

## SHOOTING TEAL DUCK AT LAKE CHAPALA

Giuseppe Antona. 1895. "Shooting Teal Duck at Lake Chapala." *The Detroit Free Press*, 3 March 1895, 11.

A lake whose blue waters rippled away in a dazzle of golden sunlight, and upon which the wind-tossed clouds cast deep shadows, as they swept grandly westward; a lake whose emerald setting revealed exquisite shades of foliage, subtle greens and softest yellows, like the rarest of Persian rugs, a richness of blossom, a brilliance of gloom, a luxuriance of arborescent growth, tropical in character and bewildering in detail; a lake held fast in the embrace of strange fantastic mountain ridges whose sharp jagged edges stretch away into the violet tones of distance until they merge into the dry brown western slopes of the Sierra Madre; this is the famous Lake of Chapala, the greatest body of fresh water in all Mexico, for which, one glorious spring morning I left Atequiza, one of a party of four, to see how fortune would favor our guns in the Chapala country.

The strong air was full of exhilaration, every glade through which we passed grew light with young leafage, and the whole earth seemed covered with universal fragrance, the life and loveliness of new-born things, which the coming of spring awakened to fuller glory.

The trip by diligence having been rendered impossible by the conductor's illness, we procured horses with some difficulty for ourselves and one extra for provisions and ammunition, and set forth upon a mountain road purple and green with riotous flowering, following a hilly and tortuous path which enabled us at every turning to glance backward at the Hacienda of Atequiza, surrounded by its wide reaches of plain and rendered a brilliant spot color by the of roses, in which the mocking birds told one another of their hopes.

The spot is bathed by a little creek, which in its turn moves a massive mill wheel, and is encircled by old houses, which serve as inn, saloon, and grocery shop and compose altogether the hacienda of Atequiza.

En route we met a company of Mexicans on horseback, with their wives, both husband and wife, or lover and sweetheart, riding on the same animal. Some of them, indeed, were in three, wife, husband and child, the woman wearing a straw sombrero over her reboso. They all progressed faster than we did, and smilingly saluted us with the usual "buenas tardes, señores," to which we responded heartily, wishing them the same.

After an hour's ride we reached a ranch which our comrade, the son of the American consul, told us was called "Rancho del Mirador," or Beautiful View Ranch, and the name is especially well given. In that wild romantic place, a family of Indians were living, clothed in the original suit of Adam, and sharing their days with horses, mules, burros, dogs, sheep, goats, and other domestic animals for associates. In their small huts they lived the year round, satisfying themselves with what gain nature gives them from their meager work. That wild and desolate locality offered an enchanting range of vision, the horror of a precipice which flanked our mountain path being well recompensed by the view of the Mexican interior ocean and the two towers of the cathedral of Chapala, which, seen from this spot, resembled two chicken feathers, which were always loyal to our sight, in the passage of the daily twenty-four hours.

We opened the rustic wood gate that kept human beings as well as beasts within the village confines, and began the descent from the ranch of El Mirador. The more we advanced the more pleasant it was, the road continually delightful from the green of the different species of cactus, maguey, banana trees,

date-palms, etc., and always in the foreground, appearing and disappearing at intervals, that great body of water called Chapala Lake.

After passing through the small haciendas of San Nicola[s], Trabajo (or work) and Buena Vista we began immediately afterwards to see the first houses of that hamlet whose name the lake bore.

Before reaching our destination we had experienced but one inconvenience, the horse which carried our provisions had a mania for outdistancing his companions, so that we had to cross the fields several times, not because we feared to lose the animal—he was not worth our trouble—but fearing that with him our provisions also would be lost. He was the eldest of our horses, but his spirit of liberty was much more advanced than the others.

Arriving at Chapala we dismounted at the Inn of the "Nueva Purissima," and to those who do not know what a fonda Mexicana is, it would appear a very strange name and they would certainly wish to know the difference between the fonda of the country conquered by Cortes and the American hotel. There can be no mistake in saying that most Americans prefer the hostelries of their native land, for the fonda Mexicana has not the principle of any of the comforts which the sons of the country of Washington know so well, and it will be enough to say that the rooms are without windows, and consequently damp with an unmistakable odor of rats.

The house was more suited to be called a stable than anything else, but we arranged as best we could and then eagerly directed our steps to the lake beach whose beauties we had anticipated with expectant longing.

The view was most fascinating: with rolling hills, steep mountains, the perfect sky, and the villas scattered here and there; one called Monte Carlo was kept by an English man named Crow and nestled among the rocks like a little fortress.

The smooth, sandy stretch of beach touched by the fringe of the waves, recalled the lake regions of sunny Italy; the blue water was populated with its finny inhabitants which, as I gazed, slid by like the figures in a beautiful dream, but as their colors were not well pronounced, I concluded the Chapala water could not be very clean. Gaily gliding over this island sea, in and out among the weeds and lilies, curving their purplish-azure throats to the fluttering ripples rode a phalanx of the wild teal duck, which made their homes in the tangle of matted vegetation on the shores, and render Chapala a veritable paradise.

Refreshed by a bath in the waters which the gilded sun rays had mellowed into tepidity, we procured a native boat and an Indian who served both as a steersman and oarsman, and embarked just before sunset well provided with ammunition and Parker guns, our zest for sport heightened by the tract of morass visible in the distance, marked by spots which the water had left in receding, and which our greed told us could not but abound with prey.

Our craft, made from a hollowed tree trunk, had for oars and rudder a single pole, such as might be called a slender flag-staff in the states, and used for such on national holidays, and which our Indian boatman and guide, Feliciano, maneuvered much like a laundryman attempting to fill a receptacle of soiled clothes.

We realized at once that we were in a splendid duck country; the gray film of twilight spread slowly over the sky as the crimson lightings of the sunset died out, and one by one the stars crept forth upon the bosom of the dark heavens.

Paddling close to the shore, we gradually and cautiously approached the feeding grounds, and leaving the smallest of wakes behind us, slid gently through the reeds and grasses and anchored behind some great logs near a mud bank.

Against the dark horizon lay the dim outline of an immense forest whose trees had stood in silent companionship long before civilization touched those shores, giant cacti half-strangled by vines, took on weird shapes in the gloom, and after a time the moon emerged from the hurrying black and lavender-colored clouds which fled before the night wind.

Where the rays struck the water, it seemed of molten silver, turning, on the outer edges, to inky blackness; blighted stumps came into prominence, and the tropical landscape, mountain, lake and shores—ourselves and boat too, in black silhouette, against the moon-path—seemed a fairy-like scene caught and held in enchantment by the genius of the night.

Ducks now began to appear on all sides, but they seemed to know what awaited them, and darted around us in dire alarm.

The swift beating of a thousand pinions could be heard afar, coming up the lake with a rushing sound, and the next instant, dark masses circled around and over us.

"Bang—bang—bang!"

Out of the reeds and sedge flew the terrified fowl, hundreds of wounded concealing themselves in the rushes, others half-swimming, half-wading away in their fright, the loud flapping of wings of the thousands in flight seeming like distant thunder, while dull thuds and loud splashes made known where our shots had told upon water and upon land.

It was a moment of intense excitement; flock after flock wheeled and flew around and struck the water, and as we kept silent for a time, the fright subsided, flight ceased and the ducks returned to feed.

"Bang—bang—bang!"

And again the merciless leaden hail cut the fluttering columns; the quick reports of constant shooting followed one another, the ducks came down singly and in pairs, the quacking was incessant, and the surface of the water was covered with the dead fowl.

Each man emptied his barrels as quickly as possible into the black clouds, loading up again every three minutes as long as ammunition lasted.

Turning to the southeast side going around the Santo Domingo cape, we came upon another vast flock of game quietly feeding.

It was a glorious night's sport and the red light of dawn broke before we thought of bagging our game. All the birds that we could see upon the water were collected and counted and three times the boat was loaded and brought ashore. The total of the night's shooting was 200 ducks, or 50 apiece, all blue-winged teal, which we loaded in some inexplicable manner upon our Mexican boy companion, and sent him back to the village, while we embarked again and using the artistic towers of the old cathedral to guide us as to our bearings, we rowed leisurely through the sunrise towards the tiny town, leaving reluctantly behind us that gunner's eden, where wild fowl shooting was so plentiful that it ceased to be a science, and where the echo of our guns shook tremulously the purple air that covered like a royal mantle those gigantic mountains.