

"OLD-SQUAW" SHOOTING AT FIRE ISLAND INLET.

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FIRE Island Inlet is a strait, perhaps three-quarters of a mile wide, dividing Great South Beach, or, as it is sometimes called, Fire Island Beach on the east from Oak Island Beach on the west, and connecting Great South Bay

with the Atlantic Ocean. As there is no other connection with the ocean within thirty odd miles to the east, the ordinary tides flow at the rate of about six and one-half or seven miles an hour.

The "old squaw," sometimes called "old wife," again "long-tailed scoter," is a small, tough, and exceedingly fast-flying bird. The female has a brown back and top-sides, and white breast; the feet are bluish, as is also the short and flat bill. The male has a great deal of brown in his plumage, relieved with large white spots; the bill is red and the tail long. The males are often called "pin-tails" and are beautiful fowl.

About the middle of November these birds make their appearance in large numbers in Great South Bay, and remain there until the middle of March or the first of April, when they migrate north. During the day they swarm about the bay, moving usually in vast flocks; and although they are very wary in the vicinity of firearms, they pay little heed to the hundreds of boats which are daily working on the various oyster and scallop beds and clam and crab grounds. About sundown, however, they fly out to sea, where they can sleep comfortably and safely in the warmer waters of the Gulf Stream, a branch of which flows some twelve miles off shore. They come in again at sunrise. It is these flights of which the sportsmen take advantage. This "advantage" (?) with a large interrogation point, is called "old-squawing;" and in telling my experience I can best describe its great charms, and its wonderful possibilities.

One night in February I had the good fortune to meet an old friend in Bay

Shore. Captain Lester, or "Les" as everybody calls him, is a fine specimen of nautical young manhood. With his six feet and odd of brawn and sinew, his ruddy countenance and genial manner, he is every inch an American sailor. He is the proud possessor of a rattling fine sloop, the *Itakit*; and when, finding my time unoccupied, he invited me to go "old-squawing," I accepted with alacrity.

We started from Bay Shore at eleven o'clock on a glorious winter morning, and sailed about the bay until half past two, when we anchored on the north side of the main channel about a mile from the mouth of the inlet. Our party consisted of Les, "Tommy Pepper" and myself; and as a preparation for the sport soon to commence, I was immediately given instructions about my part of the work. Tommy is certainly a rare type. No one seems to know exactly what his name is, so for want of a better, also to describe him as being "hot stuff," he goes by the name of Tommy Pepper. In appearance he, is a youth of eighteen or nineteen—this from a distance; but closer inspection reveals innumerable wrinkles, dilapidated molars, and a dried-up little man, and one can readily believe that forty odd years have passed over his head since he began keeping count. He speaks with a most remarkable combination of drawl and twang, and has the most unique manner of expressing himself it has ever been my good fortune to hear. He told me a wonderful tale about some friend of his who had gone out "old-squawing" and who had foolishly stood up in his sharpie while a flock of birds were passing over. The poor fellow was knocked overboard by the birds and drowned in the swift-flowing, icy water, almost within reach of his companions. Thus he paid with his life the penalty of, his recklessness, and it was recklessness because Tommy himself had warned the unfortunate against any such rash act. Of course I knew Tommy expected me to believe this, so I thanked him most sincerely for his warning and his kind interest in me.

I can see even now the twinkle in Tommy's eye, and I'd bet a dozen Blue Points that to this day the poor old fellow thinks I believed every word of his yarn. I also noticed a change in him from that moment, and can almost imagine his remarking to Les, in his driest manner, "Say, Les, we kinder wanter watch that fellow, or he'll like as not fall overboard and forgit to holler."

This bantering, however, was only a preliminary to the proper explanations. The "old squaws" are very peculiar in their flight, particularly in that they seldom or never, will fly over land, or even over shallow water. This was the reason for our anchoring the *Itakit* on the north side of the channel. As soon as the proper time arrived we were to leave the sloop and to proceed in sharpies, each man having a sharpie to himself, toward the Great South Beach. The first man, in this case Tom, was to anchor about a gunshot and a half from the sloop. I was to proceed an equal distance beyond Tom and there anchor, while Les rowed still nearer to the shore. Thus we formed a straight line between the *Itakit* and the beach. The boats being anchored, each man was to lie down in the stern, with his gun and ammunition ready at hand. At the first sign of a bird, or a flock, the discoverer thereof was to sing out, "Here they come," and then maintain absolute silence. The birds coming down the wind would undoubtedly be near the sloop, seeing which they would sheer off toward Tom. When they came within range, so that he could fire at an angle of say 45 degrees, *still lying down*, he was to let drive. The birds remaining in the flock, after his shot, would sheer off and attempt to fly over my boat. I would then repeat Tom's operations, after which Les would do the same. Any man dropping a bird, or birds, was obliged to up his anchor, retrieve his game, and, as soon as possible, return to his point in the "string," as they call the line.

The instructions were simple and explicit, and an easier thing seemed to us next to impossible. By four o'clock we were ready for shooting, and clad in hip-boots and heavy sweater in addition to regular clothing; and, these surmounted by full suits of oilers, we went on deck. The breeze had freshened a good bit since we came to anchor.

After bending spare cables to our anchors we embarked for the sport. Two hundred yards is a short distance to row, but I confess that I was very glad that Les had the inshore berth; however, by dint of hard pulling I was soon in position and comfortably settled.

I hadn't been there more than five minutes when Tom sang out: "Here they come," and, of course, I rose up a trifle to see them come; and oh! what a beautiful sight it was! There, almost a mile away, was a flock of at least two hundred birds, flying like a streak of light; and just as I looked they whirled down around Sexton Island from Dickerson's into the main channel. In turning they threw up their left wings, and the light of the setting sun shining on their white breasts made them look like burnished silver.

I dared not look longer, so lay back again with my heart beating and my finger resting on the trigger of my gun. I expected to hear Tom shoot, and in listening must have forgotten why I was there, for in an instant I heard the whistling of wings, and before I could get my gun to my shoulder at least fifty birds must have flown over my head, and within fifteen yards of me; but finally I did get a shot and succeeded in "pumping" three barrels into the bunch. It seemed impossible to miss them; in fact I expected to get at least a dozen birds, but only one dropped.

I laid down my gun, got up my anchor with its forty feet of cable, seized my oars and pursued my bird. I caught him after rowing perhaps a hundred feet, and then started hack for my place in the line. It required every ounce of muscle I possessed to propel my sharpie against wind and tide, and I was fully ten minutes in getting in line. I had shipped two or three bucketfuls of water, and the effect of the cold wind on my wet hands was anything but agreeable. Of course, as soon as I did get in line I was obliged to get in readiness to shoot, and was almost sorry to see a big bunch of birds coming down on us. This time they started to go over Tom. He got two barrels into the bunch. They sheered over to me, and I had three shots, and Les gave them "two full cylinders." Then came a great scramble to "pick up" and "get together," but before we could regain our positions three big flocks passed over us.

As soon as we had succeeded in getting placed, and I confess to being nearly a hundred feet to leeward of the others, I saw the greatest flight of the day. The fowl looked like a cloud of smoke as they swung into the main channel. But how we did "cling it to 'em," to use Tom's pet expression. I had five good shots at the flock, and dropped seven birds. This, however, I consider due more to luck than skill, because the wind had freshened to almost half a gale, and this wonderful impetus added to the fast flight of the birds made aiming next to impossible. As soon as the flock had passed we started to get up anchors and gather the fallen birds.

My previous good fortune had by this time deserted me, and as beastly luck would have it my anchor had caught a sunken wreck. Of course, I was at first unaware of that fact, and in standing away forward and putting my back into the heave I succeeded in pulling my sharpie's nose completely under water; and how the flood came in! By a careful and quick jump aft I saved my boat from foundering, and myself from an early and icy grave. I was compelled to sit almost knee-deep in water until Les and Tom had retrieved the birds and come to my assistance. We tried to get the anchor up from Les' sharpie, but failed, so we bent one of my oars onto the cable for a buoy and cast my boat loose; and this time I had the pleasure of being towed back to the *Itakit*.

When we reached the sloop and had climbed aboard, we found that between us we had shot twenty-three birds. Then all hands turned to and got up anchor and made sail. We dropped over to my buoyed anchor, and by using a windlass we succeeded in getting it up, although we stranded the cable and straightened out one arm.

Then came an exciting beat against both wind and tide, to get into Dickerson's Channel, where we could make a good harbor under the flats and be all ready for the morning shooting.

Night came on very dark shortly after our making a good anchorage, and the gathering clouds gave evidence of our getting a thorough shaking before morning. An excellent dinner and good coffee served to make me forget my inglorious wetting and "tow home." The

assurance of first-class ground tackle made the pitching and rolling of the *Itakit* only the more conducive to sweet and sound sleep, and I, for one, was mighty sorry for the call of "all hands" at four-thirty for breakfast and to make preparations for the incoming of ducks and the morning shoot.

The morning shooting is, to my mind, better than that of the afternoon, because the sun gets warmer and warmer as the time passes, and smiles alike on hits and misses.

Breakfast having been disposed of, we proceeded to "string" the northeast point of Sexton's Island. There are only ten or twelve feet of water here, so picking up birds was much easier. I never saw a more beautiful sight than was presented as the great flocks of birds, came up the beach. The morning sun glancing on the waves until they sparkled like a million diamonds and sapphires, and shining again on the silvered ducks, made it seem almost a sacrilege to shoot; but "sporting blood will tell," and a cramped sharpie is scarcely the ideal place for poetic imaginings and artistic studies. My morning's bag consisted of a brant and seven old squaws. Les bagged fifteen of the latter, and Tom succeeded in getting two.

Poor Tom! I never saw a more unfortunate man in my life. He had borrowed a hammerless ejector for the occasion, and I doubt if he had ever shot a breech-loader before; for whenever a flock came within range, he was sure to have his marker at "safe." Then he'd forget to re-load, and, in fact, everything went wrong.

We reached home after a glorious sail. Stiff joints, aching muscles, and a slight cold did not dampen my ardor in the least, and I always make it a point to go "old-squawing" whenever I can. And many a good laugh have I had at my "pigeon-shooting" friends when they first attempted to drop the hardy old-squaws; to shoot at the trap is one thing, but a squaw is quite another. One fellow was extremely ridiculous when he fired fifty shells and killed only three birds, and another, who tried it alone, when, after two hours of frigid waiting, he was rewarded by one poor crow. But, after all, doesn't just this uncertainty make sporting life worth living?