

TWENTIETH CENTURY DEER HUNTING

By T. S. VAN DYKE

IN the saddle at four o'clock and miles into the hills by the time it was light enough to shoot—such were the requirements, for now the deer has learned what settlement means and is well up on modern rifles, and, though he still lingers on the open slopes where his fathers spent so many blissful days, it is only in the night. If you find fresh tracks in the low hills that break away from the higher and more rugged ranges they will probably lead you a weary trip far beyond where once you could find the game dozing away the day beneath nodding live oak, from which he could gaze upon the sweeping plain. If you will dally with these tracks the best part of the morning will be gone before you can find where the game is, and the chances are that then it will no longer be on foot, but hidden in the depths of the chaparral in some secluded glen where it can hear your step afar and lie still with perfect confidence that you will never get near enough to see before it can sneak away.

One of the venerable tricks of the mule deer of this country is retiring into the heavy cover very early in the morning and remaining there during the whole of the day. During the full of the moon, when they are on foot most of the night and well fed before daylight, they are so certain to do this that it is almost useless to hunt. Especially is this so in the early part of the summer. There is little trouble in finding fresh tracks enough at daylight, straggling, too, in a manner that shows the deer are on the point of lying down for the day. Yet the more certain you become that they cannot be more than a few hundred feet away the more you are overcome with wonder at your inability to see one or even hear one run. If patient enough to work out a single track you may possibly start a deer just near enough to see or hear but not near enough to see long enough for a shot. I have had them almost throw the dust in my face from their plunging hoofs, yet could see no hair long enough to make sure of getting the rifle sights upon it. But even seeing one

in this way is the rare exception; for the deer instead of waiting until they are certain you see them, more often sneak off with silent step and lowered head, so that while you are wondering where they are, they may be but a few yards away knowing they are perfectly safe. For the evergreen robe of lilac, manzanita, and buckthorn that covers much of the hills of California is so dense and stiff that a man makes slow progress in it, while deer, that can crawl under a fence about as readily as leap it, find it almost as easy as the open.

Formerly the deer confined this trick mostly to the early part of the season, and as summer waned moved about more in the open and remained on foot longer during the day so that even the tenderfoot had a chance of seeing one. But now the game plays it still later in the season, so that without a good dog it is often impossible to rouse one from a very small patch of brush—even a single acre being often enough to enable the largest buck to amuse himself all day at your expense although it may be nowhere as high as your head. To drive deer out of such a place a fast dog is of little use unless there are enough in the party to guard most of the surrounding ridges and saddles as well as the deep gulches that break away below. For deer have here no established runways but dash and smash through anything, plunging into the roughest and steepest ravines, clattering through piles of rock and clearing big bowlders as gaily as a circus horse leaping hurdles. And a fast dog often loses his scent from the heat and dryness of the air and is always hard to restrain until the proper time comes. The only reliable dog for such work is a slow tracking hound, or a bird dog trained to point deer the same as birds, neither of which should ever be allowed to chase a crippled deer, no matter how great your anxiety to secure it. Deer are now too scarce to keep such a dog in training, so that a young collie and a dachshund that were with us to take their first lessons were of no use.

The consequence of this change in the

habits of the deer is that one should first find in what portion of the hills certain deer are ranging. Early in the season their daily range is seldom over a mile from a common center and often much less, so that in a range of several square miles there might be a dozen bunches of deer, each keeping on its particular tract of rough ground with few or no tracks between. We had to explore a long range for several days before finding what we wanted—a big buck. And we succeeded in locating him so late in the day that we could not move our camp that evening to his vicinity as we should have done, so as to avoid the long ride before daylight.

About the time the rocky islands of the Pacific began to rise clear cut from the shimmering floor of water far below us, we found fresh tracks of our game leading back into the rougher hills where the ridges that ran toward the ocean broke from the main chain. Here we left the horses and went afoot. But though we had located the whereabouts of our game we were still a long way from seeing it. By the time the sun was up the deer were likely to be in cover or very near it and the amount of brush was so great that even with high ridges to look down from it was much like looking for a flea in a Persian rug. The only reliable way was to track them and the tracks were winding about so much that it would take too long time to work out the crooked trails they had made here and there. Tracking without snow is never easy, especially after a dry, clear night with nothing to dampen the surface of the open ground and make tracks plain at a distance by causing a change in the shade of the light that plays from them. We had to track by cutting off—that is, to spread out and by circling around on the sides find first where the deer had not gone and thus narrow up to where they were. By so doing we avoided being together, which three should never be in still hunting; two in a party are bad enough. After circling several patches of brush and examining the tops of several ridges, with the connecting saddles and the sides of the gulches that broke away below, we met to compare notes, and decided that the deer were to the northeast. We then wait off on the sides again, but soon came together to decide that they had not gone off on either side and that the

trail was somewhere in the center. In the thirty-five years I have been hunting deer, I have never seen a meeting to compare notes more fortunate. For scarcely had we started to go ahead when that curve of brownish grey that so quickly brings the rifle from one's shoulder gleamed scarce one hundred yards away, followed by the smashing of brush and the thump of plunging hoofs that tells so truly the lofty spring of the mule deer in full headway.

"It's a doe," I yelled, for I was the highest on the hillside and had the best view. It ran with almost perpendicular jumps straight away up the opposite hillside, giving the greater part of its length as a margin for the sights of the rifles to play on; yet not a rifle was raised though the temptation was extreme. We had spent days in sifting the big hills to find in what portion the slippery game was keeping, for there is now little use in wandering at random over them in hopes of seeing something, as could once be done. Our business also required some immediate vention and for all we knew this was our last chance for a shot. We had, all our lives, been in the habit of shooting at anything we wished and at any time of year. It is quite incredible, I know, but we actually held our rifles down and let that doe bound away in plain sight. No, it was no grand moral exhibition. The motive was not lofty sentiment, but only plain business. We had deliberately made up our minds that the time had come for us to keep the laws for which we ourselves had been most loudly clamoring. Hunters are becoming so numerous that the old-time way will no longer do, and if we are to have anything to hunt we must recognize the fact that we are living in an age vastly different from that in which our best years were spent.

Just as this deer vanished through the green sumac that fringed the crest of the ridge beyond, another sprung from almost the same place where the first had risen. Though it took a different course, I could plainly see it and called out:

"Another doe."

Just then the collie broke away from his master and started after this second doe as she went up a rising piece of ground in plain sight. Instead of making her run faster the lively yelping of the dog only

made her stop, prick up her ears and look back upon her trail. Only her neck and head were visible above low brush which hid the dog entirely. But his yelping was so much like that of a coyote, of which these mule deer have no fear, that she must have mistaken him for one. Otherwise it is impossible to account for her action. I have seen deer play before slow clogs many a time both East and West, but they generally run a piece and then wait for the dog to come up. This deer, however, actually started out to hunt the dog, which had lost the scent in the hot sun and dry air after a run of some seven miles behind the horses, so that he could not locate the deer exactly, and as she made no noise he could not locate her by sound. So he ran round and round in a circle trying to catch the scent, with the deer in the center running out here and there like the spokes of a wheel, trying to get sight of him and paying no attention to us, who were in plain sight not over a hundred and fifty yards away. Finally she broke away and skipped gaily up the slope with the dog in full chase, for he could now follow by the sound of her plunging hoofs. Then he suddenly lost her trail and went whimpering about in semi-circles to find it, whereupon she stopped, looked back at him in a very inquiring manner and walked back several steps to find him. Then with lofty bound she smashed through some heavy brush to the top of the ridge, over which she disappeared. But in another moment she came in sight on a connecting ridge while the dog was laboring up the slope with despondent yelps. Here she seemed disappointed at his non-arrival and actually walked back several yards to look for him, acting in all respects like a deer that had been raised with a dog and had played with him for years. The rest of the play was spoiled by the glitter of big horns and the beamy grey of a deer's late summer hair rising into a lofty arch at about the same place from which the first deer had sprung. Fearing that the other two, who were lower down the hill, might not see it I called out:

"There's the buck."

Nothing better illustrates the slyness of this mule deer and his ability to outwit the keenest mortal than the action of this buck. The first doe had been running in

phin sight for fully a minute with all three of us talking about what a fine shot it would make. The second one was in sight and playing with the dog fully five minutes. During that time the dog was yelping his best, and we were laughing and talking in our loudest tones. I have known deer lie still with the same amount of noise much nearer, in fact so close that one could almost touch them, but in each case it was a single deer or, where it was a group, as a doe and fawns, all lay still. But it is very seldom that one will remain after the rest have run, yet this old buck knew well enough that we did not see him and was lying still in the expectation that we never would. We had concluded he had gone his way leaving these does behind, probably in quest of other fair friends, for deer are often fickle; and that being so, these does would no doubt take the same course, the sound of their plunging hoofs sending him flying long before we could come in sight. Consequently we thought the hunt ended and were standing with rifle on our shoulders and talking and laughing over the deer and dog. Why a deer often changes his mind when he has a good enough certainty on hand can be explained when one can tell why man does the same. Perhaps this one became uneasy after finding the does gone and concluded they knew best how to dodge us, as some men consult their wives in business. Or he might have been so intensely human as to share their fate whatever it might be. Whatever it was there was enough of the human element in it to suit the most exacting city snipe who wants nature spoiled by dragging "the human element" into the middle of her best pictures.

Out he came in a whirl of grey tinged with brown, fat and shiny as an army mule, with big, brown horns pointing forward over his black nose. By contrast with his black forehead his white cheeks and the white necktie around his throat seemed almost snowy in the brilliant sunlight, which glistened on his broad swelling back and even on the tawny legs grouped close beneath him as he swung high over the brush at the first bound. As I called out "there's the buck" I whirled the rifle over from my shoulder and it dropped beautifully into place with the front sight sparkling full upon the proper spot ahead

of and below the big shoulder at about the right place for the ball to meet his onward dash by the time it should arrive on his course. Only a dull click followed the fall of the hammer. Why the one bad cartridge out of a million happens to get in the rifle at such an important time is one of the mysteries of the field. As I sent that cartridge flying high over my head and another from the magazine into the barrel, fire opened all along the line. Anyone of us could have done better alone, for no amount of experience will enable one to shoot a rifle with perfect coolness in the presence of others, as may generally be done with the shot-gun. Moreover we had seen so many big bucks slip out of sight into some little gulch, twist around some rock, or vanish through a bush just about the time we thought we had a certain shot on open ground, that we did not incline to take any chances even although the brush on the hillside along which he was running broadside was not very heavy. So each staked his hopes on speed of fire and for a few seconds there was a slam-bang-rattlety-bang from three repeaters that sent the dust flying in red puffs from the hillside all around the glistening undulation of the deer's flight. But at almost the first rattle he slackened the proud pace at which he led off, the glittering tines drooped from their place on high, and the curve of his thick neck was no more like that of the sculptor's warhorse. Still he struggled nobly on, but the high sweeping bounds sank fast to a broken canter, and that changed quickly to a limping trot and then, with horns tossing proudly aloft in a last effort, he sank back out of sight as the seventh ball struck him fair in the shoulder.*

*The weight of deer is a matter of much dispute and of great interest to many. The following figures can be relied on. This was the first deer I ever actually weighed, a pair of steeltraps being on a tree at the first house we came to. I have like others, guessed at many. I guessed twenty pounds too low on this one. Thoroughly dressed and without the shanks this buck weighed one hundred and sixty one pounds. As he was very fat inside he must have weighed as he stood very near two hundred. The fat showed plainly that he had fallen off and as June is the climax of fatness here he probably weighed then ten or even fifteen pounds more. I have seen larger bucks than his but not many. It was an average big buck of the mule deer variety as found in Southern California and Mexico. I have bagged several that would probably go twenty or even thirty pounds more but it was from excess of fat rather than difference in size. I have seen eastern deer that would weigh as much as any the very largest of these and probably a little more. But that was also from ex-

To many it will seem incomprehensible that, with this one buck, we should have felt repaid for nearly a week's hunt. But we had all reached that stage in the life of a sportsman when he cares very little whether he kills anything or not. In that stage there is more real enjoyment than in any other. I never saw the time when I cared a cent for records or anything of the sort and have always despised the "trophy" business which too often means beastly murder. I never kept a head or a skin of any kind in my life, or made an entry in a game record. I never had an Indian or a guide hunt any game for me to pull the trigger on, and would far rather do the hunting and let the Indian pull the trigger. But I did have a weakness for shooting at more game than I could utilize, though I never shot a pound of anything to throw away. If I was not where I could give it away I have always let it go. But I have outgrown even this, and I find many others the same. What we wanted on this hunt was not that particular bit of meat or that head of horns, but to know whether we could get that buck or he get us. The pleasure in resolving this problem begins with the very first attempt to play your wits against the wits of the game. For this purpose anything like deer in a park or preserve would simply have disgusted us. Anything that could be pointed out by a "gillie" would have sickened us instantly. The very scarcity of the deer is an element in the sport, where not too great, and the remote rough and brushy ground on which our campaign had to be conducted, added to the difficulty of tracking on dry ground, all of which would have seemed so disheartening to the mere "trophy" hunter and so ridiculous to the "record" hunter, only intensified our pleasure. It may not be modesty to say that this is the highest type of sportsmanship, but it is what the revolving years will bring one to unless he is a market hunter. And whether creditable or not, it is what the twentieth century hunter will have to rely on for amusement unless he wants to play butcher in a park.

cess of fat. One that will dress one hundred and fifty pounds without being extra fat is a good deer anywhere.