

STRAY SHOTS IN THE LAND OF SILVER.

BY O. H. HOWARTH.

WHERE Dame Nature has lavished her wealth above ground she seldom buries much of it. And, the instances are rare in which her cautious ally, Tom Tiddler, keeps anything besides gold and silver and barren rocks within his special domain. Such, at least, has been my experience of great mining regions; and I had every expectation that this would hold good through the vast wildernesses of Chihuahua, the northernmost State of Old Mexico. As the eye becomes wearied day after day with the endless dry plains and desolate mountain ranges of that arid land, it is natural to conclude that very little in the way of sport need be looked for. Yet every rule has its exceptions, and stray shots may be obtained in the Land of Silver when one knows where to look for his game.

Near the curious old mining town of Parral del Hidalgo, situated among the lower crests of the Sierra Madre range, I enjoyed some pleasant sport. As the timbered backbone of the mountains is approached, natural life reappears, and one may chance upon something worth shooting.

If I were gifted with an inspired pen, I might be tempted to commence with a descriptive notice of the journey, per Mexican *diligencia*, from Jimenez, the railway depot, to Parral. But I shirk this, for reasons which anybody may ascertain by trying it, I have seen in the "old country" a patent disintegrator (no doubt it has its American counterpart), which has assumed the name of the "Devil." I alighted at the coach-office at Parral with a full appreciation of the action of this machine upon refractory substances. With brains permanently disarranged by hat-smashers against the roof of a coach, repeated at intervals of five minutes during a period of ten hours, one possesses, I think, a sufficient apology for refraining from further comment.

There is one point I must mention, to the credit of the waste places alluded to above, and that is that almost at any point in the huge wilderness of Chihuahua you may succeed in flushing the desert quail—a spry little bird of a variety distinct

from all the three kinds to be met with in California. He has so little fear of the shooting-iron that it is difficult to make him take to wing; but it may be done by stalking him behind the brush, and so walking into him unawares. The "dotty" character of the brush-growth makes this comparatively practicable, in the absence of speedy dogs. But he runs like the wind, and a practiced rabbit shot might almost consider it legitimate work to try and bag him afoot.

As one attains a height of six thousand feet and upwards, in the direction of the Sierra Madre, it is no bad sport to cruise in search of stray shots; and, with a healthy indifference to tolerably rough living, Parral is a good center for such explorations. The chances are, of course, improved if the expedition is opened with a ride of a dozen or fifteen miles away from the town. In starting on such a ride it is advisable, even when the year is well advanced, to be provided with sufficient clothing to encounter a coolish wind; for although the latitude verges on the tropics, there is often a remnant of snow on the main range which sends down a keen breeze when the sharp unclouded rays of the sun are off, both early and late. To sportsmen inexperienced in the matter of physical exertion at those elevations a caution may also be offered as to how they indulge in any sudden spurts of running or climbing. There is nothing, of course, in the surroundings to remind one of being at any unusual height above the sea-level; and any sudden effort is likely to induce the peculiar and disagreeable catch of breath incidental to a rarified atmosphere. I have known a man who would have laughed at the notion of getting winded in a hundred yards, sit down with the impression that he was about to give up the ghost, for a few minutes, after such a sprint at eight thousand feet above the sea.

But now let us leave the beaten track that winds away towards the next batch of mines, and make for yonder cañon, from which issues the aroya we have just crossed. A flight of little gray doves rushes across about thirty yards ahead; and, as all is game that comes to us on this trip, they are treated to the

contents of a barrel, and five of them fall. In reference to these doves I may note in passing that it was not until they came before me in review the next morning, disposed upon squares of toast, that I discovered I had killed no less than three different species with one shot. The first was a small blue rock-pigeon, white-fleshed and somewhat tough; the second, the gray pintailed dove common in North Mexico, brown-fleshed and with a choice gamey flavor which makes it quite a *bonne-bouche* for breakfast; and the third, one of the tiny turtle-doves of a reddish cast, which usually keep to themselves, but will join others in flight, especially if alarmed.

A short distance further on, a large speckled hawk of a new type, not unlike the English sparrow hawk, came in for a dose of pepper, and furnished a skin for the ornithologists, in company with a diminutive kestrel which I shot in Southern California, and which is also identical in all his points, excepting size, with his European congener. It is remarkable that among the commoner varieties of birds in this country nearly every species possesses one representative almost or quite indistinguishable from the Northern European type. This is the case with the buzzard, hawk, rook, wood-pigeon, magpie, sparrow and several of the finches; there being in each case other varieties at present but little known. Before we reached the entrance of the cañon, a singular sound greeted us—familiar enough to the mountaineer, but incomparably strange, amid the silence of the hills, to those who have never heard it. It is the sound of an approaching express train, yet not on the earth; or of some vast waterfall, yet not stationary. It increased with startling suddenness to a roar like escaping steam.

"A cyclone!" exclaimed one of my companions.

"Duck," briefly replied the other.

Down they swept at a hundred miles an hour, a short, dark, changeful column of scissor-winged birds, cleaving the air over our heads at a speed which made one wonder why they didn't turn red hot and leave a streak like a shooting star. What could have been the purpose of Nature in gifting any creature with a power of locomotion like that? In five or ten minutes they might be placidly paddling round on the bosom

of some silent mountain lake. We looked and listened in wonder, for this was not destined to be one of our stray shots. They were out of range before we knew what they were.

Next we mounted a ridge to the west of the cañon, for there was some scattered timber up there, and a slight wreath of smoke suggested that we might probably encounter a solitary charcoal-burner at his work. We did so, and in a few brief words he 'solved the main problem of the day,

"Deer?" he said. "Why, to be sure. They come by me here every morning about this time."

We almost instinctively crouched to earth, as though the mere mention of our quarry had sufficed to produce them. We had not parted company with the taciturn old Mexican woodsman for five minutes when with one consent we simultaneously dropped to the ground again. Two of the dainty, fawn-colored forms slipped past at an easy trot some three hundred yards ahead of us. We were now on the crest of a ridge, and they passed downward and out of sight behind some tall brush. Almost at the same moment a pair of antlers appeared over the lower brush, nearly a hundred yards closer to us. At once the buck skipped out into the open and turned to have a look at us. We were all somewhat young at the craft, and, alas! in our surprise the one precious moment was lost. Before a barrel was brought to bear upon him the pretty fellow was dancing away down an impracticable track among trees and underwood, and nobody offered to stop him. It was just as well; for we kept perfectly still, and Dame Fortune smiled upon our innocence once more, though all too briefly. In two minutes another white-tail followed in the footsteps of his companion—but not quite so far. He too halted, and sniffed, and eyed us curiously for one instant. In that instant a messenger sped to him, and with a mighty leap he vanished behind the brush.

"No go!" was the cry from two of the party; but the shooter thought differently. He hastened forward to the spot, and there on the bare stones lay the victim, "pinked" with a clean shot through the spine, just back of the shoulder-blades. This proved to be the triumph of the day, the one stray shot in the Land of Silver that brought us venison.