOUGH Mr. Kingston owned a quarter-section of land along the Mississippi bluffs, only about ten acres were under cultivation.

As he had informed Thad and Dick, his boyhood was passed in the country near the "Father of Waters."

At the age of twenty-two, he drifted to the city, where he secured employment with his present firm. The years rolled by and he became one of their most trusted employees. He married and a few years after took a position on the road.

This enabled him to live, if he wished, in or near some of the smaller towns outside of the city, so long as he was near the railroad.

His wife had lived a sufficient length of time in the country to appreciate its beauties, and like himself preferred a rural home to one in the city.

Every inch a sportsman, with sentiment enough in his nature to love picturesque scenery, he selected a site on the wooded, rocky bluffs overlooking the grand old Mississippi, where he purchased a quarter-section of land, and erected thereon a cosy, roomy cottage.

Here he could sit upon his own porch and hear the booming of the pinnated grouse upon the bottoms adjacent, and out upon the upland prairie. In the thickets and dense woods along the bluff, the cheery call of "Bob White," and

the muffled drumming of the ruffed grouse was borne to his eager ears. A few minutes' walk brought him to the haunts of the wild fowl, jack-snipe, and woodcock, among the rice-ponds and wooded lakes of the Mississippi lowlands. At the same time he was convenient to the railway and telegraph.

Both Kingston and his wife were of a happy, jolly disposition, and many of Mrs. Kingston's friends soon found their way "out in the woods," as they termed her rural home.

Once there, they were so charmed and fascinated with the lovely, picturesque surroundings, that they were always loath to return to the smoky, dirty city.

"There are going to be some ducks and snipe killed, from now on, Chappy," announced Thad, in a very impressive manner, to his brother the following Monday morning, as they stood on the porch, gazing at the ever-interesting Mississippi, prior to their departure for school.

"Who is going to kill them?" inquired Dick, looking at his brother out of the corner of his eye.

"Little boys shouldn't ask questions, but if you want to know, it is me, I, Thad Kingston, Esq. Who did you in your simple mind think was going to kill them?"

"I rather think a boy named Dick, who smashes woodcock, will have a fair-sized finger in that duck and snipe pie."

"There you go again. If you are going to keep on lug-
ging that poor old woodcock in by the heels, I am off for
school. Come on. I believe the blamed woodcock was half
paralysed before you shot, anyhow."

"If it wasn't then, it was soon after," said Dick, pausing, as they walked along, to launch a pebble at a far-distant kingfisher, hovering over the river.

The boys came pretty near making their boast good. The remainder of the fall, they went down on the bottoms after school, as often as possible, to get the evening shooting, and both improved wonderfully after receiving the few instructions from their father.

Thereafter they had no trouble in keeping the table supplied with all varieties of game, and in addition, frequently sent a nice bunch to some of their friends in the city.

Saturdays their father was at home, and all three busied themselves digging the potatoes and gathering the other vegetables, and storing them in the cellar for winter use, besides picking the few acres of corn, which was raised to feed the horse, two cows, pigs, and chickens. Generally, about the middle of the afternoon, the entire force struck, and shouldering their guns, went after ducks, snipe, grouse, quail, or squirrels, according to their inclination.

Sometimes the programme was varied by hitching up the horse and wagon and going after nuts, along under the bluffs or in the woods on the bottoms, where the big shellbark hickory nuts grew in abundance.

One pleasant Friday afternoon well along in November, the boys came home from school, donned their shooting clothes, called Bruno, and hurried down on the bottoms without losing any time.

Their haste was apparent, from the remark Thad dropped to Dick, as they made hasty strides down the ravine road that led to the bottoms.

"If we can just kill a goose to show papa in the morning, I'll be happy. We haven't had a shot at a goose this fall."

"We haven't seen many flying until to-day," said Dick.

"We'll go to the south end of the lake west of Willow Lake. Papa told me once that when geese or brant came

into the bottoms, they seemed to go to that lake more than the others," remarked Thad, as they hurried along."

"What kind of shot did you load with?" inquired Dick.

"The regular No. 5's we use on ducks. That's the coarsest we have; but papa said they were coarse enough if we got within reasonable distance."

"Look! There are two flocks of geese. See them? One is over the river, and one over the bottoms," interrupted Dick.

"Yes, and the flock on the bottoms is heading right across to the lake we are going to. Gee, but ain't they low; if we were only under them now!" said Thad, his eyes glistening.

The flock of great birds circled the lake once, and then, instead of alighting, headed south as if on a scouting expedition.

"Let's get into the rushes at the south end, before they come back. To heel, Bruno; we're not after snipe now," cried Thad, striding along with increased speed.

In a brief space of time, the boys and Bruno were in the rushes at the end of the lake.

"Now, if they come back, they are liable to get into trouble," observed Thad, with an air of importance, as he scanned the horizon in all directions for geese.

The quiet hush of a late fall evening was slowly settling over the bottoms and river.

The sun had just dropped behind the western hills, leaving a monument of gold and crimson to mark its resting-place.

The heavy frosts had stilled the voices of the insect world, and the absence of their familiar droning hum lent an additional quietude to the scene.

Ducks were scurrying in all directions, each flock evidently

looking for its favourite pond, where they could get lodging, and a big meal of delicious wild rice thrown in.

Long lines of stately geese and brant were going south, high over the broad river, looking neither to the right nor left.

Evidently they had dined farther north and were intending to pass the night on the wing. Calling and gabbling away to each other almost incessantly, they reminded one of a fleet of ships sending signals back and forth as they sailed.

Their cries, as they sweep majestically along, sound discordant to some, but are heavenly music to the wild-fowler.

Of course there are always stragglers and laggards, and of these, many came investigating around the bottoms, drawn by the numbers of ducks flying there, to see what the prospect was to pass the night safely and incidentally get something to eat.

Long and bitter experience had taught them not to depend too much upon the vigilance of their cousins the ducks; so when a flock of geese or brant came in the bottoms, instead of swishing into the first lake they saw, like a flock of ducks, they sailed and circled, and circled and sailed, over meadow and lake, to be sure no enemy was lurking near.

There is the difference between geese and ducks.

A duck will risk its life to fill its stomach, while a goose will risk starvation to avoid the gunner.

The boys had plenty of chances at ducks, but they were afraid of spoiling an unseen shot at geese.

"There comes a flock across the bottoms; don't move," warned Thad, as they crouched in the rushes.

A dozen honking geese came prospecting toward the boys, and just as the hearts of the latter began to beat high with

hope, and Thad's right forefinger stealthily crept toward the trigger, the geese swung off and took another course.

Two or three times was this repeated by different flocks, until the boys, especially Dick, were too disgusted to even get excited.

Perhaps it was all for the best, to steady their nerves, as a few moments later they heard a familiar honk from the south, and saw the first flock returning, with the evident intention of passing the night on the lake.

Dick squatted in the rushes as coolly as an old hunter, and remarked, in a low but disgusted voice : "I suppose we will have to get down, from force of habit, but they won't come within a quarter of a mile of us, of course."

However, Dick was to be agreeably disappointed.

The geese, gradually lowering their flight, came straight as an arrow for the boys, and when it seemed to Thad they were overhead, and he could see the whites of their eyes, he rose up and aimed at one of the leaders.

But Thad, like most inexperienced shooters, did not calculate quite right.

As he threw up the gun, the geese threw up their wings, checking their slow flight instantly. Then, as Thad pulled the trigger, he saw that they lacked several yards of being overhead, and his charge of shot just fanned the air in front of their broad breasts.

The boy could hardly believe his eyes when he saw the big birds start off at right angles, entirely uninjured, and the thought that, after getting a flock of geese so near, he should miss them, was maddening.

He clinched his teeth hard, as he aimed at a big leader, headed for the setting sun, and pulled the trigger of his remaining barrel with a forlorn hope that it might be fatal.

At the report, the gander folded its mighty wings and came to the ground with a thump that could be heard a quarter of a mile in the stillness of the evening.

"Hurrah! You got one! Go get it, Bruno," shouted Dick, joyously.

"Gee, but it's a sockdolager, ain't it? Why didn't you get one with the first barrel?" said Dick, as Bruno brought in the big bird.

"Don't talk about it; I don't know," replied Thad, his joy and disgust about equally divided at the hit and miss.

"If we get another chance, let me shoot," said Dick, eager to distinguish himself by killing a goose.

"Of course, it is your turn," replied Thad, handing the reloaded gun to his brother.

Just as the shades of evening began to fall, but while it was still quite light, Dick espied a big gray bird coming down the lake from the north, low over the water.

"Lay low, Thad, here comes my goose."

The bird was not more than fifteen yards distant as it passed a little to one side, and as the charge from Dick's gun struck it fairly, it dropped with a crash into the rushes.

"Quick! Here goes a goose right over your head, low, up the lake."

Dick turned and caught a glimpse of the goose, speeding rapidly away.

Hastily throwing the gun toward it, he fired, and the bird tumbled end over end into the lake.

"We had better go home, it is getting late," said Thad, as Bruno brought in the last bird.

"That's the way to kill game," said Dick, his boyish tendency to boast coming to the surface.

"Yes. I am awful glad you made those two shots," said Thad, with a sigh of relief.

"Why?" asked Dick.

"Because, now you will let up on that measly woodcock, and go to bragging about this double."

"Hurry up, papa. Come on around to the north side of the house. Thad and I have something to show you," shouted Dick, the next morning, after the greetings were over.

"What is it, Dick, a grizzly bear?" asked Mr. Kingston, jokingly, as they passed around the house.

"How is that for a mess of geese, for Thad and I to get after sundown with one gun?" cried Dick, triumphantly, pointing to their kill of the previous evening suspended from a tree, his round chubby face glistening like a full moon.

"Thad killed the big goose, and I killed the two small ones; made a double on 'em, didn't I, Thad?" continued Dick, shuffling about in a happy, excited way.

"It is certainly a fine mess of goose," said Mr. Kingston, with a slight accent on the last word. "That is a big Canada goose you killed, Thad," handling the big bird, admiringly.

"What kind of geese are my two?" inquired Dick, eagerly.

"You say you made a double on them. How did you do it? I never knew them to fly in company," said Dick's father, contemplating the former's pair of birds.

"Why, you see this one came along and I killed him with the first barrel, and just then, Thad says: 'Look out, there goes another one right over your head, going north,' and I wheeled around and give it the other barrel, and killed it dead as a smelt."

"You made a splendid shot, Dick, but — I am sorry to say, they are not geese."

"They ain't? What are they, then?" said Dick, in amazement.

"This one is a speckled loon, and this one is a merganser, commonly called a fish-duck. Neither of them is good to eat; but, of course, that doesn't alter the fact that you made a good shot," said Dick's father, consolingly.

"You see," he continued, "their bills are shaped differently from a goose's bill."

"Yes, sir, I see they are now. But it was late last night, and I didn't look at the bills," said Dick, his face lengthening somewhat.

"You will gradually come to know all of the different varieties of game, and other kinds of birds, the moment you see them on the wing; you will recognise them by their manner of flying," said Mr. Kingston, kindly, as they went in to breakfast.

"Wait till I get my gun, and I'll kill a goose or break a hatband," said Dick, setting his jaws together, with a determined air.

"I suppose, when you get that gun of yours, we can pick up dead geese most anywhere on the bottoms," remarked Thad.

"I'll guarantee, we'll pick up more dead geese than we did last night, after you shot," was the retort.

"Say, Dick, have you decided whether to switch over on the loon and fish-duck shot, or keep on bragging about your woodcock?" said Thad, who could not resist the opportunity to give Dick a sly dig on his boasting proclivities.

"I am going to stop bragging till you do something to brag back about; it's too one-sided."

"Shall we go after geese again this evening, boys?" said Mr. Kingston, as they were discussing breakfast a few moments later.

"Yes, by all means. I want to kill a real genuine goose," replied Dick, eagerly.

"And I want to see if I can't make a double. It seems as if a person of my caliber ought to be able to hit a wash-tub with each barrel, if it *is* flying," remarked Thad.

"That *was* a rather sloppy shot you made last evening," said Dick, with a grin, passing his cup for more coffee.

"Of course it was. I don't deny it. Still, it was better than shooting loons," said Thad, folding his napkin with an air of superiority.

"It was as far as meat is concerned, but did it ever occur to you that if the loon and merganser had been geese they would have been killed just as dead, when my eagle eye got after them?" said Dick, calmly.

"You mean your woodcock eye," corrected Thad.

"What time this evening had we better start, papa?" said Dick, ignoring his brother's remark.

"What time does the moon rise?" asked Mr. Kingston.

"I don't know. What on earth has the moon got to do with shooting geese?" said Dick, in amazement.

"A great deal sometimes, and this is one of the times," replied his father with a smile, arising from the table and taking down an almanac that hung on the wall.

"The moon will be full to-morrow. Just right. We will have plenty of light if it isn't cloudy," said Mr. Kingston, after consulting the almanac a moment.

"Can we shoot geese by moonlight, papa?" inquired Thad, with considerable curiosity.

"Yes. Some of the best shooting I ever had was by moonlight. Ducks are too small to be seen readily, but geese are so large there is no trouble in seeing them when

within gunshot, by the light of a full moon, if there are no clouds."

"Won't that be jolly? But there is no use of Thad's going," cried Dick.

"What's the matter now, smarty?"

"Why, if you can't hit geese by daylight, there is no use trying by moonlight."

"I did hit them by daylight. You keep up your end of the procession and stop worrying about your superiors."

"Why is it better to hunt them by moonlight, papa?" inquired Dick.

"It isn't in all cases. It depends upon the kind of shooting. When shooting over their feeding-grounds, you must hunt them during the day; but this is one of their roosting places, where they come to spend the night on the sand-bars. Geese must have gravel and water, and also take a nap. The reason we hunt them so late is because they don't begin to come into the river until after dark. Wild geese are exceedingly shy and wary. They have discovered that the hunter stops shooting at dusk, so they wait until after dark, when the hunter has left the marsh and river, and everything is quiet, and they can come in unmolested."

"Frequently, during a good flight, the river is a perfect babel of voices the first half of the night until the ducks and geese get settled. The latter half of the night they take their nap. We will go down to the big bar below here sometime during the day, pick a favourable spot and scoop out a shallow pit to lie in."

"If we only had another gun," sighed Dick.

"You will get a gun soon enough. You are young yet."

"You and mamma keep telling me that, but it seems to me I am getting pretty well along in years," replied Dick,

who was inclined to pout a little and feel that he was imposed upon, when the subject of guns was mentioned.

During the day, Mr. Kingston took the boys down to a big sand-bar that jutted far out into the river. He selected an advantageous point, and after scooping out and piling up the sand to form two shallow pits, they returned home to await the shades of evening.

Shortly after the sun had set, the three hunters began to don their war-paint.

"Here is half a sack of 3's, Thad, that I brought home especially for geese. Change the 5's in your shot-belt for them. They reach out a little farther than 5's," said Mr. Kingston, tossing half a bag of shot on the table.

The gathering shades of evening were stealing over the river as they walked out on the bar.

In the west, a crimson halo shed a softening glow above the Iowa bluffs, while the dense woods on the eastern shore were shrouded in the purple gloom of twilight. Between, the Mississippi, a mile-wide band of silver, sparkled in the soft radiance that streamed from the big, round, jolly face of the full moon.

"Now, boys," said Mr. Kingston, "when it gets a little later, we must keep very quiet and not speak above a whisper. Geese are very keen of hearing."

An hour passed, but not a single honk came to their ears. Ducks they had seen in plenty, and the familiar quack of mallards could be heard out in the river every few moments.

"Are you sure the geese will come here, papa?" whispered Dick, anxiously.

"I think so, if there are any flying. Keep quiet and look sharp. Sometimes they come in perfectly noiseless, and get by before you know it."

Another long wait followed. Dick was just mentally deciding that his father had led them a wild goose chase figuratively as well as literally, when a shadow fell across the bar.

As he looked up, it seemed to his excited imagination that a dozen ghostly windmills were about to alight on the blind.

Then he heard his father say :

"Give it to them, Thad." And two streams of fire shot up in the air, followed by two deafening reports, that echoed and reechoed along the bluff. Two more reports followed in rapid succession, and quick came the thump, thump, of two heavy bodies striking the bar.

Then the wary Canada geese, that had been stealing so silently over them, broke into a chorus of honking that made the woods ring as they disappeared down the river.

"Reload first, Thad, always," said Mr. Kingston, in a low voice, as Thad made a move to go after the birds. This done, they walked out on the stretch of yellow sand where two big Canada geese lay in the broad moonlight.

"Gee ! They weigh half a ton," whispered Dick, as he half dragged, half carried one of the geese back to the blind.

Ten minutes passed, and a shrill honking came to the hunters' ears from the north. A warning nudge from his father, and Dick, who had Thad's gun, got himself under control and remained motionless.

The flock could easily be followed from their continuous cries.

They swept past out of sight and range; the cries gradually grew fainter and fainter, until Mr. Kingston whispered :

"Guess they are heading for some bar farther down."

As he spoke, the honking increased in volume. It sounded as if the geese were holding a consultation over the river,



WHITE - FRONTED GOOSE.

and all talking at once. The cries grew louder. "They are coming back. Don't move or make a sound."

On came the geese, evidently heading straight for the bar, their cries, in the stillness of the night, sounding almost unnaturally loud and distinct.

If Dick had not been near his father, he would probably have done something terribly out of place. He had hard work to cramp himself down when it seemed as though half the geese in the country were bearing down upon him. He strained his eyes through the moonlight to get a glimpse of the approaching flock, which was evidently very large from the racket they made. Then a dusky mass appeared in the moonlight, and before Dick realised the situation, they were surrounded by a swarm of over two hundred geese. It seemed as though the heavens were full of geese, alighting on the bar singly, in squads and regiments, swishing over the blind just above the hunters' heads, gabbling, circling, and calling, little dreaming they were in the camp of the enemy.

Kingston, ever cool and collected, saw at a glance that they were in one of those peculiar situations where, if the hunter does not keep his head, he will enact the fable of the donkey and the two bales of hay and come out of the mêlée with nothing but an empty gun and a large stock of vain regrets.

Quickly selecting a small bunch low over the bar, he killed two with the first barrel, and one with the second, and turned to see what Dick was doing.

That young goose hunter was badly rattled. He fired the first barrel out into the heavens somewhere; it seemed to him he must hit some geese, but he never touched a feather. He was about to let the other barrel go in the same aimless

fashion, when a dozen big birds alighted in a bunch on the sand within very close range.

Dick whirled the gun on to them, and cut a swath through the bunch with the remaining barrel, killing three dead and winging the fourth. Then the mass of frightened geese gathered themselves and went honking down the river.

Bruno captured the winged goose just as it was about to take a plunge-bath into the Mississippi; the dead birds were gathered, and the hunters proceeded to take an account of stock.

"What was the matter, Dick? Couldn't you see the geese up in the air?" said Mr. Kingston, jokingly, as they returned to the blind.

"I don't know, I guess not. I fired the first barrel out in the air somewhere. Must have shot at the moon. Then I got desperate, and when that bunch dropped on the sand right in front of me, I gave them a blizzard right in the neck. I was bound to get geese somehow," confessed Dick.

"We'll forgive you this time, Dick, but that was a rather underhanded trick to play on geese," said his father, winking at Thad in the moonlight.

"I know it, but I needed geese."

"Say, Dick, I'll tell you how you can make a fortune," remarked Thad.

"How?" inquired Dick, eyeing his brother suspiciously.

"Just arrange with somebody to catch geese, and tie them to a post by the hind leg, and you can beat them to death with a club and sell them."

"I would have to arrange with somebody besides you, or I would starve to death," said Dick.

Mr. Kingston looked at his watch. "Ten-thirty. Haven't we about all the geese we can carry conveniently?"

"Yes, let's go home, now Dick has distinguished himself again," said Thad, nudging his father.

"You must expect a fellow to do desperate things when he can't have a gun of his own," said Dick, as he shouldered a couple of geese.

CHAPTER VIII.

SHOOTING MALLARDS IN THE WOODS.

A STORM followed soon after, which ended with a cold snap that closed the Mississippi for the winter.

Long lines of northern wild fowl streamed hurriedly south to more congenial climes, leaving Thad and Dick to mourn their departure.

However, the boys knew they would return when the thrice welcome spring made its appearance, and were content.

They attended school, did the chores, and helped their mother in every possible way.

Mr. Kingston hired a man to chop the summer's supply of wood in the forest, and haul it to the house, and Saturdays Thad and Dick sawed, split, and piled it in the capacious wood-house, to dry for future use; lightening their labours with talks and plans for the spring campaign among the wild fowl, and, like all hunters, indulging in reminiscences of their successes and failures the previous autumn.

Mr. Kingston possessed a fair sized library, in which were most of the books published up to date bearing on wing shooting, which the boys read with great interest.

During the winter their father brought home an illustrated ornithology, and instructed them how to identify the different species of wild fowl,—their Latin as well as their common names.

By March 1st Thad and Dick were loaded to the guards with the Latin and common names of different game-birds, and doubly eager to catch the first glimpse of the returning wild fowl.

Dick longed to have a gun of his own, but he complained not, and patiently bided his father's promise to get him one in the fall.

One Friday night, just before the annual breakup on the Mississippi, Mr. Kingston came home, and found the boys ecstatically happy over the prospect of the near approach of the hunting season.

Saturday morning the softening air gave increased promise of spring's return. A pair of daring robins had arrived during the night, and hopped from tree to tree, chirping their short notes in the odd, timid, inquiring way they always do the first day of their return from the south.

They seemed to say :

"Well, you see we are back again. Do you think we will have any more cold weather?"

The boys divided their attention between their father and watching out of the big bay-window for spring birds and a possible flock of ducks.

Presently Mr. Kingston walked quietly into his bedroom, and, coming out with a gun in his hand, said, in an off-hand, matter of fact way :

"Dick, Thad tells me that you are pretty careful with a gun, and knowing how anxious you are to have one, I have taken the liberty of buying you a gun this spring, instead of waiting until next fall. Here it is, and a good one; see if you can be as careful with it as Thad is with his."

Dick had noticed his father coming out of the bedroom with a gun, but thought nothing of it, as he supposed it was

Thad's gun that his father wished to look at for some reason, but at the latter's remarks, the changes in Dick's facial expression were amusing to see.

Finally he managed to gasp out :

"What's that ! My gun ? Let me see it !"

He handled it mechanically a moment, but it was all so unexpected that he seemed momentarily bewildered. Finally he turned to his brother and said :

"Say, Thad, give me a kick, or a pinch, and see whether I am awake or not."

The words were barely out of his mouth, when the accommodating Thad delivered a moderately vigorous kick in the rear portion of his anatomy in the vicinity of the equator, that sent the astonished Dick several feet out of the right of way.

"Thank you," he remarked, as he regained his equilibrium. "I was awake, or I am now, but say, the next time I get in this fix just pinch me ; it will be less work for you. Give me the gun again, papa ; you see I wasn't expecting it, and it seems too good to be true."

After looking it over thoroughly, "hefting," and pointing it at imaginary birds, he said :

"I don't know whether to yell, sing, or just feel tickled. You want to shoot straight now, Thad, or I'll kill ducks all around you."

"It won't be long until you will have a chance to try it, if the weather doesn't change ; the river looks ready to go to pieces most any time now," observed his father.

But the weather did change ; at least enough to hold the ice until the following Thursday, when winter gave up the fight and beat an inglorious retreat. The hot sun beat down on the rotting ice with great fervour, aided by a south wind,

and Friday, the ice was moving slowly and majestically, like a banished king, down the Mississippi.

Friday evening the boys saw numbers of mallards circling over the woods and dropping down in the small lakes near the river, and you may be sure they were up bright and early Saturday morning, to go after them. Their father did not go, having work that required his attention.

"My shot-pouch and powder-flask are just like yours, ain't they?" remarked Dick, as he donned those useful articles.

"Yes. Think you can load your gun without making mistakes? How many times do you suppose you will get the shot in first?" asked Thad, as he slipped on his rubber boots.

"Mighty few times, I can tell you; I am going to keep cool as a cucumber."

"Like you generally do," said Thad, in a somewhat skeptical tone, as they went out on the porch.

"See that pair of mallards sailing over the woods next to the river; that's right where we are going."

"I see 'em. They are right over those swales by the pin-oak ridge, where papa told us to go," said Dick, his eyes dancing.

"Bruno, you are liable to have something to do, to-day," with a friendly pat on the big, sedate head, looking wistfully toward the bottoms.

It was with high hopes and fond anticipations that Thad and Dick started out that delightful spring morning.

As they left the bottoms and walked through the woods, Thad remarked: "Remember our instructions, to talk as little as possible, and speak low."

"Hear 'em quack," said Dick, in a half-whisper.

As the boys neared the river, the sharp-eared ducks

detected their approach and took flight, with a great flutter of wings, quacking and screaming.

The boys soon came to their feeding-grounds, a long, low swale, bordered by a pin-oak ridge; low willows were scattered through the swale, and the melting snow had formed little pools of water here and there.

Hardly had our youthful wild-fowlers taken their stand behind a brushy willow, when a pair of mallards came along, chattering away like a pair of lovers.

Dick just simply *couldn't* keep still quite long enough. The ducks saw him move and sprang into the air.

Thad brought the drake down with a broken wing, and while Bruno was retrieving it, lectured Dick on his restlessness.

"I believe these ducks can see through a brick wall," said Dick, somewhat chagrined at nearly spoiling the first shot.

"Probably they could, if there were holes in the wall like there is in this tree. Papa told us, when shooting mallards in the timber, that every shooter must use his own judgment, and I believe that where they are flying past like this, the best way is to let them go by as we did at the run the day papa showed us how to shoot on a pass."

"Well, let's try the next one that way, if I can keep still long enough," said Dick.

A low, penetrating hiss greeted their ears, and a green-headed drake came along, evidently looking for his mate.

It came from Thad's side, and was Dick's shot. The latter acted like an old-timer, for once, and did not move until the drake was well past; then he threw up his gun, and as the report echoed through the forest, the mallard doubled beautifully in the air, and came to the ground with a thump.

"Bully boy. Good shot. That's the way to smash 'em," cried Thad, admiringly.

"Did you notice that was first blood for the new gun?" said Dick, with a smile that seriously threatened to disrupt his facial regularity.

"Don't get excited now, because you made a good shot, and load your gun wrong," warned Thad.

"Oh, I am as cool as a frozen rabbit," replied Dick, his eager fingers, as he reloaded, belying his words.

"That may be, but it's a warm spring day, and the rabbit may thaw out," remarked Thad, sagely.

A few moments later, a pair of mallards came along the swale from Dick's side. When Thad got ready to shoot, they were passing behind a willow, which so disturbed his aim that he missed with both barrels, and Dick did not get a shot at all.

"I believe either of us would do better if we were alone, so I guess I will go over the ridge in the next swale," remarked Thad, after he had reloaded.

The swale on the other side of the ridge was wider, but sprinkled with willows and little puddles of water, similar to the one he had left.

Thad walked to about the middle, and stood by a willow.

Having no one to converse with, he silently watched the surrounding forest, and listened to the quacking, calling mallards, circling around the timber.

A low hiss startled him, and he wheeled around in time to see a mallard drake, that had been coming toward him, rapidly climb to a higher altitude, and swing off over the woods out of range of his gun.

Then, Thad realised that he had frightened it by his quick

movements, and remembered the advice his father had given him about moving suddenly.

He was mentally chiding himself for not keeping that advice in mind, when he saw a pair of mallards coming toward him, flying slowly, side by side, evidently looking for some spot where they could fill their crops with pin-oak acorns.

He seemed to be standing right in their dining-room, for, when about twenty-five yards away, both ducks slid down over a willow and, chuckling and hissing, threw up their wings and extended their orange legs to alight.

Thad raised his gun to his shoulder, and started to draw a bead on the chestnut breast of the drake, hovering over a little pool of water ; but ere he could press the trigger, the ducks caught sight of him, and such frantic climbing, quacking, and beating the air with their powerful pinions, to get out of danger, Thad had never seen before.

Of course, like all beginners, Thad shot quickly as possible, and while the ducks were rising and of course under shot, and watched with deep chagrin the frightened fowls wing their way rapidly over the timber.

"That was a nice trick. I'm mighty glad Dick wasn't here ; he never would let up telling me about it," muttered Thad to himself, as he reloaded.

Soon after, he heard the report of Dick's gun, both barrels, and directly a mallard came over the trees from that direction.

Its flight was peculiar. The wings, instead of the full, powerful stroke of a vigorous mallard, were held out almost rigid, and only the tips seemed to be moving.

It was going down on a slight incline, and Thad supposed it was intending to alight. However, it was a good shot, and as it went over, Thad threw up his gun ; but ere he could pull the trigger, to his utter astonishment, the mallard suddenly

fell end over end to the ground. When he walked over and picked it up, it was stone dead, and then he knew that Dick's shot had mortally wounded it.

A few moments later, he heard Dick's gun again. Next, his attention was attracted by a pair of mallards prospecting along in his direction. The ducks passed to one side entirely oblivious to danger, and when Thad's gun cracked, the drake doubled in the air, and came down like a wet rag. Its mate made a frantic leap upward, but luckily Thad's second barrel caught her just as she gathered herself to leave, and she fell beside her mate.

It was Thad's first double, and he grew at least a foot. He mentally decided that he knew just where to hold now, and could kill every shot. To add to his conceit, a few moments later he killed a single mallard that came along. Then he heard Dick's gun more frequently, and pretty soon, alas, for his conceit, a pair of greenheads almost hit him in the ear, and he deliberately fired both barrels and never touched a feather.

That put a damper on his conceit, and he was just congratulating himself that no one saw his rank miss, when he heard Dick's melodious voice sing out :

" You ought to carry an umbrella to keep the ducks from lighting on your head ; they'll get your hair all mussed up."

Thad bit his lip, but went on reloading.

" Say, Thad, I've got something the matter with my right-hand barrel it won't go," went on Dick, his voice exhibiting traces of excitement.

" Will it snap a cap ? " inquired Thad, coming up to where Dick stood on the ridge.

" Yes, I've snapped two or three caps, but I can't shoot the load out."

"Is the other barrel loaded?"

"No, I shot it off at a mallard, and tried to shoot this one, but it didn't go."

"Maybe you haven't loaded it right; got the shot in first, or something."

"Oh, shucks, I loaded it all right. It's something else."

"Were the ducks flying pretty thick?"

"Yes, coming fast as I could load and shoot," replied Dick, beginning to get excited again.

"The quickest way to find out is to draw the load," said Thad, unscrewing the wormer.

He dropped the ramrod in the left-hand barrel to be sure it was not loaded, and then drew the shot wad on the other barrel.

Inverting it, he poured out a charge of powder, and handed it to Dick. The latter's eyes stuck out as he viewed this undeniable evidence of his mistake, and he looked foolish.

Thad drew the other wad and poured out a fair sized load of shot.

"Your rabbit thawed out; that was the trouble," he remarked, quietly.

"Huh," said Dick, looking up. Then he looked silly and laughed.

"I don't remember loading in any such way as that."

"Of course not. The shot probably crawled in first, while you were watching for ducks."

"Oh, let up on a fellow, can't you? You have done the same thing," said Dick, as he took the gun to reload it.

Thad remembered the fact, and wisely forebore to bother Dick any further.

"How many ducks have you killed?" asked Dick, when he had reloaded.

"Four."

"I've got two, and I hit another one that came over this way," replied Dick.

Thad was scanning the air for mallards, and apparently did not hear the remark.

"I believe we had both better go back where I was. The ducks fly more there. You can go above me, and I'll stay where I was," continued Dick.

Thad acquiesced, and picking up his ducks, they walked back over the ridge to Dick's stand.

"Bruno is having as much fun as we are; he can see a mallard farther than anybody; he just stood there beside me and watched for ducks same as a man, and if he saw some off to one side or behind, he would whine to attract my attention," said Dick, with animation, glancing down at the sagacious dog, walking sedately beside him.

"Ain't they dandies?" cried Dick, pointing to his pair of mallards lying at the foot of a willow.

Before Thad could reply, two mallards appeared in front of them, and catching sight of the boys, commenced climbing the golden stairs without any unnecessary loss of time.

Both boys gave a quick exhibition of gun play, but a climbing mallard is not the easiest thing to hit, and when the fusillade ceased, their guns were empty and the ducks still going.

"That's good shooting," remarked Dick, as they re-loaded.

"Yes; good as I did when those ducks tried to light on my shoulder a few minutes ago," replied Thad.

"Does that kind of shooting disgust you, Bruno?" asked Thad, looking down at his four-footed ally.

The latter gave a feeble wag of his feathered tail, blinked

once or twice, and looked pensively toward the Mississippi as though unwilling to discuss the matter further.

With an admonition to Dick not to shoot toward each other, Thad walked a hundred yards north, and stood between two willows.

It was only a short distance to the Mississippi from where he stood, and through the naked, leafless branches of the trees he could catch a glimpse of the river, bearing its burden of drifting ice toward a tropic sea.

High overhead, pintails and widgeons winnowed the warm spring air on their northern journey, uttering their silvery, whistling calls.

Small, isolated patches of snow, looking sooty and forlorn, were rapidly melting and filling the little swales, as though glad to be resolved again into their native element.

Suddenly Thad heard the crack of Dick's gun, and looking south, saw a mallard start for the clouds. Then he saw it wither in the air and drop straight as a plumb-line, and heard the report of Dick's other barrel.

"Good shot," murmured Thad. Then he turned in time to see a green-headed drake go over the tops of the trees, out of danger.

"Just try that again, my friend, and you are liable to get your tail scorched," he muttered.

Fifteen minutes later, six mallards were sighted, coming up from the south.

He looked for Dick, but the latter was not in sight, and he did not dare shout to warn him, for fear of frightening the ducks.

"If Dick don't see them, I'll get the laugh on him ; I'll ask him where his sharp-eyed dog is," mused Thad, as he watched the ducks coming.

"No, sir. I'll bet Dick don't see them," he chuckled, as the six big ducks passed Dick's stand, without swerving from their course.

"Now I'll show him something; I'll just knock one with each barrel, and tell him next time to keep awake when he is shooting ducks."

On came the mallards, hardly higher than the willows, and Thad's chuckle deepened into a broad grin as the conviction grew that Dick had not seen them. Quietly his index finger stole toward the trigger as he stood motionless.

Suddenly a puff of white smoke leaped out from the willows, and one big drake folded his wings and gave up the ghost, while another, evidently wing-tipped, went down through the woods and struck the ground a hundred yards away.

Dick's second barrel failed to score, and the ducks scattered over the woods, leaving Thad considerably crestfallen.

His chagrin, however, quickly changed to honest admiration at his brother's brilliant performance, and he laughed softly to himself. "Blamed good shot, anyhow, if he did knock me out. Bully for Dick."

Thad soon saw that Dick had the better stand, as the ducks seemed to swing over there more frequently. He waited until he saw Bruno cross the swale with the wounded mallard, and then decided to take a stroll toward the Mississippi, to see if he could find a better stand.

In a low place only a few yards from the river bank, a big gathering of mallards got up with vigorous protests against his unwelcome intrusion.

A pair soon returned to see if the coast was clear, and Thad killed the drake.

He made a rank miss on the next ones that returned, and did the same thing a few moments later.

Then he got mad, and the next pair that came prospecting around to see what the show was for finishing their suddenly interrupted dinner, Thad made a very handsome double, killing them both dead.

After that, he stood for a long time, surveying the grand panorama of drifting ice, and migrating wild fowl, without getting another shot.

Then a big greenhead came past. It was out over the river, a long shot, and without stopping to think that he might have trouble in getting it if killed, he pressed the trigger.

At the report, the drake threw the dark green head over on its back, and folding its powerful wings, came down with a terrific splash, in an open spot in the river.

Then Thad realised that it was beyond his reach.

As the dead mallard, floating belly up, started swiftly for St. Louis, on the muddy current, he gazed helplessly at it, and instinctively thought of Bruno, over in the woods with Dick.

At that moment he heard a voice say :

“Go get it, Bruno.”

He heard a heavy plunge, and looking around, saw Bruno swimming rapidly for his duck, and Dick standing on the bank.

Then an unforeseen event occurred, as the dog started back with the drake.

A big cake of ice came drifting by, between Bruno and the shore.

A few strokes of his powerful paws brought him to the moving mass, and throwing his fore feet upon the ice, he endeavoured to bring his body up also. A moment he struggled and then his hind feet slipped from the ice beneath the water, and down he went out of sight in the cold, muddy waters.

In an instant he reappeared, and blowing the water from his nostrils, again tried to climb upon the ice.

Three times was this repeated, and each time the faithful fellow slipped back into the river. Then he swam around in a circle several times with the duck still in his mouth as if looking for another more favourable spot to get ashore.

Again he approached the treacherous ice, and made several more futile attempts to get out of the river. Each time that he went back into the water now, it could be seen that his head sank lower as he swam. Plainly, his attempts to get upon the ice, together with the freezing water, were fast exhausting his strength.

The boys stood upon the bank, watching his struggles with increasing apprehension.

"Thad," said Dick, in a low tone, his voice trembling, "is it possible that Bruno is going to drown before our eyes?"

The dog started for the ice once more, and then Dick did a rash, foolish thing.

Laying his gun on the ground, and quickly jerking off his powder-flask, without a word, he ran down the bank, and with one leap landed on the cake of floating ice, the inner edge of which was near shore.

Running across the rotten ice, without thought of the danger of breaking in, he knelt down, and taking the duck from Bruno's mouth, grasped his paws, and tried to pull him up on the ice.

He exerted all his strength, and would have succeeded, but Bruno was big and heavy, and ere half-way out on the ice, Dick slipped, causing his hold to break, and the dog splashed back in the water.

Three times did Dick succeed in getting Bruno almost

on the ice, only to slip and see him go back into the icy river.

The fourth time, by making an almost superhuman effort, Dick dragged the dog out on the ice, just as he himself slipped and went flat on his back, narrowly escaping a plunge-bath.

At that instant a shout from Thad caused him to scramble to his feet and look toward shore.

An involuntary shiver passed over him as he saw what the matter was.

The big cake had swung twenty feet away from shore while he had been engaged in rescuing Bruno, and Thad, having his attention engrossed by Dick's efforts to get the dog out of the river, had failed to notice it and warn them.

"What had I better do,—try to swim it?" asked Dick.

"No; don't try to swim. The water is so terribly cold you might get cramps," replied Thad, anxiously surveying the cold, muddy river.

"I don't see how I'm to get off, then. There isn't a boat in sight," said Dick, looking longingly up and down the bank for a friendly skiff. But nothing in shape of a boat was to be seen.

To add to their distress, the boys soon discovered that the current set away from shore at that point. While they were talking, and almost before they noticed the fact, the cake of ice had drifted thirty—forty—fifty feet from the shore. The stretch of cold, muddy water became too wide for Dick to think of swimming, so he reluctantly gave up the idea.

Thad walking along on shore, keeping abreast of Dick and Bruno, was rapidly revolving in his head some plan to get them safely to shore.

"Dick, does the ice seem solid?" he called.

Dick stamped vigorously on the cake.

"It *looks* black and rotten, but it seems to be pretty solid here."

"Think there isn't any danger of its going to pieces for awhile?"

"I don't think there is, unless it strikes a sand-bar. Why?"

"The only plan I can think of is for me to run home and get papa, and drive down to the fisherman's shanty below. We can get a boat there, and come out and get you. Can you figure out any better way?"

"No; I don't see what else we *can* do. There isn't a boat between here and the shanty, since papa got rid of our old one," replied Dick, trying to look cheerful.

"Then the sooner I'm off, the better. I'll take your gun and powder-flask home. Good-bye. See you later," called Thad, trying to hide his feelings under a jolly manner.

"Good-bye, Thad," shouted Dick, who was a hundred and fifty feet from shore by this time.

Thad hurried up the bank, secured Dick's flask and gun, and started up through the woods for home.

He had forced himself to appear cheerful while Dick could see him, but, as he hurried through the woods, the thoughts of Dick's danger in floating down the Mississippi, alone on a frail cake of black, rotten ice, brought the tears to his eyes in spite of himself.

What if the cake of ice should go to pieces, or strike a submerged bar, and the thousands of tons of drifting ice come piling and crashing down upon it?

In either case, death was certain for Dick and Bruno. For he had seen enough of the noble animal to know he would never desert Dick.

These harrowing thoughts intruded upon Thad's mind as he hurried through the woods, but he dashed the tears away, muttering to himself :

"It's no use crying over it. That don't help Dick."

"Papa, Dick and Bruno are floating down the river on a cake of ice, and I want you to help me get them off, quick. The ice is awful black and rotten."

These pleasant remarks greeted Mr. and Mrs. Kingston's ears as they were quietly eating dinner, when Thad burst into the room, panting and exhausted.

"Thad Kingston, you are not joking?" cried his mother, her face paling.

"The deuce they are! How far from shore?" said Mr. Kingston, rising hastily from the table, for he saw, by the expression on Thad's face, the latter was in earnest.

"They must be nearly in the middle of the river by this time, as the current set sharply away from shore," replied Thad, dropping into a chair.

"And not a boat below, nearer than Jackson's fish shanty," said Mr. Kingston, with a look of concern.

"I know it, and that's why I came after you. We must hitch up 'Uncle John,' and drive down the bluff road fast as we can, and get a boat," said Thad, who had recovered his breath a little.

"You rest a minute and swallow a cup of tea, while I hitch up," said his father, hurrying out of the house.

Thad gulped down a cup of tea and seized a piece of bread and butter.

"Oh, Thad, don't let anything happen to Dick," cried his mother, beseechingly.

"Never fear, mamma; we'll get him," replied Thad, darting out of the house. Two minutes later, he and his father were

being whirled along down the bluff road at the top of "Uncle John's" speed.

Dick was in anything but a cheerful frame of mind when Thad disappeared in the woods.

Floating down a mile-wide river on a rotten cake of ice was no joke ; but, with all his impulsiveness, he was rather of a philosophical turn of mind, and resolved to make the best of a bad bargain.

Then Bruno's company was a source of great comfort to him also.

Bruno's command of language was somewhat limited, but he could talk eloquently with his eyes. In fact, he could convey his ideas more understandingly than some people who have the gift of gab.

He seemed to know that he and Dick were in trouble, and tried to comfort his youthful master the best he could.

Dick seated himself on the ice, and, putting his arm around the neck of his four-footed friend, said : "Bruno, we are in a bad fix, but I guess Thad and papa will get us out all right."

Bruno gazed at Dick a moment, and then, with a wistful look toward the spot where Thad had disappeared, squatted down beside his master.

He said, plainly as possible, "It's pretty tough, Dick, but we have got to stand it." At first Dick strained his eyes in a vain effort to see some one along the bank. But the only signs of life were the crows, cawing and flapping lazily from shore to shore, and the migrating wild fowl winnowing their way overhead toward the frozen North.

Nothing but a level mile of floating cakes of ice, between which ran the cold blue water flashing in the sun, that seemed to mock his helplessness. Then he fell to counting

the flocks of ducks, geese, and brant that streamed past, and trying to classify them. Some of the flocks came very close, and Dick half-wished Thad and he could build a blind, and go drifting down the Mississippi on a cake of ice.

He would have the flocks fly directly over them, so the birds would fall on the cake of ice, and when the cake was strewn with dead ducks and geese, it should drift against a jutting point and stop, and they would gather the game and go ashore. Occasionally he got up to stretch his legs, and walked around in a small circle very gingerly, for he knew the ice was full of holes and rotten spots.

The day was warm and bright, and the rays of the sun were boring holes in it, and making it more porous and dangerous every moment.

They had floated a long time, it seemed to Dick hours, when suddenly at least a third of the cake left the main body and drifted away. This left only a block of ice about fifty feet square between Dick and the bottom of the river.

How many more pieces the cake would break into he had no idea, and his eyes swept the bluff road with a longing, anxious gaze.

Why did not Thad and his father come? It seemed to Dick that he had been on the ice long enough for them to drive ten miles.

He was almost opposite Jackson's shanty now, and was getting ready to shout, although he could see no sign of life.

Suddenly, as he looked, a light wagon came dashing down the steep bluff road at breakneck speed; the cabin door was thrown open, and in an instant four men were dragging a stout fishing-boat down to the river.

Then Dick threw up his hat and shouted for joy. But

only for an instant. He happened to glance down the river, and the shout changed to a cry of terror.

Just below him, the floating ice had struck a submerged bar, and was piling up in a mountain of crushed and grinding ice.

If the rescuing boat did not reach him before he struck the gorge, his chances for life were small.

The men on shore realised that fact, and worked with a will. But they were obliged to row around cakes of ice, and sometimes get out and pull the boat over one, so their progress was slow.

Every cake in the path of the gorge, when it reached there, never stopped, but slowly crushed and ground its way up the inclined plane of ice until it reached the top, where it broke into fragments, part of which remained to swell the rapidly increasing pile, and the rest of the mass slid down the sides into the river with a sounding splash, and floated away. It is a grand spectacle to watch the floating mass strike the bluff bank of a small island. The few acres of ground quiver with the mighty shock; the ice hesitates a moment, then slowly begins to mount the head of the island, crushing trees and willows in its path, grinding, crushing, and piling up a mountain of dirty ice, and there it remains until melted by the sun and rain.

Dick was perilously near the gorge now. Kingston saw it and shouted to the men to work faster. Dick seemed paralysed with fright, and stood motionless, watching the mountain of grinding ice a few feet ahead of him with a sort of fascination.

“Dick, take off your boots, and jump into the river when you hit the gorge,” shouted Mr. Kingston, a ring of anxiety in his voice at the boy’s peril. But Dick stood like one in a dream.

The next instant Thad averted his face with a half-sob, as he saw Dick start up the dread incline of crushing ice.

Then he heard a shout and looked again. Dick and Bruno were in the river a short distance away, but Dick seemed barely able to keep his head above water.

Kingston knew what the trouble was. The boy's long rubber boots, filled with water, were pulling him down like a millstone.

Bruno had got separated from Dick in the crash, but was swimming straight for him now, although too far away to be of any assistance, for unless help came in a very few seconds, Dick's hours on earth were numbered.

His father, standing in the bow of the boat, with every nerve and muscle tense, saw this. He saw Dick disappear beneath the cold blue waters an instant, then the curly head came to the surface again.

As the boy started down the second time, parental anxiety could stand the strain no longer. Mr. Kingston made one mighty bound out in the river, and reaching out his long arm, caught Dick by the hair.

Then the boat swept up, and the two sturdy fishermen lifted the three struggling forms out of the water. Fortunately Dick had retained presence of mind enough to keep from breathing under water, so he was all right so far as his lungs were concerned.

"How do you feel, Dick? Give me a pair of oars, and let's get to shore quickly as possible," said Mr. Kingston, with a shiver.

"I feel as if I didn't know whether I was on my head or my heels," replied Dick, with a half-dazed look.

"Here, wrap this coat around him," said Jackson, tossing a coarse, heavy overcoat to Thad.

Thad enveloped Dick in the big coat, and pulled off his rubber boots, that were filled with water, while the men hurried to shore.

Arriving there, a rousing fire was built, and Mr. Kingston and Dick took off their wet garments and put on some dry ones belonging to the fishermen.

"That was a narrow escape, my boy," said Jackson, turning to Dick.

"I guess you don't want any more of that kind of pie right away," remarked Thad.

"I didn't want *that* pie, but I had to take it," replied Dick.

"No, sir. I don't believe, if your father hadn't made that jump out into the river, you would have made the riffle," said the fisherman, contemplating Dick, as he slowly filled his pipe.

"I hope this experience will prove a sufficient warning to you, Dick, to keep away from the ice when it is floating, and never try to send a dog out among floating ice. Twice in my life I have seen a dog narrowly escape drowning under the same circumstances, having a cake of ice drift between him and the shore," said Mr. Kingston.

"You needn't worry any more about me, papa. I know a good thing when I see it, but floating down the Mississippi has no more charms for Bruno and me, especially on a cake of ice," replied Dick.

After an hour spent in drying their clothes, the Kingstons drove home, not forgetting to extend hearty thanks to the fishermen for their timely aid.

Although they did not tell her the full extent of the danger Dick had passed through, Mrs. Kingston cried and fussed over him, and brought out an extra supply of dainties

for him to eat. Which latter, of course, went straight to Dick's heart,—and stomach,—for he was nearly famished.

Thad took Bruno and went down in the woods, and brought home the mallards they had killed, a nice lot of them, but he did not try to shoot any more. He felt as though he had seen excitement enough for one day.



DUSKY DUCK.

CHAPTER IX.

SHOOTING IN THE WIND.

AFTER Dick and Bruno's narrow escape from drowning in the Mississippi, it was curious to note the air of paternal solicitude with which he watched over the boys, and especially Dick.

He seemed to realise how near Dick had come to death in the river, and thenceforth took it upon himself to see that nothing should harm him on land. He made no outward display of his charge; just simply kept his eye on Dick and Thad, and went where they did, unless chained in his comfortable dog-house.

Sometimes schoolmates of the boys would gather at the house, and all engage in wrestling and scuffling, as boys will.

On such occasions, Bruno watched them quietly out of the corner of his eye, without apparent concern, and a casual observer could not detect that he was interested in the least in their play.

But let one of the other boys handle Thad or Dick too roughly, and instantly a low, ominous growl warned them to desist,—a warning that was always obeyed with remarkable promptitude.

Mr. Kingston hunted but little with the boys in the spring. While not a crank on the subject, he had come to look upon spring shooting as against the best interests of the wildfowler,

by shooting the ducks and geese on their flight to the northern breeding-grounds, and while in poor flesh.

However, he let the boys hunt all they wished, for the practice it afforded them, preferring to wait until they arrived at a more mature age before showing them the error of their ways.

Needless to say, they made good use of their opportunities, and every Saturday found them tramping the woods and bottoms in search of wild fowl. Frequently, after school, they would take their guns and go down upon the bottoms to get the evening shooting as the ducks came in to feed. Their improvement was wonderful, and they soon became so expert that they hit oftener than they missed, which is saying a great deal, considering their age and the length of time they had been shooting.

Of course they ran against snags, as all young duck hunters do. That is to say, they would have an off day. Perhaps after doing excellent shooting on the wing for a number of days, they would feel self-satisfied and gay, and imagine that they had mastered everything about wing shooting.

Then they would go out on a wild, boisterous day, and shoot and bang away, from early morn until night, and come home dragging four weary legs and one or two ducks, utterly disgusted and discouraged, and pour a tale of woe in their father's ear, about the guns or ammunition not doing their duty.

The second time this occurred, the boys came home about noon, looking tired and cross.

"Well, boys, what luck?" inquired Mr. Kingston, looking up from his desk, where he was writing, as Thad and Dick came in.

"No luck at all," grumbled Dick, looking sour and discouraged as he set down his gun. "Thad found a sick bluebill asleep, and by resting the gun on its tail, managed to cripple it, and that's all we got. We shot at ducks standing still in the air, time and again, and never touched them."

"You did have hard luck. What do you think was the matter?"

"The last lot of powder was no good, of course. What else could it be?" replied Dick, discontentedly, walking to the window and looking out over the Mississippi.

"What do you think about it, Thad?"

"Why, I think as Dick does, that it must have been the powder. I don't see what else could have caused such a rank lot of missing; we have been killing ducks right along, before to-day."

His father looked out of the window and said:

"The wind is blowing pretty hard, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir; it has been blowing hard all the morning," replied Thad.

"I will walk down to the river with you after dinner, and show you why you failed to kill any more ducks; I must finish this letter now," said Mr. Kingston, quietly, turning to his desk.

"Papa is a queer chap, ain't he? He talks as though he knew all about why we didn't kill any more ducks," remarked Dick, as they strolled outside and seated themselves on a rustic bench beneath a big hickory.

"He probably does," replied Thad, who had acquired great respect for his father's knowledge.

"I don't see how, when he wasn't there," said Dick, skeptically.

"There are a whole lot of things you don't see.

Didn't he sit in his chair and tell us all about where we shot, and how we missed those teal last fall?" replied Thad, with great unction.

"I know he did, but that's different. He knew we shot behind, because we hadn't been taught how to shoot; but now we know all about where to aim, I don't see how he can tell why we didn't kill anything," said Dick, flipping a tiny pebble from his thumb at a fly on the fence.

"Maybe we don't know all about aiming yet. I tell you he is mighty darned awful smart, and you mark my words, Mr. Dick, he'll tell you all about it," said Thad, impressively.

After dinner, the trio took Thad and Dick's guns and walked down to the river. A stiff breeze was blowing downstream, and consequently the waves were very light.

The boys were in a great state of wonderment to know what their father was going to do. They were not kept long in suspense.

Mr. Kingston picked up a good sized block, and hurled it thirty-five yards across the wind, out on the bosom of the Mississippi.

"Thad, let's see how many No. 6's you can put in that block; and Dick, you and I will watch the charge, on the water."

"I'll make a sieve of it," replied Thad, confidently, throwing up his gun.

A sharp report followed, and Dick roared:

"Never touched it. The whole charge went two feet to the south. You're a dandy; no wonder you can't kill anything flying, when you can't hit a block the size of a dinner table, sitting."

Thad looked dumfounded.

" Didn't I hit it, papa ? "

"No, Thad. The whole charge went across the water, below the block. Now, Dick, you try it," he continued, turning to that young gentleman, who looked restless and eager to distinguish himself.

"Watch your little brother show you how to hit a block, Thaddy, old girl. If I don't blow it out of the water, you can throw me in the river," said Dick, as he stepped to the score with the proud look of conscious superiority.

Dick missed the block nicely, his charge also going to the south, and Thad observed :

"You blew it out of the water like fun. You didn't come within four feet of it ; you can blow better with your mouth. Now prepare to take your bath, smarty." And Thad seized Dick by the slack of his pants and the back of his neck.

Dick looked beat and foolish.

"Is that right, papa ?" he asked, wriggling out of Thad's grasp.

"Yes, Dick, you never touched it," replied his father, laughing at the boy's perplexed look.

"You try it, papa," suggested Thad.

Kingston took the gun ere the block had floated too far, and fired.

"You hit it all right," exclaimed both boys in the same breath, as they saw the charge sweep across the block.

"Let me try again ; I believe I can hit it," cried Dick, eagerly.

"Wait a moment, until I find another target ; this one has floated too far," said his father.

The next block had hardly touched the water before Dick levelled his gun, but to his chagrin the load of shot again went to the south.

"Your nerves must be unsteady," observed his father, winking at Thad.

"What is the reason neither Thad nor I can hit it, and you can?" asked Dick, in great perplexity.

"The reason is very simple, Dick. The wind drifts the charge of shot to one side. Now shoot, and hold about as far to the north, as the charge went to the south."

Dick did so, and most of the shot struck around the block.

"Try it again, Thad, and hold as I told Dick," said his father.

The former did so, and struck the block with nearly the centre of the charge.

"Now do you see, boys, why you missed ducks this morning? The wind was blowing, and every time you shot, the charge drifted more or less, according to the angle. Remember after this, when shooting in the wind, to allow for the charge drifting. I might have told you this, at the house, but it is hard to believe it until you see it demonstrated on the water. Now you know it to be a fact and will always remember it."

As they were walking home, Mr. Kingston said :

"To show you how difficult it is to believe the fact that shot will drift with the wind, I will relate that I once saw four men, all old duck hunters, shoot at a winged duck on the water, at right angles with a hard wind. The first man missed it as you did the block. The next one, instead of learning a lesson from his companion's miss, and holding in the wind, also aimed at the duck. He missed with both barrels, and the two men following did the same thing, so the duck swam away in safety, because these men had never practised at a target on the water to see how the shot would drift."

"I am glad to hear that," remarked Dick. "I began to

think that Thad and I were the two biggest fools on earth, for we never see anything until you tell us, but it seems that other folks are just as big fools as we are."

"As you are," corrected Thad; "I only shot at it once."

"You had a mighty close call at being a fool. All you lacked was an opportunity; you would have stood there and shot till the river froze over, and never touched it, if papa hadn't told you how," said Dick.

"What do you think now, Dicky boy, about your old father sitting in the house and telling you how you missed ducks?" inquired Thad, giving Dick a somewhat vigorous poke in the ribs with his thumb, as they walked up the bluff some distance behind Mr. Kingston.

Dick stepped out of reach of his brother's too friendly thumb, as he looked up admiringly at his father's stalwart form.

"I'll give it up; he's a trump," was all he said.

Thad and Dick remembered the lesson on shooting in a strong wind, and the next time they encountered one, did not come home empty-handed.

Although the wind still bothered them, as it does every shooter, and they failed to make the scores they did on a quiet day, they always returned with a moderate bag even in the wildest weather.

About the middle of April, the jack-snipe arrived, and they, together with Bruno, had fine sport with the puzzling long-bills, and by the time the spring flight was over, both had become wonderfully quick on the trigger, and a jack-snipe stood no more than an even show of escaping.

The bursting leaves again covered the trees, and the forest aisles were rife with singing birds, when the boys laid away their fowling-pieces, with a regretful sigh, as all boy hunters do.

The grass upon the bottoms was nodding and waving in the gentle breezes, and the handsome red-wing blackbird swung gracefully on the bended rush, singing to his help-meet, on her near-by nest, or fluttered above some heedless intruder's head, scolding ceaselessly at his impudence in coming into his front yard and bothering the women folks when they were busy with their work.

The dancing sunshine peeped through the dark green foliage, where the peaceful kine, with full stomachs, chewed the cud of contentment in the graceful shade, half drowsing in the summer air.

"Boys," said Mr. Kingston, one day, as they were sitting under the trees in the front yard, "you must have a new boat, and each of you a jointed rod, and reel; I want you to learn to catch black bass. We will build a boat-house on the bank of the river, and have a place to keep the boat, oars, etc."

"That strikes me all right. Thad can do the rowing, and I'll catch the fish," remarked Dick.

"There you go again, always looking for the soft end," said Thad.

"Well, if you're so afraid of a little work, I'll do the fishing, and you can do the rowing," replied Dick, facetiously.

"There won't be rowing enough to bother about, only to the fishing-grounds. And I am going to show you another method of shooting ducks, also."

"Don't we know everything yet, about shooting ducks?" asked Dick, in astonishment.

"Not quite, Dick, although you know considerable for a boy," replied his father, with a laugh.

"What kind of shooting is it?" inquired Thad.

"Shooting over decoys."

"What are decoys?" asked Dick.

"Decoys are wooden imitations of ducks, or other game birds, painted to resemble as closely as possible the live bird. Small flocks of decoy ducks are set out in the water where ducks feed, or rest, or on some fly-way. The birds in flying about see the decoys, and, thinking they are genuine, try to alight with them. The shooter has his blind near by, and when the circling ducks are near enough, rises up and shoots."

"Gee whittaker, Thad! That's the boss way to shoot ducks," cried Dick, joyously.

"I should say so; beats the other way all hollow," replied Thad.

"Just think of it," continued Dick, his mind conjuring up visions of comfort, "a fellow can sit still, and let the ducks come to him, instead of wearing off about four inches of his legs every day, looking for the ducks. Why didn't you tell us about it before, papa?" he inquired, with an injured air.

"If you wore off four inches of your legs every day, you couldn't hunt only a couple of days; you would run out of legs," observed Thad, surveying Dick's short drumsticks.

"Oh, you will have to shoot ducks all kinds of ways. Over decoys, in the woods, on a pass, and in the marsh, and sometimes in corn-fields."

"Corn-fields," echoed Thad, "do they shoot ducks in corn-fields?"

"Sometimes, when the water is low, and feed scarce. Some of the best shooting I ever had was in corn-fields. Of late years, shooting over decoys has been my favourite; I guess I am getting lazy in my old age. I used to love to tramp around, but now it is more fun to sit in a comfortable blind and let those do the tramping who wish."

"I must have been born lazy," said Dick.

"No chance for an argument there. No one to take the other side," remarked Thad.

Kingston was good as his word. He bought the boys a light, safe boat, built a boat-house on the bank of the river, above high water, and arranged slides so the boys could get the boat up and down easily in low water, for the upper Mississippi has a rise and fall of twenty feet or more.

He bought them each a good jointed rod, and reel, and went with them and showed them where both the small and big mouth black bass, that king of river fish, could be found. He taught them how to cast the fly, and how to fish with minnows and the trolling-spoon. For Mr. Kingston was as skilful in fishing as he was in shooting wild fowl, and Thad and Dick could not have had a better instructor.

They were quick-witted, and soon caught the knack of handling the reel and rod.

CHAPTER X.

HORNETS' NEST WADDING.

ONE Friday afternoon in September, Thad and Dick came home from school about three o'clock, an unusually early hour.

Dick told his mother that school "let out" earlier than usual, for some unexplained reason.

This may have been true, and probably was, as it is quite a customary thing for schools to do, Friday afternoons, on certain occasions.

However that may have been, one thing could be plainly noticed, even by a casual observer. That was, that something of unusual importance was about to take place.

The air of mystery and half-suppressed excitement, the eager restlessness, apparent in the boys' every action, all went to confirm that fact.

"We don't want Bruno."

Dick paused in a half-inquiring way.

Thad shook his head, "No," and Dick snapped the chain in the wondering Bruno's collar.

"Do we want our guns?"

Again Thad shook his head. "We don't want anything but a stick."

"Come on, then."

In reply to his mother's query as to where they were

going, Dick said they were going to take a walk along the foot of the bluff, just to look around a little.

Bruno whined one mournful protest at being left behind, as they started; but he was too well trained, and too philosophic, to make much fuss, and watched the boys disappear among the trees, down the bluff road, with the best grace possible.

Once down the bluff, and alone by themselves, secrecy was thrown to the winds, and the boys talked.

Dick said :

"It's the greatest thing we ever struck."

"Yes; and it's just by an accident that we found it out. If we hadn't gone with Jim Watson down to the river, and got acquainted with old man Fisher on the house-boat, we wouldn't have known anything about it," replied Thad.

"I wonder why papa never heard of it. And he couldn't, or he would have told us, anything as important as that," said Dick.

"That's what I can't understand. Papa seems to know everything about hunting, but he has never mentioned hornets' nest wadding, so he couldn't have known what it was," replied Thad, greatly perplexed.

"Maybe there wasn't any hornets' nests where he was raised," observed Dick.

"I guess that's the explanation, 'cause you know old man Fisher said that not one hunter in a million knew anything about it's being good for wadding."

"Why, didn't Fisher say that he hadn't even tried it himself?" remarked Dick, in an inquiring tone.

"Yes, he did, come to think. You know he traps more than he hunts, and he probably didn't care enough about making long shots to take the trouble to get it. You know

he told us it was an accident, the way he happened to know of it. An old Dutch doctor told him about it, back east, years ago. The old doctor used to hunt a lot, and he accidentally found out about hornets' nests for wadding," said Thad.

"Old Dutch doctors are awful wise. They know a lot that other folks don't," said Dick, looking around mysteriously.

"Yes, and they keep it to themselves. Do you remember how Fisher said the old doctor found it out?" asked Thad.

"I don't remember exactly," replied Dick, thinking hard.

"Why, he was out hunting pheasants one day and run out of wads. He didn't have a scrap of anything in his pockets that would do, and the only thing he could find was an old hornets' nest. He loaded the gun with that, and then he didn't get any more shooting until he was going home. Then he saw a pheasant sitting on a knoll about a hundred yards away, and shot at it just to get the load out of his gun, and killed it dead as a door nail."

"Oh, yes, I remember, now. And then he kept shooting it, and trying it farther and farther, until he found he could kill nearly a quarter of a mile," said Dick, his face lighting up.

"That's what he did, and he kept it to himself, until Fisher gave him a new mink-skin cap one day; then he told Fisher, and told him never to tell a soul, and Fisher said he never did until he told us, to-day."

"Gee, ain't it lucky we went down to Fisher's house-boat to-day? He's going down the river in a day or two, way down to Arkansas, to put in the winter trapping. We may never see him again," said Dick, in the tone of a person who has had a narrow escape from being disinherited.

"Awful lucky. I wonder what there is about it that makes it shoot so," said Thad.

"It must be some secret power that the hornets put in it," observed Dick, sagaciously.

"It's queer how it acts. Fisher said that old Dutch doctor told him that it would shoot just exactly so far, and shoot hard enough to go through a duck; but a foot farther than that, he couldn't stick shot into paper," said Thad.

"We're mighty lucky in having one of these nests around here, ain't we? Fisher said that old doctor told him that probably there wasn't more than a dozen in the whole United States."

"Yes, I remember. That old doctor told him there were two kinds of hornets, and the kind that makes these nests are awful scarce. That's why there's so few nests in the country," said Thad.

"Ain't it funny, that probably the only nest in the State should be right here under the bluff, close to us?" cried Dick.

"Won't we have some fun with papa, though?" said Thad, jubilantly.

"Fun is no name for it," cried Dick, vaulting a bush nearly as high as his head, in his elation.

"We'll hide our wadding and keep papa guessing how we make such long shots," remarked Thad.

"Won't it be jolly, though? We won't shoot at ducks or anything, unless they are way off, two or three gun-shots away; and then we'll shoot and kill, and then watch papa look at us and ask how we did it. But how are we going to keep him from seeing our wadding when we load?" asked Dick, doubtfully.

"We *must*. That's all there is about it. We can make some excuse and walk off a ways; or turn our back to him.

We've got to do something like that, for if he ever gets a glimpse of the wadding, he'll know right away what's up, 'cause he's sharper than tacks, papa is," replied Thad.

"I know it, but we'll fix that all right. Say, do you remember just the tree it's on?" asked Dick, peering ahead, along the bluff.

"Yes. It's just a little ways ahead. It's on the limb of an oak-tree about ten feet from the ground, on the side toward the bluff," replied Thad.

"Are you sure it's an *old* nest?" asked Dick, with sudden misgivings.

"Sure. I never saw a sign of a hornet around there, and I've looked at it a dozen times," replied Thad, positively.

Thad's reply brushed the last cloud from the horizon of Dick's happiness, and he felt airy enough to jump the Mississippi at about two jumps.

"And say, Thad; do you remember another thing Fisher said that old doctor told him about this wadding? He said you couldn't kill anything except game birds with it, and it didn't make any difference whether you aim exactly right or not; the duck or pheasant, or whatever it was, seemed to draw the shot, something like a magnet, you know."

"Yes. And he said you might shoot at robins or blue-birds, or any birds like them, for a week, and you couldn't touch one; it just seems to be made for shooting game," replied Thad.

"It's a good thing there isn't lots of nests in the country, ain't it? 'Cause then every one would get to using them for wadding, and they would kill every time, and after awhile there wouldn't be any game to shoot, it would all be killed, wouldn't it?" said Dick, as a sudden thought struck him.

"Of course. And that's just why there *are* so few," replied Thad, wisely.

"There it is, now," he cried, suddenly, pointing eagerly to a grayish brown ball, big as a man's head, that hung suspended from the end of a limb a short distance ahead.

"How is the best way to get it down?" asked Dick, stopping a short distance from the coveted wadding, and devouring it with eager eyes.

"Better throw a club up and hit the limb just above the nest. Maybe it will break off," suggested Thad, walking up a little nearer.

"Say, Thad, I thought I saw a hornet go in the nest just then," said Dick, eyeing it sharply.

Thad circled around the coveted prize, and surveyed it long and earnestly. "Nonsense. It's only your imagination. Besides, I ain't sure these kind of hornets have stingers," he said, finally.

"I didn't think of that; maybe they don't," said Dick, as the new idea struck him.

"Bet you I knock it down the first smash," said Thad, poising his club.

"Whale away," cried Dick.

And Thad whaled away.

Of subsequent events the boys told a somewhat conflicting story. Thad said that a quart of hornets poured out of that apparently defunct nest, while Dick averred, positively, that there was not a hornet less than three pecks.

Both boys, however, agreed on one thing. They were surrounded in a twinkling by a cloud of large, robust, indignant hornets, anxious to avenge the attack upon their home.

Dick also claimed that, instead of running at once, Thad stood around on one leg, waiting to see whether it was as



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he suspected, that this particular brand of hornets had no stingers.

If so, he settled the question to his entire satisfaction.

A big, fierce-eyed insect, on the skirmish line, made a vicious pass at that unfortunate youth, and drove a barb-wire lance into the back of his neck that sent him six feet in the air with a howl of anguish, and started him flying along the bluff toward home, at a clip that would have made a quarter horse cast his racing shoes and start for the pasture in despair.

"Come on, Dick, they've got stingers," shouted Thad, his arms gyrating, and slapping the air like a windmill loose in a storm.

"'Course they have. Ouch! any fool knows that," yelled the frantic Dick, darting after Thad with all the speed in his short legs.

Along the bluff went our youthful wildfowlers, fast as they could run, leaping rocks, and bounding over bushes high as their heads.

At every other jump almost, the air would be rent with a yell of pain, showing that the indignant insects were taking ample revenge for the insults heaped upon them.

"Thad, hold on, and help get some of these hornets off the back of my neck," wailed Dick.

"I can't stop, the blamed things won't let me," answered Thad, waving his arms wildly as he fled.

"Darn it! you'll pull a fellow out of the river, and then let a lot of hornets eat him up," cried Dick, petulantly, nearly frantic with pain.

"I'd sooner pull you out of four rivers than face this mess of hornets," returned Thad.

Nevertheless, he remembered the ice episode, and his heart

softened in spite of his pain, as he thought of his younger brother behind, at the mercy of the relentless insects.

"Hurry up, then," he shouted, pausing in his mad career, and taking off his hat to keep the hungry insects at bay, while he waited for Dick to come alongside.

It was a bad move on Thad's part. For no sooner was his head uncovered, than the vigilant foe got into his hair, and their long, lithe bodies, barbed with a venomous sting, pricked his scalp like red-hot needles.

Uttering another yell of pain, he forgot all about assisting Dick, and turned and fled.

He was not to be blamed. It is no summer picnic, facing a crowd of angry hornets. The writer has been there, and knows all about it.

Gradually, however, the maddened hornets, having taken their revenge, dropped behind one by one, until but two or three were left.

They desisted none too soon, for the boys were tired out, and a sight to behold.

Lumps on the back of their necks; lumps on their jaws, and over their eyes,—for the swelling comes up almost instantly,—while Thad had two or three additional reminders on his head, where he had taken off his hat.

But their enemies had departed, and for that the boys felt thankful.

"Blast your picture! take that," said Thad, making a vicious slap with his hat at the last visible hornet that still buzzed hungrily around them, as they seated themselves on a mossy log to rest their tired legs and ruminate upon their adventure.

His aim was true; but as the offensive insect fell, it struck on Thad's left wrist, and quick as a flash sent its keen barb

in the flesh ere it dropped to the ground, and was smashed under the disgusted Thad's heel.

"Gee whittaker, that feels good!" he muttered, grimly, surveying the red spot on his wrist.

"Feels natural, don't it? One more don't make much difference. I'm just a mess of lumps," said Dick, who was too tired, sore, and out of breath to cry if he had wanted to.

"If you are all lumps, what am I?" replied Thad, taking off his hat, and feeling of his sore cranium.

"Same thing, only more lumps, I suppose. Gee, but I'm sore!" groaned Dick.

"Come on; let's go home, and see if mamma knows of anything to stop the pain," said Thad, rising stiffly, and starting toward home.

"I've a good notion to get the gun, and go back and blow that nest to flinders," remarked Dick, vengefully.

"Excuse me. I haven't lost any more hornets' nests just at present," observed Thad, sagely.

"Well, it makes me so mad to think we have been done up by a mess of hornets," said Dick, rebelliously.

"I feel just like you do, but the next time I tackle a hornets' nest, it will be in the middle of the winter, when the pesky critters are frozen stiff," remarked Thad.

"I wonder if that ain't what makes the wadding so powerful," said Dick, as they walked along.

"What is that?"

"'Cause it's so hard to get," replied Dick.

"If the wadding is half as powerful as the hornets, I don't wonder it will kill a quarter of a mile," said Thad, with grim facetiousness.

"What will we do about telling papa?" he added. "I hate to give up the idea of fooling him; but he's so sharp, he'll

find this scrape out, and we can't get that nest until winter."

"How is he going to find it out if we don't tell him?" inquired Dick, feeling gingerly of a sore spot over his left eye.

"Oh, how does he find anything out? He can see through the side of a house," asserted Thad.

"Suppose we tell him how we got stung, but not tell him what we were after; he don't know anything about the wadding, so he won't be any wiser, and we can get the nest during the winter, and use it next spring," suggested Dick.

"It's an awful long while to wait, but maybe we can't do any better," sighed Thad, who had set his heart on using the magic wads the next day.

The boys looked like the breaking up of a hard winter, as they walked dejectedly into the house.

Mrs. Kingston took one look at their woebegone appearance, and threw up her hands in alarm.

"Goodness mercy! where have you been, and what is the matter?" she cried, hurrying up to them.

"Hornets," said Dick, briefly, in a tone that spoke volumes.

"What's good to take the soreness out of these jabs?" inquired Thad, feeling around over his anatomy to see if he had mislaid the location of any of them.

"They say ammonia is good," replied his mother, hurrying away after the aqua ammonia bottle.

"Does that soothe the pain any, Thad?" she inquired after applying the ammonia.

"Yes, a lot," replied Thad, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Why, Dick Kingston, you are just covered with stings," said his mother, with anxious solicitude, as she applied the soothing alkali to the venomous acid stings.

"You may not believe me, mamma, but I discovered that fact some time ago," replied Dick, making a grotesque attempt at a smile.

"For heaven's sake, Dick, don't try to laugh while you are in that fix. Your face would scare a mud-turtle into a spasm," said Thad, with a look of concern.

"If I am any homelier than you are, I must look awful. Let's see you try to laugh," remarked Dick.

The fact of talking about laughing, caused Thad to unconsciously screw up his features in an attempt at a smile.

"There, there, that will do; please don't try any more. I'll dream of that mug of yours, all night. That lump on your upper lip, and the one on your jaw, just sets you off; a glimpse of you would give a skunk typhoid fever," said Dick, turning away his head.

"How did the hornets happen to attack you?" inquired Mrs. Kingston, after she had finished her task.

"Oh, Thad supposed he had found an old dead hornets' nest, and hit it a swat with a club; but the hornets happened to be in there having a four o'clock tea, or something, and they got hot about it, and about a million chased out and hit us a swat apiece," said Dick, looking at Thad, with a peculiar expression.

"I didn't know hornets were so infernal particular about a little thing like that. If I had thought they were going to make such a fuss over it, I wouldn't have thrown the club. But we have to live and learn, don't we, Dick? I feel as though my hornet education had received a great impetus," said Thad.

"I think so, too. I noticed the hornets gave us a great impetus toward home," remarked Dick.

"Let's go out and unchain Bruno, and see if he knows us," suggested Thad.

Bruno seemed to be aware that something had gone wrong. He sniffed around the boys, and looked them over solemnly, as if to find out what the trouble was.

"Bruno, you want to thank your stars you are a dog, instead of a fool-boy," said Thad, patting him on the head.

"Gee, but you do look hard," said Dick, taking a critical survey of his brother.

"I couldn't look as homely as you do, if I tried for a week," was the reply.

"You can look homelier than I do, without trying," said Dick, briefly.

The following morning, both boys were stiff and sore.

They arose later than usual, and came down-stairs as though walking on eggs.

Their father was reading, but laid aside his book and said :

"Good morning, boys. What is this mother tells me, about your having a row with some hornets? Why, you are both as stiff as an old foundered horse. Tell me how you happened to get into such a scrape."

"There isn't much to tell. Only we had a row, and got the worst of it," replied Thad.

"I should say you did get the worst of it. You are the two worst bunged-up looking boys I ever saw. You look as though you had been fooling with a Kansas whirlwind."

"We were, and the whirlwind caught us," replied Thad.

"We feel just as tough as we look," said Dick, seating himself tenderly in a cushioned rocking-chair.

"You were trying to get some hornets' nest wadding, of course," said Mr. Kingston, in an off-hand way.

"Some *what!*!" gasped Thad, looking at his father, and then at Dick, in petrified amazement.

"Hornets' nest wadding," repeated his father, eyeing him curiously.

The boys looked at each other, and then at their father, in silent wonder. Then Thad turned to Dick and said, quietly : "What did I tell you?"

"Where did *you* ever hear of hornets' nest wadding?" inquired Dick, in a chagrined and somewhat defiant tone.

Now Kingston was a keen, shrewd observer. To use Thad's admiring expression, "he was sharper than tacks."

The blank looks and surprised expressions, together with their adventure, told him the whole story. They had been regaled by some one with the usual yarn about hornets' nest wadding.

"I heard of it when I was younger than you, Dick. I was stuffed full of lies, along with the rest of the boys, and nearly got stung to death trying to get it."

"Ain't it as good as they say it is?" asked Thad, mentally watching a great big air castle crumble to the ground.

"No earthly account. No better than an old newspaper. A box of the felt wads we use, is worth a ton of it," replied his father.

"Is that so? Gee, Dick, but we was lied to, awful!" said Thad.

"You and Dick must have got it worse than I did. You see, nearly every boy, when he begins to hunt, passes through this same experience. Some unscrupulous older person gets hold of him, and knowing his credulity, tells him some kind of a story about this wadding and the great things it will do.

I do not believe in deceiving boys, and I meant to have told you about this hornets' nest sell, and warn you to be on your guard for a big yarn, but it slipped my mind."

"I am awful sorry you forgot it. It would have saved us a big assortment of sore spots, wouldn't it, Dick?"

"About four hundred, I figure," replied that gentleman, after feeling of his "spots."

"Well, boys, you have both been lied to and stung, and I have been lied to and stung. All the fun I see we can get out of it, is to compare lies. I heard of it when I was between ten and eleven. A big lout of a young fellow told me, together with two or three other boys of my age. I never knew whether he believed the story himself, or lied to us purposely, because we were small and ready to swallow anything. However, it makes little difference. He told us it was the strongest and best wadding that ever was known. It would kill farther, and keep a gun cleaner, and did not require so much ammunition.

"We swallowed the yarn at a gulp, and started to look for a hornets' nest. Found it without much difficulty; got chased and stung, and our clothes torn. Captured it finally, and after using it, discovered that we had been duped, and its magical properties were all a myth.

"Now, if you boys can remember where you heard of it, who told you, and how big a lie they told, we can compare stories."

"We never heard anything about it until yesterday," replied Thad. "We were down to the river at noon, in old man Fisher's house-boat, and Fisher told us about it. Dick and I have been down there several times, and Fisher seemed to take quite a fancy to us; so yesterday, after making us promise not to tell any one else, he told us about hornets'

nests for wadding. He said an old Dutch doctor told him about it, back east, years ago."

"What did he claim it would do?" asked Mr. Kingston.

"Fisher didn't seem to know much about it except what had been told him. He said he had never taken the trouble to get any, but that old doctor told him it would kill a quarter of a mile."

"A quarter of a mile! Great Scott! I should say you *had* been getting a dose," said Mr. Kingston, in astonishment.

"And he said it would shoot just exactly so far, and kill, and an inch farther the shot would not go through paper," continued Thad.

"Really, is it possible a man could make up such a whopper as that, and tell it with a straight face?" said his father, in amazement.

"That isn't much to what he said about it," chimed in Dick. "He said you couldn't kill anything with it except game. That it wouldn't shoot with any force toward anything else."

"Worse and worse. Or rather, better and better. That old Dutch doctor must have sat up nights, to manufacture that mess of yarns. He ought to have a chromo," laughed Kingston.

"And Fisher said he told him that when you shot at game, it didn't make any difference whether you aimed exactly right or not; if you shot within a certain circle, the game would draw the shot like a magnet," said Thad.

"That is another new variation. That old Dutch doctor was evidently no ordinary mortal. His facilities for plain and fancy lying were unsurpassed. In fact, I don't know that I ever heard his equal.

"There is always somebody waiting to stuff boys with the

old hornets' nest yarn, but that old doctor seems to have made a specialty of it."

"He certainly filled us up, clear to the neck," said Thad, in disgust.

"Of course it is possible that this old doctor is a myth, and Fisher made up these yarns himself, out of whole cloth; but it hardly seems probable that an ignorant trapper could get up such a string of fibs."

"If I thought Fisher made up the story he told us, I would go and shoot a hole through his old house-boat," said Dick, indignantly.

"Tut, tut, Dick, don't be revengeful," said Mr. Kingston, gently.

"The chances are ten to one, the old man was lied to as badly as you were. He just merely passed the story along."

"No, there is no use of us getting mad about it, Dick. We will just have to bury it alongside of Santa Claus, and Jack the Giant-Killer, and a lot of other rot we swallowed for years," said Thad.

"I guess you boys were intending to play a joke on your old father, and not let him into the secret of that wadding, if it had panned out as you had expected," said Mr. Kingston, turning to Dick.

"Yes, sir," acknowledged Dick, who was just sore and disappointed enough to own up to anything. "We were going to fool you to the top of your bent; we were going to kill ducks way up among the clouds, and make you pay us a royalty for telling you how we did it."

"I thought we three were partners, and were to tell each other all of our scrapes and troubles," remarked Mr. Kingston, with a quizzical look.

"We are. But can't a fellow play a joke on his partner?"

We were going to tell you all about it after having some fun with you."

"I suppose it is all right, only, as it panned out, the joke was on the other foot," said Mr. Kingston.

"On the other head, you mean," replied Thad, grinning.

"The back of my neck caught a big share of that joke," remarked Dick.

"When any one tells you big stories after this, come to me before trying to investigate them, and it may save you both lots of trouble," observed their father, rising, as Mrs. Kingston appeared with the welcome call to breakfast.

"I know I don't investigate any more hornets' nests right away, if I know it," said Thad, seating himself at the table.

"Nor I, either. Hornets do too much investigating on their own hook," assented Dick, as he prepared for a vigorous onslaught on his breakfast.

"What makes grown folks tell boys such awful lies?" asked Thad.

"Because they know boys will believe them," replied his father.

"I'd like to be twenty-one, and meet that old Dutch doctor out in the road. I'd make a sick-looking Dutch doctor out of him. I'd teach him to lie to people," said Dick, with a ferocious look.

"I have a better scheme than that," said Thad. "Find a hornets' nest, and tie him close to it. Then hide, and stir up the hornets."

CHAPTER XI.

A DUCK CONVENTION.

ONE hazy, peaceful Saturday in October, shortly after the boys had recovered from the effects of their frolic with the hornets, they started down on the bottoms with their inseparable companion, Bruno.

Mr. Kingston had some correspondence to attend to, and did not accompany them that day.

The Mississippi bottoms, we will remark if we have not done so before, were something of a flatiron shape, the point of which ended at the Kingston home, where the river again touched the bluff. Below, the river and bluff separated rapidly, the low land broadening out into a wide bottom that extended for miles, when the river again touched the wooded hills. The boys had never been to the lower end of the bottoms, their hunting, so far, being confined to the upper end.

A belt of woods extended along the river, the whole length of the bottoms, filled with lakes large and small, which, with the numerous rice lakes on the open meadow, formed one of the finest wild fowl grounds in the country.

There were no large towns near, so the grounds were not hunted to death, farmer boys and the residents of the little village of T—— comprising most of the shooters.

“Suppose we go down to that big rice lake in the edge of woods ; we never was there but once,” remarked Thad.

"I'm agreed," replied Dick, and they headed that way.

This lake was farther to the south than they had been accustomed to hunting, and was a resort for nearly every variety of wild fowl, on account of its size and the abundance of several different kinds of food.

The boys went in at the north end and walked through the rushes to the open water.

A regiment of ducks, large and small, arose with a great flutter of wings. Some of them circled about and dropped back into the lake; others headed over the woods toward the Mississippi; while many drifted to the other lakes on the bottoms.

"Let's sit on this rat-house in the rushes, and maybe some of these gentlemen will loaf in this direction," said Thad.

"Here comes four, right at us," said Dick, as a bunch of gadwells headed for their blind.

"Shoot first, they are on your side," whispered Thad.

At the report of Dick's gun, the leader wilted and splashed in the water, causing Bruno to prick up his ears and look interested.

As the ducks scattered, Dick killed one with his second barrel and Thad made a beautiful long shot, killing one dead, high in the air.

At the reports, the ducks again arose from the lake, but the weather was warm and still, making them disinclined to fly; so most of them, after circling once or twice, dropped back in the lake once more.

Bruno retrieved the dead ducks handsomely, and just as he walked up to the blind with the last one, Thad whispered:

"Here comes an old mallard right close to us, watch me cut him in two."

The duck was not ten yards distant, and unsuspicuous of danger, when Thad fired.

It was a foolish thing for him to do, as the mallard was too close and would have been spoiled for food if struck fairly.

His aim was poor, however, and he only burnt the greenhead's tail.

He was feeling sorry for the duck before he fired, but his failure to kill irritated him, and he mentally vowed to break every bone in that duck's body. His second barrel missed just as clean, and then Dick laughed derisively.

"You can't shoot; let your uncle show you how to smash him," and Dick levelled his gun.

He fired both barrels in quick succession, and the drake, still an easy shot, flew on down the lake, nearly frightened into a fit.

"Well, I'll be darned," was Dick's comment, as he watched the escaping greenhead.

"What do you want to be darned for?" inquired Thad, who was rapidly reloading.

"Where could we have shot, to miss that duck with four barrels?" said Dick, as he reloaded with a crestfallen air.

"I'll give it up. I know where we didn't shoot, though."

"Where is that?" asked Dick.

"At the duck. I ought to have had more sense than to shoot at a duck as close as that, anyhow."

"It's a mighty lucky thing for that mallard we didn't have hornets' nest wadding," observed Dick.

"Yes, we would have shot the bowels right out of him. At that distance the duck would have drawn the shot right out of the gun, without shooting."

It was too fine a day for wild fowl to fly much. They were fat and lazy, and preferred eating to flying.

The boys sat on the rat-house for half an hour without getting another shot.

Occasionally a flock drifted in from the bottoms or river, but they dropped into the water at once and went to feeding.

Dick became restless, and remarked :

"I am going down to the lake below ; maybe I can scare up some and give you a shot."

"All right. You take Bruno ; I'll kill everything that comes here," replied Thad.

Dick departed, and Thad settled himself comfortably on the rat-house.

It was a warm, quiet, lazy day ; no ducks were flying, and before Thad knew it he was nodding. Once or twice he caught himself in the act, and roused up, only to nod again.

Presently he was astonished to hear a voice say :

"We must do something at once to save our lives. There sits one of them now, on that muskrat-house. Can't we tie his hands some way ?"

Thad peered through the rushes, and was thunderstruck to see a great mass of ducks in the lake, some of them within a few yards of him.

He had not seen them come in the lake, and greatly wondered how they got there. His first thought was to pick up his gun and mow a swath through the flock, but when he tried to move, he found himself held motionless by some invisible power.

Pretty soon he heard another voice, that he recognised to be a gadwell's, say :

"It is all well enough to talk about tying his hands, but how are we going to do it ? I don't want to get near them

again, if I can help it. Four of us flew up the lake a little while ago, and this one and his brother were hid in the rushes, and killed all three of my mates ; I barely escaped with my life. Oh, it is terrible," and the distressed gadwell wrung its feet and wept bitterly.

The other ducks tried to comfort the poor gadwell, as many of them had lost relatives, and besides had troubles of their own, in the shape of stray shot pellets, lodged in their bodies.

A big mallard, with an agitated voice, and a limp, spoke up :

" My friends, what this persecuted gadwell says is only too true. I can bear witness that they are a murderous pair of little rascals, and should be disposed of in some manner. They are learning to shoot altogether too well for our health. Their father is teaching them, and he is one of the best shots in the country. I know it, for I have seen him kill hundreds of my relatives.

" Just a few moments after the gadwell massacre this morning, as I was coming down to attend this convention, these two boys nearly murdered me in cold blood, right here at the head of the lake.

" I owe my life to the fact that I was too close to them ; they fired four barrels at me, not more than two wing-flaps distant. One of them singed my tail feathers, so I can barely use it for a rudder. I tell you it is a terrible feeling to have a charge of shot pass within a few inches of you and not know but the next barrel may fill you full of lead. The fright I received this morning has made me so nervous, I fear my heart is affected permanently."

The big greenhead looked very sad and depressed, as he finished his remarks, and a wave of horror rippled over the assemblage, at the recital of his narrow escape.

"I know all about them," spoke up a big Canada goose. "Just about a year ago, the largest boy killed my mate, dead, and put several shot slanting up through my breast, so I was nearly the entire summer recovering from the effects of the wound. They are getting to be a nuisance on these bottoms; I would like to get a good stroke at one of them with my right wing. The left one is still lame from a shot wound," and the big Canada swam majestically about among the admiring ducks, that got respectfully out of his way and gave him plenty of room.

"I don't see anything very terrible about these boys," spoke up a little blue-wing teal. "My mother has told me about them. She said that a year ago last September, she was with the first flight that came down from the North, and these boys shot at them all one day, and only killed one. So they can't be very dangerous."

"Have you had either of these boys shoot at you lately?" inquired a pintail, severely.

"No, I never saw either of them before. I just came down from the North. I was only born last spring," replied the teal, modestly.

"I thought so," said the pintail, decisively. "And now let me give you some later advice. Keep away from them. Since your mother told you that story, these boys have been receiving instructions from their father. I tell you they are getting to be bad medicine, and they are always on the look-out for young, fat, juicy teal," and the pintail gave the youthful teal a look that caused that plump party to glance about uneasily, and slowly swim toward the foot of the lake.

"Oh, pshaw! I ain't afraid of them," said a handsome little bufflehead, jauntily. "I think, with blue-wing teal, that you folks are making altogether too much fuss about being

afraid of these boys. I have passed them several times this fall, and I am alive yet. Just fly a little faster when you pass them, and they can't hurt you."

"You talk like a fool," said a widgeon, savagely. "How are we to know when to fly faster? They are always hid in the rushes or woods."

"Oh, don't pay any attention to what that little snip says. There isn't enough of him to plug a rat-hole, when the feathers are picked off, and he thinks the rest of us are built the same way," said a redhead, contemptuously.

"Are you sure the buffleheads have a voice in this convention? It seems to me they ought to be classed with the crows and bitterns," said a big canvasback, swimming up to the contending parties, and eyeing the little bufflehead with disdain.

"Do you mean to insult me, sir? My family is just as respectable as yours, if we are not so big and clumsy," retorted the bufflehead, flaming up.

"No, I don't think that is possible, after the heartless remarks you just made," replied his burly antagonist, calmly.

The bufflehead, nearly beside itself with rage, made a rush for the canvasback, and, catching a bunch of feathers in its bill, pulled with all its strength.

The canvasback tried to strike the little fellow with his wings, while the friends of each gathered around, quacking and jabbering, calling for fair play, and trying to separate the combatants.

For a moment it looked as though the convention would break up in a general row, but finally the belligerent ducks were pulled apart and taken aside to cool off, while the work of the convention proceeded.



WOOD DUCK.

"My friends," said a wood-duck, sadly, "it pains me greatly to see our deliberations disturbed in such an unseemly manner."

"Heaven knows we have troubles enough without quarrelling among ourselves. My family is probably persecuted more than any of you, as many of us nest right here, and consequently have to bear the brunt of the shooting until the rest of you come down from the North."

"These wicked men and boys hunt us from the time we leave the egg, almost. Every year we are becoming less numerous on these bottoms, and in a few years, if something is not done to stop the slaughter, we will go with our friends of long ago,—the buffalo and Indian."

"I am glad to see so many delegates here, and I sincerely hope that nothing more will happen to mar the harmony of our proceedings, and that something will be done to drive away these terrible duck hunters."

The wood-duck was so affected by its own remarks that it was obliged to wipe its eyes with a bit of lily-pad, as it retired amid quacks of applause.

Here a drake bluebill, that had kept in the background, swam forward and said :

"Mr. President, I fully agree with the remarks just made by our esteemed relative, the wood-duck. We should do something at once, or we are surely doomed to extermination. My family has suffered more than I care to remember, but what shall we do? We cannot, as some of you suggest, tie this boy's hands, as we have no rope. We cannot drown him, as he is too strong. It occurs to me that the most feasible plan is this: Arrange ourselves in one long line, single file. At a given signal, fly rapidly past him, and each give him a peck in the eyes as we pass. I think there are

enough of us to put out both of his eyes. What say you?"

A murmur of applause and admiration greeted these bold remarks, and Thad, sitting on the rat-house, began to feel uneasy, and made a fruitless effort to reach his gun, but, fortunately, a diversion occurred in his favour.

A plebeian mud-hen, skirmishing for something to eat, had swum into the convention, uninvited and unannounced, and sat listening to the various complaints.

As the bluebill ceased speaking, the unwelcome visitor broke out into a derisive laugh.

"Afraid of two little boys; you are a brave lot of jays, ain't you? My advice is to get a crop full of rice, and then go soak your heads. I have lived here for two years, and never had a shot fired at me. Your troubles are all in your minds, or your livers."

Having delivered itself of these unwelcome remarks, the mud-hen paddled off in the erratic, disjointed manner peculiar to no other bird, and began nosing around among the indignant ducks for more provender.

It had hardly wet its bill in the water, when a lithe, long-necked pintail sprang out from among the audience, and exclaimed, with flashing eyes:

"Mr. President, I arise to a question of muscle. I love peace as dearly as any duck on earth, but darn me if I am going to let a flabby, worthless, chicken-billed mud-hen come in this convention, and tell a respectable assemblage of ducks their business. With your permission, I'll lam the stuffing out of this scum of the marsh."

And the irate pintail, without waiting for the aforesaid permission, flew at the obnoxious mud-hen, and kicked, slapped, pounded, and pecked that poor fowl till the water fairly boiled.

Amid quacks of "Give it to him ; that's right, break his neck," etc., the shrill voice of a green-wing teal was heard above the din.

"Fly, fly, for your lives ; an army of hawks is coming !"

Such a quacking, fluttering, and flapping of wings Thad had never seen before.

Looking to the west, he saw a vast swarm of the dreaded hawks coming like the wind.

Once more he made a desperate effort to lift his gun, and — awoke.

He rubbed his eyes and stared about in a half-dazed way for a moment, then pulled his wits together, and realised that he had been asleep.

His gun lay at full cock beside him on the rat-house, where he had placed it, convenient for a sudden shot.

Somewhat stiff from lying in a cramped position, he arose, and it did feel good to straighten out his legs again. His dream seemed so real that he involuntarily looked around, half expecting to see a cloud of fleeing ducks and pursuing hawks ; but excepting one hawk lazily patrolling the air, and a small bunch of ducks circling over an adjoining lake, none were in sight.

On the lake below him a few scattered mud-hens loafed aimlessly about, looking for something to eat, as usual, each one paddling its own canoe, and apparently paying no attention to the others.

A few flocks of ducks were bunched about over the lake, with submerged bills, industriously feeding.

"Goodness me ! Is it possible that was all a dream ?" muttered Thad, aloud, his mind reverting to the duck convention. "It must, though. I'm a great hunter to fall asleep in a blind ! Gee, but didn't that pintail make it warm for the

mud-hen, though!" and Thad laughed aloud at thought of the ludicrous sight.

"I wonder how long I slept, and where Dick is."

Looking at the sun, Thad found he had slept an hour or two, and, as it was now after noon, he felt hungry.

The boys did not leave home until nearly ten o'clock, and fortunately had taken the precaution to each put a big bread and ham sandwich in their hunting-coat pockets.

Thad was positive that he never remembered setting his teeth into anything half so delicious as that sandwich.

He had half finished it, and was eyeing the last half regretfully to think it was not four times as big, when, looking to the south, he saw something that caused him to quickly deposit the remnant of his sandwich on top of the rat-house, and grasp his gun.

The reason was apparent. Four geese were coming up the lake along the west shore, and only a few yards high.

Thad's eyes sparkled, as he watched the big birds closely, mentally figuring if it were possible to get all four of them with two barrels.

Suddenly, he saw a puff of smoke shoot out from the rushes, and one of the geese folded its wings and crashed into the water and rushes.

Another puff followed, and another goose came down.

"I wonder if it's Dick. Gee, I hope whoever it is will leave some for me," muttered Thad.

The remaining two geese came past him, a beautiful shot, and his soul thrilled with joy, as he saw both of them tumble head over heels, one after the other, as the report of both barrels of his gun rang out.

He had just retrieved them and got into the blind, when he observed Dick and Bruno coming up the lake.

"So it was you that killed those two geese," he remarked, as Dick came into the little clearing by the rat-house, and threw down two geese and a mallard, exclaiming, as he dropped on the house :

"Hully gee, maybe you think I ain't tired. I have walked off the first four inches of my legs."

"Where have you been?" asked Thad.

"Oh, tramping around to different lakes. I must have walked about thirteen miles. There isn't much flying. I jumped and killed this mallard, and missed two more shots. If I hadn't seen these geese, I wouldn't have got much. I wish papa would get those decoys."

"Have you eaten your sandwich yet?" inquired Thad.

"Have I eaten it? Of course I have, and licked the crumbs off my fingers. I wish I had six more just like it," replied Dick, hungrily.

"I was just eating mine when I saw those geese coming. Take half of what's left; you have exercised more than I have," said Thad, generously dividing his piece of sandwich, and Dick, nothing loth, accepted the bounty gratefully.

"That was pretty good goose-shooting for a couple of boys, wasn't it? But they are lots smaller than the big one you killed," said Dick, as he licked up the last crumb of his donation.

"Maybe they are young ones. But say, it's mighty lucky they didn't come ten minutes sooner," remarked Thad.

"Why?"

"Because I was asleep. Snored away here for an hour or more, and I had the funniest dream you ever heard. Thought the ducks had a convention here on the lake, to see if they couldn't do something to stop you and me from shooting them," and Thad told Dick his dream.

"That was a queer dream. So the bufflehead thought we wasn't much good. I'll just lay for them. What will we do now?"

"Oh, let's sit here awhile, and see if the ducks come in this lake much to feed."

As the afternoon waned, ducks began dropping in to feed, giving the boys an occasional shot; but the lake was too large to give them much shooting without the help of decoys, and they did not care to wait for the evening flight, as they had a goodly distance to go, and quite a load to carry already.

During the afternoon they were treated to an odd sight.

A big mallard was sailing around along the west shore, close to the water. He was lower than the highest rushes, and looking for a place to alight. He was so much pre-occupied with his own affairs that he failed to see a bunch of green-wing teal coming from the west, just skipping the rushes.

They were going very swiftly, evidently bound for some mud-bank near the river. Suddenly there was a collision. The centre of the flock struck that mallard, tipping him a somersault in the air. The teal separated, like a school of minnows when something is thrown among them, came together a few feet farther on, and dashed away on their course, apparently none the worse for the mishap.

The mallard seemed to have had his feelings hurt by the unceremonious treatment, and hurried away to some other lake, where teal were more polite.

"Gee, I'll bet that mallard's ears ring," laughed Dick, as he witnessed this unusual sight.

"It's a wonder to me some of those teal didn't get knocked galley-west, but they seem to be just like rubber balls," remarked Thad, in astonishment.

"Don't you think we had better go home? We have quite a ways to go, and I am just simply starved. There is nothing left of me but my backbone and ribs. I could eat one of Bruno's hind legs," said Dick, appealingly.

"I guess so. Eight ducks and four geese are a pretty good load. We'll be tired enough when we get them home," replied Thad.

"I'm rather glad these geese are small. They are easier to carry," remarked Dick, as he shouldered his share of the plump geese.

As Thad surmised, they were tired enough when they arrived home.

Dick began to clamour for something to eat before he was fairly in the house.

"Mamma, come and take a good look at me, and then hurry and get supper," he cried, sinking into a chair.

"Well, Dick, what is it? You look natural. What is the matter?" asked his mother, surveying him affectionately.

"There ain't anything the matter. Only now, when you are with folks who are bragging about what they have seen, you can tell them you once saw the hungriest boy that ever tramped the meadows thick with dew. Now hurry and get supper," he said, impressively, as he pulled off his rubber boots.

"Hello, boys, you must have struck a goose mine! Four geese; that is something unusual," said Mr. Kingston, coming in the summer kitchen where the boys were changing their clothes.

"What kind are they?" asked Thad.

"They are the Hutchins goose. Just like the Canadas, only smaller. How did you happen to get four of them?"

"We killed all we saw. Didn't we, Dick? There was

four in the flock, and Dick killed two, and I two," replied Thad.

"Well and truly told. Had there been more geese, they would now be lying in the cold embrace of death," said Dick, in a tragic voice.

"For goodness sake, what ails that boy? Has he gone crazy?" said Thad, gazing at his brother in astonishment.

"Yes, my friends. You see before you a small boy crazed with hunger," replied Dick.

"I'll go in and help mamma get supper, and see if we can't get you filled up," remarked Thad, arising.

"Supper is all ready," announced his mother, appearing at the door.

Dick made a rush for the dining-room, nearly upsetting his mother in his haste, and the way food disappeared around his plate was a caution. In fact, Thad afterward claimed that it actually made him cry to watch Dick eat.

"Thad, tell papa that wonderful dream you had when you fell asleep in the blind," said Dick, after he had partially filled the aching void in his interior.

Thad told his strange experience while asleep on the muskrat-house.

"An odd dream, Thad. I suppose it was caused by missing that mallard with four barrels," said Mr. Kingston, with a quiet wink at Dick.

"I suppose you have seen lots of strange sights, and made lots of unexpected shots, in the years you have hunted," said Thad.

"Yes, any number of them," replied his father.

"What was the most wonderful shot you ever made, papa?" inquired Dick.

"I hardly know, Dick, I have made so many. I have fired

a broadside into a hundred closely massed blue-wing teal, without ruffling a feather, and I have shot one barrel at a butterball going ninety miles an hour, in a high wind, and killed it stone dead ; but I think the most wonderful shot I ever made was with a rifle."

"Tell us about it ; I am just full enough to listen," remarked Dick.

"It happened when I was about seventeen years of age, when I lived in the country. I owned an old rusty muzzle-loading rifle that I used to amuse myself with, shooting gophers, blackbirds, or whatever came in range. One rainy day I saw a blackbird alight on a post in the yard.

"Of course the old rifle was loaded at once, and I stepped out on the back porch to try my skill.

"Twenty yards beyond the post on which the blackbird was sitting, was a tight board fence, and beyond that was the barn-yard.

"I aimed at the blackbird and fired offhand. The bullet wounded the bird, and went on through that tight board fence, into the barn-yard.

"About twenty yards farther, it passed square through the neck of a big Brahma rooster, killing it instantly. Went twenty yards farther and killed another big Brahma rooster, striking it in the neck, also. I think that was the most wonderful shot I ever heard of, that I knew to be absolutely true."¹

"I suppose if you hadn't run out of roosters, the bullet would have killed more," remarked Dick.

"You must have loaded with hornets' nest wadding," observed Thad, which remark raised a general laugh.

¹ An actual shot. — F. E. K.

CHAPTER XII.

TWO TYPES OF MEN IN THE WOODS.

DURING the following week, Thad and Dick went down on the bottoms two or three evenings after school, but when Saturday came they were just as eager to go again.

"Boys," said Mr. Kingston after breakfast, "I'll tell you where I think we had better go to-day. You know where that narrow run goes in from the river and runs parallel with it, down about half a mile, and then widens into a shallow bay. That run is an excellent place to shoot bluebills; it is a fly-way for them between the river and that bay, which is a favourite feeding-ground. If they are stirring, we will get some shooting, and Dick won't have to wear his legs off, as it is almost like decoy shooting."

"That suits me, and by the way, when are we going to get our decoys?" remarked Dick.

"They are ordered now, and should be here in a few days," replied his father. "Now you boys go on down, and I will be there in about an hour. Go anywhere along the run; sit perfectly still and the ducks will pass you not more than twenty yards distant. You know how to shoot on a pass."

"All right, sir," replied Thad, and getting into their clothes and shouldering their guns, they started.

The boys walked down through the woods until they were far enough south, and then turned east to the run. They

were within a few feet of the bank, when they discovered a man clad in the garb of a hunter, sitting with his back to a tree, evidently watching for wild fowl.

The boys hesitated for a moment what to do, and just then the hunter discovered their presence.

The boys politely said "Good morning," but he paid no attention whatever to the salutation. Surveying them coolly for a moment, he said, roughly :

"If you children want to stay here and see me kill ducks, you want to sit down and keep quiet."

Mechanically Thad and Dick sank to the ground by a tree, and divided their attention between watching for ducks and observing the strange hunter.

In a short time a pair of bluebills came up the run just above the water. The man got his gun into position, and, before the ducks were fairly abreast of him, fired. The ducks were not touched, and the boys heard him swear as he broke his gun, threw out the fired shells, and inserted fresh ones.

It was the first breech-loader either had ever seen, and they stared a moment, and then Thad nudged Dick and whispered : "See, he has one of those new kind of breech-loading guns papa told us about."

Ducks were flying fairly well, and soon the stranger obtained another shot, only to miss as before. Three or four times he did the same thing, muttering an oath every time he missed.

Finally he growled out :

"Either you kids scare them, or else these shells are no good. I never missed that many ducks before in my life."

At the first shot the man fired, Thad made up his mind he was a novice, and the fellow's remark that he never

missed ducks Thad took with a grain of allowance, although he had been used to hearing the truth spoken.

The next shot, the stranger crippled one of the rear ducks out of a small stringing flock, that fell a short distance up the run, on the opposite shore.

Then his excitability showed that he had not been accustomed to killing ducks in very large numbers.

"Now, how the deuce (only he used a stronger term) will I get that duck? I'll give one of you boys a nickel to swim over and get it."

"The dog will get it for you, sir," replied Thad.

The stranger looked at Bruno a moment, scornfully.

"Will that farm cur retrieve ducks?"

"Yes, sir," replied Thad, choking down his indignation at hearing Bruno called a cur.

"Yes, of course, let him get it if he can," said the man, eagerly.

Thad spoke to Bruno and motioned with his hand, without arising from his seat.

The intelligent animal walked down to the run, swam across and hunted up to where the crippled duck was hiding, picked it up, came back, recrossed the run, and stood holding the duck in his mouth by the wing.

The stranger rushed up with the eagerness of a boy to get the duck, but the dog growled and stood motionless, looking at Thad.

"What's the matter with the cur?" said the man, peevishly, looking at Thad.

"He is not used to hunting with strangers," said Thad, taking the bird from Bruno's mouth, and handing it to the man.

The latter took it eagerly, wrung its neck, and sat down

to wait for more. Thad gave the dog a pat on the head, and said, "Come and lie down, Bruno."

"He is quite a retriever. What will you take for him? I'll give you a dollar, although that's more than he is worth."

"He is not for sale," replied Thad.

Just as he was seating himself, a pair of bluebills came along, and seeing him, swerved over the timber.

"Why the devil can't you keep still! I'd have killed both of them," growled the duck hunter, crossly.

Thad was pretty thoroughly disgusted, by this time, with the fellow's actions. It was his first introduction, out in the woods, to that kind of a person, and he was at a loss how to take him, or what to do.

He felt like leaving, but he knew they would have to go a long ways up or down the run to get away from him, and he hoped his father would come soon.

In a few minutes a sudden whim seized the hunter, and he said :

"I suppose you farmer boys shoot blackbirds. Some time come down here with your old muzzle-loader, and let's see you try to hit a duck flying, then you can see how easy it is."

Under ordinary circumstances the boys would have declined, and walked away indignantly, but Thad was so disgusted at the fellow's coarse, ungentlemanly actions, that he determined to show him that a farmer boy and a muzzle-loader could kill ducks.

Without a word, he walked down, and seating himself on the bank, cocked his gun.

Pretty soon the man said :

"Get your old gun ready, here comes one."

A bluebill came dashing along from the stranger's side,

passed him, and was even with Thad, but the latter had not made a move except to grip his gun a little tighter.

"Why didn't you shoot, you little simpleton, or let me," said the stranger, angrily, turning to Thad.

The words were hardly out of his mouth, ere the boy's gun came to his shoulder and with surprising swiftness was thrown upon the fleeing duck, now several yards down the run.

At the report of the gun, the bluebill went end over end into the water, dead.

"Ha, ha," laughed the duck hunter, sarcastically. "Forgot to shoot, didn't you, till I told you. You have got to be quicker on the trigger than that; you wouldn't kill another duck in a week that way. I'll show you how to kill the next one."

Thad said nothing, but reloaded his despised muzzle-loader, and Bruno retrieved the duck.

Shortly a pair of bluebills came along, and the man slowly raised his gun to his shoulder, took deliberate aim, and fired both barrels when the ducks were abreast of him.

The birds went down the run with increased speed, and then Thad's gun went to his face, and swung after them. A double report followed, and both bluebills lay floating on the water.

The fellow was nearly beside himself with rage at having his eye wiped by a boy, and a supposed farmer, at that.

When Thad made the second kill the man plainly saw it was not an accidental shot, but superior skill, and the fact only added to his ill-nature. But, with all his anger, he was shrewd enough to wait until the ducks were retrieved and in a pile.

Then he turned to Thad, fairly livid.

"You think you are damned smart, don't you, because you

have accidentally killed a duck or two with your old pot-metal gun? I could kill ducks all around you if I wanted to. I'll take the ducks and go; there is enough for me."

So saying, he gathered up the ducks killed by Thad, and the one he had crippled, and stowed them in his hunting coat.

"But you didn't kill all of the ducks," protested Thad, his cheek reddening with an indignant flush.

"Shut up your mouth, or I'll slap your face, you little whelp. I did, too, and I'm going to take them," roared this big, chivalrous hunter, advancing toward Thad in a threatening manner.

A low growl attracted his attention, and, glancing down, his face paled as he saw Bruno ready to spring at his throat.

It is uncertain what would have happened next, but at that instant they were all startled at hearing a ringing voice say:

"Avast there, my friend, take somebody nearer your size."

All turned as they heard the voice, and Kingston stepped out of the woods and walked up to them.

"You and Dick get back out of the way. Bruno, go and lie down. I'll attend to this party."

Bruno turned away, growling, and the boys obeyed mechanically, for there was a look in their father's eye they had never seen there before, and the keen ring of his voice, so different from his usual kind, jolly manner, made Thad shiver.

The bullying hunter was evidently surprised at seeing a man, for he hurriedly stuffed the last duck in his pocket and, picking up his gun, prepared to leave.

Now Kingston had witnessed the last half of the trouble.

He came noiselessly through the woods, as he always did, and it occurred to him that, before making himself known, he

would watch the boys shoot a few times and see how skilful they had become.

Hearing the voice of a man, he stopped, and his anger, at seeing the fellow try to bully a boy of fourteen, was so great that it was with difficulty he could restrain himself. And when the bully started to slap Thad, he thought it time to interfere.

Kingston was a man over six feet in height, strong, and lithe as a cat. In addition he was an athlete of no mean pretensions, and absolutely devoid of fear.

Walking up to the fellow, he said, with cool, scornful sarcasm :

" You are a brave thing. I won't call you a man, to bulldoze two little boys because you thought no men were around. I am ashamed of belonging to the same race you do. I have witnessed this whole thing. Take those ducks out of your pocket, and be quick about it."

His voice changed to a steely ring as he spoke the last words, and his eyes fairly glittered.

The man was evidently ashamed at being caught doing such a mean, despicable thing, but Kingston's sarcastic words stung him, and he replied, sullenly :

" I won't do it. They are mine. That cub lied when he said he killed them."

The words were barely uttered, when Kingston's right fist shot out, and caught him on the jaw with a force that fairly lifted him from the ground, and hurled him flat on his back, several feet away.

He had no sooner fallen than his adversary, with a bound, stood over him.

" Now will you give up that boy's ducks, or do you want more medicine ? "

Kingston spoke the words with contemptuous coolness, as he stood surveying his fallen foe. The effects of his knock-out blow on the stranger were curious, and Kingston would have laughed outright, had he not been so thoroughly angry and in earnest.

The burly hunter who was so eager to slap Thad scrambled to his feet, with a white, scared face, and, hurriedly pulling the ducks from his pocket, grabbed his gun and hat, and started down the run at the top of his speed. As he disappeared in the woods, Thad turned to Dick.

"What does that remind you of?"

"Hornets' nest wadding," was the reply.

"Where did that fellow come from?" asked Kingston.

"I don't know; he was here when we came. He has been swearing and growling at us all the time. Then I beat him shooting, and that is what made him so mad at me. What is the matter with him, is he crazy?" said Thad.

"No," said his father, "he is one of a class of men that like to browbeat children, and show his importance generally, when he thinks no one is around to resent it. I regret having to fight before you boys, but that fellow needed a lesson. He will not bother this locality again very soon, I fancy."

The trio seated themselves on the bank of the run, and took shot about for an hour, killing half a dozen birds, then Kingston said :

"You boys watch the run, I am going back in the woods to another lake. I will not be gone long."

Every few minutes a bluebill or ringneck came up or down the run, and passing so close the boys obtained a shot at each and all of them.

Dick had just made an unusually quick, brilliant shot, killing a swiftly flying ringneck, when Bruno gave a low growl, and they heard a voice say :

“ That was a fine shot, my boy.”

The boys turned quickly, and saw a tall man standing up on the bank a few feet away.

Their recent experience made them chary of strangers, and they looked at each other, and made no reply.

But one glance at the stranger showed they had nothing to fear, for his face was beaming all over with jolly good-humour and kindness.

The sort of a face that instantly attracts children ; that friendless dogs and stray kittens instinctively go to for sympathy and help.

One might swear that the owner of that face was a gentleman, and considerate of the rights of others, whether in the parlour or the woods beyond the pale of civilisation.

“ If you have no objection, I will sit here a few moments and watch you shoot. I will be quiet and not frighten the ducks,” continued the newcomer, pleasantly.

His genial manner was irresistible. The boys’ disagreeable experience an hour before with the other stranger was forgotten, and Thad replied, in a friendly tone :

“ Certainly not. You are welcome to sit here, and shoot with us if you wish.”

“ Oh, no. I don’t wish to interfere with your sport. Go ahead and shoot ; I prefer to watch you, anyhow. It is a good while since I have seen any one shoot the way this little fellow did just now,” he said, smiling in Dick’s direction.

The boys each shot once, and then Thad felt bold enough to say :

"You are welcome to come and shoot, sir. We get plenty of shooting, as we hunt nearly every day."

"I am almost afraid to shoot in company with such expert shots, but I can't more than miss, and it does seem like old times to get out on a duck pass again," replied the man, laughing, as he walked down, and seated himself by the boys.

He wore a new suit of hunting clothes, and carried the handsomest gun Thad or Dick had ever seen. From its general resemblance to the one carried by their former visitor, they knew it was a breech-loader.

Of course that gun rivetted their attention, — so much that they almost forgot to keep their eyes out for ducks.

"Whose first shot is it?" inquired their new friend, in an easy, offhand way, as though he had been with them all day.

"You take the next one," replied Thad.

The stranger soon obtained a shot, and crippled a blue-bill with the first barrel, and killed it with the second.

He was much slower in his movements than either Thad or Dick, and did not shoot with the dash and brilliancy that characterised their method.

And, it may be added, he did not kill as often or as clean. A fact he was quick to acknowledge.

"You boys are too much for me. I never saw your equals at pass shooting, at your age. I never saw anybody wait so long before making a move to shoot. Did you have an instructor?"

"Yes, sir. Papa taught us," replied Thad, modestly.

"Your papa must be a fine shot."

"He is the best shot in the world," chimed in Dick.

"I don't doubt it," replied the stranger, laughing at Dick's enthusiasm. "What is your name?"

"Dick Kingston."

"And yours?" turning to Thad.

"Thad Kingston."

"And my name is Howard. I live in the East."

At that instant a step was heard, and Thad said:

"Here comes papa, now." And Mr. Kingston stepped out of the woods.

His brow clouded when he saw the boys hobnobbing with another stranger. Dick noticed it, and cried out:

"This man is all right, papa; you won't have to lick him."

Kingston's face flushed slightly, and a shade of annoyance passed over it at Dick's blunt, outspoken remark.

This the stranger saw, and his quick wit helped to smooth Kingston's troubled brow.

Arising, he said, with unaffected frankness, although an amused smile lurked in the corner of his eye:

"From what these boys have told me, this is Mr. Kingston, I believe."

"Yes, sir. That is my name," Kingston replied, looking keenly at the tall stranger.

"My name is W. O. Howard, of the firm of Brown, Howard & Littlejohn, New York City. Here is my business card. I am on the road most of the time, and having heard so much of the Mississippi bottoms, and its wild-fowl shooting, I took the first opportunity, when out in this country, of seeing if reports were true. I brought my gun with me, and landed at the little town above here this morning, and walked down to see what the bottoms looked like.

"Happening along here, your boys kindly invited me to shoot with them, but now that you have returned I will walk on, with many thanks to these boys for their courtesy

in inviting me to shoot. I am just wandering about aimlessly; I am such a great crank on wild-fowl shooting, that I just can't keep away from a duck pass, or a bunch of decoys."

His frank, open countenance told the keen-eyed Kingston that here was a man after his own heart, and he hastened to say :

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Howard. Don't leave on my account ; be seated. There is room for all of us ; we are not shooting for the market. There is my business card," handing the stranger his travelling card.

The latter glanced at it, and said : "So you are on the road, too."

"Yes ; but I prefer to live in the country," replied Mr. Kingston.

"Sensible man. I also live in the country, but I don't have any such hunting-grounds as this near at home. You ought to be contented, especially with these two boys for hunting companions," said Mr. Howard, nodding toward Thad and Dick.

"I am," replied Mr. Kingston, simply. "And by the way, what have these boys been telling you about me ?" he added. "That was a very raw remark Dick made, when I came."

"The boys have told me nothing, although from what this little fellow said I suspect you have had trouble with some hunter," replied Mr. Howard, smiling at the thought of Dick's remark.

In a few words Kingston told of the trouble with the first hunter.

"Served him just right," said Mr. Howard. "I have no patience with such people out in the woods. There are

several kinds of them, according to their disposition, and I have had experience with nearly all of them. The fellow you had the trouble with belongs to the class who think everybody in the country is a fool, and consequently beneath them, and their legitimate prey. Then there is a kind who make the life of their camp mates miserable by their sulkiness or peevishness if everything doesn't go to suit them, or the food isn't just right. The man who shirks, and leaves his camp mates to do the work, may also be placed in the category of wood cranks.

"The peculiar part of it is that these same people, when in civilisation, are respected citizens and pass for good fellows. I used to claim that getting drunk would bring out a man's inner nature better than anything, but I have come to think that staying out in the woods for a few days will do it more thoroughly. When I am unfortunate enough to get caught out in the woods with one of those cranks, I remember it, and ever after shun him as I would a leper."

"You echo my sentiments exactly. I have known people who were the most agreeable and most companionable fellows in the world, when in the confines of civilisation, but remove them to the woods, and I would as soon herd with a bear," replied Kingston.

"If you folks will stop talking about the neighbours a minute, and keep quiet, I'll kill you another duck," remarked Dick.

"All right, Dick," said Mr. Kingston, gently closing his left eye at their new friend.

A single duck came up the run. As it passed, Thad remarked :

"There is a bufflehead, Dick; just what you have been laying for."



DICK'S BUFFLE DUCK.

Dick banged away, and the handsome little duck went into the water with a splash, where it lay on its back, kicking its short legs into the air like a baby.

Bruno had almost reached it when the white and green topknot came right side up, looked around a moment to get its bearing, and started away up stream as lively as though it had just dropped in for a call, and now had an important engagement elsewhere.

Everybody was astonished, especially Bruno. He gazed after the departing fowl with a disgusted look as much as to say :

"That is a nice way to treat a fellow," and reluctantly swam ashore.

"What is the matter with your butterball, Dick?" inquired Mr. Kingston, with a laugh.

"That's where the hitch comes in ; there don't seem to be much of anything the matter with him," replied the perplexed Dick.

"Don't worry about it. You are not the first hunter who has been aggravated by the sight of one of those little rascals flying away after it was supposed to be dead.

"I have had one of them float around on its back for half an hour, with its head under water, apparently dead, and then seen it suddenly turn right side up and go skimming off, to all appearances unhurt.

"One of the popular names for it is 'spirit duck,' and it seems very appropriate," said Mr. Kingston.

"You were sensible to start the boys out with muzzle-loaders. It looks now as though the breech-loader would, in a few years, almost entirely supplant the muzzle-loader, and, in the years to come, the muzzle-loading days of their youth will be a pleasant memory. My old muzzle-loader, at home,

is treasured as a priceless relic. I paid four hundred dollars for this gun, and it shoots away ahead of the old one, but I don't expect to ever have a tithe of the sport with it I have had with the old-timer," said Mr. Howard.

"That is one view I took of the matter. Then the cost of a good breech-loader is so great that I thought it best to wait awhile before buying one, and see if they still held to their love for shooting, which all boys have when young. If they do, I will get them breech-loaders," replied Mr. Kingston.

"I don't think you need have any fear on that score. The love of hunting was born in them," said Mr. Howard, laughing.

"I hope it is," replied Kingston; "for I think every boy should encourage the love of some outdoor sport, not only for the health and pleasure it affords, but also as a pleasant way of spending the evening hours of his life, when he retires from active pursuits."

"You are right," said Mr. Howard, with an affirmative nod. "I would not exchange the enjoyment I take in shooting, fishing, and wandering in the woods and by the streams, with the birds, for a mountain of gold. It never tires, never wearies one, and there is something new and interesting to be learned every hour almost."

The four hunters shot until about one o'clock, when, at Kingston's invitation, Mr. Howard accompanied them home to dinner. Later, they went down among the rice lakes, and took in the evening flight of wild fowl. Then Kingston, much to Thad and Dick's delight, prevailed on his guest to remain until Monday morning and take the same train he did.

Mr. Howard left the pleasant home of the Kingstons with regret, and Thad and Dick obtained a ready promise to return and hunt with them at his earliest convenience.

Sunday the Kingstons took their visitor for a drive. The

road wound along the brow of the Mississippi bluffs, and as Mr. Howard surveyed the broad winding river, the hundreds of rice ponds, and wooded lakes, he exclaimed :

"I have a boy about fourteen, named Frank, who is beginning to evince a love for shooting and fishing, to whom this place would be a paradise. He bids fair to be a chip of the old block."

"Send him out," cried Dick, eagerly.

The older people smiled, and Mr. Kingston said :

"Yes, let him come by all means. It will do him good."

"He cannot shoot much on the wing yet, but he wants to learn," said Mr. Howard.

"Let him come out next spring," suggested Thad, "and Dick and I will give him some lessons."

"I am afraid he will prove a nuisance, for if there is anything an old duck hunter doesn't like, it is to try to shoot ducks alongside of a greenhorn," said Mr. Howard, smiling.

"He won't bother us. He can tell us about New York City, and we will show him how to kill ducks," chimed in Dick.

And so it was arranged that Frank Howard should visit them the following spring, and Mr. Howard would come also, if business permitted.

CHAPTER XIII.

OVER DECOYS.

IT was well along into November before the decoys arrived. Thad and Dick haunted the freight office every day for a week, only to receive a shake of the head from the local agent. But finally their patience was rewarded by the arrival of two crates of decoys, containing a dozen each.

They took them home, opened the crates, piled the ducks in the woodshed,—a dozen mallards and a dozen redheads,—and gloated over them until the arrival of their father, on Saturday.

Then the decoys had to be weighted with a strip of lead on the bottom, and the strings with weights attached.

This operation occupied the better part of Saturday, so the boys did not get a chance to try them that day.

The following week Mr. Kingston took a vacation.

For two weeks, or more, the weather had been beautiful,—warm, hazy, and peaceful, with not a breeze to ripple the water's surface, or disturb the crimson and yellow leaves that had fluttered from the trees.

It was the calm that generally precedes the wild autumnal death-dance of the elements, that heralds the death of fall, and the approach of winter. And when that dance is ended there are few wild fowl left in the North.

The longer the calm continues, the more certain the storm is to come, and generally the more severe it is.

Kingston had been raised on the banks of "the Father of Waters," and from long observation knew the storm would come soon, and as it always lasted two or three days, and meant the last heavy flight of wild fowl, he took a week's vacation, feeling pretty certain of being in at the death.

Thad and Dick attended school as usual, and Mr. Kingston, with his gun and Bruno, wandered through the woods and thickets along the bluff, in search of ruffed grouse and quail, or threaded the dense woods on the bottoms, looking for a belated woodcock.

Sometimes it was out on the bottoms, following the muddy shores of certain lakes in quest of the toothsome jack-snipe, or seated on a muskrat house in some favourite rice lake, lying in wait for wild fowl.

Happy days, full of contentment and quiet joy.

Caring not to make a large bag, he only took the hardest and most difficult shots. In fact, to be out in the woods and fields with dog and gun, sauced with an occasional shot, was enjoyment enough for him.

Bruno was almost as much company as a man,—more than some men; and after school the boys met him at some agreed point, and they paid their respects to the wild fowl until the crimson west faded away into a black abyss, and the shadowy silhouette of a circling duck was no longer visible against the evening sky.

Speaking of shooting wild fowl late in the evening, here is a queer thing that has bothered me for a matter of over thirty years that I have been shooting them.

I was never able to see a single duck by moonlight.

I have caught shadowy glimpses of flocks many a time, and killed some of them. But time and again have I stood in a marsh or rice lake, where the mallards came to feed, and

by the most brilliant, whitest light that ever streamed from a full moon, strained my eyes and striven in vain to catch a glimpse of the ducks, circling over and around me.

I mean now after dark, or what would be dark if the moon were not shining. Yet I was possessed of very good eyes,—neither near nor far sighted.

Thursday, a gentle, misty rain set in. One of those warm, soft rains that seem to apologise for wetting a person.

That night the wind changed to the northwest, and the mercury in the thermometer dropped so rapidly it was in danger of dislocating its spinal vertebræ.

Friday morning, when the Kingstons peeped out of the window overlooking the Mississippi, a scene met their eyes that always sets the blood bounding and tingling through the veins of the wild-fowl shooter, and causes his eye to dance and sparkle with the wild joy of the chase, while he mentally champs the bit like a war-horse that sniffs the battle from afar, dances a jig, and hurries into his clothes.

The heavens were alive with fleeing wild fowl.

They were everywhere. Scudding along just above the water, high over head, sitting in the channel, drifting with the current, while, far as the eye could pierce over the Iowa and Illinois hills, the stream of wild fowl poured along, fleeing before the gale.

To a lover of wild-fowl shooting, who has never stood on the banks of the Mississippi and observed one of these great migratory flights of ducks and geese, during a late autumn blizzard, it is a sight worth seeing.

Ducks especially seem possessed of the wild spirit of "Pau-paukeewis;" the soul of the "Storm Fool" is in every one of their little bodies, and they seem drunk with the mad joy of the storm.

At least, they act that way.

A flock of hundreds will come dashing down the river as though they had a through ticket to the gulf, with no stop-over privileges. Suddenly a whim seizes them, and they circle around over the river two or three times, and drop gently into the storm-lashed waves with as much composure as though they were settling in a quiet lake of a still fall evening.

To all appearances they will finish their journey by water.

But no. In five minutes,—perhaps as many seconds,—another whim seizes the leaders, and away they go, helter skelter down the river, as though possessed of the Evil One.

Again a flock will dash into a little pond,—one that ducks never think of alighting in, when in their right minds,—hurl themselves into the water, sit there two minutes and look about sharply with their heads in the air. Something startles them, a falling leaf, or the chatter, maybe, of a squirrel, and they are out of the water and gone in a flash.

I have seen these feats performed hundreds of times.

Long lines of stately geese and brant float along at a high altitude, attending strictly to business and heading straight for the south.

They are too big and clumsy, and too sedate to waste their time darting about aimlessly, like the ducks. They just plod along on the main road, while their small cousins, the ducks, skirmish in every nook and cranny for fun, or something to eat, continually getting themselves into hot water by dashing headlong into every fleet of decoys they see around some point or bay, and, when the mistake is discovered, the heedless fowls are generally short several members of their company.

Do they take warning from their repeated mistakes, and reform? Not they. Like some of their human prototypes, they have neither the time nor the brains to rectify mistakes.

"Jiminy crickets! Dick, come here and see the ducks!" cried Thad, as he stepped to the window.

Dick had been awake for some time, but he was so deliciously warm, and cosy, and comfortable under the bedclothes, that he contemplated the getting-up process with considerable disfavour.

He was vaguely conscious of the fact that he must get out of that warm nest sometime, but, like all boys, he kept putting it off, dreading it, for the end of his nose told him in unmistakable language, that the atmosphere had changed materially since yesterday.

But at Thad's magic words, there was a mighty upheaval. The bedclothes went one way, and Dick the other. With one bound he was out of bed, and at Thad's side.

"Where? Where?" he cried, eagerly.

"Everywhere," replied Thad.

The rain had ceased, except an occasional squall, but a heavy blanket of cold, gray, rough-looking clouds hung over the sky, and raced along south with the wild fowl.

"Gee! Look at them! I wonder if it is too cold to go hunting!" cried Dick, between shivers.

"I'll bet it isn't. Let's get down-stairs. Papa is watching them, you may be sure," replied Thad, hurriedly dressing.

Mr. Kingston had been sitting by the window for an hour, watching the heavy flight, when the boys came down.

"What do you think of that? Isn't it good for sore eyes!" cried Thad, as they bounded into the sitting-room.

"Looks old-fashioned, Thad," replied his father, turning from the window.

"Will it be too cold and windy to go hunting, papa?" inquired Dick, anxiously.

"No. This isn't cold; it is just nice fall weather," laughed his father.

"Good! Now we'll try our decoys," shouted Dick, gaily, catching Thad by the seat of his pants, and dragging him backward around the room.

"Oh, you excitable, duck-legged little nuisance. Let up, before I stand you on your head," said Thad, breaking Dick's grip on his trousers.

"Do you know what day of the week this is, Dick?" said Mr. Kingston.

"It's — only Friday, Thad," said Dick, after thinking a moment, his jaw dropping as he looked at his brother.

Then it was a study to watch Dick's face. He scratched his head a minute, and then looked up at his father.

"Do you suppose our education would be entirely ruined if we didn't go to school to-day? Will we grow up to be idiots?" he asked.

"*You* will, of course, but stopping school won't affect the matter, with such a rattle-brained Joskins as you are," remarked Thad.

"Oh, is that so?" replied Dick, scornfully. "I guess I am at the head of every one of my classes, except grammar, and that don't count. It was just invented by some sour old maid who hated boys and wanted to bother the soul out of them."

"I don't think one day, and especially Friday, will retard your education much, Dick, and it is such a splendid day for ducks you may both stay out of school," said Mr. Kingston.

"Good!" shouted Dick.

"Where will we go?" inquired Thad.

"We will take the decoys down to that little bay at the foot of the run. It is surrounded on three sides by heavy timber that breaks the force of the wind, and opens out into the river. We will go on the north point and have the wind in our back, as wild fowl always alight against the wind. The decoys are heavy to carry, and I will take them down to the shore in the boat, and you boys can walk down through the timber."

After breakfast they all put on extra warm clothing and went down to the boat-house, where Thad and Dick helped get out the boat and load the decoys.

Then they started down through the woods, and their father rowed down the shore.

"Whew! Isn't this a snorter?" laughed Thad, as an extra gust of wind took off his hat, filled his eyes with dirt, and surrounded them with a whirling eddy of dead leaves.

"This is jolly. We can have a chance to try our luck again in the wind," replied Dick.

They followed the run, and on the way down obtained several shots at passing ducks, killing two.

When they arrived at the bay, Mr. Kingston was across on the point, setting out the decoys. It was only a short distance from the point to the head of the little bay, and when he had finished, he rowed over after the boys.

While they were returning, a flock wheeled into the decoys, but, seeing the boat, changed their minds.

Mr. Kingston left the boys on the point and ran the boat up a few yards under the willows and parallel with the shore, so it would not show enough to frighten the ducks.

The underbrush was so dense at the point that little more blind was needed than nature furnished. A few willows

stuck in here and there, a couple of short logs for a seat, and they were ready.

"When I came here, the bay was sprinkled with ducks. We ought to get good shooting," said Mr. Kingston, as he looked out over the rolling whitecaps of the Mississippi.

"Here comes a bunch," said Thad, in a low voice.

Half a dozen bluebills whirled in from the river, and seeing the decoys, came straight for them.

Kingston had slowly put the gun to his face, before the ducks turned toward him, and as they hovered over the decoys, he pressed the trigger.

One duck fell, and as the rest gathered themselves, he killed another.

The boys fired one shot each at the same instant, and one more duck dropped.

"I killed my first duck over decoys," said Dick, gleefully, as he saw the bird fall.

"You must have filled it so full of shot, it sunk; I don't see it anywhere. I killed that duck," replied Thad.

"Not this morning, you didn't, my son," said Dick.

"Sh! kill that pair of teal, I am not loaded," said Mr. Kingston, as a couple of greenwings darted from the river.

The boys fired their remaining barrel, and both teal went on up the run.

"You will find this kind of sport is totally different from pass shooting, boys. You don't have a chance to swing the gun here; if they try to alight, catch them just as they check their flight and raise the wings to drop in the water. Another thing,—never bicker over who kills a duck over decoys. When two or more are shooting, no one knows for sure who killed it," said Mr. Kingston.

A mud-bar ran out from the point, so the decoys were in

shallow water. Bruno had barely to swim to retrieve the ducks, and the water being almost dead there, the birds did not float away quickly.

But what astonished the boys most was the comparative quietude of the little bay. They had fully expected to shoot in a wild, boisterous wind, but while the forest bent and groaned before the blast, and out on the Mississippi the whitecaps rolled ceaselessly, the sheltered bay was a grateful harbour for the ducks.

"Easy now; here come four pintails. Thad, you shoot first," said his father, and an instant later the birds were teetering up and down over the decoys.

At the crack of Thad's gun they sprang into the air, and when Dick cut loose at them they were up in the wind.

"They are not a very easy mark, Dick," laughed his father, as they watched the four pintails fly off down the river.

"It's like shooting at a rubber ball on the first bounce," remarked Dick.

"Or the end of a spring-board," said Thad.

"Pintails are a hard bird to hit over decoys; they dance and teeter up and down so much, when about to alight," said Mr. Kingston.

"Wait a minute, here come a pair."

The boys suspended loading operations, and as a pair of gadwells hung over the decoys, Kingston's gun cracked twice, and both lay drifting on the water.

"Why do you put the gun to your face before the ducks get here, papa? I thought you told us not to raise the gun until ready to shoot," said Dick.

"That was on pass shooting. This is entirely different. Here you want to shoot at a duck when it is in the most

favourable position, and the nearer you are ready the quicker you can shoot when your judgment tells you the bird is where you want it. But if you don't see it in time to get the gun up before it gets too near, don't try it ; remain motionless until ready to shoot."

"Here comes your meat, Dick," said Thad, in a low tone, as a stately mallard sailed into the bay.

He saw the decoys, and, as his wings bowed over them, the report of Dick's gun rang out, and he collapsed like a wet rag, and went in among the decoys with a splash, a victim of misplaced confidence.

"Here comes some of your favourite buffleheads ; you and Thad shoot," half whispered Mr. Kingston, as eight or ten of these little ducks came toward the decoys.

The buffleheads dropped into the water, and Dick raised his gun.

"Hold on, Dick. Don't shoot sitting ; let me scare them up for you," said his father.

"Shoo ! Get out of there !" he called out.

The ducks looked at him a moment, and started to swim away.

"That swimming racket is too thin ; skip out," he shouted, above the noise of the wind.

Then the ducks took the hint, and rose out of the water, and the boys poured a broadside into them.

One duck dropped, and to Thad and Dick's utter astonishment, every duck in the flock followed suit, and splashed back in the water.

"Hully gee ! We smashed every mother's son of them," cried Dick, jubilantly, turning to his brother.

When he looked at the water again to feast his eyes on the floating buffleheads, not one was in sight. The rippling

water sang and danced ; the wind sobbed through the trees, and the whitecaps on the Mississippi beat and pounded noisily upon the farther shore, while the decoys bobbed about solemnly, as though they knew a thing or two, and wouldn't tell what it was.

"Dog my cats ! Where did all those ducks go to that we killed a minute ago ?" said Dick, scratching his head in amazement, as he turned to his father.

The latter was chuckling softly.

" Didn't I tell you they were 'spirit ducks' ? "

" Don't you suppose we killed them ? " inquired Dick.

For answer, a top-knotted head popped up out of the water like a cork, a little farther out than when it disappeared, and went whizzing away across the Mississippi. It was followed by another and another, until a string of ducks was skimming the water.

" You will be short on buffleheads, Dick, if some of them don't stop flying away pretty soon," remarked Mr. Kingston, who was nearly smothering with laughter at watching Dick's look of perplexity and disgust.

" Doggone it ; about twice as many have come up and flown away as went down. I believe they went under water and laid eggs, and hatched out a lot more," remarked Dick, as he saw them go.

" They are too many for me," said Thad, as he reloaded.

" Can't a fellow *ever* kill one of them ? " asked Dick.

" Oh, yes, they can be killed, of course ; but having a very small body, and a very heavy coat of feathers, there isn't much to shoot at," replied his father.

" I'll kill one if it takes a charge of dynamite," muttered Dick.

" Ah, here comes something. If they come within gun-

shot, give them every barrel you have got," whispered Mr. Kingston, with sparkling eyes, as a flock of white-looking ducks sailed in on the farther side of the bay.

One circle, and the ducks saw the bunch of decoys, and made straight for them.

All three guns roared, and then roared again, as the ducks started to leave the hornets' nest they had plunged into.

"Hurrah! Five canvasbacks; I'll get them with the boat. Be quiet, Bruno," as the latter asked with his eyes if he should get them.

Kingston picked up the ducks, and hurried the boat back out of sight.

"That was a piece of good luck. We don't get many shots at those fellows, here on the Mississippi," he remarked, as he threw the big, handsome birds down on the pile, with a look of supreme satisfaction.

"Keep quiet, here come two," whispered Dick, and a pair of birds splashed in among the decoys as though they were plumb tired out, and didn't care a cent what kind of company they were in.

The boys waited for their father, but the latter only laughed, and said, contemptuously: "Don't get excited, boys; they are only common old mud-hens that have got lost out on the Mississippi in the storm."

The despised mud-hens looked around a minute or two, and, not liking the looks of things, started to swim away.

Kingston hurled a club at them, and gathering up their weary bodies, they went skimming down the river, trailing their black legs through the water as though they had no strength to hold them up.

"How do you feel, Thad, are you cold?" inquired Mr. Kingston.

"No, sir; I am as snug as a bug in a rug," replied Thad.

"And you, Dick?"

"I never felt so jolly good but once before in my life; and that was when the teacher forgot to lick me," said Dick.

Sometimes there was a lull in the shooting; then again the ducks would come so fast they could not keep a load in the guns.

"I'll take Bruno out in the woods, and give him a run, he looks cold," remarked Mr. Kingston, looking at the shivering dog.

He had just returned, and was still standing behind the boys when a bufflehead whipped around the point, and dropped in among the decoys.

"Here is your chance to get revenge, Dick," said Thad.

"I'll scare him up, and you kill him. Make a sure thing of it this time. Ready now."

The bufflehead got out of the water, and instead of going out over the river, flew past the blind to go up the run. The little fellow was not thirty feet away when he passed Dick, and the boy could almost see the white of its eye. Forgetting all about his instructions on shooting passing birds, in his eagerness to kill that particular duck, Dick banged away with both barrels, but the only noticeable effect was to make two big splashes in the water behind the bird.

Dick was frantic.

"Kill him, Thad! Smash him! Cut him in two!" he yelled.

In a second Thad had sent two charges after the bunch of flying feathers, but to no purpose.

Mr. Kingston laughed, took a step down the bank, and, throwing his gun on the bufflehead, pressed the trigger.

"There is your 'spirit duck'; I don't think he will fly

away this time, Dick," he remarked, as the duck struck the water.

And he was right. Bruno brought it to shore, and Dick examined it and gloated over it.

"No wonder we couldn't kill it. It's nothing but a bunch of feathers," he remarked.

"Bunch of feathers and a gall," suggested Thad.

"If I had only killed you myself," sighed Dick.

"Why did you shoot so quick?" asked Thad.

"Why did *you* shoot so quick?" retorted Dick.

"Oh, I didn't care about killing it. I just shot to accommodate you. I was trying to see if I could cut its head off," replied Thad.

"You have queer ideas about which end of a duck the head is on. You came a good deal nearer cutting off its tail," said Dick.

"I guess that bufflehead in my dream had a pretty level head after all," said Thad.

"That's what he did; but this fellow won't bother any more boys," replied Dick.

By noon they had a fine pile of ducks.

"Oh, look, it is snowing!" cried Thad, pointing to the white flakes out over the water.

At that instant the sharp report of his father's gun rang in his ears, and both boys looked up. Nothing was in sight.

"What did you shoot at, papa," inquired Thad.

A great splash in the water's edge a few feet from him, answered, and Thad saw a big duck lying on its back fanning the air with both feet.

"Another canvasback," he announced, as he lifted it out of the water.

"That isn't a canvasback, it is a redhead. He was trying

to sneak over our heads without our seeing him, but I fooled the gentleman," said Mr. Kingston, as he rapidly reloaded.

"It looks just like a canvasback," said Thad, stepping into the blind. His father picked one of the latter ducks from the pile.

"Do you see this canvasback's bill is black and runs almost straight from the top of the head, while the duck you have has a blue bill, that is scooped out on top like a turned-up nose? You notice also, that redhead has a much more chunky head than this canvasback. Can you tell them apart now?"

"Yes, sir, I can see a big difference now," replied Thad.

"See it snow," said Dick, as he watched the whirling flakes driven before the blast.

For half an hour the snow-storm raged, and ducks galore came into the sheltered bay. Our duck hunters improved the opportunity and added materially to their bag.

"Hark," said Mr. Kingston, as the storm eased up a little.

All listened, and distinctly an "Ah-unk, Ah-unk," was borne to their ears on the blast.

"Geese, and to the north of us. Keep quiet," said Mr. Kingston, in a low tone.

The cries of the geese gradually became clearer, but whether they were on the line of flight or not, the hunters could only conjecture.

"Do you think we will get a shot at them?" whispered Dick, eagerly.

"I don't know. Stand perfectly still; they sound as though they were coming right over us, but they may be too high for a shot," was the whispered reply.

The cries ceased for a time; so long, in fact, that the hunters standing there with beating hearts began to think

the birds had changed their course and gone across the river.

Suddenly five great gray forms loomed up right over their heads, not thirty yards high.

"Give it to them, boys, every barrel; I'll take the leader," cried Mr. Kingston, raising his gun.

Those five geese must have thought Hades had let out for noon, when the six barrels poured their death-dealing pellets up through the trees.

As the six reports boomed out above the roar of the storm, the leader and the one directly behind him doubled in the air, and, folding their big wings, came down into the water with a splash that sounded as though a section of the Iowa bluffs had fallen into the river.

"Bully! two old seed geese," shouted Thad, and he and Dick put down their guns and danced a double shuffle, to the edification of their father. Then Thad started after the big birds, now kicking around in the shallow water.

Dick was just putting the finishing touches to his jig, and, as Thad turned his back, he could not resist the temptation, in his exuberance, of launching a kick at his brother's anatomy. A kick that, had it taken effect, would have materially helped Thad out to the geese, but, owing to the abbreviated condition of Dick's legs, it fell short.

"I saw you, young fellow, and if your legs had been over ten inches long, I would have made you hard to catch," called out Thad over his shoulder.

"Gee, they weigh about forty pounds apiece, I should judge," he remarked, as he came wading back through the shallow water, towing a goose by the head in either hand.

"Not quite that, I guess, but they are big Canadas," said his father.

"Thad, stand still a minute," said Dick.

The former was in the edge of the water, and halted, standing like a statue.

He could see nothing, but heard his father say, quietly :
"Now give it to him."

Then he heard the crack of Dick's gun, and, looking out over the bay, saw a small bunch of white and black feathers going end over end like an acrobat, finally striking the water with a splash.

"Good shot, Dick, you got one at last," he heard his father say.

"What did you kill, Dick ?" he asked.

"Dick finally got his bufflehead," replied Mr. Kingston, while Dick's face was wreathed in smiles.

"The lunch is all gone, Dick, are you hungry again ?" he inquired, as Bruno was bringing in the duck.

"Don't mention it ; I am always hungry," replied Dick, his mouth watering.

"Count the game, Thad."

"Sixty-five ducks, and two geese," replied Thad, after sorting them over.

"That isn't bad ; it looks as though it was going to clear off and freeze. Have you had shooting enough, Thad ? It is about three o'clock."

"Yes, sir, plenty," was the reply.

"It is no use to talk to Dick, I know he is nearly starved."

"How do you like decoy shooting, Dick ?" asked Mr. Kingston, as they were getting ready to return.

"It's my kind of shooting,—gives my legs a chance to grow," replied Dick.

CHAPTER XIV.

PRAIRIE - CHICKENS.

THE cold wave that followed in the wake of the blizzard left the ponds and quiet lakes sheeted with an icy veneer as a memento of its visit, cutting off the food supply of the wild fowl.

But the wild fowl were not bothering their heads about the food supply in that latitude, for they had fled to sunny climes, and only a stray flock of belated mallards, and a few fish-ducks, those denizens of the winter air-holes, remained of all the countless hosts that a few days before had swept the river and bottoms with circling wings.

Thad and Dick contentedly put away their guns and decoys to await the welcome springtime.

The winter passed, and before they knew it, blustering March was at hand, and the river was again singing its old-time song of freedom.

Wild fowl and singing birds again made glad the heart of man, and the boys got out the guns and decoys, painted the boat, and entered upon the spring campaign with the keen zest of youthful hunters.

They gradually came to place their decoys off the points of the islands, or "towheads," as they are termed, in the Mississippi.

Mr. Kingston took them out in the morning, at daylight, two or three times, and showed them what it was to breathe

the fresh, crisp morning air, and watch the sunrise on the Mississippi, while waiting for ducks.

This was another phase of duck shooting Thad and Dick had not thought of, and they fell in love with it at once.

Of course it was disagreeable at first, getting out of a nice warm bed before daylight ; but once up, and outside of a cup of hot coffee, the boys took a keen delight in rowing out to an island, placing the decoys, and viewing the broad expanse of river, in the cool shadows of the breaking morn ; returning to an eight or nine o'clock breakfast, that was sauced with the ravenous appetite of boyhood, and made still more keen by early morning exercise.

In fact, after one of these morning jaunts, it was simply astounding the amount of provender Dick would stow away and still feel comfortable. For Dick was a great eater. He was always hungry, and always figuring ahead, and helping his mother plan what to cook.

Thad was entirely different. Tall, slim, and tough as a knot, he cared little what the bill of fare was, and generally finished his meal before Dick had fairly started.

About this time, Frank Howard arrived from New York. He was a tall, white-faced, slim, good-natured fellow, and Thad and Dick "took" to him at once.

He brought a light, handsome breech-loader, any quantity of fine new hunting clothes, and a back-load of shells.

The wealthy New York boy had evidently been sensibly reared, as he made no effort to "show off."

Thad and Dick took him out on a pass, and over decoys, and it was amusing to watch his enthusiastic, but futile attempts to kill ducks on the wing.

The boys were patient and kind, and showed him how he shot behind, and tried to teach him their method.



"AND THEY BECAME SHREWD, PATIENT, TIRELESS ANGLERS."

He was slower to learn than they had been, but, before he left, became proficient enough to kill about one shot in four, a fact that pleased him immensely, and he returned home with the promise to come every season.

Spring passed all too quickly, and after the ducks, geese, and jack-snipe had departed, Thad and Dick turned their attention to fishing.

It is wonderful how quickly some boys will pick up the art of angling.

At the close of the second summer, after their father had bought them proper tackle, and instructed them how to use it, they could handle a small or big mouth black bass almost as skilfully as their sire. And they became shrewd, patient, tireless anglers.

If the bass declined to take live minnows, the boys did not go home complaining that the fish would not bite. Not they. The bass were tempted with a spoon, flies, live frogs, butterflies, worms, crawfish, until something was found to tempt their capricious appetites. For a bass will generally bite if you have the particular bait he wants.

And no one knew better the favourite haunts of the bass than Thad or Dick. They knew every perpendicular mudbank where the "redeyes" lay in wait for the youthful and unwary crawfish, and no redskin ever crept more silently upon his foe than they stole to the top of these banks to angle for the small-mouth bass. For that gentleman is almost as wary as his far-famed cousin, the trout, and the least unusual noise, and good-bye "smallmouth." One may as well go home and fish in the wash-tub.

They knew every swift rocky point and shore where the bass kept the schools of minnows in a fever of unrest, leaping out of the water to avoid the voracious cannibals. Out

on the river nearly every day, they soon knew the fishing places better than Mr. Kingston, and when he was at leisure to go with them he generally left it to their judgment where to go.

It was the close of August, and school would soon begin.

One Saturday morning, Mr. Kingston said :

"Boys, we haven't been after prairie-chickens yet. Suppose we hitch up and drive down on the bottoms and try them a whirl. They are nearly full grown now, and delicious eating."

"I'm agreeable, especially the hitching-up scheme. You are getting more sensible every day ; my legs haven't grown out yet where I wore them off, hunting ducks, before we got the decoys," said Dick.

"Just my size. I want one good hunt before we start to school. Say, Dick, if you have good luck with your legs, and we keep on shooting over decoys, and your legs keep growing right along, they may get to be nearly thirteen inches long by the time you are twenty-five," observed Thad.

"My legs don't bother me, so long as my stomach don't get any smaller."

"No danger of that, it won't get a chance."

"Do we want rubber boots, papa ?" inquired Dick.

"No, of course not. They would scald our feet. Wear your shoes, we will hunt on the ridges. There was no high water to drown them out this spring, and there should be plenty of chickens on the ridges," replied Mr. Kingston.

"What size shot ?" inquired Thad, bringing out his shot-belt.

"I prefer No. 7's, although I have had good success with 6's and 8's ; we have 7's, and may as well use them."

When they were ready, a jug of water was placed in a pail and packed in ice, a lunch wrapped up (for Dick, Thad said), and they climbed into the light spring wagon, helped Bruno in, and started down the bluff.

It was a pleasant day for August. A light breeze, and just enough light clouds to mitigate the glare of the sun.

A low ridge ran for several miles through the middle of the bottom, along which ran a road made by farmers in gathering the crop of wild bottom hay. When once the hunters were fairly on this road, Bruno was cast off, and started to range the ridge, while the hunters drove slowly along, a short distance behind.

Bruno had covered perhaps eighty rods, when the sharp-eyed Dick exclaimed, "Bruno has something!"

Sure enough, there he stood about fifty yards ahead, stiff as a work-bench.

"Now, Dick, you can flesh your maiden sword on young grouse. Here is a willow we can tie to, back a few rods, then we can all shoot," said Mr. Kingston, driving back to the tree.

"Now, boys," he said, as they were walking up to the dog, "remember to take the birds in front of you as nearly as possible. And never shoot across a companion's face at a bird, just to show your superior skill and quickness. It is very ungentlemanly, and your companion cannot but think, although he may be too polite to say anything, that you are a selfish pig, and he will probably have a pressing engagement elsewhere the next time you invite him to hunt with you. Of course, that is supposing he is ready to shoot. If his gun is unloaded, or he has fired both barrels, and a bird flushes, you are at liberty to shoot in any direction. Careful, now. If there is a large covey, they will probably rise

one or two at a time until we commence shooting, then the whole covey will go. Easy now, Bruno, rout it out."

Bruno took a step forward, and whirr, a grouse got up directly in front of Dick. Bang, and still it went. Bang again, and the bird wilted, whirr, at Thad's feet. Bang, and the fleeing grouse dropped, cut to ribbons before it was fairly on the wing.

Whirr, and Kingston grassed a bird at twenty-five yards. Whirr — whirr — bang — bang — whirr — whirr — whirr ! The guns were empty, and still the tantalising grouse continued to rise all around them.

"Dear, I wish we had breech-loaders," said Thad, regretfully, as he watched the plump birds sail away across the bottoms, after the guns were empty.

"Yes, here is the place where a breech-loader comes in handy. There were twelve or fifteen birds in that covey," replied his father, as he finished reloading.

"Are they all up, Bruno?" Whirr, a bird arose almost behind him, and a little to the left, and sailed away.

Quick as a flash, Kingston whirled on his hips, without moving his feet, and cut down the grouse at forty yards.

"You are pretty quick on the trigger at chickens, as well as ducks," remarked Thad, capping his gun.

"Oh, just tolerable. That is an old trick of theirs, trying to sneak off behind a fellow. How many did you get, Dick?"

"Only one. I missed with the first barrel."

"You shot too quickly. Take your time, and remember you are not shooting woodcock in the brush, where the bird is out of sight in a second. These are young birds, and easy to kill; your gun is good for them at forty-five or fifty yards. What did you do, Thad?"

"Killed my first, and missed the second one somehow; I thought I was on to it, but it forgot to fall," replied Thad.

"I am afraid your first one was pretty badly shot to pieces. It was not more than ten yards from you. Try to keep cool and have your wits about you, and if a bird is too close, wait a moment with the gun in your hands, until it is far enough away so you will not spoil it."

"Did you get one with each barrel, papa?" inquired Dick.

"Yes, and that fellow that tried to sneak away behind us, is three. You and Thad, one each, is five. That isn't so bad for a starter."

The birds were gathered, and they walked back to the wagon, took a long swig of cool water, and started on.

A quarter of a mile farther on, Bruno drew to a point on the edge of a rice pond.

"I wonder if he has chickens by that slough," said Thad.

"Either that, or he is pointing a rail, and there is no tree convenient," replied his father.

"You and Dick go over, and I will hold the horse. Then I can see how Dick holds his nerve," said Thad.

So Mr. Kingston and Dick got out of the wagon and walked over to where Bruno was standing.

"You take the first shot, Dick. Get them out, Bruno."

The dog stepped slowly ahead, and a big, brown, awkward-flying bird rose up from the tall grass.

"A king-rail. Paste him, Dick." And Dick "pasted" him thoroughly.

"You held your nerve all right that trip, Dick," said Thad, as Dick threw the rail in the wagon.

"Yes, I am proud of myself on cornering one old king-rail in the tall grass, where he had to get his legs tangled getting out," replied Dick.

"Never mind, if you get rattled on the next covey we will load you in the wagon and let you hold the horse while we shoot," observed Thad.

"We may both have to hold the horse," remarked Dick, as they drove on.

A short distance farther down the ridge and Bruno slowed up gradually, his tail waved suspiciously, and then straightened out.

"Ah, another covey. Now watch the youthful Richard make a double," said Dick, his eye lighting up.

"I will bet you two fried chickens for supper, you don't make a double," said Thad.

"Take it. Now come on, and I'll give you an imitation of a short-legged boy holding his nerve," replied Dick, leaping out of the wagon.

"Where will we hitch the horse?" said Thad.

"You and papa hold him, and I will go over and shoot the chickens," said Dick, pretending to start off.

"Hold on. That's too thin. You probably have a couple of dead ones in your pocket, and you will try to work them off, for what you kill," called Thad.

"There is a clump of willows off to the right," said Mr. Kingston, pointing to a few willows a hundred yards away.

"You drive over and hitch, Thad, and if you hurry, maybe we will wait here for you," said Dick.

In a few minutes Thad returned, and as they approached the spot where Bruno was standing calmly as a wooden Indian, Mr. Kingston said, in a low tone:

"Keep cool. Remember it is just like shooting at a mark."

Whirr — whirr — bang — whirr — bang — bang — whirr — whirr — whirr — bang — bang — whirr — whirr — bang, and

the guns were empty. "Whirr — whirr, and still the grouse sprang out of the short grass.

"It's tough, boys, but they will keep," remarked Mr. Kingston, laughing, as they watched the birds sail away unharmed, after the guns were emptied.

"Yes, some day we will have breech-loaders, and then we will make it warm for these gentlemen," said Thad, who had longed for a breech-loading gun since the day they had met the two strangers on the run.

"How did we make it this time? What did you do, Dick?" inquired Mr. Kingston.

"I won my two fried chickens all right, from our long-legged friend here. That makes five chickens I will have to eat for supper, as I was intending to eat three," said Dick.

"For heaven's sake. Is it possible I am going to be the cause of your death?" said Thad.

"Pooh. You don't think five fried chickens would phase me, do you?" asked Dick, scornfully.

"No. By the great horn spoons, I believe you could eat a sawdust bear and enjoy it," replied Thad.

"Maybe I could. It makes me feel a little hungry to think of eating even a sawdust bear. But that has nothing to do with the number of chickens you killed just now," said Dick.

"Papa and I each killed two, of course."

"That was pretty good shooting, boys," said Mr. Kingston, as they put the six additional grouse in the wagon and climbed in.

"Yes. If we have good luck and strike a few more big covies, we may get enough for Dick's supper," remarked Thad.

"Aw, smarty. Think you are funny, don't you?" said Dick, turning up his nose.

"Hold on, boys. We must give Bruno some water," said Mr. Kingston, as they were about to drive on.

"What is the matter with eating our lunch, too?" inquired Dick.

"I suppose we might. It is after eleven o'clock, and of course Dick is hungry," replied Mr. Kingston, laughing.

While they were eating their lunch, Mr. Kingston said:

"Boys, you never had occasion to notice in how small a space a young prairie-chicken can hide, and you would hardly believe it. For instance, you would hardly believe it possible for birds the size of these we are shooting to conceal themselves on that mowed ground over yonder, so effectually that a person standing ten or fifteen feet from them, and knowing they were there, could not see the faintest semblance of a bird."

"No. Can they do that?" asked Dick, in astonishment.

"Yes, I have seen them perform that very feat, many a time."

"It doesn't seem possible. How do they do it? The stubble is not more than an inch or two high, and these chickens are more than two-thirds grown. Seems as though they would stick up above the stubble like a mud-turtle on a board, no matter how closely they crouched," said Thad.

"I don't know how they do it, but they have a way of flattening and spreading their bodies out that is simply wonderful. I recall an instance of this kind when I was on the farm years ago. Young prairie-chickens have a great habit of climbing up on the cocks of wild hay late in the afternoon, when they



RUFFED GROUSE.

have filled their crops with grasshoppers. A whole covey will perch up there and sun themselves for an hour or two. Our farm lay partly on the bottoms, and, after I had come to learn their habits, I used to watch for them to do that, as I had no dog then, and they were otherwise difficult to find in the grass.

"One afternoon I looked down on the bottoms, and there, only a short distance from the house, were two or three cocks of hay covered with young prairie-chickens, and, seizing my gun, I started down to interview them.

"Another peculiarity these young birds have is that, when they discover any one approaching, instead of flying away, they steal quietly off of the haycock, walk out in the stubble a few yards, and squat down.

"The chickens saw me coming and did this very thing; but the grass had been recently cut, and the stubble was so short that my only fear was they would not let me get close enough for a shot.

"Before I got near them, not a bird was in sight. And do you know it, boys, I walked right into the centre of that covey, and stood there looking over the mowed ground, knowing they were all around me, and not a sign of a bird could I see. I was simply amazed. It seemed as if the earth had swallowed them.

"I must have stood there ten minutes, peering at the stubble, and taking a step cautiously now and then, vainly looking for a brown feather, but not a head, wing, or back could I detect. The stubble was apparently as devoid of life as a desert. It was a curious sensation to know that twelve or fifteen pairs of sharp eyes were watching my every movement, only a few feet from me, and I could see nothing.

"Finally I almost stepped on one, and it sprang up as

though it had come out of the earth. I killed it, but not another bird moved.

"I reloaded, and then took another long look, but saw nothing. I became vexed with myself, and it would have been more satisfaction for me to discover one of the little rascals lying on the ground at my feet than to have killed the whole covey ordinarily."

"After a bit I nearly stepped on another, and it got up under my nose. I killed that one, and then they began getting up all around me, but I never succeeded in seeing a single one until it got out of the stubble."

"Maybe they possess the power of making themselves invisible," suggested Thad.

"Perhaps they do, but I rather suspect it is a way they have of flattening out until they are about as thick as a postage stamp," replied Mr. Kingston.

After lunch Bruno was set to work again, and found three more coveys, out of which they killed twelve, and then, as it was two o'clock, and the hunters were three miles from home, and Dick wailing for dinner, they started back.

On the way home a dozen young local mallards dropped into a tiny rice pond a short distance from the road.

"What is the matter with a pair of young mallards?" cried Thad.

"You and Dick go after them, and I will hold the horse," said Mr. Kingston, reining up.

He watched the boys steal quietly up to the little pond, and presently he saw the mallards spring into the air. Two white puffs of smoke shot out from the rushes, and two mallards dropped straight as a plumb-line. Two more puffs followed, and another mallard fell.

When the boys came back, Mr. Kingston said :

"Why didn't you get the other one?"

"Oh, we both shot at the same duck. I suspect Dick was afraid he would miss his last duck, so he shot at mine to be sure of getting another, and have enough for his breakfast," replied Thad, climbing in the wagon.

When they arrived home the game was drawn and stored in the ice-house, and Dick ate fried chicken rolled in corn-meal for supper until he saw them in his dreams.

CHAPTER XV.

THE CAVE.

THE following Saturday the boys did not know what to do with themselves. Mr. Kingston had some correspondence that required his attention, and the boys were left to their own devices.

For some reason they did not feel like hunting, so they played croquet until Dick became disgusted,—as Thad was beating him every game,—and threw down his mallet.

“Oh, shucks, that isn’t any fun, let’s do something else. What can we do? I don’t want to hunt, I’m too lazy. I feel just like lopping around under a tree. How do *you* feel?”

“Loppy, also. I don’t care about going hunting, either. Papa can’t go with us, anyhow. Think of something.”

“I’ll tell you what let’s do!” cried Dick, suddenly.

“What?”

“Let’s take a couple of hammers and go along under the bluff to those two big hickorys, and eat hickory nuts. They are just elegant now before the frost comes.”

“I don’t care; I’d just as soon,” said Thad.

So they hunted up a hammer and a hatchet and started.

Bruno had been half dozing under a tree, but as the boys left the yard, he slowly got up and jogged along after.

A quarter of a mile brought them to the two big hickorys,

standing within a few feet of the bluff. Climbing the trees, they knocked down enough nuts for a "starter," as Dick said, and then, each finding a stone to crack on, sat down in the shade close to the base of the bluff, and began feasting on the rich, sweet nuts. Their happy jaws going at full speed sounded like a drove of pigs under a plum-tree.

They talked a little to rest their overworked jaws. During one of these resting spells Dick said, at the same time casting a furtive glance along the bluff :

"I wonder if there are any rattlesnakes around here."

"I don't know ; guess not. I haven't seen one this year," replied Thad, without looking up, as he was busy extracting a big meat.

"I hope not. I don't want to meet any of those gentlemen. I wish one of their heads was right there," and Dick mashed an imaginary rattlesnake against the face of the bluff with the hammer.

The hammer sank to the handle in the rock. Dick stared.
"Thad, look here!"

"What's the matter?" said Thad, munching away on the big meat.

"See that hole. I just made it with the hammer."

"That's funny ; how did you do it?" said Thad, stopping his jaws, and looking interested.

"Dogged if I know. I just said, 'I wish a rattlesnake's head was there,' and hit the rock a welt, and the hammer went right into the solid stone ; must be rotten. I wonder if it's rotten all the way up. If it is we want to be digging out from under it." And Dick cast an apprehensive look up the face of the cliff.

"Nonsense, it isn't rotten. Don't you see, it made a hole right through the rock, just like you would knock a knot out

of a board. That shows there is a little crevice in there," said Thad.

Dick struck the cliff another blow, but the hammer rebounded.

"There, you see, there isn't any more holes. After this, please don't call my attention away from these nuts, for such a simple thing as that," and Thad resumed his seat and cracked another hickory nut.

The face of the rocks was almost covered with creeping vines where they sat, and Dick pulled some of these aside, and thumped the cliff here and there. Pretty soon the hammer made another hole.

"Here is another crevice. I tell you, there is something wrong with this bluff," exclaimed Dick.

Thad looked up.

"That is queer," he mused. Then he looked at the rock again. "Let's clear away the vines so we can get a better view of it."

The vines were cleared away, and Thad examined the face of the bluff, carefully.

Suddenly, he exclaimed :

"Look here, Dick ! Where the hammer went in, it is just a little different colour. See, here is a spot like it ; and over here is another. Strike here."

Dick did so, and again the hammer went into the bluff.

Thad stepped back and looked up and down, and along the bluff.

Then he looked back at the little spot in front of them where the hammer had made several holes.

"It's the funniest thing I ever saw. What do you think the reason is for the hammer making a hole when you strike where that light-coloured rock is ? "

"I'll give it up. It seems as if the bluff was full of crevices," Dick replied.

Thad pushed away more vines, and looked over the rock once more.

All at once an idea flashed through his head, and he slapped his leg, and cried out :

"Dick, I'll bet I have solved the mystery."

"What is it ?" said Dick, eagerly.

"There is a cave in the bluff, and it has been sealed up. It is just like seeing a figure in a picture puzzle ; after you see it, you can't see anything else. Do you see here ? The two colours only go up a little way, about four feet, and along the bluff about three feet. The rest of the rock is all one colour."

"I see it now," cried Dick, fairly dancing with excitement.

"See this light streak all around this stone. The light streak is the kind the hammer went into. Break a hole around this stone," said Thad.

Dick thumped away vigorously, breaking the rock every blow.

He made a black, uneven hole around the stone all but an inch or so, and then Thad inserted his fingers on two sides of the hole, and lifted out a stone the size of his head.

A flood of sunlight entered the larger opening.

"Now do you see the cave ? Didn't I tell you !" cried Thad, triumphantly pointing to the gloomy-looking hole.

"It's a cave, sure enough. I wonder what is in there," said Dick, with a look of mingled joy and awe.

"We will find out mighty soon," replied Thad, picking up his hammer.

"Gee ! suppose there is a lot of gold and diamonds in there," said Dick, with glistening eyes.

"Then we will find it," replied Thad, pounding vigorously away at the cliff.

The boys worked with a will, and soon loosened two more stones nearly as large as the first.

They now had an opening as large as a man's body, and the day being warm they stopped a moment to breathe.

"Hokey, but that's hard work!" said Thad, pulling out his handkerchief.

"Hully gee! I should say it was. It's worse than hoeing potatoes," replied Dick, the beads of moisture standing out all over his chubby face.

"Yes, it's harder, but a little more exciting."

"Slightly; hoeing potatoes isn't a very exciting pastime, unless a bee gets up a fellow's trouser leg, like it did mine a while ago."

"That's so, a bee does help a whole lot," said Thad, grinning at thought of Dick's experience.

Thad was standing directly in front of the opening, wiping the perspiration from his brow, when without the least warning a huge wildcat sprang out of the cave straight at him.

Instinctively, he threw up his arm to protect his face and throat, and the animal caught his coat sleeve in its mouth.

Thad staggered, and at that instant another animal bounded through the air and seized the cat by the back of the neck in its powerful jaws. It was Bruno.

Dick was so thunderstruck at seeing an animal spring out of the rocks, that for an instant he stood motionless. But when he saw Bruno leap to Thad's assistance, his wits came back, and, seizing a club that lay near, ran to help beat the animal off.

But his help was not needed. The grip of Bruno's strong jaws, with the quick shake he gave, had broken the cat's

neck, and torn it loose from Thad, and it lay on the ground gasping its life away, with the dog still chewing at its neck.

"This is a nice go. How did that wildcat ever get in there?" said Thad, ruefully surveying his torn clothes.

"There must be another opening," said Dick.

"If there is, the cat couldn't get out of it; don't you see it is nothing but skin and bones? It was so weak it could hardly jump out of the hole; it must have been nearly starved," said Thad.

"Did it bite through your coat?" asked Dick.

"No; just tore my clothes," replied Thad. "Let go of it, Bruno; it is dead." Bruno let go of the cat, but stood with bristling back, looking as if he would like to chew it a little more, to make sure.

"Do you suppose there are any more wildcats in the cave?" asked Dick.

"I don't think so. I believe that critter got in there accidentally, somehow, and was starving to death. That is the reason he jumped at me; they don't ever bother folks unless they are starving. Bruno could lick a ten-acre field full of such poor skinny cats as this one."

"Hadn't we better go home and get papa to come and help open the cave? I'm afraid there are more wildcats in there," said Dick, casting an apprehensive glance into the black opening.

"No; let's open it ourselves. I'll tell you how I think that cat got in there," said Thad, looking up the face of the cliff.

"How?"

"I think there is a fissure somewhere in the rock, running up to the top of the bluff, and that cat has a den up there; there's a half a dozen things that might happen to make it slip

down in the cave. The rock is as smooth as a house along here for fifty yards, not a sign of a hole; but maybe we can find out when we get in the cave. Come on; I'm going to have a peep into this cave, if I have the clothes all torn off of me." And Thad picked up his hatchet and went to work again.

Dick, reluctantly and somewhat gingerly, went to work, peeping fearfully into the hole every few moments; but nothing more disturbed them, and gradually his courage and eagerness to explore the cave returned.

In an hour they had opened the cave to what Thad thought was the original size, and their hammers made no impression on the rock.

"That's the size of it," said Thad, ceasing his work, and peering into the cave.

By the sunlight that streamed in, they could see an irregularly shaped room that looked to be larger than the sitting-room at home, but the mouth being nearer to the south side, they could not see the north and northwestern parts with much distinctness.

"Let's go home and bring papa. We don't know what may be in there," whispered Dick, in an awestruck voice.

"I don't believe there is anything more in there," replied Thad.

"I don't like to go in," objected Dick.

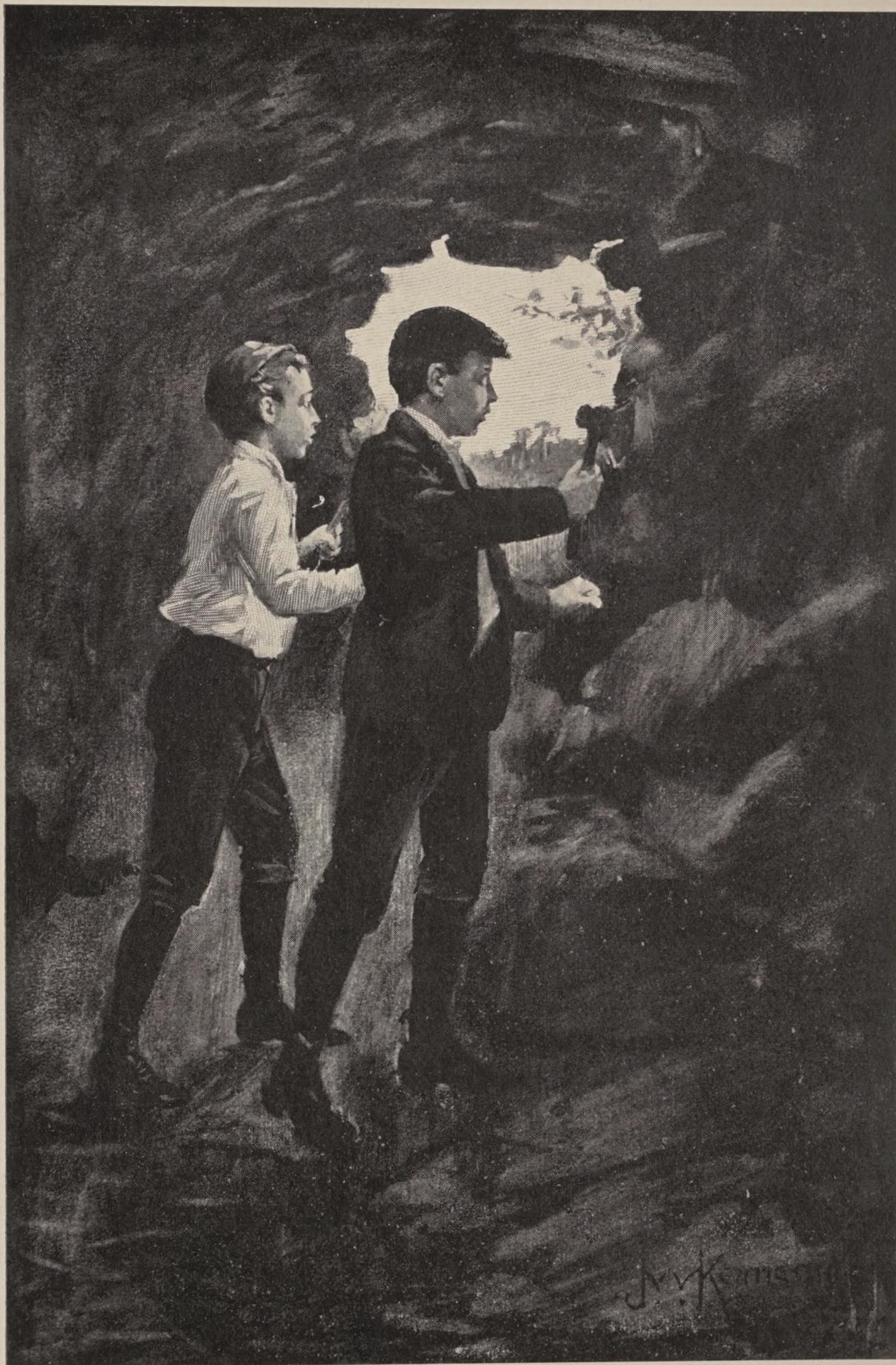
But Thad stepped boldly through the opening into the cave, holding his hatchet ready for business.

Gradually his eyes became accustomed to the dim light.

"Do you see anything?" asked Dick.

"Not a thing."

This reply encouraged Dick, and he stepped cautiously in.



"AFTER LOOKING AROUND CAREFULLY, THEY TOOK A FEW STEPS
BACK INTO THE CAVE."

After looking around carefully, they took a few steps back into the cave.

Just then Dick glanced ahead on the floor of the cave, and he clutched Thad's arm and whispered :

"Look there."

Thad looked in the direction indicated, and there on the ground lay the grinning skeleton of a human being.

"For Lord's sake, let's get out of here. It may be a robber's den, for all we know," whispered Dick, his teeth chattering as he hurriedly backed out of the uncanny place.

The unexpected sight of a skeleton and the contagion of Dick's example caused Thad's nerve to weaken for an instant, and he followed Dick out of the cave.

Dick was half-way down to the road, and going with tremendous strides. Thad afterward told his father that Dick's hat was swinging about on top of a few long hairs that stuck above his head like a fish-pole.

The sunshine restored Thad to his normal condition, and he called out :

"Hold on! Where are you going?"

"Going home, of course," replied Dick, halting and turning around.

"Don't be in such a hurry. Skeletons don't hurt anybody; come on back, and let's sit down and talk things over."

Thad's cool manner restored some of Dick's confidence, and he reluctantly and slowly walked back up the slope.

"I don't want to go into that doggoned place any more. Why don't you want papa here?"

"Because it is more fun to explore it ourselves. I ain't afraid to go in again," replied Thad.

"I believe it's a robber's cave," said Dick, dropping on the ground beside Thad.

"It may have been, once; but you can see it has been sealed up a long time. I'll tell you what I think."

"What?"

"I think that some time a man has been sealed up in there and starved to death; but it was a long time ago."

Dick's eyes bulged at the thought of such a tragedy.

"Honest, do you?"

"That's what I think. It was sealed up by *somebody*, that's sure. Those stones didn't climb up there of their own accord."

"There is something mighty queer about it," said Dick, scratching his head.

"I am going in and look around again. You and Bruno can stay at the mouth and watch. I want to solve the mystery of this thing if I can," said Thad, picking up the hatchet, and starting in the cave.

"Have your hatchet all ready," warned Dick.

Thad looked about sharply, as soon as his eyes became accustomed to the dim light, and, seeing nothing, walked up to the skeleton.

It was lying at full length, as though a person had been straightened for the grave, but, either from lack of time or inclination, had not been buried. Thad examined it carefully. The only mark of an injury to the bones was a small, round hole above the left eye.

"See anything more?" called Dick.

"No. Only there is a bullet hole in the skull, that knocks the starved-to-death theory."

"Is that so? Then he was murdered," said Dick, excitedly.

"Looks like it," was the reply.

Thad walked to the farther part of the cave. In the

northwest corner he could see a rift a foot wide in the rocks, running back in the bluff, and up toward the top.

"Here is where the wildcat got in, Dick."

Dick's curiosity overcame his fear, and he tiptoed into the cave.

"Where?"

Thad pointed to the rift.

"That probably runs clear to the top, where its den is."

They looked around the room, but could see nothing, and then went back to the skeleton.

"How long do you suppose it has been here?" inquired Dick.

"Maybe a hundred years, for all we know."

"Chop around in the ground, there may be something buried," suggested Dick.

"Shucks! what would be the use of burying anything here; it would be just as safe on top of the ground, with the mouth of the cave walled up," replied Thad, burying the blade of the hatchet in the damp soil.

After chopping around aimlessly awhile, he said:

"If anything is buried, it is deep."

"Chop around the head," suggested Dick.

Thad did so, and soon his hatchet struck something hard.

Scooping away the loose earth, he said, presently, in an excited voice:

"By George, Dick, I believe here is the corner of a box!"

"Gee whiz!" And Dick was on his knees in a trice, his hands throwing out dirt like a badger.

Soon the outlines of a box came in view, and then a cave full of skeletons and wildcats could hardly have driven them away.

Thad soon lifted out an oblong box encrusted with rust and dirt.

"Hully gee! that's a find, isn't it? I'll bet it's full of money, or something," whispered Dick, shrilly.

The box was so heavy it made Thad grunt to carry it to the mouth of the cave, and he could hear something rattling around inside.

After scraping off some of the rust and dirt, they saw it was an iron box fastened with a small padlock.

"Break it open with the hatchet," said Dick, eagerly.

Thad raised the hatchet and then paused. "We may break the box all to pieces that way, getting it open. I'll tell you a better plan; I'll stay here and watch it, and you go home and get the horse and wagon, and come back, and we will take all this stuff home and let papa open the box. We will give him a surprise."

"That's the ticket," cried Dick, springing up.

"Now mind, don't you say anything to papa, or let him come."

"All right, I'll fix that," said Dick, starting off at a two-forty gait. In half an hour, Thad heard the wagon, and Dick soon hove in sight, perched on the seat alone.

"What did papa say?" queried Thad, as he walked down to the road.

"I didn't see him. Mamma came to the door and asked what I was going to do, and where you were. I don't just remember what I did say," replied Dick, jumping out and tying "Uncle John" to a convenient tree.

Half an hour later the boys drove into the yard and unhitched.

Their mother came to the door and said:

"Dinner is ready, boys."

"Tell papa to come out," replied Thad.

Mrs. Kingston stepped to the sitting-room door and said :

"The boys want you to come out in the yard. They are excited over something."

"What is it, boys?" said Mr. Kingston, walking up to where Thad and Dick were standing by the wagon.

Then he caught sight of Thad's torn apparel. "For goodness sake, where have you been to tear your clothes that way? You look as though somebody had thrown you into a blackberry patch with a pitchfork."

"We have a few specimens here, and I got my clothes torn getting them," replied Thad.

"Great Scott! I should say you did have some specimens. A skeleton, a box, and a wildcat. You must have found a robber's cave!" said Mr. Kingston, in astonishment.

"We found a cave all right, and got these things out of it," replied Thad, triumphantly.

"Well, well, who would have thought of such a thing. Have you opened the box yet?"

"No, sir; and Dick is nearly crazy to see into it. He thinks it is full of diamonds or something; and it *is* awful heavy."

"Bring me the cold chisel," said Mr. Kingston, lifting the box out of the wagon.

The chisel was brought, and in two minutes the box was open.

Mr. Kingston lifted the lid, and the boys crowded forward and peered into it.

There before their eyes lay a great pile of yellow gold.

"It's money! It's money! Mamma, we are rich! We are rich!" shouted Dick, dashing for the house and nearly upsetting his mother, who was coming out.

"What is the matter, Dick? Have you gone crazy?"

"No, we have found a lot of money; come and see it!" cried Dick, dashing back to the wagon.

"It is money and lots of it," said Mr. Kingston, running his fingers through the pile of coins.

"Not a scrap of anything to tell where it came from, or whom it belonged to. It looks as if there had been some papers here once, but they are rotted and gone now. Ah! Here is a ring," said Mr. Kingston, picking up a heavy gold ring.

On the inside of the ring was the inscription:

"L. A. 1822."

"That was a long time ago, but, of course, there is no way of telling how long after this ring was engraved that the man died in the cave. But come," he added, "don't let us keep mamma waiting dinner. I will carry the box in the house, and after dinner we will count the money. Perhaps we will find something else in the cave that will throw light on the subject."

At dinner Thad gave a full account of their adventure.

"So you were pretty badly scared when you saw the skeleton?" said Mr. Kingston to Dick, with an amused smile.

"I guess so; at least, I was agitated. I would have been home roosting under the bed in five minutes more, if Thad hadn't called me back. My hair won't lay down good yet," replied Dick.

"Wasn't Thad scared also?" asked Mr. Kingston.

"Naw. He don't know enough to get scared."

"Lots of bigger folks than you would have crawled under the bed, or wanted to, if they had run afoul of a skeleton in a dark hole. But come into the sitting-room and we will count your money, and see how wealthy you and Thad are."

"Is it all Thad's and mine?" asked Dick, as his father led the way into the sitting-room.

"Of course; every penny of it. You found it, didn't you?"

"Yes, but we belong to you, don't we?"

"Certainly, but it is worth something to make your hair lie down again."

It took some time to count the money,—all gold,—but finally Mr. Kingston picked out the last coin.

"That is all. Here is some mold that was probably papers at one time, and here is a little scrap of something that looks as though it might have been a piece of canvas. Probably the gold was originally in canvas bags."

"How much money is there?" asked Thad.

"Fifteen thousand, five hundred and twenty dollars."

"Gee crickets!" said Dick.

"Jupiter Jackson! And you say it is all Dick's and mine?" ejaculated Thad.

"Yes, all of it."

Thad studied a moment.

"Is our home all paid for?"

"All but about two hundred dollars," replied Mr. Kingston, promptly.

"Count out two hundred dollars," said Thad.

"But, Thad, I cannot permit that. This money belongs to—"

"Count it out instantly," said Thad, with a mock sternness that sounded almost real.

Mr. Kingston counted out the money and placed it in a separate pile.

"Now count out a thousand dollars, and put that in another pile."

"What is that for?"

"Never mind what it is for. Do as I tell you," replied Thad, with the air of a commanding officer.

This was done.

"The two hundred dollars is to finish paying for our home. That thousand dollars is for you and mamma. It is to partly pay for the trouble and worry of raising Dick and I so far. Don't say a word," he warned, as his father started to raise a protest. "I don't recollect how much trouble I made you, but I am older than Dick, and I can remember many a night when you and mamma were up with him when he was sick, and you thought I was asleep. A thousand dollars won't more than pay for it."

Mr. Kingston's eyes moistened, and Thad's mother walked over to him, and, kissing him silently, vanished in the dining-room.

"Now count out three hundred and twenty dollars," continued Thad, trying to look unconcerned.

The money was counted out.

"That three hundred and twenty dollars," said Thad, "is for you and mamma and Dick and I to spend foolishly, if we want to. To buy breech-loaders, and silk dresses, and such things."

"Bully, we will have breech-loaders now!" cried Dick, gleefully.

"That leaves seven thousand dollars apiece for Dick and me. We will commission you to put it out at interest for us until we get ready to go to college. Does that suit you, Dick?"

"Yes, siree! To a dot," declared Dick, promptly.

"Well, now the money is all divided, we had better hitch up and take it to the bank before somebody steals it."

laughed Mr. Kingston, "then we will go down to the cave again and explore it more thoroughly."

"By the way, papa, there is a bullet hole in the skull of this skeleton. I forgot to mention it before," said Thad, as they went out in the yard to unload the "specimens," and take the gold to the bank.

"Sure enough, there is. In all probability there was a tragedy connected with the sealing up of that cave. I would give much to know the true history of it, but unless we discover something in the cave to throw light on the subject, I don't suppose we will ever know anything about it."

The money was deposited in the bank at T —, and they drove back to the cave, armed with lanterns, matches, pick, shovel, guns, etc.

"We have a pick, shovel, and hatchet, and you have your gun. I rather think the wildcats want to be looking out for us. However, if you are afraid, you can go back and wait," said Thad.

"I'm not afraid if any wildcats show up; they are our meat," replied Dick, laughing.

"Come on, then."

The southwestern part of the cave, near the fissure to which Thad had called Dick's attention as being the place where the wildcat got in, curved like the crescent of a moon.

Mr. Kingston scrutinised the wall carefully, as he walked along with the lantern, to see if there was an opening out of it.

He was a few feet in advance, and as he turned the curve stopped suddenly. "Ah, boys, look here! You didn't find everything."

"What is it?" cried Thad and Dick, in a breath, pressing forward.

Mr. Kingston held up the lantern and pointed to a fissure or passageway three or four feet in width that extended back into the bluff in a southwesterly direction.

"I should say we didn't. The light was dim here, and I took this for a solid wall," said Thad.

"Maybe here is where the wildcat came from," said Dick, peering into the passageway.

"Maybe it is. Let's go back in a ways and see if we can find his den," said Kingston, coolly.

"Gee! see the bats. Scat! there is one bigger'n a pumpkin," said Dick, as a bat hit him in the ear.

"'Bats, bats he found on every side,'" quoth Thad, laughing to see Dick dodge.

Guided by the rays of the lantern, they followed the passageway. Its course was more or less zigzag and uneven, but the main direction was always west. The opening, about fifty feet farther in the bluff, widened to six or eight feet, so the explorers could walk abreast without crowding, and also give Dick plenty of elbow-room to use the gun, and be ready for anything from a mouse to a grizzly.

"I am awful glad we didn't find this gloomy old tunnel until you came," remarked Dick, peering around on the rocky walls, as they walked slowly along.

"Why not?" inquired his father, looking down at him with a grin.

"Oh, because that simpleton of a Thad would have insisted on exploring it, and of course I would have gone along to protect him, and had four kinds of shivers chasing up my spine, expecting to have a wildcat jump straddle of my neck," replied Dick.

"Yes. You would have been a beautiful gooseberry-bush to take along for protection, wouldn't you? From the way

you ran when you saw those old bones, I couldn't have drawn you in here with a windlass. If we had found this dark hole, in addition to the skeleton and wildcat, it would have made Bruno's legs ache to catch you before you got home and under the bed," remarked Thad, in a sarcastic tone.

"I *was* a little rattled when I saw that skeleton," confessed Dick; "but you must remember that skeletons are out of my line. I am no medical student, nor a grave-digger."

"No; but you are a first-class foot-racer, especially down-hill," quoth Thad, with a grin.

"The whole bluff may be honeycombed with caves for aught we know," remarked Mr. Kingston, pointing to numerous crevices and passages on either side of them, that extended into the rocks at right angles with the one they were traversing. Some of these were but a few inches in width, but extended upward beyond the feeble power of the lantern. Others were of sufficient diameter to admit a person.

"I don't think I want to be the first person to explore those places," remarked Dick, pointing to a passageway a couple of feet wide running off to the right.

"Why not?" asked Thad.

"Because if a person met anything, there wouldn't be room to pass," replied Dick.

There seemed to be no end to the passageway. It was as if some huge, ill-shapen turtle had crawled and bored its way through the rock, while yet in a plastic state, and the latter, in the process of cooling and hardening, had split in all directions.

Dick kept his eye out, and gun ready, but there was no occasion to use it. Everything was quiet and solemn, as

though they were traversing an old forgotten cemetery. The only sign of life was the noiseless, flitting bats.

It seemed to Dick's excited imagination that they had gone miles, and still the passage opened up before them. From behind every jagged rock he half expected to have an Indian spring out with a war-whoop, or a bear rise up on its haunches. "We must be half-way across the state," he finally remarked.

"Oh, no. We have only come a few hundred feet," replied his father.

"There don't seem to be anything but bats," said Thad.

"It looks as though you boys had killed the only surviving inhabitant, except the bats," replied his father.

Suddenly the passage they were following widened into a cavern, which, on examination, the explorers found to contain as much floor space as an ordinary country dwelling.

"I guess we have reached the end of our journey, boys," remarked Mr. Kingston, as they looked around.

"Probably here is where the gentleman resided, whose bones we discovered in the outer cave," observed Thad.

"It would look that way, but, if so, we ought to find some evidences of the fact," replied his father.

"Maybe it is a wildcattery," hazarded Dick, who could not get the idea of finding more wildcats out of his head.

"A what?" asked Thad, in astonishment.

"A wildcattery. Same as a hennery, you know," repeated Dick, innocently.

"Oh, I see. Wildcattery is good."

"What is this, I wonder?" said Mr. Kingston, as his progress was stopped by a stone slab two feet from the ground.

"And what is this?" asked Thad, picking up something

from the stone slab. On examination it was found to be a stone drinking-mug. Further examination revealed a narrow table but little wider than an ordinary store counter. It had been made by placing three flat, rough slabs of stone end to, making a table several feet in length.

Scattered about on this table, our explorers counted seven stone mugs, exactly alike.

"This looks as though we had found the place where the gentleman used to live," remarked Thad, jerking his head in the direction they had come.

"It also looks as though he had company," replied Mr. Kingston.

Just then Dick stumbled over something, and cried out:
"What's this?"

His father held the lantern, and Dick's hat rose a couple of inches as he saw in the dim light another skeleton.

"It looks as though we had run afoul of an old forgotten cemetery," remarked Thad.

Kingston raised the lantern and peered about them.

A few feet distant lay still another grinning skull.

"I don't know how you fellows like it, but I don't think this is a very cheerful place," said Dick, in an awestruck voice, unconsciously gripping the gun a little tighter.

"Don't be afraid, Dick. These people have been dead many years," said his father, reassuringly.

"It ought to be cheerful in here; there is certainly company enough," remarked Thad, pointing to the myriads of bats fluttering around from being disturbed by the light. "However," he continued, "if you are afraid, you can take the back trail, and papa and I will go on exploring."

"Oh, I am enraptured with the scenery here," replied Dick, sarcastically, "only I can't say that I particularly enjoy

the society of bats. But of course it's all the way a fellow is built. I suppose you have about brains enough to enjoy the companionship of bats."

"I like 'em all right, if they don't get too familiar," said Thad, scraping a big one off the back of his neck.

Further investigation revealed three more skeletons, making five in that cave, and a close inspection showed a small round hole in the skulls of two of them.

It was a gruesome find. Five human skeletons, in a gloomy cavern far in the bowels of the earth, and two of them bearing the marks of bullet wounds; and Dick, although he felt safe in the company of his cool, brave, resourceful father, breathed a sigh of relief when they had made the circuit of the damp, clammy place, and knew there were no more skeletons.

"Looks as though there had been a big fight in here, sometime in the past, doesn't it?" said Thad, as they came to the stone table once more.

"Yes; it is almost a self-evident fact that these people were either killed by outsiders, or in an affray among themselves," replied Mr. Kingston.

"Five skeletons here, and one in the outer cave makes six. Here are seven mugs. What do you figure from that?" said Thad.

"It looks as though seven men made their headquarters here, and six of them were killed," replied Mr. Kingston.

"I figure that they all got drunk and got into a fight, and the soberest one got away," said Dick.

"All right, Dick. We will accept your explanation until we find a better," replied Mr. Kingston.

A few moments later, the explorers found six rifle barrels, thickly encrusted with rust, lying on the ground along the

north wall, but a few feet from the table. The weapons had evidently been left standing against the wall, and, in the long years they had stood there unmolested, the stocks had rotted away and let the barrels fall to the ground.

"Here is something that goes to prove that these former inhabitants were not killed by an outside foe," remarked Kingston, picking up one of the rusted barrels.

"How is that?" inquired Thad.

"If they had been fighting some outside enemy, these rifles would not have been stacked up here."

"Good guess! You will find, if that seventh man ever shows up, that my theory hits the nail on the head," remarked Dick.

A short distance from the rifle barrels, the boys found traces of a fireplace. Beyond this, except a few rotten pieces of wood, their search was fruitless. Nothing more was found that would tend to throw light on the mystery of the former tenants.

"This is certainly the most interesting and perplexing mystery that I ever stumbled upon. I wonder if there is another entrance to this place?" said Mr. Kingston, as he walked to the west side of the cavern.

"Yes; here is our passageway, continuing on west."

"First thing we know, we won't be able to find our way out of this hole, and then somebody will discover some more skeletons, some day," remarked Dick, as his father started out of the cave on the west side.

"Don't be alarmed, Dick. We will get out all right."

"Oh, I am not worrying about that. All that's bothering me is, that if our skeletons are found here, folks will naturally think we belong to the original gang, and that would hurt my feelings. As to getting lost here, nothing would tickle me

like starving to death in a nice, cheerful place like this," observed Dick, facetiously, as he followed his father out of the cave.

They had not gone more than two hundred feet, when Thad cried out, "I see daylight ahead!"

Sure enough, a short distance ahead, a faint gleam of light could be seen, that came through a narrow opening hardly two inches wide.

There the passage came to an end, and their way was barred by a mass of earth and rocks.

It required a vigorous use of the pick, shovel, and hatchet to make an opening large enough to admit their bodies, but they finally succeeded, and, stepping out in the open air, found themselves at the bottom of a deep, wooded ravine.

"Gee, this smells good!" said Dick, filling his lungs with fresh, pure air.

"Do you know where we are, boys?" asked Mr. Kingston, as he looked around.

"Yes, sir," replied Thad, promptly, "we are in that deep ravine at the south end of our pasture."

"Do you know, boys, I have had an idea for some time that the passage opened out in this ravine," remarked Mr. Kingston.

"I never thought of such a thing," replied Thad.

"What will we do, go back the way we came, or go down around the ravine?" inquired Dick.

"Go back the way we came, of course. We want to carry home some relics," replied his father.

"And maybe we can find some more money in the big cave," said Thad.

But although they spent some time picking around the cave, they found nothing. The floor was solid rock,

covered with an inch or two of earth, so it was impossible to dig.

Gathering up the rifle barrels and mugs, the trio started home, promising to return and explore it again at some future time.

"I most know a lot of robbers lived in there once," said Dick, as they drove along in the shadow of the bluff.

"What makes you think so?" asked his father.

"Oh, because nobody would be fool enough to live in such a dark, dismal, clammy hole unless they had to, to hide away from honest folks."

"I rather think you are right, Dick, in its being a rendezvous for thieves sometime in the past. Years ago, the Northwest was infested with outlaws and horse thieves, and it looks as though these caves had been one of their dens, but we will probably never know the true history of it."

"Unless we find that seventh man," said Dick.

"He is probably dead long ago."

"How do you account for the skeleton and money, and the opening being sealed up in the outside cave?" asked Thad.

"It is all a matter of guesswork. At first, I thought the opening had been closed for the purpose of concealing the tomb of some person, and also the box of gold. But since discovering a back door, I am inclined to the belief that this end was fastened up to lessen the chance of others discovering the cave, and whoever did it just used the back entrance in that dark ravine. But for the merest accident, the cave would have remained undiscovered for ages, as a landslide had covered the back entrance. Probably the ones that hid the gold were killed to a man, and the secret perished with them."

"From there being mugs on the table, and no dishes, it

looks as if whoever lived there paid more attention to drinking than they did to eating," remarked Thad.

"It looks that way. Perhaps some gang used it as a place of carousal, to lay plans for robbery, and celebrate a successful raid."

"I would give something to know the true history of it," said Thad.

"So would I," replied Mr. Kingston, "but the chances are we never will. However, we cannot tell. A clue may be found some day that will unravel the whole mystery."

CHAPTER XVI.

OVER DECOYS WITH BREECH-LOADERS.

A LITTLE over a year has passed since Thad and Dick so unexpectedly discovered the cave in the bluff.

Glorious October, the month to delight the heart of every sportsman, is at hand with its ripened, luscious nuts, and banks of crimson leaves.

Whistling wings again make music for the hunter's ear, as the myriads of wild fowl pass down the broad Mississippi on their flight to the sunny South.

Once more the rice pond reëchoes with the circling pinions of hungry ducks and geese, as the softened shades of evening dim the light of day, and the splashing wild fowl eagerly seek the luscious rice.

After much corresponding, and many tests of their shooting qualities, Mr. Kingston finally purchased three breech-loaders late in August, and Thad and Dick were happy.

The first thing they did with the new guns was, as Thad said, to make the prairie-chickens "sick," and when the blue-wing teal came down in September, from the way they were kept dodging shot, the bewildered birds must have thought an army of shooters was investing the rice lakes.

Now the larger ducks were arriving in augmenting numbers, and the watchful hunters prepared for their reception.

Thad and Dick were sitting under the trees, looking out

over the Mississippi to catch a glimpse of any wild fowl that might be passing.

"We must get out at daylight in the morning, and have a duck picnic on the foot of the island," remarked Dick.

"A duck picnic first, and a pick ducknic afterwards," replied Thad.

"Oh, but some folks are bright. Bruno, you should be thankful you don't understand English. You don't know what you have escaped."

Bruno turned his head and looked at Dick a moment out of his big, honest eyes, and then solemnly resumed his occupation of gazing out over the river.

"There goes a nice bunch of bluebills down the river," said Thad, pointing low over the water.

"And there goes another bunch, way back over the timber. We will try and get an introduction to them in the morning," said Dick.

"Come, boys, roll out. It is after four o'clock," called Mr. Kingston up the stairway next morning.

Thad was awake instantly. "Dick," he cried, shaking that drowsy individual by the shoulder, "it's after four o'clock. Get up."

"What if it is?" growled Dick, crossly. "Breakfast won't be ready till seven. What the deuce do you mean, waking a fellow up at four o'clock?" And that sleepy duck hunter turned over and drowsed off again.

"Well, you're a bright duck hunter!" muttered Thad, in disgust, gazing down at his somnolent brother.

"Dick, get up! We are going after ducks at daylight,—do you hear? Ducks,—ducks. Quack, quack;" and Thad shook him vigorously.

"Gee whizz, that's so! Why didn't you tell a fellow?"

said Dick, now wide awake, springing out of bed and hurrying on his clothes.

"You are the biggest sleepyhead I ever saw. I would like to see you try to wake up alone, at four," remarked Thad, as they were dressing.

"That is easy. I would arrange it so as to wake up at four o'clock the second morning," replied Dick, as he started down-stairs.

"Gee, but that's good," he remarked, a few minutes later, as he quaffed a cup of hot, delicious coffee, and rapidly cut crescents in a slice of home-made bread and butter.

"That is the beverage to keep off malaria, in the early morning. Some hunters take whiskey, but I prefer hot coffee," said Mr. Kingston, as he finished his lunch.

The faintest tinge of gray brightened the eastern sky, as they dropped the decoys about thirty yards from the point.

Mr. Kingston arranged them in two bunches, scattering a few between to give the appearance of a continuous flock.

Decoys placed this way on an island in the river show up much better, and birds coming up or down can see them past the shore line.

"Now each man bring his stool, and we are ready," said Mr. Kingston, as he ran the boat a few yards above the blind in some willows.

"Ah, but this is glorious," he remarked, filling his lungs with the invigorating morning air, as he seated himself in the willows, and gazed at the brightening east.

A low whistle from Thad, and, as he turned his head, the report of the latter's gun woke the echoes on the old Mississippi, and Kingston heard a splash and saw a fleeing form beyond the decoys going down the river just above the water.

"They came from the north. I didn't see them until they were at the outer edge of the decoys, and I only had time to get in one shot," explained Thad, as he slipped in another shell.

"Lie still, Bruno. It is too far out for you. Too much swimming against the current," said Mr. Kingston, as Thad started for the boat.

He had just picked up the duck, when he heard a soft whistle from his father, and without looking around he lay flat in the boat.

An instant later he heard a double report, followed by another, and then two splashes in the water. Then he straightened up and saw two more bluebills drifting away.

"You stay out in the boat, and we will fill it for you," said Dick, as Thad came in the blind.

"I thought of that, but concluded I would be bald-headed before the boat was full," replied Thad.

"There is a flock crossing below, and here comes another up the river, but I guess they are too high to see our decoys," said Mr. Kingston.

The flock coming up were high in the air and off to one side, but they seemed socially inclined, for, when nearly opposite, they caught sight of the decoys and, pointing their heads toward the water, came almost straight down with a graceful twisting of the body, accompanied with a rushing roar of the wings that is much better appreciated when seen and heard.

When near the water they again swept up with a graceful curve, took a wide circle, and headed for the point.

"Wait until they raise their wings to alight, then each take a duck on his side," whispered Mr. Kingston.

The three guns cracked almost as one, and three bluebills

splashed in the water, and at the second round two more dropped.

"I thought I killed mine, — who missed ?" asked Mr. Kingston, as he came into the blind after picking up the ducks.

"My duck dropped," said Dick.

"I cannot tell a lie. I failed to do it with my little gun," said Thad.

"Here comes one lone bluebill up the river right at us," remarked Dick.

The duck was fully fifty yards high, and, as he came over the decoys, paid no attention to them. "That fellow isn't going to stop, and I am going to try him a whirl," said Kingston, as the bluebill came over them, a little to the left.

As the gun cracked, the handsome little bird checked his flight as suddenly as though shivered by a blast of lightning.

His form doubled up in a black and white ball, and for an instant he remained almost stationary in the air. Then down he plunged, head first, striking the water with terrific force by reason of the great height from which he had fallen.

"It does me good to double up one of those little chaps when he is high up, they fall so hard," remarked Mr. Kingston, inserting a fresh shell.

Then for a short time everything was quiet, and no ducks came near.

"Boys, just look at that sunrise! It certainly is more beautiful than any picture ever painted by a mortal."

The eastern sky was a blaze of gold and crimson.

From the horizon half-way to the zenith, the sky was draped with light, airy clouds, through which the sun, that Master Painter, had traced the most delicate tints and effects.

Here was a bit of thin, gauzy cloud, that the sun had transformed into a crimson veil. Another showed the short,

choppy waves of the Mississippi, turned to blood. A narrow black cigar-shaped cloud was now dressed in purple. Others were a rich orange. Some a delicate carmine, while here and there the clouds were rent in twain, through which shone benignly the soft, rich azure of heaven, like an Immortal eye smiling down upon the world.

Mr. Kingston gazed upon this wonderful picture in an ecstasy of delight. He was entranced with the beauty of the scene.

Old hunter that he was, sport was for the moment forgotten.

The sharp report of a gun at his elbow recalled his wits, as a bluebill struck the point in the edge of the water, throwing spray all over him.

"Hello, what does this mean?" he asked, wiping the drops of water from his face.

Dick was just putting in a fresh shell, and looking innocent.

"Was that you, Dick, trying to drown me?"

"I—yes, sir, I guess so. I happened to look down the river just as that fellow came over the decoys a few feet above the water. He kept coming, so I gave it to him in the neck," replied Dick.

"You must excuse me, boys, but when I see such a sunrise, I feel like taking off my hat to the Invisible Artist."

"Here comes an immense flock up the river. If they only just come this way we will give them something to remember us by," said Thad.

"They are coming, all right. Gee, but there is an ocean of them," said Dick, a moment later, as the big flock swung toward the point.

It is a beautiful and nerve-thrilling sight, to watch a great body of wild fowl dashing straight toward you. Such a flash-



RED - WINGED BLACKBIRDS.

ing, dashing panorama of colours as they present, gliding through the air on the wings of the wind.

"Get ready, boys," warned Mr. Kingston, and an instant later there was a mighty rush of wings as the cloud of blue-bills swept over the decoys.

"Give it to them, now." And such a cracking and banging as came from the willows!

"Quick, Thad; there is one trying to climb up in the air and can't," cried Dick, breaking open his gun.

A second later, a charge from Thad's gun caught the climbing bluebill amidships, and he withered in the air and splashed back in the water.

Dick turned and saw his father twisting his body around and looking straight up in the air, trying to point his gun at something.

Dick looked up in time to see a bluebill quiver in the air a moment, and then drop to the ground straight as a plumb-line.

"There are three winged,—kill them, quick," said Thad, sending a charge across the water into one of the swimming ducks.

Kingston turned in time to catch another, and Dick paralysed the third.

"How many did we get?" asked Thad, looking out over the water as the smoke of battle cleared away.

"I can count eleven," replied his father, starting for the boat.

"Gee, we got a mess of them that trip," remarked Dick, as Mr. Kingston came into the blind, after gathering the birds.

"Yes, we don't get a shot at such flocks every minute," replied his father.

"Breech-loaders are the stuff over decoys, ain't they, Thad?" said Dick, gleefully, patting his gun affectionately.

"I should say they were. It is more fun than drowning out skunks," replied Thad.

"There is a mallard sailing around the river below us, but they are pretty cautious," said Mr. Kingston.

The mallard took a circle that brought him near the decoys.

"If he does that again, and comes a little closer, he may hear of something to his advantage," remarked Thad.

Another circle, and the mallard was just outside of the decoys.

"I believe I can tickle that fellow from here," said Thad, throwing up his gun.

At the report, they heard the shot crash into the duck, and saw him throw his head over his back and come down with a great splash.

"A good shot, Thad," remarked his father, as the former started after his duck.

The sun was now well up, and there came another lull in the shooting.

Then for twenty minutes the hunters sat in the willows on the point waiting for the wild fowl, and they chatted in low tones of their hits and misses, thoroughly enjoying the crisp, cool, autumn air.

The dense woods along the Mississippi were draped with the brilliant leaves of autumn, while, high up the bluffs, tier upon tier of crimson, green, and yellow foliage gave the appearance of a vast bank of mosaics.

Between the dazzling sheen of colours, the grand old "Father of Waters" wound its peaceful way like a broad band of silver.

And now the ducks began to fly again, and for an hour the hunters were kept busy. At eight o'clock their bag was twenty-six, and they began to think of returning home, when a peculiar whistling of wings greeted their ears in the quiet morning air.

"What is that?" queried Thad, in a low tone.

"Goldeneyes. Keep quiet," replied his father.

The whistling ceased, and then began again.

"They are coming down from the north, high up," whispered Kingston.

The willows were so dense on the point at their back that they could neither see the ducks, nor the ducks see them. An occasional whistle was all they had to locate the direction of the coming wild fowl.

"They're an awful while coming," whispered Dick.

Then the hunters heard the soft rustling and swishing of wings, and, looking to the west, saw a dozen goldeneyes, or "whistlers," as they are termed, coming straight for the decoys.

A few seconds later, the handsome ducks discovered they were in the wrong pew, as the three guns belched out death and destruction, and they dashed off down the river minus four of their comrades.

"Here is where they get their name," observed Mr. Kingston, opening the eye of one of the ducks Dick brought in, and showing a golden ring around the iris.

"Do they eat as good as they look?" asked Dick.

"I am sorry to say not. They are among the poorest of the duck family. But, of course, when a fellow is shooting ducks, he isn't thinking much about their edible qualities until he gets home. Then again, especially in places like this, he will make a quick snap shot, when he doesn't know

until afterward whether he is shooting at a canvasback or a mud-hen," replied Mr. Kingston.

"I don't think you will ever fool this child on that score. I could tell a mud-hen four miles away, in the dark," remarked Dick, confidently.

A few moments later, as they sat motionless, a duck flashed by the point on Dick's side, going south. Dick promptly threw up his gun and doubled the fleeing fowl in the air, and it splashed among the decoys.

It was all done in five seconds, and no one knew what kind of a duck it was. "Bet you a dozen buckwheat cakes against a slice of ham, it's a redhead," called Dick, as Thad started after the game.

"Take it!" he cried.

"Who wins?" asked Dick, as Thad rowed quietly in the willows.

"You will be shy on buckwheat cakes, this morning, my son. It's a measly old mud-hen," replied Thad.

"It is, like fun," said Dick, incredulously.

Thad tossed the bird at Dick's feet. One glance at the dull-coloured plumage, and the white-pointed bill, told Dick that Thad was right.

"I'm sorry to kill such an ornery thing, but it had no business to get in the way."

"What are you going to do for buckwheat cakes this morning?" said Thad.

"I suppose I'll have to be satisfied with a few. I was intending to eat thirty-five, but I'll worry along on twenty-three, for once," replied Dick, with a sigh.

"And, by the way, isn't it about time to go after them? I feel a little hungry myself," remarked Mr. Kingston.

"I suppose so ; although my share is hardly worth going after," said Dick.

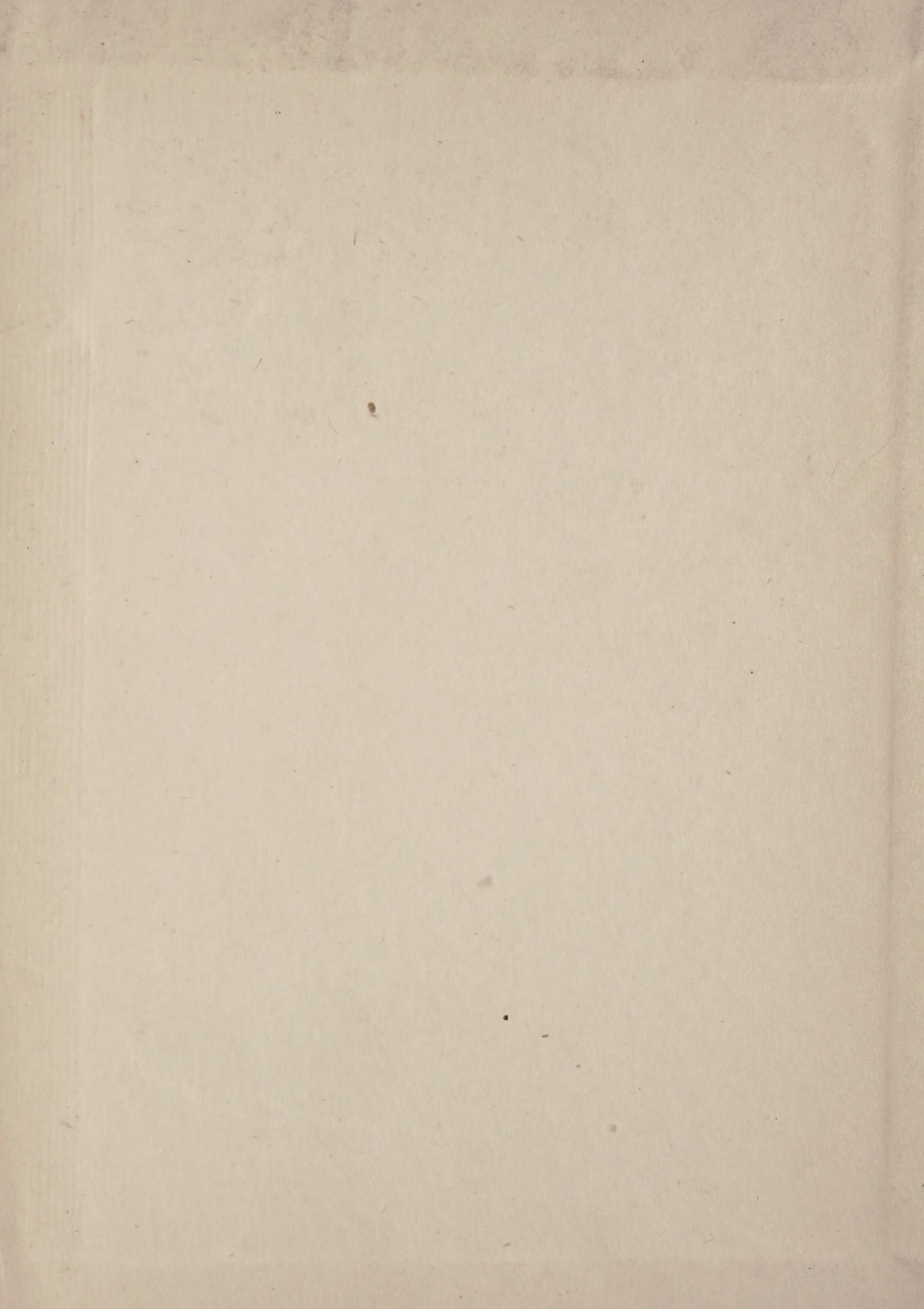
And now, as they take up the decoys and prepare to return home, we will take a regretful leave of the Kingston boys. We hope to meet them again in the near future, but if Fate will it otherwise, we may be sure they will grow to manhood, strong, vigorous, and hearty, from their free, health-giving, outdoor country life.

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THE END.

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