

# THE ROMANCE OF GREY DRAKE

(By Hugh Ross.)

THERE had been a frost that morning—an appropriate frost—for it was the first day of winter; yet the forenoon suggested rather one of those delightfully mellow mornings of early spring. A still morning; tranquil; blue sky and the warming sun coaxing the grouchiness from the cold earth.

High up a lark soared carolling, and far above the lark a harrier hawk turned innumerable somersaults shrieking applause to his acrobatic feats. Slick and fast and following the river came six ducks. Two kept slightly in the wake of the other four, for they were a mated pair who had joined the others in the interests of mutual safety. Above the patch of bush, where the river turned forming a big pool, they circled. Peaceful and deserted waters enticed them down. Too peaceful; too completely deserted was that pool. The wise old leader turned at right angles, leading his followers away from the river and far up a hazy blue valley into the bush-covered hills, while down in the undergrowth at the pool muttering men reluctantly lowered the hammers of twelve-gauge guns.

Far back in a dark recess of the hills a lagoon, black watered, long and narrow, revealed itself to the eager eyes of the speeding fliers. Definitely this looked safer, and the waters were dotted with ducks. Up to the ears of the flight-weary travellers was borne quacks of welcome. This, however, was by no means the first shooting season the shrewd old leading drake had survived, and he circled a full dozen times before leading his companions in a long swishing dive just above the heads of the floating ducks, and, as they shot along a few yards above the water, from the scrub behind them spurted quickly two purplish puffs of smoke, and two ducks (they who trailed farthest behind) dropped limply among the decoys on the quiet water. Further along the lagoon a third duck went down, the white under-wing feathers flashing brightly in the sun.

Frightened, the remaining three tried to turn blindly in the very face of the guns, and two more went down. Staggered by one shot, grey drake's desperate swerving saved him from two more. Then, swift as an arrow, he sped back along the lagoon.

Loud voices cried a warning to the man who had fired first. "Look out, Joe! he is coming back." Yet grey drake hurtled past unscathed, and the silence was broken only by the sorrowful remarks of Joe to the effect that both ejectors of his new hammerless had jammed and that he could not get the empty cartridges out.

More than an hour later grey drake, utterly exhausted, his eyes glazing, planed blindly downward once more. The pool—a pretty willow-fringed clear pool, reflecting here and there the golden blooms of encroaching gorse—was blurred and uncertain to his eyes. Yet it screamed a warning, for the house was within twenty feet of its edge, and in his downward flight one of grey drake's fluttering wing tips actually touched a wireless aerial. Unheeding, he splashed on to the surface, and from the bank no guns exploded spitefully. The amber eyes brightened presently; a slow stroke or two bore him under the yellow-leaved willows where the cooling waters cleansed and soothed the burning shot wounds.

Grey drake was safe, for who would think of looking in the back yard for a wild duck? To find them, man left his home in the darkness of early morning and journeyed far afield. So grey drake remained unmolested. In a weed-choked streamlet that entered the river just opposite the house he found long nights of happy dabbling and returning strength. Poor grey drake! He was so very quiet and unoffending; he asked nothing but to remain on that stretch of river throughout the day; to be allowed a mad, merry flight in the grey dusk of morn and evening, with permission to wage nightly war upon the parasites infesting the swamps.

A grey rat led to his discovery. This pest stole eggs, vegetables, fruit; he gnawed holes in the walls and dug further holes beneath the chimney and under the garage. He even acquired a taste for soap and the front tyre of my motor-cycle. For this latter crime I decided he should die. Having a wish also to ascertain the killing powers of a new 25-calibre rifle, I followed him to the river. As he ambled along a