

A MORNING WITH THE BLUE-BILL.

BY ERNEST WILLARD CHUBB ("GREENHEAD").

THE glory of an April sunset was paling as C—— and I left our train at a little way-station near the bank of the winding Bark.

We were bound for a certain club-house situated upon the eastern bank of the Bark, at a point eight miles distant from the station. An oft-tried sporting friend, E——, had asked us to join him in a day's bluebill shooting, and had promised to meet us with a suitable trap. Before our gun cases, shell boxes and shooting togs had been deposited in two convenient piles, we heard a quick rattle of wheels, speedily followed by E——'s well-known hail, "Hey! Good work!" In a moment our duffel was transferred to the spring wagon, and we were off. As we sped through the deepening shadows E—— explained that the river had overflowed its banks, and that bluebill were on the flooded marshes in force. For a number of years I have noticed that this locality has been a favorite resting-place for the fowl during their northward flight toward the British Provinces, and in this secluded spot I have made many a heavy bag before the ice left the lakes.

As we draw near the marshes we hear the wavering note of a snipe as he soars aloft upon his evening flight. Again and again the sound comes to our ears, as the bird towers aloft to sweep earthward a moment later, on lightning wing. The rasping cry stirs our blood, and we are confident of sport on the morrow, when we at last turn in at the gate of the farm through which we must pass in order to reach the club-house. A moment later, the club-house door is unlocked, and our lantern brought into requisition. By its aid the horses are soon housed for the night in the boathouse adjoining. After making everything snug we emerge from the heated interior of our confined quarters to breathe the pure outer air.

The moon has climbed above the timber, and the broad marsh presents a lovely picture. And what a concert is borne to our listening ears, for loud on every side swells a grand chorus from the throats of ten thousand frogs. Not

the gruff and sonorous-toned bull-frogs, but those tiny and sprightly striped fellows, whose notes sound so sweetly to the ear of the lover of Nature. A flock of geese are flying somewhere out over the river channel, presumably in search of a roosting place, for presently we hear a medley of honkings and flapping of wings, followed by the sound of heavy bodies alighting. During the interval of silence which follows, even the frogs seem affected, but presently one or two, more venturesome than the others, pipe up shrilly, as if challenging competition; others join in, and soon the old roar resounds again.

The outlet to the spring at our feet serves us in floating our boats to and from the river channel, some thirty or forty rods distant. A snipe, which for some time has been amusing himself soaring aloft, comes down and alights almost within reach. The wings of wildfowl beat in rapid motion overhead, and C—— enthusiastically exclaims, as we turn to rejoin our more practical companion inside the house, "I'd like to live here a month."

We turn in, and after what seems merely a brief nap, E——'s stentorian tones announce: "It's four o'clock, and time to get up." With feet thrust into an old pair of sandals, E—— attends to the stove, for while the air does not seem cool, yet we are all unconsciously shivering. Under the influence of a roaring fire our coffee pot is soon puffing, and after frying a few fresh eggs we are in readiness for breakfast.

Long before our hurried meal is over, a glance through the little east window discloses the fact that no time should be wasted in getting started for the blinds. Owing to a scarcity of boats, C—— and the writer share one craft. We paddle cautiously through the flags and watercress with which the spring is overgrown, and entering the ditch, pole our way out into the swollen river channel.

A dense white fog is rolling along close to the surface of the water, and long before we have emerged from the

ditch and headed our craft up stream, the low, musical "kherr, kherr" of blue-bill is heard from every side. Our eyes endeavor to penetrate the mist, but not a feather can we see, although many birds pass within a few yards of us. Cautiously we ascend the stream, bend after bend. Flocks, startled by our approach, rise from the water with noisy demonstrations, and for a few moments the air resounds with their chatter. We paddle toward an old-time stand of mine, and ere long the fog lifts, and a mighty flock of duck looms into view before us. For a second or two the fowl regard us with surprise, which quickly changes to alarm, and they rise in one vast body, their wings sounding like the roar of thunder. In a twinkling we are surrounded by a hundred whistling pinions. So near do many of these birds approach our craft that we can see their every marking, and we are sorely tempted to lay down the paddles and open fire. But remembering past experiences, we use all possible dispatch in setting out our flock of decoys, after which C— paddles the boat across the river to the western bank, leaving me standing upon a very soft spot, surrounded by a coarse, straggling growth of wire grass. C— has not concealed the boat in the shelter of the tall canes before a pair of bluebill bear down upon our little fleet of decoys.

I am insecurely perched upon a tottering bog, but with this frail support threatening momentarily to collapse, and subject me to a plunge bath, I cannot resist cutting loose at the head bird as he passes over the decoys. No time to pick up dead now, or even to chase cripples. That fact is clearly demonstrated, for a pair of buffleheads come in with a rush, Ahroom! One report alone sounds from each side of the river, and a spat-spat upon the water proves that second barrels are not required. One of my long boots has worked down in the mud until the top is painfully close to the water line, and a horrid suspicion is also dawning across my mind that a certain portion of my trousers is getting damp. With great care I reach for a square piece of plank which has become lodged on the muddy shore, a few feet distant. "Mark south," sounds a voice from the opposite bank, and in my eagerness to secure a shot a few stray drops of ice-

water find their way down bootleg number one. Bang, bang from C—, and a moment later I too make a successful shot which, however, nearly proves disastrous to my equilibrium. A few seconds later I have gained the coveted bit of pine, and feel secure from any further wetting, although I am still far from being comfortable, crouching in from six to twenty inches of very cold water. Some of our dead birds have drifted around a bend of the river, and we realize that it is better to make a hasty collection than to lose part of the game already down. As C— has the boat upon his side of the river, he pushes off, and although he is gone but a very few minutes, I point out four more birds for him to pick up on his return. As C— reaches the bank he commences counting the gathered birds before again pushing in among the flags, but only succeeds in getting as far as seven when I silence him with a "Mark north." Five blue-bill are almost upon us, their black and white markings showing up clear and sharp. Three of the five are cut down by our salute, and thus the sport goes on.

"Hawnk, hawnk, awuhnk."

"Geese," I exclaim, and as we peer excitedly in the direction of the sound we see four old Canadas winging their way diagonally toward us. Their towering flight alone is a sufficient indication that we have been discovered. We take the chance of very long range, but our four charges of heavy shot have little effect upon the quartette winging its way high above us. A single quill cut loose by a stray pellet comes floating and twirling down, serving to show that our lead at least reached the wary Arctic explorers.

A few minutes later the sun comes bursting through the bank of fog, and the flight is soon over. After picking up our decoys and the remainder of our birds, we drift slowly down the winding stream, toward the club-house. Our bag of something over thirty birds, to which E— adds fifteen, fully satisfies us. An eight-mile ride home in the warm April sunshine follows, and this we enjoy as keenly as the earlier hours of the morning. Altogether the day is one not soon to be effaced from the blackboard of memory, and the remembrance of it will serve to tide over many a long hour of dull office routine.