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Steady Nerve of Early Rising Riflemen

***Some of the Things That Jack London Learned by
Watching the Marksmen at the Shell Mound Butts***

***Extreme Care Exercised by the Skilfull Shooters in
Preparing Their Trusty Weapons and Loading Them***

Promptly at eight o'clock, ere the sun had dissipated the morning mist, the contestants at the Bundes Fest let loose with their rifles. They were canny marksmen, these, who left their snug beds at such a chill hour; for they knew when the light was good, and wished to try their skill when the air was quiet, before the sea-breeze came romping in from the Pacific.

And they were ambitious, too; for a cash prize was the reward of him who made the first bull's-eye of the day. This early and successful bird was B. Jones, a local man of ability and reputation. After this first little flurry the marksmen settled down to business, and thereafter until noon, when they knocked off for an hour to go to lunch, there was no cessation from the continuous firing. It was a rare treat to watch a sharpshooter settling down to work. With shooting case and gun slung over his shoulder he would tread his way to a vacant place at a table, shaking hands, nodding greetings, and bandying persiflage right and left. Once at a table, off with coat, collar and cuffs, up with the sleeves and on with a short and very business-like apron.

Then comes the unpacking, for quite a bit must be done ere he burns his first powder. The gun must be set up and every part explained and wiped with painstaking care. The oil, which he so solicitously put into the barrel the evening before, must as solicitously be taken out again on cotton rag—if he wishes the weapon to do its very best possible by him. And one by one he examines the cotton rags carefully as they emerge, until at last one comes forth immaculate and innocent of grease.

Then there is the loading outfit. The caps and cartridges and bullets must be taken out and arranged, ready for use. By the way, all the sharpshooters load their own shells, and load them on the spot. They are very finicky, these knights of the target, and very wise. They will not trust the most reputable firearms company to do their loading for them, and they know just what is what when they do it for themselves. Each has a particular number of grains that constitutes his favorite charge of powder, and he sees to it that that particular number of grains, neither more nor less, goes into place behind his bullet. However, so fine have they got it down, there is little variation in the weights of their charges. The great majority shoot from 41 to 44 grains of semi-smokeless powder. Besides greater evenness, another advantage accrues from loading one's own shells—one always knows the exact condition of his powder.

The tables in the shooting hall are pitted curiously with countless holes. One wonders; but when the sharpshooter screws his powder measure into the surface of the table the phenomenon is explained.

Screwing the palm-rest on and adjusting and blackening the sights with a burning match, he gives his gun a final look-over and turns to the loading. Most of the guns are muzzle-loaders—that is to say, the bullet is loaded via the muzzle, the shell and powder by way of the breech. The bullet has a slightly wider base, and as it is shoved down cleans the gun as it goes, gathering and sweeping before it whatever dirt happens to be in its path. Thus, the marksman shoots with a uniformly clean barrel, and uniformity is what he strives after, especially when he has scored two bull's-eyes on the “honor” target and has only one more shot coming.

Deftly capping the shell, the sharpshooter slips it beneath the aperture in the powder-measure. A couple of twists of a thumb-screw and it is filled with the precise charge of powder desired. A thin wad completes the process, and with the rifle in one hand and the shell in the other, he goes to his shooting-box and takes his first whang at the target. Then he must return and go over the whole performance again.

In the hey-day of a machine age, when we are accustomed to the finest mechanisms, these target rifles are, nevertheless, marvelous creations. And creations they may be rightly called, for to the exquisite article turned out by the gun maker we must add the personal equation of the owner. Each marksman makes his gun over to suit himself, recreates it, so to say. Out of all the guns it is to be doubted if any two would be found that are even roughly alike. The most cursory glance suffices to indicate that there is just as much individuality about them as there is about the men who fire them. With proper training one could doubtless study human temperament from these things of wood and steel.

In sights alone there are innumerable devices—in fact, as many kinds as there are kinds of eyes. And out of butt-plates, long and short, curling and straight, “Schützen” and “Swiss” and “Hunting,” rubber and nickel and brass, could be epitomized a complete course in comparative anatomy.

While as for palm rests—there is no end of them. Among the throwing-sticks of the Alaskan Indians one may look in vain for two alike, and so with the palm rests of the Schützenbrüder. Just as each man possesses a hand quite his own and quite dissimilar to all other hands, just so does each palm rest resemble no other palm rest under the sun.

And they are expensive affairs, these rifles, the average cost of each being somewhere around \$100. Nor are they toys, either. To be under fire from one at half a mile would be more edifying than comfortable, while at even a mile or more a man would be struck with an irresistible desire to head for tall timber.

The Pope rifles seem to be the favorite, and though calibers up to 45 are permitted the 32-40 is the standard. And here in a way is illustrated the infinite care and study which must be taken by a man if he would be a sharpshooter. The bullet of a 38-55 is larger than that of a 32-40. Being larger, the chances are, with precisely the same aim and landing in precisely the same spot, that it would cut the ring a little bit closer, get in a little bit farther—in short, make a little bit bigger score. But, on the other hand, the recoil is heavier, as it naturally is in proportion to caliber. So the sharpshooters, after delicate and prolonged experiment, have concluded that better results can be obtained with a minimum recoil than with a maximum cutting bullet; and the 32-40, for all-round target purposes, seems to give the greatest satisfaction.

It is not all in the mere aiming and firing, in the loading and cleaning and handling. Important though they be, there are other things which must be taken into consideration. A man

must bring into play the finest and subtlest judgment. He must be able to estimate on the instant the true values of virtually intangible things. And the ability or non-ability to do this constitutes the chief difference between a crack shot and a bungler. The study of the light is a science in itself, while the wind drift is probably harder to calculate than all other things put together.

No cause is without an effect, and no force can be without result when acting upon a flying object cut free from everything save gravitation. And so with the wind upon a bullet. In the two hundred yards which the bullet must traverse between the muzzle and the target there is ample time for the wind to deflect it from its course. And the least deflection will prove fatal to the score, while the wind, acting with never twice the same velocity and veering very often in its direction, must be mastered or the marksman fails. And since there are men who make good scores, it is obvious that the wind is often mastered.

Again, a good sharpshooter must know himself—must know his own physical condition to a nicety. The dictum of the physician that a healthy stomach is the correlative of a sound mind is something more than a mouthful of words. And all public speakers have learned at severe cost that their best efforts have been made when their stomachs were in best trim. And it is so with the sharpshooter, who, if any man ever does, must call upon the finest and most delicate resources of his mind. If a man be not at his best and if he knows his business, he will not attempt any of the big shooting.

King Hayes, who has hit a ten-inch bull's-eye 198 times out of a possible 200, at 600 feet, and who has worn the crown of the Schützenfest for three years, thoroughly understands this. "No, I shall not shoot," he said to-day; "not until I feel better. A heavy cold on the stomach, you know; so I dare not dream of entering the lists."

Frank Dettling of the Sacramento Helvetia Club, the man who shot the first center bull's-eye of the fest, was the only one in the morning who ventured his skill against the Honor Target Germania. Each member of the National Bund is entitled to only three shots all told, so they are not in a hurry to try conclusions with it. But Dettling, unafraid, made a score of 55 out of a possible 75, and since so many prizes have been offered he is not anxious to sell his score card.

A. H. Pape, king of the California Schützen Club, scored 46, 47 and 49 out of a possible 150 on the standard target, 8 on the ring target made 71 and 72 out of a possible 75.

The most splendid shooting, however, fell to the credit of C. M. Henderson of the Golden Gate Rifle and Pistol Club. At the man target he made three flags and a 19 in succession—that is to say in four shots he made 79 out of a possible 80, beating Harry M. Pope by three points.

That this may be appreciated by the non-elect it were well to explain this man target. It represents the head and upper part of a man's body, the whole figure being black. It is divided in perpendicular lines half an inch apart, the center line counting 20 and the numbers running down on each side to 1. Now at 600 feet this target simply appears black to the eye, yet Mr. Henderson put three shots dead into the center and die fourth but half an inch off.

"Pretty close to \$200 for the ten days!" his friends cried jubilantly as they crowded around to congratulate him. It is highly improbable that any competitor during the remainder of the fest will make the 80, while the possibilities for even a tie-score are not many. Anyway, M. Henderson does not see his way to accept \$190 for his chance of getting the \$200.

It will not come amiss, in conclusion, to speak of the precautions taken against accidents. No smoking is allowed in the shooting hall. In the same place, under all circumstances, the rifle must be carried perpendicularly, the muzzle toward the ceiling. And all manipulations with the rifle, all alterations and aiming for the purpose of regulating the sights, must be done on the stand, the muzzle pointing toward the targets.

But all this is in the very nature of the men of the Bundes Schützenfest. What else could be expected of men who are so definite and coherent in all they do and who take such fastidious care of their guns? No horseman ever tended his pet racer more tenderly than do they their rifles, and many a lover loves his loved one not half so well.