

A CHAMOIS HUNT.

BY A. RANGER.



ILL-HEALTH is not always an un-mixed evil, for if it sometimes makes one an exile from home, it not infrequently gives him privileges which, but for sickness, he might never have had. It has been so in my case more than once; but take a single instance: I had been for a week or more picking my way along one of those narrow but beautiful valleys of Italy which are formed by the numerous spurs of the Alps just south of Monte Rosa, when my swarthy-skinned muleteer broke his long silence by informing me that we had reached the extreme upper end of the valley and were now actually among the foothills. He concluded by pointing suggestively toward a curious old chalet, standing among chestnut trees, half a mile distant on a hillside. I nodded approval, and not many minutes later dismounted at the door of "The Chamois"—for so Antonio called the quaint hostelry. He said it had been given this name because it was the headquarters for all hunting parties from Florence and other Italian cities. He further explained that the whole region was famous for the numbers of chamois to be found, and that the King himself had often visited the valley.

It had been my purpose to climb

Monte Rosa on the Italian side and make descent by way of the Theodule Pass and the village of Zermott. I was, therefore, not unwilling to stop for a day of rest before undertaking the difficult task, even had no special inducement been offered; but, when I learned the name of the house and why it was so named, I was seized with an almost irresistible desire to stop there for a while in hope of having a little hunt of my own.

And my lucky star must have been ascendant just then, for as I entered the house I found a group of ten or a dozen Italian gentlemen, in the garb of hunters, excitedly listening to a peasant who stood in the center, cap in hand. I was not sufficiently familiar with the language of Dante to understand all that was said, but I heard the term "chamois" frequently used, and I soon learned from the porter (one of those polyglot persons to be found at most European hotels) that the party consisted of noblemen from Genoa and other places who were out for their annual hunt, and that the peasant was explaining that he had just seen a bunch of six chamois on a mountain-side not many miles away. These creatures are not usually of a gregarious disposition, but they are sometimes found in considerable herds, and the peasant's story seemed to be accepted as a truthful one. An attack on them was therefore planned for the next day. Here, now, was my opportunity, and I instantly began to plan for an invitation to join in the sport. Fortunately, I had with me an open letter of introduction from a well-known Scottish sportsman, who had spent several winters in Italy, and by means of this, and through the kind offices of mine host, who could jabber a little English, I made the acquaintance of Count Ferratti, the leader of the party, who gave me a cordial invitation to accompany them on the morrow. I was without an outfit at all suitable, but the hotel keeper was about my size (I refer to his physical make-up, of course), and as he was prevented from going, by some unexpected business arrange-

ment, I gladly accepted the loan of his "rig," including as fine a rifle as I ever saw.

During the evening the party amused themselves with all sorts of yarns, including personal experiences in hunting chamois, and tales of marvelous exploits by noted men from all parts of Italy. I engaged the aforesaid polyglot to act as interpreter, and in this way learned a number of very interesting things. One of the older men claimed to have hunted frequently in company with King Victor Emmanuel, and was loud in his praises of the skill and power of endurance of that rough old warrior. It seems that Victor took special pleasure in this kind of sport, and was never known to grow weary of it. He was a daring climber, and a most remarkable shot with the rifle. He had a way of keeping just behind a comrade when game was in sight, and would often manage, when he thought his friend might not hit, to fire simultaneously with him, and without his knowledge, and though it was probable that the King usually killed the chamois, he would never make or allow such a claim, but always insisted on giving his companion credit for a fine shot. It appears, too, that he used to get terribly angry at Count Cavour and Garibaldi, because he could never get either of them willingly to join him in the sport, or listen with any real interest to the stories he told on returning from a hunt. Incidentally, too, I learned that this illustrious trio, to whose united efforts we must attribute the creation of United Italy, were so totally unlike in all their tastes and habits that they took but little interest in each other outside of their relation to a common cause.

We were out of bed at an early hour next morning, and before the sun had begun to pierce with his slant javelins of light the dense fog which covered all the valley, had reached the broad base of the mountain on which the game had last been seen. Ferratti deployed his men with the skill of an old field-marshal. The mountain was to be scaled simultaneously on all sides, except where it joined itself to the mighty flank of Monte Rosa. We were directed to take our places and await the signal, which was to be a blast from the leader's horn. I do not know whether it may have been because I was an Amer-

ican, or for some other reason, but Ferratti paid me the compliment of assigning me to a position near the center of the line and next to himself. I readily found my place, and had waited with as much patience as I could command for more than an hour, when I heard the welcome horn, whose silvery notes echoed sweetly from crag to crag as the sound rolled onward and upward and died away in the far distance. Then I began the ascent. But I soon found that the post of honor was the post of difficulty here, as in so many other places in human life, for suddenly, out of the gray mist which was beginning to lift, there arose before me an almost perpendicular cliff of some hundreds of feet, which it seemed could only be scaled by one who had wings. I thought of my poor left lung, and came near concluding at once that I, too, was left. But after a long search I discovered the bed of a summer torrent, and by dint of the hardest sort of climbing managed to get upward some five or six hundred feet, after which the way became much less difficult. Here, too, the grandeur and beauty of the region began to impress me—

"As many a pinnacle, with shifting glance,
Through the gray mist thrust up its shattered lance."

I caught glimpses of the bold outlines of the neighboring mountains, and saw the colossal shoulders of Monte Rosa, which are nowhere else seen to such advantage. In fact, I had almost, for the nonce, forgotten that I was a sportsman and not a scenery worshiper, when I was aroused from my reverie by the sound of a rifle-shot, followed by another and another in quick succession—the last, after a brief interval, supplemented by a long, shrill whistle, which I took to be the signal of a successful opening of the campaign. I knew, however, that if the quarry were started and not brought down at once, it would be likely to keep on at about the same level on the mountain-side, and probably give an opportunity for the next hunter to try his hand. Accordingly, I dropped behind the nearest boulder and nervously watched in the direction whence I had heard the firing. Several things conspired to make me nervous. I was not strong at best, and was a good deal heated by climbing to my present position; and, besides, I remembered that I

was the only representative of a nation famous for the use of the rifle, and naturally felt that it would not do for me to make an unsuccessful shot.

But I had not long to think about it, for suddenly, as if they had sprung, Minerva-like, into existence, two full-grown chamois came into view on the edge of a cliff some four hundred yards to the right and above me. They stopped for an instant only, and then disappeared as quickly as though the earth had swallowed them. I kept my eyes riveted to the spot for perhaps five minutes, at the end of which time the wary creatures came in sight again. This time they stood close together, half facing in my direction, and somewhat nearer than before, on a gigantic boulder. Evidently they had chosen this position that they might the more readily discover whether they had enemies in front as well as behind them. As they stood there with heads high in air they formed a picture worth traveling far to see. For a moment I was affected by it, and quite unable to shoot. But I soon remembered that the reputation of American sportsmen was at stake, and that but once in a lifetime did one have such an opportunity. Then my nerves became like steel, and with a steadier hand than I have sometimes held a rifle on nobler game, I sent the leaden messenger on its errand. An instant later

and I was on my feet prepared for another shot. But the smoke hung low for what seemed a long time, and when I did get a clear view neither of the chamois was in sight. I was being tortured with doubt as to my success, and had even begun to think how I could explain matters to the rest of the party, who would assuredly know of my failure, when I heard an exultant shout at my left and not far away. Later appeared my nearest neighbor in the hunt, who clapped his hands and poured out such a stream of mellifluous eloquence that I could only conclude that my shot had taken effect, and that he knew it. And so it proved. For, leaving his rifle with me, he bounded away with almost the agility of the chamois itself, and returned with the game.

I had no other chance to test my skill for the day, and perhaps, as in the famous case of Henry Clay, who drove a nail home at the first shot and declined to shoot again until some one had done better, it may have been well that I did not. Other members of the party were successful, too, for on returning to the hotel we found we had secured three fine specimens of what is, perhaps, more difficult to successfully hunt than any other sort of game.

That night we had a grand dinner with chamois served *à l'italienne*, and with an American as the guest of honor.

