

AMONG THE DOVES IN CALIFORNIA WITH A SHOTGUN.

BY T. S. VAN DYKE.

GAME is no longer valued by the thump it makes on the ground; while those who return from shooting at the dove in flight to water, with the weight of the bag less than that of the cartridges with which they proudly started, are convinced that the proverbial innocence of the dove is all imaginary. Improvements in guns have developed in the bird such a surprising ability to take care of itself that scarcely anyone is to-day ashamed to hunt it. Some of the most difficult shooting to be found with the shotgun is on this bird when it leaves a tall tree, dipping downward as it goes; while to stand under a tree and make a double shot on a pair of them, catching one as it comes in to alight and the other as it goes out at the other side; is one of the finest bits of practice one can have.

In California, although we have plenty of other and larger game, the dove ranks high as one of the game birds, and probably there is no Eastern State where it makes as fine shooting as here. We do not go after doves among the stubbles or long weeds, seeking a rising shot, though they rise far enough and fly swiftly enough to make a double shot on a pair thus springing from the ground, a shot that no one need be ashamed of. Flight shooting is so much more difficult that rising shots seem child's play.

It is in the countries having a dry summer, with water-holes plenty enough, yet not too plentiful, and reasonably near good feeding grounds and sufficient shade? that the dove makes the best shooting. These three are the prime factors, and when well combined they often make an evening flight of doves such as is never dreamed of in any of the wet countries. And they have a velocity, a twist and a finish about their style of flight that are seen only in the land of dry summers when the birds are moving for water. And where these are well combined marvelous flights of doves are yet seen in many places, in spite of settlement that has long since driven out all other game.

At two o'clock one afternoon the Southern Pacific train landed seven of

us at the station of San Fernando, and in a few minutes we were in one of the adjoining orchards. The valley of San Fernando contains about one hundred and fifty thousand acres, mostly covered with immense wheat fields, and girdled with rugged mountains. In some places, such as the tract around the old Mission where we stopped, several thousand acres are in orchard and vineyard. In the deep shade of the orange, lemon and olive, the birds were sitting by dozens enjoying the cool breeze that swept through the trees from the distant Sea. Sometimes fifteen or twenty would be almost together under a tree like a flock of quails. Wherever there was a spot of water from the leakage of an irrigating hydrant, doves could be seen drinking along the edge, with some in flight to and from it. In the corral of the old Mission were dozens around the water-trough and the puddle its leakage made on the ground.

But this was not the shooting for which we had come, for the birds in flight were not yet numerous enough; and while a good rising shot could sometimes be had, it was rare. The birds were wild and rose out of shot, and though they came around the corrals and associated in a friendly way with the cattle and horses, they knew right well the sheen of a gun, and had a strong suspicion of everything with two legs. It was far better to await the flight to water in the evening, when a single hour was liable to call for all the cartridges one could comfortably carry. Therefore we spent an hour or so inspecting raisin-grapes and prunes, with pears, peaches and nectarines, that were in great abundance; and then about four o'clock some of the party took a stand near the irrigating hydrants that were at the head of every forty-acre field, while the rest spread out on San Fernando Creek, in which the water runs all summer for some distance above ground.

I went to an orchard of orange trees about three years old, just large enough to hide behind without stooping, while the well-cultivated ground was so free

from weeds or grass that I would have no trouble in finding fallen birds, a very important point often overlooked in many kinds of shooting.

I could have gotten probably very much better shooting on the stubbles and over the patches of sunflowers on the uncultivated ground, but without a good retriever one will have plenty of work, and lost time as, well as lost birds, on such ground.

Orchards were round about me on every side and thousands of birds were in them. These places are the summer home of the dove, and the evergreen shades of the lemon, olive and orange they especially love. Here their cooing resounds from early spring, and here they breed in spite of all the civilization around them. Sometimes there are a dozen nests in a tree, and in early summer the young ones learning to fly whisk and flutter about the houses and yards on downy wings, too feeble to make the whistling sound of the older bird. These orchards they love as much as the live oaks of the hills or the sycamores and willows of the water-courses, which they also frequent in great numbers. But the gentle cooing of summer was gone, and the birds were now strong on whistling wing, and seemed to know that the time to look out for the man with the gun had come.

Scarcely was I in position when my first bird came in straight as a bullet. I was about a hundred yards from a hedgerow of eucalyptus trees some sixty feet high, the next best thing to a hill to get under the lee of, if you want hard instead of easy shots. Birds were so plentiful that we cared nothing for easy shots and rather avoided them, I was so much out of practice from shooting nothing but a rifle of late that almost any shooting would be hard, but I followed my usual rule and stood where they would dip and twist the best.

The first bird I shot at cleared the hedgerow and came downward with a lurch and a twist rather alarming, and as I raised the gun he flew away to the right with a dip of some fifteen degrees toward the ground from the line of his swift flight. The motion of a quail's wings often makes its flight seem swifter than it really is. On the other hand, the motion of a dove's wing is often so deliberate as to make its speed appear less than it actually is. I was

not quick enough to catch the bird on the quarter, and its first twist would have left the shot above it if I had. Fully five feet ahead of it I held as it whistled past me, and had the luck, so common, of pulling just as it shot downward from its course. Through the haze of the smokeless powder I could see that not a feather quivered, and before I could turn the second barrel upon the dove, it went, in a whirl of gray, around an orange tree in the next row. I had made the common mistake of forgetting that I was somewhat out of practice and allowed the bird to get too nearly on a line with me. Such shots should be taken on the quarter; if for no other reason, to land the birds near to you. It is only when in good practice that one can allow them to pass that point with much assurance of getting more than a tail feather, as the distance necessary to hold ahead becomes surprisingly great.

Far and near other guns began to ring over the land; doves were spinning over the lines of trees and over the open fields as gayly as if winged with the wind, and here and there one or two went whirling over, while the rest shot ahead as if little alarmed. While I was watching them, *s-s-s-s-t* came a dove, scarcely a foot above the end of my gun, resting in the dense top of a young orange tree behind which I was standing out of sight. The quickness of early years seemed to come back with a rush as I wheeled and landed the bird almost in the top of a tree in the next row behind me.

The birds, in pairs, in threes and in small bunches, were scudding about and preparing for the evening flight for the water-holes. But I had little time to look, for over the row of tall eucalyptus trees came a pair of doves directly toward me and at a speed that left no time for play. Holding two feet or more ahead of the nearer one as it came in on the quarter I sent it whirling over with the first barrel; then as I turned the gun on the other one it was not there, but well past me, speeding down the wind at a pace that left no hope of hitting it. Shooting almost entirely with the rifle for a year or so, had made me wholly too slow with the shotgun on such game.

Bang, pop, rattle-te-bang went gun after gun around me. Here I could see a dove whirl out of its straight line of flight, and there a lot sheer at the

report of a gun, or some one run to pick up something; and while I was watching them the whistling wings of a pair of doves right over my head made me turn around just about the time they were comfortably out of reach behind me. Three more followed them over the hedgerow, the first of which turned over in a cloud of feathers as it passed the quarter, while the other two dipped and twisted with a rush that I was too slow to catch, and away they went unshot at. Two more followed almost before I was fairly loaded, descending over the row of trees with still more of a dip and twist than the last; and again the first one went over as it passed the quarter, dropping almost upon the last fallen bird, while the other was again a trifle too quick for me, and at the report of my second barrel only a tail feather came fluttering down from its swift course.

Faster came the rattle of guns up and down the line, and faster streamed the doves in all directions across the land, As is usual in such cases, every one seemed to have better shooting than I. But I had little cause for complaint, for hardly had I returned to my tree after picking up the last two birds than half a dozen rose over the row of trees ahead, shooting up as they came into sight, and dipping downward with a quick twist as they came over and settled down to their course. Over went the first as it reached the quarter, and bang went the second barrel at the last one of the others as it passed me on the other side. But again I was too slow with the gun, and away it went with the rest, darting upward, and speeding like the wind.

In this way I soon shot ten doves in succession with the first barrel, and missed ten in as quick succession with the second—a very peculiar record, and one that I had never before made. As I was not shooting for count, I concluded I would see what was the matter. If I could no longer hit anything that passed the quarter, it was time to know it. So, when the next ones came, I let them come alongside before firing. They came in great shape, dashing down over the row of eucalyptus, and whisking low over the tops of the orange trees. Six feet, as it seemed, ahead of the leader, I turned the gun and pulled the trigger. Do doves shoot down in-

tionally? They do it so often that it certainly seems so, and this time anyone would have sworn that it was with malice aforethought, for never did a bird shoot downward from the line of flight with a quicker twist at the exact moment I pulled the trigger. No mortal could have caught that bird, and scarcely anyone could have recovered in time from his surprise to do better than I did with the second barrel, namely, nothing.

Scarcely had I loaded when a couple more were on hand. They seemed flying slowly and easily, but what a delusion I found it as I raised the gun! They shot swiftly upward instead of downward, as so many do, and before I could resist the impulse I fired where I had first raised the gun. Not a feather floated on the air, and I was not at all consoled by catching one of them at a long shot with the second barrel as they wheeled. I found what I knew long before, but had forgotten, that one must be in the best of trim for these rapid flyers, and that playing too exclusively with the rifle on game will make one too slow for doves.

As the lofty hills of Simi were turning blue and the granite peaks of the Tejunga range began to glow under the sinking sun, the number of doves increased by the minute. The main line of flight was along San Fernando Creek, where four of our party were stationed. But the largest rush of birds was in the corral of the old Mission, and to the water in this inclosure they were pouring from all directions. Down out of the sky they came, with others apparently rising out of the horizon; around the corner of the old church they whirled with a velocity that gave you a crick in the neck to turn quickly enough to follow them, while others came, swift and straight as flights of arrows, from the fields and orchards. Along the creek, however, were birds enough to keep any gun hot, and there was the center of the uproar. Up and down this there was a steady whistle of wings until the shadows of the mountains stretched across the broad valley, while the constant rattle of guns sounded much like the fire-crackers on the eve of Chinese New Year's. When we had all the birds together, there were 236 for the seven guns, and on the same ground the next day there were apparently more birds than before.