

gaze of his rivals, slowly lighted it and walked towards the door.

"Going to pack up, Jimmy?" sneered Billy.

Martin paused and half turned. "No," he answered, "going up to unpack."

Dawn crept tardily up from the east to show the curling waves of the lake champing white teeth at the low, dun-coloured sky. Martin, crouched in his blind, eyed his bobbing decoys and wondered if Billy and the captain were yet in their respective hides.

The sharp "tak-tak" of two double barrels, speaking almost in unison, gave him his answer. He gripped the pump-gun on his knees and glanced up towards the blinds at the curve of the lake. Apparently the captain and Billy were shooting from the same hide. Had they bagged any? Martin wondered.

As if in answer to the thought a long line of low-flying red-heads grew up out of the mist and swung in towards his blind. As the frantic ducks swept in and turned against the wind with set wings, the Winchester coughed six times, deliberately as the ticking of a clock. And at every cough a duck crumpled up and fell sprawling on the wind-whipped water.

Again came the report of the other fowlers' guns. This time Martin saw their skiff dancing on the waves and knew that they were gathering dead birds.

He produced his pipe and tobacco. Well, let them bag them, he thought, as he filled and lit the old brier-root.

"Swee-swish-swee-swish," and a flock of blue-bills darted above his decoys and went down with the wind at express speed.

Now, a novice at the work of duck-shooting would have taken a snap shot at that retreating flock of ducks on the chance of body-crippling a bird or two. But Martin was no novice. He simply sank lower in his blind and waited.

Far out on the lake the flock turn-

ed and curved back towards him, dropping low as they sped towards the decoys. Once again they swept outside the wooden ducks—then, as before, sped outward. Still Martin did not shoot. He knew, from experience, that a flock of blue-bills will invariably come above decoys three times. He knew also that, on returning for the third time, if they did not light, they would not return again. Accordingly he braced himself and waited the incomers, which had again turned and were speeding towards him.

This time as they flashed above his decoys, Martin's "pumper" spoke again, sharply and deliberately. Through the deepening light he was able to count the birds which the wind had driven into shore. Twelve all told. Not a bad beginning, thought Martin.

Other ducks came in to him, in singles, twos and in tattered remnants of flocks. Noon found him with eighty-one ducks as a showing. He wondered how the captain and Billy had fared. All morning their guns had been kept busy. In another hour would come the grand show-down, when he would know whether he or his rivals would have to go back to the city. He squatted in his blind and waited. But the wind had changed, the sky had become clear, the ducks had ceased to fly.

An hour later Martin loaded his ducks into his skiff and paddled shoreward. He had seen the other boats going in a few minutes before. Marion and her father had gone first, Billy and the captain close behind.

Martin had a premonition that he had failed—failed by a shade. Try as he would, he could not shake the feeling off.

They were waiting for him at the landing. "How many?" were the first words of Billy and the captain as he landed. Martin saw Marion's eager face as she waited for his reply.

"Eighty-one," he answered. "And you?"