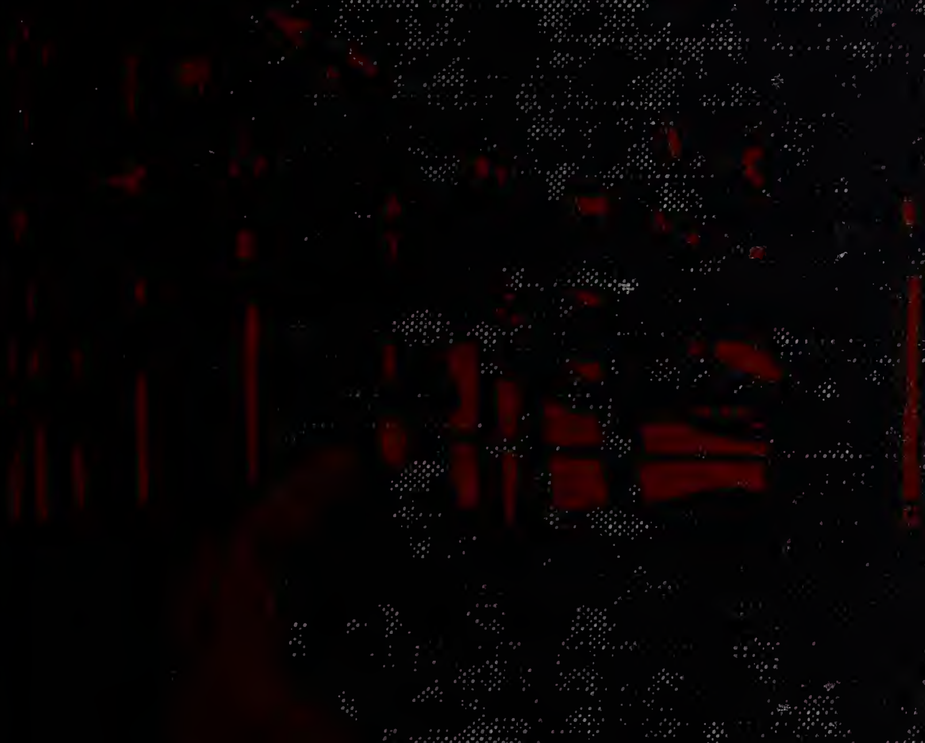
THE HUNTSMAN IN THE SOUTH



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THE HUNTSMAN OF THE SOUTH

Alexander Hunter.

FRONTISPIECE

THE HUNTSMAN IN THE SOUTH

BY

ALEXANDER HUNTER

AUTHOR OF "JOHNNY REB AND BILLY YANK"

VOLUME I

VIRGINIA AND NORTH CAROLINA

Other volumes to follow

NEW YORK AND WASHINGTON
THE NEALE PUBLISHING COMPANY
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To

Miss Lutie P. Blow,
The Pride of the County, The Queen of the Hunt,
and the Lady of the Manor,
this book is dedicated

56373

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CHAPTER I

SPORTING IN THE OLDEN TIME

It is the inexorable law of Nature that all living creatures prey upon one another. By beak, talons, and claw the fight was commenced, and it will end only when this world is no more.

To say that sporting is a cruel pastime is to ignore the fact that all fin, fur, and feather batten upon one another, and if the rifle or gun did not end their days, they would be killed anyway.

I think the greatest gift Nature can bestow upon a child is to endow him with a love of the forest, the field, the stream, and to infect his blood with a longing for field sports. It will make the boy and the man stronger, healthier and happier.

My sporting days commenced many years ago, on a big plantation bordering the Potomac River. Game was plentiful in those days when the muzzle-loader was king, and it was a woeful day for sportsman and game alike when the breech-loader and the pump-gun were invented.

My first weapon was one of that kind known as " a gaspipe barrel," and it was Sam, the overseer's son, who prevailed upon me to purchase that dangerous firearm. Sam was a short, stumpy, carrotty-headed boy, with a snub nose, big mouth, and small blue eyes. He was thin, but his joints were large and knobby, and he was as tough as a pine knot.

That boy Sam was a case. He should have been christened "Original Sin." He was not like other boys. The average boy has his moods and emotions, and is a mixture of good and bad, but Sam seemed to have no goodness in his make-up. There was more devilment in that shockhaired cocoanut of his than in the combined craniums of a reform school. He was not vicious; only an unlettered, shy, country boy, whose brain was working all the time, forming plans that jeopardized his hide, and often his life. A chicken-fight woke him up, and a dog battle was his delight, but to be a participant in some wild deed was joy to his soul. He never counted the cost. Sam was not that "kind of a hairpin." He was in hot water all the time, and inveigled me into many a scrape, though I am bound to confess I did not need much urging. Sam had the imagination, and I had the power, and I could beg him off from punishment from my side of the house, but not from his own. Many a time has Sam signaled me to come into the barn, and, with a mixture of pride and anguish, he has shown me the welts on his attenuated frame, the result of the rawhide wielded by the brawny arm of his father.

I never can forget my first gun. Sam and I had many a consultation on the subject. I bought a single-barrel, for which I paid three dollars and seventy-five cents, and smuggled it safely home. A powder-flask, a shot-bag, and box of caps completed the outfit. Sam volunteered to keep the gun hid in the barn, and we were to use it when we could do so without his folks or mine "catching on."

My father gave me two slave boys for my own, Robinson and John. Their mother worked on the plantation. They were about my age, ten years, and Sam was a year older. The two young darkies had an easy time of it, for neither of them did a stroke of work. Life was all "beer and skittles" to them; they ate at the family kitchen, and strutted among the field-hands like two little black bantam roosters. I was so proud of my ownership and so jealous of my rights that I obtained from my indulgent father a pledge that nobody should order them around but myself. They feared only two people on earth—one was my father, the other their mammy—and as her idea was that if you spare the rod you spoil the child, she laid it on thick and well. I have often heard the screams of my two followers, but I could not help them—my influence stopped at the cabin door. My father had a fixed principle on that subject. He himself never interfered in the domestic matters of his bondsmen, nor did he allow any one else to do so. I may say here there was no more indulgent and gentle master on earth. He did not farm for a living. He was a retired naval officer, a man of great wealth in those times, and inherited the plantation until I should become of age, as General Hunter, my deceased uncle, had bequeathed all of his landed estate to me.

One Saturday, which was always a red-letter day for me, for I did not have to go to school, Sam sent John to wake me early, and I hastened to our trysting-place, the barn. Sam was big with portentous news. His dad and mine were going to an adjoining farm owned by my father, to see about having the wood cut, and now was the time for our hunt. "That 'ere field where the men's a-plowin' is full of field-larks," said Sam. "My! won't we physic 'em? But mind," he added, "don't you forgit the bargain. It's turn and turn about."

"All right," I responded. "You slip over to the field with the gun, and I will come over after breakfast, and you tell the hands not to let on about this hunt."

Sam nodded, and vanished.

When I saw my father ride off I made a bee-line for the field. It was in the spring-time, and every plow on the place was running. Sam and I carefully loaded the piece, then we tramped all over the immense field. There were plenty of larks, but they seemed to know all about guns, and they certainly knew about the range of my new piece, for they would let us creep up to within about seventy-five yards, and then they would fly away. I was in front, Sam behind, and my henchmen followed. I set the pace. When I crouched, they followed suit; when I crawled, down on their knees fell the whole crowd, and when I wriggled slowly toward the birds, the three would squirm behind me. It was our first hunt with a real gun, and we were all intensely excited. But we had our trouble for our pains. Nobody could fool those larks; so panting, breathless, and exceedingly dirty, we stopped and held a council of war. Sam proposed that I hide behind a pile of briers, and if I would give the order to Uncle Peter, the foreman, he would make the plowmen form in a line and drive the birds toward me.

No sooner said than done. Uncle Peter grinned when I proffered my address, but nodded his head, and then the whole working force left their horses and plows, formed skirmish lines at the far end of the field, and cautiously advanced.

A practical Northern farmer would have thrown up his hands at the sight of twenty-odd horse plows standing idle in the furrow while their drivers wasted precious time on such a frivolous and absurd act. However, that is the way we farmed on our plantation.

The string of men, stretched out some yards apart, covered one side of the field, and advanced slowly toward me. I crouched expectant, almost breathless, behind a brier bush. The larks started all right, but they did not fly as we expected, for when within a hundred yards of me they all rose in the air and flew into the next field. There was one, however, which passed over my head, and I fired in the sky, but the bird kept on and never even switched his tail.

Sam now came up, and as I handed him the gun he proposed to go down the river.

Just as we started, Carlo, the house-dog, a small terrier, came running up and joined our party. We had nearly reached the river, and now we had to climb a Virginia snake-fence. The three boys scrambled over, but, being a little winded, I sat resting on the top rail. Sam had laid the gun on the ground, and was busy fixing his suspender, or " galluses " as we called them. He never wore but one, and, as his breeches were his father's old ones, shortened, when that one gallus broke Sam could not move. As he was working with the gallus, Carlo, who was nosing around, jumped a rabbit close by; and the dog and darkies started after it, all of them making all the noise they could. Sam wanted to join them, but his breeches tripped him up and down he fell, and, beside himself with excitement, seized the gun, and before I could utter a warning shout he let loose at the rabbit, then some fifty yards away. Carlo whirled around and made a bee-line for home, uttering a yelp at every jump; the old hare put on more steam and went across the field like a flash; the two darkies gave a yell and fell on the ground, bawling louder than a barn full of calves. Sam, the cause of it all, dropped the gaspipe gun, shed his breeches, and started for home. He ran like an antelope before a prairie fire.

I slid off the fence and approached the crying darkies, with my heart in my mouth, figuratively speaking. They were frightened out of their small wits. Being possessed with the idea that persons who are shot always die, the two boys simply lay on their backs, looked up at the sky, opened their wide mouths to their fullest capacity, and yelled and yelled, and each seemed trying to outdo the other. I made them sit up, and after delivering a short monologue I managed to get them to tell me where they were shot. They pointed to their legs. I rolled up their pants, and found a little puncture on Robinson's leg and two on John's. There was a drop of blood where the pellets had entered, and on seeing this the two set up a howl that beat the band. Upon a closer examination I found the shot stuck in the wounds, and I squeezed them out. Fortunately they wore my cast-off garments, made of good thick cloth. It took me some time to calm them down, and it was not until I had promised them twenty-five cents apiece, did the tears give place to their habitual grins. I told them that if they ever mentioned the shooting my father would make them field-boys, and they would have to work with the darkies.

The boys kept their mouths shut, and the affair was never found out at the house. Carlo got the worst of it, his hind-quarters having been well peppered; but as he could not talk we were safe, for Sam was not in the habit of giving himself away. He told me afterward, in confidence, that if he had "physicked them niggers" he had made up his mind to run away and become a pirate.

This happened in the spring, and several months later, just before Christmas, Sam got us into another scrape. He summoned me to the barn by one of my trusty henchmen, for Sam would never come to the mansion. On his first and last visit there my sisters teased him, and nothing that I could say or do would induce him to repeat his visit. Well, Sam summoned me to the barn, and unfolded his plan. There was, he said, a rowboat anchored a short distance from shore, and we could wade out and secure it. That evening our quartette made our way to the river about one-half mile distant, and, just as Sam said, there was a skiff, or flat-bottomed boat, tied to a stake; but there also was a ducking-sloop several hundred yards off shore, riding at anchor, but we could not discover whether any one was on board or not.

It was a bitter cold evening and the ice fringed the beach, and the question was, how to get the skiff? It was ebb tide, the water was shallow, and the boat not fifty feet away. Sam began peeling off his clothes, and I followed his example, but the darkies put in a vigorous protest. I knew they were shivering already, and if they took off their clothes they would catch their death of cold; but it was a question of follow your leader, and they had to disrobe. I bent double with laughter, seeing them dancing on the ice-coated shore, but there was worse in store for them.

When we started to wade out to the skiff the icy water made us hold our breath. Then there was flat, rank mutiny among my sable minions; they broke for shore, blubbering as they hopped first on one foot then on the other. I rushed back and seized John by the arm, Sam grabbed Robinson, and we pulled them in the water by force. We waded out to the skiff, the water nearly to our waists.

My, my! it was cold; the jaws of the colored boys chattered so that they could not even "holler." When we reached the skiff the water was up to our armpits. We scrambled into the skiff the best way we could, and fumbled at the rope trying to untie it. All at once John gave a yell and pointed to the schooner. A man was seen jumping into the skiff; in a second more he raised a gun and fired, and the shot frightened us half out of our senses. "He's coming with his swivel!" cried Sam, and overboard he went, headforemost, overturning the skiff as he did so. Down we went into the freezing water. That bath was worse than wading; it literally took our breath away. We involuntarily swallowed as much as our stomachs would hold, and somehow or other we got on our feet and made for the shore, splashing and churning the water in our haste. Sam was in the advance; he had reached the shore and begun to dress, and just as he got one leg into his pants the avenging pursuer's gun was heard " nearer, louder, clearer than before."

It was pull Dick, pull devil, with our crowd then. Each seized a handful of raiment and struck out across the bleak, barren, frozen field. There was no chivalry among these fleeing scamps, no aiding the slow nor helping the lame; we did not even look around, we raced madly forward. We were panic-stricken. Had we stopped to think we might have known that the market-gunner fired merely to scare us away from his skiff; but thought and self-control were not stopping on the shore that evening.

In our rush for safety we came upon Sandy, or " Crutch," as we called him, because he was lame and limped along with a pair of wooden supports of his own manufacture. Sandy was the assistant gardener and he was a large, coal-black negro, with the biggest mouth I ever beheld. When Sandy's eyes fell on the four naked figures, one white, one yellow, one black, and one striped, skimming over the frozen ground, he was so amazed that he was dumb; but in a trice he threw back his head, opened his cavernous mouth, and emitted such a roar that it was echoed back from the Maryland shore. He laughed so hard that he would have fallen had he not braced himself with his crutches.

I don't know how the others reached home, but I know I aimed for the kitchen, and bolted in the door and heard the cook's startled ejaculation, " De Good Lord! " Only then did I draw a full breath. As soon as she had covered my nakedness I told her my piteous story. She promised to keep the matter secret, and she did.

The upshot of the matter was that the next morning I was taken with an attack of pneumonia, and, as my life was despaired of, an Episcopal minister was sent for and I, or what was left of me, joined the church. Nor did the affecting scene end here, for I asked my father to summon the chief negroes on the place and let me bid them a final farewell. They thronged the room, and at my father's request a pile of gold was put on the bed, and when I feebly shook a bondsman's toil-hardened hand my father would hand him a gold-piece as my last gift. The emotional nature of the darkies found vent in muffled cries and sniffings, which discounted the mourners' bench at a camp-meeting. Having bade them good-by, and having settled my earthly account, I turned over and—went to sleep, a real cherub. I awoke safe and sound; but alas for a death-bed repentance! about a week after, when my pulse again made healthful music, I summoned my father to my bedside and asked him to make those niggers give back all the money.

One more piece of mischief planned by Sam wound us all up, busted the combination of "The Little Four," and ended our boyish pranks for good and all. It happened about a year after my conversion, and when I was at that period of boyhood denominated as "pert, chipper, and sassy." It is a time in a boy's life when he ought to be shipped as a cabin-boy for three years on a sailing vessel, under a strict captain, and be licked into shape.

Sam had a great scheme. The same gunning-sloop that had been the cause of all our troubles the year before was now anchored close to the shore, and the captain, the same man who shot at us, had gone to Washington with his crew, which, by the way, consisted of one boy.

"Now," said Sam, "we'll draw up the ankers, set the sails, fix the hellum, an' let the derned old sloop sail down the river. Come on!" And we followed the Corypheus in a dogtrot. It was a clear, sunny winter day, with a steady northwest wind blowing. We found the sloop fastened to a tree by a chain, and secured by a padlock. Sam started on a run for home to get an ax, and soon returned. Posting John about a couple of hundred yards above the vessel, and Robinson the same distance below, to watch the possible coming of the owner, Sam went to work with the ax and soon succeeded in smashing the padlock. The pickets were recalled, and by hard work we hoisted the heavy sail; next we heaved the anchor. This was the toughest work of all, but finally we pulled it from its muddy bed.

The door of the cabin was locked, and Sam and his dusky allies wanted to break it open and examine the place, but this was too much. I told them we would be hanged if we were caught, and Sam gave up the idea. We secured a piece of rope and tied the handle of the rudder straight forward. The sail was flapping at a furious rate, but soon we had the sheet taut, and fastened the line. All being ready, and the sloop straining to get her keel out of the mud, we ran to the rear and jumped ashore; then, using our united strength, we shoved the vessel into deeper water. The sail bellied out, and the sloop jumped like a race-horse. At first, there being no ballast, she careened so much that we thought the craft would turn turtle;

but when she got outside the point the northwest wind struck her full and fair and turned her prow, and, as the helm kept the craft steady, she headed for the south and went straight as the crow flies, down the Potomac. We shouted and screamed and had a regular Indian war-dance.

But our joy was transient. Revenge was sweet, but short-lived. As we saw the sloop disappear down the river we turned, looked at each other, and beheld each face "sicklied over with the pale cast of thought." Our hearts sank low as each pictured, according to his fancy, the dire consequences that would ensue if we were found out. Then we began to talk about it, and the more we talked the more scared we became. At first it seemed a piece of mischief; then felony; finally, it was highway robbery, and I told them the penalty was death. Sam suggested that we didn't steal the vessel, but I held to the view that we were real pirates. Then the darkies blubbered, and Sam grew so white that each freckle came out distinct and clear.

We swore and crossed our hearts that we would never tell. Sam observed we had better scatter and strike for home alone, so we dispersed, and with the silent tread of the sandaled friar we made our way to the house.

I did not sleep much that night, and I actually lost my appetite. When a healthy boy goes back on his feed he must suffer, I think, more acutely than a grown man. The torturing suspense lasted for three days, and then the storm broke. On the third day John came running to the house late in the evening and said Sam wanted to see me. I found him in the barn, and he had fallen off so that his daddy's clothes flopped on him as if he were a scarecrow.

"They're coming," said he. "I've been watching both ways all the time, and I seed two men coming up the gravel walk." We hid in the barn and watched them enter the house. By this time it was dark. Shortly after I heard the darkies shouting for me, but I did not answer. Sam wanted me to run away with him, but I had tried that once, and had more than enough of it.

The next thing we heard was the yells of my sable minions, softened and mellowed by the distance. Sam said, "Them dern niggers is catchin' it, an' they'll tell on us, you see if they don't." I thought so too, and I left Sam to his own meditations; and I judged they were not pleasant ones, for he knew full well what was in store for him. On my return to the house one glance at my respected parent showed me that he knew the truth. I saw the jig was up, and I fled, as I always did when in trouble, to my mother's arms, for, gentle and gracious as she was, she would have faced Satan himself and his legion undauntingly to defend me from punition.

The upshot was I was packed off to boarding-school. My two former servitors were sent to the field, and Sam, as he told me before I left, "got the derndest lickin 'of his life." I never again saw this "Imp," as the darkies called him, nor ever heard what became of him, for his father went West and carried his family with him.

My father, like all naval officers, was fond of company. We had all sorts of guests, men of every profession, but my delight was the old Virginia planters who would tell of days agone, and dilate upon "the good old times." Their tales of the sportsmen in their youthful days were enthralling to me, and I never grew tired of their stories of the "grand meets," and of the sportsmen of their era, especially of the Virginians of Colonial times. There was one man whom they called, by common consent, the "King of sportsmen," the "Prince of entertainers," and the "Devil in the saddle," and that was Jack Mason of Pontiac. From what I have heard of him, Jack Mason stood head and shoulders above any sportsman that Virginia, the mother of sportsmen, ever produced. From all accounts the man must have been a second Admirable Crichton. "He was," says Colonel Byrd in his memoirs, "the most graceful dancer of the minuet who ever trod a waxed floor." Tradition speaks of him as a wild, mad blade, and a lover of practical jokes.

In the ancient files of the *Williamsburg* (Virginia) *Gazette,* which I saw in an old scrap-book, there is an account of one of Jack Mason's practical jokes, a joke which certainly is unique in sporting annals. It seems that there was a large fancy-dress ball given on the James River, and the morning after the ball a group of sportsmen were discussing the fall shooting, and several of them began denouncing a certain Scotchman named McDougal, a crusty old bachelor who had a big farm on the James River adjoining, which was full of partridges, as he would never allow any one to shoot on his land. It was pure selfishness, as he himself never fired a gun.

Jack Mason asked several questions, and then offered to bet a barrel of Canary wine that he would shoot over the ground, and do so by the owner's permission. He was taken up on the spot. That afternoon, as the Scotchman was sitting on his porch, an apparition was seen walking up the gravel walk toward the house, the like of which the old Scotchman had never seen in the New World. It was a slender, effeminate, simpering fop, arrayed in the costume of a guardsman of Charles the Second's time—a slouch hat with plume; red jacket, white satin waistcoat, buckskin tights, and boots polished like a mirror. Behind him strode a darky with a light Joe Manton, a game-bag swung over his shoulder, and at his heels a couple of pointers. The gallant of the King's Guard advanced and made a sweeping bow, and in a mincing voice asked permission to shoot a few birds. The Scotchman was about to refuse, when, on second thought, his grim Scotch humor conquered him. He wanted to see that gay bedizened figure changed into a dirty, ragged dandy with his clothes ripped and torn, so he signalled an assent. Then the servant handed the gun to the finest shot that was ever foaled in Virginia.

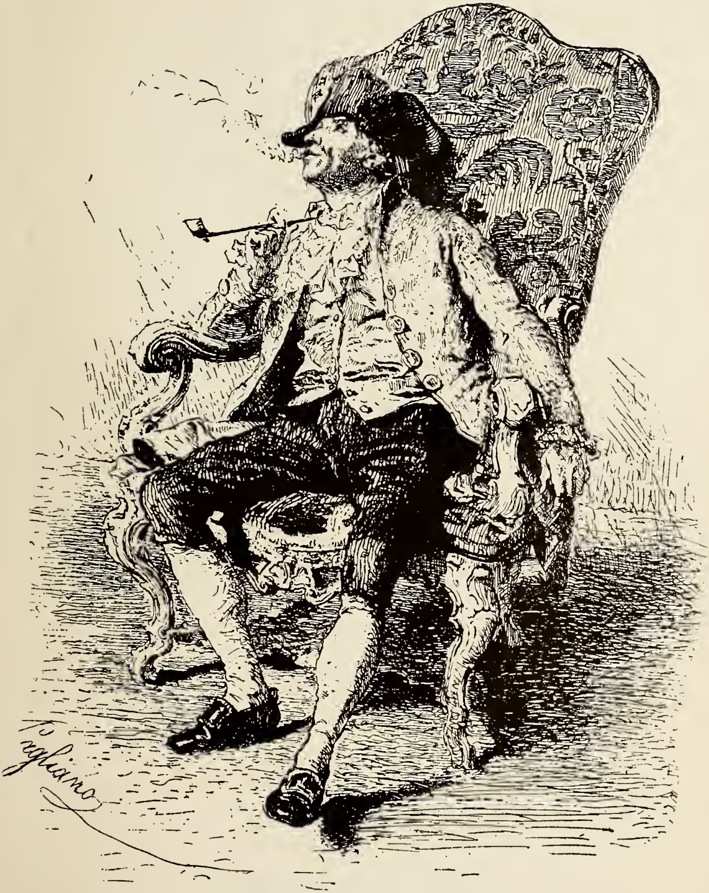
Directly in front of the house was a large broom-sedge meadow that sloped gently downward, and through its bottom ran a small stream fringed with bushes and briers. When the cavalier reached the field he hied his dogs on, and the gentleman from the "land of cakes" had his last laugh at the ornament of the boudoir attempting to hunt; for the Scotchman beheld the dogs stand, saw the gentleman advance and wave his hand to the pointers. Then a large covey of partridges was up and away in a second, but the gun spoke, and three birds dropped. Jack had made a cross-shot that only an expert can do. He then handed his gun to his valet, who quickly charged and capped it.

Another flock was soon discovered, and with his right and left barrel Jack dropped three more. He then pursued his way to the stream, sent his dogs in the bushes, slowly made his way, and killed every bird that rose. As he disappeared through the meadow the Scotchman went into the house, feeling that he had been outrageously tricked.

Jack lived a gay life until he was near thirty years old, then he married and became a noted planter. In the parlor of the Pontiac house there used to hang an old picture of the redoubtable Jack, etched by a foreign artist, when he was a staid, stately old gentleman, and I secured a photograph of it.

It was in the year 1860 that I returned from boarding-school to spend Christmas at home, and as I had arrived at the age of fifteen, when a lad can be intrusted with a gun, I had royal sport. No boy could have wished for more. The Potomac was a wonderful game river then, and furnished an unfailing supply of succulent food to the dwellers on its banks. The number of fish that swam in its clear waters would seem incredible in these times of purse ponds and seines miles long.

Our overseer used to devote one week in the spring hauling a small seine, and it was usually so full that every hand on the plantation was called to help haul it in, and there were enough herrings salted in barrels, and smoked shad in kits to fill our huge cellar that ran underground the whole length of the house. Fresh fish were served on every table of the place nine months out of the



Jack Mason

FACING
26

year. The troll lines set a short distance from the shore yielded a steady supply of catfish, eels, perch, sunfish, and fresh-water terrapin, or "tarrapins," as everybody called them, a luxury only second to their cousin the diamond-back.

As for the wild fowl that haunted the river between Washington and Mount Vernon, it was simply astounding. I have hunted ducks in later years from Barnegat to the Gulf of Mexico, but never have seen such apparently limitless numbers of wild fowl as fed and circled in the very sight of the Capitol's dome.

The channel of the Potomac River is on the Maryland side. This channel varies from one to two hundred yards in width. For a mile and a half the water was rarely over two and a half feet deep at low tide, and on the Virginia side the flats were bare at low water. On these shallow bottoms there grew in the greatest luxuriance an indigenous plant called wild celery, which the wild-fowl preferred to any other food. About the middle of November the birds began to congregate in such huge flocks that on a clear morning, when suddenly disturbed they took to wing, they made a noise like rolling thunder.

Of course before the war there were sportsmen in the two cities of Washington and Alexandria, but they confined themselves to the laziest mode of shooting, and followed the creeks and streams that led to the river, where they could get, with little trouble and outlay, all the sport they wanted.

As a general rule our family on the plantation soon became tired of eating wild-fowl. Even the incomparable canvasback palls upon the palate, as much as the partridges which are eaten, one each day for a month, on a wager. Frequently when company was expected to dinner, and it was desired to have a plentiful supply on the table, my aunt, a famous housewife, would call up Sandy, who was the utility man, or "Handy Billy," as the sailors have it. "Take brother Bush's gun, Sandy," my aunt would say, "and go down the river and shoot some ducks." "How many does you want, Miss Jane?" A mental calculation, and my aunt would give him the number, and Sandy, calling one of the house-boys, would hop along with a broad grin on his face.

There was a large tree on the river's brink, and not over a dozen yards out was a famous wild-celery bed. It was a favorite feeding-place of the ducks.

When about a hundred yards from the river, Sandy and his companion would advance in single file to the tree, the ducks slowly swimming out into deep water. When the tree was reached Sandy would hide behind the trunk, and his companion would walk back homeward, and the wild-fowl, seeing the coast clear, would swim back to the feeding-grounds. When the flock was well bunched Sandy would let loose both barrels with deadly effect, and then he would hurry to his cabin, shove off in his skiff, collect the dead ducks and shoot the crippled ones. The wild-fowl never caught on to this game; but they were rarely shot at, for the slaves were not allowed to keep firearms.

Across the river from Mount Vernon was one of the most famous ducking-blinds on the Potomac. The steamboat passengers noticed with curiosity what appeared to be a small island directly in the center of the river, which at this point is about two miles wide. It is a miniature Loch Leven Castle, and the ruins of a small stone edifice make of it a romantic picture in the varied panorama that unfolds as one passes down the "River of Swans." Right opposite on the Maryland side is one of those old colonial brick houses that tell of days when his Majesty was "prayed for" by fox-hunting parsons, and where the King's health was drunk before each toast by the cocked-hat gentry. The house, which stands on a high hill, and faces Mount Vernon across the river, is the manor-seat of the Chapmans, a family whose name is connected with every public enterprise or "high emprise" since the conversion of the colony of Maryland into a commonwealth.

General John Chapman was a great lover of rod and gun, and just before the Civil War he conceived the idea of making comfort and sport go hand in hand. Having made his soundings, he kept his slaves steadily at work during odd days and off hours hauling rocks in flat-boats and dumping them into the rolling river. He kept his own counsel, and his neighbors began to fear he was going crazy. At last his island was completed. Like the Old Point "Rip-Raps," it rose sheer from the water, and was composed entirely of loose rock. Chapman Island, as it was called, had an area of about a quarter of an acre, and was shaped like a cigar, the smaller end gradually decreasing in height and breadth until the narrowing ledge disappeared in the water. At this point the decoys, rarely under a hundred, often double that number, were placed. At the large end of the island was a hunting-lodge, at a distance of about seventy-five yards. It was built low, but the walls were thick, and a coal stove kept it comfortable in the stormiest, coldest days. It is doubtful whether there ever was a blind in all America that surpassed in attractions this artificial island.

As a general thing, when moving in great numbers, ducks choose the middle of a river, and seeing a large flock (the decoys) floating near the point, they would invariably swirl aside and join them. At a time when the river was full of water-fowl, some idea may be had of the royal sport they had, without any terrible exposure and endurance; a warm fire, refreshments of all kinds within a minute's walk, and the ducks raining down in a ceaseless stream from the sky—it was the very poetry of sporting.

In the fall and winter months General Chapman had his house filled with men whose names are household words in America, and his oyster roasts, canvasback, and terrapin stews were as widely known as were the dinners of the great lobbyist and gourmand, Sam Ward, who flourished a quarter of a century afterward.

The winter of '60 and '61 ended my shooting days for a long time. The boys on the Southern plantations dropped their fowling-pieces and seized the musket, the saber, and the lanyard; the setters and pointers became house-dogs, the pack of hounds ate their heads off, and the game had a rest from their natural enemy, man; for the sportsmen, North and South, instead of killing game, were busy shooting one another.

I was overjoyed at the prospect of being a real soldier. What boy who reads the "Odyssey" does not feel his pulse stirred when he reads of

Hector, of Achilles, and the mighty Ajax? But my heroes were Leonidas and Horatio, and I determined I would fight like them. The Spartan and the Roman were the champions for me.

I unslung from the wall an ancient broadsword, a family heirloom, and practiced daily with it, using both hands instead of one, for it was very heavy. I rehearsed my part many, many times. I would take my stand with my gleaming weapon, and if the enemy came at me—well, he had better look out, that's all!

A few years later, after I had been in actual battle, I changed my mind about Horatio. I thought it would have been more sensible for him to open the drawbridge and stand on the safe side. It is true I never fled from the foe, but when my comrades took to their heels I just skimmed the ground, and if there was any boy of my size in the army who could beat me running, I never saw him.

CHAPTER II

A COON-HUNT

Talons of an eagle, eye of a snake, teeth of a leopard, breath of a skunk, and the temper of a grizzly bear. Such is the coon. When he isn't grinning with rage at his pursuers, he is either snarling, yowling, spitting or growling. Had this little animal the weight and stature of a camel or an ox, and were his size in proportion to his qualities, he would be lord of the brute creation by might of sheer fierceness and power. Even the kingly lion would creep into the dim recesses of his covert, and the pugnacious rhinoceros plunge into the depths of the deepest pool at the sound of his coming.

The coon has, in addition, the craft of the coyote, the stealthiness of a wildcat, and he can hibernate like the tortoise.

Yes, a wonderful animal is the coon! There is more deviltry, thievery, more of general cussedness, more simon-pure malignity, in a coon than in any other animal that walks on four feet. The man-eating tiger that devastates whole provinces in Southern India could not hold a candle to the coon if the coon's fighting weight was two hundred pounds instead of twenty. He would then prove a tougher foe than the fabled dragon that Theseus slew.

I have often seen, in the backwoods villages and cross-roads of old Virginia, captive coons pitted against all kinds of dogs, from the mastiff to the bow-legged bulldog, and, except in two instances, the coon whipped his foe inside of three minutes.

A big, savage buck coon, when he lets himself loose for a fight, is a sight to see; such concentrated fury, deadly malice, such unrepressed rage is expressed by eyes, teeth, and bristles that one becomes almost a convert to Pythagoras's theory, and almost convinced that the soul of one of the foremost imps of the Inferno has passed into the little beast's body. His jaws snap like a pair of castanets, showing teeth as sharp and pointed as a shark's; each individual claw works convulsively in anticipation of bloody work, while every hair from snout to tail stands on end. The coon in a fight lies flat on his back, and then he literally goes "tooth and nail" in the mill; his four paws, each armed with four or five horn talons, work like the flails of a machine threshing wheat, and tear hair, hide, and flesh into ribbons, while the keen incisors cut and slice at a fearful rate.

It is difficult for a dog to fasten his jaws on a fighting coon, for, lying on his back as he does, his throat is very short, whilst the belly is guarded by his claws. The dog, on the contrary, has his nose, eyes, lips, and ears, the most sensitive parts of his frame, open and undefended, and after one round with his coonship most dogs are content to let him alone.

A coon has other gifts, or rather vices, for he has not one single virtue, unless it be his love of fighting. The coon is the Joey Bagstock of animals. "Sly! Devilish sly is old Joe." To be as wily, artful and cunning as a coon has passed into a proverb.

An old coon can feign death even better than a 'possum, and when he makes up his mind to play dead he *is* dead to all intents and purposes, and torture cannot move him; he may be kicked, stabbed, trodden under foot, and he bears it as stoically as a Comanche at the stake. It is rarely, though, that a coon counterfeits death; indeed, he must see all avenues to safety closed and he himself unseen before he lays out to be a "demmed moist corpse."

Still another characteristic of the coon. He is said to be the only wild animal that possesses histrionic ability. He can act. How else could he capture the wary, shy land-crab that hies away to his hole or into the surf at the faintest indication of danger? A crab, owing to his protruding eyes, can see all around him, and his sense of smell is as keen as a vulture's. But what avail sight and smell when opposed to the cunning of the coon? The crafty animal stretches out on the ocean beach and, like "Brer Rabbit," he lies low. Then it is that the festive land-crab, in his wanderings on a moonlight night, comes across the supposed carrion, and after a good deal of backing and filling gets close enough to stretch out a long claw to investigate by actual touch. In a second the coon has his whole weight on the crustacean, and, uncaring for the grips and nips he gets from the crab's claws, proceeds to tear the upper and lower shell apart with all the skill of a "crabber" of a canning factory. Then Mr. Coon indulges in a late game-supper.

When this sagacious animal, in his afternoon prowls on a foggy or drizzly day, perceives near the stable or house a flock of domestic fowls his tactics are of a different kind. He tolls the young members of the brood to him, just as a trained setter tolls wild ducks to the shore; only it takes months of instruction to teach the dog, and constant practice and discipline to keep him up to the mark; but the coon gets all this learning by instinct. He lies on the ground and tolls in a circle; he plays every kind of antic for hours at a time, for his patience is limitless, and many an unsophisticated fowl pays the penalty of its curiosity, for just as surely as the chicken, duckling, or gosling advances with cackle and quack to examine the strange creature, just so surely will its callow existence end then and there.

In short, the coon is a bloody pirate. He sails under the black flag, and all fur, feathers, fins, and claws despise and hate him. He is an excellent climber, and robs countless nests of their eggs and young; all go down his voracious gullet. He squats on the seashore and watches the female turtle lay her eggs, grinning meanwhile over the fact that the maternal deposits will soon be his dainty meal. He is passionately fond of frogs, and—shades of Epicurus!—he dotes on oysters, and sometimes gets his paws caught in a trap. The coon also eats rabbits, squirrels, rats, moles, and, in fact, all rodents. Nor does he confine himself to a flesh diet. He has a passion for growing-corn when it is in that milky condition known as "roasting ears." He chews chinquapins, and would peril his hide any time to eat his fill of haws or ripe persimmons.

There is a story extant of an old darky who was wood-chopping one day, and leaving his dinner, pipe, and bag of tobacco by the fire, did not return until late in the evening; when he did return, he found his dinner had been eaten up and a coon was sitting in the crotch of a huge sycamore tree, with the bag around his neck, the pipe between his teeth, and the soothing smoke curling from between his lips.

One bright, frosty day in autumn my cousin and I started off in a light Jersey wagon for a visit to a kinsman of ours who lived in eastern North Carolina. We lost our way and found ourselves, when night came, in the predicament of the man who took the wrong fork of the road. The pike dwindled to a highway, then to a lane, next to a cow trail, from that to a hog path, and lastly into a squirrel track that ran up a hollow tree and ended in a little hole.

Finally, hearing the bark of a dog, we unhitched the two horses and rode through the bushes until we reached a cabin. The owner came out with a pitch torch in his hand and invited us to enter. We found the cabin a very primitive affair. A blazing fire of pine logs illumined the interior in a cheerful glow. The walls were of unhewn logs, daubed with clay; the floor was of earth packed hard by use; a home-made table, bunk, chairs and stools completed the furnishing. An old-fashioned hair trunk, now entirely bald, which had probably been in the family for many generations, was a conspicuous object in the room. Overhead there was a loft, used for storage.

Our host came in, and a mutual introduction took place. His name was Zeb Web. He was thin, grizzled, of saffron hue, and prematurely aged; he was forty-six years old, he said, but he looked sixty-five. He spoke in a drawling tone, as if he wanted to kill as much time as possible in talking. He was as hospitable, though, as Philemon and Baucis combined, and considerate of our wants. He insisted upon going out and killing some of his chickens for us, when we reiterated that anything would do for a meal, as we were dead sleepy as well as tired.

"I've got some cold coon that was left over from yestiddy, an' some fust-rate cider."

"That's the very thing," we agreed, and a few minutes later we were sitting around the frugal board, and Epicurus himself never enjoyed more his sybaritic feast than did we our cold coon, hot ash-cakes, and sweet cider.

After we knocked the ashes from our pipes, Zeb offered us the use of his bunk, but as the bed clothes had neither been washed nor aired since the cabin was built, we respectfully but firmly declined it. An armful of hay spread on the floor, over which a blanket was laid in front of the fire, made a good enough bed for any sportsman, and, with our saddles for pillows, we were soon sound asleep.

Next morning, after a good breakfast, with cider instead of coffee, we had time to look around, and our attention soon centered on the host.

Zeb was a most original character, and a striking illustration of what malaria can do for a man. His trials discounted Job's, and his description of what he had suffered from childhood was in itself a wonderful jeremiad.

It seems his father, mother and two sisters had died years before, "taken off," as Zeb explained, "by them hell-fired ager-fevers."

As for himself, he had alternately shaken his boots off before breakfast with chills, and then sweated off ten pounds of flesh with the fever.

Besides this, he had been run nearly wild by "proud flesh," laid up with rheumatism, was a victim of neuralgia, had been paralyzed in his left leg, invalided with dyspepsia, afflicted with the measles, rustied with the rash, twisted into a knot by indigestion, laid out flat with miasmatic bone-fever, and his blood all curdled with the poisonous mephitic air. He was a blighted being, the victim of more diseases than Galen ever dreamed of. According to Zeb, his liver was upside down, his palate was entirely gone, his epiglottis burst, his diaphragm corrupted, and his spleen as large as a bucket. All these melancholy details were droned into our ears until we began to get sick from pure sympathy.

Yet we could easily understand the cause and effect, for a more unwholesome, pestiferous spot could not be found in a week's journey. Swamps surrounded the house on three sides, and, except when there was frost or snow, the virulent and insidious malaria was in every breath one drew. Zeb's sole help was an old darky called "Skillet."

"How came you by such a name?" I questioned.

"'Twas gib me long afore de war by my ole marse what was killed in some of dem battles in Vaginna. I was allus thin an' porely when a boy, an' my ole marse 'e called me Skilleton; den all tuk it up, an' it's 'bout as game name as any, I specks."

Skillet wore a pair of pants that he had made with his own hands out of an old blanket, and as they were cut straight like a pair of compasses, and sewed up on the edges, his appearance was most ludicrous.

We had intended to go on with our journey as soon as our horses were fed, but Zeb persuaded us to remain over one day, promising us a big coon-hunt in the night.

"Coons is thick around here, I tells you," said he, "an' I half lives on 'em in the winter. Mos' ruin my corn crap every year, an' if 'twa'n't fur my dogs, dad blame me if I could raise a chicken or a duck. Look thar!" and he carried us round the cabin. "I cotched all them this fall."

There certainly must have been plenty of coons, for scores of their skins were nailed over wall and roof to dry.

About an hour after midnight we made our preparations, or rather Zeb did, and they were simple enough—only a couple of bags with pine light-wood knots and a pair of axes. As for George and myself, we carried nothing but our guns, with a dozen shells loaded with No. 3 shot.

Zeb's pack was composed of six dogs, in whose veins flowed, I believe, some blood of every breed, from the wolfhound to the beagle; but they were mongrels of high degree, and death to coons. The patriarch of the pack was named Jefferson Davis, or Jeff, for short, and both Zeb and Skillet agreed that he was the finest coon-dog in the old North State.

After shutting up our own dogs in the smoke-house, we followed Skillet, who led the way with a blazing pine-knot in his hand.

"Consarn you, Skillet! don't forget to tie up them dogs, 'cept Jeff," sang out Zeb.

"Dat's jes' what I had on my mind, sah; I'se gwine to do it now."

"What is that for?" we naturally inquired.

"'Cause them air dogs will make too much noise at first, an' if they ketch the coon on the open they will mount the critter an' git all tored up. Now, Jeff don't make no sound till he finds the coon, an' he don't tackle them, nuther. That air dog knows them swamp coons is worser nor the upland coons."

"Is there any difference?"

"Difference? Of course thar is," replied Zeb. "The swamp coons lives better, fights harder, is bigger, an' their tails is longer too."

"Bes' let de dog loose now, sah," interrupted Skillet. "Der's some coons on de fence, I'll be boun'."

"Sic 'em, Jeff! hunt 'em, sir! trail 'em, boy!" shouted Zeb, and the dog, giving an intelligent whine, disappeared in the darkness.

We made our way through the corn-field and cotton-patch, and having reached the fence stopped to wait Jeff's signal.

Except for the little gash of flame, it was as dark as a tinker's pot. Inside of five minutes the dog began to yelp loudly, and as the sound came from one place we knew that Mr. Jefferson D. had treed.

We hurried forward eagerly, and found the dog sitting on his haunches looking up into the branches of a big sycamore that stood off by itself in a little glade on the borders of the swamp.

We craned our necks, and stared upward with all our might, but as the tree was full of gnarled limbs, and fully sixty feet high and proportionately large in girth, we could detect nothing.

Zeb took a torch and examined the tree.

"It's too big to cut down. We'll have to leave the coon whar he is. Call Jeff off, Skillet, an' send him up the swamp." The old dog was loath to leave, but finally he trotted off, and we took up our journey once more, this time along the edge of the swamp, every now and then stumbling over a prostrate tree, and getting smart raps occasionally in the face from branching limbs. Skillet's torch was our beacon, though it sometimes performed strange gyrations as the old darky would get tangled up by the unruly course he was leading.

Again Jeff's bark broke the stillness of the night. This time the dog was in full cry, and pursuer and pursued shot across our route and took a back track.

"That coon is on the run, Skillet; unloose the dogs." And in a trice the pack went tearing after their comrade, and set our blood on fire by their music.

Old Skillet set his aged bones in motion and started on a run, waving his flambeau above his head. Zeb's frame gathered headway, and he looked, in the flickering light, like Death on the run. George and I brought up the rear, often tripping and falling over some obstacle. Skillet kept well in advance and never looked behind. No danger of him tripping, for he carried the light.

The sprint was a short one, for the dogs had stopped running, and were baying clamorously at one spot, probably under some tree. There being no need for haste, we made our way leisurely to where the dogs were indulging in their chorus, and no sooner had Skillet's torch lit up the surroundings than Zeb ripped out:

"May my everlasting soul and body be dog-goned ef this ain't the same old sycamore!"

"Dat's de truf," responded Skillet, leaning despondently against the tree trunk. "Dar's two coons up dat 'ar tree, an' dar's two coons lost, an' skins sellin' at a quarter apiece, too."

"Can't you climb it?" questioned George.

"No, sah; no man kin clime dat smooth-bark tree. Can't git no hug on it, nuther."

"Why don't you cut it down?"

"Done take half de night. I'se too old an' weak."

"Consarn the luck, anyway!" cried Zeb. "Stop yer jaws, an' shet yer mouth, Skillet, an' drive them dogs off, an' let's get away from this air durned spot."

We now took a different direction, this time striking straight into the swamp, and making our way carefully, for the ground was boggy in places, and the great cypress trees spread their roots out in all directions, and from these roots there sprang up spines and spikes above ground that made caution necessary.

In that particular part of the swamp there was neither bush, thicket nor shrub, and the surroundings were mystic and incantatory. The lofty cypress trunks rose up grandly like the masts of a huge ship, the blazing torch lighted up the scene close around us, and deepened the background to a seemingly impenetrable opaqueness, and the immeasurable silence of the forest stirred the imagination powerfully. It was such a spot as the mad King Lear would have chosen to wander in, and call down imprecations upon all mankind; or where Eugene Aram would have beheld strange shapes, unreal outlines, and skeleton fingers in the fantastic moss-shaped limbs and branches of the cypress.

We passed slowly through this end of the swamp. Old Jeff had gone off somewhere and had not, as yet, given tongue. So we all lit our pipes and took a long pull at our flask. We barely had time to knock the ashes out of our brier-roots before we heard the summons, about half a mile off.

Zeb and his servitor put their heads together, and came to the conclusion that Jeff had treed. All hands made a bee-line for the dog, and found him under a small gum tree.

"Hi, hi!" cackled Skillet, "dat dorg done run on dat 'ar coon so sudden-like dat he didn't hab time 'nuff to clime a big tree."

Zeb soon discovered the coon, and pointed him out. We could just distinguish a dim mass high up, outlined against the diamond-besprinkled sky.

"Git yer guns and blaze away," suggested Zeb, and George and I both fired toward the object. Our aim was true enough, and the coon, mortally wounded, dropped to the ground, and a tap from Skillet's ax finished him.

"Let all the dogs loose, Skillet; we'll hunt to'ards home, now," said Zeb.

"Bes' keep 'em up till we git to de ole mill track; dar's plenty of pussimmon trees, an' it's monst'ous good place fer coons."

Zeb assented, and we started again. A quarter of an hour's tramping brought us to a barren field, that yielded nothing but brown straw and persimmons. Striking diagonally across, we plunged into the inky, murky woods.

"Loose 'em now, Skillet!"

Before the dogs started off Jeff had slipped away unnoticed, and the rest of the pack had hardly been swallowed up in the darkness before the noise of the dog's yap was heard, mellowed and sweetened by the distance, sounding like the notes of a flute, long, lingering notes.

The crowd pulled up.

"'Pears to me," said Skillet, "dat Jeff's jes' a-lumberin'."

"You kin bet yer head on that," replied Zeb; "he's a-goin' it as fast as he kin lay one foot after another, an' he's striking to'ards the clearin', too."

As he was speaking, another dog of the pack struck a trail, and away he went at right angles from us, barking like mad.

"Two coons up!" shouted Zeb. "Great Jehoshaphat, there's another!" and the balance of the pack came tearing toward us and, whirling suddenly to the right, went into the depths of the woods.

"Three coons up; good Lawd!" cried Skillet. "Come on, my chillens, jes' you take up stakes an' trabbel! Dust along!"

The fire of youth flushed through the veins of the ancient African and strengthened the rheumatic limbs, and he took the lead, yelling with all his might. We all rushed ahead, frenzied with excitement.

What a run that was! Skillet far in advance, whirling his torch like an Indian does his tomahawk, Zeb shambling along with the bag of lightwood knots and an ax on his shoulder, with George and myself shinning it and shouting like maniacs, while the very woods rang with the melody that floats from a dog's throat when he has his quarry in sight.

Go it, old Skillet! Let your flambeau wave in the front like the plume of Henry of Navarre, and we will follow! Make hay while the sun shines, and chase a singed cat in the dark. Meat—fat, juicy meat—enough for a month is afoot! Hot coon, with yams; cold coon, with turnips; roast coon, with dumplings; stewed coon and cider. Stir your stumps, old Africa! Skins are a quarter apiece! Shine up lively! The coons are putting in their best licks, and the dogs are stretching out. Three coons a-going at the same time! Coons as fat as sucking-pigs and swimming in gravy! Hurry up, . . . and be in at the death!

Great Scott, how Skillet did run! How that ancient son of the Congo managed to get over the ground! Not Milanion, running for fair Atalanta, made greater efforts. Visions of fries, stews and roasts passed through the darky's mind, and seemed to put life and mettle in his heels. He left us all behind.

All at once there was a splash, and the guiding torch went down. Skillet had tumbled into a miry hog-wallow and his light had been quenched, but the fall did not quench him.

"Light that air knot, you Skillet! How's we uns to get along in the dark?"

The answer came back, clear and decisive:

"Ain't got no time to stop an' fool with no light! Boun' for ter follow dem dogs an' dem coons. You heah me a-talkin'? Whoopee!"

The route ran across another open field and enabled us to go at full speed; but soon we got into a bad piece of woods, and had almost to grope our way. Zeb pitched headlong over some obstruction and lost his bag, inside of which were the pitch-pine knots and the dead coon. George and I got each a dozen tumbles and were roughly used; but there was no use of complaining, for there was little sympathy in that crowd.

The yelping of the dogs was by this time clear and distinct, and seemed to come from one spot. As we got closer the sound redoubled, and showed that every dog was there and doing his best. Soon Skillet's voice was heard shouting:

"Here dey is! Here dey all is!"

We reached the spot, an opening in the woods, panting, breathless, almost fagged out, but still jubilant and joyous.

George had matches and a newspaper in his pocket, and with these we had a blaze in a second; to our utter stupefaction, bewilderment, and even awe, we recognized the same old sycamore tree!

"Well, this beats all!" ejaculated Zeb, letting his ax fall in amazement.

In a few seconds our light had burned out and we were again in darkness. Then it was that we could hear Skillet, if we could not see him.

"Logorremity! dem ain't coons. It's de Debbel hisse'f dat's done tek dar shape! Nebber seen more 'an two coons before in one tree in all my born days. Dem dogs been voodooed, sart'in an' sure. Ain't gwine to meddle wiv nothin' no mo'; have de witches arter me nex'."

Meanwhile, George and I had fumbled around and had found a dead pine tree close by. We soon had it leveled with all its resinous knots and lightwood, and in a few minutes a ruddy, crackling flame made every object distinct.

"I ain't gwine to stay here. I'm bound for home," said Skillet, shouldering his ax.

"Jes' listen at that old bow-legged, no-scalp, crook-back, knock-kneed, superreptious nigger!" cried Zeb. "'Tain't nothin' up that tree but coons."

"'Tain't no coons," replied Skillet doggedly; "never hearn tell of all dem animals 'semblin' in one tree. Dey is de Debbel, I tells you!"

"Just think of fat roasted coons and potatoes," I suggested.

"And skins at twenty-five cents, spot cash," added George.

Skillet was shaken.

"Pity to lose 'em, but bes' not to fool wiv hoodooed t'ings. No, I'se gwine home right now."

"May the Devil, witches, voodoo and all," shouted Zeb, in wrath, "take you, hide, skin an' wool!" And, seizing the ax, he struck a mighty blow on the tree trunk.

"Why, doggone my buttons!" he cried joyously, "if this tree ain't hollow!"

"What's dat? 'Fore de Lawd! is dat a fac'?"

"Holler as a drum, I'll kiss the Bible on it!"

The old African turned, spit on his hand, grasped his ax, and let into that tree with all his might. Zeb, catching the spirit, sprang to the other side, and the rapid blows of their axes sounded like the hoof-beats of a horse galloping over a hard road. The tree soon tottered, swayed to and fro and then fell with a crash.

The dogs rushed forward, but no coon was visible.

An examination showed that the entrance into the hollow trunk was directly at the fork of the first branch. The hair on the branch showed that this was the only place of ingress to the interior.

Zeb made a fire in the big end of the hollow trunk, whose dimension was equal to a flour barrel, and on this flame he heaped a hatful of damp leaves. Next he cut two stout cudgels, one of which he gave to Skillet, telling George and me to keep our guns and shoot any coons that got away from the sticks and the dogs.

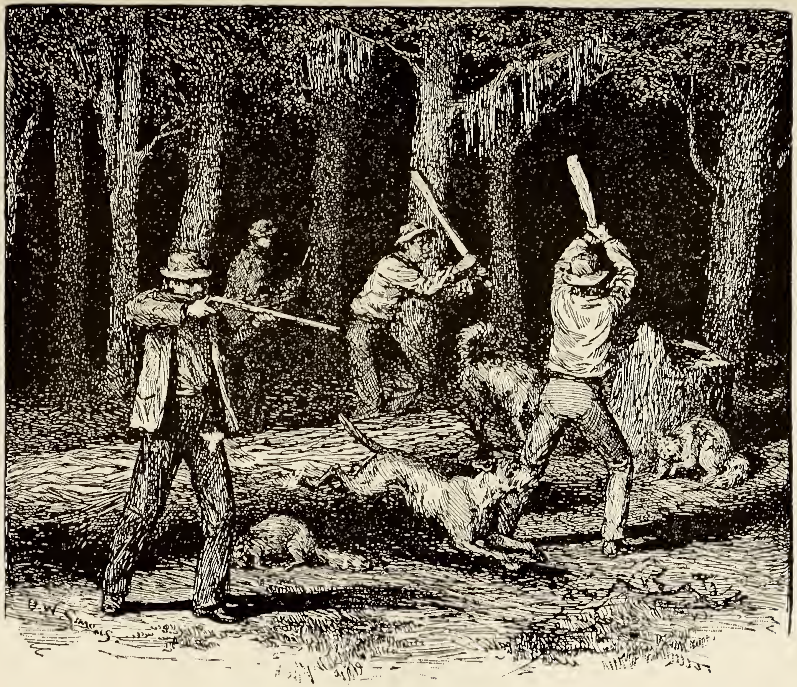
We waited, dogs and all, in a state of strained expectancy.

The interior of the trunk must have been warm by this time; but coons can stand a great deal of heat without flinching, although they cannot stand smoke.

Zeb then put a whole armful of leaves on the fire, and the fumes began to pour through the smaller hollow.

Skillet had stationed himself at this point, and his eyes gleamed in the glare of the flame like a set of opals. All at once he shouted:

" Dar he! Dar he! " and a coon popped out right in the midst of the waiting men and expectant dogs; a second followed, then a third, a fourth, and still another, and another! Oh, what a tableau in the midst of that forest! What a scene of action! Men, dogs, and animals in one complex, complicated, entangled struggle and shout and uproar, and furious rough and tumble, spill and pelt! It was a whirlwind of scuffling, jumping, hitting, stamping, kicking on the part of the men, and bites, snaps, clawing, spitting and tearing on the animals' part. A babel of sounds



"Yank 'em! Hi, yi! Scrunch 'em up, gulp 'em down! Rip 'em! Hi, yi!"

echoed through the woods. Yelps of pain, snarls of rage, clicking of teeth, but above them all rose the high, shrill, cracked tones of Skillet's voice:

"Sic 'em, dorgs! Bust dar snoots! Yank 'em! Hi! Yi! Scrunch 'em up! Gulp 'em down! Rip 'em! Hi! Yi!"

It was a sight I never expect to see again; those half-starved dogs had tasted blood and it maddened them; they hung onto their foes, tooth and nail. As for the coons, they fought savagely, as they always do, and left to themselves they would have torn the dogs' faces to pieces; but the clubs of the men disabled them one by one, and they died game, and were defiant to the last.

The butchery was over, and men and dogs alike sank to the ground utterly exhausted.

The fire was burning low, the wavering shadows grew denser and darker, and the air, full of moisture, changed into a heavy frost that sparkled and gleamed on all it rested upon. Venus blazed at her zenith. The morning stars had sung their march to the monarch of the day, Phoebus's car was being hitched, and the Morn, waked by the circling hours, would soon unbar with her rosy hands the gates of light. Zeb drawled out:

"It's durn near day."

"How many are there?" George asked.

"Dar's prezactly nine coons in dis hyar pile, an' one we los' makes ten. I'se been a coon-huntin', man an' boy, gwine on some sixty years; I'se seen some good times an' some big hunts; but, gentlemuns all, dis hyar night takes de cake. Ef I ever hears any nigger braggin' 'bout de number er skins he ken show, I'se gwine to shut dat fool mouf of his'n by tellin' him 'bout dis coon-hunt."

CHAPTER III

THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP.

"Away to the Dismal Swamp he speeds—
His path was rugged and sore,
Through tangled juniper, beds of reeds,
Through many a fen where the serpent breeds,
And man never trod before."

AMID the varied and vast wonders of Nature's handiwork none is more worthy the traveler's attention, the artist's pencil, or the interest of the capitalist than the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia. No one, unless he has visited the spot, can form an adequate idea of its attractions; it must be seen to be appreciated; no description, however faithful the portrayal, no pencil, however true its limning, can do justice to it.

The impression universally conceived of the place is entirely erroneous, since the very name is so suggestive of all that is dreary, desolate, and forbidding that one is likely to picture only oozing quagmires, treacherous quicksands, dark morasses, and unfathomable bogs. While the locality is, as a general thing, what its name signifies,—a huge swamp,—there are little islands scattered here and there, of solid ground, which delight the eye with scenes of picturesque loveliness; and while, also, in some sections its characteristics are as weird and suggestive as the Hartz Mountains, as sombre and desolate in its utter loneliness and sterility as the Desert of Sahara, yet, again, they are as fair and beautiful as the opening vistas, the placid waters of the famous gardens of Corisande. Hence it is that the explorer finds so much to awaken his admiration and enthrall the imagination, or to arouse within him feelings of awe—awe at times almost akin to fear—as he may chance to pass from a scene of smiling beauty into one of gloomy desolation.

The Dismal Swamp lies in two States; one section in Virginia, where it runs from east to west, twenty-five miles in length; the other, in North Carolina, stretches for twenty miles in a southward direction. In width it is much contracted, averaging only about twenty-five miles. The whole area is eight hundred square miles.

The soil is spongy and soft, consisting of vegetation and matted roots, which form but treacherous footing. There are no quicksands. The most wonderful feature of this strange place is that, in defiance of the laws of Nature, the swamp is above the level of the surrounding country, instead of below it; the greater portion being between seven and eight feet higher than the banks, as was ascertained by careful measurement when the railroad running between Norfolk and Petersburg was made to traverse its upper section. Another singular fact is that the waters flow *from* and not *into* the swamp. Five rivers draw their source of supply from the Dismal Swamp: the South Branch of the Elizabeth, the South Branch of the Nansemond, the North Run, the Northeast River, and the Pergamond. Of these, the first two flow into Virginia and the latter three into North Carolina. Follow them all to the head, and they lose themselves in the Dismal Swamp; not the slightest trace of them can be found above the ground. The vast amount of water by which these rivers are supplied is drawn from the spongy soil that retains the rain like a reservoir,—as it really is, of Nature's own making,—and it furnishes a never-failing flow.

A canal has been constructed from Norfolk to the lake in the center of the Swamp, some twenty miles distant. This canal is very narrow, very shallow, and full of snags. Another artificial entrance, equally contracted and insufficient, and called by courtesy a canal, runs from the vicinity of the little town of Suffolk to the opposite side of the lake, some twelve miles distant.

A party consisting of two, and complete in itself for all necessities of the occasion, and for enjoyment, viz., a journalist and his artist friend, left the cars at Suffolk one warm August day, prepared to investigate the swamp. Probably the cool depths beneath entangled trees, through which no vagrant ray of sun could even glimmer, acted as an incentive to the undertaking, for although we have said the day was warm, it was in reality hot. The very air seemed like exhalations from a furnace. Not a soul was visible in the whole village (or "town," as the inhabitants insist); men, women and children had all retired within their homes, and closed both door and casement. Even the darky and the dog, who love to stretch themselves out in the sunshine, with a temperature that will well-nigh roast an egg, and sleep the long hours through—even they had sought cooler quarters beneath some friendly roof. Store-doors stood ajar just for the name of the thing; indeed, the clerks were doubtless asleep, since there was but slim chance of any kind of trade on such a day. Only the sun and the flies, the blue-bottles especially, seemed to be doing business, and they appeared to be having everything their own way, inasmuch as there was no other sign of life or motion anywhere. It was really a deserted village.

Suffolk is not, however, the "loveliest village" by any manner of means. Situated at the extreme northern end of the swamp, it stretches itself out into one long street bordered for half a mile with houses that stand at variance one with another; built, in sooth, without reference to design or regularity, in that higgledy-piggledy style which seems the peculiar characteristic of all Virginia villages—as if each house by settling down where it pleased, and facing where it listeth, north, south, east, or west, was the Fourth of July in itself, and had a vote. A few cross-streets here and there had made attempts to ramify the village, but such efforts, never having approached anything like completion, had degenerated into lanes. A spire or two rising clear and distinct against the sky showed where the worthy worshiped. A score or so of stores lined the sidewalks, while scattered at intervals were the ubiquitous bar-rooms, over whose juleps (the eastern Virginian drinks nothing in summer but brandy juleps) the village magnates met to discuss their own affairs and politics.

The next morning some time was spent in collecting supplies for the intended trip and in securing a guide. At last, after the supplies had been purchased and stowed away, the guide was found in the person of Bob, a typical Dismal Swamper;

a long, double-jointed, slab-sided specimen of humanity, the biggest eater (suggesting a stomach like an anaconda's—the whole length of his body) and the biggest romancer in the world. His face wore an expression of combined shrewdness and good humor. A shock of tow-colored hair rose through sundry ventilators in his hat like sprouting wheat through the knot-holes of a barn floor. Underneath what had once been a rim was a sallow face, decorated with a nose the color of the immortal Bardolph's. His clothes were not many, nor much to boast of; they scorned a fit, and in one respect they reminded one of the "whited sepulchers" of old, "full of bones."

Bob had had an eventful career, so it seemed to the villagers. He had left his paternal home not far away, and shipped before the mast from Norfolk, bound on a voyage to South America and the West Indies. On his return he eschewed a sea-going life as being too industrious for one who hated all manner of work, and settled down in the village for the balance of his days to live on the glory of his exploits. These he recounted whenever opportunity presented itself, and, in order that the salt of his sea-stories should not lose its savor from over-repetition, Bob came to draw largely on an imagination second only to that of Munchausen's. So his habit of gentle misrepresentation was rather the gradual development of the necessities of the day than an inherent bias toward evil. Indeed, Bob might have been thought religiously inclined, if doing no manner of work on the Sabbath could be taken as a sign; only he treated every day in the week just as respectfully, and that told against him. He was a nondescript character; he lived from hand to mouth, and was always ready to act in any capacity, to turn an honest penny, provided no actual work was required.

Placing our traps in a cart we rode about a mile to the place where Bob was in waiting with his skiff—a small, rude flat-boat some ten feet long and drawing about six inches of water.

Taking our seats in front, we piled up the luggage in the center. Bob seated himself with the air of a veteran traveler, and using a double paddle, with steady, automatic strokes, he started the boat down the swamp. The canal for the first three miles was as wide as the ordinary room, and covered with a green slime, through which Bob laboriously propelled the canoe. Locomotion was necessarily slow and wearisome, and the surroundings were somber beyond description.

A short while before an immense fire had swept over this portion of the swamp, destroying thousands of magnificent trees, and leaving only a charred desert thousands of acres in area. For a month the fire lasted, until, for miles around, nothing could be seen but this wide-stretching waste, still smoking in places, with here and there the blackened trunk of a tree remaining, a monument to the surrounding desolation. No living thing was visible, not even a bird; even the buzzards avoided circling over such hopeless and barren wilds.

A few miles and the scene changes, only to become, if possible, more dreadful. Great trees, killed by the action of the fire, stand singly and in groups, their skeleton branches clearly outlined against the sky, with little puffs of sullen smoke drifting upward from the smouldering trunks. Young reeds cover the ground and wave silently in the noiseless breeze. It is as if kindly Nature had died, and the curse of God had desolated the earth. One could imagine himself in a world of departed spirits, spirits condemned to wander through this vast Hades with no voice to break the horrible solitude; seeking rest from the pangs of torturing remorse and finding none. In fancy one can see the doomed pariah of De Quincey, who, hunted by Bramah through the jungles of India, has sought refuge in these desolate swamps, and is cowering behind the tree-trunks, or fleeing wildly, blindly, through the dim recesses of the morass.

Bob's voice broke the silence: "I wouldn't paddle down here at night by myself for no money!" And he gave the skiff an energetic push in attestation of his statement.

We overtook a long-boat going after shingles, and we hitched our skiff on behind. These lighters carried shingles to the railroad at Suffolk, and were propelled by men walking on the bank and pushing a pole, one end of which was fastened to the boat. The tow-path consisted of but a single log laid down, the butt of one touching another. These logs were not fastened, but lay loose in the ooze of the swamp; and though the boatman had the oar of the lighter with which to steady himself, he stumbled every other step, and walked in water over his knees.

The wealth of the Dismal Swamp lies altogether in its shingles. The "Land Company" carries on a regular business, and employs a large force. Cypress trees grow frequently to the height of one hundred and thirty feet, and are as straight as the masts of a vessel. The shingles made from them are the best and most durable of all; the wood splits readily, is soft when green, and hardens as it dries. The workmen live in comfortable shanties on the little islands, generally in the interior of the swamp. They are wholly negroes, with white foremen who return in the evening to their homes outside, and never stay in the swamp except in rare instances. The negroes are a well-fed, happy, careless set, and in the calm summer nights the sound of their fiddles and banjos make the gloomy woods echo with jovial strains.

Stopping at one of their cabins, we found them well supplied with bacon, meal, potatoes, game and whiskey. The life that they lead is somewhat like that of a soldier, at times full of hardships, but followed by seasons of perfect rest.

The shanties of the negro laborers are always built over ground, the nature of the soil preventing any other manner of building. One of these dwellings was a curiosity in its way. It was constructed by bracing scantlings against four cypress trees that happened to grow at regular quadrangular distances, then the house was lifted upon those supports several yards above the water. This roost was approached by a skiff, and entrance was effected by climbing a ladder which hung from the door, so that its inmates literally and truly lived in the tree-tops. A sensible and comfortable house—barring the mosquitoes.

Through the desert we have been describing the boat steadily made its way. The sun, now risen high in the heavens, poured down its dazzling rays with fiery fury. There was nothing to intercept them, nor a ripple of wind to temper their remorseless heat. The perspiration rolled down the glistening faces and bared breasts of the two negroes who propelled the boat. Sitting in front, watching the scene, a strange sight arrested my attention. As far as the eye could reach, the logs forming the tow-path were covered with terrapins and snakes known as water moccasins. The incredible numbers of the snakes put to blush the maddest dreams of a victim of *mania à potu.* In some places a fallen hemlock would be literally covered, as, basking in the torrid noonday sun, they curled on the massive trunk and entwined along the branches, their brilliant-hued, variegated bodies glinting in the sunlight and presenting a beautiful but horrible picture. There seemed to exist a perfect understanding between them and the terrapins, for they rested peacefully cheek by jowl.

Above the gentle, low swish made by the passage of the boat through the water could be heard the splash! splash! of the reptiles and the turtles as they slid off the logs, their heads popping up like corks along the route. The boatmen did not seem to mind them, frequently treading them down as they made a misstep over their boot-tops into the mire. It seems as if the African has not that antipathy to serpents cherished by the Anglo-Saxon.

"Uncle," I said, going back to the rear of the boat where a venerable darky held the helm, "there are plenty of snakes hereabout."

"Sure dey is, Boss. Dey swa'ms aroun' on de canal, a-sunnin' deyselves."

"The boatmen do not seem to mind them?"

"No, sah; we gits used to dem."

"Do any of the hands ever get bitten?"

"Oh, yes, sah, sometimes; but we allus cures de bite by drinkin'. Some of dese no-count niggers would rather get bit dan not; dey loves whiskey so!"

"Wouldn't you be afraid to travel along here in the night-time?"

"'Fraid! Lor', boss, no! I comes offen to set my traps. De only t'ing I'se 'fraid of is ghostesses, an' thar ain't none here I ever seed, though I hear tells on 'em."

"What kind of traps do you set?"

"Tarrapens—snappers, we calls 'em."

"How do you catch them?"

"We takes, sah, a piece ov twine as long as yo' arm, wid a hook at one en', an' baits 'em wid a frog, tied live by dere leg, den tie de odder en' to de log. De snapper comes 'long an' swallows de frog, an' we carries 'im home, string an' all. We catches plenty when de moon is right."

"The moon! What has that to do with it?"

"Why, sah, yo' see de snapper don' bite well 'cept when dar's a full moon, sah."

"Why, how do you account for that?"

"I dunno, 'pears to me de frog can't see 'em in de dark, an' de snapper gets all he wants; but in de light ov de moon, sah, dey see 'em comin', an' gets away—den dey bites free at de bait."

"What do you do with them?"

"We eats 'em, sure; an' den we sells 'em in town—gits a quarter an' a half dollah, 'cordin' to dere size."

"Do you catch anything else?"

"Oh, yes, sah; de swamp is full ov coons an' 'possums."

"Any bears?"

"Plenty ov bars, sah. When we's a settin' our coon an' 'possum snares in de night we hears 'em a-plungin', a-scrimmagin', an' a-runnin' thu' de canes; but Lor's a massy, dey nebber 'sturbs us."

"Do the sportsmen ever kill any?"

"Not in de swamp, sah; de canes dey is too close up to foller dem up. De farmer hyarabout what libs on de aige ov dis swamp shoots at 'em when dey comes out to eat de green co'n. Bars is monst'ous fond ov green co'n an' melons."

The boat was now turning off into a side-passage, and Bob resumed the helm.

Within three miles of the lake the scenery becomes exquisitely beautiful; neither grand nor striking, but simply and naturally beautiful; not the loveliness that stirs the senses and awakens wonder, but that loveliness which touches the heart and gradually and silently deepens its spell. The canal loses all semblance of its title, and paddles come into requisition. Reeds, flowers, and the holly line each bank and nearly reach across, while away up in the air the branches of the majestic hemlock, the stately maple, over which vines, creepers, and the funereal cypresses trail in graceful festoons, interlace, forming a grand avenue so densely shaded that scarcely a ray of the sun is able to penetrate. As the boat glides in the motionless water, the avenue stretches before it straight as an arrow, and loses itself in a dim, indefinable aisle. The water of the canal looks as black as ink, though it is really the color of Madeira wine. Its great peculiarity is its faithful reflection of objects. Every tree, bush, flower, and shrub, even the butterfly that darts above it, and

''At last Lake Drummond opens to the gaze.''

the spider-web that spans the chasm, is mirrored with marvelous distinctness and tint. Indeed, the color and delicate shades of hue are reproduced with startling fidelity. Looking into the water as you glide, you feel as if you were really floating in air, while your own face is reflected with a purity no mirror can excel in reproducing.

In traveling through the swamp an exceedingly depressed feeling takes possession of the explorer. The absolute stillness makes one sad despite all reason; and faces that one has seen never to meet again, voices that have passed away save as they echo in the memory, come back with a reality and pathos that haunt only the dead, quiet, wakeful hours of night.

At last Lake Drummond opens to the gaze, like the slow rising of the curtain disclosing the beauty of the stage; and one thinks if God ever made a fairer sheet of water, it is yet hidden away from the eyes of mortals.

There it lies, Lake Drummond, in the very center of the great swamp, pure, undefiled, and fresh as a child's heart in the mad rush and roar of a city's life. Its waters, whether in placid repose or stirred by winds gentle or rough, always wear their own rich ruby hue that gleams like gold in the sunshine. Hidden deep in the midst of an inaccessible swamp, this lovely lake seems to dream away its life, pure and untainted from all contact with the world. One can almost believe it was made by Jupiter for the chaste Diana to bathe in, away from the haunts of men.

It is a novel and weird scene, this stretch of ruby water extending in all directions, for Lake Drummond is seven miles long by five miles wide, and looks longer than it really is. No sails gleaming on the water light up the dark background; no long slender cloud of smoke darkens the horizon, marking the path of the swift-fleeting steamer. Naught but the calm, still lake, radiant in its solitary beauty, rests before you, bathed in a solemn calm, as if of a Sabbath holiness. Out of the slime, the mire, and the mud it has gathered up its waters, pure and uncontaminated as when first they fell from heaven. The beautiful lake of the Dismal Swamp!—like the one oasis in the desert—the precious gem in the miser's hoardings—the jewel in the toad's head,—you are yet the heart of the swamp, and hidden in its jealous embrace, its very life, and its "joy forever"!

In olden times the Dismal was never entered, and it was as late as the Revolutionary War that a hunter named Drummond first discovered the lake. To the people who lived upon its edges its unexplored waste was a land of lost spirits—a land of Plutonian shadows. "Once entered, none return," they said. Thus it was that rumor, tradition, and superstition combined made it a realm of enchantment, within the confines of which dwelt warlock, witches, hobgoblins, and, if the truth must be told, the very Devil himself, hoofs and horns. There were tales, too, as Colonel Byrd writes, of numberless wild animals vast in size and of surpassing strength and fierceness, the like of which mortal eyes had never seen before. The boldest sportsmen only skirted its extreme edges in pursuit of game; none were so brave or daring as to venture within such an undoubted Valley of the Shadow of Death.

But the hunter Drummond, on one occasion, became absorbed in his chase of a wounded deer, and caution was forgotten for the while. He followed his game so far into the recesses of the swamp that he became lost. In its worse than Cretan labyrinths he wandered hopelessly and aimlessly for three whole days, until want of food and sleep, and excessive fatigue well-nigh cost him his life. One cannot help fancying his feelings during the time of trial; his constant wanderings and incessant struggles; his sickness of heart and helpless despair; and afterward, the ecstasy and delight when, worn and weary, foot-sore and fainting, the fair sheet of water burst upon his bewildered senses. Did he think it a dream, a dream that would vanish from his distempered fancy when he should reach it and try to bathe his brow in the cooling depths? Be that as it may, emboldened and buoyed up by his discovery, he made his way from the swamp and reported the wonderful lake that was hidden away in the morass.

The lake was called after him, affording one of the few instances on record in which the discoverer was known to leave his name and render it famous.

Lake Drummond has no beach, the forest-trees running close up to its boundary, and standing like so many sentinels around it. The water is tinctured and colored by juniper, gum-leaves, and other decaying vegetable matter, hence it is considered possessed of fine medicinal properties for all pulmonary diseases. Invalids suffering from such diseases have confessed themselves benefited to such an extent that they send for regular supplies, and use none other. It keeps sweet and pure for a great length of time; consequently, ships bound on a long voyage often have their casks filled from the clear depths of Lake Drummond. The water is slightly acrid to the taste, but that only adds to the zest in drinking it. There used to be a popular superstition that some portions of the lake were fathomless, but Commodore Barron, of the United States Navy, when on a tour with a party of friends, sounded it thoroughly, and found its average depth to be about twelve feet. The greatest depth was in the middle, and did not exceed twenty feet. The bottom is generally of mud, but in places it is of pure sand.

Such is the extreme loveliness of Lake Drummond that many years before the war a speculator, with an eye to untold millions, built a cheap hotel on the spot, and advertised for stray tourists, for anglers, and for sportsmen who wanted to practice their art. He guaranteed the swamp to be perfectly free from all ordinary diseases—indeed, declared it the healthiest summer resort in the world; the waters, he said, teemed with fish in all primeval abundance; as for game, the swamp was overflowing with it. That was all true; but by the first of August, landlord, guests, waiters, chambermaids—all hands—had cleared out, bag and baggage. Mosquitoes, gad-flies, gallinippers, sand- and yellow-flies had answered the advertisement in countless numbers, resolved to fight it out on that line if it took all summer, and immediately many bloody battles ensued. Between them and their victims the fight waxed wild and wilder, without pause or hindrance by day and by night; they fought in sunlight and starlight, sitting, walking, eating, until the rout was complete. Not a man, woman or child was left in the swamp to tell the tale. Only the house built on an artificial foundation survived the fierce encounter, and that, when we saw it, was slowly sinking into dignified and stately ruin.

Stopping at an unoccupied cabin under the shade of a clump of huge trees, in which workmen once lived, we took our dinners (Bob appropriating the share of six), smoked our pipes, and awaited the lengthening shadows of the afternoon. Then we pushed out the boat and spent several hours in fishing. So plentiful were the fish, and of so great variety, and so rapidly did they bite, that our boat was soon half full.

Of course, Lake Drummond has its traditions—traditions not of horror, or of blood-shed, or crime, but in fit keeping with the divine and mystic fairness of the scene. One, possibly the oldest tradition, is as follows: Before Colonial times even, an Indian warrior dared to love the daughter of his chief, who, like many fathers, raised the mischief because the young man could not show more wealth than a pair of strong arms and a brave heart. " No ponies, no blankets, no beads, no nothing." But the lover had won the maiden's heart, and she was persuaded, by dint of eloquence and blarney, to run off to the lake he had found in the swamp near by, there to live on perfect happiness and fish, till old age should overtake them, or the abode of the Great Spirit be sooner reached. They eloped in true lovers' fashion. Years went by, and there they remained in the swamp, mourned as dead in the hunting-grounds and wigwams of their extensive acquaintance. Then they were seen to cross the lake together in a canoe, and were never heard of more. But the Great

Spirit was so pleased with the love and rare devotion displayed by the warrior and his bride that he ever allows them at stated intervals, as great mark of his favor, to return to earth and linger in the scene of their former happiness; and this they continue to do, winding up the little pleasure-trip by a midnight sail on the moonlit waters. Then they vanish into spirit-land as noiselessly and mysteriously as they came, leaving but a meteoric flash to mark the way they went.

Moore, in his "Melodies," gives us another tender legend of the swamp, and with this we are more familiar. A young man lost his mind when the woman he loved died, and in his ravings asserted that she was not dead, but had only gone to the Dismal Swamp. He disappeared suddenly, and was never heard of afterward.

As we fished the afternoon wore away and the evening shades drew nigh. The sun, sinking beneath the tops of the lofty trees, cast a reflection of the majestic cypress on the mirrored water at its feet. From the borders fringed with myrtle, laurel, and yellow jessamine, floated fragrant odors that loaded the air with voluptuous, rich perfume. As the sun dipped lower to the horizon, the gray shadows deepened and the warmth died out of the lake. The dense woods closing up in serried ranks around the water became merged into one somber mass that cut blackly against the sky, like a huge wall that shut out the world. The soft night gently and slowly descended over earth, while the observer, mute and spell-bound, gave himself up to the influences of the hour. Then the stars stole out one by one, each reproduced by the reflecting waters of the lake, till it glittered like a heaven below, no constellation wanting.

Millions of fire-flies sporting in the air lit up the scene with a phosphorescent glow that made everything unreal; tremulous gleams of light pervaded the sky, air and water, making a scene of entrancing loveliness. The surroundings seemed all unsubstantial, more lovely than a dream, fairer than a vision, and more vivid than any coinage of the brain.

In this illusory glare, imagination, with its potent art, played strange antics. That huge log, half-submerged, with dead skeleton branches standing upright in the air—are you sure it is not a graceful ship swinging lazily at anchor? The hoarse, discordant hoot of the owl floating across the lake,—mellowed in the distance,—could you not swear it to be the voice of the sailor giving orders, or the boatswain calling to quarters? And there, just as we turn to go, there! away off, we see, or think we see, as clearly as we ever beheld anything, a white canoe dreamily floating away. The tradition comes to mind—or has it ever really been absent?—and we try to follow the spectral boat across the star-lit and fire-lit water. It is gone; and again and yet again it comes, and in the evanescent gleams is lost. We watch and wait, half-hoping, half-fearing, to see what mortal eye had never looked upon; and as we intently gaze in silence one of us repeats softly:

> "Oft from the Indian hunter's camp
>   The maid and her lover so true
> Are seen at the hour of the midnight damp
> To cross the lake by their fire-fly lamp,
>   And paddle their white canoe."

As we make our way along the shore, what a remarkable contrast the quiet day forms to the night of sound! The swamp, then so absolute in its stillness, is now startlingly alive with sound. The plaintive note of the whippoorwill is mingled with the hysterical scream of the screech-owl; the stealthy tread of the coon is rustling the tall reeds, while afar off the bear crushes through the canebrakes. The musk-rat splashes into the water from a log; the otter ripples the stream as he swims; the hum of myriad insects fills the air—all commingling into one steady chorus or sound.

And the Frogs! Ah, the Frogs (capital *F* for the occasion)! they lead the orchestra without competition—lead it so overwhelmingly, so prolongedly, that it is only when they stop to take breath and subside awhile that the others can have any kind of justice done them at all. To use Bob's expression, "They are a caution!"

What careless, unmolested, happy lives are meted out to these frogs. The Dismal is their paradise; here they live, and die of old age—that is, unless sore throats and late hours carry them off sooner; for they never die of boys or Frenchmen. They are a jovial, musical set, even if they have discordant voices. They keep late hours, and all night long they talk, halloo, gossip, whoop, swear, make stump-speeches, and sing hymns to their own very great satisfaction, at least; and not until the "wee sma' hours ayant the twal" do they retire to sleep off the effect of their night-long carousals.

If some wicked fairy of the swamp, or some witching Circe, wont to change men into strange shapes, like unto the way that fascinating ancient coquette transformed Ulysses's Argonauts—I say, if any one of that ilk were to appear suddenly before me, and waving her magic wand around my head, ask me, out of pure politeness, what animal shape I most preferred to take on, I should unhesitatingly ask her ladyship to metamorphose me into a frog, and put me in the Dismal.

But it was getting late, and insects were coming out in too great force, so Bob turned his canoe back to the shanty, which in a few minutes we covered with enough green boughs to make it mosquito-proof, and in a shorter time than it takes to write it we were fast asleep. Bob's snores kept rhythmical time to the song of the frogs, and made no mean chorus to their lullaby.

The next morning our explorations were continued. In the evening we crossed the lake and visited the only inhabited house in the vicinity. Inhabited, did we say? At that time, we should rather think it was!

This establishment stood a few hundred yards back from the lake, built upon ground artificially formed. Two families were residents of the cabin, and were of that kind known as "Low-downers," utterly ignorant and illiterate. They were the hardest set to look at we have stumbled across in a life-time of wanderings. The *Maison de Doree* was a shanty after the order of the Irishman's—three rooms in one: parlor, bedroom, and hall. Into this apartment all crowded and slept; and there were more pigs, cats, babies, and dogs in one habitation than an uninitiated man could have deemed possible. The pigs were the cleanest of the whole caravansary, the cats the most aggressive, and the babies the loudest and dirtiest of all.

Fortunately we had brought hammocks. Swinging them outside, we lay and watched the domestic conduct of this happy family who had lived all their lives in the Dismal Swamp, and knew no other place. There were five women (it is well to be exact, since the census-taker of this district might have omitted this much of his duty), one boy, sixteen children—of all sizes and colors, thirteen sucking-pigs, five dogs, ten puppies, four cats (three tabbies and a tom), two litters of kittens, five dissipated-looking ducks, three hens, a melancholy-looking rooster, one sociable sow, and ninety million mosquitoes. Between the fowls, the beasts, and the family there existed a state of perfect equality; all mixed together, seeming to enjoy life and one another's society amazingly. None of them was proud.

Our guide brought our provisions from the boat, and got the household to serve up supper. A table was set under a shed. There were only two knives and one fork in the whole establishment. Our eating was the signal for an incipient bread riot. Two of the larger children watched the table with sticks—not to keep away the flies, but to beat off the rest of the brute family. The discord was deafening; the sow grunted, the pigs squealed, the dogs growled, the babies yelled, the cats fought, spat, and clawed, the women scolded, and all united in one infernal uproar that resounded through the swamp, and must have scared many a bear from his lair.

When supper was finished the night was well advanced; the great Northern Bear had risen high in the sky, still pointing true to the polar star. The mosquitoes were in uncounted millions; they came, armies on armies, waves upon waves, clouds upon clouds, and charged in platoons, in serried line, and single file, and threw themselves, with bloodthirsty voracity, upon every living thing in reach. It was useless to brush them off; like the Mamelukes at Abouka, repulsed at one point, they would reform and charge again. At last the whole family beat a retreat inside, carrying Bob with them, as their guest, and the cry went up, "Hold the fort!" Inside our hammocks, our faces covered with our linen dusters, we lay as secure from the persistent bills as a newly bankrupt debtor from the importunities of his creditors. "Sleep, balmy sleep, that knits up the raveled sleave of care," fell upon the scene and pressed our wearied eyelids down.

We were aroused by our guide.

"I can't stand this here thing, nohow!" he was saying emphatically.

"What is the matter?" we exclaimed, starting up and rubbing our eyes, yet half asleep.

"I would liefer be in h—l as stay in that cabin thar. I'm d—d if all them animals an' skeeters ain't too much for me! Bin all over the world, an' never seed such life befo'. An' it's hot in thar! Whew!"

"Why don't you row into the middle of the lake and sleep in the canoe?" we asked, with absolute commiseration.

"'Cause it 'pears like it was goin' to storm, an' I don't keer to drown. S'pose, though, I kin walk about till day if the 'skeeters don't carry me off! 'Spec's one of 'em will put me on its back an' fly away, nohow. Reckon I'd be right fat but for the 'skeeters an' chills. Jus' look at 'em. Won't come here agin for no money, I swar!" Bob walked off and we resumed our slumbers.

The hours passed by, the sun came out, and with it the inmates of the cabin. We watched narrowly to see if any of them would make morning ablutions, as the canal was but a single step from the door. But water was a superfluity with them, and of no use except to drink. We determined that something should be clean, so we pitched two pigs and a cat in the canal, and the manner in which they paddled out showed it to be their first experience with water.

We took a plunge in the lake; but our guide made his toilet by dipping one hand in the water, smearing it over his face and wiping his damp countenance with a handkerchief. Then we paddled ashore and cooked our breakfast, smoked our pipes and discussed our next move. It was no use trying to explore any portion of the swamp on foot; the guide positively refused to join in any such proceeding. It was impossible to get any game by merely cruising along the rim of the lake.

The guide repeated his statement that he knew of a farmer who lived on the border of the swamp who had a good pack of dogs, and that by putting up there we could be reasonably certain of getting a bear or a deer. We therefore adhered to our first decision, to retrace our steps and return to the mainland; so we left the place in the early morning, and as we reached the inlet, where the lofty trees rimmed its boundaries, we turned our eyes to the lake for the last time. The waters lay now as still and tranquil as they will rest forever. The glinting rays of the sun tinged its surface until it glowed like garnet and ruby in its setting of jet. We were loath to leave it, but the unsympathetic guide sent the boat gliding up the canal.

We reached our quarters at Suffolk that night, and the next morning we hired a team and drove some fifteen miles to the home of a Mr. Milton Seabright, whose farm lay on the borders of the Dismal. Our host was a genial, companionable man, who loved hunting better than he did farming. He was a bachelor, some forty years old, and took life easy. His corn-field furnished him with bread, his hogs and the game he killed, with meat. One suit of clothes lasted him a long time, a tobacco-patch filled his pipe and kept his jaws moving all the year round. He did not care for style, and had never been sick a day in his life. His apple-orchard, planted by his father, furnished him, in trade, with a barrel of brandy yearly—so what more did he want?

"I never had the blues but once," said he to me, "and that was some years ago when a Suffolk gal kicked me, and I am durned glad of that now."

Milton, or Milt, as he was called, was a true philosopher, and as he had but little need of money, he never bothered his brain about accumulation. He kept a pack of eight dogs of very uncertain lineage, though they showed the hound more than any other breed. Two of the pack were of unusual size, strength, and ferocity, and what with the battles amongst themselves and their fights with the bears and coons, their dewlaps and ears were torn to ribbons.

"A good bear dog," said Milt, "must be a mongrel; a cross of the hound with the mastiff or bulldog is the best; the first gives him the nose, the second the pluck. An ordinary hound will trail a bear, but he won't tackle him and make him take to a tree. When them dogs close on a bear, it's shindy or skedaddle, and it don't take 'em long to make up their minds, nuther! I killed last year twenty-one bears. Most on them, though, I shot outside the swamp, when they come prowling around after roasting ears and melons. A few I treed in the swamp, but it's tough work, as you'll find out to-morrow."

Milt was right. We did.

Milt's weapon was a muzzle-loader, with eighteen buckshot to each barrel, and the dogs would delay the bear in the open until he closed up on them. When treed, one load was generally sufficient to make bruin descend to find new quarters, and as he came down, the second barrel would be sure to finish him.

We ate our breakfast by candle light, and Milt, my comrade and myself started out at dawn for the swamp, about a mile away.

The night had been an unusually sultry one for that season of the year, and there was every prospect that the day would be, as Milt expressed it, "a blazer." The dogs spread out in fine form, and loped along through a big corn-field, snuffing the ground at intervals. Once in a while one would give a yelp, but the rest of the pack never noticed it. We kept along the edge of the swamp for a couple of miles without stirring up any fur larger than a rabbit. The birds, though, were in the greatest profusion, covey after covey whirring away into the woods and branches. A huge flock of swamp blackbirds covered the ground, it seemed, solidly for an acre or more. Doves, too, were flying in flocks of hundreds. I never saw so many at one time. They darted all around us, offering beautiful shots. Certainly, had we known of this profusion of small game, we would have preferred a rattling bird hunt to a tedious chase after a bear. But we consoled ourselves with the thought that we would let ourselves loose at them the next day.

We were drifting along in an aimless fashion when Jack, the grizzled veteran of the pack, uttered a melodious howl, long drawn out. Every dog rushed to his side, and after sniffing they all gave tongue.

"Is it a bear or a deer?" I asked when we reached the spot.

"Bar; see the hair rising on them dogs' backs? That's a sure sign; it means fight to them—and they are getting their mad up. If it was a deer trail they'd be off like a shot. Here's the footprints."

The dogs now went on a run and disappeared in the gloom of the swamp, and we plunged after them. The cane-brake was composed of reeds—great, strong, lofty poles, such as are used for fishing-rods; and growing together as closely as one's fingers. It was slow and tough work forcing our way through them, and before we had gone a couple of hundred yards the sound of the dogs' voices ceased entirely. We came to a standstill, Milt sounding his horn frequently and getting no responsive cry. It was an hour by my watch before we heard anything, and then there was a slight rustling in the cane, and all unexpectedly a full-grown doe ran almost onto us. Before we could jerk our guns up she made a mighty leap sideways and was out of sight in a second.

The cane-brake was so dense that it was impossible to see ten feet ahead. All threw up their guns, but none pulled trigger, realizing that we might as well fire in the dark.

" Dog-gone the luck! " growled Milt, " that doe was as fat as butter. It ain't any use staying in here any longer; that bar has struck for the lake and the dogs never will catch up with him."

We retraced our steps, getting in the open, and sat smoking and talking for some time. Just as our patience was becoming exhausted and we were thinking of returning home, one of the pack—a long-limbed gyp named Queen—came out of the swamp all covered with black pitch-like mud. A long blast from Milt's cow-horn brought the others, all mud-coated from the tip-end of their noses to the end of their tails. Their lolling tongues and heaving sides showed that they had toiled hard.

Another long wait, to give the pack time to recover wind, and we continued the hunt. The sun was by this time high in the heavens, and its beams were scorching. The next place where the dogs were thrown off was an old meadow that had not been cultivated for some years, and was fast relapsing into its primeval wilds. Young pines and bunches of briers dotted the field throughout. The land trended far into the swamp, and was in the shape of a horseshoe. We kept across, while the dogs followed its borders around.

All at once a simultaneous cry broke from the pack, and an antlered buck leaped with easy bounds through the field; the dogs had cut him off from the swamp, and he was striking for the woods behind us. In his flight he never saw us; his fear was of the dogs. His course was diagonally across the field, which would bring him within easy range of our guns. We dropped silently into a patch of broom-straw, and waited for him. He never swerved a hair's breadth from his line of flight, and just as he passed through an open space, between forty and fifty yards distant, every gun exploded. The deer gave a mighty bound and vanished from sight, the hounds right behind him, baying with all their might. By the time we had slipped fresh shells into our guns, a frenzied outcry from the pack apprised us that they had overtaken their game. In a few seconds we were with them, and found the animal prone on the ground, feebly gasping for breath.

He was an eight-tined buck, and his hide was literally perforated with shot. It being so warm, Milt skinned him then and there, and hung the carcass to the limb of a tree. It was so intensely hot that we were glad to take a long rest in the shade, and nothing but a sense of pride kept us from going back home and loafing through the rest of this worse than mid-summer day.

Once more the dogs were sent out, and we proceeded slowly along the brink of the swamp. In passing through a dense coppice we came to a dead cedar which was covered with vines heavily weighted with an enormous quantity of fox-grapes. Here it was that the pack gave a savage howl and rushed, with a common impulse, into the canes.

"Come on!" yelled Milt, "that bar is not far off; he was eating them grapes when he heard us coming."

Into the cane-brakes once more, pushing our way through by main force for nearly a mile! It was hot enough to roast meat, and the tremendous exertion brought the perspiration out of every pore. The dogs suddenly deflected to the right, and we could hear them crashing through the cover. At last the faintest vestige of sound died away.

So here we were for the second time, stuck fast in the brakes. It was now high noon, and Milt's prediction came true; it was "as hot as blazes," and growing hotter, as not a breath of a breeze could reach through this dense, impenetrable cover, and the moisture from the swamp, changed into steam by the heat, almost parboiled us. Just as we were about to leave in utter disgust, our discomforts were forgotten, for the bear had evidently been overtaken, and had turned, and was fighting his way to the higher ground of the ridge where the large trees grew.

"Follow me!" yelled Milt. "We've got him now, sure!"

He pushed forward and we kept close to him. Shades of Acteon! what a rush we made! Each man was panting and blowing like a miniature locomotive, and steaming like one, too.

Bursting and tearing a path through the thick cane-brake with desperate energy, we came to higher ground, where the cattails took the place of reeds and vines, and here we made better progress, and at last, gasping, panting and reeling, we reached the place where the dogs were barking around a thick, scrubby black-jack tree. Gazing upward we saw the bear sitting on his hams in the crotch of a big limb.

"Aim at his head," said Milt. The gun rang out, and the animal fell like a bag of meal.

Well, I had killed a bear, but he was only half as large as I had expected, and I certainly would not have gone through so much to shoot such a small animal.

"Why!" said my companion, giving the carcass a contemptuous kick, "a policeman could have arrested that bear by himself and carried it to the station-house."

We lay on the ground utterly spent and almost mad with thirst. O for a draught of seltzer or a bottle of Bass! The very swamp smoked with heat, and the gaseous caloric seemed as if it would melt the solid flesh. I thought of the Arab maxim, "Bagdad is a stove; Cairo, a furnace, and Aiden, hell."

We rested on the roots of the trees, incapable of exertion. The dogs had crawled off in search of water, and that was the last we saw of them. I have been in some hot places in my lifetime, but never did I experience such intense, steaming, prostrating heat as filled the Great Dismal. It was positive, actual suffering—a burning fever—a cremating nightmare!

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How many changes have taken place in old Nansemond County since my first visit to the Great Swamp! Suffolk, the champion somnolent village of Virginia, has grown into a handsome city, and the "manner-born" can stand in that busy mart and view the mills, factories, shops and handsome residences, and think with pride that Virginia enterprise, brawn and brains have done all this.

But innovation stops at the Great Swamp; there it rests, the same as it was in the pre-Adamite period—scientists say, aeons and aeons ago. It is a freak of Nature, unimplanted, uningrafted and unmutilated, the greatest wonder of the New World.

The difficulties of getting in and out of the swamp have in a measure been overcome, and parties can visit Lake Drummond without incurring hardships.

The place can be reached either from Norfolk or Suffolk; but the journey from the former is exceedingly tiresome, as the high banks of the canal shut out the view entirely. The best plan is to take the cars to Suffolk, about a half-hour's ride, and start from the Jericho call, two miles from the town. It is like traveling through fairyland. Mr. Alphonso Royston of Suffolk has made it his profession for over a score of years to pilot and take charge of tourists who visit the Great Dismal. He has built a large, comfortable camp on Lake Drummond, but all persons intending to stop over must furnish their own bedclothes, provisions and liquors. There is good sporting in the Great Dismal at certain seasons of the year. There are wild cattle, bear, deer, otters, wild-cats, coons, 'possums, squirrels and old hares in abundance.

The proper time for the huntsman to go to the swamp is in October and November. There is fine fishing at that time; the waters teem with black bass and perch, and at times they bite freely. Fortunately the bottom of Lake Drummond is so filled with stumps and logs that it is impossible to haul seine in its waters. To the sportsman, the tourist, and the scientist the Great Dismal is a place of peculiar fascination.

All strangers who visit the South, and who delight in the beautiful, the weird, the unreal, the romantic, should visit this solemn yet lovely place.

CHAPTER IV

AN OLD VIRGINIA FOX-HUNT

In Sussex County, Virginia, was probably the finest hunting in all the Middle States, for the country was not only adapted for the propagation of game, but was very thinly settled, the few estates being of immense area, and chiefly devoted to the production of cotton. Then, again, the land-owners stringently enforced the game laws. The slaves, of course, were forbidden to carry or possess firearms, and confined their hunting operations to the legitimate darky game—the coon, the rabbit, and the 'possum. The poorer class of whites could not afford to keep dogs, and so the whole preserves were for the pleasure and sport of a very few rich land-owners.

Deer were chief on the list, and they were so plentiful that a dozen were frequently killed in a day by a small party of three or four. It was not then the uncertain sport it is now, for at that time, the land being under cultivation and enclosed with what is known as the Virginia snake-fence, the deer avoided them, so that in the drives the sportsman always knew exactly where to stand.

The fields teemed with birds. In the wintertime there were frequently, at this place, dozens of partridges, in large coops, that were kept in high condition and turned loose in the spring. Thus the supply was always kept up.

The hunting was splendid. At that period the cane-brakes and impassable morasses were cleared, and the birds had no impenetrable fastness to fly to when flushed. Big bags were the order of that day. Even with their Joe Manton muzzle-loaders, fifty birds to a gun was no uncommon result of a day's hunt.

And the fox-hunting is something to thrill our hearts even now, in retrospection. They were grand affairs, those gatherings of the neighboring gentry, called "meets"; they were to the master what the corn-shucking jubilee was to the slave. As many as one hundred and fifty hounds, the property of the planters for fifty miles around, were often in full cry after a single fox. Imagine, if you can, the ecstatic music from such an orchestra. If there are sweeter or more tuneful sounds on this terrestrial sphere, human ears have never heard them.

The grand sweep of the grounds and the picturesque mansion of Tower Hill are all that remains of the old plantation; the busy hum of life, the ring of the blacksmith's hammer, the whirr of the spinningwheel are no longer heard, while the old "Mammy," that autocrat who queened it over all, has disappeared. Even the master and mistress acknowledged her sway, for had she not raised them from puling infancy to lusty manhood and maidenhood, and on her sympathetic bosom had not their tired childish heads ever found a resting-place? Ah, me! the vision of that aged but erect figure, clad in bright calico, with a gaudy bandanna handkerchief covering her grizzled head, rises before me now. Then the stately butler, with his Chesterfieldian manners; the proud coachman, the envy of the field-hands; the fat cook, no unimportant personage, I can assure you; the likely maid-servants, and the whole tribe of pickaninnies—have all gone, vanished into the dim past!

Now an air of Sabbath-like stillness broods over the quaint old place, a half-dozen hounds lie stretched out under the shade of the trees, a couple of setters are snapping at the flies on the porch; three or four horses graze contentedly on the lawn, while a tame fawn is gamboling on the green.

Throughout these mutations the love of sport has survived all changes, all vicissitudes. The stable where eight hunters fattened in the stalls, now has only one, which is used both as a riding-horse for the ladies and to follow the hounds.

The resplendent gamekeepers have gone the way of all the rest, and one deer a week is about the average in September. Where there were a dozen just after the war, there is one now, and the ubiquitous darky is the cause. They never work until urged by hunger, and live always in cabins in the woods. Each African is the possessor of an old army musket and two or three mongrel dogs, who will chase anything, from a squirrel to an antlered buck. It is a common occurrence to pass in one hunt a dozen negroes with their gangs of curs, scouring the woods and old fields for deer —or "meat," as they call it,—and a cordon of them watching for the game to pass. Their weapons are loaded with all kinds of shot, mostly squirrel shot, and they pepper every deer in the section, and the consequence is that one rarely kills a buck or a doe without finding a pound or so of small shot in the carcass. They will shoot anything, even a wild turkey-hen sitting on her nest.

The formation of a darky's stomach is as different from that of a white man's as a Congo African's head is from that of an Anglo-Saxon's. The lowest class of negroes have no desire for regular meals; they eat whenever they are hungry, and will often get up at 2 o'clock in the morning and scoop clean the hominy pot.

No white man will go to work without breakfast; such an attempt would result in faintness or nausea; but the colored man and brother can labor on for hours without eating. I have often heard one say in the harvest field, "I'se sort o' hongrey; I ain't et no breakfus dis mawnin'."

Through all the changes wrought by time and circumstances, old Tower Hill has held its preeminence of being the rendezvous of devotees of the gun and lovers of the chase. The planters were reduced from affluence to poverty, but the Old Red is as cunning and the tuneful baying of the hounds is as sweet as ever.

In ante-bellum days nothing marked the dissimilarity between the North and South so much as the observance of National holidays. In the North, Holy Week, the Fourth of July, and Thanksgiving Day vied with Christmas and New Year. In the agricultural South, where there were few cities and towns, the tastes and fashions were formed by the rich planters. The Fourth of July passed unnoticed, for it was in the midst of the harvesting, and the planters were too busy threshing their grain to listen to the shriek of the American eagle. Thanksgiving Day was not observed. It is true the table was graced with a big turkey, but that was daily diet during November. But Christmas! Ah! that was the period when rich and poor, black and white, old and young, joined in a grand jubilation, and kept it up for half the month! It was looked forward to and prepared for months in advance. Christmas was to the Southerner what Passion Week is to the people of the ultra-Catholic cities of the Old World. For two weeks all work was suspended, and good-natured license given everyone to follow his inclinations. Everybody's heart was open, every hand gave freely; dull care was bottled up, salted down, or put on ice, until the end of the allotted period. The old darky-saying, " feelin' Christmas in mah bones," meant a keen anticipation of coming pleasures.

Christmas on the plantations was celebrated in various ways. The younger sons of Africa dressed up in their best and forsook the country, and, with their last few months' wages in their pockets, flocked to the villages and towns to visit friends or relatives. The older colored people feasted, drank and indulged in nightly prayer-meetings, so as to mix earthly food with spiritual grace.

The great event to the farmers, when old and young celebrated the opening of the holiday season, was the " Meet," after which the youths and maidens spent two weeks in an unwearying round of visits from house to house. Each host in turn gave a supper and an all-night dance, where the old Virginia fiddle put life and mettle into the dancers' heels.

But the Christmas fox-hunt was the occasion where all met on an equal plane, and the white-haired grandsire could hold his own with the slim, bright-eyed stripling.

Christmas meets have been an institution in the

South, especially in the Old Dominion, ever since the first settlement, some three centuries ago. The young sons of English squires brought over the custom, and their descendants have perpetuated it.

Some years ago I spent the Christmas holidays at Captain Blow's place in Southampton County, Virginia.

The plantation of several thousand acres was in a wild, retired spot, bounded by a mill-dam on one side, the Nottaway River on the other, and surrounded by great pine forests. To hunt the fox there was no child's play; it meant that those who followed the hounds must ride hard and ride far, over the sedge-fields, through the dim woods, across the many streams, in the marshy swamps, with the cry, "The Devil take the hindermost, and the boldest rider wins!" There were zig-zag fences to jump, wide chasms to take a header over, and creeks to cross at a rattling pace, when it would be a toss-up whether it would be wade or swim.

Captain Blow, my uncle, had followed the hounds for nearly a half-century regularly every hunting season, save during the four years when the bugle displaced the hunting-horn. On many a charge, at the head of his regiment during the war, Captain Blow would give the field halloo, and the Virginia fox-hunters would follow him with the same ringing cheer as when, in peaceful days, they saw the old red fox break cover and strike across the open country with the pack in full cry behind.

Of course, the Captain was master of the hounds, and what he did not know about the wiles of old Reynard wasn't worth knowing.

At that time it was the custom, owing to the great distance from one residence to another, to congregate at the house of the M. F. H. the night before the hunt, that all might be ready for the sport of the next day.

No matter how many came, there was always room and a warm welcome for all. It was astonishing how many people could be stowed away in an old Virginia house. As for meat and drink, the preparations had been going on for a week before.

Hog-killing time was over, and the great mounds of succulent spare-ribs were in the smoke-house. Last year's sugar-cured hams, that pride of every Virginia housewife, were taken from off the hooks where they had been hanging so long; the choicest sheep and turkeys were ready to be sacrificed, and the guinea-keets, warned by instinct, fled to the recesses of the woods.

I reached Tower Hill early on Christmas Eve, and barely had time to make my toilet when the guests began to drop in.

How sweet was the music of the horns floating through the air of the still twilight, as the huntsmen wound their way along the country roads converging toward a common center! and their parti-colored packs of dogs, the younger ones bounding before the riders in wild anticipation, the older ones trooping sedately behind, too proud in their veteran dignity to betray such puppy enthusiasm! Some of them answered to the horns with short yelps of delight, while others prolonged the clear notes with melodious howls. Soon the broad, green lawn in front of the mansion was swarming with them, and woe to the housewife if eggs or chickens were lying around loose, for keen noses were searching in every direction.

The hospitable doors were flung wide, and the windows were ablaze with lights; cheerful voices mingled; there was dismounting and handshaking all around, and loving kisses as the girls met their hostess. The horses were led away by the grinning darkies. Inside, the great hickory fire gleamed and crackled, outshining the lamps, and bathing everything in a rich, warm glow, which was reflected by the antique mahogany, the pride of Tower Hill, for it was brought from England by one of Rupert's Cavaliers, who fled to Virginia, and with many of his fellows learned to love the wild, free life in the New World so well that they made their homes in his Majesty's colony.

Upon a table in the parlor was a huge silver punch-bowl, likewise a relic of a more prosperous time. The rich aroma of apple-toddy steamed through the whole house, and every guest was at once introduced to King Wassail, an exclusive and aristocratic potentate who came out of his retirement only on Christmas Eve.

What a picture the gallant Captain made, receiving his guests and touching glasses with all who came! His ruddy face contrasted finely with his snow-white hair and beard; there was welcome in his cheery voice, jollity in his laugh, and sterling honesty in the warm grasp of his hand.

But *place aux dames!* What pen can describe the hostess—Miss Lutie, his daughter—the pride and delight of his eye?

In the full flush of charming womanhood, she was as sweet a vision as ever poet raved about, or rival suitors quarreled over. Yet sweet and tender and domestic as she was in her home, she was the most fearless horsewoman in all the country round. She would keep in sight of the hounds through thick and thin, up hill and down dale, where many a good rider would draw rein and flunk at a six-rail fence, and deem it no disgrace to slip over the lowered draw-bar.

There was another fine rider, Miss Thomas, of Boston, who had fallen in love with the free, untrammeled country life, and there was Miss Etta Norman, who lived near them. The Captain's two sons, George and Cargill, completed the household. The eldest son was more at home with his setters on the stubble-field than when riding after the hounds, but Cargill was a born fox-hunter. He cared for no other sport; he rode like a centaur, and had won more brushes than he could remember.

After supper the horn told the initiated that the dogs were about to be fed. Every one, except the old stagers who were ready for whist, was out on the porch to watch the feeding. There a stalwart negro, bearing a huge tray of broken bread, followed by the fat cook similarly burdened, waiting for the master to distribute the meal. Every master of hounds knows that to command or control his dogs perfectly he must feed them from his own hand, and he will allow no other to usurp this duty.

It was a weird scene; the dogs' red and green eyes glittering through the darkness; the sound of their deep baying echoing back from the dense forest upon the stillness of the night. It made us shiver and turn to the brightness within.

"Hold up the lantern!" cried the master.

"They shall eat all they want to-night, for they will have nothing in the morning. A hungry pack hunts best, but a good feed to-night will keep up their strength all day."

When the bread had been distributed the dogs were secured for the night, every owner carefully attending to his own, else there had been many a battle.

Then the elders settled down to their rubber of whist, while the younger ones assembled before the roaring fire in another room, and instead of

> "Where youth and pleasure meet,
> They chase the glowing hours with flying feet,"

they paired off and broke up into congenial groups. There was a good deal of the Claude Melnotte business, too, in a quiet way.

Captain Whit, a planter from across the Nottoway, one of the most popular fellows in the country, was surrounded by an admiring crowd, for he had his banjo, which he could pick almost as well as the inimitable Joe Sweeny himself. Sitting near was Jim Christian, from Richmond, a light-weight rider and all-round sportsman, who could knock a fiddle cold. But his instrument was mute, for Jim was hidden away in the corner with Emma. In the dining-room at whist was Jack Purdy, a noted fox-chaser, who had brought his pack of trained dogs with him.

When midnight came the Christmas toast was drunk by everybody, and soon silence and slumber held Tower Hill.

When the cocks began to crow lustily and the light mist grew luminous, the old house wakened suddenly. Christmas greetings were shouted, and soon the sound of busy preparations was heard. The sun was slanting through the latticed panes when the horns were blown, and one by one the company assembled.

It was a glorious hunting morning, and for a time Christmas was forgotten. A hurried breakfast, then the girls mounted, dressed in close-fitting habits; the huntsmen swung into their saddles; off dashed the horses, away bounded the hounds, the horns rang out, and the merry cavalcade was off for the place of meeting, three miles distant.

The dogs were wild for the chase, and it was hard work to keep them in. The horns sounded incessantly as we galloped along the narrow road, and every now and then a huntsman was obliged to dash out into the fields to break off the dogs from a deer-trail or a "sight chase" after a rabbit, frightened out of the hedgerow.

At last our horns were answered by others in the distance, and there was a cry of "Here they come!"

"How many?"

"Only ten horsemen, and I think as many dogs."

"Hurrah! We have thirty, so look out for a splitting chase."

"Never saw a better morning. Just damp enough for the scent to lie, and not a breath of wind," said an old hunter.

"Where shall we drive?" asks our host of last night. A dozen voices answered at once:

"Right down in our pasture; you are sure to start——"

"We've been saving a fox for you in our meadow," interrupted a second.

" Hunt around our house; a fox catches a goose for us nearly every night," exclaimed a third.

" Why, an old gray fellow has been skulking about our hen-houses for two years; I can take you right to his den," chimes in number four, while a fifth sings out:

" My pea-patch is trampled smooth with tracks. They hunt hares there like a pack of terriers."

" Bosh! " muttered Jack Purdy gruffly. " Never saw a man yet who didn't want to hunt near enough home to hear his own dinner-horn, and I never started one of their tame foxes yet. Here, boys, let's put the dogs into that brier-patch yonder."

As this man was the hero of a hundred hunts, and owned the largest and best-trained pack at the meet, we turned our horses' heads and followed him through the dewy broom-sedge around a little hill. Slowly we picked our way, encouraging the dogs with shrill whoops and the cry " Hark," which is our Virginia " tally ho," and is uttered by the skilled huntsmen in a tone so penetrating, urgent, and peculiar that the sound will nerve the dogs to any exertion. The novice cannot hope to imitate this thrilling call; it is born of long practice and the deep excitement of the chase.

We laughed and jested as we leisurely followed the hounds; they were ranging in wide circles, sniffing the ground carefully, their lashing tails telling of their pent-up eagerness.

Suddenly there was a clear, prolonged note from a dog in the thicket. Our laughter was hushed and a breathless silence ensued. The dogs pricked their ears and listened. Then that ringing note burst forth again and again.

A huntsman spurred forward, crying, " Hark to Mona! Here, h-e-r-e! He's in that bunch of briers! He's struck! She never opens on anything but a fox! Here, h-e-r-e!"

Several of the girls and younger huntsmen dashed forward, but there was a cry of "Keep back, you will bother the dogs! Here, h-e-r-e!" All the while from the thicket the bell-like notes rang out clear and steady, and then were joined by a chorus of eager canine voices.

All the huntsmen cried, "Hark! Here! Here!" and the whole pack closed in on a running trail and were away through brier and broom. Our horses were excited by the sudden outcry, and trembled under us; we restrained them with difficulty as our host shouted out to us, "Boys, wait a minute, till they are well away with him!"

Presently we heard a whoop that made the welkin ring again. Every dog and man had found a tongue, and George, the eldest son of our host, was waving his hat and dashing through the brush like a madman.

"Here, h-e-r-e! Hark! h-e-r-e!"

There, just before him, we saw a small gray shadow gliding with sinuous swiftness through the long, dry grass.

Mona sighted him first, and in a moment Black Snake was at her side, with Beauty just behind, and the pack coming up. The foremost dogs, wild with the sight, scent and sound, sped after the flitting form.

Behind them was the frenzied pack, running close together, and mingling their many tints like a stream of varied rushing color, raised their voices in a grand chorus which poured out all the passion, desire and enthusiasm of the canine heart.

Following hard rode the sportsmen, laboring to keep pace with the flying pack.

What a sight it was! and how the morning air rang with the mellow music of the chase! Thirty hounds in full cry, and thirty huntsmen at their heels made a kind of music as inspiriting to the fox-hunter as the Marseillaise was to the French Revolutionist.

It was an open country, no fences except around the farmhouses, and those were of pine rails. One of them we soon encountered; some cleared it at a leap, others scattered and, crushing the rails, pushed through. The rest, not sure of their horses or their horsemanship, dismounted and lowered the fence.

Unfortunately, Cargill, our best rider, had a stubborn, spirited animal that was never known to take a leap. Nothing vexed Cargill so much as this, so that day he dismounted and lowered the fence with more than usual disgust, while the girls, well mounted, leaped it easily, shouting to him sarcastically, " Come on! " Too angry to see, too furious to answer, Cargill replaced the rails in a mechanical way up to the last one before he realized that he had left his stubborn mount on the other side.

What pen can describe the tumult that filled his soul when his sweetheart swept by him with a pitying smile! Down must come the fence for a second time; but help was at hand, for an old darky came hurrying from where he had been pulling ground-peas, and scattered the rails for him.

I saw old Manuel a day or two after, when I was out quail-hunting, and asked him what Cargill had said on mounting Dido.

" 'Fore de Lawd, I neber seed a man so spasm-mad in all my bo'n days. De mar' kep' a-balkin' an' a-balkin', an' Mister Blow he kep' on a-spurrin' an' a-spurrin', an' he said as well as I ken 'ermember, ' Get up, you doggoned, infernal, stubborn, lop-eared old crowbait! I'll ride the Devil out en you befo' I'se done! ' " And it is needless to say, he did.

Away we went with a rush. The fox swept through an impassable thicket, with the dogs close behind; we broke right and left and came together at the lower end. The dogs were out of sight, but we could hear their music plainly, and the cavalcade swept on in full gallop. But the deep-mouthed bay of the hounds suddenly ceased; they became mute. Some one in the rear shouted:

" What's up? "

" Lost him! " cried Cargill in the front, pulling up his mare.

" How! Why? " asked a dozen others, checking their gait.

" A burnt field gives no scent, that's why; the cute old fox knows he is safe, and is lying low; our only chance is to scatter and try to stir him up. He won't move unless we ride over him."

Around and across the field the huntsmen rode in zig-zag ways, all the time urging on the dogs, who were nosing about and sniffing suspiciously. Still no fox. A wise old Reynard was he, and cunning enough to lie rolled up in a ball in the blackened ashes.

In the mean time, the dogs left the field and began trailing a swamp some distance off, all except one old hound that had tired himself out and was trotting along, his head down and his tongue out. Suddenly Miss Lotta's horse shied violently, almost unseating the Lady Di Vernon, practiced rider though she was.

Looking down, she screamed, "Here he is! Here he is!"

The old hound saw the fox, and a transformation ensued. With every hair bristling, he uttered a savage yelp and rushed at the quarry. He might as well have tried to grasp a sunbeam. The fox gave one tremendous bound and slipped away like greased lightning, into a thick pine coppice, with the hound howling on his track. In a short time every huntsman and most of the dogs were in hot pursuit.

Oh! the mad rush, the frenzied run, the ecstasy of the free and reckless dash straight on, looking neither to the right nor left, feeling in the unrestrained exuberance of the moment that we were riding on the pinions of the wind! It is this glorious madness which intoxicates like rich old wine and fascinates the fox-hunter, and makes him a devotee of the chase so long as he can sit in pigskin.

The horses were wild with excitement, their heads stretched out, their eyes gleaming, and their limbs moving with all the swiftness which muscles, sinews and nervous force can give.

On, through a sedge-field, which waved like a field of yellow grain. A shaky, half-decayed fence barred our way. Some jumped it high and clear, among them our host's daughter, her eyes sparkling like steel, her cheeks glowing with excitement. The horses breasted it, the rotten structure gave way, and the horsemen poured through.

Suddenly the fox doubled and struck again for reached the bank, jumped and disappeared. We reined up. The river was about sixty yards wide, and fox and hounds were swimming across, though carried down by the rapid current. We all gazed in speechless admiration at the scene below, and then cheered old Reynard for taking the boldest leap, the most desperate chance, ever remembered in old Southampton.

Then we all followed Cargill, who was striking for a ford about a half mile below. We were soon across, and had joined the dogs in the open field. The fox first turned to the left, then doubled to the right. With failing strength, his body heavy with labored breath, the hero of a hundred runs saw that the game was up. He turned deliberately and mutely faced the open mouths of the pack.

Only a half dozen were in at the death. Cargill sprang from the saddle. In a second George was by his side, and they fearlessly threw themselves in the midst of the struggling, snapping, snarling mass of dogs. Only Miss Lutie of all the ladies was there, and the brush was handed to her. By the time she had pinned it to her hat the balance of us came pumping and straggling up, and gave a gasping cheer.

Then we dismounted to breathe our horses, and passed half an hour in discussing the incidents of the hunt. There had been many tumbles, but no serious hurt. One veteran hound was ridden down in the heat of the chase and badly mangled by the hoof-strokes of the rushing horses. After the hunt was over his master found him, and tenderly laid him across the saddle-bow, and rode homeward with the poor old head pillowed on the broad chest that we may be sure covered a warm heart.

That night there was a feast and a most jovial company. A huge wild turkey, the trophy of George's gun, was at the foot of the table, flanked by a half dozen of his humble barnyard brothers. Old Virginia hams, juicy as a spring lamb, tender as a six-months' pig, and as sweet as sugar, were facing each other on the opposite side of the table. Trussed poultry and fried chicken were scattered around; blackberry and current wine surrounded the wassail bowl. It was an ideal Christmas dinner, and a marvelous plum-pudding, the pride of the culinary art, was its crowning glory.

The laugh and jest passed around, and the genuine country mirth over the mishaps of unlucky riders rang out unrestrained.

Suddenly there was a pause. George and Cargill had carried off Captain Whit and Christian, and we heard the tuning of the fiddle and the banjo.

There is no use trying to finish old stories, or even to complete a sentence. The table was vacated in short order, and soon music burst forth, of the kind that sets the foot to keeping time in rhythm. Give me the fiddle and the banjo for strains that break down reserve.

Then all the company broke into the favorite county Christmas song.

I have never heard either the words or the tune sung anywhere save in old Southampton. Like all the best Southern airs, it was borrowed from the old plantation darkies, and where they got it, the Muse only knows.

Captain Whit led off, the fiddle chiming in, and the company giving the chorus with such emphasis that it almost lifted the rafters.

"Mr. Hare, Mr. Hare, he run and he squat;
He lifts up his leg like the ground mighty hot,
And yet Mr. Hare gwine to land in the pot.

CHORUS—

"Cook a heap, cut a splash,
Put a rabbit in the hash.

"Mr. Coon, Mr. Coon, he racks mighty fast;
Mr. Coon mighty smart as he slips through the grass,
And yet Mr. Coon gets cotched at last.

CHORUS—

"Mr. Mink, Mr. Mink, he's slicker dan sin;
He makes a little hole and den slips in,
And yet Mr. Mink gwine to lose his skin."

Then the company rose and gave the last verse with all the unction and force of their lungs, and throwing all the sarcasm they could into their voices when singing the last line of the chorus. The singers paused then and all the fox-hunters rose and filled their glasses, and at a signal from the leader they joined in, and the vast volume of sound caused the very windows to rattle.

"Are you ready?" asked the director, waving his hand. "Now for it!"

"Mr. Fox! Mr. Fox! he gits ober de ground;
He runs cross-ways and he runs all around,
And yet Mr. Fox gwine to get run down.

CHORUS—

Cook a heap, cut a splash,
Put a rabbit in the hash."

CHAPTER V

DUCKS AND COONS AT HATTERAS

It is but a question of time, and a very short time at that, when the eastern North Carolina coast will be as familiar and well-known to the Northern sportsman-tourist as the Adirondacks or the Thousand Islands.

That section running from Pasquatank River to Cape Lookout, some 300 miles long, embraces within its borders the finest game preserve on the American continent, and it is a region that will afford fine shooting for years to come, for Nature has fenced it in with swamps, and interspersed it with impenetrable coverts where game can retire and rest in safety when too closely pursued. Immense fens and bogs abound, and these are further protected by miles of shoals, the water of which is but a few inches in depth. The water is too shallow in places to impel a craft, and the mud so soft as to make wading a labor infinitely more wearisome and fatiguing than even the treadmill.

Thus it is that feathered game cannot be exterminated, and as the tillable land can only be found in spots, and is of a low sandy soil, agriculture does not pay. Besides, the whole region is most unhealthy; bilious fevers and chills abound, and keep all emigration away. Most of the inhabitants are fishermen or shingle-cutters, and use their little farms more as a place of residence than as a source of profit, for agriculture as a means of support in this swampy country means starvation.

A few barrels of nubbins, a few score stacks of peanuts, a few hundred rows of cotton plants constitute the crops. As most of the young men leave home to get a livelihood elsewhere, the population remains stationary, the country unsettled, and the region still continues to be the paradise of sportsmen.

The extreme eastern portion of North Carolina consists of a narrow strip of land extending along the entire coast, and separating the ocean from the interior waters. This strip is sandy, varying in width from about one-fourth of a mile to about five miles; in places it is entirely bare of vegetation, being merely the beach of the ocean; in other places, especially in the neighborhood of Cape Hatteras, where it is the widest, it is covered by live oaks, red cedars, and the ordinary trees of the mainland, and a shrub called yeopon, from which is made a tea much valued by some. This strip of land is called the "Banks." It is broken only by four considerable inlets: Hatteras, Oracoke, Beaufort, and the one at the mouth of the Cape Fear River. Through these, vessels from the sea enter the interior waters. The depth of water which can be carried into the interior through Hatteras or Oracoke is 8 feet, at Beaufort 16 feet, at the mouth of the Cape Fear River 12 feet. This strip of land is not suited to agriculture; the frequent winds prevent the cultivation of grain, or of any but low-growing vegetables, but the soil is not in most places barren; and the melons and sweet potatoes grown on the banks are considered to have more saccharine matter than those grown in the interior. It is pretty thickly populated, the people living by fishing and pilotage.

On the way to Hatteras, one time, we spent a few days with an old gentleman living on the banks of one of the wide streams that run into Croatan Sound, North Carolina. It was more like a grand river or a frith, at the point where his house was built.

I, in company with two friends, was paddling along a creek, when, suddenly turning a bend, the narrow inlet broadened into a spacious sheet of water, beside which was a low but spacious farm-dwelling with numerous outbuildings. The elderly owner hailed us from the banks, and with that proverbial North Carolina hospitality invited us in, and later on insisted on our staying with him as long as it should suit our convenience. As an inducement, he promised us that we could kill any number of ducks by "tolling." We had hunted ducks for years, in every imaginable way, but never in that fashion. Tolling consists in the use of a trained dog gamboling on the beach and attracting the ducks through curiosity, close to the shore, where the gunner lies hid.

"I believe I am the only one in this region who shoots ducks by tolling," said the old gentleman. "It used to be a common thing in my day. However, I will show you how it is done to-morrow, for it is going to be a cold, rough night, and it will drive the ducks in from the open sound."

We were awakened before the break of day by our host, and by sun-up were safely ensconced in a blind made of seaweed, a few feet from the water's edge. The sight before us was one to make a sportsman's blood rush through his veins. As far as the eye could reach could be seen ducks in couples, groups and ricks, while the air was alive with them flying inshore, and lighting with a great splash. We crouched in the blind, Mr. Menefee telling us not to move or speak. The dog was an aged setter, a cross, it seemed to me, for he was neither Irish, Gordon, Laverack nor Belton. He knew his business, though, for his master had trained him years ago, and used him regularly to supply his household wants. Mr. Menefee took a position some fifty yards from our blind, and behind a small mound of seaweed only large enough to conceal his body, and ordered Rex to "hie on."

The old dog deliberately trotted along the beach. About a hundred yards from the shore there was a large flock of ducks feeding off the wild celery, and for a time they took no notice of the dog, who trotted up the beach, and then at a low whistle from his master retraced his steps. He kept this up for fully ten minutes, and then we saw the scattered ducks slowly swimming toward us.

Old Rex, at the command of his master, cantered along the shore, and this quick motion evidently startled the mass of water-fowl, for they ceased feeding, and I could see them through my field-glass turning their heads first on one side and then on the other. Then the dog was ordered to lie down, and he remained thus for at least half an hour.

The whole flock were now on the *qui vive* and were swimming and circling in every direction, but slowly advancing toward us.

Again Rex was ordered to rise and gambol along the beach, and the sudden movement set the ducks paddling away; but the bolder spirits faced about, and like a flock of sheep the mass followed them.

When the dog had nearly reached his master's blind, Mr. Menefee in a low tone ordered him to lie down and roll; soon the astounded ducks beheld four paws sticking in the air. This caused an impelling movement shoreward, and the rising sun glinted and glistened on the emerald and opal-hued heads not over fifty yards away.

It was an artistic performance throughout, and we held our breath and fingered the hammers of our guns nervously.

Two or three times old Rex got tired and rose, and looked inquiringly at his master; but a rotary motion of his hand informed the dog, who was nearly beside himself with excitement, that his master desired him to continue his rolling.

Nearer, and yet nearer the water-fowl advanced; closer and closer they pressed on one another, drifting inch by inch, and foot by foot toward the fatal spot.

With straining eyes we gazed alternately at them and at Mr. Menefee, with our nerves strung to the highest pitch. Would he never give the signal?

Rex could act no longer. Nature gave out. He was crouched spread-eagle fashion, in the position that a setter sometimes takes when he runs upon a flock of partridges in a bare corn-field. His eyeballs gleamed and every individual hair seemed to stand on end.

At last the signal was given; we saw his master cock his piece, and we all three rose up, and taking a lightning aim at the fluttering, flying mass, pulled both triggers. A volume of sound, a dense smoke, a shout of unrepressed excitement from all, a frenzied barking from Rex as he bounded into the water, and the deed was done.

Our spoils for the eight loads were three killed and three crippled ones, which we secured after an exciting chase in a boat.

Five minutes later there was not a duck to be seen on the bosom of the water, only long lines flying out in the sound.

"No more tolling to-day," said our host, "or not until evening at any rate; those ducks won't stop short of twenty miles."

We asked him why such a method of killing ducks was not much practiced.

"For various reasons," was his reply. "First, it requires a trained dog; and there are only a few that are so pre-eminently intelligent that they can be coached. It takes infinite pains and patience. I have spent more time in tutoring old Rex there than I have in bringing up any of my children. Then, there is only one shot to be had after all, and the shooting over decoys is much more successful; it takes much time, too, and only young ducks in the beginning of the season can be tolled. Later on, when the wild-fowl have had more experience, it is labor lost, for they become wary and suspicious, and move away from shore as soon as they catch a glimpse of any object, no matter what it is. Then again it is so uncertain; at the most critical juncture the merest trifle will scare the flock off before they are within gunshot. The slightest movement of the hunter, any noise, even the click of a gun-lock, will send them hurrying away. It frequently happens that the dog becomes excited, and either stands them, or whines, or, unable to control himself any longer, dashes into the water; then the anxious watcher has his trouble for his pains. For this reason the sport of tolling is too uncertain to be popular, especially since the advent of the breech-loader."

"What is the greatest number you ever killed?" I asked.

"About eight or nine years ago, three of us fired into a solid rick at point-blank distance, guns loaded with No. 4 shot, and we got sixty-nine canvasbacks."

"Do all ducks tole, Mr. Menefee?"

"No; canvasback, redhead, blackhead, spoonbill and shovellers tole readily, that is if they are young; but other kinds, such as the black duck, bald-pate, blue-wing, bull-head, sprigtail, dipper, coot, loon, and brant won't tole at all. There are but few canvasbacks now, and tolling, except to an old fellow like me, who has plenty of time and an old muzzle-loader, doesn't pay. Still, it suits me and old Rex there, doesn't it, old dog?" The toothless old setter rapped his assent vigorously on the floor with his tail.

Chaplain and myself, through the courtesy of Superintendent Kimball, of the Life Saving Service, had a circular letter to the keepers of the L. S. S. on the North Carolina coast, and we were entertained by Captain Pat Etheridge, keeper of the station at Hatteras.

The crew of the station were a striking-looking lot of surfmen; they should receive double the pay they get, for they are by far the hardest-worked crew in the Life Saving Service.

One evening Wesley, one of the assistant keepers, proposed a coon-hunt. The "banks" around

Hatteras are the raccoon's paradise; there are more of these animals to the acre there than in any other place on earth. There are regular paths through the brushwood and sea grass leading to the ocean's edge made by these nocturnal prowlers. The beach was their market-place; there they would get their crabs, oysters, young sea birds, wounded water-fowl, frogs, shellfish and carrion. There never had been any organized attempt to thin out the coons, and they had multiplied to an enormous extent. They roved and wandered at will all over the island, and the keeper could not retain a cat upon the premises, for just as sure as Mrs. Puss or Mr. Tom remained out of doors at night, just so sure would the mangled form be found in the morning; for anywhere a cat can climb, its foe can follow.

In an evil moment we consented to Wesley's proposal, and urged the keeper to go with us, but he declined.

"I don't want to spoil your pleasure, gentlemen," he remarked; "but coon hunting isn't the thing it is cracked up to be. At least I have not found it so."

An indignant remonstrance arose from his listeners. It was glorious sport, we all agreed; and it was pure laziness on his part, nothing else.

"Well, have it your own way," he said; "but I would not go in the swamp in the nighttime, not if every coon that was treed would come down as he did to Captain Scott."

Leaving our guns behind, we started about an hour after sunset, Wesley leading the way with a lantern in one hand and an ax in the other. We kept up the causeway, and in about ten minutes heard Jeff give tongue. Jeff was a nondescript mongrel on the Hatteras Cape and was absolutely worthless for anything else, but he would hunt coons.

"He's treed," cried Wesley, "come on!" And waving his lantern as a signal, he disappeared in the chapperal, which was so dense, so thorny, so full of holes, hog-wallows and quicksands as to be nearly impassable in the daytime; as for making our way through it in the dark, it was a dubious undertaking, and we soon found out it was too much for any civilized being. We had begun to taste the delights of coon-hunting.

We followed Wesley's light, which shone as weirdly as the deceptive "Jack-o'-lantern" itself, and worked our way carefully among the hanging vines, and charged by main force through the tangled briers, Jeff all the time barking frantically some two hundred yards away. After we had picked, screwed, and crawled about half the distance, a slimy, sluggish creek stopped our further progress.

"There used to be," said Wesley, "an old tree that had fallen across the stream. If it is there now we can cross on that."

After a scuffle and scramble over prostrate timber and fallen rotten trunks, we reached the natural bridge. It must have been there for a long time, the outer wood being soft and the whole body covered with moss. Holding tight to each other, we slowly wabbled our way across. All went well until we reached the middle of the tree, when Wesley, who was leading, suddenly uttered a profane ejaculation and attempted to jump back, but too late. The combined weight was too much for the bridge. It gave way, and all three went down together into the freezing black water, up to the arm-pits. The lantern went out, of course, and we scrambled out as best we could in the profound darkness, each one making his own remarks about the situation.

As soon as we stood on the shaky ground I told Wesley to lead us out of the cursed wilderness; that I for one had had enough sport. My comrade said, as he had had all the fun he wanted, he was ready for home. Wesley, whose vice was swearing, ripped out an oath that he was a blanked fool for bringing us on such a trip. We promptly agreed with him.

Our file-leader started with his followers close at his heels, but he had evidently lost his bearings. He led us over fallen trees whose dead branches were festooned by trailing vines as tough as iron wire; then we got into a brier-thicket armed with thorns as long and sharp as a shoemaker's awl. Worrying through this trap, leaving scraps of torn clothing behind, we wandered in a jumble of mixed bamboo and fox-grape shoots as strong as whipcord, in which snarl we got completely tied up. Wesley's profanity at this stage was appalling. We actually had to use our knives to get out of the place, and finally, after a hard fight, we reached the open.

"Thank the Lord I am out of it!" said Chapman, breathing like a porpoise. "If I lived a hundred years at Hatteras this would be my last coon-hunt."

The keeper and I were too busy picking the briers out of our flesh to answer him.

CHAPTER VI

AMONG THE QUAIL IN VIRGINIA

If any thorough sportsman were asked the question, "Which is the most wonderful bird on the North American Continent?" he would answer, "The Virginia partridge."

Suppose Bob White were to disappear suddenly and leave not a trace behind, what would be the result? "Why," an unthinking gunner would reply, "we would lose some good shooting, that is all." Old Jack Anderson, the slowest but the safest shot on the Rappahannock low-grounds, would probably remark, "Life would not be worth the living in that case," while the darky would whistle in answer and then declare that the colored man and brother "didn't have no show nohow wid dem partridges."

Yet the consequences of the annihilation of that game bird would almost amount to a financial disaster. Plain, unpretending Bob White furnishes at least one-half of the sport in both the North and South to-day. Exterminate him, and every gun manufacturer in the land would fail; every ammunition factory would go to the wall; half of the sportsman's bazaars in the country would close their doors; hundreds of mechanics would be out of employment, and thousands of workmen would be turned out to the cold charity of the world. Not only this, but every kennel in the land, whose combined capital runs into the millions, would be broken up, and blue-blooded setters and long-pedigreed pointers would not bring the cost of their collars. The vast collection of guns would greatly depreciate in value, and the shrinkage in price of all sporting goods would be enormous. Yes! a wonderful bird is the little brown-coated, shy partridge, who is as much the friend of man as is his deadly enemy, the dog, who hunts him.

Notwithstanding the demands for his life, Bob White, by adapting himself to circumstances as well as adjusting his nature to the pressure of environment, not only maintains his place, but steadily increases in number. Nowhere in all animate nature is there a more signal triumph of that great discovery of Darwin's of the "survival of the fittest." Here is a bird, the pride and delight of the epicure, bringing always a high price, that is snared, gunned, baited, trapped, hunted, shot at and worried, until it is almost a miracle that the species does not become as extinct as the dodo.

What is the secret of this marvel? Simply this: the quail has changed its habits entirely. Forty years ago, when the pointer was the favorite hunting-dog, the partridge roved and rambled at will over the wide meadows or spacious stubble-fields, and the dogs ranged and quartered the field in full view of their masters, who enjoyed witnessing the showing off of their fine acting as much as they did the shooting of the birds. When the covey was flushed it scattered right and left, and a crack shot could, by careful, painstaking hunting, pick up every bird, and practically wipe out the flock.

All that is changed. Bob White no longer wanders over the heather, nor lets his appetite carry him far from cover. He feeds only close to the edge of a miry swamp, dense thickets, or heavy forests. Once flushed, he does not fly as his ancestors did, a hundred yards or so, and drop down anywhere. No, he rises straight over the treetops, and almost with the speed of a bullet he is out of sight. Nor does he stop until a long distance has been covered and pursuit effectually frustrated. Another modern characteristic of the quail is its method of running, when alarmed, through brake and brier. This causes the dogs to stand the trail, thus enabling the covey to get out of harm's way, and lie undiscovered in the recesses of some impenetrable coppice.

The quail is America's national game-bird. The wild-fowl can be shot only on the watercourses, but Bob White is everywhere. For him the farmer's boy, the city sportsman, the amateur and the professional, buy their guns. The vast quantity and variety of game that was once spread over this country is fast becoming but a memory, and so are the great flocks of wild pigeons, the immensity of whose numbers none but sportsmen who can carry their memory back fifty years or more can comprehend. The wild turkey, the beauty and pride of the forest, has become almost extinct. The pheasant is exceedingly rare, the prairie-chicken is becoming scarce, the squirrel, that once chattered and gamboled in every oak-forest, is dwindling away. The sora, rice-birds and grass-plover are being rapidly exterminated. But Bob White, by his wonderful intuition, has made and kept a place for himself, and at the end of each season, when the roll is called, instead of a crippled few, there responds a greater number of survivors than the tale of the missing, and enough are left to show the next year in fuller flocks and rounder numbers in the bird census.

Partridge hunting in the South is essentially different from that sport in the North. In the South the farms are more widely scattered; the area of tilled land is much less; the swamps, thickets and woods are larger, thicker and more vast than the fertile, carefully cultivated farms of the North. The bird itself, in this wilder section, seems to be stronger of wing, more wary than the Northern bird, and has learned the trick of trusting more to its legs than its wings.

Hence the worth, value, and importance of the hunting-dogs are estimated differently in the North and in the South. In the North, fine carriage, free ranging, slashing style and staunchness are paramount considerations. In the South, methodical hunting, careful trailing of the running birds, a capacity to push his way through briers and vines, good retrieving, and, above all, toughness, goes to make the crack hunting-dog. A setter or pointer that was the winner of a bench show, or even a field trial in the North, would not be the dog that a Southern native sportsman would choose. He wants a dog that understands the habits of the game and knows where to hunt for it. A Southern prize-dog, with its rough coat, big limbs, and general absence of grooming, would not receive a second look at a Northern show.

Then again, the sportsmen go to work so differently in the various sections. A native in the West or East can drop a score of shells in his pocket, take his gun, whistle to his dogs, and stroll off in the fields and meadows and knock over a dozen birds or so—enough to have a broil for breakfast and maybe a pie for dinner—and return invigorated rather than broken down by his tramp over the clean, clear farms. In the lowlands of tidewater Virginia or North Carolina it is different; there the fields are interspersed with swamps, bogs, morass, sloughs, marshes, broom-sedge, briers, and weeds as plentiful and as tall as the cactus plants on the plains. A successful hunt requires preparation on the part of the sportsman; he has to plan beforehand and arrange every detail.

First, the dogs are taken in hand; the long-haired setters have been running around loose all the summer, and in the average farm-house they receive no special attention during nine months out of the year. They hang around the kitchen, sleep on the porch, go hunting on their own account, chase old hares, and lead, in general, a vagabond life. By the time the hunting-season arrives they have a general disreputable canine-tramp look. They have become unkempt, shaggy and rough; their long hair on their ears, legs and tail is full of burrs, with Spanish needles sticking everywhere. Their ears are generally sore from the attacks of flies and frequent scratching. The dog is called and made to lie down, and a pair of sheep shears freely used upon him. He is clipped close, and rises a neat, lithe dog, with his self-respect restored, and ready to return to his old training. Too much importance cannot be attached this clipping operation. Nothing is more worrying to a sportsman than to see his dogs, emerging from some clump of burrs, stop every minute or so and frantically go to work with tooth and nail, endeavoring to bite or scratch off these pestiferous burrs and thistles.

After the dogs are attended to, the saddles and bridles are overhauled, boots greased, and shells placed in the saddle pocket. All this being done, the dogs are fed (and nothing but dry cornbread should be given them), and the sportsman is ready for a day's hunt. It generally takes a couple of hunts to get the dogs back to thorough discipline.

It goes without saying that dogs hunt better when they are hungry—their noses are keener, their dash more ardent. This is simple nature. A gaunt, hungry dog can carry his hide and bones on a run all day, but a plump, well-fed one will get so tired that he will break down in a couple of hours. One thing in this connection a sportsman must watch, and that is, that no dog must be allowed to be in the near vicinity of a dead bird. In seeking for a crippled or lost quail the shooter's voice or whistle should be going all the time. Even the best of dogs, when he finds a dead bird in the recesses of a thicket or wood, and a perfect silence prevailing, is tempted to make a meal of the luscious morsel. It is his instinct, and the temptation is often too great. In such case, if the dog is caught in the act, cut a switch, catch hold of his hind leg, and give him as sound a thrashing as your arm is capable of bestowing. One such whipping will last the season through. A sportsman cannot watch his dogs too carefully. Many mysteriously lost birds could be traced down the animal's throat; but a dog won't give himself away, and his companions can't talk, so many go on eating birds regularly without being detected.

Before leaving home for my hunting-trip of some five or six weeks I thought it best to have too much ammunition rather than too little; then again, I wanted to get a perfect quail gun, if such a thing were possible. I have tried several makes and calibers during the last score of years, and never yet got a weapon that completely satisfied me, one that filled all the requirements. This time I consulted Billy Wagner, the gunsmith at the National Capital, who not only is the finest shot and wins all the best prizes at our club shoots, but knows more about guns than any man I ever met.

I told him what I wanted, and we went over the whole matter. In the course of the conversation he said:

"There are many sportsmen who possess choke-bore guns, who are convinced of their utter unsuitability for the field; still these guns are endeared to them by years of companionship, and they cling to their old friends through thick and thin. It is only when they return from a hunting trip and have found how unfit their chokes are for partridges that they make up their minds to alter them.

"There are two modes of changing a choke to a cylinder—one, by reboring; the other, by filing off two inches of the barrel. The latter is the favorite, as that will prove," and he showed me a keg filled with the filed-off ends of dozens of barrels.

"I like the latter plan," he continued. "Two inches off the muzzle will not change the shooting power of the gun. Now, if you want a matchless quail gun, let me take off two inches of that No. 12 Greener. That will leave the barrels twenty-eight inches, plenty long for such work, and being then a cylinder it will scatter, and the bore being so large will send the shot with great force through the branches of the trees and bushes, and be the very thing for thick cover shooting, when you have to shoot at the bird by guess-work, as you do half the time."

I gave him my No. 12 Greener trap-gun and told him to go ahead and make 28-inch cylinder barrels.

"What size shot do you usually use in shooting quail?"

I told him No. 8.

"Well," he said, "let me load a couple of hundred shells with No. 10's, and try them on my account."

"Very well," I said, "I'll try them, and report."

My destination was an ideal old Virginia homestead, one of those farm-houses around which cluster only pleasant memories. Every room had its tradition, every cabin its recollection. I thought what satisfaction I would have in furnishing birds for the table.

There is a great difference between the character of a pointer and that of a setter. After a year's absence my pointers showed no recognition of me. They obeyed me, and gradually memory awakened. But with the setters it was different; their faithful, loyal hearts never forget. It confirms my belief that Ulysses's hound remembered him long after son, serf, vassal and peer had consigned the warrior to oblivion. The setter is away above the pointer in loyal attachment, and is far more jealous and loving.

With what ecstatic feelings one starts on the first hunt of the season! The wild delight of the dogs, the whole household on the porch, the plantation-hands grouped around, everybody smiling broadly, and every heart light and interested!

I generally promise a pair of gloves to the girl who will guess correctly the number of birds each sportsman will bring home; this adds to the zest of hunting, for nobody likes to disappoint the one who lays odds on him. I promised the gloves as usual, and at last we were off.

Our party consisted of George B., a fine shot and thorough all-round sportsman; Whit W., who was an enthusiast in quail shooting—both of them were to the manner born, and knew every hog-path in the county; and Fred Blake, a countryman living near, who had the roughest, shaggiest, most un-cared-for setter I ever laid eyes on.

Whit and myself rode horses; George had a trained mule which should have been in a circus—it was a perfect animal for the hunting-field. Fred trailed along on foot. As we were leaving the yard a whole raft of little pickaninnies rushed from the various cabins to open the gate for us. Our route lay through a wide, dry, broom-sedge meadow which harbored nothing except larks, and we began to teach the dogs sober business. They were six in number, two of them canine débutantes, this being their first season in the hunting-field. All of them, young and old alike, were possessed with a mad desire to rush all over the meadow at full speed. We were continually ordering them to the rear, where they would trot along dejectedly at the horses' heels. This method should be rigidly enforced, especially when one is hunting over wide stretches of country. Dogs that are allowed to range at will break themselves down in the early part of the day. It should be the aim of the sportsman to husband his dogs' strength by every means in his power. Useless running through the woods, ranging across barren meadows, is just a waste of going-power, of which every dog has but a limited supply. Many sportsmen are too thoughtless to trouble themselves about the dogs, except when they are standing; but toward evening they will learn what a trial a wearied, tired dog is.

Reaching an old stubble-field, bounded on two sides by a reed-marsh, we waved the impatient dogs off, and they shot away like an arrow from the bow. We sat on our horses, and watched them going at full tilt, when suddenly Tom struck the trail of a running covey and followed it in all its devious windings, while the rest of the dogs were scattered widely, each doing his best. Tom began to walk slowly forward. Calling to my companion, I jumped off my horse and followed Tom, who was now creeping stealthily toward a bit of bamboo thicket. Soon he straightened out to a dead stand. The other dogs, seeing us dismount, came dashing up, and soon backed Tom, and the fine sight almost conquered my desire to shoot.

We stood for a minute with guns at a ready, when Tom turned his head around and gave me such a look of agonized entreaty that I hesitated no longer. Going forward I kicked a dead tree that was partly submerged in the swamp. In an instant a covey of full fifty birds flushed out with a noise that sounded like the bursting of a shell. We all blazed away, but only two birds fell.

Hieing the dogs on, we three entered the thicket and tried to follow them, but the vines and briers were too thick to get through. The dogs were evidently standing scattered birds, for they gave no sign of hearing our whistle and cries.

"Let us get out of this," panted George, who was fighting with an encircling grape vine, and we retreated faster than we had come, and waited some fifteen minutes before the dogs, tired of standing, began to flush the birds. We again made an effort to get to them, but it was impossible for any of us to force our way through the tangled labyrinth of vines, bamboo, briers and interlacing reeds; so we all fought our way out, and rested in the thick grass until the dogs came to look for us.

"Never mind," said Whit, consolingly, "we will get another shy at them before long."

Into our saddles again, we followed the dogs a long distance, but no trail was struck, and no birds, though the dogs searched every piece of open heather. It was an interesting sight to watch the dogs ranging. Red Rover and Jessie, both young dogs, would quarter the fields in fine style, while Belton, Yank and Tom, with wider experience and finely trained instinct, would encircle every brier patch, explore the edges of every ditch, dive into every bunch of pines, sniff at every bamboo thicket, but they let the open meadows severely alone; while Range, Fred's pet dog, would only hunt on his own hook.

We worked our way through several promising fields without result, and then approached the end of the open. Here was a large peanut field, the stacks standing some forty yards apart, like a skirmish-line of battle. The earth was bare as a parade ground, and afforded no cover. Between the latter and the Virginia snake-fence there was a patch of tangled grass and briers, some twenty feet wide, and on the other side of the fence was a swamp a hundred yards or so wide. The dogs went on a run across the peanut field, only Yank and Belton stopping occasionally at a stack to snatch a mouthful of the nuts. Red Rover, in front of us, came to a stand, and almost at the same moment Belton and Tom, lower down, stood a covey, while Yank, on our right, was valiantly pointing something in the angle of the rail fence. We swung ourselves from our saddles, and after a hurried consultation we separated, and I made for Tom. Whit strode in the direction of Belton, while George walked straight for Red Rover. Looking around and seeing all my companions in a line, I opened the engagement by walking in front of Tom and flushing the birds, who launched themselves over the thicket as if they had been grape and canister shot from a gun. I dropped both of my birds this time. No sooner had I pulled the trigger than the other guns rang out, and looking around I saw George take up a bird, while Whit had a big jack-rabbit hanging in his hand, which Yank had been standing all the while.

We all three now entered the thicket, which proved to be more open as we advanced into it; but still it was a tiresome route to push through, and a tough place to hunt. We knew there were two large coveys scattered and lying in hiding; but, though we pushed and scrambled some distance in, we could not find a bird. We spent at least an hour in the fruitless search, and then, disappointed and weary, came out and remounted our horses.

"It is no use to stop here," said Whit. "We will go to Smith's place."

So we rode around the swamp, and, taking down a fence, rode through the most majestic forest of white pines that I have ever seen. This bit of woods had never been touched by the ax, and the trees were of great height and thickness. The ground was so luxuriantly carpeted with the needles that the feet of our horses made no sound whatever.

"Suppose we stop here and take a smoke," said George.

The suggestion was received with favor, and tying our horses we stretched ourselves on the soft, spicy ground, and loading our pipes each gave himself up to a meditative, dreamy smoke.

About two o'clock in the afternoon we roused up and made for a large farm, where we hoped to strike the sport rich, for last year our party had had some good shooting over these grounds; nor were we disappointed, for within a couple of hours we found four coveys, and after one shot would hardly mount our horses before we would again dismount for another.

Most of the birds were in an old apple-orchard which had long since ceased to bear, and the plowshare had left the land untouched for many a long year. The ground was thickly covered, in patches, with berries. Toward evening we were pretty well tired out, and started for home, intending to stop at another farm on our way.

In skirting a barren field we were greeted by a sight which, in all my experience, I had never witnessed the like of before. I was riding leisurely along and noticed Tom switching his tail in a lively manner, showing that he had struck a warm scent.

Bordering the field, and close to me, was a dense thicket of bamboo briers. "There has been a covey ranging along here," I thought, "and they are in that cover now."

Right in my front was a big bunch of half-decayed peanut vines which had fallen from some gathering-wagon. Tom arrived, and stealing up to within a couple of feet of this, he came to a dead stand. Belton crept alongside, and he too became rigid. Yank, who was quartering the other edge, saw the pair, returned at a swinging pace, and, treading gingerly as he drew near, jammed himself against Tom, and stretching out his long neck, stiffened into a breathing statue.

I put the whistle to my lips and gave a long blast to attract Whit's attention, who, with Red Rover and Jessie, was beating a patch of broom-sedge a quarter of a mile away. He heard me, however, and when I waved my hand he put his horse to a gallop and came straight for us, with the dogs following close behind.

I had no thought of the possible game when I summoned my companion; I was only anxious for him to see that beautiful stand. Red Rover, seeing his friends, must needs drag himself cautiously to the front, and there stood the four dogs, side by side, touching each other, motionless, petrified, as it were; every muscle tense, every hair bristling.

It was the most powerful, artistic sporting picture I ever saw on the hunting-field, and I would have given a big pile to have had a camera with me. It would have made a photographer's fortune, for every sportsman in the land would have bought a copy. We were both so fascinated by the spectacle that we neither moved nor spoke; fully five minutes elapsed before we dismounted and advanced. Expecting to see but a Molly cotton-tail spring out, I called warningly to the dogs, "Steady," and gave the bushes a kick, when —whew! fully a dozen birds started out, taking us so completely by surprise that, though both barrels were emptied, we did not touch a feather.

"That beats me," said Whit, staring in a dazed way at the receding specks so rapidly disappearing over the tree-tops of the swamp. "I felt sure it was a rabbit."

"I was thinking of the dogs," said I, "and fired, I suppose, mechancially. I certainly did not take aim; but the Bob Whites deserve to get away. What a beautiful picture we owe to them! No magician's wand ever exerted more potent sway than the scent of those birds effected when it turned those sentient dogs into the semblance of carved bronze!"

There were fully a hundred birds in the piece of pine woods across the way; so we called the dogs to heel, climbed over the fence, and put only Tom and Yank out, for there was no cover. The pines were small and stood very thick and close together. The two dogs started off, stepping very gingerly, as if they were on a thin crust of ice and were well aware of its brittleness. There was nothing to hide the birds but the pine needles which lay thick upon the ground, and a crouching bird could not be seen.

Every good field-dog has a specialty peculiarly his own, and Yank's was finding single birds. Often when a covey is flushed many of the quail fly into the open woods, and as they are the same color as the pine needles, and as there is absolutely no cover, it is very hard to get within gun-shot, as they flush very easily. It was in such pine woods that Yank would surpass any dog I ever saw. He was wonderful! His foot-fall was so delicate that no noise was made. He seemed a mere specter gliding through the dim pine woods, and he would often come to such a sudden stop that every muscle was thrown into bold relief, his eyes gleaming like coals—a picture to delight an artist.

It was evident that the birds were within a few feet of us, but to save our lives we could not distinguish them from their surroundings, into which they blended so perfectly in color. I remarked to George that it must be a false stand, for it was simply impossible for any birds to be crouching so close to us.

"Is it?" said he; "now watch," and he took a couple of steps forward, when from our very feet arose that whirring sound which brings such a thrill to the sportsman's heart.

It was to be snap shooting, as we saw instantly. George's bird arose above the tree-tops; his gun rang out and down came the bird. My bird took a turn and gleamed against the sky for a moment. I chanced a shot and it brought the game to bag.

At the sound of our guns one after another of the affrighted birds took flight, as we could tell by the noise of their wings. It was exasperating, but there was no help for it. The dogs could not have worked more carefully. It was just one of the many drawbacks that a sportsman must contend with in every hunt. We got several shots apiece, though, and did some shooting which we were proud of. Three birds I missed clean, but I consoled myself with the thought that only a chance shot, and a wild one at that, could have brought them down. All three of them sprang from my feet, as it were, and instead of rising and soaring over the tops of the trees, they corkscrewed their way at full speed through the thick pines. It was simply wonderful that, with a tree in every two feet square of ground, any bird could in its rapid flight, make its way through the hundreds of turns necessary to get out of gun-shot. To aim was impossible, and there was not one chance in a score that a shot would hit anything but a tree.

Getting out of the woods we struck a great broom-sedge field, and a few yards from the fence Red and Jessie came to a dead point, trembling with excitement, while in the rear was Range, who would persist in edging himself forward. Fred and I stood side by side, our guns at ready. I gave the word to Jessie, "Hie on!"

There was a moment of breathless, intense nervous sensation, then as Jessie sprang on the tree there was a loud whir, and fully thirty birds took wing. I killed one and missed another, while

Fred brought down his brace handsomely. I called the dogs to heel, and so did my companion; but his hard-headed, obstinate animal, true to his name, commenced "ranging" across the field, perfectly indifferent to his master's yells. Presently Fred, with his gun, waited until Range was about seventy yards off, and then sent a charge of No. 8 into his stern. It doubtless hurt the dog a little, a very little, but the long hair on his rear quarters was so matted with cockspurs and sheep-burrs that nothing short of a bullet could penetrate; but it broke up his indifference, and he came loping back, uttering short yelps at intervals, as if in protest, and lying down in the grass began to pick the burrs off with his teeth.

When I remonstrated with Fred for such unsportsmanlike conduct, he answered unconcernedly, "Oh, I blaze away at Range about a dozen times a day. His tail is a perfect shot-bag by this time."

Most of the birds having flown to an open pine woods, we rode up, hitched our horses, and entered it on foot. The ground was covered with needles and as smooth as an oilcloth, and it seemed as though not even a sparrow could be concealed in it; and so perfectly was the plumage of the quail blended with the surrounding vegetation that we could not detect a sign of their presence; even when Red was standing one, and we looked with sharpened gaze, not a thing could we see that looked like a bird.

At the word, Red started forward and actually caught the bird in his mouth. We picked up five birds out of the flock and would have secured more but for Range; he went dashing about at full speed and flushed several, a proceeding which caused his irate master to give him another dose of shot, the only argument which seemed effectual enough to bring him to heel.

We remounted and rode to another field; this time Range distinguished himself and made a magnificent stand, off to our right a couple of hundred yards. He stood as firm as a stone wall, though both Fred and myself were shooting at some scattered birds in a little stretch of swamp that bordered the meadow, as we hastily advanced. It was a joy to see our two dogs, when they caught sight of Range, steal along as if treading on eggs, until their sensitive nostrils caught the scent, and they, too, stiffened.

This flock, to use a country expression, was a "whaler." There were at least sixty birds, but we both shot badly, only scoring one each. The quail flew to a swamp near by and we followed them. The briers were so dense that we could not enter, so we walked along the edge and sent the dogs in. We could only keep track of their whereabouts by the commotion in the flags and bushes. Every now and then a bird would take wing, and we dropped six in this way, only two of which we secured. Both of these were brought me by Jessie, who was noted for her retrieving.

We were both tired out when we had fought our way to the end of the swamp, so we called our dogs in, lit our pipes, and smoked for a half hour; then, mounting, we continued our hunt.

As we were riding along through a strip of woods, the dogs trotting behind, we came to an open place where the broom-straw reached nearly to the saddle; a loud flapping of wings startled us, and we saw two wild turkeys rise above the tree-tops.

Fred, who was in front, had a fair shot, and winged the rear one, which floundered to the ground with a broken wing, and it immediately put out toward the river, with the dogs in hot pursuit. We had to ride carefully, for the trees were close together. Shortly after, we heard a splash in the river, close at hand, and riding to the high bank we saw Red, with the turkey in his mouth, making for the landing farther down. He evidently had caught the bird when close to the bank and had tumbled in, but had kept a firm hold on his game. We met the faithful dog as he clambered up with his heavy load. It was a hen turkey, and was fat as butter. I tied her to the rear of the saddle, and we then rode on to the field for which we were headed when the turkeys interrupted.

We put the dogs out; they started a hare, and we both dismounted. I soon saw the little Molly cotton-tail cantering along a path that led to a swamp. I let her have one barrel and crippled her. Range heard me fire and dashed off. I shouted to Fred to mount and get the dogs together and keep them from chasing the rabbit. I waited for some minutes, and then searched for the hare and Range. I finally discovered them, and Range was busily engaged in dining off the rabbit. I backed tracks and motioned Fred to dismount, and later showed him the picture—the hungry dog and the vanishing rabbit. He was the maddest man on top of the earth at that moment. He slung his gun around, and I am confident he would have put a load of shot, at short range, through the dog's head but for my intervention. I told him to cut a thick hickory switch and give the dog the worst hiding he ever had; that unless the vice of eating killed game was eradicated he might as well give him to some darky for a 'possum dog.

We stopped shooting only when the sun went down, and each had a very respectable bag. The greatest drawback to the day's sport was the heat, which distressed the dogs very much; but there were plenty of streams where they could drink and bathe.

As we jogged homeward I remarked to Whit that I was struck by the conspicuous absence of hawks.

"Yes," he said, "and the consequent increase of birds. It is an old saying, 'the more hawks the more birds,' meaning, where the birds were thickest, there would flock the hawks; the presence of one indicates clearly the proximity of the other."

But all that is changed now, and this change we owe to the darkies. The hawks steal their fowls, and the African is a deadly foe to anything that meddles with his hen roost; it is his own monopoly; he will spend hours in constructing traps for minks and other "varmints," as he calls them, and on a rainy day he will be out from dawn to dark killing the feathered thief who finds it easier, if left alone, to catch the tame chickens than the wild birds. On a rainy day the hawk is not inclined to fly, but sits with ruffled feathers, sleepy and lazy. Then it is that the avenger is abroad, armed with an old musket that is almost sure to kill something when it goes off, for the trigger is not pulled until its object is close, and the sable shooter makes every shot count. The result is a decided gain to the sportsman, as one hawk can destroy more quail in a year than the greediest hunter-expert.

After long experience I have come to the conclusion that the best time to shoot Bob Whites in Virginia and North Carolina is after November 15. I have for many years kept a diary, and I make it a rule always to jot down at the conclusion of the day's hunt the result; no matter how tired and sleepy I am, the record of the state of the weather, the conditions of the shooting and the number bagged are duly chronicled. I find this memorandum of great service to me.

Recently I overhauled my diaries, running from 1880 to 1903, and the reading was curious and instructive. The record embraces all kinds of shooting, but here I will only allude to that concerning Bob White.

I always commenced shooting on the first of November, my favorite grounds being in Fauquier, Rappahannock,—the valley and tidewater section,—Sussex and Southampton counties, Virginia, and the western part of North Carolina. About the first of December I generally knocked off and commenced on the wild fowl.

I noticed that in the first week of November, in hunting quail, the entries all showed thick vegetation and hard work for both dogs and sportsmen, and bags ranging from twelve to twenty birds to each gun. The second week the shooting would be decidedly better, with the spoils ranging from twenty to thirty birds. The third week was, on an average, better still. The dogs would break down at intervals, had run all the flesh off their bones, and had gotten their second wind; and the cool crisp air enabled them to go at a rattling pace all day, consequently the number of birds killed was markedly greater. I have bagged as many as forty-five, and any number of old hares, but such days, of course, were an exception.

I may say here, that when a sportsman goes for a month's shooting he goes for pleasure, and not for profit. He does not hunt industriously from morning until dusk, like a man who has only a few days to indulge in sport and wants to crowd a week's work into a day's shoot, and stuff his pockets with every possible bird that can be killed, crippled or run down. A sportsman who has the good fortune to be an inmate of a charming Virginia household, with his time at his own disposal, takes things easily; he hunts only on good days and loafs a good deal, and spends hours of the time lying at length on the heather under some tree, enjoying his pipe and reveling in the dreamy languor of a perfect Indian-summer day. Of course he rides; to tramp for hours on foot may suit a pot-hunter, market-gunner, or our African brother, but does not appeal to an amateur sportsman.

As for myself, I am content when I bring home a dozen Bob Whites; that number will supply the table for a day. And as I never send off birds to my friends when I shoot on my host's preserves, there is no incentive to keep on shooting just for the sake of killing. I may add, however, that I always reserve the results of the last three days' shooting to carry home, and that is the time when I push myself and my dogs to the top notch.

Another patent fact in my thirty years' record among Bob White, is that the number of birds killed depended largely upon a wet spell of weather. A drought is fatal to a big day's shooting. After a day or two of rain is the time to find the coveys, and have glorious sport. I mean a driving steady rain, not a drizzle; a rain that will fill the lowlands and swamps with water, thus driving the birds from their hiding-places and forcing them to feed upon the ragweed in the upland fields. On such days it is the perfection of sport, for the dogs can range at will over field and fallow and not be compelled to skirt swamps and thickets. Then again, the rain has kept the birds huddled up in the woods and they are unusually hungry, and feed nearly all day to make up for their enforced fasting.

To those who contemplate going Bob White shooting for any length of time in the Virginias or Carolinas I would like to give a few hints, which they will find on trial to be exactly the right thing. First, as to guns. Don't take a choke-bore gun if you can possibly help it; remember you have to shoot a Bob White whenever and wherever it can be seen. Ten yards, in the bushes, brakes and woods, is the average distance, and at that space with a full choke you can readily see how badly birds will be mutilated. In the open, it is a different thing; you can choose your time and settle on a steady aim, like breaking clay pigeons; but Bob White shooting nowadays is mostly done in a tangle of reed-vines and bushes and requires snap-shots.

Feed your dogs with raw meat a week or so before you start on your hunting trip; this will give them strength and bottom. During the hunting season give them corn-bread mostly. Scraps of all kinds of food makes a dog lazy and blunts his keen scent.

Always take a rubber coat or blanket; the latter is the best in every way for a hunting trip, as one soon finds out. A thick leather jacket over the hunting-vest is a good thing, as it keeps the body sufficiently warm to dispense with an overcoat, which is too cumbersome to be used in Bob White shooting. A corduroy hunting-suit is a necessity; it is the only material that is proof against briers and the rain.

As to foot-gear, there has been so much written about this most important part of the sportsman's outfit that I forbear to give any advice on the subject. However, I will give my own experience.

I have tried, during the last thirty years, every style of boot, shoe and leggings, and I now use none but the English untanned hunting-shoe. I have for the past few years found them perfect in every regard, and when one wears them, sore feet or chafed ankles are an impossibility. I do not believe in the laced boot; it is not high enough to protect the knees from the brambles and thorns. Neither is the canvas legging a success, for it is speedily torn to pieces by the briers. A pair of stout sole-leather leggings that fasten with a spring and reach to the knees is exactly the thing. I have a pair that I have hunted in for ten years, and they are still serviceable.

Always take two or three pairs of old kid gloves with you. By cutting off the fingers at the second joint, they will save your hands from being badly scratched by the ubiquitous briers. Every huntsman ought to have his own leather drinking-cup.

I never carry the game in my pockets, but have a heavy sole-leather bag, which was made to order. This is swung on the rear of the saddle, and is convenient in many ways besides. It is no fun to carry around one's person one or two dozen Bob Whites, especially if the day be warm.

If the country is open, use a No. 16 bore; but if it is rough or swampy, with vines and cane-brake galore, a No. 12 gauge is the thing.

Bear in mind one fact: never use a choke-bore to hunt quail.

CHAPTER VII

COBB'S ISLAND

"THERE'S nothing new under the sun," they say, yet the history of Cobb's Island, off the coast of Virginia, differs from any romance ever told.

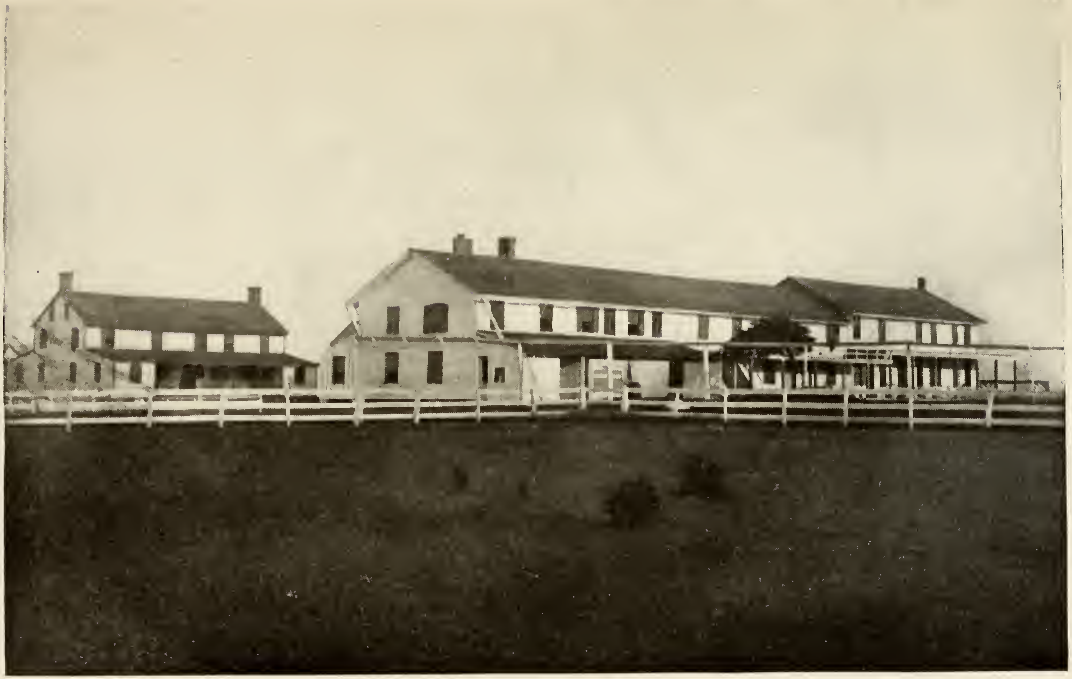
The story of a lone island in the ocean has ever been an enthralling one, both to the old and the young alike, whether the island is peopled by savages, castaways, or buccaneers; and its buried treasures have ever been the favorite theme of the historian, dramatist and story-teller. Yet what romancer has ever told of a speck of land in mid-ocean that grew day by day, until it became a broad domain, and produced more wealth than any pirate's hoard ever contained? Furthermore, when this lone isle in the sea passed from the possession of the sons of Neptune, the ocean recalled its gift, the island sank from whence it rose, and now the heaving billows sweep unchecked over the place where but a few years ago there flourished a large village, with its hotel and sportsmen's lodges.

Some time between 1825 and 1830 there lived on the eastern shore of Virginia an old man named Cobb, who had emigrated from Marblehead, Massachusetts, and who gained a living by fishing and oystering.

This fisherman was a shrewd old fellow, and after much cogitation he conceived the idea that if he could find a good, solid piece of land near the source of supplies it would save him time and money. So keeping his eyes open, he came across a small sandbank a few acres in extent, about sixteen miles from the mainland, off the Virginia coast, that evidently had risen directly out of the ocean by some convulsion of Nature. This solitary spot was already occupied by a lone fisherman who spent the spring and summer in catching fish and gathering oysters. A bargain was soon struck between the two, and for and in consideration of the sum of thirty dollars and a sack of salt the fisherman transferred all his rights to the sand dunes to his rival, no doubt congratulating himself that he had gotten rid of a doubtful piece of property, inasmuch as it was likely to be swallowed up by the waves. Probably, like many an unlucky fellow, he deplored to the day of his death the fact that his fore-sight was not equal to his hind-sight, for he lived to see the time when old man Cobb refused a cash offer of one hundred thousand dollars for the property.

The new owner was a man of great nerve, and coolly took all the chances of having his family name extinguished, by moving his family, bag and baggage, to the sandbank and making the place his permanent home, though the ground was by no means secure, and would tremble, so the story goes, like a bowlful of jelly whenever an unusually large and heavy billow struck it. It is said that many seasons passed before the women of the island could sleep quietly in their beds when a storm was raging along the coast.

Day by day the island grew in area and solidity, and in about two score years there was a substan-



''The Cobbs erected a long, rambling structure.''

tial piece of land, of fully fifty acres, and sea meadows of several thousand more.

Old man Cobb and his sons formed a wrecking company, and fortune smiled upon them. A ship loaded with coffee from Brazil went ashore, and the Cobbs saved the cargo, and received $10,000. Another ship panned out $5000 for salvage, and their last windfall was a three-masted bark of $4000. Had old man Cobb and his three stalwart sons been content to remain in their humble sphere, they would have been kings of fishermen, the emperors of sportsmen, and Rothschilds among the toilers of the sea.

Then the United States Government built a station, and manned it with a picked crew, and the Cobbs found their salvage fees gone. They had more money than they could spend, but when is man ever content?

So the Cobbs, who received a steady income from visiting sportsmen, determined to make Cobb's Isand a summer resort. Just here it may be well to say that this place was then by far the finest shooting-grounds on the Atlantic coast for wild fowl and bay-birds. It was not only the feeding-grounds of enormous numbers of brant, geese, and snipe, but, being so far out in the ocean, it attracted, as a resting-place, vast flocks of migrating birds, and it was literally the paradise of sportsmen.

The Cobbs erected a long, rambling structure of boards along the line of architecture of the inns of Virginia and North Carolina, which have been built in the same style since the memory of man. Several cottages were also added, and the season opened auspiciously with two hundred guests.

I happened to be there at the opening, and it made a greater impression upon me than any seaside resort I ever visited. The attempt of three simple-minded, honest fishermen to run a watering-place, without the remotest idea of anything outside of their storm-tossed isle, was certainly unique and rare.

Warren Cobb, the eldest son, was a rough and ready mariner, with a voice like a fog horn, and an insatiate thirst. He was a typical ruddy-faced, good-natured, weather-beaten, ocean fisherman. He never refused an invitation to "splice the main brace," and each succeeding drink only made him happier than the one before.

Nathan, the second son, was a very tall, angular man, of powerful build, and withal as gentle and tender as a child. He was the only sportsman in the family, and was, without exception, the finest shot I ever met. He probably killed more wild fowl for market than any other gunner in America. With all his simplicity, he had strong horse sense, and refused to join the hotel syndicate. "Here I is, and here I stays," was his ultimatum, as he pointed to his neat house and fine garden. So he stuck to his business, and in the course of time he owned nearly the whole island.

Albert, the youngest, was the bright one of the family; he was a sport, too, but his game was draw-poker.

Well, the opening was a great success. However, a young, inexperienced fellow from the mainland, a friend of the family, was installed as clerk at the hotel. But he kept no books; he carried the current sheet and ledger in his head, and at the end of the season he "skipped," and left nothing behind save his conscience, and that was probably of small value.

It was truly ludicrous, these untutored, unimaginative wreckers catering to the wants of the delicate, refined pleasure-seekers. Well, the balance was about even; these Norsemen did not understand their guests, and the guests certainly did not comprehend their landlords.

The guests were, for the most part, fashionable people. When the hotel and cottages were filled at the opening of the season the Cobbs were simply dumbfounded that there were people in the world who could want so much. Livery, telegrams, drainage, laundries, waterpipes were as Sanscrit to these simple-minded men, and they were as much out of place as was Christopher Sly in the lord's palace.

The fare was plentiful, most profuse; in fact, it was served in wholesale quantities. For example, a guest would call for fish, and a huge sea-trout, some two feet long, enough for a whole family on Good Friday, would be placed on the table. Bread—a corn-pone the size of a Belgian curbstone would be handed up. Beef—and a collop that would satisfy a Pawnee Indian would arrive. Soft crabs—six at a time would be brought. Such things as sauces, pickles, condiments, preserves, were unthought of there—simply because they were unheard of. Indeed, the weather-beaten wreckers who had lived, as it were, in a world of their own, must have felt as did our savage Saxon ancestors when the witching *dames par de la monde*, of the French Court, following in the wake of William of Normandy, appeared before the eyes of the uncultured Britons.

These wreckers, like the old Norsemen, were children of Nature; they ate when they were hungry, drank when thirsty, rose with the dawn, and retired to their rest at the end of the day. So, the rich and fastidious sportsmen brought their wives, sisters, cousins, and aunts to the island on a kind of lark—and they had it.

It must be confessed that some of the sportsmen, for the sake of a practical joke, inveigled their people to Cobb's, and many of the visitors expected to find on the island a modern hotel with gas and electric lights, splendid band (alas for that one fiddle and harp!), superb bar, wine vaults, tonsorial accommodations, billiard saloon, telegraph facilities, and many other things considered by many the necessaries of life; and when they saw the meager establishment, a few actually returned home, but the majority remained, and many declared it to be the best time of their lives. There was no conventionality at Cobb's, no grades of social position; every one was on an equal footing, and as one of the Cobbs was heard to remark, "If they didn't like it, they could lump it."

But it was in the ballroom, where the "*band*" was waving and weaving a "voluptuous swell," that the proprietors would saunter through the room clad in their usual costumes of an oilcloth hat, Guernsey jacket, canvas breeches, and rubber boots reaching to the hip. But withal, there were no bonifaces in America that were as popular, for the Cobbs were so sincere, so true, so democratic that they treated all alike. Whether you were noble or serf, rich or poor, famous or unknown, it was all the same to them; and when the visitors left the island it was with regret at the parting.

Old man Cobb took no part in the new deal; none ever saw him at the hotel. He had a fine plot of ground, and a snug, comfortable house, and there he stayed with his tame brants, as isolated as if he were a lone fisherman on a lone isle, as in days of yore.

For many years Cobb's Island was the most famous resort in America for the combined attraction of hunting and fishing; and a week's stay at that place was like taking an ocean trip abroad. It possessed a peculiar fascination for the sportsman, and many of us went to the island year after year.

We went in the spring for the robin-snipe; in the summer for the bay-birds, and in the winter for that king of salt-water birds, the brant.

Cobb's Island was a favorite rendezvous for the American Yacht squadron, and in the summer all sorts of craft filled with pleasure-seekers would anchor off the place, and there would be feast, fun and frolic.

Warren Cobb was a favorite guide for the sportsmen, as nothing could ever disturb his good nature or exhaust his patience. He used to tell a tale of a dude huntsman and his valet, whom he once took out snipe-shooting. Warren said all the girls gathered on the porch to see them off. The valet had to get a cart to carry his traps down to the landing, where a boat lay.

Arriving at the blind just off Wreck Island, Warren set the decoys, and if the sportsman was not made comfortable, it was not the fault of the valet. A large camp-chair was placed within the blind, and then the valet held an umbrella over his master's head to keep off the torrid rays of the

August sun, and actually fanned him as the heat grew more intense. A big block of ice had been brought along, and with it a half dozen bottles of champagne, a few bottles of beer and a quantity of old rye. Then the fun commenced.

A few young birds came up to the decoys, in spite of the strange appearance of the place, and Warren Cobb swears that after the sportsman fired he would hand his gun to his Jeems Yellowplush to be reloaded. "And," said Warren, "bust my breeches if we didn't have a drink around over every bird that he kilt! And when the water riz and come in the blind, he makes me take him on my back and carry him to the boat."

I asked Warren how many birds the dude killed? He replied that he counted ten, and then his memory "done give out."

Bill Johns, another guide, more like Warren in looks and temperament than any of his brothers, swore that Warren did not let out all the details of the dude's eventful hunt. He avers that he had to bring the whole crowd home, and that the mixture of beer, champagne, and whiskey was a sure knockout for them all; the valet was as helpless as his master. However, Bill said he got them all onto the wharf save Warren, who, in attempting to jump from the boat to the wharf, went headfirst in the water, which was about three feet deep, and that the shock only half sobered him, for when he arose, and spit about a bucket of the briny from his mouth, he hiccoughed out, "Doggone it, Bill Johns, how your boat do leak!"

A few years later, under modern management, Cobb's Island became a popular watering-place, and was known as the sportsmen's heaven. The bay-birds were killed by the thousands every summer, and the fishing was a revelation to many of the guests. The islanders were making money, and when affairs were at high tide, old ocean gave them a high tide of Neptune's.

On the 19th of October, 1879, a steady rain commenced falling, which continued for two days, and on the night of the 21st the north winds shifted to the southeast, and by nine o'clock was blowing a hurricane; the windows rattled, shutters banged, and the pine board hotel shivered in the force of the wintry blast. The Storm King let loose, careened at pleasure across the wide waste of waters, and shrieked in its mad glee as it swept resistlessly over the broad Atlantic.

" A bad night for vessels," remarked some one, and then all retired for the night; for the islanders were used to hard blows, and could slumber quietly in a tempest that would cause a landsman to say his prayers and keep on praying the night through.

All were asleep except the coastguardsmen, who kept watch, ever and anon looking through the window, trying to pierce through the darkness, it being impossible to patrol the beach; the wind was so violent it would carry them off their legs.

About midnight the different inmates of the cottage were aroused, one by one, by the coastguard with the startling information that the tide was rising and bursting over its high-water mark, and was advancing in angry charges that would sweep the island away.

Like the dreadful cry of fire in dreaming ears, it woke the slumbering inmates, who started up affrighted, in such garments as they could hastily snatch in the darkness. They all ran for safety to the hotel, which occupied the highest point of ground on the island.

The angry roar of the waves was now heard, mingled with the scream of the blast, and surely and slowly the black billows advanced; the bath-houses were swept away; next the coastguards' house was torn from its place, and drifted inland. The crowd assembled in the ballroom of the hotel. The women cried and moaned; the men cursed and prayed alternately. They could do nothing; and stout wreckers as they were, inured to the dangers of the deep, they shrank appalled as the treacherous waves closed in around them. No boat could live in such a sea; and, like caged rats, they could only wait and hope for the coming day and the subsidence of the waters.

About four o'clock in the morning a dreadful sound smote their listening ears. Above the noise of the warring elements they heard the crash of a building, the splitting of timbers, and the falling in of beams and planking. It was the New York house, within fifty yards of the hotel, that had caved in, the supports having washed away, and the whole fabric sank in an unsightly ruin.

Old man Cobb sat stoically waiting for death. His son Nathan was bidding his wife farewell, and Albert sat with his head buried in his hands. But Warren, jovial-hearted son of Neptune, seeing all hope gone, waded across to the bar-room, and, lighting a tallow candle, which cast a ghastly light over the scene, he and Bill Johns drank until they grew recklessly happy, and began playing seven-up on the counter, where they both sat cross-legged, for fifty cents a game, while the water was two feet deep on the floor and the chairs and tables were swimming around the room.

At half-past four o'clock the waves lapped the porch; at a quarter to five the steps were washed away, and the beat of the charging rollers thundering on, made the island tremble and rock as if it were in the throes of an earthquake. At five the fluid in a thin stream trickled through the cracks of the closed door, and then they all thought their time had come. But the storm had reached its height; in a few minutes the water began to recede, and every one drew a long breath. By eight o'clock the ocean was in its usual place.

Daylight showed that the topography of the island was much changed. Immense sand lines were thrown up, looking like miniature mountains; the ground was covered with driftwood, spars, shells and marine vegetation. All the fences were washed away, as were several cottages.

A most singular circumstance of this flood was that all of old man Cobb's tame brant were swept away. Many of them drifted into Chesapeake Bay, and some of them found refuge on Hog Island, twelve miles distant; but they every one returned, and their show of delight at again meeting one another seemed almost human.

It was several years before Cobb's Island recovered from the blow; but at last patrons were assured that floods, like the eruption of Vesuvius, never happen twice in a lifetime, so the old place was regaining its former prestige.

I will long remember one Christmas I spent on the island all alone. My two companions had business engagements compelling their presence at home, and they left on Christmas Eve.

The morning of Christmas was warm, bright and sunny. The ocean lay in all its majestic beauty, as calm, still and smooth as a lake hid away in some mountain fastness; stately ships decorated with bunting appeared motionless on the surface, and earth, air and water harmonized in one grand anthem in honor of the Nativity.

"It's too calm for ducks," said Nathan, whose opinion on all matters pertaining to hunting was as irrefutable as the laws of the Medes and the Persians, "but it's a perfect day for snipe."

"Why?" we asked.

"Because bad weather scatters the large flocks in every direction, and they are very shy; but on a calm, warm day they unite and become lazy and will let a man walk almost up to them. I'll make the boy get the cart and carry you where there are acres of them."

In a short time we were on our way along the beach toward Hog Island.

After going about five miles, our island gradually contracted, until a narrow strip of sand some fifty yards wide, over which the waves at high tide dashed, showed where the possessions of the Cobbs ended.

On this sandbank the snipe were feeding in countless numbers, and I am not exaggerating when I say that the bar running into the sea was so thick with them that there was not a bare spot discernible. Creeping up on my hands and knees to within forty yards, I sighted along the fluttering mosaic-looking ground and pulled trigger. A long swath of dead and dying marked the track of the shot.

For every one killed there were two wounded, and I had a lively chase in the water after them. Many escaped, for the tide was rising and the crippled birds can swim like a duck. They soon reached deep water and were safe from me, but not from the sea hawks, who came out in force and swooped down on the wounded.

I gathered up the dead and piled them in great heaps. I had nearly gotten through when I stopped work for further sport. A flock of snipe fully a hundred yards long and thick were performing the most beautiful evolutions possible to conceive. A leader marked the way, and with unerring precision each bird followed and kept his proper distance. There was no confusion, no jostling, as they spun through the air with the speed of the wind. Now skimming along the surface of the water, then in a second up in the blue vault with the suddenness of a rocket, next a slanting curve, a concentric circle in every movement. Each bird would seem to turn its body, and the bright sun shining on the mass that shifted in color every moment made the result indescribable.

I was brought back to earth by Bill Johns, my guide, who grasped my arm, and said we had better hurry back home.

"It's going to be a splendid day for brant. See, the northwest wind is rising."

I looked around; it was true; the surface of the ocean was ruffled by the breeze, and what sportsman does not feel his pulse thrill at the thought of a perfect day with the brant?

There must be three elements, all favorable, before one can have any luck over the decoys. The tide must be just right,—that is, falling, on the ebb at daybreak,—the sun must come out brightly, and the wind must be blowing. During all of our stay these three things did not conjointly appear. If a wind was blowing, the tide was wrong. If the tide was right, there was a perfect calm. If the sun was shining and the wind blowing, the tide was on the flood; or if not on the flood and the wind was just right, then the clouds were banked up in the sky. In fact, these three uncertainties making one harmony was as risky a thing to count on as a call in faro, and all sportsmen know how uncertain a thing that is.

Arriving at the hotel the guide left the cart, and we hurried to the wharf where the boats, loaded with decoys, always floated. I only stopped long enough to change my box of No. 8 shot for No. 4's, and fill my flask.

We were soon under weigh, and reached the blind off Gull Island about noon. Bill scattered about a hundred decoys around the blind, and left me in a little flat-bottomed boat inside the blind. He with the larger boat put back to Gull Island, about a half mile distant.

Now it must be understood that the deep ocean did not surround Cobb's Island. On the south side was what is known as the Broadwater; that is, sea-meadows, sand-bars and mud-flats, with deep channels running through them. These flats were covered at high tide with from four to six feet of water; at low tide they were bare, and it is here that the brant have their haunts, feeding on the young mussels, clams, and the like.

The blind was built of long, slim cedar trees, about six feet by four, just wide enough to enclose a small flat-bottom boat.

The wind had freshened, and, as it came from the north, it was piercing and cold. The tide was falling. It would probably be an hour or two before the birds would flock to the flats to feed.

Shades of Æolus, how old Boreas was spreading himself! I cowered in a corner of the blind, lit my pipe, tied an old glove over the bowl to save the tobacco from being blown out, humped my shoulders, and gave free rein to my imagination.

Here was the one day in the year when every man feels his heart softened and touched, and "good will toward man," for twenty-four hours at least, is something more than a mere sentiment. Here was the day which the whole civilized world celebrated, when reunion of family and friends is the universal custom. What mortal would voluntarily leave home, relatives, or boon companions to sit out in the ocean, in a driving wind, solitary and alone? "Surely, no sane man would do such a thing," is what nine-tenths of the people would say; but the fraternity of sportsmen would, almost to a unit, agree that he would leave everything his heart held most dear, for a shy at the royal brant, even though the day be Christmas, Thanksgiving and Fourth of July rolled into one.

The silent, solitary figure in the blind, who smokes his pipe and waits motionless hour after hour, has a keen and vivid sense of enjoyment incomprehensible to those who have no sporting instincts in their make-up. What do they know of the thrilling pleasure which comes with the sight of game, or at a neat, quick shot?

What do they know of the quiet, meditative happiness of watching the distant flight of birds, and speculating upon their possible movements? What do they know of the delight of strained expectancy that a sportsman feels as, with finger on the trigger, he watches with keen eye the rapidly fluttering wings which bring the game within shot?

Of all human enigmas, the majority of people will pronounce the sporting crank the greatest. The time, vigor and money wasted is, in the estimation of most people, inexcusable. Whether it is worth while to go through so much to gain so little,—as the charity-boy said when he was whipped through the alphabet,—does not admit of argument, they will announce with utter conviction. "Why," said a lady to me on one occasion, "my husband has periodical fits of insanity. They attack him in the fall of the year, in the full of the moon, when he seizes his gun and goes forth to get his feet wet, his face scratched, his hands roughened, his clothes ruined, to return with about as much game as I could buy for a dollar in market, to say nothing of the money he spends on his trip; and then he keeps a horrid dog the year round which fills the house with fleas, and chews up enough linen on the clothes line to clothe 'some poor orphan.' I don't understand it."

If quaint old Izaak Walton was a married man, how many lectures he must have had for mooning about the streams and lakes! His neighbors probably pointed him out as the greatest crank or most innocent idiot in the country.

But my meditations were cut short by a brant—a brant is about the size and weight of a Muscovy duck—darting by; evidently he was a scout sent to learn if the flats were visible.

I knew by the signs that the birds would soon appear, and I prepared for action.

Just here I want to say a word about brant hunting. It requires so much exposure to shoot brant that few sportsmen will endure it. It is generally a severe ordeal, sitting still for hours in the open, with nothing to break the force of the freezing wind. On this occasion I followed Nathan Cobb's advice, and did not suffer from the cold.

When I go brant hunting I put on a thin summer undershirt and drawers, then don woolen garments; this makes a lot of difference. A pair of linen or silk socks covered by two pairs of thick yarn ones will keep the feet perfectly comfortable. Always wear corduroy. Another valuable hint I will give to sportsmen. Get an oilcloth of the best make, carry it to a tailor, and get him to make a pair of breeches or trunks reaching to the knees, and coming high up to the waist; these should be as wide and ample as a Dutch burgher's. Lastly, high hip boots, reaching to the thighs, make the lower limbs snug and warm. The outer shirt should be of blue navy flannel, over that a vest of Saxony wool, and over all the corduroy vest and coat. Thus equipped, a man is wind-proof, cold-proof and water-proof. The cap should have flaps to pull over the face, and the throat must be protected by a thick comforter of woolen or fur, preferably the latter. In hunting brant never wear gloves; wear woolen mits, so that they can be easily slipped off when one is shooting. If the hands get cold, hold them awhile in the freezing water to take the frost out. These are little details, but it is just such simple minutiae that mark the difference between comfort and discomfort.

But to return to the brant. The tops of the sandbars now began to be visible among the waves, or rather the surf, for the wind was simply howling over the ocean, and it drove all the brant from the ocean into the Broadwater, and tore the big flocks all to pieces.

I had expected good sport, but I never dreamed that it would rain brant; for when they did appear, they came with a rush, and from all points of the compass. I fired at least fifty shells loaded with No. 4 shot, as fast as I could slip the shells in, and my gun-barrel became so hot that I had to immerse it in the water.

The brant must have seen the decoys glistening in the sunlight for miles, for I could see the birds high in the sky, coming to the blind with wings set on a gentle decline. Many of them actually settled among their wooden prototypes, a rare thing for them to do. There were so many birds that I could pick the shots, and let the ones going with the wind alone, and blaze away at the brant that approached beating against the gale.

The water was about two feet deep when the birds began to fly, but the waves made the boat rock so that it was impossible to take certain aim. I had to make snap-shots, and scored many a miss; but when the water receded a foot, and the boat settled upon the sand, then it was that the shooting was simply perfect, and I would not have changed position with any man on earth, Czar, Sultan or King.

I did not stop to count the birds that fell; it was the living, not the dead, I was after.

It was warm work! I discarded my coat, then the woolen jacket, and worked in my vest. Oh! it was glorious while it lasted; it was the very summit of a sportsman's dream, and repaid me for the long weary days on the island, the fruitless waits at the blinds. It is the hope deferred that maketh the heart of the sportsman sick.

I had carried only one box containing one hundred shells, and I fired the last when the sun was low in the west, then I drew a long breath, took an equally long drink from my flask, and looked around. I saw Bill Johns picking up the dead and shooting the cripples—a very easy task, for the brant never dives, but swims straight on.

Nobody but a born and bred waterman could have managed a sailboat in such a fierce breeze, and I sat there and watched Bill with the keenest interest. In about an hour he anchored his boat in deep water and waded out to where I sat.

"What's the matter?" he shouted.

"I have fired my last shell," I replied, "and I have had enough."

"All right, we will stow the decoys away."

On our way to the island I counted my game. Fifty-eight birds was the total; the finest day's work among the brant in all my thirty years' shooting.

"There were some cripples I could not reach," said Bill. "They were on the flats, and I hadn't any time to waste."

The next day I strolled over to Nathan Cobb's, and found him packing his game in barrels to send to New York.

"How many have you, Nathan?" I asked.

"I killed one hundred and eighteen," he replied, "and a good day's work, as I get forty cents apiece for them."

I asked him what was the greatest number he ever killed in one day, and he replied, " One hundred and eighty-six."

Nathan was the best wild-fowl shot I ever met. He used a No. 8 Greener, very heavy, using brass shells which he loaded himself. But few men could stand the jar of continued shooting from such a gun.

In the summer of 1890 it looked as if Cobb's Island was destined to become one of the finest watering-places on the Atlantic Coast. A rich syndicate commenced negotiations for the property, intending to erect costly buildings and improvements strictly up to date. An engineer examined the island and found that the front was slowly crumbling into the sea; so he advised the prospective purchasers to wait another year. At the end of that time he made another examination, and found that ten feet of the entire beach had disappeared; this discovery stopped the deal.

The hotel as originally built was fully five hundred yards from the beach, but steadily and surely the ocean had encroached until, in 1896, it was within fifty feet of the hotel; then the end came.

On the evening of October 4, 1896, the sun set in a blaze of golden splendor. The sea was unruffled, the air balmy, and there was not a cloud in the sky. The islanders pursued their ordinary occupations; some were mending their nets, others were gathering their harvest of fish from the boats. The life-guardsmen were told off, and those on duty had started on their rounds along the beach. The housewives were busy getting supper, and from each chimney there arose a light cloud of smoke.

Sunday morning dawned clear, with a fitful breeze from the northeast, which increased as the hours wore on, and the surf began rolling inward with increasing power, dashing beyond the high-water mark. Still no alarm was felt until the wind changed into a gale, which soon became a hurricane. Then the islanders were moved to sudden action. All the furniture was moved from the lower floors and crowded into the rooms above. The life-savers manned their boats and watched the beach.

The breakers were now driven by the wind with inconceivable force, and rolled up around the hotel, and as the wind increased in velocity some tremendous billows swept clear across the island. Then there was "hurrying to and fro," and most of the people sought the houses that were on the elevated ground, which was generally the crest of some sand dune, over which the coarse grass had grown.

Soon, instead of an occasional vagrant wave, the whole line of breakers were chasing each other like race horses on a steeplechase, and breaking with a roar against the different dwellings.

It was a scene of grandeur; even the stolid islanders were moved to admiration. The island was invisible, and immense waves came charging from the ocean at their homes, as if they were serried lines of cavalry. The sand dunes broke the force of the mighty surges, otherwise the houses would have disappeared in the clutch of the ravening waters.

Whilst the people were safely housed in their second stories, the stock and cattle were swimming around the houses, uttering cries of distress and fear; but no Noah's Ark was there to afford protection. Horses, cows, goats and dogs were all mingled together, and every now and then some wave, overtopping its fellow, would catch up some animal and bear it across the mainland and drown it in the deep channel at the rear of the island.

Soon even the highest points were under water. Then the life-guardsmen went from house to house and rescued the inmates one by one, and carried them to the life-saving station.

It was a heroic task these brave men had, for the wind had risen to a velocity of sixty miles an hour, and it required strength, courage and skill to face the dreadful storm.

There happened to be several large oyster sloops in the vicinity, and in these many of the islanders took refuge, where from the decks they watched the homes of their childhood being washed away; not the houses alone, but the very earth was swept away, and all their belongings were engulfed in the insatiable maw of the angry ocean. Where thousands once had walked was now a barren waste of foam. The island had for the most part disappeared like the fabled Atlantis; and instead of the sound of babbling children and voices of men, the notes of accordeon, or the song of the village girl, is now heard but the whistling of the blast, the beat of the breakers, and the shriek of the gull and the sea mew.

CHAPTER VIII

A FISHING AND HUNTING TRIP ALONG THE NORTH CAROLINA COAST

CAP'N JOE PEYTON lived down on Currituck Sound, North Carolina. He owned a big house, a long seine, one hundred acres of land, a thousand or more acres of marsh, a couple of double-barreled guns, a Chesapeake Bay dog, a brier-root pipe, and he had a very fine-looking wife.

If there is anything more needed to make a sportsman happy, deponent knoweth it not. But to Cap'n Joe's mind there was a drawback, one element missing from his otherwise complete sum of human happiness: he frequently bemoaned the fact that Providence had not caused an apple-orchard to grow near the house, a feat (to use a Hibernian expression) the hand of man could not accomplish, for the soil was one-half swamp-mud and the other half sand. The house was built between the ocean and the sound, and but a pistol-shot from either.

"Cap'n Peyton," as he was called by his acquaintances, and just plain "Joe" by his intimates, was a man somewhere in the fifties, over six feet tall, with a form which, in spite of its decided embonpoint, indicated great strength and vigor. I have frequently thought, as I looked at his jolly face, "Here is the personification of old Jack Falstaff!" There were the same twinkling, cunning eyes, dancing with merriment; the same bald head, garnished with long hair at the sides;

the same bulbous nose, fiery red; the sensual mouth half hidden by a heavy beard; the same rich, resonant voice full of joyous bonhomie; the same careless, soulless, prevaricating Jack as portrayed by Hackett, that glorious Thespian of my boyhood days.

Cap'n Peyton was also the owner of a small sloop, named the *Sally Lunn,* in which he offered to take a party along the North Carolina coast, as far down as they might wish to go, and to remain as long as they desired to stay.

"I don't want no pay for myself, or for the boat," he wrote, "but you may furnish the solids and the liquids, and pay my boatmen and a cook. I would enjoy a little cruise; so get your party together and I will meet you at Van Slyck's landing."

It was no trouble to gather a crowd on those terms. The offer of a vessel and a navigator free of charge is a rare one; so accordingly, on the twenty-sixth day of August, our party of six rendezvoused at Norfolk, Virginia.

There was Bill Cracklin, a native of the old North State, a veteran of the late war, who bore a reminder of it, in the shape of a shattered foot, from Malvern Hill, which caused him to limp slightly. Bill was a good boon companion, undemonstrative and uncomplaining. Then came Tom Pilcher, a middle-aged man, more of a gunner-farmer than a fisherman, and his friend, Dick Long, likewise middle-aged; but he handled the rod better than he did the double-barrel. Jack Yates, a young man, a good all-round sportsman; Charlie Ransom, the younger—the "Babe" as we called him; and your humble servant.

With the exception of Bill and myself, the jaunt was the maiden voyage of the participants. I doubt if any of us realized what a trip in an open boat, along the Carolina coast in the dogdays, really meant; I am sure I did not, though I had had once or twice in my life some bay-bird shooting along Barnegat Beach.

Our party met together at the Purcell House, in Norfolk, one Sunday morning, and I arranged for our passage on the little paddle-wheel steamer *Comet,* which was to leave at seven o'clock the next morning.

At the hour named we boarded the craft and were soon paddling along at a lively rate. The *Comet's* course was up the south branch of the Elizabeth River, through the Great Dismal Swamp, by canal, to Currituck Sound. It is an interesting tour in summer, if it happens to be one's first experience and the charm of novelty is added to the scene. At this season the swamp with its dense, green shade, broken at intervals with stretches of glade and prairie, with wild bushes and vines covered with brilliant-hued flowers, each throwing out its own particular perfume, was almost overpowering. Here and there was a primitive dwelling, with its garden patch adjoining, inclosed by cypress slats, all forming a pleasing panorama as it glided before our vision in double view from the vessel's side.

The canal is only a few feet wide, and it required skillful steering when the steamer rounded the sharp bends. She had to shave the points very closely to keep her nose out of the opposite bank, and when another steamer was met each had to hug its respective bank until its bilge was in the mud and the branches of the trees overhanging the canal swept across the deck, causing the passengers to "lie low" to avoid being brushed off into the black waters beneath.

It was, however, when the boat met a raft of cypress logs,—a raft sometimes three thousand feet in length,—drawn by a wheezing, asthmatic tug, that the steersman got in his fine work. There was a clanging of bells on the *Comet,* backing and filling, sudden bumps which indicated that the yielding logs had been struck, and a general commotion on both sides. Frequently the roustabouts of the steamer would jump onto the raft and struggle desperately to keep the logs from becoming lodged in the paddlewheels. But all were in good humor; there were no oaths and no quarreling. Perhaps it was as well, for hidden on the raft somewhere was a gun, which was used to shoot muskrats, or to obtain a mess of blackbirds for supper, and the steersman on the *Comet* had a double-barrel standing conveniently near with which to knock over a summer-duck or a flock of shore-birds. It does not do to swear at a man down there, where a curse is equivalent to a blow.

After a pleasant day we reached our destination about six o'clock in the evening. Van Slyck's landing was the last place but one where the steamer touched, and our journey farther south was necessarily made by sail.

Cap'n Peyton joined us there, and we all went to the only store in the place, to provision our craft. We were not sparing; every man had a suggestion as to what he would like, and if the article of his choice was in the store it was bought. When it seemed likely that we would forget something, the storekeeper would kindly prompt us until we had nearly exhausted his stock, and it seemed as if we had enough to feed a regiment for the summer.

It was dark before we started for Cap'n Peyton's, where we intended stopping for the night. The distance was five miles, but the wind was dead ahead and it was very late when we reached the place, and we were too sleepy to enjoy the supper prepared for us.

We were up betimes, however, and took a survey of the premises.

It was a sporting-club-house of which our friend was the keeper. The building was as large as a town hotel, and elegantly furnished. The club numbered some twenty-five sportsmen from New York. The shares were worth five thousand dollars each. The preserves embraced three thousand acres of swamp-land and water, and was considered the best place for common ducks in Currituck Sound.

I looked over the record for the winter of 1893-94, and noted that the best bag for one day was one hundred and ninety-three, mostly mallards and black ducks. There were many bags of one hundred, but the average on good hunting days was about fifty.

I visited the wild-fowl pond in which were confined the live decoys. There were two swans, eight or ten wild geese, and quite a number of common ducks; some, like the geese and swan, were originally wild, but had been crippled and then captured.

The ponds were built half on land and half in the water, and the fowls were fed every night with corn. A singular fact regarding them was told me by the Cap'n, as follows:

"The wild geese I let loose early every morning, and they sail about the sound, but always return in the evening to get their feed; but I have to keep them penned up in May and November, for their instinct then asserts itself, and they would migrate and return no more. I have lost many that way."

"Do the geese understand their business?" I asked.

"Just as well as I do," he answered. "Why, there are some geese in there that do not require to have gyves on to be anchored; they stay of their own accord, and seem to enjoy luring their brethren to their death; and some even swim alongside the boat as it returns in the evening."

All the morning the men were employed in transferring our supplies from the sailboat to the sloop, and it was nearly noon when the *Sally Lunn* unfurled her wings to the breeze and we started on our voyage of pleasure. The Cap'n had caused all the ballast to be left behind, and used watermelons instead. "When they are gone I'll use clams," he said.

For nearly five hours we sailed with a spanking breeze astern, and made our first stop at Nag's Head, a celebrated resort in the olden days, but at this time far on the down grade. The hotel, or tavern rather, was built after the drygoods-box style, in which there are no curves, or any attempt at architecture. Three porches ran around it, and the whole structure, being destitute of paint or color, looked like an infirm poorhouse which would some day fall from sheer age and weakness.

It stood upon a strip of land about a hundred yards distant either way from the ocean and Roanoke Sound; but the wind had reared huge mountains of sand on the beach, which were much higher than the hotel, completely shutting out the view of the ocean as well as intercepting the salt sea breeze. Only the shallow sound was visible to the guests, and a wharf, run out several hundred yards into the channel, was their favorite place for exercise.

The interior of the hotel was unique, to say the least. The house was erected upon piles in the shape of a square, with a courtyard in the center, covered with black mud and some four inches of water, wherein reposed a huge hog, while around him ducks were swimming. The scene was very much like that of the rear of an Irish tenement house in the suburbs of some great city.

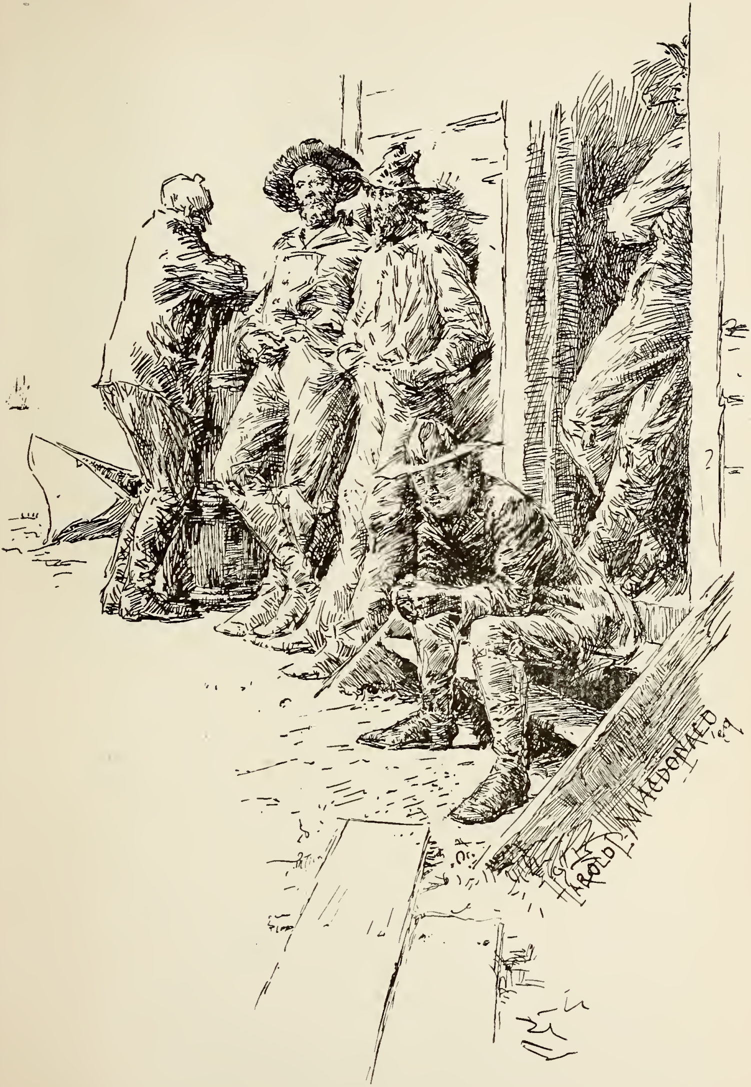
Cap'n Joe, who knew everybody down that way, introduced us around the bar.

The bar at a Southern watering-place is quite different from the bars of the North and West. It is a general rendezvous; more like a club-house than anything else. Contracts, business affairs, politics and the news of the day all have their swing. If a wife wants her husband or a maiden her sweetheart any time between breakfast and dinner, she sends a waiter for him to the bar, as a matter of course. Julep is the standard drink, but every now and then some ancient, white-headed fellow will totter up to the bar and call for the once famous "whiskey toddy."

Our next stopping-place was Manteo, a small town opposite Nag's Head. This is the oldest settlement in North Carolina. It was there, some time in the seventeenth century, that a small body of settlers from Virginia built their log-houses; and it was the birthplace of Virginia Dare, the first white child born in the State.

Our object there was to obtain a fisherman who knew all the best places at which to ply our lines and rods. We paid the man, Wise, two dollars a day and " found " for his services, and it proved a dear bargain.

Now, a word about the North Carolina coast. Commencing at Virginia Beach, near Norfolk, Virginia, the ocean beach runs due south without a break for about fifty miles. As a thoroughfare for vehicles it is unexcelled, but excepting the life-saving stations at intervals of five miles, and an occasional sporting-club-house, which was vacant nine months in the year, there were no habitations. There are five great sounds parallel with the ocean, which at one time must have been a part of the sea, but in some great tidal disturbance a sandy ridge sprang up that runs as straight as a die for over a hundred miles, and effectually bars the ocean from farther advance. This strip varies in width from a hundred yards to a mile, and is composed mostly of sand that moves backward and forward with the wind. Sometimes great mounds accumulate which are larger than any public building. Sometimes there are " sea meadows," as they are called, level plains covered with coarse grass which is the subsistence of the herds of undersized, thin cattle. Here and there are oases in the desert, in the shape of pieces of slightly elevated land on which are built houses and outbuildings, surrounded by waving crops. But these alluvial spots are very rare, and a few miles from Virginia Beach they cease altogether.


HAROLD MACDONALD

"It is a general rendezvous."

The ocean breakers, assaulting the sand fortifications night and day, trying to effect a breach in the line and mingle with the waters of the sound, have succeeded in two instances in forcing a way through. The first gap in the strand is at Oregon Inlet, about fifty miles from Virginia Beach (the Virginia railway terminus on the Atlantic), where the waters of Chesapeake Bay pour into the sea. At Oregon Inlet the salt water of old ocean mingles with the fresh water of Pamlico and Roanoke sounds, which in turn impregnates with a briny taste the waters of Albemarle, Chowan, Croatan and Currituck sounds. The Oregon Inlet is about one-half mile wide, and New Inlet nearly two hundred yards. These two inlets are separated by Bodie's Island, a sand bank some ten miles long by one and one-half miles wide.

Having given, not a graphic, but a topographical description of the section, I will rejoin the "Innocents," whom I left at the wharf at Manteo.

The sunlight was barely sufficient to enable us to see to cast off the line which held the *Sally Lunn* to the wharf. There was a fine breeze blowing and the sloop sprang along like a bounding horse. It was a delightful sail and the night was salubrious.

The "Innocents" were at their best; they sang, or tried to sing, laughed, joked, and were in the best possible spirits.

A little before midnight Wise, the guide, told the Cap'n to ease the main sheet. It was dark and we could see nothing but the gemmed arch above and the stars reflected by the dancing waves, but we knew that we had reached the inlet, for the majestic rise and fall of the craft showed that the bosom of old ocean was sending its throbs inland.

Wise, having taken his station in the bow of the boat, yelled to Jack to let go the sail, and down it came with a run, bringing the craft to a standstill. We could see the dim, opaque shadows of the land right in our front.

A lantern was lighted, and we saw a rough plank shanty which had been built upon a platform close to the shore. Wise said it belonged to a fisherman who used to stretch a gill-net across the channel in the spring and summer, and that we were to bunk there for the night, as the sloop had neither cabin nor shelter.

Wise might have saved his breath, for the mosquitoes, attracted by the light, began to swarm around us; then there was the murmur of profane language, and the sound of whisking of clothes and handkerchiefs through the air. It was a hopeless fight, for they came in armies—millions, waves upon waves. Then we scrambled out onto the creaky, rickety old platform.

"Cap'n, for Heaven's sake keep that lantern in the boat!" sang out Bill Cracklin, who was balancing himself on a loose plank, fearing every minute to break through and tumble into the water.

"If he does, how can we see to get into this old shebang?" called out Tom Pilcher. "Pass that lantern up here, somebody!"

"If I do, all the mosquitoes will come too," said Bill.

"'Will come?'" said Tom sarcastically. "They are eating me alive this minute."

"God Lord, let's do something!" howled Jack Yates. "These insects sting like wasps."

Striking a match we found that the door of the shanty was barred, but the only window in the house was open, so I crawled in and unbarred the door, and the crowd rushed in and shut the door and the window. Another match's wavering gleam enabled us to take a fleeting view of the interior.

It was a mere shell, used for storing fish, although two bunks with some tattered bedclothes showed that it was a bedchamber as well. But, ye gods, the odor! It was simply horrible, sickening! The bugs! Pah! We felt our blood run cold.

The lantern was brought, and the details became clearer and more loathsome. Evidently no one had been in the place for months, and a barrel of weak brine which stood in one corner contained decayed fish. Jack Yates rushed outside, and we heard him having an attack of sea-sickness in its worst phase.

In another corner was a tub with the remains of spawn, offal and odds and ends of every kind of fish and crab that swims. This was thrown into the stream by Sam, the cook, but that was all he could do; then we took the lamp and looked around for a place to sleep.

To most of the "Innocents," who couldn't sleep without two sheets, a hair pillow and spring mattress, the sight of those moldering, loud-smelling rags was not conducive to good temper, and grumbling broke out afresh.

"Well," said Yates, "I have slept in the cabins of the Canadian trappers, but they were fine hotels compared to this."

"A roustabout's pallet on board a canal-boat is heaven to this!" cried Dick Long. "I'm going to lie down on the floor."

We had brought with us a heavy, padded coverlet and one blanket to each man. It was Hobson's choice as to where we were to lie. The odor still remained; nothing short of burning down the shanty would destroy that. The bugs were still there, and plenty of other insects that had established headquarters in the place were no doubt waiting to make our acquaintance.

Some of the party were lying on the floor; Jack Yates and I had squeezed into one of the bunks, and it was quiet for about five minutes, as each man tried to sink peacefully into slumber; no sound disturbed us save the hum of the mosquito. Suddenly came the sound of Jack's quavering voice:

"It's hot enough to roast a pig in this hole; can't somebody open the door?"

"No! Somebody nor nobody is going to open the door; there are enough mosquitoes in here now," Bill Cracklin, who was lying against it, growled out.

"Boys, it's hot; fearfully hot!" said Pilcher. "I can't sleep; I feel now like a lobster boiled alive."

"Oh!" said Dick Long, "their sufferings are nothing compared to mine. I'm roasted and my carcass has been sucked dry by the cursed insects."

Then followed a slap and a hearty malediction.

"Fellows," wailed Jack, "can't we light the lantern? If I must die I want my glazing eyes to rest on my friends' loved faces; this Cimmerian darkness is torture—oh, confound the mosquitoes!"

"The lamp—the lantern—let's have a light!"

from several. Then up spoke our Quintus Curtius, otherwise Portly Bill:

"Light the lantern! Boys, are you crazy? Why, this old shebang is full of knot-holes, and if a light shines there will be a million mosquitoes."

"There are that many in here now!" howled Tom.

"No, there ain't," responded Bill soothingly. "The few that are in here now will soon get full; let them alone, and they will let you alone."

"Just listen to him," cried Charley, the infant. "He knows they won't tackle his tough old hide so long as they can feed on me."

"For my part," said Long, "I don't know which is the worst, the heat, the stink, or the mosquitoes."

"Oh, the heat," said Jack. "I feel like the old man who died unconverted. Shall I tell you about it?"

"Yes, go ahead," cried several.

"Well, there was an old couple, very poor, who lived near a large city. The woman was a firm believer, but the man had no faith to speak of. At last the old fellow fell sick, and grew steadily worse. Despite the grief and admonitions of his wife, he held stubbornly to his disbelief in hell. Several weeks after his death his aged wife went into the city to sell some chickens and blackberries. While there she heard of a clairvoyant who could put people in direct communication with the dead. So she hied herself to the ghostly go-between and asked to have speech with her husband; and the following conversation was held:

"'John, are you happy?' A gruff 'No,' mingled with a strong smell of sulphur, was the reply.

"'If there is anything I can do for you, John, call on me.'

"'All right; please send me by express a palm-leaf fan, a suit of summer clothes, and a barrel of ice-water.'"

When the laughter had died away after this narrative, somebody inquired where the Cap'n was.

Bill replied that he, Wise, and the cook were on the boat, and he added, "By George, listen to that! Why, dem my buttons if it ain't a camp-meeting hymn; they will be asleep soon, for that hymn business is the last stage."

"Say, has any fellow got a match?" queried Charley Ransom.

"What do you want it for?"

"Oh, I want it for fun," sarcastically. "Say, Bill, lend me your tobacco-bag."

He filled his pipe, struck a match, and sitting cross-legged, declared he enjoyed this smoke more than any he had ever had. That stirred up the sufferers, and soon match after match was ignited, showing each man with his face swathed in some garment. Soon little dull gleams shone here and there, and the room was rapidly filled with smoke. It must have made the mosquitoes "sit up and take notice," for they tortured us no more that night, and soon the snores of the "Innocents" indicated that they were at peace with the world and mankind for the time being.

The sun was showing its broad disk over the ocean brim when, yawning and gasping, the crowd came out of the cabin. Some disrobed and plunged into the water, and the salt bath acted like an elixir; others commenced fishing from the platform, but caught nothing save crabs.

The cook was hurrying breakfast, and from the short pipe of the cooking-stove in the bow of the boat puffed a spiral streak of smoke. The boat was moored to a post, and the shanty was built upon a platform which rested on piles some three feet above the shallow water. We were right on the edge of the swamp, which extended for miles, and was the breeding-place for the mosquitoes, and enough were produced to supply the whole State.

Directly in front was the inlet, and right across were the low, sandy flats of Roanoke Island, with the light-house showing distinctly against the sky.

The improvised gong, consisting of a tin plate and a knife, was sounded, and all hands turned in to a breakfast of coffee, bread and butter, soft crabs, fried fish, oysters, ham, roasted tomatoes and potatoes, which bill of fare, to a keen appetite, was all that could be desired.

The " Innocents " showed their appreciation by stuffing themselves. Even Dick Long, the invalid, who had wanted to start straight for home, got outside of four cups of coffee, four biscuits, three hogfish, six soft crabs, and the garnishings.

Then came the seductive pipe, and the men almost forgot the woes of the previous night; I say almost, but not quite, for Jack Yates was anointing his face with oil and declaring he would sleep in the bed of the ocean before he would pass another night in that filthy hutch.

There was great bustle as all hands got ready to angle. Lines were overhauled and hooks examined, and following the fisherman Wise about a hundred yards down the bank, we took positions where the inlet made a sharp curve, and the tide, now at its flood, rolled in heavy billows from the Atlantic. There were no fancy rods or flies used by the party. Each man had a cord about thirty yards long; the hook was of large size, protected by a shank of copper wire, and a half-pound sinker was attached; the bait used was clams, crabs, or a strip of flesh cut from the sea trout.

We stood in a line about ten feet apart. The bank was about two feet above the swelling tide and sloped at an acute angle. Nearly all the "Innocents" were novices at hand-line fishing. It may seem easy to sling a line, with a heavy lead attached, as far as it will go, but practically it is as easy as playing the violin.

"You jest seize the instrument by its neck," said the Irishman, "draw the bow across its belly, move your fingers, and that's all."

Bill had tied one end of his string to his suspenders. He shot the lead and away it sped heavenward; and as Bill stood watching it with a gratified smile he felt a twitch; his suspenders jerked from the button, and away went the line and disappeared under the waves. Bill stared with his mouth open for fully a minute, then went back to the sloop to hunt up another line. Afterward I wished that he had not found one.

In the mean time, the slingers were having all sorts of mishaps. Jack Yates had lassoed himself helpless. He did accidentally, in one throw, what it would take a man ten minutes' hard work to perform.

His arms and legs were bound fast by the encircling line, and Wise had to use time and patience to get him loose again. Tom Pilcher had swung the lead around his head and let it go. It started all right, but the line became entangled in a knot, and Tom was sitting on the ground picking away to get it untwisted. Dick Long sent his missile straight, as did Wise; but I was cutting a hook out of my pantaloons, a hook that had gone through beyond the barb.

Bill had returned by this time. He had obtained a line and hook, but in his hurry he could not find the box wherein we kept our tackle, although he discovered an old rusty iron ring-bolt, about six inches in diameter, which he used for a sinker. He came running down, and hastily baiting his hook, launched the line into the air. It caught, and the sinker, describing a parabolic curve, struck me on the back of the head, making me see more stars in a second than I had observed in all my lifetime. I mildly reproved him as I rubbed my head and then bathed it in the stream. I told him if he ever caught me close enough to him hereafter he was at liberty to knock my brains out with his old junk-shop line. Bill snickered and said that I did not have enough brains to bait a fishhook.

Wise caught the first fish, a magnificent sheepshead, which weighed fully fifteen pounds, and he had a tough struggle in landing it.

The sheepshead is considered by far the finest-flavored fish that makes its home in the ocean; but gourmands go farther and declare it is the most delicious morsel that swims in sea, river, lake or stream. They are not plentiful, and only at certain seasons will take the bait. Our party caught several of these fishes, but sea trout and weakfish were the more numerous. It was fine sport, and for two hours all hands were hard at work. And it was real work. The throwing of the coiled line, the rapid pulling in of the cord hand over hand, the darting around for bait brought every muscle into play and bathed our bodies in perspiration. By noon all the members of the party were pretty well exhausted, and gathered together under an improvised awning and feasted on iced watermelons. Then came the brier-roots, which naturally led to the discussion of tobacco; for every one of the crew and the passengers of the *Sally Lunn* was a devotee of the weed; each man had his tobacco-bag filled with some mixture which he was ready to prove was the best brand on earth.

"Now," said Cap'n Peyton, "I have smoked all the various kinds of tobacco, and for good, solid comfort give me this," and he held up a huge roll of Niggerhead. "There's a brother of mine living down in that tobacco-raising section of Virginia known as the Black Belt, and he saves me about a dozen pounds of the rankest, blackest, strongest tobacco in the crop, the kind that grows in the lowlands. I just roll the leaves tightly, and when I want a smoke I just shave off the edges, and there you are."

"That air tobacco can't be beat," said Sam, the assistant navigator, as he crammed a bunch of it into his pipe.

"That's so," assented Parker, the cook; "it's good enough for me; mos' ez good as seegars."

"But, Cap'n, your tobacco is so confoundedly strong that the pipeful I tried yesterday brought out the sweat on my forehead, it parched my throat, burned my tongue, and left a rank taste in my mouth for an hour after," said another.

"I tried it, too," said Jack Yates. "It made me dizzy and set my head buzzing as if it were a beehive."

"Must be mighty holler," muttered the Cap'n, and Jack subsided.

"After all, it is a matter of taste, like everything else," said Bill Cracklin; "but a good smoke depends, in my opinion, as much on the kind of pipe as on the mixture."

"What is the best kind of pipe, Bill?"

"A gentleman," continued Bill dogmatically, "ought never to smoke but one kind of pipe, that is a long, reed-root stem and Powhatan clay pipe; of course, I mean for smoking after meals and when taking his ease. Now I have a root stem that I bought ten years ago; I put a mouthpiece to it, and I have burned in that time between two and three hundred pounds of good tobacco, and the stem is the color of a cured meerschaum. A whiff from that pipe is a joy indeed, and according to my mind it is sweeter than any cigar that ever was made."

"Oh, as to pipes, tastes differ," said Tom; "the German loves his long China bowl; the Irishman his clay pipe, with about three inches of stem; the Turk his water-pipe or hookah, the Chinese the opium bowl; and the Englishman the bulldog brier-root, loaded with 'shag,' and so on; and each swears his own is the best."

"That's enough, Tom," said Bill; "you have put one-half of us asleep and the rest will soon follow. Just listen to the Cap'n's snore; it sounds for all the world like the puffing of a canal paddle-wheeler."

"Well, you had better keep awake," retorted Tom innocently, "for your snore would stir up the life-saving crew to thinking some steamer had gone ashore."

In the evening it was decided to leave this sport, fine as it was, and go ten miles farther south, to New Inlet. All hands agreed that at this place the accommodations for getting rest were not up to those of a first-class hotel; so the anchor was lifted, the sails set, and we reached our destination before sunset.

This place was a great improvement over the other. Instead of being a vast marsh it was a solid island, with the New Inlet life-saving station about a half mile away. The inlet was of comparatively recent date. The distance from shore to shore was not over two hundred yards, and the waters of old ocean came boiling and seething in during floodtides, making the place look like a vast caldron.

Our tents were soon pitched and the stove was fired up, while Parker busied himself preparing supper.

About that time Captain J. W. Westcott, the keeper of the life-saving station, dropped in and we gave him a warm welcome. He was a fine specimen of stalwart manhood, thoroughly trained. He had just returned from Bodie's Island, one of the places that President Cleveland was so fond of visiting, and where the shooting of both wild fowl and bay-birds was very good. The first day's shooting at this place resulted in the President bagging one hundred and sixty bay-birds and four curlews; all of these were killed by single shots and while flying. This is a very good record for even a crack shot, and one of the coast guards, who was with Mr. Cleveland, told me that the President tumbled over nine out of every ten birds he fired at. The blind was merely a hole scooped out of the sand, some three feet deep, with rushes strewn over the bottom. About fifty tin snipe-decoys were spread around, and when the snipes were driven off the flats, where they fed, by the rising tide, they would fly to higher ground. That was the time for the sportsman to have his innings.

After supper Captain Westcott insisted upon our spending the night with him at the station-house, which invitation Bill Cracklin accepted for all, saying that it was not the first time some of the crowd had been in the station-house, only it was in the city and they had been compelled to do so.

We found the change most agreeable. The large room over the boat-room was the sleeping-apartment; it was scrupulously clean, and screens in the windows protected us against the entrance of mosquitoes. The camp cots were most comfortable, and the room was delightfully cool and pleasant. We had nine hours of glorious sleep, and upon rising found a breakfast ready for us that was fit for a king.

Then we all went fishing, and found the place even better than Oregon Inlet, though the only time we could catch anything was at the slack and the flood of the tide. The fish came with a rush then; such lusty fellows, full of spring and fight.

I grew tired of hauling them in, so I made Wise get the station sailboat and sail with me back and forth. I rigged up a kind of trolling line, by the aid of a tin spoon and a strand of Parker's auburn locks and three fishhooks. I let it trail some thirty feet behind the speeding boat, and the way the bluefish jumped at the bait was beautiful to see. Not over one in ten that took a snap at the glittering lure was hooked, but it was an exciting effort to land that one, and his splashings wet me all over. However, the shower-bath of cold sea water was more pleasant than otherwise.

One thing is certain: no man can get tired of trolling if the fish bite freely. The rapid motion of the curving billows, the bright sheen of the water rippled by the fish as it strikes, all combined, sends the blood dancing through one's veins.

The ways of fish are past finding out. Suddenly they stopped biting, and we had to wind up our lines and retire.

These deep-sea fish are as capricious as mountain trout. Some days they will bite like a steel trap and pull like a horse; on other days they will not rise to any kind of bait. Sometimes they fancy clams, and again they turn up their tails at them. They crave crab-meat on one tide, and avoid it the next. They do not seem to hanker after minnows at any time.

Crabs are the curse of fishermen down there. Unless the bait is taken at once by the bluefish or trout, a measly crab is bound to claw it, which makes the holder of the line so mad that if the crustacean holds on and is drawn in he is incontinently mashed flat.

Occasionally we caught an eel—a huge, slimy, slippery fellow—that had to be clubbed to death to prevent the tangling of the lines. We could always tell when we had hooked a flounder by the way the cord would whiz through the water, for these fish, some two feet long by eight inches broad, are as thin as a shingle and they cut through the sea at a most astonishing rate of speed.

The most singular denizen of the deep is the "toadfish," about as long as one's hand. When first drawn out it is not over an inch thick, but as the air enters its lungs the fish gets nearer and nearer round, until it is as taut and as tense as a blown bladder; then it bursts like a paper bag.

There were thousands of beautiful sea-shells scattered along the beach, but what interested me most were the live ones. I watched one variety of this aquatic animal with the greatest curiosity. It was more like a snail with feet than anything else, and would make its way along inch by inch. I wondered what it subsisted upon, and most unexpectedly I received an answer, and one which was another lesson in the beautiful harmony of Nature.

As I was sitting idly smoking on the prow of the boat, swinging my bare feet in the water, I hastily drew them in as a big sea-nettle came floating by. It was swept by the current to the bank, and before it was carried off a big shellfish commenced devouring it. Now if I could find out what the nettle eats, I would be satisfied.

The swamp coon makes a meal upon the shellfish by digging out the meat with its claws; then man sets a trap, and maybe catches the coon. Thus all things animate ultimately find a graveyard in the stomach of man.

"Well, boys," said Cap'n Peyton the next morning after breakfast, "what's the plans for to-day."

"I'm going a-fishing," said Dick Long.

"So will I," spoke up Bill, Tom and Jack.

"That's all right. Here, Wise," he shouted, "get the bait and carry these gentlemen to the best fishing-grounds."

"Well, Cap'n, what do you intend to do?"

"Oh, I reckon I'll lay around."

"If that's all you have to do, suppose you send a boy, and telephone to Bodie's Island Life-Saving Station. You know them, don't you?" The Cap'n laughed.

"Know 'em?" he said. "Why, I know every man, woman and child from Currituck to Hatteras."

"Who is the keeper of the Bodie's Island Station?"

"Oh, he's an old darky, named Jake, who used to wait on me during the war. It is the only station manned by a colored crew on the Atlantic Coast, I believe."

"That's exactly right. Send Sam to the New Inlet and let him telephone Jake to meet us with a cart; I want to go over Bodie's Island."

Two hours later we made a run across the inlet and found "Uncle Jake," as he was called, awaiting us with a cart and two strong mules. The keeper was a fine specimen of the old régime darky, now so rare. He was, "before the war," the valet of a rich man who lived on Roanoke Island, who taught him to read and write. Jake was a splendid waterman, and when the station was established in 1870 he was chosen chief. His establishment was as neat as a pin, and his crew were a fine, lusty set of men.

Jake was my guide. He was a veritable antiquarian, and knew all the traditions of this historic island, for Bodie's Island was once the home of Captain Teach, or the pirate Blackbeard, who before the Revolutionary War was the scourge of the South Atlantic Coast, and as bloody-handed a villain as ever cut a throat or scuttled a ship.

Bodie's Island is ten miles long by one mile wide, and Oregon Inlet was the exit and entrance for this buccaneer, and at the rear of the island his craft lay hidden. For some ten years he continued his depredations, and tradition tells us that he captured many vessels, murdered scores of seamen and secured a vast amount of plunder which he spent in riotous living. He had over a dozen wives—one, in fact, at every port; and he made no scruple of marrying, frequently assuming a disguise for that purpose, and appearing and working at some village in the guise of a simple fisherman. He always chose the finest and most buxom lass, and soon there would be a wedding. Jake told me of a half dozen residents in Dare County who were the direct descendants of Blackbeard.

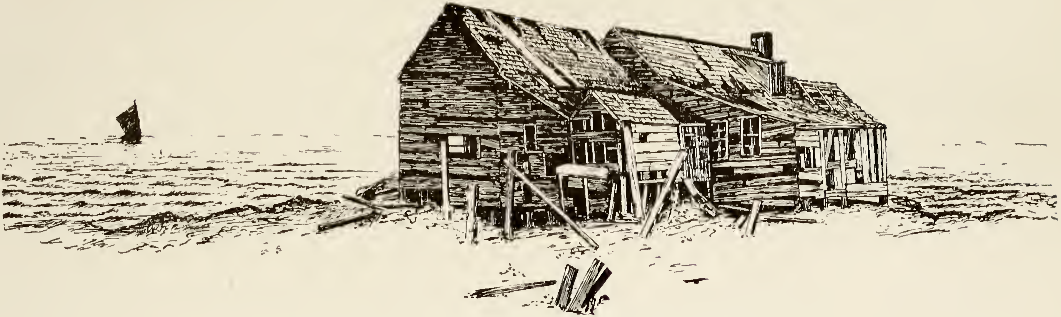
This cold-blooded, resolute villain became such a terror that England sent a corvette under Lieutenant Eaton to capture or kill him. Eaton disguised his vessel as a merchantman and cruised along the coast. The bait took. Blackbeard boarded the craft and found out his mistake when it was too late. He was killed by Lieutenant Eaton himself, and ten of his crew were hanged at the yardarm.

I did not stop to hunt on Bodie's Island, but kept on and examined the houses of the wreckers, who lived and pursued their calling prior to the year 1870. Some of the dwellings were large and roomy, and if walls could talk, what tales might they not tell of dark conspiracies, the dividing of plunder and the heavy drinking of old liquors and wines that had been saved from the various wrecks.

I counted the remains of seventeen vessels lying upon Bodie's Island. This coast is the most dreaded by mariners of any in the world. Even now, with all the appliances of steam, weather bureau, and life-saving station, scores of ships are wrecked on the hundred miles of coast from Cape Henry to Hatteras.

Before the establishment of the stations and the erection of the light-houses, this coast was like the vortex of hell to sailors. The insidious current inshore, the frequent storms, the dense fogs and the sandbars, all combined to make the wrecks frequent and complete. Nowadays, a greater portion of the freight is carried in the vast, roomy iron steamers that rarely are driven ashore. But in the olden days all merchandise went on wooden bottoms, and then the wreckers flourished on this island. They had their own way then, for the canal connecting the North Carolina sounds had not been constructed, and this section was as isolated as an island in the Pacific Ocean.

I saw the house of the most noted wrecker on the coast, Captain Jesse Etheridge. The dwelling was originally well made, of plank, with a huge fireplace. For more than a score of years no hand had touched the house; the planks and the weather-boarding had dropped from their fastenings, and the whole house had a tumble-down appearance. The quaint furniture was just as the last occupant had left it. I took a sketch of the place when I left.



“I saw the house of the most noted wrecker on the coast.”

At one time Bodie's Island was heavily wooded, but nothing remains save a few decayed stumps, and the sand drifts at will and assumes all sorts of curious shapes. This place is a famous wild goose and swan resort in the late winter and early spring. The geese and swans are the wariest wild fowl that fly. I question if either the crow or wild turkey has the cunning of these birds. After a little while they grow to understand the little game of the wooden decoys, and take no more notice of them than if they were sticks of wood; then live decoys are the only lure that will bring them within gunshot. When in actual use these decoys know that it is dangerous to swim within gunshot, so when the wild fowl come skimming over the water, the decoys paddle close to the blind and remain there until the guns sound, when they will rise, flap their wings and give vent to discordant shrieks.

Cap'n Peyton told me he had a wild goose decoy so tame that she was never carried in a boat, but would swim alongside both going and coming. Even on a dark night the faithful bird would stay close to the boat, and on reaching the wharf would walk into the inclosure.

I never enjoyed a day more, although Cap'n Peyton said he had had enough of the old tumbledown ruins, and preferred a nice, whitewashed cottage, with flowers in front, to all the ancient, moldy wrecks in the world.

The next day being Sunday, we spent the time in loafing, and we got so tired of sleeping and smoking that we decided to have a big supper on Monday night at the life-saving station, and we determined to see how many delicacies we could procure in the immediate vicinity. Each man had his instructions, and early in the morning we separated, each to his appointed task.

Jack Yates and I started off together, with our guns and a half dozen snipe decoys apiece. Taking the boat, Parker rowed us across to Bodie's Island, promising to call for us in the evening. We carried our fishing lines and some bait, and these we left on the beach. There were plenty of amateur fishermen, and our quest was for birds, not fish. Jack had a 12-gauge Lefever; I a 12-gauge Greener, with about four inches of the muzzle filed off. This destroyed the choke—which, by the way, I never believed in—and it made the gun handier. We each had about one hundred shells, charged with No. 8 shot, besides a score or so loaded with No. 5, for curlews.

We went to the rear of the island, where there was a big marsh separated from the shore by a broad creek. Along the banks were hollow depressions in the sand, filled with water. We stuck the decoys in these shallow ponds and made two blinds of seaweed, about a hundred yards apart. Spreading our oilcloths in the bottom, we retired into our holes, and like the shop-boy who takes down the shutters of the store, we were ready for business.

The first bird I saw was a curlew, which was headed straight for the decoys. Slipping in a couple of No. 5 shells, I lay low. These birds never go in flocks in that section, unless they are winging their way to roost on some lone sand island in the sound. I saw them once in heavy flocks—it was about the time when Cobb's Island was submerged—and then I killed sixty-odd; but that was an epoch. I considered it a lucky day when I knocked over a half dozen of these wary birds.

As I expected, the curlew rose as he approached the decoys, and he was fully fifty yards in the air when I gave him both barrels, and he fell with a thud. I picked him up, and found he was so fat that he had burst to pieces, and I held in my hand only a mangled mass of fat, oil and feathers.

I heard Jack's gun crack, and saw a flock of calico-backs swirl past. They kept off to the right; but two coming my way, I bagged them, and laid them under a pile of wet seaweed to keep them fresh.

A long hour passed, and there was not a sign of any game bird in the sky, except, indeed, the strikers (a species of small gull) that hovered by dozens over me, and kept up a discordant shrieking that became so exasperating that it was as much as I could do to refrain from blazing away at them.

It was low tide when we took our stands. But the tide soon began rising rapidly, and the creek was overflowing its banks, the pond was getting deeper and the decoys began to float off, so I chose a higher location. As the water covered the low flats it drove the birds off and they commenced flying freely. I got six graybacks out of one bunch, and killed a dozen straight. Then my hole filled with water, and I was compelled to seek other quarters. I retired to higher land and for an hour had medium sport, getting three dozen snipe and two curlews. I could hear Jack banging away at a lively rate, and when he joined me he had four dozen birds and five curlews. The sun was blistering hot and the white sand dazzled the eyes, so we concluded we would return to camp.

On reaching the inlet we could see nobody on the opposite side, so there was nothing to do but wait. To pass away the time we dropped our guns and took up our rods, and standing at the angle of the ocean beach and the inlet, we threw our lines, baited with crab meat, into the seething water. The rods were almost bent double by severe tugs at the lines, and we each drew in a large sea trout. There must have been a school of them fishing off the bank, for they seized the bait before it sank, and for an hour we had gloriously exciting sport.

By that time it was noon, and we were getting hungry, but not a soul could we see. The heat was almost unbearable, and there was no shade, so we went a-swimming, and then began fishing again. But the tide was then on the ebb, and the school of fish had gone.

Three o'clock came, and still no sign of the boat, and we were by that time both mad and hungry. Jack proposed that we take a position farther down the beach and shoot off our guns at regular intervals. This we tried, but it had no effect; it may be the noise of the breakers deadened the sound. We remained there until late in the evening, and when Wise appeared with the sailboat we felt ripe for murder.

He explained the reason of the delay.

Cap'n Peyton and Parker had taken the craft without saying a word to any one, and had gone a couple of miles through the swamp, looking for clams and oysters. The sloop's pinnace was also used by some of our party, and the sloop itself would have been sent, only there was no one to aid him in running her.

Upon our return we had a banquet fit for the gods, and the menu was composed almost entirely of native delicacies. Parker, the cook, surpassed himself, and as he had the great stove from the station on which to prepare the viands, it was a labor of love. We had eel and catfish stew, a famous Dare County cured ham, broiled bay-birds, sheepshead, trout, clam chowder, roasted drumfish, soft crabs, and sweet potatoes; and the entertainment wound up with a tureen of real diamond-back terrapin stew. It was a jovial evening we spent.

The next morning Cap'n Peyton was in high glee. He had gone down to the beach to take his morning swim, and had heard and seen drumfish in the breakers. It was just the day for drumming, and as we went to the door we saw there was a dull, leaden-colored sky, with a heavy northeast wind blowing, which made the air chilly and damp. The keeper fortunately had enough lines to go around. They were exactly the kind used for catching codfish, about an eighth of an inch in diameter, with a large hook tied to a wire leader, the sinker weighing nearly one-half pound.

" Now," said the Cap'n, " we have got to catch some sand crabs and fiddlers for bait."

We burst out laughing, for we had all tried to catch this white, ghostly looking crustacean that had its hole a short distance from the high-water mark, but although we could see hundreds within a pistol shot distance, we could not capture a single one. Even when bathing and in prime running order, the fleetest of us could not secure one. If it could not reach its hole, it would slide into the breakers and be lost. I shot a couple and they were disgusting-looking things.

"You catch them, Cap'n, and we will eat them, claws and all—and eat them raw, too."

"I'll take you at your word," he said.

So he fell to work with a spade that we had not observed, and after digging about two feet found the astonished crab, took it up, and, handing it to Bill Cracklin, told him to "chaw it up."

Well, we had to acknowledge the corn, and confess that our skipper knew more of fishing than all of our party put together. We caught a basketful of bait, and then strung out along the surf and proceeded to take off our lower garments, while some went "the whole hog," and kept nothing on but their hats.

I had not forgotten my experience with the handlines, and I knew that if one of those huge sinkers should hit me it would be my passport to "Kingdom Come," so I went away up the shore, and there entered the surf. I gave the line a sling that ought to have sent it to its utmost length, but it only tangled up and dropped a few feet off. I then tried the scientific way and got it out at last.

It is indispensable that the sinker shall be shot beyond the breakers, and to do this the thrower must stand up to his hips in the water and cast the lead fully ninety feet. To accomplish this feat the line must be coiled in the left hand, the right hand gives the lead a twirl and lets it go, and it hums through the air at an angle of forty degrees. The coil, following the sinker in a long, arching spiral, finally straightens to a parabola, and disappears with a loud splash far in the blue, heaving billows.

Drum-fishing is, beyond question, the most exhilarating kind of fishing to be found on the coast, and if the drums bite at all they bite freely. The sand moves with the tide, so when the lead sinks to the bottom the line must be held taut, for if the drum gets his head to the sea he will surely break away. I knew this, but I lost my first fish, nevertheless. I was keeping the line well in hand and walking up the beach, sometimes in water ankle-deep as the waves receded, then waist-deep, and some incoming roller would dash against me, when suddenly I felt a little tug at the line, and thinking it was some small fish, I let the cord give, and then came a jerk that almost pulled me face downward. I held on and followed until I was getting beyond my depth, and then secured a foothold as the waves receded, and hung on. There was a ceaseless, steady pull, very different from the rush of the Canada trout, and something gave way. When I hauled up the twine I found the fish had pulled himself loose.

I baited and made a beautiful throw, and the bait was seized at once. I turned to the land, put the line over my shoulder and ran. It was a good pull, and I did not stop until the fish was floundering on the sand above the high-water mark. It was a beauty, and would weigh, Cap'n Peyton judged, at least twelve pounds. I stood panting, but flushed and thrilled with delight, as I viewed the lusty fellow, his scales flashing back the light and changing from golden sheen to silver and emerald.

Three or four other throws resulted in nothing, as the crabs took the bait, which they did five out of six times.

I caught three more drums, the largest a fifteen-pounder, and I was pretty well tired out with whirling the lead, drawing in the long line and rebaiting the hook, as well as making my way through the water.

We all got back to the station late in the afternoon, and the keeper sent his mule and cart for the spoils. In all there were thirty-one drums. Jack Yates was the champion, for he captured a thirty-five-pounder that was weighed on the keeper's scales. Tom Pilcher came next with a thirty-pounder. The average throughout was below twelve pounds.

Singular as it may seem, the big drums do not bring the price the smaller ones do, for the older and larger they are, the coarser the meat is. For perfection as a table-fish, an eight-pounder is the one. The one we had for dinner was larded and put into a pan half full of water, then it was roasted in a hot oven. It weighed a little over seven pounds, yet furnished the entire party. The fish was delicious, and after the feast we had another " stag conversation party," as Bill Cracklin described it.

We were talking of field-dogs that night, and Cap'n Peyton told of a wonderful English setter that had belonged to his grandfather. That ancient gentleman had to be the stand-by for all the skipper's marvelous tales. Well, he once owned the most astute canine that ever lived. Among this dog's many traits was his knowledge of dates.

"Many a time," said the Cap'n, "I've heard my grandfather say that the visitors used to try to fool Begum by getting their guns and game-bags, and pretending it was the first of November. They would call Begum, with a great show of excitement, who would rise, trot into the dining-room, look at the calendar, and then return, show his teeth, and go and hide under the house."

A day or two later Jack Yates and I started to pay a visit to Roanoke Island and the light-house there. The station sailboat was a tight little affair, but the way it acted on the sound during a big blow made us think our last hour had come. Had we not, Jack and I, bailed fast all the time, the boat would have filled with the flying spray, and sunk.

It is astonishing how quickly a storm springs up on the coast. One moment the sun may be shining, with a steady breeze blowing, then suddenly the sky will be overcast with clouds, the wind will veer to another point of the compass and blow great guns. Certainly, had it not been for the inlet, we would have been compelled to run the boat ashore and spend the night on the beach in the open air.

However, we landed in safety, and having anchored the boat, we proceeded to the coast-guard house and made ourselves at home; we sat talking with the keeper and his crew until long after midnight. Most of them were sportsmen, and they gave us all the points about sportsmen and sporting matters in that section. In the first place there were not many ducks, for the salt water of the ocean pouring into the sound had killed the wild celery for many miles in the Pamlico, and thus, the favorite food of the wild-fowl being destroyed, they avoided the section, and only fugitives and ducks of the commonest varieties were killed about Roanoke.

The great sport was to be had in the late winter and early spring, they said, when the wild geese assembled in vast numbers. Those geese were an institution on Roanoke Island, both wild and tame; of the latter there were scores, for whenever an islander crippled one he would save it if he could. His flock was often increased in a singular manner. Seeing and hearing the tamed wild geese, their relatives would come to pay a visit, and often would follow them into the narrow enclosures and coops, which were baited with corn. The wild goose thought he had struck the softest snap of his life and that he would stay over night. He would make a fearful outcry when the captor caught him and clipped his wings, and his antics when trying to fly were something wonderful. But he would soon quiet down, and leaving off his wild ways, become a staid, respectable goose, as fat as an alderman; and the joy of his life was to entice his wild brethren from their vagrant ways and make them even as he was.

Captain Spence, the Vanderbilt of Roanoke Island, who owned the only carriage on the place at that time, had over fifty tame geese which he used for decoys, and the way he knocked over the wild geese and swans was a caution. Fifty and seventy-five were often killed in one day, though from a dozen to twenty were considered a good day's sport.

A tough wild goose is harder to kill than a cat. Its bony carcass is covered with sinews and gristle, over which is a coarse skin protected by an inside down, and over all that are coarse, thick feathers, almost as impenetrable as sheet-iron. It takes No. 1 shot, driven by five drams of powder, to send a pellet into a goose's body. Indeed, if it were not for its outstretched neck and head, which are its vulnerable parts, the old goose would be as safe against shot as a mud turtle, or "tarrapan," as the natives call them

We spent two days very pleasantly at Roanoke Island, seeing the natives in all their originality. The most curious thing that struck us was the universal bull team. It was there the fashionable conveyance for all freight.

On our return we found the camp demoralized. The most of the crowd were not fitted to rough it, and had become homesick; they were thoroughly tired of Nature, and longed and pined for Art; the ocean in all its majesty was not to be thought of in juxtaposition with Pennsylvania Avenue, and the vast sea-meadows were as nothing beside the public parks. So they voted to go home, and go they did, all except Bill Cracklin and the writer. We determined to go to Cape Hatteras by getting each station to furnish us a mule team.

The next morning we bade good-by and *bon voyage* to our friends, and watched the *Sally Lunn* as she sailed away in the distance.

CHAPTER IX

HOW THE NATIVES "DO" THE SPORTSMEN

"Dear Sir:

"You asked me last summer to notify you as to when was the best time for duck-shooting off the Capes. From all indications the brant and black ducks will be in heavy force about the 1st of December. If you want good sport make your preparations to come about that time. Cold weather will have set in, and the birds will be young and not shot at. It would be necessary for you and your friends to go aboard a schooner and anchor off near the blinds, so that in rough weather you would be on the spot; for if you boarded on the mainland your expenses would be heavy and the shooting not worth the while, to say the least of it, for on windy days the ducks fly up to the decoys and you could not reach the blinds were you on the mainland. There are millions of water snipe, too, so you had best bring a large supply of No. 10 shot. I cannot promise you luxurious fare, but can give you plenty of good bread, butter, eggs, beef, bacon, oysters, clams, stewed terrapin, ducks, snipe, and wild geese. Bring a heavy supply of ammunition, waterproof boots, and clothing, and come down on the steamer *Northampton* on the 3rd proximo from Cherrystone, and across the main to Caperville is ten miles. I will have an ambulance waiting for you and your traps. My schooner, well-furnished, will be ready, and you can embark at once.

"My terms are $4 per day each; I to furnish everything. All game can be expressed to any point you desire. It would be best for you and your friends to make some arrangement with a Baltimore commission house to dispose of your surplus game, for after your friends are remembered you can probably pay all your expenses and have enough funds left over for Christmas. I would expect you to remain at least ten days, as my expenses in getting ready for the trip will be considerable.

"Very truly yours,
"JOHN MACGUIRE.

"P. S.—Bring two breech-loaders with you, as one is apt to get so hot with rapid firing as to necessitate an extra piece; also, your rifle to shoot at long distance at the wild geese. There are acres of them.

"M."

Now I appeal to every lover of the gun if this letter is not calculated to make any sportsman go off at half-cock—to make business distasteful for the time and turn his thoughts, waking, and his dreams, slumbering, to visions of slaughtering of wild fowl? With such a letter in his pocket a man might be pardoned for ignoring "the partner of his bosom and the sweet offsprings of mutual affection," as Mr. Micawber pathetically expresses it, and let his gaze wander lovingly and longingly to his pet breech-loader which sits so solitary and alone in the corner.

The family circle hear dark hints of failing health and failing appetite; glowing descriptions of successful duck-hunts from the pens of enthusiastic Nimrods are read aloud, and, like a skillful engineer preparing the approaches for the erection of his batteries, the shootist carefully breaks ground for his intended departure—and then it becomes known that he is about to leave on a great duck-killing trip. Like Hector preparing for a foray upon the Grecian host, he is surrounded by admiring friends; the warriors help him to arm-buckler, casque, javelin; the fair Trojans give him helpful words and smiles. And, like the favorite son of Priam, as he goes out to slay and conquer, he deals in liberal promises, not like Hector, though, by giving this one a love-lock from Paris's brow, that one a golden gorget from Belus's shield, or the gilt eagle that adorns the top of the Thracian standards; instead, he pledges his solemn word to forward hampers of game to every acquaintance; a pledge that, if carried out, would load down every steamboat on Chesapeake Bay.

But in the midst of all this exultant preparation comes the boding voice of some "Cassandra in breeches," who croaks of bad luck, of wild shooting, of stormy days, of biting weather, of colds, rheumatism and neuralgia, of false, fleeting, and perjured guides, that make the word of promise to the ear only to break it to the hope.

But who ever heeds the warning voice when bent on an enterprise, whether it is the voice of conscience, of our creditors, or of our friends? Allah Bakalum! "What is to be shall be," and so we and our friend James Fox, of Richmond, proceeded to lay in our stock of ammunition.

Just here, by way of digression, I would like to ask my fellow-sportsmen why there is always such a wide disparity between the estimated and the actual expense of fitting out for a hunting expedition? It seems a very simple and inexpensive affair; powder and shot don't cost much. "A mere bagatelle, not worth a moment's consideration," says the huntsman, as he stuffs his roll of notes in his watch-pocket, those same "promises to pay" being the expenses of the round trip. "A mere nothing," is it? "Not worth a thought?" Well, reflection comes when buying a ticket to your destination—Where is the money? Surely some of it is lost! You search in each pocket, knit your brow, and then, after a moment of study, a new light breaks upon your bewildered mind. The paraphernalia that your gunmaker has beguiled you into purchasing is about ten times more than you dreamed of, and as you think of your bank account, and supply yourself with blank checks, you register a mental vow to be more cautious in future. Everybody cuts the suit according to the cloth; that is, everybody but a sportsman.

This time Fox and myself compared notes. The expenses were already as much as the whole trip ought to have cost, and we had not left Richmond. But when a man finds himself in that position called "in for a penny, in for a pound," he gets as reckless as a poker player who "sees" a heavy blind on a bob-tail flush.

On Thursday evening we left the capital city for Norfolk. From Norfolk the route to the capes and to Cobb's Island is to Cherrystone, thence by land across the peninsula.

Leaving the wharf at seven o'clock in the morning, we reached Cherrystone by noon. This place is a village situated on an inlet that runs into the Chesapeake Bay, but a few hundred yards distant. This same small hamlet, obscure as it is, has yet a name that is as much of a household word in America as is Waterloo, or Gretna Green in Britain, for it is here that the finest bivalves in the world are grown.

The Cherrystone oyster is a thing of joy, and a delight to every epicure and gourmet in the country. These oysters sell at from $7 to $10 a barrel, and the demand exceeds the supply tenfold. But few reach the public, as private clubs and customers generally contract with the oystermen for all they can gather.

Stopping at Cherrystone only long enough to load our traps, and to attempt the disposal of a dozen on the half-shell, a feat beyond our gastronomic capacity—fifteen miles brought us to the coast.

Mac and the sloop awaited us, and in a few moments everything was, to use a nautical phrase, "snug and ship-shape." Then we began to take in the surroundings. Our cabin was fearfully limited as to space. Like Mr. Dick's apartment, it was so small that you couldn't swing a cat in it without hurting the cat; only a dwarf could stand upright; in fact, a big drygoods box is the best simile I can think of. A miniature stove stood in the center. On each side were the bunks—and such sleeping accommodations! Not longer nor wider than a coffin; once in, you were wedged tight; indeed, our Joe, who has big feet, could not turn over without getting out of bed.

Our crew consisted of the guide, an ordinary-looking man, and his mate Joe. Now Joe was a character that Hogarth or Felix Darley would have loved to limn, and Dickens would have made a character-sketch of him. He was nearly seven feet high, but continued living in the low-roofed cabin had so diverted his naturally upright figure that he always walked, even in the open air, as if he had lost something and was looking on the ground for it.

Joe confessed to being but thirty-eight years old, but he looked fifty; the heat of the stove which he was continually roasting over (he was the cook of this craft) had seamed and lined his features until he looked as if old Father Time himself had set his sign upon him. Joe's face was a study; in profile it was a half-moon, with a nose in its center that Julius Cæsar would have been proud to possess; a huge nose indeed, that sounded like a fog horn when Joe blew it with his fingers, which was his usual way. Underneath was a mouth that Dame Nature had made after she had taken into consideration the long, flexible body that had to be filled. The larger the hold, the bigger the hatchway. It was a mouth equal in size to the one that little Red Ridinghood saw when her supposed grandmother popped her head out from under the bedclothes. Joe's ears opened wide like those of a retriever on a dead stand, and his head was surmounted with the thickest, bushiest shock of hair ever seen. Joe was, albeit, not "the glass of fashion or the mold of form," yet he had sterling honesty, simple-mindedness and perfect good-nature, qualities which are better than outward show. If Joe had one fault it was that of Uncle Toby, and Heaven would forgive him, for he meant nothing by his oaths.

Shortly after our arrival night set in, the solitary lamp was lit, and by its dim light Joe proceeded to get supper. The little stove grew red-hot, and the hatchway had to be opened. Meat was fried, bread was cooked, coffee was boiled, and, the long ride having given us an appetite, we crouched down and made a hearty meal; then we took a walk on deck with our cigars, to give the guides time and place to eat their supper.

It was a beautiful night, calm, clear and mild; the broad firmament fretted, as Hamlet says, with "its golden fire"; the air, laden with salt, was fragrant to the lungs; the bay reflected back the myriad stars. Across the way we could see the gleaming light of Cape Charles, that every forty seconds revolves and flashes a broad pathway across the still, calm waters. Nature seemed to have robed herself in a costume of spectral white, and charmed all with her weird, enthralling loveliness.

To descend from the stars down to the little cuddy-hole is a descent indeed. But it was getting late, and we must be off by day to-morrow. Our preparations for retiring consisted in taking off our boots and wrapping up in an old, dirty coverlet that was grimed with dirt, and smelled—Jupiter, how it did smell! After having tucked us in, the guides placed a sail-cloth on the floor, and Joe, doubling up his legs, spread a blanket over himself, and Mac blew the light out, and then snores—one a tenor and Joe's a deep bass—soon showed that slumber had weighed their tired eyelids down.

Not so with us. The close, imprisoned position we were lying in, the hard planks with no pallet, kept us awake. Hours passed, and "sleep, balmy sleep, that knits up the raveled sleave of care," was not for us. It was pitch dark; the swishing of the water against the oaken bottom of the boat, not two inches from our bodies, kept our senses painfully on the alert. The noisome, mouldy odor of the bedclothes, the varied odors of the lamp-oil, stale cooking, old clothes, all combined, made a horrible noisome odor that arose in heavy exhalations and could find no vent, for the door of the cabin was closed tight. To my comrade, all unused to roughing it, and a perfect Sybarite, the situation was torturing.

Dawn came at last, a bright morning, but we did not get under weigh until near noon. And then slowly making our way along under a ripple of wind came to anchor off Smith's Island, some ten miles from Cobb's Island, and about a mile from the mouth of the Chesapeake. A southwest wind arising, we went to the blinds and placed out the decoys. But it was a bad day, and the ducks did not fly. Though we sat there until dusk only four brant rewarded our efforts.

That night we rested better, as our noses became more accustomed to the confined air of the cabin. The second day it rained, and we took a tramp on the island—only getting wet and angry for our pains. On the third, we were out only two hours, and killed only one little deadapper.

The morning of the fourth was chiefly spent in trying to get warm—or rather, Mac said it was too cold for ducks—and we doubled up, waiting for the wind to moderate; but it still keeping up, we insisted on going to our blind. Phew, it was cold! The wind cut like a knife, and blew so hard that the waves were capped with foam.

Still, we did not suffer; each of us had on two pairs of drawers, two pairs of trousers, and a pair of canvas breeches over them. Our bodies were covered with three woolen shirts, vests, coat, and oilcloth. Three pairs of yarn socks, over which our rubber boots were drawn, kept our feet comfortable. Only our faces were exposed, and we were blinded with tears when we faced the wind.

The decoys were put out, and we took our position in a small boat inside of the blind, which consisted of cedar bushes stuck in the mud. Mac and his large boat went to a blind some half a mile distant, where he concealed himself. It was low water, and the bars around us were covered with snipe in numberless quantities; but we kept quiet, though we were sorely tempted to shoot. The wind was now rapidly rising, and at last a regular nor'wester was whistling around us. The tide was on the flood and rushing like a mill-race, and soon the brant, the gamiest bird that flies, commenced to move.

Here come four in one bunch! We fire, and three fall dead, the other dropping in the waves a couple of hundred yards away. We slip fresh cartridges in, and a large flock is seen heading directly for our decoys! We crouch low, and wait for them, with every nerve on a tension. They wheel by on pinions of the wind like a flash of light, but the lead is swifter, and two fall from the flock.

But, see! Here comes a single bird, who circles around and finally alights outside of the decoys. We do not waste a shot on him, for the brant are flying in squads, in couples, and in flocks, and every few seconds our guns speak out.

The sport was glorious and exciting, but it soon came to an abrupt conclusion. The stiff nor'wester was now changed into a gale, and it howled as if so many demons of the deep were unloosed. Just at this time Mac passed by, luffed, and ran alongside of us. He cried out:

"Jump on board!" We did so, and left our boat adrift.

"Why don't you get the boat and the decoys?" said Fox.

"The wind is too stiff," said MacGuire, who was undoubtedly scared, and thought of nothing but safety. "It's blowing so that I won't try to reach the sloop, but will have to make a run for Smith's Island." So saying, he placed her head before the wind, and in a few minutes the boat's head struck upon the sand.

Now, neither Fox nor myself was a sailor, but we had common sense enough to know that Mac was so timid that even a breeze made him look longingly at the nearest land. He lived in perpetual fear of storms, hurricanes, and cyclones. He was always in expectation that the wind was going to "bust" into an everlasting tempest, and that he would be, like old Mrs. Gummidge's son, "drowndead." We knew there was no real necessity for running into shore at a time when the ducks were just sailing around the decoys.

"Four days gone," significantly said Fox, holding up the fingers of one hand, "at $8 a day—and no ducks."

The keeper of the St. Charles Light-house received us most kindly and hospitably. He was an educated gentleman, having taken his degree at the University of Virginia. Though he has his wife and children with him, his is an inexpressibly lonely and dreary life. The days seem like weeks, the months like years, and the monotony is well-nigh unendurable. Truly might he exclaim, with Alexander Selkirk,

"O solitude, where are the charms
That sages have seen in thy face?"

The eternal sameness and utter isolation from all mankind is hard to bear, for man is a gregarious animal and needs company. It must have been such a place as this that caused the plaint in Locksley Hall:

"Oh, the dreary, dreary moorland;
Oh, the barren, barren shore!"

The next day found Mac toasting his shins at the fire, and, as it was near sunset before we were in the blinds, and in the mean time the wind had gone down, the result was nary a duck.

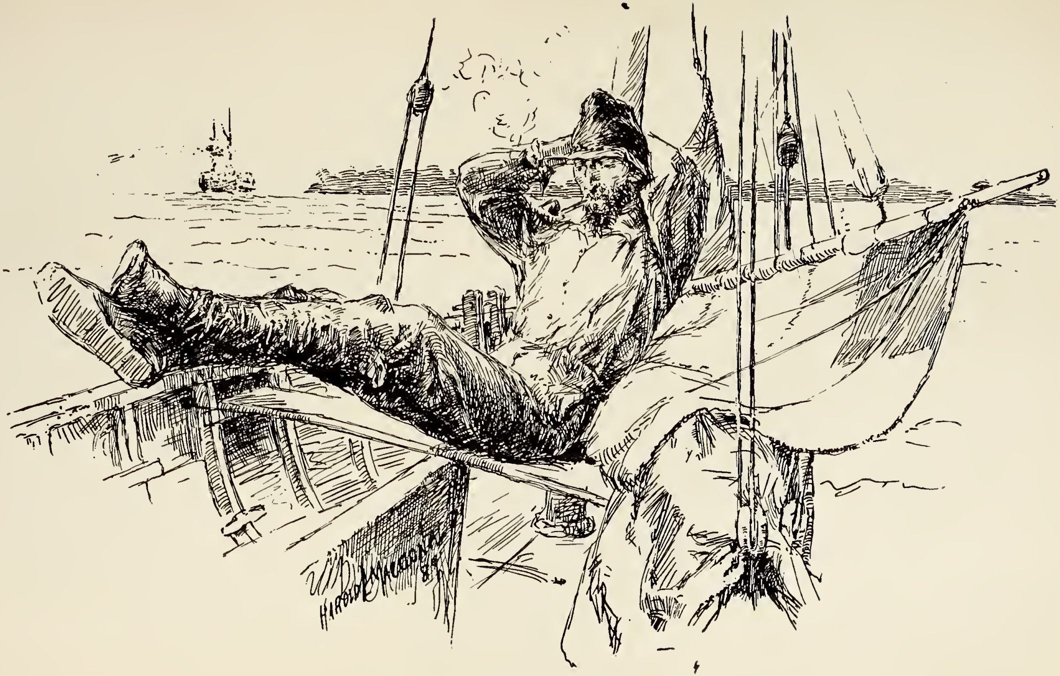
"Another day gone," said Fox.

Out of temper, we pulled back to the sloop, and found that Joe had fulfilled, as he always did, his contract, and had a hot supper awaiting us. After the meal, and we had lighted our pipes, we listened to Mac's vivid description of what he was going to do. Fox and myself glanced meaningly at each other, while Joe sat half enveloped in a cloud of smoke that poured from his mouth, his whole attitude expressive of perfect content.

It was none of his funeral. He wasn't after ducks.

"Joe," said Fox, "are you fond of gunning?"

Joe grunted a negative.



“It was none of his funeral ; he wasn't after ducks.”

"Why?"

"'Cause I most killed myself once; got 'nuff of guns to last me forever."

The next morning, after an early breakfast, we remained in the blinds during the floodtide, and had a spurt of good luck; but the wind was not high enough, so we returned to the sloop early and passed the rest of the day after the guide's fashion—in the cuddy-hole over the stove.

"Another day wasted," I remarked.

"Yes," said Fox; "I am getting tired of being imposed on. Here we are, paying four dollars apiece, and we don't get two hours' shooting a day. It's fine fun for Mac to doze over the fire all the time, and play us off with what he is going to do. Here are millions of snipe within pistol-shot of the boat, and he hasn't even deigned to carry us to shoot them. I'm going back home to-morrow."

"Yes," I replied, "the whole trip is a fraud, and I will go back, too."

That night we notified the guide of our determination, and he promised to carry us to the blinds at daybreak, hail, rain, wind, or sunshine.

"How's the weather, Joe?" said Fox, poking his head out of the bunk, as the gray dawn came stealing in through the pane of glass that constituted the window.

"I don't know, but I will see," announced Joe, as he rose up and almost burst his skull against the low ceiling.

"Durn me for a fool!" he muttered, sotto voce. "That's five hundred times I've done that; 'pears to me I never will l'arn sense. Wish my blasted head was off, anyhow."

"Raining like blazes," he shouted, after taking a survey of the weather through the cabin door.

So we remained in our shelves, and watched the breakfast in course of preparation. Joe could scare up a meal in ten minutes when he was in a hurry, but this morning he took his time in a leisurely way, and had a real artistic spread before us. "I never have no appetite noway, when I have to cook," said Joe, and then he sat down and ate enough to make a half dozen men ill with indigestion.

Noon by our watches, and still the rain came down in one of those steady pours that looked as if it meant business and did not intend to leave off. Cramped, cribbed, and confined as we were in the cabin, we were glad to put on our waterproofs and take a trip to Shell Island. A tramp of a couple of miles showed us nothing, and we returned, out of sorts and disgusted, to the sloop.

"Another day gone, and nothing to show for it," said Fox.

The next morning it was blowing great guns, and the ducks were flying beautifully, but our guide, Mac, curled himself in the bunk, with a congestive chill, as he said. My comrade and I smoked our pipes in wrathful silence.

Both Fox and myself had had enough of this, and we insisted on returning home. So Captain Joe commenced to raise the anchor; then, with our assistance, the sails were spread, when Mac, coming out of the cabin, seized the tiller and steered. All went well until the sloop turned sharp to the right, up a bend in the river, where she ran into the teeth of the gale. She could make no headway, so sails were reefed; then she kept on her course. The wind shrieked, the cordage rattled, the sails flapped, the mast creaked, and the sloop, with the blast on the port side, cut through the water with the speed of a race-horse. The waves swept the decks clear; the water-casks went first, then all Joe's wood, next Mac's decoys, then my hat blew off. It was the biggest kind of a time. Inside the cabin there was the devil to play—the boat careened so that the stove slipped aside and broke the pipe off, and the cabin was filled with dense smoke. Then could be heard the crash of glass as the lamp slid off the shelf; the crockery clattered, the knives jingled, the pans rattled, and it seemed as if the last hour was at hand.

Fox and myself stood in the cabin with our heads out of the door. Joe clung to the anchor-chains forward, while Mac steered the boat by means of a rope hitched around the tiller. The water was rapidly shoaling now, but the wind still beat the waves up high, and bellied out the canvas to its fullest extent. Mac clung, like grim death, to the rope. All at once the line slipped off the end of the helm, and the holder disappeared from view into the bubbling tide beneath.

> "And is he gone? Oh, sudden solitude,
> How oft that fearful question will intrude!
> 'Twas but an instant passed and there he stood,
> And now——"

"Save me, for God's sake!" came an agonized cry from the stern.

We looked over, and there swung Mac, the other end of the rope being tied fast.

"Save me!" cried the pallid lips; "save me!"

uttered the imploring eye, and, more dead than alive, we hauled him aboard.

Scared? No, sir. He was only a little demoralized; he hadn't touched bottom all the time, but had hung suspended by the rope. The water was only two feet deep, and the keel had sunk deep in the mud.

"Thank Heaven! I've escaped from a watery grave!" he cried as he reached the deck.

"Dog-gone it," said Joe, "he mout have waded in shore! The water ain't 'bove his boot-tops!"

CHAPTER X

AMONG THE CURRITUCK BAY-BIRDS

When getting ready for my regular summer trip to the North Carolina Sound, I looked around for a good quartette. As the world goes, one learns many things, and one of them is, that for a hunting party "us four and no more" is the exact number that will give the greatest mutual benefit. Four can pair off; four can separate equally, leaving no man, like the fifth spoke of a wheel, useless and alone. Four can make a full whist hand, or "seven-up"; in fact, four is the sportsman's number, as potent as the magic nine of the Chaldeans.

It is a matter of indifference to me whether or not my companions are good shots, as but a fraction of the time spent on the trip is spent in actual shooting. It is good comradeship that makes nomadic hunting a success. There are certain types of men that should be avoided, like poison, on such expeditions.

There is "the good shot," selfish and opinionated, who can talk nothing but "shoot" all the time. No matter what subject is broached, he turns the conversation to his own exploits. His sole object is to make others feel small, and he never loses an opportunity to boast of his prowess; and in field, thicket, sea-meadow, or on the river, he invariably chooses the best location, or occupies the best blind, and, like a bantam rooster, he is continually on the crow. Such a fellow can run up the score, but he adds nothing to the enjoyment of the party.

Then there is the envious man, who wants the best of everything, and, as envy and suspicion go together, he imagines that every one is leagued against him, and upon the slightest run of bad luck he announces his intention of breaking up the party and starting for home.

And who has not met the penurious man, the fellow who treats a pleasure trip as if it were purely a business transaction, and haggles over every expenditure like an old customer in a pawnbrokers's shop. "Sundries" haunt his waking hours, and drift through all his dreams. If he would, oh! if he would *only* keep it to himself—but he does not. No man will stand imposition, but there is a wide difference between "extras" and robbery. Don't select the penurious man to be one of your party of four.

Then the kicker. We all know what he is, but as he often affords subject for mirth, and as the kicking comes as often from heredity as from untoward circumstances, we can pass him by.

Last of all the objectionables comes the chronic grumbler, and he is worse than all the others combined. Just as a pinch of asafoetida will impregnate the whole atmosphere around, so the grumbler can diffuse misery and discontent to all who come within the boundary of his malign influence; he is an annoyance, a grievance, a nuisance, a vexatious bore, and a general sickener. If there can be on a hunting excursion a worse thorn in one's flesh, I have never met with it. The grumbler settles down to work soon after the trip commences; nothing suits him; it is all worry, bother, plague, baiting and badgering. He is a kill-joy, a veritable prophylactic snag and sawyer to your pleasure-boat floating down the stream.

Now the crowd I invited to my Currituck Club were men of different metal. Everybody in Washington knows Captain Burgess. A fellow of infinite wit, and, like Falstaff, the cause of wit in others; well into the forties, he was the image of Fritz Emmett, when Emmett of genial memory was at his best, and had Burgess taken to the stage in his youth he would have made his mark.

"Cap," as he is called, is fond of all kinds of game, and is as much at home when bluffing on a bob-tail flush as when blazing away at the birds from sink-box or blind.

"Mac" is a tyro, but willing to rough it, and, except when his liver is out of order, takes alike with frolic welcome "the sunshine and the storm." York, the youngest of the four, is an ardent sportsman, a quick, sure shot, and his capacity to rough it is second to none.

As for the outfit—a party going on a hunt is almost sure to take much more than they need. I gave each man a list of things for a week or ten days' absence; they were simply to go in light marching order, with no wagon-train. One old suit of clothes for hunting, and to be worn there and back; a change of underclothing, india-rubber boots or old shoes, oil cloth, 500 shells, a mosquito net and a pair of old kid gloves with the fingers cut off, and an old slouch hat. That was all. Of course each man clubbed in for the liquids.

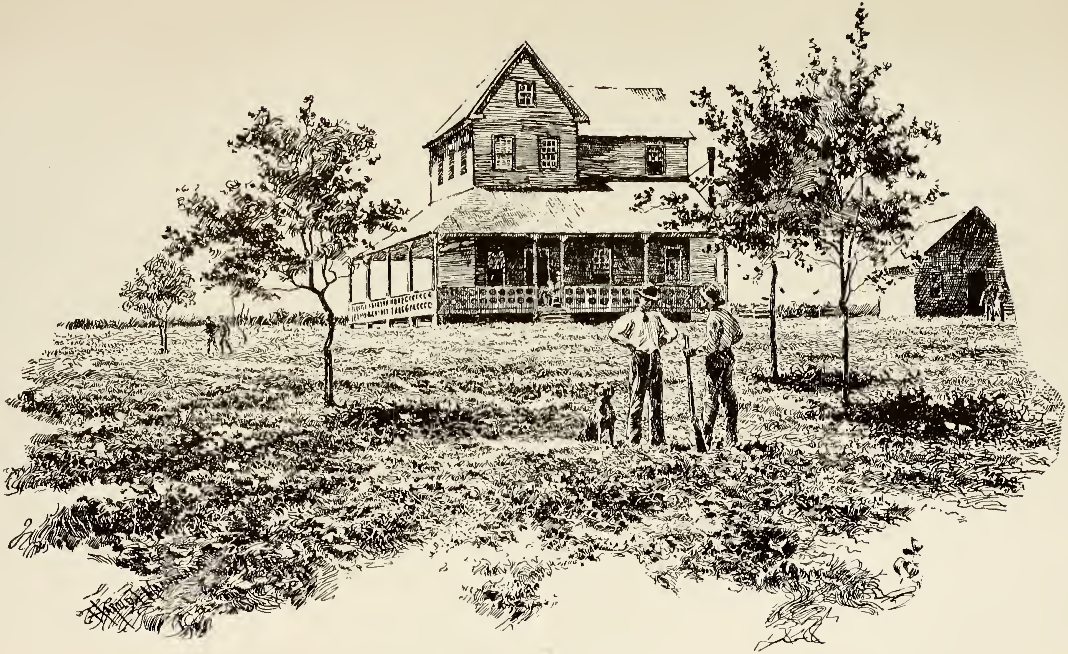
Reaching Norfolk, we ordered one ton of ice, to be forwarded to the club via steamer, to preserve the birds. As we did not start for Currituck merely to slaughter birds, but to give to our epicurean friends at home a rare dish of broiled snipe, we used the only means possible to preserve those dainty and perishable birds; we also went around to a game commission-merchant and rented two ice-packing cans, each about six feet long by four feet wide and three feet deep.

The merchant gave us minute directions as to how to pack the birds. Two tons of ice, he thought, was sufficient; but the expense of getting it to Currituck Sound when there was no direct transportation would be more than the cost of the ice itself.

We took the cars to Virginia Beach, and meeting with Captain Drinkwater's team we were driven along the beach for thirty miles to our destination. The tide being high, it was an all-day's journey, for, instead of fast trotting along the smooth, velvet beach, we had to plow through eight inches of sand, and an ox team would have been just as serviceable under the circumstances as a pair of fleet goers.

The Currituck Inlet Club had been founded some five or six years before by a small and select party of Norfolk gentlemen, who kept the membership down to one dozen. Afterward the club was increased to twenty, then to thirty, and the initiation fee was also increased, and certificates of stock issued; there was no printed constitution and no by-laws.

The place was famous for its sea-meadows, and has been celebrated for a century or more as the finest place for bay-bird shooting on the Atlantic



The Currituck Inlet Club.

Coast. On one side is the ocean, and Currituck Sound is on the other. The club's meadows are about a mile wide and a couple of miles in length. The grass is short and thick, with here and there shallow ponds that are filled with water except in time of drouth.

These basins are the great reservoirs for the yellow shanks, graybacks, grass plovers, which mostly arrive in May, disappear in June, and return again in the latter part of July, and remain until some time in October.

While epicures and gourmands consider these birds most excellent in delicacy and flavor, few ever reach market. Snipe are safe from the pot-hunter, for their flesh is so fat and tender that they spoil in a few hours on a hot day, and they must be placed on ice shortly after they are shot, and kept there until they are served, else decomposition is sure to follow. Of course market-gunners cannot afford to bring ice such a distance, even had they a refrigerator to hold it and packing contrivances to ship their game. Hence, though the birds command a fancy price, and are in great numbers, the natives or gunners do not care to waste their ammunition except to supply their own tables.

This leaves the clubmen a fine show, and as few of them ever come down during the summer there is choice shooting for the few who care to risk the positive discomforts of torrid weather, swarms of mosquitoes, and the absence of all fresh fruits and vegetables, for this pure sandy soil produces nothing, neither orchard nor garden stuff; even the milk is canned.

The glory of this club is in its snipe shooting; the ducking privileges are far from choice, and cannot be compared with those of adjacent clubs. This being the case, it is to the interest of the club to guard zealously its rights and privileges. How this is done I will presently show.

The regularly appointed keeper of the club is C. S. White, or "Shant" White, as he is called. His brother Leon once lived on the lands of the Swan Island Club, but was forced by that organization to leave the place, and owning a marsh and piece of ground on the lands of the Currituck Inlet Club, he erected his dwelling there. Mac and I stopped at Shant White's, while Cap and York remained at Leon White's, about 100 yards distant.

On approaching the keeper's house we found him stretched upon a shuck pallet in the yard, playing with his baby. A big pan filled with lightwood knots was burning brightly, and though the flames attracted the mosquitoes from far and near, yet the pungent, resinous smoke kept them at bay. These smudges are the favorite method employed by the islanders to get some rest and comfort in the early part of the summer nights; they retire early and get up late. Twelve hours good, solid sleep, with a half dozen naps during the day, suffices to keep them alive.

About sunrise we started for the shooting-grounds about a mile away, a team carrying our guns and shells. The mosquitoes were out in force, and literally covered our bodies; but with the nets covering our heads, the gloves on our hands, we bade defiance to them.

"Skeeters is bad, certain," remarked Shant, clutching a handful off his neck and crushing them in his palm. "They will carry me off, wagon and all, ef they keeps on this way; almost drain my blood."

"What blood can they get out of you, Shant? Tell us that," remarked Cap.

"They ain't after my blood," said the driver, "but after the supper I ate last night, I reckon; and then they will suck my bones ef I let 'em." Then he got down, broke off a bunch of twigs, and fought them as if they were a swarm of ireful yellow-jackets on the warpath.

Fortunately for the sportsmen, the beams of a hot sun, or a stiff breeze, causes these pests to sink out of sight; but for this wise provision of Nature such a thing as hunting bay-birds on the North Carolina coast would be impossible. I have had some hard experiences in my life with these insects; I have fought the Jersey mosquitoes, off the coast, battled with them in the Florida everglades, and have suffered their torments in the swamps of Cape Charles; but for persistency, bloodthirstiness and relentless persecution I give the palm to the North Carolina coast mosquito. They seem larger than any other species I ever met, and as these shallow pools on the sea-meadows are their breeding places, they literally swarm. On our drive through the bushes that day they covered horse, cart and occupants, and not until we got out in the open and caught the strong wind from the ocean did they take leave of us.

We occupied blinds a couple of hundred yards or so apart. A few bushes stuck in the ground, a small box to sit upon, a couple of dozen tin decoys stuck in the shallow ponds, and we were ready for work.

The cart put back to the house, Shant telling us he would call about 10 o'clock. All around were the flying birds; at once the snipe began circling over the decoys, and each gun was ringing out in the morning air.

I alone had taken a trained setter, and he now crouched in the blind awaiting my signal to bring the killed and wounded birds. The bay-birds here rarely fly in flocks, consequently all our shots were singles and killed flying.

The birds seemed to detect the cheat as they approached near the decoys, and invariably shied off, thus bringing the gunner's skill into full play. I suppose we averaged a shot every two minutes, though of course not regularly. Sometimes we would fire so fast that but for our thick gloves we could not have held the heated barrels; then a lull of a minute or two would come. For more than an hour I made preparations to light my pipe, but before I could succeed I would have to stop to shoot, and my friend and comforter was taken up and thrown hastily aside a dozen times because the birds came so fast.

There was no necessity for calling them; they would head for the decoys of their own accord, and it required at times some fancy shooting. It was comparatively easy when they circled or beat against the wind, but when they darted by, borne on the pinions of the breeze, they went like a rocket, and one had to swing the muzzle of his gun fully five or six feet in front to knock them over.

I used that morning a No. 12 Colt gun, and found that it worked admirably, though the natives invariably shoot snipe with a No. 10 bore. As to the size of shot, the standard seems to be

No. 8; but I think that is too large for this kind of shooting, one size smaller, or even two, being better adapted to the work, as the snipe is not a tough bird and is easily killed.

The sun was about an hour high when the sky became overcast and one of those sudden storms so common to the North Carolina coast burst upon us. The rain came down in torrents, being driven almost horizontal by the gale of wind.

Then it was that the bay-birds came with a rush. It was a new experience to me, to shoot in the face of a tropical thunder storm. The rain was so dense that it was impossible to see the snipe until they were well over the decoys, and it was tough work bringing them down. I had to shoot entirely with my back to the wind; it was utterly impossible to see how to aim, facing the blast; it was like having buckets of water dashed in my face, and completely blurring my vision. I made many misses, and knocked over only about one bird for every two shots.

In a few moments the face of the whole country was completely changed; instead of the level sea-meadows with here and there a pond, the scene was reversed, and as the storm died away and the sun burst out its struggling beams showed a vast sheet of water, with only here and there a hillock of sand.

Then ensued some moments of rest, which we all utilized in gathering our game. Jessie, my setter, saved me many a long chase after cripples.

It is a singular fact that a blue-blooded setter hates to retrieve salt-water snipe. From long generations of hunting the quail and its kindred, they learn to distinguish that kind of game by instinct, and any bird so different in scent from the quail or upland game-birds ceases to afford them pleasure. Certainly Jessie manifested, at first, great reluctance to touching them, and it was only her habit of implicit obedience, the result of long and thorough training, that made her obey my commands.

Unless one forces himself to eat at the untoward hour just before sunrise, he is certain to suffer for it. Nature abhors a vacuum, and shooting at such a place on an empty stomach is sure to be followed by violent headache; the face becomes flushed, the eyes glassy, and the temples throb painfully.

The preceding summer all three of my companions were compelled to stop shooting, and were taken back home in the cart, utterly prostrated. This time I insisted on the crowd eating, at least a biscuit apiece for breakfast, so when we knocked off for the morning all hands were as fresh as the proverbial lark.

On counting up, my pile showed 114 birds to 150 shells fired. Cap came next with a score of 80, while York made a fine showing; it was his first experience with the bay-birds, and with 100 shells used he had brought down 57 birds, all single shots.

Tuesday we varied the proceedings by a water trip to the various clubs in the sound.

The Swan Island property is very valuable; likewise is that of the Light-house Club, and a glance over their register showed them to be a set of genial, jolly members, sportsmen and gentlemen to the core. Our party was much indebted to the courteous keeper of the Light-house Club for many kindnesses. Monkey Island Club is a secluded retreat, and is probably the smallest club in existence, it having only four members.

There had lately been formed three new clubs in this vicinity, the Martin Island Club, the Deal Island Club, and the Ragged Island Club. The two former are fine places for ducks, such as mallard, shufflers, black duck and the like; but the Ragged Island's property is without exception the finest game preserve along the whole Atlantic Coast for redhead and canvasback. This lies in Back Bay, adjoining Currituck Sound, and consists of some thirty or more islands, ranging from six acres to a few rods in area. The preserve is about three miles long by one and a half miles wide. The Ragged Islands have been the most famous shooting spot in this section; indeed, if all the tales I have heard of the bags made there are true, it is the gunner's paradise. The shares of this association were held at $1,000, and Mr. C. A. Woodward, a young merchant of Norfolk, was president at that time.

That evening we left the Light-house Club for a sail down Currituck. The moon was just rising, and a more exquisite picture than the unruffled, placid sound I never saw; but it is like gilding refined gold, or painting the lily, to attempt to describe a moonlight night, so just take Mr. Claude Melnotte's description of Lake Como, as he poured it into the listening ears of the charming Pauline, and you will have the picture. The boat rocked idly to and fro in the swell; Shant drew his mouth organ from his pocket, and even that much-abused instrument gave forth liquid notes as "Way down upon the Suwanee River" floated out over the water.

What a change in one short half-hour; no spectacular play ever disclosed a greater transformation scene between the dropping and the rising of the curtain; for suddenly a terrific squall came sweeping across the ocean and over the sound, probably a portion of a hurricane from Cape Hatteras. In five minutes it was dark as Erebus; the wind was howling like a legion of fiends; the rain gust did its best to sink the boat, and kept Shant bailing with all his strength. We flew before the wind. It was a grand picture, lit up by the lurid lightning that flashed in almost one continuous blaze.

Another hour, and again a transformation scene. The moon shone with a lustrous radiance in the cloudless sky; the waters heaved in smooth rollers, and all Nature was hushed in a tranquil rest.

The effect was exhilarating; a couple of bottles of wine were opened, waterproof garments were thrown off, and then York and Mac, after deviling each other, threw off their clothes and plunged into the waves. Shant followed, and my dog Jessie leaped overboard to join the frolic, while I, having borrowed the mouth organ, struck up the "Devil's Dream." Shant climbed aboard, arrayed in Nature's undress, and let himself out in a jig, and slowly the boat drifted through the water, the mermen swimming *en train*. A passing fisherman, hearing the sound of the music, would doubtless have thought the whole picture but a coinage of his brain.

We reached our own club about 10 o'clock, nearly starved, only to find that all had gone to bed and there was nothing in the house to eat, the cook not expecting us until the next day. We then went over to Leon's house, where we found the remains of a supper. Hungry as we were, the sight took away our appetites, and we told him we would ask for no supper if he would have a smoking-hot breakfast for us early in the morning. To this he assented, and we returned to sleep with aching voids that tinctured our dreams. We awoke early and went over to Leon's to eat that hot breakfast; to our dismay, the whole household was buried in profound slumber. After hammering at the door, that worthy came yawning into the porch, his "gallusses" hanging down his back. He drawled out he "hadn't no breakfast," and ushered us into the same room with the same table, the sight of which had turned our stomachs the evening before. There lay the greasy ham and the saleratus biscuits. It was eat or starve, for we could not go to the blinds in our present condition, not having eaten a square meal for twenty-four hours. We felt like the man who had to eat crow—"we got outside of it, but we didn't hanker arter it."

We made Shant hitch up his team, and York and I set out for the blinds. During the whole journey not a word was spoken; we were too mad. But the bay-birds flew beautifully, and kept us working at our guns in a lively manner. I used No. 12 and 16, and the latter fully answered my purpose in the majority of shots.

Wednesday evening we drove several miles in the wagon, and seeing some grass-plover I placed my decoys in a pond, and without any blind I squatted on the edge and awaited developments. The others kept on to occupy their old blinds.

Of all the birds in this section, the grass-plover is the finest and largest, but they do not often come in such numbers as to afford continuous shooting. They are fast flyers, and rarely circle around the decoys, but dart by. I happened to strike the right spot at the right time, and never in my experience did I see such a steady flight; they came twenty or thirty a minute without a break. I had some three score of No. 12 shells, and I fired straight along, the birds dropping right and left, and but for my dog I would have lost most of them, for it was useless to chase cripples; one would miss a dozen shots by so doing. Owing to the long shots, fully one-half were only winged and fell into the grass. Jessie lay crouched at my feet motionless, and only at the word of command would she dart like a streak after the bird and bring it and drop it at my feet. Owing to my want of concealment all the birds shied to the right or left, and every shot had to be taken over fifty yards.

Just about this time there occurred the most fascinating effect for a sportsman possible to conceive. The birds flew straight from the west, and low in the western horizon was a huge bank of clouds behind which the beams of the setting sun gleamed, changing the mass of vapor into a roseate, golden and crimson mosaic. The sight was gorgeous, and dazzled the eye. Right from this mass of opaline-tinted clouds the birds shot out like a dart hurled by a powerful engine. The glare was so strong that the birds could not be seen until within fifty yards. It seemed like an optical illusion, the flashing and glancing of wings appearing suddenly from the fantastic, colored mist and the luminous shade.

These grass-plover have a spread of wings equal to that of a sea-gull, and they know how to use them. When killed they do not fall, but tumble to the ground. I soon fired my last shell from my No. 12 Greener and seized my No. 16-bore, but I might as well have shot with a horse pistol.

By this time the sun had set, and I killed a few that were directly over my head; but I did not knock over more than one in five shots with the small gun. I stopped shooting before it became too dark to pick up the birds that had fallen in the pond, and just as the wagon drove up I finished my count, having exactly fifty-one grass-plover, and a few yellow-shanks. Though I built a blind in the same spot soon after, I never killed another plover there, nor did any of my companions. The birds mysteriously disappeared. Cap's score for that day was 160 graybacks and yellow-shanks.

On Thursday morning all of the party save myself went fishing about three miles up the beach, where a half-submerged rock lay. They caught nothing, but the sun got in its powerful work, and as they had splashed about bare-footed they all had blistered feet and ankles. On Friday the condition of the men was pitiable. Mac was sick in bed, York had a big swelling on his upper lip, which prevented his enjoying the hugest joke, for to laugh was torture. The skin was cracking on his nose, and he could hardly limp across the room. Cap was used up; his ankles had all the skin burned off by the sun, his face was badly scorched, and his wrists were swollen from bites of mosquitoes and bedbugs. I, too, was scarified by the devilish insects on wrists and ankles. I went to the blinds alone that morning, and had scored over a hundred birds before my friends appeared. The yellow-shanks and grass-plover had vamoosed, and only the graybacks were in sight.

When Shant White dropped my decoys the sun had just risen, and I was no sooner settled in my blind than three men formed a skirmish about one hundred yards ahead of me, and two more stood an equal distance behind me, and they blazed away at every bird that flew over them. By what authority they were shooting on the club's territory I do not know, nor did I ask. I was almost as humble as Uriah Heep by this time. Though I said nothing, I, like the Irishman's owl, kept up a thundering sight of thinking.

The birds flew beautifully, and when my 125 shells were exhausted it was somewhere about 9 o'clock, so I signaled Shant to bring up his cart and take me back to his house. The others of our party remained in the blinds and returned three hours later, with but few birds, as they had dispersed over the feeding.

Early in the morning and in the late evening are the best times for shooting. The birds are on the wing then and stool readily. It is a waste of time, labor and patience to wait in the blinds during the forenoon and afternoon, to say nothing of the positive discomfort of sitting under a dazzling sun, unprotected by shade or umbrella.

The secret of making big bags consists in three things: First, do good shooting; it goes without saying that expert handling of the gun is the paramount consideration. Second, keep motionless in the blind until the very moment you are ready to shoot. A single incautious gesture, and the game will swirl to the right or left out of gunshot. Third, let the birds pass the decoys, and just as they turn, or beat back, give it to them. Never, if you can help it, let a bird light among the decoys. One is almost certain to shoot, and the scattering pellets will riddle the decoys as well as kill the birds.

Many large scores have been made by members. The club has unfortunately no written record, and the tallies are marked up like Rip Van Winkle's score, on the wall. Brief as it is, nothing could plainer show what excellent shooting this place affords. The worst score was that of a member from Washington City, who wrote on the wall under date of May 7, 1890, "I bagged five yellow-legs, and that was all. I made big preparations, and these snipe cost me about $20 apiece."

Friday all hands were out early, and it being our last day, we remained in the blinds until the early afternoon. Cap, who took an all-day's shoot, closed the day with 106. Both York and Mac did well. I stopped at 118. A final count-up showed the grand total was 1,267 birds. Large as the score was, it could easily have been doubled had we hunted steadily and started out at dawn every morning.

On returning from each shooting, the birds, perfectly dry, as the slightest moisture decomposes them, were laid side by side, belly upward, in shallow zinc cases about three feet long, twelve inches wide, and about three inches deep. There was only one layer of birds put in each case, which was then fastened and placed in a large refrigerator, and covered with broken ice. In shipping, these cases were placed in ice boxes. The birds soon become frozen, and will remain fresh and sweet as long as the ice lasts. It should be renewed every twenty-four hours. It is indispensable that this is looked to, for a change of temperature for even one hour will ruin the birds. We were compelled to order another ton of ice, and at least half of it melted in transit.

After dark all hands set to work collecting our traps. Mac and I settled with Shant. His charges were exceedingly moderate, $7.50 for board, $2.50 for boat-hire, cart-hire, and personal attendance.

Just then York came in, laboring under some excitement, and asked me to come over to the other house, as there was going to be music in the air. He said that Leon's bill would bankrupt the crowd. It was exactly double the other. I have one of the bills beside me now, and will copy the unique production:

"Board for Cap and York, $18; horse and wagon, $6; three days' labor, $9; for hire of boat, $2; one bottle of 'peaches,' $1; down to Wash Woods, $2.60; use of decoys, $4.50; fishing, $1.50."

The charge of $9 for personal service, "labor," topped, in the way of extortion, anything that ever came under our observation, seeing that both York and Cap cut their own bushes, made their own blinds, planted their own decoys, and brought in their own birds. The "labor" of this worthy consisted in dumping his guests on the ground and then driving off. Even the decoys were not his, for I had loaned York a portion of mine.

I settled the matter by advising my friends to pay Leon White exactly the amount his brother had charged us, neither more nor less.

A word of advice to those contemplating going down to shoot on the North Carolina coast: always make your bargain beforehand. Do not be restrained by any notion of false delicacy, for the natives, as a general thing, are going to charge as much as they think the visitor will stand. The advice I give to sportsmen going there is based on knowledge gained by many years of experience. Make your contract for board, attendance, and so on with the keeper and guide, and in the presence of one of your friends. Also make a note of the terms on a piece of paper; a simple thing to do, but one that may save the visiting gunner a lot of annoyance and vexation.

A week's summer trip to shoot snipe on the Virginia or North Carolina coast, at the outside, should not cost over forty dollars; that is, with Norfolk as the objective point. That amount will cover everything—ammunition, liquids, and all.

Board at the keeper's house is one dollar per day; never pay more. Two huntsmen can make the trip for $35 each, and four together can have the whole week at a maximum of $30 apiece.

This trip was, barring some set-backs, a great success; of course there is a reverse side to every shield, and just here I want to emphasize one fact, that only a born sportsman can take the fat with the lean. A man who becomes discouraged and disgruntled on a hunting-trip had better give away his gun, and make of his trained setter a house-pet, for the sporting blood is not in his veins.

To illustrate. The next year after our hunt in Currituck, I met a fellow-clubman who had just returned from Currituck Sound, North Carolina, where he went to have a shy at the bay-birds. His account was a tale of woe from start to finish.

It seems that he and his companion left Norfolk in the middle of July, going by steamer to Knott's Island. Then the hot wave struck them, and the ton of ice which they had shipped to preserve the birds lasted no time. They found the ponds all dried up, no birds, and the two days they had to lay over like a visit to Vulcan's realm. There was not a breath of air; the mosquitoes turned out in full force, and nearly drove them frantic. It was so hot they could not remain in the house in the nighttime, so they had to repair to the porch, where they smoked and fought the pestiferous insects throughout the long hours of darkness.

Their trip back was not much better. The little steamer paddled slowly through the Great Dismal Swamp Canal; there was no suspicion of a breeze, and the damp, mephitic atmosphere of the swamp, full of humidity, fairly steamed them, and the skin peeled off their faces and hands.

They were full of enthusiasm when they left Norfolk, but a more disgusted, extinguished, demoralized couple of men, on their return, were never seen in the streets of that historic town. Actually, neither had shot off his gun during the whole trip.

I told him to try and try again.

"No," he said, "the trip cost us $50 apiece, and I've had enough of it."

I told him that he would never become a sportsman.

Speaking of bay-birds, it is a singular fact that they disappear utterly and entirely during a dry spell; but a heavy rain that fills up the water-holes in the sea-meadows will bring them back in uncountable numbers; they seem literally to drop from the sky. I have often wondered where they hide themselves; it is certainly not migration, for even a sudden thunder-shower will cause them to appear instantly in vast numbers. As Shant White, the keeper of the club, expresses it, "They comes and they goes like the skeeters."

CHAPTER XI

A SPORTING FIASCO

As in every business or profession, the sportsman has his ups and downs; chiefly the latter.

How many carefully arranged hunting trips have resulted in a "water haul"; how many dreams have been dispelled; how many bright anticipations, how much time, labor, and money have been wasted, only a sportsman knows.

For years I had hoped and planned to have a private shooting-box on the North Carolina sounds, where I could carry out my pet theories, raise my own decoys, and, above all, entertain a few choice sportsmen of the dead-game sort.

My hopes were realized, but, like the Scriptural apples, they turned to dead-sea fruit on the lips.

I learned that the light-house at Pamlico Point, near Goose Creek Island, was to be abandoned by the Government on account of shoaling water. I made application, gave bond to protect the property, and the tower, buildings and island were turned over to me, and that winter I gathered a choice party to join me in a hunt that was to be a record-breaker.

There were four of us, a duck-hunting quartette, comprising Messrs. Charles Hallock, William Wagner, one of the finest wing-shots of America; George Ransdell, an old Black Horse cavalryman in the war days, who had spent the last quarter of a century roaming over the frontiers of the far West and Mexico, and myself. It was a goodly company of Bohemians and sportsmen who confidently went forth in the North Carolina sounds to slay vast quantities of water fowl, and to enjoy the pleasure that only a coterie of congenial spirits can find in out-of-the-way places, far from the swirl of the "madding crowd." Most men have a touch of the savage in their composition or a tinge of the old Norse blood in their veins, and take keen delight in severing themselves from all the luxuries and charms of civilized life, and roughing it in a way that a tramp would despise.

It takes some thirty hours to reach Pamlico Sound from Norfolk by way of steamer. Half of the time the route is through narrow canals that connect the Currituck, Chowan, Albemarle and Pamlico sounds. The scenery is flat and unpicturesque, and consists entirely of swamps and pine barrens.

Reaching Pamlico Island in due time, the steamer's whistle blew the warning signal and a boat put out from the place to meet us. Its owner was the ex-light-house keeper, who when the light was abandoned found, like Othello, "his occupation was gone"; but he still remained at his old quarters, simply because he was too lazy to move away.

It was a small boat that came dancing over the waves; sufficient, perhaps, to have carried "Caesar and his fortune," but certainly not capacious enough to hold four men, one dog, a small arsenal of guns, boxes of provisions, several hundred pounds of ammunition, eight bags of decoy-ducks with their weights attached, a half dozen trunks, besides any number of traps, not counting a huge demijohn—a cure for snake bites, and the only cure for any accident, home-sickness, or mishap that might befall us.

The wind was blowing great guns, and the whole sound, as far as the eye could reach, was full of white-caps. It was with great difficulty that the little craft could be made fast to the leeward side of the steamer, and as we looked down from the gangway and watched the lantern rise and fall in the swell of the billows, some eight feet from the crest to the trough, there arose a protest from all.

"I am not prepared to leave the world yet," remarked the Professor, as we nicknamed Mr. Hallock. "Davy Jones won't get me in his locker to-night if I can help it."

"I'm rather timid of water, anyway," said Wagner, whom we had dubbed "Major Clam," because, being a silent man, he rarely opened his mouth except to take a drink. "I was on a yacht once on Lake Erie, and it was overturned and all hands lost on board. I'd just as leave commit suicide at once as to get in that cockle-shell."

"Are you uns a-comin'?" cried the voice of the boatman, commencing in a high tenor and sinking slowly to a low stomach note, as the boat dropped from the crest deep in the hollow of a rolling wave.

"As for me," remarked Old Boreas, so-called because Ransdell was always blowing his money about, "as for me, if you catch me inside that coffin, then I'm a bigger fool than all the three wise men of Gotham who went to sea in a bowl."

The result was that the captain of the steamer launched the life-boat, and six stalwart rowers soon landed us on the island.

It was a barren sandbank in a wide waste of waters, and as we scrambled ashore we were prepared to see the ex-keeper's wife, and even a whole tribe of children; but the crowd of Goose Creek Islanders who stood crouching, leaning, reclining, and slouching around the tower and house rather astonished us. They did not show any extravagant delight in the meeting, only welcoming us with a nod and a grunt. Their appreciation of rest was most patent—every man of them leaned or reclined against something; half a dozen or so were propping up the tower, another squad braced up the house, while others ballasted their boats, made fast to the shore, by lying full length on the seats.

The typical Goose Creek Islanders are tall, most of them being fully six feet when standing erect—a thing they rarely do except when yawning. Their hair is generally of the color known as carrotty, and it is combed every Sunday morning in honor of the day. Their foreheads are receding, their organs of vision are protruding, and of that kind called out West "the jackass rabbit eye," in color a dull blue. A sparkling black or clear hazel is rarely seen. The said eyes are generally as destitute of expression as Banquo's ghost, except, indeed, when their glance rests upon a roll of money or a handful of coin, and then it is curious to watch them light up, and really scintillate. The nose is nondescript, and the mouth is a real catfish one, like little Jack Gibbs's in the nursery ballads, who had

"A rainy new moon for a mouth."

Their cheeks are lank, and covered with a sparse beard which grows in detached spots like clumps of wire-grass in a run-down field. The jaw is their best feature, being strong and firm, denoting tenacity, and, if not courage, at least the absence of fear. The complexion is always of a lead or saffron color; no one ever saw a rosy-cheeked, fair-faced Goose Creek Islander. The sickly hue is caused by generations of chills and blood tainted with malaria. Ague fever is the cross all have to bear, from the toddling child to the tottering grandsire. "Chills is bad" is a common and pathetic expression, as the unfortunate stricken one retires to some dark corner and alternately shivers and roasts. Their throats are long, and the Adam's apple especially prominent. They always stoop, simply for the reason that it is too great an effort to hold the backbone erect. That part of the body known as the abdomen is very long, a wise provision of nature, intended to allow a large storage of food within. The limbs are lengthy and the hand enormous, with knuckles as big as door-knobs. Clothe these figures in a mixed costume of sportsmen's cast-off garments of the finest material and the native's coarse butternut fashioned by the native house-wife, and the man, the typical Goose Creek Islander, will stand before you.

Take, for instance, Tim Cignal, the *ci-devant* light-house keeper. Tim was one of the crowd that awaited us, and he was the only one that abided with us—to our sorrow. He wore a fashionable billycock hat, dogskin jacket, over which his homespun coat hung; fine corduroy breeches, and a pair of india-rubber boots.

While we busied ourselves in housing our stores and traps, not an islander moved; they kept their gaze fixed on vacancy, inert and motionless, except that their jaws moved regularly, and they spit, ever and anon, a long stream of tobacco-juice from between their closed teeth. This is an art to be accomplished only after long practice; but only the expert can expel it with his jaws clenched tight.

At last the ex-keeper, who had elected himself as host and custodian of our stores, stepped out on the porch.

" Boys, walk up and reef yer sails."

The motionless figures were touched into life and motion as instantly as were the denizens of Tennyson's sleeping-palace when the kiss of the Prince broke the charm. They all arose as one man, and actually hurried in, and imbibed in a way to make the famous major and judge blush with envy.

To make a long story short, the islanders remained with us for three days, eating, drinking, and lounging, until they cleaned out our whole large stock of wet and dry groceries; then all except Tim launched their boats, spread their sails, and departed for their island home.

The morning after our arrival our party started off on a reconnaissance, visiting many points in the vicinity; the result of our observations was that, with the exception of a few black-duck, there was no shooting around the island, and Messrs. Hallock and Wagner left for home the next day. George and I determined to stay for a week, anyhow.

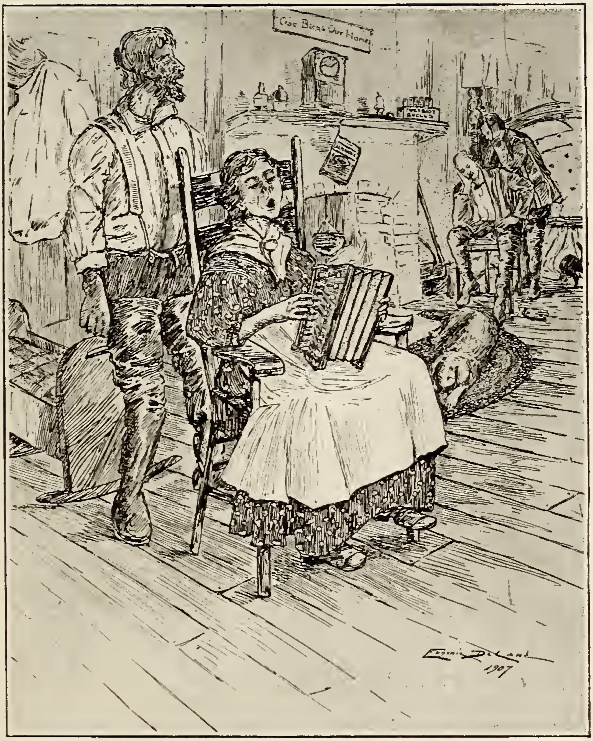
The ex-keeper and his wife, her friend

Nancy, George and myself constituted the household.

Nancy was a big, buxom girl from Goose Creek Island, and was far superior to any of her clan, inasmuch as she could read and write, and was a noted musician on the island. She could, in the language of the street, "knock an accordion cold"; but, unfortunately, she could only play hymns. She explained to us that the hymns made her sad, and, as Artemus Ward said, "If she was sad, we were sadder than she was." Of all the lugubrious strains that were ever evolved from an instrument, the most lugubrious were brought from that diabolical accordion by Nancy.

The night after our companions left was very stormy; in fact, there was a hurricane off Hatteras, and we were catching the tail-end of it. The ocean billows swept over the intervening sand dunes and came rolling across the sound, raising the tide several feet above high-water mark. The wind shrieked and howled, and when George opened the door the storm burst into the room, strewing the floor with sleet. It required the combined strength of the household to close that door. The keeper's wife retreated to her room in a panic, and Nancy, awed and frightened, brought out her accordion for comfort. It was a huge affair, about the size of a barrel churn, and had been purchased by subscription by the admiring Goose Creek Islanders. It was the only musical instrument on the island.

Nancy could turn a tune and that was about all, but had she possessed a good instrument one could have listened to her without feeling his blood running cold. For years that accordion had been drawn, pulled, jerked, twitched and squeezed by


God Bless Our Home
Almanac
Eugenie DeLand
1907

They were singing "In the Sweet By and By."

rough hands, until it had the same sort of demoniacal melody that a boarding-house piano has.

Some high-strung musical people shrink from a false note as from a blow, and if any such had been compelled to listen to Nancy that night they would have gone mad.

The mournful, melancholy strains made us shiver; my dog Jessie darted under the bed, and lay there, from whence occasionally would come a protesting, suffering yap or whine.

After a while Nancy let herself loose, and began to sing in a nasal mezzo-soprano. This capped the climax, I thought, for discord had reached its limit; but when the keeper butted in with a voice which could only be likened to a crow afflicted with asthma, discordance could no farther go.

George leaned over and shouted in my ear, "They are making Rome howl!"

When Nancy began to play I feared that the billows would sweep away the house, and when she commenced to sing I did not care one way or the other; but when the man and woman joined together in song, I felt like *Gonsalvo,* "Come tempest, come storm, anything but this."

They were singing "In the Sweet By and By," and were at the last line, "We shall meet on that beautiful shore." Nancy's eyes were closed, but her mouth was wide open; the keeper's eyes were closed, and his mouth open, and the raucous discord issuing from their throats was simply grewsome. All at once, with a wheezy shriek, the accordion rent asunder, the voices ceased, and Nancy burst into tears.

It is always sad to see beauty in tears, but this time "it were better so."

"The harp that once through Tara's Hall" would be heard never, never more; for when the keeper examined the pride and delight of Goose Creek Island, he flung it on the floor with the remark, "The derned thing has done busted its insides out."

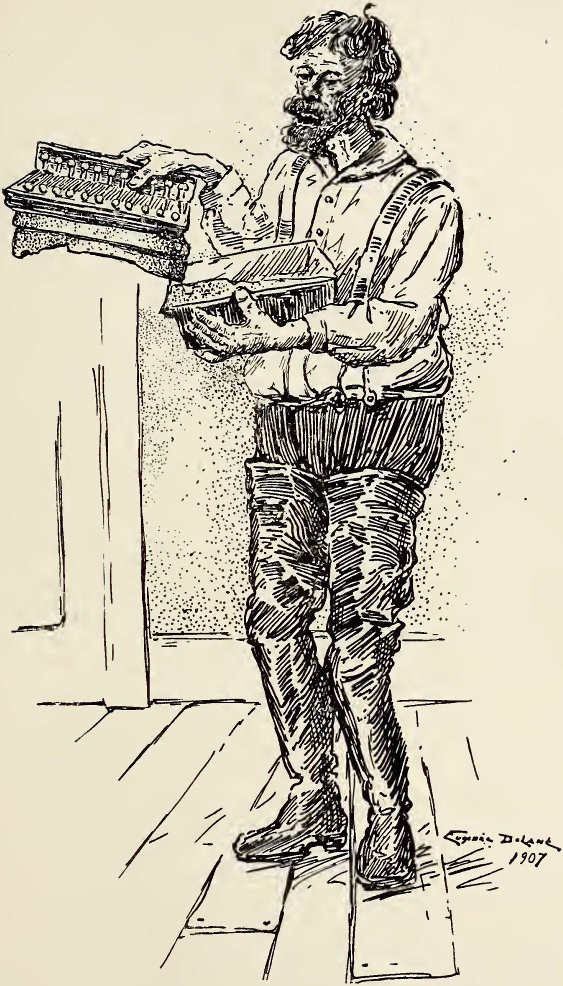
The next morning the gale had subsided, but a boisterous northwest wind was still blowing. George and I spread our decoys on a point near the light-house, and we had hardly regained the blind before a wild goose came sweeping with the wind in grand style. We both fired, and he tumbled head over heels before striking water. Jessie plunged in after him, but the goose was only winged, and started for the sound.

Now a goose is a fast swimmer, and I watched the race with the keenest delight. The water was very rough, and soon both pursued and pursuer disappeared in the distance.

I ran to the house and obtained the keeper's glass and hurried to the top of the tower. Adjusting the focus I could see Jessie about a mile away, as she rose on the crest of the waves, her head turned seaward; and as I watched she disappeared from sight.

I went back and joined George, greatly concerned about the dog. I told him that she was so thorough-bred and game that she would follow that goose across the Atlantic or sink in the attempt.

As we were talking, George, who sat facing the water, threw his gun up to his shoulder and fired. I turned around and saw that he had shot an eagle, or rather broken his wing, for the bird was flapping in the water.



"The dern thing 's busted."

"I sighted him as he was darting down at the decoys," said George, "and fired just as he struck."

"Well, that's something new in my experience," I answered. "I have shot hawks that mistook the decoys for live ducks, but never an eagle."

"We will go and capture him," said George, and started on a run to where our boat was concealed, about a hundred yards upstream. After a battle we secured the historic bird.

After some discussion we cut off the mangled wing and let the monarch of the air loose on the sand island, where he could be king—a king confined to the earth, and with only one wing. He would be like Jove deprived of his thunderbolt, Vulcan without his hammer, or Neptune without his trident.

An hour passed and Jessie had not returned; my heart sank low. I would rather have lost all the rest of my kennel—my hunting traps—my favorite gun—than that she should come to grief.

I cursed my thoughtlessness in letting her go after that goose; I might have known what the result would be. I went to the keeper and told him to man the boat, but I had slight hope of ever finding her in that wide waste of water.

I was just climbing into the boat when the keeper shouted, "For Heaven's sake! There's your dog now."

I turned, and on the other side of the island was my peerless setter, dragging herself along the beach with the neck of the dead goose between her teeth.

I flew across the sands like a shot. Jessie stopped, but not until my arms were around her neck did she unclose her jaws.

"Well, Jessie," I said, "it was a tough old goose, after all. I am going to have it roasted and you shall have it all."

Jessie understood me, for she licked her chops and wagged her tail.

When the question is put to a young father, "What is home without a baby?" he will promptly reply, "No home at all." When you ask a sportsman, "What is home without a dog?" he will respond in different words, more strongly expressed, but which convey the same meaning. Speaking for myself, I know that one of the greatest charms of home would be lacking if my faithful, loving dogs did not listen for my footsteps, and their joyous bark resound through the house. Ah! how beautifully Byron expressed it! Many and many a time when lost in the woods, or out of my bearings in the swamps, I have had that couplet ringing through my brain as the faint, far-off yell led me to the farmer's house. Yes,

"'Tis sweet to hear the honest watch-dog's bark
Bay deep-mouthed welcome as we draw near home."

Observation for a score of years has taught me that, comparatively speaking, few sportsmen understand or rightly appreciate the dog. They use him, they abuse him, but they do not comprehend the capabilities of the intelligent brute. I do not know anything about any kind of dog except the pointer and the setter. As for hounds, I never could care for an individual hound, but I can grow enthusiastic about a pack. I have often thought that a dog's instinct comes so near to reason that the dividing line is invisible. Every actor on the lyric stage must master the ten dramatic passions and be able to declaim them before he can become a great actor. Wonderful as it may seem, a dog has them all. Anger is shown by the bristling hair on the back and the bared fangs; fear, by a drooping of the tail and hanging head; jealousy, by a piteous whine and restless movements; grief, by a desponding attitude. As for love, a dog's love is more honest and unsullied, more faithful and true, than any other in this weary old world. A man may sink into the gutter and kill the affections of all who are nearest to him, but his dog will cling to him through all. As for hate, we all know that some individuals are abhorrent to dogs, and no blandishments can overcome it. A dog can feel despair, as Vonthoren has shown in his great picture, the "Lost Dogs." Joy? We see dogs show it every day. Pride? Every well-conditioned dog has it to a marked degree. As for laughter, any owner of a dog can make him either look foolish or angry by laughing at him, and I have seen in a group of performing dogs in a theater one who failed to do his trick, and such a chorus of dog laughter would show itself in their yelps that the despairing animal would slink away with every aspect of shame.

Moreover, a dog has histrionic ability, and can act. Who has not seen a huge dog and a diminutive one at play; see the great beast fly in fancied terror from his little adversary. One simulates a savage purpose, and the other pretends a deadly fear, and runs as if his life were in danger and he were frightened out of his senses. A dog has imagination, and he dreams. Tennyson, in "Locksley Hall," speaks of this; "Like a dog, he hunts in his dreams."

Then what good physiognomists and perfect judges of human nature dogs are, especially of feminine human nature! The soft, seductive smile, the cooing and caressing voice of beauty, cannot deceive a dog; he can tell the affectation of fondness from the real thing, and I say that when a woman dislikes dogs, and avoids contact with them, just beware of her, that's all. Her heart is not true, and her selfishness and coldness will be found to be phenomenal.

Well, to return to our hunting expedition. The next evening, our provisions being exhausted, George and myself determined to visit Goose Creek Island and replenish our store. There was a heavy head-wind blowing, and soon the rain came down in torrents. The sails were lowered and we went to work with the oars; it was hard pulling, and we made slow progress against both blast and tide, and not until night came on did we make the landing. Then there was a tramp of two miles in our heavy rubber boots, along the causeways of the swamp and the ox road through the pines. In single file we stumped, slid, and waded along the miry route, and at one time almost stalled in the quagmires, another time up to our hips in some deep hog-wallow. It was tough work, and when we finally reached the store, wet and miserable, we were panting from our exertions like the winner of a four-mile steeple-chase.

The store was closed, so we hunted around for some place in which to lodge. Chance led us to a house not far off, and in response to our knock we were civilly invited in. The picture of that room was full of interest to us; one of strong lights and shadows, such as Rembrandt would have loved to portray on canvas.

The room occupied the whole length of the cabin. The floor was of dirt, packed hard; a large fireplace occupied one side, and the smouldering pine knots would occasionally flare up into a bright blaze, alternately glooming and lighting up the interior. A high four-post bed fronted the fireplace, which was half concealed from the rear portion of the room by a bed-quilt suspended from a rafter. The walls within had been adorned with illustrated papers tacked to the logs, not only to keep out the wind, but for decoration.

On the high bed sat one of the most aged beings that ever mortal eyes rested upon. Her stockinged feet rested upon a chair, her long, disheveled white hair fell in tangles down her back and about her shoulders; but oh, her face! It was one not soon to be forgotten; it was like "She" when her charm had failed, when she looked "every day of her age." The ancient visage was plaited with wrinkles, covered and intertwined with lines, furrowed with creases and corrugated with crows'-feet. Her age was subject for wild conjecture. She looked like the actual Cumaean Sibyl, to whom Apollo granted the prayer "that she might live as many years as she had grains of sand in her hand"; but as she neglected to ask for health and youthful bloom, she showed her antiquity very plainly.

This old woman's figure was clad in homespun, and she rocked her body to and fro like Sycorax uttering a curse, or Meg Merriles invoking a tempest. Her eyes were still sharp and bright, and their glances elfin-like and uncanny.

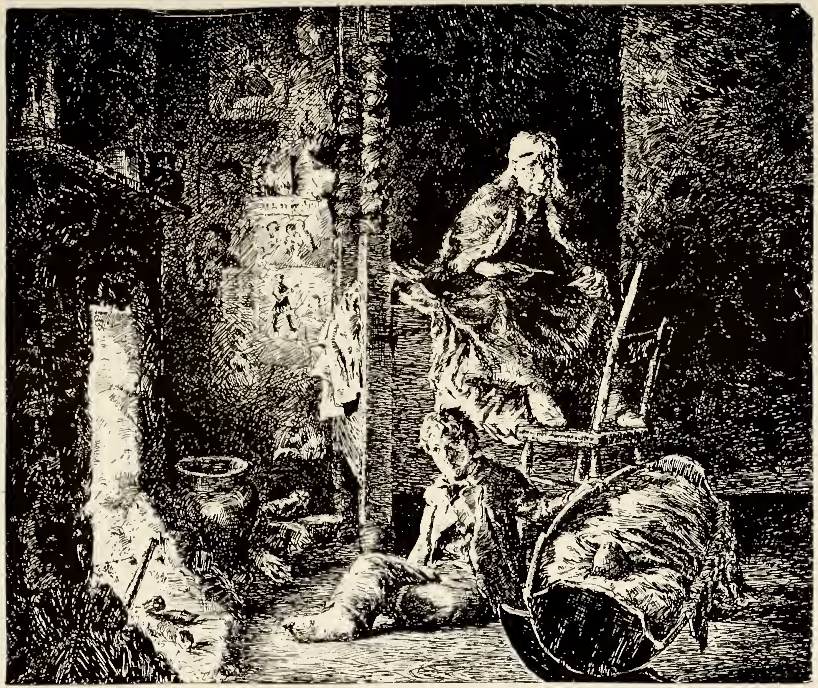
Suddenly she stopped rocking, felt around the bed with her skeleton-fingers, found her tin snuff-box, opened the lid, and then took from the bosom of her dress a stick about the size of a lead pencil, with one end chewed fine; this she rolled around in the snuff; next, she lifted her lips with the fingers of her left hand, while with her right she rubbed the stick along her blackened, toothless gums, wiping up the grains of snuff from the outside of her mouth with her long, flexible, discolored tongue; then she wiped the saliva from her mouth with the back of her hand, which in turn was cleaned by rubbing it on the bedclothes. Then she gave a sniff of content, and sat—sat—her senses steeped in dreamy repose.

It was the first time I had ever seen anybody "dip snuff," and the performance was simply revolting.

At the foot of the bed a little boy sat rocking a cradle, in which was an infant not over a week old. The cradle and the grave were cheek by jowl.

We decided to go farther and seek other quarters, the real reason being that the atmosphere in that apartment was appalling and nauseating.

We met with success at the next house, and though the houses were mostly alike, this one was clean. A huge fire was made, and our host sold us a gallon of Catawba wine. We decided to stay, though behind a hanging blanket was a bed wherein four daughters of our host, aged anywhere from sixteen to twenty-five, lay snugly tucked in. Even Boreas, who was broken down



"The cradle and the grave were cheek by jowl."

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and tired out, was fain to yield to the urgency of the case and crawl beneath the blanket of his shake-down.

In the morning, before we awoke, the girls got up and cooked the breakfast, and, on our return, after we had made our ablutions at the branch just below the house, we found the beds made, the floor swept, and a hot meal of Johnny cakes, bacon and coffee awaiting us.

Goose Creek Island is one of the most inaccessible, un-come-at-able places to be found in the South. Its area comprises several thousand acres; its soil is unusually fertile, and admirably adapted for the raising of stock. The island is surrounded for many miles inland by almost impassable swamps. Access by water is had through a narrow, tortuous channel only navigable by the smaller craft. For miles around the water outside of the passageway is only a few inches deep, a worthless stretch of water, too shallow for fish and too deep for agriculture. Hence the islanders lead a very retired and isolated life, practically as much shut off from the world as if they were in the middle of the Atlantic. There are about 250 houses on the island, mostly cabins, though there are several well-to-do planters, who, educated and refined, keep aloof from the poor and illiterate inhabitants. The women of the latter class are buxom, but with no symmetry of form—not one of them wears corsets. Their complexions are of the same muddy, unhealthy color as that of the men. The girls are shy and retiring, but they are daughters of Eve, and in their way strive to keep up with the latest fashions. Their dresses are made principally of calico, cut straight, and many of them use bustles; but as newspapers are scarce, they use dried sea-grass bunched in a knot, and as their dresses are not fashioned long in the back they tilt up in a most comical manner, displaying to a looker-on an expansive view of their home-made yarn stockings.

The Goose Creek Island women are immeasurably superior to the men in everything; they are good, modest, and hard-working, and they labor from morning till night. All of them have peculiar, pathetic, mournful-looking eyes, and they all use snuff.

The author of "Annals of a Quiet Neighborhood" should come here for inspiration. An occasional bark of a dog, or the cawing of a crow high in the air, is the only sound that breaks the stillness. Even echo is silent. Around the village store the male denizens sit in the sunshine and solemnly puff their pipes, as imperturbable as the old Dutch burghers with Governor Wouter Van Twiller in their midst in the tavern porch at Nieuf Amsterdam, smoking their long calumets, and discussing the probable appearance of the English fleet off Spuyten Duyvil Creek.

One is apt to conclude that, after all, these listless people are the happiest of their kind; and, barring chills, their existence is one of passive content.

Nearly all the able-bodied Goose Creek Islanders own boats, and nearly all of them have, hidden away under the bow, a box some two feet square, one side of which is closed with a sliding lid. Inspection of its contents will reveal a kerosene lamp and a tin reflector.

A dark, calm night is chosen, and the boat is noiselessly propelled by a pole along the estuaries and creeks of the North Carolina sounds where the ducks congregate to sleep. The gunner sits in the bow, with his ears open, and so keen is a trained pot-hunter's hearing that he can detect the swimming of the ducks as they move away. The pusher sends his craft along with hardly a ripple. The gunner now opens the slide and a dazzling glare flashes over the water. The ducks, bewildered by the light, mass together and swim slowly in a circle, blinking at the blinding gleam. The gunner fires at point-blank range, and dozens are killed at one discharge, and as many more are crippled, and flutter away and die on the marshes. The rest fly aimlessly away and the next morning migrate to distant parts.

Hunting water-fowl by fire-light is a grave offense against the State laws, and heavy penalties are exacted if the offender is caught. But, ah! there's the rub. It is almost impossible to capture these pirates, for as soon as the shot is fired and the dead ducks gathered, the lid of the fire-box is closed, the craft glides away in the darkness, and the reflector is not used again until some remote point is reached. It is needless to add, this kind of shooting drives all the ducks from the neighborhood.

The creed of the Goose Creek Islander is that the wood, the water and the wilderness is free to all. In the late fall nearly every able-bodied man among them starts off to Currituck and other shooting-grounds where the Northern sportsmen most abound, to serve as guides and hangers-on. Most of the Northern club-men are very wealthy and they scatter their money lavishly, and the

Goose Creek Islanders receive so much for so little service that they become spoiled, and charge enormously for everything they are called upon to do. They never hesitate to ask for what they want, and have about as much sense of delicacy as a Piute Indian.

Of course I am speaking only of that class known as "low downers." As for the planters and farmers of eastern North Carolina, a truer-hearted, higher-toned and more generous people never lived. They are famed all through the South for their State pride, their kindness and their unstinted hospitality. But I think every sportsman who ever shot over the blinds at Currituck or vicinity will indorse every word I write about the grasping rapacity of these islanders, and I know that those who are yet to go there will be glad that they have read these lines, for they show prospective hunters what to expect. To those contemplating a trip to these famous ducking grounds, one word of advice. Estimate the expense of your jaunt, multiply the total by three, and you will then have enough left, *if you are economical,* to get home.

Having purchased our provisions, our trio put back to the light-house. The wintry weather, interspersed with storms, kept us on the Point, and we found that our anticipated sport of brant shooting was illusive as a dream, for every brant had suddenly disappeared. The solution was easy: some of the islanders had been shooting them in the night, and scared them off for good and all.

In a few days our situation grew desperate. Our stock of food, thanks to Tim, was well-nigh exhausted; bacon, hard-tack, flour, sugar, coffee, were all gone, and we were living on corn-bread, rain-water, and ducks. But we were sick of ducks; we felt like the Welsh vicar, when he said grace:

> "For ducks hot, and ducks cold,
> For ducks young, and ducks old,
> For ducks tender, and ducks tough,
> We thank Thee, Lord, we've had enough."

The shipwrecked mariner was never more anxious to leave his abode than my comrade and myself were to get off this desolate sandbank; but the winds still held high carnival, and a sail of some twenty miles out in the sound to catch the Newberne boat was more than Tim was willing to undertake.

One morning we saw the U. S. tender *Violet* beating to windward, so we hastened to the top of the tower, and made frantic signals to them to send a boat ashore. We could see through the spyglass the officers consulting on the quarter-deck, but evidently the waves were too high for them to think of launching their pinnace.

At last, when our cupboard was almost as bare as Mother Hubbard's, and we were living on fat meat, meal and rain-water, the welcome sound of a steamer's whistle was heard. We had joyfully collected our traps and made ready to go, but what was our astonishment when Tim absolutely refused to sail about a half mile out to meet the *Manteo* unless we paid him fifteen dollars.

"Well," said Boreas, "if this doesn't take the rag off the bush! These people don't know what gratitude is! Just think what I have given that man—all my spare underclothing, boots, hat, handkerchiefs, ammunition enough to last him half his life, tobacco that will keep his jaws moving and his pipe full for the balance of the year, fed him like an alderman, wined him like a lobbyist, and now to be blackmailed in this manner! I won't pay, that's flat!"

We sat there looking at each other, too angry to speak. How I wished for the sandals of Vidar which sustained equally on the earth, in the air, and on the water.

But it was no use to kick; Tim held the trump cards, and he knew it, for he reclined on the seat of the boat with an air of supreme indifference. We could not afford to remain, it would be days before another steamer would pass the place, and we were threatened with absolute famine.

All this time the boat was approaching rapidly, and whatever was done must be done at once. So we were perforce compelled to submit to the extortion, and we paid the money, very much in the same spirit as the traveler in Spain who, when wending his way along the mountain defile, heard a soft voice crying, "Charity, gentle stranger; for the love of God, charity!" and gazing around he beheld half a dozen long barrels of the musketoons leveled at his heart.

So we cashed up, Tim hoisted sail, and in a few minutes we were safe on the steamer's deck. Tim shouted good-by most cordially, and said we must be sure to let him know when we came again to those parts.

CHAPTER XII

A HUNT WITH PRESIDENT HARRISON

President Benjamin Harrison inherited his great love of sport from a long line of noted Virginians. His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather lived on two of the finest and most historic plantations in old Virginia, called Upper and Lower Brandon, and situated on the banks of the James River about fifty miles below Richmond. In those days every planter was an ardent sportsman, no matter whether he "rode to hunt or hunted to ride"—to use that immortal distinction of Asheton Smith's old whip.

The Virginian's life was modeled after that of the old English squire, who, with his broad acres and devoted tenantry, shot, fished, and rode—an ideal country-gentleman.

General Harrison's great-grandfather, one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence, was very fond of out-door sport, though in his case it took the form of fox-hunting, and at his home in Berkely he always kept a large pack of hounds.

His grandfather, the tenth President of the United States, whose home was at Brandon, was another lover of the chase; while Scott Harrison, the father of General Harrison, was a noted all-round sportsman. On his maternal side the blood of sportsmen ran thick in the President's veins, for the Carters, Pages, and Burwells loved the sound of the horn, the baying of the hounds, and the crack of the shotgun better than anything else on earth.

General Harrison was a very reserved man, and but for an accident the people of the Capital might never have known that he was a devotee of the gun.

He had been in the White House over half of his term before the press dispatches announced that he and his family would pay a visit to Virginia Beach on the ocean shore contiguous to Cape Henry. This is in the vicinity of the Ragged Island Club's domain (of which I was a member), and I was commissioned by the officers of that club to invite the President to make our club-house his headquarters during his stay in Virginia.

Now, I had heard that it was a difficult matter to obtain an audience with the Chief Executive, but my card with the simple sentence, "An invitation for the President to shoot," was all the passport necessary.

The invitation from the Ragged Island Club was accepted on the spot by General Harrison, and he and his valet reached the club-house one evening a few days later, in the month of February. There was no ostentatious reception. The President was introduced to all the members present, and they were soon discussing plans for the next morning. He expressed a wish to be put into a blind as early as possible in the morning, and to be left there with a retriever, saying that he would hunt as the others hunted. He wanted no extra attention, and declared that he did not mind exposure, and could stand anything the rest could.

Our distinguished guest was called at three o'clock the next morning, and he soon came in, looking bright and cheerful. His costume consisted of rubber hip-boots, dog-skin vest and waterproof blouse, over which he wore a thick "dreadnaught" coat. His gun was the handsomest one I ever saw, and I do not think there is another like it in America. It was made for him by a prominent American manufacturer, and the inscription, "Protection to American Industries," was cut on the barrels. It was a twelve-gauge with exquisite barrels, and the triggers and guard were of pure gold, while rich chasing adorned the piece all over.

The clubmen told Mr. Harrison, however, that it was too light for work in a blind with canvasbacks going at the rate of eighty miles an hour. They therefore induced him to take a heavy, thick-breeched ten-gauge for the long shots.

The only man in the club who declined to have a "bracer" that morning, to get up an appetite for breakfast, was President Harrison.

Soon the party broke up, the gunners going to different points for their sport. Many got into the boats at the wharf close to the house; but the President had to walk across the island, mostly marsh-land. As I was going in the same direction to Southwestern Point, I accompanied him. Two guides preceded us, and the President's valet followed in the rear. Oh, what a picture of misery that darky was! At the White House he was the proudest individual in Washington, a sable Malvolio who thought, if he did not say, "I know my place and I would they should know theirs." But here, in a desolate bog, an hour before dawn, with rain and sleet driving through the air, he was a very humble valet indeed. Early morning sport evidently had no charms for him, for as he tramped along, with the rain dripping, and his clothes streaming, he looked the picture of despair.

Reaching the farther end of the island, the weather outlook was very bad, and the guides told the President that it would be a stormy day, and that he had best think twice before starting.

"The worse the weather, the better the luck," he laughingly replied.

We got into separate boats, the valet returning to the club. Each boat contained two men, one dog, and about fifty wooden decoys, besides a coop of live ones. It was pitch dark, and on all sides could be heard the flapping of wings of wild fowl disturbed in their slumbers.

Swiftly my boat surged ahead until the point was reached, when I got into the blind, lighted my pipe, and made myself as comfortable as possible; the guide, in the mean time, was dropping the decoys into the water.

Soon it began to grow lighter, but the driving sleet cut off the view, and I could not see the incoming birds until they dropped among the decoys; then I would wave my hand to the dog and he would plunge in and flush them. The birds made such easy marks that it was hard to miss.

I had killed about two score, when they stopped flying; so I paddled over to the President's blind. He was all alone, having sent the guide home with instructions to come for him in the evening.

The blind was right on the edge of the marsh, and was made of grass. The occupant was sitting on a cracker-box with the dog at his feet and a goodly pile of ducks in the corner. His hat was pulled down, and his overcoat collar turned up, and all that was visible of his face was a pair of keen eyes and some whiskers.

We had been chatting for some little time when I saw two widgeon beating up toward the blind. I lay flat down, and the President made as pretty a double as I ever saw. One bird was knocked cold, the other was crippled and made off. Twice Mr. Harrison fired and showered the water all around it, but the distance was too great and the duck got away. Then occurred to me one of those exasperating incidents which so provoke a huntsman.

Just as Jack was swimming to retrieve the duck, a good bunch of canvasbacks, two or three hundred yards away, were heading for the decoys. I called to Jack, but nothing short of death could have kept him from getting that widgeon. We watched the flock, hoping against hope, and if Jack had remained in the water I think the birds would have come up to the decoys; but when the dog sprang out of the water, they whirled and disappeared down the island.

I went back to my blind and remained until dark, occasionally hearing the boom of the President's gun.

Finally the guides returned and took us home, thoroughly chilled and tired. Then came the reward—such a recompense as good Dame Nature gives to those who obey her laws.

With keen appetites the party gathered around the table; the President said a good old-fashioned grace and we all sat down.

At first it did not look like a very bountiful spread—no gleaming cut-glass, flowers, or silver plate; only a bottle of champagne, a big bowl of celery, and a loaf of bread at each plate. Half a dozen oysters on the half-shell as an appetizer; then a pause. Then came the steward on a run, bringing a canvasback right from the oven; he darted out, returned and deposited one after another, until each man had been served with a canvasback, and the real climax of a hungry sportsman's dinner was reached.

The morrow was rest-day by law. There would have been no shooting anyway, for the day was calm and bright; so it was passed in reading, smoking, playing cards, and telling stories—of course politics was barred. It was no longer " Mr. President," but " Mr. Harrison," and our guest was left to follow his own pleasure. There were no cringing callers bowing, smiling and scraping before him; no group clustered around him and hung upon his word. The President of the United States was a stout, full-blooded man, clothed in a corduroy suit; who threw sticks into the water for the dogs to bring out; who lay on a plank in the sun and smoked; who laughed and chatted with the guides and told hunting-stories, and moved around with nobody but Jack, the Chesapeake Bay retriever, at his heels.

It must have been an intense relief to Mr. Harrison to be natural and at ease; to come and go unwatched; to speak from the fulness of his heart, and know that his words would not be flashed over the wires before the sound of his voice had died away. The relief from the strain of keeping himself within himself, of weighing every word, and controlling every impulse, must have been unutterably sweet. But best of all was the fact that among the Virginia Democrats around him, not one had a favor to ask, and the President knew that he was receiving a welcome for himself and not for the favors he could bestow, and so he dropped his official robes. The politician, statesman, and ruler was gone; the true sportsman remained. Could it be possible that the laughing, genial man, the hail-fellow-well-met, in rough hunting-garb, could be the austere occupant of the White House; the cold, forbidding Executive who froze out office-seekers, congealed the ax-grinding patriots, and petrified the advice-givers?

To see the President roughing it with the boys was to witness the acme of the freedom of a republican government. When the Prince of Wales accepts an invitation to hunt, he always has some of his boon-companions along. If the Emperor of Germany, or even the President of the French Republic, was to honor one of his subjects with a hunting visit, a numerous staff would surround him; the best detectives of the country would be engaged for the occasion. Here in free America the ruler leaves his office and goes to an isolated island, away from all mail and telegraphic facilities, accompanied only by one colored servant, and surrounded by his political enemies. It was a picture that would have caused European royalty to open its eyes.

The President of the club and the President of the United States started out together before dawn the next morning, and shot from more sheltered blinds about a hundred yards apart. The weather had turned bad again, and the rain froze as it fell. It was not a good ducking-day, for there was not enough wind, and many of the clubmen returned to the seductions of a bright fire and soothing pipes; but Mr. Harrison stuck to his blind all that day. He was the last to return, and it was long after dark when he came in, and for his fourteen hours of exposure he had about two dozen ducks, mostly canvasbacks.

One of the members, who had watched his shooting for about two hours, declared that the President was as good a shot as any man in the club. This was a compliment indeed, for there were some clever shots at Ragged Island.

The President was a very abstemious man; he always refused drinks between meals, and actually declined the club's celebrated cocktails before dinner, though he was not proof against the steward's famous mint-juleps. The following day was Mr. Harrison's last, and the elements were favorable for sport, though it was very cold and stormy.

A consultation was held and as the wind was from the north the distinguished guest was given the finest blind on the place. It was called St. John's Island, and it was a certainty that good shooting could be had there when a north wind was blowing. A week before a gunner bagged fifty-one canvasbacks from that blind in one day, and two days later thirty-nine were killed. The boys decided that none of the blinds in the President's vicinity should be occupied, and that he should have all that part of the island to himself.

It was dark that evening when we assembled once more around the red-hot stove in the sitting-room. All inquired about the President's luck, but no one had seen either him or his guide.

We waited and waited, and the cook announced that dinner was ready, but still no sign of our guest. The clubmen became alarmed; it would be a terrible reflection on them if anything should happen to him. Every man seized a lantern and started across the swamp, and it was well that we did so, for the President had missed the footbridge and was wading slowly and laboriously through the black ooze of the swamp, toward the club-house. He was already up to his hips and very tired; almost exhausted, in fact.

We hailed him with triumphant shouts and relieved him of his gun. Notwithstanding his mishaps, he was jubilant. He had had royal sport, over forty canvasbacks having fallen to his gun, besides many other ducks; but he was more pleased over having killed a swan than anything else. The guide was seen staggering homeward a little later, half-hidden under an enormous burden of wild fowl.

When we assembled in the club-house the President was a sight. The lower half of his body was a mass of mud and the upper half was encased in ice. He said that he had suffered with cold at first, but the rapid firing soon warmed him and he then had as much shooting as he could attend to.

It was a joyous party that sat down to our last dinner. There were no speeches, for which the President seemed duly thankful; but there was true cordiality.

After a vote, it was announced that General Harrison was an honorary member of the Ragged Island Club, with the right and title to come and go at pleasure. Then came a chorus of approval, and we all rose and drank to his health, with the expressed wish that he might come often, and the assurance given that all Virginians would welcome him as a brother-sportsman.

CHAPTER XIII

CANVASBACK SHOOTING AT THE RAGGED ISLANDS

When a sportsman fails to find good shooting at one place, the only thing for him to do is to try elsewhere.

Shooting every day in the week; gunners everywhere, blinds, batteries and sink-boxes sown thick over Currituck Sound, North Carolina; market-gunners, poachers, irresponsible guides, thoughtless, improvident natives, game-hogs, who slaughter duck in the nighttime, had, early in the season, either killed, crippled or frightened the ducks away. There was no shooting, and not enough wild fowl to tempt the Northern clubmen to make the long journey southward.

I started for home, but at Norfolk I fell in with some of the Ragged Island clubmen. I joined a coterie, and we were to leave the next morning.

Ragged Island is situated in Back Bay, Virginia, about fifteen miles south of Virginia Beach. There are two ways to reach the club; one by traveling along the ocean beach, the other by the inland route; we chose the latter.

Our party of six took the steamer *Rogers,* which left at 7 A. M. for Pungo's Ferry, some twenty miles distant as the "crow flies," but a much greater distance as the Chesapeake and Albemarle runs, following its various detours.

Reaching the Ferry about noon, we found carriages awaiting us, and after a brisk drive of five or six miles we came to Hill's Landing. There we found the club's yacht in readiness, and a sail of two miles brought us to the club-house. A circular-letter of instructions, written for the benefit of the members, gave full information as to the route and transportation to the Ragged Islands, whether by canal or via Virginia Beach, by hired wagonettes or private conveyances; also schedule of prices.

"The Ragged Islands" is an appropriate name. There are thirty-two in number, of various areas, and they present a decidedly ragged appearance. The club property is situated in the center of Back Bay. The soil is mainly firm marsh-land, which affords good grazing for cattle, and is well supplied with broad creeks varying in width from one hundred feet to four hundred yards. The water averages about twenty or thirty feet in depth. The creek bottoms are covered with wild celery, and so thickly does it grow that it is difficult to push a boat through the waters.

These islands are three miles long by one and one-half miles wide. On the east, some two miles across Back Bay, is a sandy stretch of a mile wide, which separates the bay from the ocean. A few miles to the south is Currituck Sound. On the west is the peninsula, and on the north the bay extends some distance. There are no marsh-lands within four or five miles of Ragged Islands, and with one exception no clubs. Nature has planted this great wild-fowl feeding-ground, solitary and alone in the bay, and there is no other spot to compete with it.

The club-house was a handsome structure, built with a view to comfort and even luxury. There were several acres of solid ground, with shade trees, where the old fishermen's and huntsmen's cabins were built, one or two of which are still standing. In the club-house were smoking-room, spacious dining-rooms, closets, wine-rooms, and bedrooms, the latter with single beds, all having stoves and being well lighted. Everything was of the best quality. The house itself was situated but a few yards from the beach; outside was the boat-house and the wharf. A long enclosure, running into the water, contained the duck pond, where the live decoys were kept. Near by were the kennels of the water dogs, which were trained to bring in the ducks.

Then there was the plucking and packing-house, where the game was prepared for shipment for the members.

A rigid rule of the club read, that under no circumstances should any game be sold. A member breaking this rule was liable to expulsion. The keeper and his three assistants were all sworn constables, appointed by the court, and not one of them was allowed to keep a gun on the premises. This was an innovation and a wise one, as any clubman or visitor who has shot in the North Carolina sounds can bear witness. It means good shooting for the members and their guests, and for them alone.

The guides were regularly employed and were paid monthly, and it was optional with the members to employ them or not; some did, others did not, as the shooting-grounds were not far distant from the club-house. Where the club guards or guides were employed the money was not paid to them or to the keeper, but a due-bill was placed in a locked tin box, similar to those used in city clubs, and the secretary made out the bills every month. Such a plan does away with the persistent and obtrusive attendance of guides who are "on the make." The guides there were a self-respecting body of men, who got regular wages, and it was a matter of indifference to them whether they went shooting or not. No member or guest was allowed to fee a guide. There was also a gill, purse-net and seine, which the keeper used to supply the table daily.

The keeper, who was also the caterer, alone was paid in money. His account was a separate one, and at a fixed rate of fifty cents a single meal; if a guest missed a meal, of course he did not pay for it. Beds were free. The keeper was allowed to make no other charge. He also received a regular salary, paid monthly. By this admirable system there was no extortion, no extra charges or fees. All boats and decoys were the property of the club, and of course were free. They were tied at the wharf, always equipped, and a member might use them how and when he pleased. The rule against shooting on the three "closed days"—Wednesdays, Thursdays and Sundays—was rigid and inflexible. Any member breaking the rule would have his name presented to the grand jury of Princess Anne County, without fail.

The club shares were $1,000; the annual dues were $12.

At the club-house a hot supper awaited us, then came the reign of the "brier-root." No sooner were the ashes knocked out, than all hands went to work to get ready for to-morrow's sport. Boxes of ammunition were opened. Most of the members buy machine-made ammunition, though some prefer to load the shells themselves. This is troublesome, of course, but it is a very safe plan.

It was about half-past four in the morning when we hurried out. The first thing we did was to open the window and examine the state of the weather; the outlook was anything but encouraging. The brisk wind of the night before had died away, and it was not cold enough by half for a perfect day. Downstairs the lamps were burning, and all the stoves red-hot. A morning warm drink checked the yawns and longing to lie down and finish our sleep, and an appetizing breakfast made us wide-awake. It being our first day, a good deal of time was wasted in getting started, and the sun was poking his rubicund face above the waters of the bay as we shoved off.

Mr. Portlock and guest, with guide and dog, were in one boat, Messrs. Driver and Hargrove in another,—they dispensed with a guide,—while Mr. Woodard and myself, with guide and dog, occupied a third.

About twenty-five wooden decoys were in the bow of our boat, together with a coop containing six live decoys. Our destination was about one half mile from the club-house, in a marsh where two streams met. Our blind was in the crotch of the inverted Y, and fronting the broad stream. In this position we would have to be on the alert, and not only face the stream in front, but keep a keen lookout on the two converging creeks in our rear.

The blind was built for two, but my comrade made a nest in a group of cat-tails a few feet behind.

"You shoot at the rear ducks on the right, and I will take the rear ones on the left," said he, and we were soon ready, gun in hand.

In the mean time, the guides were placing the decoys. The wooden ones were hurled right and left, but the live ones took more time; great care is necessary in placing them. A cord about six feet long has a four-pound weight attached to one end, and a snaffle on the other, the latter to go through the leather loop that encircles the duck's leg. A sudden jerk is apt to snap the poor creature's limb, so both the duck and the weight are lowered gently in the water. These live decoys were placed at wide intervals, and on the outside of their wooden prototypes. There was a moderate breeze stirring, but not enough to ruffle the water, protected as it was by the high reeds of the marsh. This was unfortunate, as the motionless attitude of the decoys causes the approaching wild fowl to instinctively shy off; but in rough water, every bird being in motion, it is not until the ducks are directly over the decoys that they detect the cheat, and then it is too late for them to profit by the knowledge.

We were fully an hour behind time. Too much stress cannot be laid upon the necessity for the duck-hunter to get to the blinds very early. He should be in position and have everything in readiness by the earliest dawn, for it is in the first hour of light that the finest sport occurs. Then it is that the wild fowl, awakening from their sleep, fly fearlessly, and afford the best shooting. They were cutting the air in all directions, and we greatly regretted our tardy movements.

The decoys being placed, the guide poled his boat some distance to the rear, and hid in the grass. The dog crouched in the blind, and in a minute two black-ducks sailed by, and both dropped to our report.

"This is the first shot with my new gun," said Woodard, "and it is a good omen."

The dog now plunged in and retrieved the ducks, and hardly had he dropped them before a pair of mallards came hurtling through the air, evidently with no intention of stopping. We both sent an ineffectual volley after them. Next came three blue-wings, but only one continued its flight.

"We will have moderate shooting," remarked my companion, "but it will be nothing in comparison to what we would have if a heavy wind were blowing; a northeast or a southwest wind is the thing. I have sat here many a time and fired steadily for a couple of hours at a time, irregularly all day, at the ducks which came in a constant stream. A freezing, cloudy, windy day, such as the fox-hunters love, is exactly what we want. The old refrain, 'A wintry night and cloudy sky gives promise of a hunting morning,' suits the clubman as well as the master of the hounds."

A short wait, and along came a pair of mallards, which had evidently had an engagement to take breakfast at sunrise with a party of friends and were now making up for lost time. Both of us pulled; my comrade's primer snapped; my bird fell with a loud splash into the water, while the dog, who was watching their coming, had him in his mouth before the smoke of the gun had drifted away. In a few moments a solitary duck came, cleaving the air, and I sent two loads after it with compliments. Another short interval and another duck passed by, coming from the rear. We both thought to wing him by a long shot, but—both of us failed to do so. Fully a half hour passed. A light wind had sprung up and a cloud obscured the sun. Then, as I was jotting down these notes, a couple of blue-wings passed within easy shot, but neither of us observed them until too late. A black-duck flashed by, and again Woodard hazarded a long shot in vain. Next a solitary mallard, looking for his mate, approached the decoys. It was his least search, for Woodard knocked him out neatly.

It was then that we got into a discussion and lost a capital shot thereby.

"There, see what our tongues have cost us," said Woodard, as a pair of canvasbacks swirled to the right, and were out of sight in an instant. "We must keep a better lookout than that," was my reply, and for some minutes we sat in solemn silence.

A chance remark of Woodard's brought up a new subject, and we both went to "argufying," as Captain Cuttle says, when the discussion was brought to a sudden stop, and we jerked up our guns only to find a fine bunch of blue-wings darting to the rear.

"Don't that beat h—alifax!" ejaculated one of us. "We are like a couple of garrulous old women over a tea-pot!"

The words were hardly uttered when a red-head came toward the decoys like a rocket; an incautious movement betrayed us, and up he soared. Woodard fired as he did so, and I fired an instant later; but it was the first shot that winged him, and down he came in zig-zag circles, beating the air frantically with the uninjured wing. Striking the water, the duck paddled for the opposite bank, with the dog close behind, and both disappeared in the rushes. The guide hastily entered the boat, and poling across found the dog on a hot scent, which soon ended in his capturing the cripple. While they were across the run, both of us emptied our guns at a canvasback at a long shot, but failed to stop him, though a few feathers falling gently through the air showed that the mark had been struck. We had scarcely slipped our shells in when a blue-wing circled around the decoys and, singular to relate, both of our hammers clicked simultaneously, the primers failing to explode. There was a muttered anathema, for the best of men will swear sometimes, and a defective shell in duck-shooting is the most exasperating thing I know of—but our second barrels scored a hit.

The guide returned, threw the duck on the pile, then went and hid himself, while the dog crouched like a hare in its form. A couple of mallards stooled beautifully, and Woodard taking the right and I the left, they fell without a flutter.

Soon a pair of black-ducks came up; but seeing the dog they soared aloft as directly as a rocket, and escaped. This sudden mounting in the air is a peculiarity of the black-duck when alarmed, and it has often been a source of wonder to me where they get the motor power to dart upward with as much ease and swiftness as a falcon can sweep downward. It saves them nineteen times out of twenty. A single mallard fell to my gun, and he had hardly been retrieved when Woodard made the shot of the day, bringing down a redhead that was going literally like a flash; such was his velocity that, though the shot was instantly fatal, he fell at least a hundred yards distant and skipped along the calm surface of the water.

Once again the writing of these notes cost me a duck, Woodard having gone back to talk to the guide. A mallard, unseen by me, hovered over the decoys and then took wing. I grabbed my gun and pulled, though the bird was some seventy-five yards distant. The shot splashed all around him, and the way that duck traveled was a caution. I took out my brier-root and was filling it, when Woodard's gun rang out. I looked up. He had sent a shot skyward at a black-duck fully eighty yards away, and as a ten-gauge does not kill at that distance, except in fiction, he got no meat that time. But we did soon after, and added two more mallards to our bag.

Shortly we both made a clean miss at two sprig-tails, each of us giving both barrels, and as I watched the vanishing birds I could only repeat, for consolation, the Turkish word "kismet." It was not fated that those ducks should be served up hot for ourselves, or in pot-luck for our friends.

"As the Governor of North Carolina said to the Governor of South Carolina," sang out Woodard, and the invitation was thankfully responded to, and incontinently two mallards swept by unchallenged. "It is a singular thing," said Woodard, philosophically, "that such indulgence always brings a duck to the decoys and——" What more he would have said was lost, for we both dropped in the grass as a string of sprig-tails flew swiftly by us. Our guns rang out and the dog brought in a couple. Both were snap-shots, and we solemnly shook hands. A lull of some moments ensued, then my companion failed to make an easy shot, because he had forgotten to cock his new "hammerless." My first barrel was a failure, but the second bowled one over.

I use wood powder entirely, and that gives one a chance to put in the left-hand barrel, a thing often impossible to do when using black powder, which very often causes so much smoke as to hide the flying bird from view.

We both emptied our guns at a solitary, which was too far off for aught but a peppering. Another string rapidly approached the decoys, and as our tame ducks answered their call they dropped suddenly and we let go every load in our guns, knocking over three out of the seven, and badly wounding a fourth, which rose, but with extended wings went down on an inclined plane until he dropped in the swamp a half mile away.

"Who hit that duck?" I inquired.

"I did, with my second barrel," replied Woodard. "It is astonishing how much lead they can carry off sometimes; he was stationary when I fired."

"Then the shot must have been loose," I said.

We both examined our shells, and found that many of them rattled when shaken, showing that they were loose.

I would like to impress this point upon sportsmen. Many shells are hastily crimped, and in jolting the wad becomes displaced, and one fails to get many birds that he is fairly entitled to. I always make it a rule to carry a pocket crimper with me, and it is invaluable.

I looked at my watch; it was eleven o'clock. The clouds which lay banked in the sky in the early morning had disappeared and the vault of heaven shone only with a deep blue. The hope "that a wind might rise" was a forlorn one, and but little shooting could be expected now. However, we were both sportsmen enough to take the "lean with the fat," and we did not grumble.

Fully a half hour passed with nothing stirring, and the pair of redheads that flew within shot took us by surprise and got away without even being scared by the report of our guns. We bagged a mallard soon after, at long range, though it took four shots to do it. Another lone duck got away from lack of attention. If one shoots for meat it is always best to be alone. One is then on the *qui vive,* and there are but few wasted opportunities. One pair of eyes, properly managed, is better than two pairs for duck-shooting. But for real enjoyment, hunt in pairs; half the pleasure is spoiled when a good shot is made if there is no one to witness it, and time does not drag so slowly when one is in good company.

After a few minutes we essayed another distant shot, but the game failed to materialize. Then another calm ensued. I struck a match to light my pipe, when Woodard exclaimed, "Look out!" I dropped the match and seized my gun, but it was a false alarm. Looking down I discovered that the lighted match had fallen on the dry rushes in the bottom of the blind and a first-class bonfire was imminent. Not wishing to be prematurely cremated, I proceeded to stamp it out. I had scarcely taken my seat when Woodard shot twice and brought down a soaring mallard most handsomely.

Another pair of mallards passed on the right of the blinds, and my comrade's shot was wasted in the air. "Too far!" I shouted.

"Yes, I know," sang out Woodard; "but it is fun, if nothing else."

"Here comes a fool duck," I remarked to Woodard, as a guileless mallard flew along the water and plumped down among the live decoys. We rose up out of the blind, but the duck would not take wing, but kept so close to his new-found friends that we could not fire. We shouted vociferously, but to no purpose, and then, as a last resort, sent the dog in. After one or two experiences a dog learns to know the live decoys perfectly well, and will not touch them.

As the dog plunged in we stood with our guns ready to knock cold such an imbecile bird. Suddenly it took flight, but instead of flying away it came directly over the blind and we both fired.

Any one who has shot advancing bluerocks at a trap will recognize how difficult it is to strike a coming object; only a practiced shot can do it, and in this instance we both had our trouble for our pains, and we agreed that it was the smartest duck we had ever seen.

We were then treated to the sight of a large flock of mallards away off in the distance making our way. We lay low, and breathlessly watched them as they came rolling over each other; they seemed like breakers rushing on the beach. It was a fine sight, and a sportsman will understand the thrill that possesses one when a living wave like that approaches the blind. Will the advance hold good, or will it break before reaching us? The uncertainty increases the fascination; hope and fear alternate in the breast.

Straight up the creek the dark mass progressed, their harsh voices making music to the gunner's ear. They approached to within a hundred yards, flying low in the air, then the leader dropped his wings and went down in an inclined plane toward the decoys, and behind him his followers imitated his movements exactly, their long necks stretched and the sheen of their feathers glinting in the sunlight. We silently cocked our guns; in another second they would be right upon us, when —oh, confound the luck!—the guide, awakening from his nap, within arm's length of us, got up and languidly stretched himself and yawned. He dropped like lead when he heard and saw the ducks, but it was too late. The leader gave a sudden quack of alarm, and veered off at right angles over the marsh, and getting up steam the entire flock were "out of sight" in a twinkling. My comrade and I exchanged some forcible remarks, and then sank into a moody silence. This was soon broken by a string of baldpates, which came up to make friends with the live decoys, which were indulging in some remarks about their country cousins. We both emptied our guns and three of them turned up their toes; a fourth fell at such a long distance in the marsh that we did not think it would pay to hunt it up.

I suppose fully fifteen minutes elapsed without sight or sound to repay our waiting. We both listlessly leaned back and unbent a little from our long stretch of strained expectancy. The whir of wings aroused my companion, who in turn aroused me. A small flock of redheads was just alighting in the water. We jumped to our feet, and as the startled fowls arose in the air we both fired at the same instant. Our haste defeated our object, for instead of the half dozen we expected, only two fell.

"Well," said Woodard, "no use crying over spilled milk; it takes several hunts to get the steady self-control so necessary for a sportsman in these marshes. A man does not only have to get his hand in, but his nerves must be in order." A remark that was verified shortly after by my missing a duck that only required a steady aim to secure.

That was the last shot. It was now high noon, and the boat came to take us to the club-house. Placing in the decoys, animate and inanimate, we poled our way back, well satisfied with our morning's work; if we had not made a big bag we had at least passed a jolly morning, and had had as fine sport as any reasonable man could wish.

We enjoyed our dinner in spite of the bad cooking. The way the imperial canvasback is served up by home talent is enough to make the shade of Sam Ward walk abroad at midnight or cause John Chamberlain to come forth from the grave.

About 3 P. M. we returned to the blinds. There was a dead calm and it was intensely hot, as the swarm of droning mosquitoes languidly moving in a cloud over the water testified. We waited in vain for the water fowl; tired and half asleep, we sat for a while in the blind, then got out and stretched at full length on the heather.

All Nature seemed asleep. Nothing was stirring; even the ubiquitous crow had alighted somewhere, while the blackbirds were, doubtless, taking their evening siesta. Off to the right a narrow strip of the swamp only half hid the open water of the bay, and on its calm surface great ricks of wild geese rested motionless. Here and there the white form of a swan floated, and with our glass we could see the long, graceful neck ever in motion. I have watched these swans many times most longingly, and they never seem at rest, but swim about as it were, mechanically and without purpose. It is the wariest bird that swims, and can only be decoyed in the sea-meadows where it flies, in stormy weather, to roost.

I looked around; Jack, the dog, was stretched out, dreaming of bringing in untold game; the guide was curled up entirely oblivious of all things mundane; my comrade was lying on his back snoring like a fat pig, so I made a nest in the bushes and followed his example.

Several days of clear, calm weather stopped all point-shooting at the club, and all of the Norfolk contingent returned home, leaving me the sole occupant, barring the keeper and the guides.

There is only one kind of duck-shooting that can be pursued in calm weather, and that is the floating sink-boxes that are anchored away out in the center of a sheet of water. This consists merely of a trough, a little wider, longer and deeper than a coffin, wherein the shooter lies prone on his back with his decoys around him. Water-proof canvas wings, some ten to twelve feet wide, prevent this box from sinking. Of course the water must be calm; when the wind freshens, the partner in a boat near by hastens to his comrade and takes him in; the canvas wings are folded and the box towed to the ducking-sloop in waiting. This mode of shooting is only used by the market-gunners. No sportsman could find pleasure in lying at full length, staring up at the sky, and only rising to shoot at a flying duck. Motion is denied the gunner, for any sudden movement would cause the canvas wings to dip and the water to rise in the trough. In cold weather it must be torture to thus remain absolutely motionless; yet there are professionals who follow this method for a livelihood. It unquestionably affords the best shooting, for the deception is so perfect that the ducks fly fearlessly among the decoys; there is nothing to arouse suspicion in a big raft of mallards, blue-wings, redheads, and canvasbacks lying a mile or two from the shore. The gunner must be an expert—often firing while lying flat down—and at the best he can only assume a sitting posture, facing one way. He must often take his best shots by twisting himself around, as he cannot turn.

I sent one of the guides to make arrangements with a local market-gunner, and he called for me before day.

He put out all his decoys, about three hundred, around the sink-box, in the middle of the bay; then he deposited me in the trough and told me he would hover around and pick up the dead and crippled birds. "Lie still," he cautioned, "and don't smoke," and then he paddled away, leaving me to my own devices.

It was a calm, stirless morning, and the bay was as smooth and unruffled as a country ice-pond. The dawn was just breaking, and as the ambient light woke the world to life I felt as if I were being born again in another sphere. What solemn thoughts flash through one's brain! When the morning star had sung its march to the monarch of the day I thought of those exquisite lines of Romeo's,

> "Night's candles are burnt out,
> And jocund day——"

A flash of flame swept over the bay; across the horizon there dashed within a few feet of me a couple of canvasbacks. I could see their eyes as they turned and twisted their heads. I did not move, and they splashed among the decoys.

I had two ten-gauge guns lying beside me, but before I could rise a small flock of widgeons came by with set wings, and they too dropped near the blind.

"Things are getting interesting," I thought, and I was gradually working myself to a sitting posture when a huge flock of canvasbacks passed within a hundred yards and split in two parts; one winged its way up the bay and the other swirled to the left, heading straight toward the battery. This was more than flesh and blood could stand, so getting into a sitting posture I gave it to them when within thirty yards; five dropped. There was a mighty flutter of wings, and instead of using the second gun, as a professional would have done, I watched them careening down the bay.

I slapped shells in my favorite Greener as I saw two canvasbacks coming to the blind. As they were in front I knocked them both over easily; but when a group of pintails came from the left I screwed myself round and made an inglorious miss with both barrels.

I had hardly lain down again when a "solitary" passed overhead. I fired, still lying down, and the duck kept on as if he were on a trip to the North Pole with no stop-over ticket. I thought, "I must be more on the alert," so I sat up and craned my neck in every direction—not a sign of anything moving. I suppose a half hour passed, and getting tired, I filled my pipe and the white smoke was soon curling around the box. An inquisitive duck, desiring no doubt to investigate the phenomenon, came bowling through the air, and down he tumbled with a broken wing.

Then a long wait ensued, and I became very weary of my constrained position. I laid myself flat on my face for a change, and then, of course, a duck flew by. Next a shell-drake came cleaving the air, but I failed to stop him, though I gave him two loads.

After trying every position except standing on my head, I was cheered by seeing a whole raft of ducks leave the shoals where they had been feeding and fly up the bay, splitting into small flocks as they proceeded. I felt certain some of them would come my way, so I lay low and did not raise my head until some of them had passed directly over me.

The sight almost made me lose my nerve, for a huge flock, not a hundred yards to my right, was heading directly for the decoys. They saw me, too, but could not check their flight soon enough, and swirled by. I turned on my left side to fire, and I suppose they were fully sixty yards off. I let loose both barrels but brought down only one; but, great Scott! the gun almost kicked the bottom out of the box, and the canvas wings dipped and let about a half barrel of water into the trough. This was more than I had bargained for! "No more flat-on-the-back shooting for me," I mentally exclaimed, as I rubbed my shoulder. I love sport, but I am not enthusiastic enough to lie in a box half filled with freezing cold water, like a seal in the zoo; so I crouched down and only shot from the front or on the left.

I had become heartily tired of the situation; every bone in my body cried out in protest against the constrained position; my head ached, my limbs were asleep, the muscles were strained, and my vision was blinded, for the sun shone in my eyes. That tomb-resting position was a little too much. I looked at my watch. I had been two hours in that box; it seemed as if I had lain there since the day before yesterday. I waved my handkerchief and Tom, the guide, paddled up.

"How many did I get, Tom?" I inquired.

"'Bout fifteen," he replied. "If I'd been in that box I'd got double as many."

"I suppose you would," I answered, "but no more battery-shooting for me; I feel as though I never want to lie down again."

Tom grunted, and pocketed the "tenner" I handed him without a word.

"You men over thar had better stick to p'int shooting," he said when he landed me at the wharf.

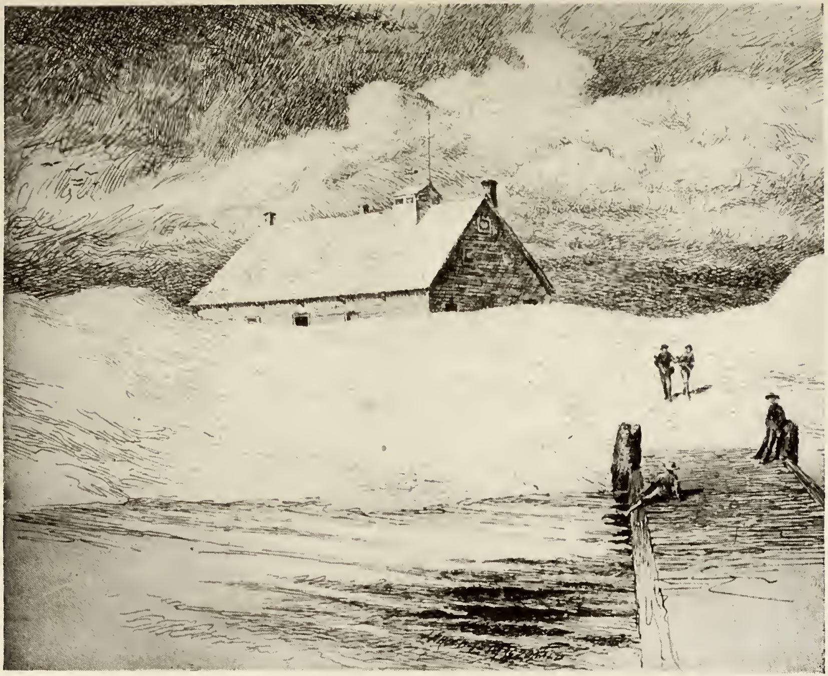
CHAPTER XIV

THE SPORTSMEN'S CLUBS OF CURRITUCK

Most of the Virginia and North Carolina coast-line, beginning only a few miles below Virginia Beach and extending over a hundred miles to Hatteras, is taken up by five great sounds: Currituck, Albemarle, Chowan, Croaton, and Pamlico. All of these bodies of water were undoubtedly at one time a part of the ocean, but a sandbar, extending from north to south as straight as if laid out by a surveyor's compass, interposed and stopped the billows. Five great ponds of shallow water were left, all of them fed through narrow inlets by the sea, except Currituck. The frequent rains make this piece of water almost fresh, though at times the incoming tide leaves the water slightly brackish. It varies in depth from two to four feet, and the bottom is as thickly covered with wild celery as is a well-kept lawn with grass.

The peculiar condition of the water is what makes this favorite food of the water-fowl so abundant, and its being so plentiful has made the sound what it is to the sportsman.

Currituck Sound is interspersed with many islands and marshes, varying from a few square feet to hundreds of acres; and there is not a foot of this ground in the whole territory that is not owned, registered by title-deeds, recorded in the archives, and watched over as if it sheltered a



''A huge building almost hidden from view by two mountains of sand.''

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gold mine. All the best points have been bought by syndicates, and the members of these have formed clubs. As a consequence, a small area on the North Carolina coast contains the largest collection of club-houses in so small a space to be found anywhere in the world. A strip about forty miles long by three to ten miles wide is literally sown with them, ranging from the shanty of the market-gunner to the spacious mansion.

In the early autumn vast flocks of ducks and geese, starting from their breeding-grounds in Labrador and flying southward, follow the trend of the Atlantic Ocean and stop wherever they find food. The higher-grade varieties, such as the canvasback, redhead, spoon-bill and shoveler, are inordinately fond of wild celery, and vast numbers wend their way to this favorite haunt at Currituck, which has, in consequence, been famous for over two centuries for its wild-fowl shooting. This is the only attraction the place offers, for if there is a spot on earth otherwise more dreary and uninviting than that region, I have never heard of it.

The strip of sand that separates the Atlantic Ocean from Currituck Sound is the very embodiment of desolation. In winter storms careen over it at will, and the low marshes and sea-meadows are alternately flooded with water and swept by shifting sands, and in summer the sand-flies and mosquitoes make life a burden; yet there is a hardy race inhabiting those shores. The men are tough as pine knots. They have sallow skins that are thick as parchment, and loose, raw-boned figures. They earn their living entirely by fishing, hunting, and acting as guides; at home they are lazy as Indians. The guides certainly earn their "per diem." They have to row or wade out, pick up the dead ducks and secure the cripples, set the decoys, and often jump into the freezing water. Besides, they have to sit idle for hours, with no excitement of shooting to warm them up; and it is positive torture for some who are handy with the gun to sit and watch a bungler blazing away at canvasbacks and redheads, only splashing the water with his shot. Some of the clubmen allow their guides to carry a gun and to pick up their missed birds. These eastern North Carolinians are born sportsmen. Expertness with the gun, like their poverty, is their heritage; and they, in the vernacular of the coast, "shoot to kill."

If game is plentiful the sportsman remains in the blind all day, and returns to the club-house after dark as tired as a dog and hungry as a coyote.

To belong to a crack club on Currituck Sound is almost as expensive as keeping a yacht, for the keepers and attendants are regularly employed all the year round, and the extras amount to a large sum.

The Swan Island Club has a fine preserve. It has three thousand acres of shoals, flats, and points, besides extensive sea-meadows, affording excellent goose shooting in spring, while in summer the meadows are alive with bay-birds; but not one of the members was ever known to visit the club during spring or summer. This club is an old one, antedating the war. Its membership consists of eighteen men, all of Boston. The initiation fee was $5,000. It has a spacious, handsome frame-house, with out-buildings for the keeper and his assistants.

This club controls the best shooting-grounds in the immediate section, though the ducks are of the more common variety, such as shovelers, blue-wings, etc. An occasional canvasback is shot, but the water around the island is too deep and the wild celery too scarce for this bird.

The keeper there showed me a novel contrivance to keep poachers off the grounds. On the top of the house was a tripod on which was mounted a large rifle that revolved on a pivot. When the keeper discovered, by aid of a powerful field-glass, any marauder, he promptly sent a bullet in his near proximity, and the detected party always took the hint and moved on. There are several thousand acres in this tract, and there is always good shooting, for the ducks have learned to gather there when gunned out of the sound. But notwithstanding this, few of the members visit the club.

The winter before, when I came down near this place to shoot, there had been but one of the clubmen there during the season, and he had lived a solitary life for over two months. His bag up to that date amounted to four hundred pairs.

What most interested me were the live-duck decoys which were kept confined in a wire enclosure on the edge of the water, half in and half out. These decoys were imported from Germany at a cost of ten dollars a pair, and were so well trained that they were not fastened by a cord or cable. The guide said these ducks could see and signal a flock before he could catch sight of them, and that three times as many wild fowl could be shot with their aid as with the ordinary wooden decoys.

One of the oldest resorts is the Currituck Club.

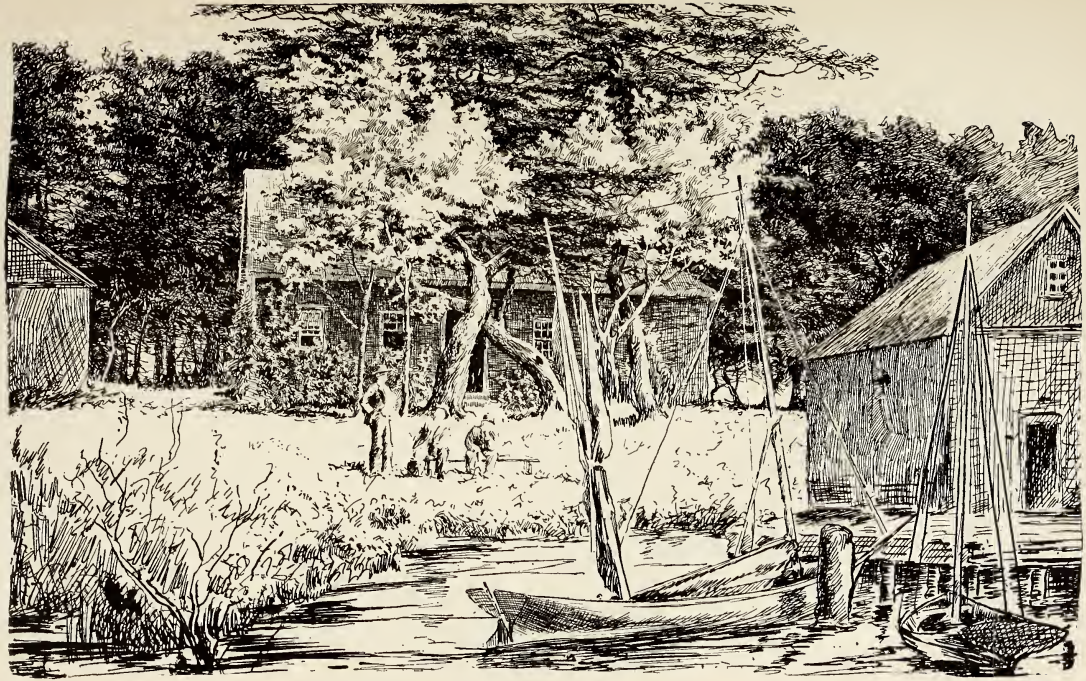
It is a huge building almost hidden from view by two mountains of sand, which have slowly been amassed by northwest gales. It appeared to me to be only a question of time when the whole building would be engulfed by these twin moving mounds.

The clubmen's quarters were very cozy, with a fine library and well-stocked wine-cellar. The shooting at this club has deteriorated very much of late years. A score of years ago there was no finer shooting on the sound.

The Narrow Island club-house, the acme of comfort in winter and a fit rendezvous for the Lotus Eaters in the summer, the finest, snuggest and the most exclusive club in America, we found at Pamunkey Island, with its area of about two hundred acres. It lies right in the middle of the sound, and is a famous resort for all kinds of water fowl. A large rick of decoys, a short distance from the shore, rarely fails to attract sufficient wild fowl to afford fine sport. Years ago, two hundred ducks to a gun was no uncommon sport; now, one-fifth that number is considered a fair day's shooting. Four Northern members own the island. The club shares originally cost $25,000 each. The island in summer is the most romantic spot I ever saw. Fig trees filled the air with the most delicious odor. The water-oaks were of great size. Wild grape vines were trailing everywhere, and a dreamy languor pervaded the scene, and it seemed the ideal land of romance.

We visited many other game preserves the two days following; each one being very like the other.

The oldest syndicate in Currituck is the Palmer Island Club, owned mostly by New Yorkers. The



Pamunkey Island Club House.

shares, I was told, originally cost $5,000 each. A great many canvasbacks are killed here. One clubman secured one hundred and sixty of these dainty birds as the result of one day's shooting. This club is now disbanded, and the grounds are leased to a private party.

But Currituck has its off years, for occasionally a furious storm will cause old ocean to flow across these sand-stretches and fill the sound with salt water. The natives and clubmen regard this as a great calamity, as the salt kills the wild celery for a time, and the wild-fowl seek pastures new.

By the way, the canvasback is the only duck which has the strength to pull up the wild celery by the roots—the root being the only edible portion of the plant; the other ducks take greedily what the royal bird leaves.

Not far from the Palmer Island Club is the "Widow Mitchell Club." The widow keeps open house for the visiting sportsmen. As she owns the shooting-grounds and makes the sportsmen furnish their own table with game killed by their own guns, and charges each a handsome sum for board, she realizes what the natives consider a princely income.

A few miles farther down is another house of entertainment, which used to be kept by the widow Van Slyck. Of the thousands of sportsmen who have visited Currituck in days gone by, few failed to interview the widow. She had the temper of Xantippe and a tongue to match. But, oh, ye gods! how she could cook and serve a canvasback! It was this accomplishment, augmented and backed by the knowledge of the snug little pile laid aside, that secured for the widow her second husband.

A brave, reckless man was he, and many a sportsman will smile when he learns that some four years or so ago the widow Van Slyck became a blushing bride.

The oldest, most companionable, easy-going, hospitable sporting combination in the locality is the Light-house Club Company. All the original members have passed away, and those of the present are middle-aged *bon vivants,* who love sport and good living equally well.

The house itself is a big, barn-like affair, which is slowly but surely being submerged by a huge sand-mound that towers high above the roof; and a wind-storm sends the atoms all through the house until everything and everybody is gritty. The sitting-room is a perfect art gallery in its way, for several of the members are artists and have donated illustrations of local hunting-grounds.

When telling of the club-houses on the North Carolina sounds there is one that must not be overlooked, and that is the "Poor Man's Club." No luxurious quarters are these; a bunk with some straw, a little sheet-iron stove, a frying-pan, coffee-pot, and tin plate constitute the commissariat; while the one room answers the purpose of half a dozen. The bar is represented by a stone jug of villainous corn whiskey that would lay out any one but a North Carolina coast-man.

This "club" consists of two market-hunters; and the lank, lean, unshaven pair manage to bag more game than the largest syndicate on the sound. Shooting wild fowl is a business with them, and they practice every lure, endure every hardship, and generally violate every law to obtain the game. Their time is taken up between sitting in their blinds and snoring in their bunks. I have known them to retire to the unsavory hole on Saturday night and slumber unbrokenly until Monday morning. They are very reticent about the number of wild fowl they kill, but I have heard them say they often get over a hundred ducks between sunrise and sunset.

It is a surprising fact, and hard for any one outside to believe, that the wild fowl here are fed just as regularly as the housewife feeds her chickens and turkeys. The item of corn alone is a very heavy one at every club. In the autumn the keepers watch for the advent of the first feathered visitors, and every morning thereafter they go to some shallow place and scatter the corn. The ducks soon discover the food, and after three or four days they come regularly to the place. They also impart their discovery to new arrivals, and as a result all the ducks in the vicinity start for their feeding-grounds soon after daylight. But if they are shot at incessantly they seem to " drop to the game," and avoid the place.

There are epicures who visit the sound for the sake of their sated appetites. They brave all the hardships of early rising, bitter weather, and long waiting; but nature gives them their reward. When they return at dusk, half-frozen, and wholly starved, they take a bath, followed by an aromatic cocktail, then a game supper—such a game supper!

Here is the home of the diamond-back terrapin, which meat, take it all in all, is the most delicious, when made into a stew, ever placed between the lips of man.

At the head of the table is roast canvasback, a royal bird which neither Europe nor Asia can match. The side-dishes are winter bay-birds, or snipe, on toast. Most of the clubs, as I said, have wine-cellars, and the fragrance and taste are multiplied to the wearied huntsmen, who quaff their champagne with a zest they never experience in the city. Then the dreamy delight of a cigar, and a narrative of the day's hunt, and finally to bed, to sleep—that restful slumber which only follows severe physical exertion.

This is the bright side of the sportsman's life; of course there is a reverse side, and it comes in long spells of unseasonable, warm, calm weather, when the ducks will not decoy, and the gunner soon tires of the monotonous scenery. Especially dreary are the days when a long rainy period sets in, and effectually stops all shooting, and keeps everyone within doors.

But it is the open winter that breaks up the clubman. The warm days succeed each other in monotonous succession, and the shooter does not even take the trouble to visit the blinds; waiting becomes a bore, and lounging a pain. A summer calm broods over the sea and sound, and the men dawdle about in their shirt sleeves.

In the fall and winter of 1890 there was no cold weather, and the shooting was an utter and complete failure. Many sportsmen, disgusted, left for their homes before Christmas; others remained in the hope of a change of weather, until the middle of January; then the most sanguine gave up, and left the club-houses to their solitude.

In the latter part of February the bulk of the canvasbacks and redheads have either been shot or driven off, and then wild geese make their appearance; but few of the clubmen wait for them, though many of the clubs keep live wild-geese decoys. These birds are trained to the work, and are anchored by a string tied to their legs, with a heavy stone on the other end. They are placed in a straight line from the shooter, that he may tell at a glance the location of the wild water fowl. Notwithstanding these precautions, the decoys are often shot by nervous sportsmen. Then, again, the tame geese sometimes drag their anchors and get out of line, and run the risk of being killed. It is astonishing how much sense these birds have; they understand thoroughly the work cut out for them, and seem to revel in it. They keep quiet when nothing is stirring, but the moment a flock of wild geese is perceived, they raise their voices in an incessant call, and take a devilish delight in luring their brethren to destruction.

It may well be asked, what is the size of the bags made by the clubmen? It is to be expected that they would have splendid shooting to repay them for the large amount spent for house, equipment, and privileges. In answer: first, the size of bag depends largely on who is handling the gun. A moderate shot in a good season can average about seventy-five ducks a week, or about twenty-five a day. Nearly all the clubmen would be satisfied with that record.

The finest bag I ever heard of being made by an amateur was by a member of the Palmer Island Club, who, some few years ago, killed in one day two hundred and sixty canvasbacks. Had the sportsman been shooting for the market he would have made a good day's work of it, for his one hundred and thirty pairs of canvasbacks would have brought at least five hundred dollars. Mr. C. C. White, keeper of the Norfolk Currituck Club, killed one hundred and twelve canvasbacks in a day, and with an antiquated muzzleloader at that.

The record of crack shooting and big bags excites the interest of sportsmen, and *vice versa.* All who handle the gun keep an account of their successes. But where is the huntsman who keeps memoranda of his failures?

I chanced one night at the sound to be present at a gathering of club-house attachés, and listened with pleasure to the narration of the incidents respecting their several clubs. After hearing about fancy shooting until it became monotonous, I asked them to give an account of some of the worst shots they ever came across. This request provoked a good deal of laughter and chaffing, and one guide said he could sit up all night and not get through telling of all the bad shots he had run up against.

"I remember," he continued, "a bad shot; a worse one couldn't occur. A member of our club brought him along. He was studying for a preacher, and his health had given out. He was poor and puny, narrow-chested, stoop-shouldered, with a sharp nose, and the biggest pair of spectacles resting on it I ever laid my eyes on. This young man thought he knew everything and more than anybody else. He actually loaded his own shells, and the next morning, when we were all standing in the room, he slipped in a couple of them shells that the caps had only been forced about half-way, leaving the edge above the butt of the shell, and, in consequence, when he closed the gun with a jerk its cap of course exploded, and the charge tore a hole as big as my fist in the top flooring, and passed through a bed where one of the guardsmen was lying, striking within an inch of his head. It certainly was a wonder he did not kill somebody. It scattered the crowd, anyway.

"I was the guide that was chosen to carry him to the blinds, and I tied the gun to the boat so that he could not make cold meat of me when I was poling with my back to him.

"After the decoys were set, I shoved the boat into the blind, and placed the preacher in the bow with his face p'inted outward, and told him to be careful not to fire until the ducks was right over the decoys. Pretty soon a string of mallards turned the point about a quarter of a mile away, and no sooner did he clap eyes on them than dang my buttons if he didn't throw up his gun and let drive. Of course the shot didn't even reach them. The birds were flying right smart that day, and if I had been behind that gun I could have got fifty as easy as falling off a log; but that air preacher, he'd pull trigger at a flock a mile and a half in the air. It warn't no use to tell him anything, he just let fly at every critter he saw—ducks, geese, coots, loons, swamp-hens—all was the same to him; he was bent on killing everything that flew in old Currituck."

"How many did he get, after all?" someone asked.

"Wall, you see, he shot into a thundering, all-fired flock, and he couldn't miss if he had tried, and he brung down two. Toward evening, though, he did the trick. A string of ducks was flying over the boat. He up with the gun, and it went off unexpected, as them hammerless guns are apt to do, and the butt kicked him a stunning blow on the nose, almost mashing it flat; but dog-gone my buttons if the gun wasn't p'inted right, and he knocks three over by accident! But he had enough of sport. He nursed his nose all the evening, and put out for home the next day."

The most sportsmanlike method of killing ducks is, of course, over the decoys; and the question of the weight, caliber, and character of the gun is of supreme importance. In the first place, the man who buys a costly gun should be as carefully fitted as when he buys a suit of clothes or a pair of shoes. By all means, have a reputable dealer measure you and make a gun to order.

Ready-made guns are like ready-made clothes—they are cut on general principles; they may fit and they may not. A person with a short neck wants a straight stock; a person with a long neck, a bent stock. A gun should come up to the shoulder so perfectly adjusted that the eye can range along the barrel without twisting or bending the head.

Expert gunners in Currituck do not believe in large guns for duck-shooting. A No. 10 is the best size, provided it has plenty of metal at the breech. A light-breeched gun with the heavy duck charges will, with continuous firing, so hammer the shoulder and face as to sometimes unfit a gunner for shooting for days. It is an axiom among gunners that "the heavier the breech, the lighter the recoil."

In duck-shooting, many amateurs make the mistake of using too large shot. "The bigger the pellets," they argue, "the more deadly their work." That is true if the shot were in numbers the same: but the large size scatter, and the smaller clump together. No. 4 is the standard. In a driving wind, No. 3 is the size.

There is one thing the amateur sportsman should note: never shoot at an advancing flock, for the birds' fronts are protected with muscles and close, compact feathers, and the wings are edgewise to him. It is impossible to convince an amateur that it is wiser to withhold his fire. He must learn by oft-repeated experience that it is wasting ammunition, and losing both ducks and his temper, to let drive into a "heading-in" flock. The proper way is to lie low in the blind, and to take them "on the turn," as the saying goes; meaning, to wait until they reach the decoys and, checking their speed, turn either to the right or to the left; then is the time to let them have it, for the wild fowl are for the moment nearly stationary, with outstretched wings, and the vulnerable part of their bodies exposed. A couple of barrels pointed right cuts a clean swath through the mass.

Sometimes a single duck darts by, with no intention of stopping, and now the individual behind the big end of the gun has a chance to prove whether or not he is a novice. An upland shooter will miss the fowl nine times out of ten, while a veteran duck-hunter will bag his game almost to a certainty. I have often witnessed the amazement of these mountain and valley sportsmen trying their guns for the first time at duck-shooting. They were fine shots in their section, killing partridges in a thick covert, bowling over the swift-flying pheasant, dropping a startled woodcock in his zigzag flight through the interlacing branches of a jungle or over the tops of trees; yet here they were burning powder and not touching a feather, and they are apt to blame the gun-loading, or attribute it to sheer nervousness.

The explanation is simple. They do not calculate or estimate correctly the velocity of the duck's flight. No one can understand except by actual demonstration the great space the gun must be pitched in front of the flying object. A canvasback, for instance, going with the wind at a speed of a hundred miles an hour, could only be struck with the sight thrown fully fifteen to eighteen feet in front.

The rules and regulations of the different clubs, while they differ in detail, agree in all the main points. Among the latter are the following:

"No person who follows shooting or fishing for market or hire shall be admitted as a member of the Association, nor shall any shooting or fishing for market or hire on the part of members or guests be permitted.

"Each member shall be entitled to take one guest or person to the grounds of the Association, which guest shall be entitled to all the privileges. No invitation shall be extended unless the member accompanies his guest, and no guest shall be allowed to remain longer at the club than the member extending the invitation.

"No member or guest shall give any money or gratuity to any employee of the Association.

"No gun shall be fired on property of the Association on Sunday between the rising and setting of the sun, and no loaded gun shall be carried inside the club building."

Besides these clubs, there are many fine shooting-points owned by the natives, who entertain visiting sportsmen; and in the winter, when the ducks fly well, there is hardly a point, blind, or sink-box that has not its occupant.

As a rule, only wealthy men, who do not count the cost, comprise the clubs. "Those who dance must pay the fiddler," and those who shoot at Currituck pay a big price for the game they bag. Certainly, at a moderate computation, each duck that falls to the guns costs at the lowest estimate $5, often five times that amount. The initiation fee of the members is from $1000 to $5000, with annual dues ranging from $250 to $400 a year.

CHAPTER XV

HOG ISLAND, VIRGINIA

NEXT to Jamestown, the first settlement made in Virginia, the most interesting spot in that State, to the antiquarian, is Hog Island, on the Atlantic Coast. It was the redoubtable John Smith who first discovered this place. The second day after he landed at Smith's Island and planted the English flag for the first time in the New World, he started out on a voyage along the coast, when a great storm arose, his boat filled and he escaped, as he said, "by ye mercy of God."

He named the island upon which he landed, Shooting Bears Island, as the small species of bruin which to this day abound in the cane-brakes of the Dismal Swamp were numerous on the newfound isle.

It is a great pity that this place did not retain its beautiful Indian name, "Machipongo Island," which, translated, means "fine dust and flies"—literally, fine sand and mosquitoes. These two inflictions plagued the natives, and made the island uninhabitable to the thin-skinned, thinly clad Indians, who only visited it at certain periods of the year to fish and hunt.

The origin of the name "Hog Island," and the person or people who applied the harsh, ugly name to the place, is unknown. The islanders say that in colonial days a vessel was wrecked near the shores, and a large number of hogs swam safely to land, and some matter-of-fact person named the spot Hog Island. There are certain antiquarians of Northampton County, however, who claim that the people of the mainland named the place Hog Island simply and solely because the inhabitants were more like hogs in looks, manners, and way of living than anything else. Certainly there never was, is not, and never will be anything like *entiente cordiale* between the people of the mainland and the islanders.

Hog Island is about four miles long, and varies from one to two miles in width. On the south side runs the Great Machipongo Inlet, whose average depth is forty feet. It is a noble sheet of water. The life-saving station is built on the banks of this inlet, close to where it empties into the ocean. The chart of the Coast and Geodetic Survey shows that the sand shallows for one or two miles, making the place very dangerous to those "who go down to the sea in ships," and mariners give the place a wide berth. The beach is five miles long, with firm sand.

I have made many visits to this island, for the spot always had a peculiar charm; it excites the imagination, stimulates the fancy, and the old colonial ghosts haunt the spot. It is well worth a visit to the tourist.

The early history of the place is in the musty, worn and tattered records of Virginia, in the State Capitol. There is a document bearing date of 1672, which consists of a "letter patent" to Sir Henry Chinchley, of the island known as Machipongo, and his grant of the same to certain colonists, whose names are Henry Patrick, Thomas Hewes, William Mainey, Henry Meadow, William Taylor, John Harbush, Thomas Cooke, Edward Young, George Griffin, John Parson, Richard Bagley, Thomas Shermingham, John Baker, William Bannister, Grace Winter, Abraham Hill, Matt Morgan, John Corry, Richard Hyde, Upham Holt and Ann Emmerson.

These settlers presumably had families, and they resided there no one knows how long. Certainly they must have had a different life and one in marked contrast with the colony at Jamestown, who were many times on the brink of actual starvation; for on the fruitful Machipongo Isle no man need work and no man need starve.

There were no newspapers in those days to chronicle events and to "show the very age and body of the times," nor was there any local historian among the lot; so that their lives and their adventures are not known. They were as isolated from the world as were the mutineers of the merchant ship *Bounty* on Pitcairn Island, and they were lost to the outside world, and in that lone, forgotten spot—

> "The world forgetting and by the world forgot."

The colonists disappeared—man, woman, and child. What they suffered, endured, or enjoyed will never be known. But doubtless the tale would bear telling and would make fascinating reading.

There must have been a conflict with the warlike tribes of Accomacs, who would not be likely to submit to having their most fruitful isle seized, like the brightest jewel torn from a crown. The Indians may have closed in upon the island with a great fleet of canoes and massacred and tortured or slain the last one of the settlers; or the mosquitoes may have routed the colony; but if they left the island of their own accord, some of them would undoubtedly have remained in the vicinity. But there is not one of their descendants on the Atlantic Coast to-day. There is not the slightest clew to the fate of these people, and their disappearance is as unfathomable as that of the lost colony of Sir Walter Raleigh, which vanished from Roanoke Island. Certain it is that they left not a token or relic behind; nor is there a grave or mouldering bone to show that the white man lived there long before the Pilgrims built their first village.

The earliest settler of Hog Island who has a real record was a man by the name of Labin Phillips, who settled the place during the Revolutionary War.

Shortly after the surrender of Cornwallis, Labin built the first habitable home on the island, which is still standing and is an object of great interest to the sportsmen and tourists who visit the place.

The dwelling is built of red cedar and is of a quaint, odd style of architecture, such as the early colonists erected, and is worthy of preservation as an object-lesson in proof of the durability of the red cedar, which, after a hundred years, remains firm and sound; whereas, oak, pine, hemlock or black Jack would long since have rotted and fallen to pieces in the damp sea air.

The house would delight an antiquarian. The chimney takes in one entire side of the structure, and is built of clay and wood, corn-cob fashion, and of course liable to catch fire at the smallest provocation. In this house was a barrel of water, and leaning near by was a long sapling with a great bunch of rags tied to one end, looking for all the world like the sweeps that the "chimney devils" of the last century used. Whenever the sticks in the chimney burst into a blaze the rags were plunged into the barrel, the pole was thrust upwards and the incipient flame quenched.

There died on the island a short time ago an aged citizen named Samuel Kelly, aged eighty-two years. Even when a boy he showed a decided bent for making money, and for keeping it also. When he reached manhood he united the characteristics of Daniel Dancer, the miser, and that of the famous Captain Kidd; for he hoarded his money, and then buried it.

"Sam" Kelly became the most unique character on the island. He established a little store, but, paradoxical as it may seem, he could never be found there; no man's foot was allowed to cross the threshold. The owner would call on the natives every morning, get their orders, and deliver the goods in the evening. There never lived a more thorough miser. He visited nobody, never entered a church, never gave a cent to charity, never had a decent coat on his back, and probably never sat down to a well-prepared meal.

As there was no other store on the island, his neighbors knew that he must be making money and hoarding it. Every man, woman, and child was aware that there must be a fortune hid away somewhere in his cabin, for some of his neighbors had caught a passing glimpse through the window of the miser gloating over a great pile of gold coin.

As the years glided by the hoard increased. Never spending a cent, and saving every dollar, it was a matter of much speculation among his neighbors as to how much he was worth.

But the talk was all among themselves; they never breathed a word of old Sam Kelly's hoard to the fishermen and lightermen who stopped at the island. It is marvelous that a decrepit, defenceless miser should live in a dilapidated cabin for years, his gold unsecured by safe, vault, or strong-box, easy for the first strong hand to clutch, and yet there was never a single attempt made to rob him.

Samuel Kelly lived to see nearly all his contemporaries buried, and that " fell sergeant, Death, so strict in the arrest," seemed to have forgotten him, but at last Samuel was summoned to appear before the Bar. On his death-bed his friends and only surviving relative besought him to reveal the secret of his hiding-place; but the ruling passion was strong in death. Shrouds have no pockets, but if the miser could not carry his treasure with him, no one else should have it, and so he died carrying his secret to the grave. The house was searched, and under the counter in his little store were found two boxes, one containing three thousand dollars in gold, the other, two thousand in currency. Then a thorough search was organized and every possible or likely spot was examined, but not another cent was ever discovered. His only relative and heir was his sister, Miss Nancy Kelly, now ninety-four years of age, and who is to-day the richest person on the island.

There are at this writing (1907) forty-two dwellings on the island, and every householder seems to be above want. Each year the island exports 150,000 bushels of oysters, the average price being fifty cents a bushel. The fish and game bring almost as much, so it appears that there is a good deal of money floating around Hog Island.

To a student or a thinker with archaeological proclivities the people of Hog Island present a curious study. Here is a community of forty-two families, averaging six children to each. Most of these households have, father and son, existed on the island for three centuries. Now what kind of people has this intermingling and intermarrying produced? Living in a land where no one need work, and where Nature has given them a fine climate, the ocean and land, and food in plenty, we might expect to find as ideal a community as ever existed in Rasselas's Happy Valley; but such is not the fact. The islanders are below mediocrity. There are some bright examples, but the majority are slothful, and their dispositions mean and malicious. There are no criminals among them, for the reason that they have not the energy or spirit to commit a crime, except in the breaking of the game laws. They fish and hunt, and labor for a few weeks gathering oysters, and this labor gives them enough money to live in ease and comfort. Most of these islanders hibernate like an animal; they eat heavily, and then doze for hours. Some of them recline and repose twenty hours out of the twenty-four.

I had one hunting experience at Hog Island that I will never forget. I turn over the pages of my diary and find it was the 18th of December, 1905.

I was staying with the assistant light-house keeper. That morning we went to the blinds about a couple of miles from the island, and some three or four hundred yards from a sand spit that divided the ocean from the inlet.

We soon had the decoys spread, and the sport was good from the start, for the wind was blowing furiously, and the way the black-ducks came darting in from the ocean was good for the sportsman. We were both so busy shooting that we failed to notice that the tide was ebbing fast, and that meant being caught on the flats. When the little boat in the blind began to thump on the bottom we awoke to the fact that we would have to hustle if we were to get back to the island that day.

We jumped out and piled the decoys into the boat with frenzied haste, and then started to pull the boat through the shallow water a couple of hundred yards to where our sailboat was anchored in the channel; we had not gone half the distance when the batteau, heavily weighted by the decoys, stuck in the mud. The water was only a few inches deep, and we pulled and hauled with all our might until every sinew was strained; but all in vain. Now here was a nice state of affairs, a "purty predicament," as the keeper expressed it, in an open boat with the icy wind that came unchecked from Spitzbergen; the thermometer below the freezing point, and our wraps all left in the sailboat!

"Jerusalem! but it is cold," said the keeper, and he humped his spine, thrust his hands in his pockets as far as they would go, sank his neck between his shoulders until only the top of his cap was visible, and lapsed into gloomy silence.

There was nothing to do but sit on the side of the craft, and wait. The mud, black, plastic, and adhesive, was fully two feet deep, and only a web-footed bird could have stood upon it without sinking.

If my companion had been a congenial spirit we could have whiled the hours away, but as the keeper never vouchsafed any answer save a grunt or a groan, I might as well have attempted to philander with a " Marble Wenus " as to get up any conversation with him.

" A watched pot never boils," and measuring time—waiting—is worse than the most violent physical toil.

It is in just such situations that the sportsman's old brier-root becomes his best comforter; and, by the way, the art of lighting a pipe in a high wind, when everything is wet except the matches, is only known to old campaigners. How can one light a match when there is nothing dry to scratch it against? It is very simple. Take off your hat, open your knife and place it inside, and rub the match along the sharp edge; so there you are.

It is only in trying situations that the pipe is truly appreciated; like the jewel in the toad's head, it shines brightest in adversity. To those who face hardships tobacco is a boon; it banishes dull care, it soothes the nerves, it brings hope to the wearied heart and rest to the tired brain. The stem of the pipe is sweeter to the taste of the used-up sportsman than the kiss of the rosy-lipped maiden, and the odor of the smoke more fragrant than the odor from a bank covered with flowers. At least it appears that way when one is stuck in a mud bank, with the mercury below freezing, and the wind blowing sixty miles an hour.

We remained in that spot for five hours, and I never felt more overjoyed to reach a well-warmed, well-lighted house, for we were half frozen and wholly starved.

> "Quick the measure, dear the treasure,
> Sweet is pleasure after pain."

That night the worst hurricane in the memory of man swept over the island. It was a little after two o'clock in the morning when the assistant keeper rushed into my room, clad in oil-skins, with a lantern in his hand, and told me in excited tones that the brant were flocking by the thousands around the light-house, and to dress and go with him to the tower.

I was soon ready, and reaching the four-acre enclosure in which the light-house stood, the full force of the raging wind, filled with sleet and snow, struck us with such force that we staggered like drunken men. Inch by inch we worked and battled our way until we reached the tower. Climbing the spiral steps we reached the keeper's room, just under the revolving light. The place was well-warmed by a red-hot stove, and a table of books and magazines gave the place a cozy, comfortable, homelike look. One of the keepers was keeping watch and ward, his head surrounded by a halo of tobacco smoke. It was a scene of peaceful content; but one step through the door and it was chaos on the rampage—Old Boreas raging and running amuck. To stand, as it were, in mid air, enveloped in a hurricane, was certainly a new sensation. It seemed as though the final moment had come, the "*Dies Irae,*". the convulsive throes of Nature in the wreck of matter, and the crash in the crucible of the world.

The round tower was encircled by a narrow iron balcony just below the lantern. On the south side where we stood clutching the railing, the wind, which struck the tower on the north side, almost with the force of the ocean billows, was fended off. I doubt if any man could have lived for five minutes on the north side of the tower.

The brant, driven by the furious wind, and bewildered, buffeted and frightened by the warring of the elements, were naturally attracted by the flashing lamp high in the air, and they aimed for it from all points of the compass.

It was a sight worth taking a long journey to see. The brant, the shyest, wildest, most timid of water fowl, were within five feet of us, but, evidently blinded by the light, they could see nothing. Some would circle around the tower, others dart by; and wonderful to relate, some would remain stationary in the air, their wings moving so rapidly that they were blurred like a wheel in rapid motion. I thought at the time what a tremendous power must lie in their wings to enable them to nullify the wind that the instrument inside indicated was blowing sixty-five miles an hour.

What a treat to be able to gaze on those wild birds and study them at close range, when they were free and unfettered in their native element two hundred feet above the earth!

The lamp in the tower revolved every forty-five seconds, and for a short time every bird was in the vivid glare, which displayed every graceful curve of neck and head, and the set and balance of the body, and enabled one to look into their brilliant eyes.

The brant is not a glossy, showy bird like the wood-duck or mallard, but in the driving rain and under the powerful rays of the lamp they were exquisitely beautiful; their plumage looked like ebony, and the tints changed to many an iridescent hue. It was enthralling to watch them dart in the midst of the Argand's refulgent gleams, one second vivid and tangible, the next swallowed up in Cimmerian darkness. Every few seconds, above all the rush of the wind, would be heard a loud tinkling sound as a blinded brant, dazed by the rays, would strike the double two-inch plate-glass that surrounded the burner, and fall dead from the impact; sometimes dying on the platform of the tower, but more often falling to the ground.

Sterling, the keeper, picked up twenty-eight that night, and at the base of the tower there were several islanders with their dogs, who secured dozens of the water fowl, the exact number they never divulged.

Some of the islanders asked the keeper on duty to allow them to ascend the tower and shoot the hovering birds. Certainly a man using a small gauge gun could have killed hundreds that night. I told the keeper that if such a murderous act was permitted the Government would dismiss every one of the light-house employees.

After two hours spent in the tower I returned to bed, and in my dreams I could still see the darting, circling brant.

Nature has richly endowed Hog Island. I question whether there is any other one spot on earth where fish, flesh, and fowl are more abundant. In the winter the flats are the haunt of the brant, and the sloughs, of the black-duck; in the spring are the snipe, and in the summer and autumn the bay-birds. The oysters and clams are countless. In the creeks, channels, and inlets are found every variety of fish, especially the delicious sheepshead and hog-fish; and the garden produce is far superior to that of the mainland. The shooting around the island should be very fine; but the State game laws are treated with contempt, and the wild fowl are driven from the vicinity. When President Cleveland was serving his second term he visited Hog Island, and was much impressed with the game outlook, and some of his friends built a large commodious club-house a short distance from the life-saving station, and several sportsmen bought parcels of land and erected handsome shooting-lodges.

Then there was a golden chance for the Hog Islanders to make the place a great tourists', yachting and sportsmen's rendezvous, which would have yielded a handsome return without labor; but these people, actuated by jealousy or malice toward the strangers, instead of preserving the game, deliberately practiced night shooting, which of course drove the wild fowl from their feeding-grounds. It is a well-known fact that no matter how much shooting is done in the daytime, if the birds are undisturbed at night they will cling to their favorite flats during the whole season; on the other hand, if they are hunted in the night they rise high in the air and head for some distant point, often hundreds of miles away. The clubmen left the place in disgust, and the shooting-boxes are now rotting on the ground.

In 1905 I went there in the early part of the season, and there were immense flocks of brant all around the place. Standing on the tower I swept the broadwater with a powerful field-glass, and saw Machipongo Inlet black with wild fowl.

I expected to have fine sport, and was at the life-saving station early the next morning, when Harry Bowen, one of the crew, an exceptionally bright native of the island, was to take me to the blinds.

The captain of the station told me that there would be no sport, that he had heard the reports of the guns all night, and he called up several of the surfmen who had patrolled the beach, and they said that from ten o'clock P. M. until near daybreak some of the islanders were shooting the brant and black-duck.

Harry came to the station from his house about a half mile distant, and gave me the names of three of the islanders who had made a big killing, as he expressed it.

I went to the look-out and used the glass, and could not see a duck in the whole inlet. These islanders knew that the game laws expressly prohibited night-shooting in any form or manner, yet they contemptuously ignored the statutes.

Perhaps a word here about the game laws will not be untimely.

Until 1878 there were no game laws in Virginia, and any one could shoot at will all the week and Sundays too, day or night.

While a member of the Legislature, in 1875, I framed and formed the first game laws for the State, and met with a great deal of opposition, especially from the mountaineers. One member gravely informing me that he would have to oppose me for the reason that the swallows tumbling down the chimney scared his children.

The Virginia sportsmen have succeeded in passing good, honest laws to protect the game, and that King of Sportsmen and Prince of Good Fellows, Polk Miller, has worked for years to not only enact laws to protect the game in Virginia, but to see that the enactments are carried out. It would be a good investment to have a game warden reside at Hog Island during six months of the year.

The game laws should be strictly enforced against night-shooting. All law-abiding citizens of both Virginia and the Carolinas agree to this, and the great majority agree that spring-shooting should be abolished.

Maryland, Virginia and North Carolina all have a navy to protect their fish and oysters, and if the same amount of money was spent in protecting their game there would be an abundance for the next half century.

CHAPTER XVI

GUNS AND DOGS

WHAT a compass is to the mariner, a trowel to the mason, a sledge to the smith, an ax to the woodman, a plow to the farmer, the gun is to the sportsman.

Every huntsman has his own peculiar fad about guns, and to secure good advice on this subject one must seek the experience and advice of his brother-sportsmen.

At one time I addressed a communication to several prominent gunsmiths who knew how to shoot as well as manufacture a gun. I asked each one what kind of a gun he would make for his own boy, aged, say, from ten to sixteen, and all but one replied, "A 20-gauge gun."

For an adult, all agreed that a No. 12 gauge was the thing, and that it must not weigh less than 7¼ lbs.; with a gun of that gauge, weighing less than seven pounds, there would be so much recoil that shooting would be unpleasant, because the owner would be afraid of his gun. Many a young sportsman has turned to other kinds of recreation because of this.

It is the consensus of opinion among the practical sportsmen I have met that for an all-around gun a No. 12 gauge, with one barrel open and the other a modified choke, is the best.

I wrote to Uncle Billy Wagner, Washington,

D. C., a man of national reputation, who as a gunmaker and sportsman of many years' experience ought to know, and I asked him what kind of gun he uses. His answer was, "For field-shooting, or general bird-shooting, I use a gun with both barrels open."

As to the price of a gun, all sportsmen agree that it is folly to buy a cheap gun, and greater folly to buy an expensive one. A good gun will last a sportsman all his life, and if the purchaser pays more than one hundred dollars for a double-barrel, he is simply paying for the ornaments. A gun costing between fifty and one hundred dollars is good enough for a king.

It is a popular fallacy that the more a gun costs, the better it will shoot, and the sporting-goods merchant encourages that idea. A new ten-dollar gun will shoot as hard and as true as a thousand-dollar one, both being of the same gauge and using the same charge. In a short while, however, the cheap gun will, figuratively, go to pieces.

A young sportsman who lives in a hunting region, who has an unusual figure, such as a very long neck or *vice versa,* long or short arms, should have a gun made to measure, just as he would go to a tailor to overcome some peculiarity of form.

About the caliber of the gun for wild fowl shooting there is a great difference of opinion; but I will bank on the market-gunners, for when a man makes his living by killing game he is pretty certain to get the deadliest weapon on the market. I never saw a pot-hunter on the coast who ever used a gun under a No. 10, and a very stoutly constructed one at that, with plenty of metal at the breech, and a heavy stock. I have often used a No. 8 on brant, but it lacks the easy swing and handling of the No. 10.

A few winters ago I tried a No. 4 single-barrel Greener, that took the prize at the St. Louis Exposition. It was a superbly built weapon, but I found it practically useless for every-day work. It kicked like a broncho and bellowed like a howitzer.

As for ammunition, in these days of wood powder it is safer to buy ready-made ammunition.

"Now what kind of dog ought a young sportsman to choose?" I think I voice the opinion of nine-tenths of the veteran huntsmen when I say, get an English setter. The pointer, it is true, is a noble hunting-dog; he is far more graceful than the setter, and, being built like a greyhound, gets over the ground more rapidly than the setter, and in dry, hot weather he does not suffer from thirst like his rival. Many sportsmen aver that he possesses the keener scent, and consequently can find more birds than the setter, but that is merely a matter of opinion. The pointer has but little local or personal attachment. In the hunting season he will follow anybody who has a gun. The English setter, on the contrary, is fidelity itself.

Of course, a dog must be of pure breed, but for practical purposes it does not make any difference about a short or long pedigree. Certainly I do not think any setter puppy is worth over twenty-five dollars.

When buying a dog get him when about a month or six weeks old, and teach him yourself. A young lad can train a setter puppy and fit him for the field as well as a professional trainer. Place the food before the puppy, and tell him to "Take care" in a quick, decided tone; use a slight switch; then change your voice and wave your hand, and tell him to "Hie on." It is astonishing how soon he learns his lesson. After a week or so, hide his food a short distance away, and order him to hunt it. He will soon catch on, and when he finds it, order him to "Take care," then wave your arm, and let him eat his meal.

If you live in the country, hide his food in a distant field, only be certain to go to the spot in a round-about way so that he cannot follow your tracks. Never permit any one to feed your dog. Always let him look up to you as his sole support in life. Teach your dog to retrieve, using your handkerchief. Teach him to lie down at command. When the dog is thus trained you will have an animal to be proud of. A well-trained dog is a thing of joy and pride; but an untrained setter is an unmitigated nuisance.

Finally, when you decide upon going hunting in any section unknown to you, write to the postmaster of the section, enclose a stamp, and simply ask him to deliver it to some prominent amateur sportsman, and in that way you will strike the right people, who will treat you fairly and honestly.

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