

## A CHAMOIS HUNT IN THE ALPS OF THE CANTON DE VAUD.

BY SCOTT A. SMITH.



HERE were three of us, father, son and the writer. It was near the end of June. We started at 1 o'clock in the morning from Les Plans de Fréniere by that route which leads up by the bridge of Nant, and mounted quite directly to the northwestern ridge of the Grand Muveran. This position gave us views both on the northern and the western sides of the mountain.

It was our intention to go up to a passage or vire, which takes a serpentine course upon the mountain side and traverses it a long distance one thousand feet below the summit! or at a height of nine thousand feet. These vires are natural passes at the foot of walls or where layers of rock have separated.

On arriving at the limit of the pastures the sun announced itself by vague glimmers; soon it was distinct and clear, then we walked with great prudence, looking with care in all directions. Our attention was redoubled when we

came to a turn in the path, or on mounting to a higher level which opened up new slopes. The father, always in advance, would crawl to a point of view and rise only when he had assured himself that there was no game in

sight. We continued to ascend until the way was stopped by a large rock, behind which was the commencement of the vire. Here the view was very

Upon the western side of the ridge were those walls which descend by formidable precipices into the valley of Nant. The gorges were of such depth as to almost daze the mind; by simply pushing a stone it could go bounding down more than eighteen hundred feet to the pasture lands below.

There was a possibility that the chamois would come from that side by one of those furrows cut into the sides of the Muveran from the top to the base which serve as natural routes of descent to grass slopes inaccessible to sheep but much liked by the chamois. At some distance on the other side was a large plateau in two steps; upon the highest rested a glacier overlooked by an amphitheatre or wall of serrated peaks. The lowest step received all of the debris which fell from the glacier or the surrounding heights. Nearer were hills without number, gorges and terraces, while farther down were spots of grass and fields of snow.

The first examination gave no good result; then the father with his glass searched all the rocks and patches of grass for an hour, with no better success. We young hunters were beginning to be impatient, when suddenly he threw himself back and made us a sign to be silent. Six hundred feet below two chamois came round a mound of earth out upon one of the snow banks, or névés. These are made in large part by snow avalanches from the cliffs above, and were packed almost to the hardness of ice. Soon appeared three, then four, and finally five. Each for an instant carefully examined the surroundings; then, believing themselves in security, they commenced their morning's sport.

These are happy moments in the lives of chamois; after they have breakfasted their play begins, which consists, in part, of simple frolics, displays of power and agility, races to no end, solely for the pleasure of running and to feel themselves alive. With many capricious movements they raced over the snow, the rocks and the grass, always returning to the névé, which was apparently their favorite arena. There was one, always the same, which from time to time stopped for a moment,

and with his nose to the wind carefully inspected the surroundings. I had often seen chamois at play but never before with so much abandon, so much desire. The day was perfect, a clear sky, pure exhilarating air. Nature was in her hour of joy and no doubt they felt its influence.

At times, starting together from the bottom of the *névé*, they went up at prodigious speed, in short quick bounds, their front legs bent like a bow, then in-

No doubt there came to them great enjoyment when standing like statues on the verge of a precipice they with extended necks curiously examined its profound depth.

Often in mounting or descending one of the troop by a sudden impulse would turn at a right angle to their course and bound quickly away; all of the others instantly followed. If the first felt himself pressed by the pursuers he increased his efforts,

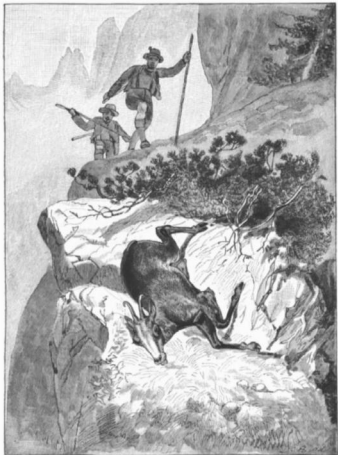


HEAD OF FULL-CROWN CHAMOIS (MALE).

stantly turning they dashed down the slope, racing rapidly where the incline was not too great. On the steepest places they would slide with stiffened thighs and the whole weight of their bodies thrown upon the hind feet, cutting deep furrows in the impacted snow, and bring themselves to a halt on the verge of a fissure or at the edge of the wall of the *névé*. Appearing to have a just measure of their power it was evident that they had in mind no thought of a fall.

while taking devious courses to distance them. Again, and quickly, as though the word had been given, they turned and rushed at one of their number; he, although taken unawares, never seemed to be without resource to escape. His method was to put space between himself and his pursuers by bounds of desperate quickness; afterward he would lead the whole troop until desire for another change seized them.

At these times if either of them failed



FOUND AT LAST.

to act his part with absolute promptness his way was blocked, he was horned and roughly thrust about. One of them may have met the disapprobation of the others, for he took himself away with a sudden movement and a dispirited air; perhaps he was aged, but that the beautiful morning had given new life to his blood, until finally seized with the melancholy of age

he left that turbulent group to rest the remainder of the day.

To me it seemed that from all this display of agility, alertness and endurance there must result a training to meet those exigencies of a life liable to require instant decision and action to escape from that ever-threatening destroyer, the hunter.

The idea of doing the least harm to



A FIRST GLIMPSE OF THE GAME.

these interesting animals should have been far from our minds, and yet we trembled with impatience and desire in thus seeing them, in knowing that our rifles were loaded, and in thinking how little nearer we needed to be to have them within a sure distance of our aim. To surprise an animal which has a sense of smell so delicate, eyes so piercing, an ear so sure and quick, a speed so great, and one, too, that is seldom off its guard is not an indifferent affair, and one pursues such an object all the more ardently as the difficulties increase. If a hunter—I mean an amateur—could capture a chamois alive and carry him in triumph to the plains, to be set free the next day, perhaps he would do so, but it cannot be thus taken, consequently he seeks to kill this animal, which preserves the ability to tax his efforts to their utmost strain.

We discussed in low tones our future course. There was no possibility of approaching them upon the *névé*, but we had a choice between three methods of chase.

It was known to hunters that there were only two places where the wall or barrier before mentioned could be passed, and in each case the ascent was very

steep. If the father and I hastened to occupy those avenues of escape, then the son had only to descend toward the troop to force them to pass under our fire, but to do this three hours were needed, and during that time the game might go to the Mueran or elsewhere. The second plan was for two of us to remain where we were while the other went to their rear, thus forcing a flight in our direction; but this attempt would be full of uncertainties, as they might pass the ridge beyond our reach, or leave their position for a certain couloir, or furrow, which led directly to a *vire* higher up the mountain. To prevent this latter possibility another hunter was needed. Lastly, we could wait until they retired for the day, when it would be possible to follow and find them, for as a rule chamois then remain quiet.

The last proposal was the wisest, and the father insisted on its adoption. As a true hunter he had little liking for that



OH HIE NATIVE HEATH.

method of chase which posted hunters to act with others who took the part of dogs. To shoot at the game in its swift course of flight, the chances were that although the balls might fly wide of a vital spot, yet the animals might be wounded, and a wounded chamois is in nearly every instance a chamois lost.

After waiting an hour and a half there came no cessation in their play; then we young hunters, in our impatience, urged the second plan. The son was sent to turn them toward us.

When three-quarters of an hour had passed we heard the report of his rifle. The father and I were in new positions; he had moved farther on to block the main vire leading up to our place, and to be ready to hasten to the summits if necessary. I was posted lower down. The chamois fled in the worst direction for us, but the best for them, they mounted to the highest vire. As soon as this was seen by the father, he commenced to climb the rocks with an agility which was truly surprising. He arrived only in time to shoot at the rear one, which shook his head as though the ball had brushed his ear.

Our next course was to the southern side of the mountain.

The father led the way, and carefully examined all passages to make sure that nothing was left unseen. We soon saw the chamois at their ease in the shadow of a rock near the head of a small glacier. A sharp nasal whistle informed us that our presence was known; then there was a general flight, a *saute qui peut*. One of the number, a superb animal, tall, and with a haughty way of carrying his head, without doubt the sultan of the troop, crossed the glacier at a gallop and disappeared; two others sprang into couloirs which permitted them to pass to the summits, but the last one went straight at the rocks to scale them in front. We mounted toward him with great rapidity, hoping that he would persist in what was seemingly a useless attempt. Three trials were fruitless, but rebounding again with those thighs of steel he gained a resting place for his feet, and soon rejoined his more prudent comrades. In ten minutes we saw the three upon the summits, with their forms distinctly outlined against the sky. Their manner was that of being in perfect security, without thought of flight. They walked leisurely, and made long halts to look in our direction and perhaps wished us joy. One of them tossed his head

in a most provoking manner; it was, no doubt, the very chamois we had so confidently expected to capture.

For us there remained only to submit to our discomfiture and as a passing thing to measure the exact strength of a chamois. We went up to examine the rocks and found a nearly perpendicular wall from ten to twelve feet in height, having at least eighty degrees of inclination. As high as I could reach with my stick there was not even the shadow of a projection. By nearly vertical leaps he must have reached with his front legs a height of not less than twelve feet; above that point could be seen some slight depressions and narrow ledges, but all of them were far apart. It was impossible to understand in just what way his hoofs could hold to such a surface. No hunter or climber could scale that wall without a ladder.

The chamois continued to watch us. The father expressed no thought of attempting anything further with them. He commenced to examine the declivities on the other side of the glacier, hoping to discover some trace of that fine sultan who had abandoned his seraglio to put himself in safety. Nothing was seen. We mounted upon a rocky course which led to a second glacier, and wherever the rocks gave place to a little earth or gravel there we found his footprints.

Arriving at the top we realized that the inner man needed replenishing. It was late in the day, and except a small piece of bread, eaten on the march, there was only the far-away remembrance of a breakfast between midnight and 1 o'clock. The son had neglected to reload his rifle, and time must be taken for that.

Seating ourselves near a small stream which flowed from the glacier, we opened our provisions.

The young hunters ate with great appetites, but the father was uneasily seated and did not cease to hurry us. Our repast was near its end when he disappeared; before we were fully aware of that fact there sounded the report of his rifle. Adieu to the dinner; the bread here, the ham there, all were thrown aside. Seizing my rifle I sprang upon the glacier and saw coming toward me two chamois, a mother and her little one, in full flight. The mother turned. To take aim and miss was the affair of an instant. I had a second barrel, but she was no longer in view, having passed the ridge. A rock

separated us. I ran there. The chamois was below at twenty paces. I was about to shoot when a large slab which projected over the steep incline gave way under my feet. Half falling, half jumping, I landed upon a lower level, then upon another, all the while trying to recover my balance. In falling my rifle struck the rocks and exploded. The unbalanced rock went bounding down, carrying with it an avalanche of stones. The young chamois, from the report and the noise of the loosened stones, was seized with such fright that he turned, rushed up the glacier, then rested an instant, uncertain, lost and paralyzed; finally running in all directions, his movements ended by his seeking refuge among some rocks in the prolongation of the ridge.

The mother, missing his presence and heeding only the promptings of maternal love, returned and remained an instant near us. Our rifles were empty; the son had so intently followed my movements that he had done nothing more than to raise his hand to put in the charge. For all this fortune in favor of the mother I have a hundred times thanked heaven. Then looking all around, to be satisfied that her young was not lying dead upon the snow, she turned and fled precipitately to the lower glacier, there halted and made great efforts in looking and whistling. They may have exchanged some signal, for with a tranquilized air the mother took a course to one of the peaks, in the direction of Canton Valais, which we judged to be her usual resting place.

The father explained his movements. In his impatience he went upon the glacier to cross it, when there appeared eight chamois; among them was our sultan. Unfortunately they had scented us, for they were already in motion toward a curious passage which led up from the glacier and over a ridge to the west. The father, being a little nearer to its entrance than they, hastened there to turn them in our direction, but only succeeded with the mother. She, however, passed down in a way to avoid him; then he discharged his rifle to put us on the alert.

A long and unsuccessful search was made for the little chamois; the rocks showed no trace of his feet. While aiding us in this the father, with his glass, kept the mother in sight to locate her exact retreat, in view of our movements on the morrow. We left that labor to him, and

while seated upon the rocks thought of rest only, and of enjoying the last moments of the day.

The sky above was clear. Far in the south the Pennine chain displayed itself along the horizon, with its giant peaks gathered around Mont Rosa and his grand domes. Farther to the west was Mont Blanc. She seemed very distant, and yet more brilliant than usual, as her base was lost in blue vapors then mounting from the Rhone. In the near foreground was a labyrinth of savage peaks, naked and bristling; here the long tapering line of rocks forming the Haut de Cry; there the Dent de la Forclaz, that irregular mass which crowned the rest with his natural tower like a donjon keep; then came the Muveran, its ridges fierce and rude, its fissures with profound depths, and rocks upon rocks seemingly ready for overthrow. Other summits were strewn around, all standing out in full light, displaying the nudity of their sides.

Suddenly there came a glow which enveloped the whole surroundings. It mounted to the most elevated points; each one of those austere masses, each one of those ruins took for an instant its coloring from the setting sun. As the light faded from us, and we became submerged in the invading darkness, there were yet the higher peaks of the Pennine Alps which refused to give up their light; they stood in the full rivalry of their splendor. The dark form of the Matterhorn was flushed with a sinister light, the icy top of the Weishorn brightened and glimmered; the Grand Combin appeared crowned with a halo of glory, and Mont Blanc was all covered with a mantle, purple and flaming; placed nearest to the setting sun, its last adieux rested upon her after the others had paled and darkened.

The day was at an end; it was necessary to find a resting place until morning. We descended rapidly, and were soon inside the chalet nearest to where, on the morrow, our further endeavors in the chase should commence. The cows had not yet been driven to those high pastures, but we were sure of wood with which to make a fire, and ere long it flamed in the middle of the room.

With our frugal provisions and the gourd in circulation, all were soon in a contented mood. Conversation languishing, each sought his rude bed—simply a plank, nothing more.

I cannot say that such nights are voluptuous in repose, but memory is a clever magician, transforming into pleasure that which was painful. The pillow, although at the time not comfortable, yet becomes in the distant past above all picturesque. Such nights rest in one's memory when others are effaced.

The following morning we were up very early; there followed no delay from a sleeping cook; neither was there the annoyance of an account to settle. It was about 3:30 and daybreak came on our arrival at a point where we hoped to see the chamois as she came down for a morning meal.

Vain delusion! The place of her refuge was unoccupied, and upon the whole mountain side was no living thing. The sun rose and still nothing appeared; an hour passed and yet nothing came. Leaving our place of concealment we walked over the glacier, but found no traces in the snow except those of the night before. We climbed a ridge to get extended views; there was the same solitude. Finally the father, by his good judgment and gymnastic ability, succeeded in reaching the sleeping place of the chamois, but found nothing to tell of the direction she had taken. The only satisfactory explanation was this, that in her love for her young this mother had taken a mode of departure which should leave no trace. The father exclaimed: "There is a charm over the life of the animal; let us go hence."

There came to me a great sense of relief when our backs were turned upon the place, and I doubt not that my companions felt the same. The danger we had threatened to that poor mother caused me much remorse.

The father, our man of experience, reasoned thus: Followed and surprised on the Grand Muveran, the chamois have sought more secluded retreats and probably have not retaken the route whence they first came, but more sure that their course has been by a low ridge extending south from the Muveran, and possibly not stopping short of the Dent de Monele. Between the two places mentioned were many peaks, and we had time enough to visit at least the first of them, the little Muveran and the Dent aux Favres.

The word was given: En route and march quickly.

The little Muveran was a sort of bizarre horn, pointed and twisted, which, although

less high than the surrounding peaks, carried an air of defiance to the sky rather than a look of aspiration to reach it. The chamois liked it well and were often there in great numbers. The father assured me that he had counted more than thirty at one time, but to-day, after an hour's search, it was found deserted. Then to the Dent aux Favres, which was no better inhabited.

Wearied with so much unsuccessful searching, tired with so much ascending and descending, some of which was very trying in its nature, we gathered our provisions for a final meal, and while eating discussed a way for returning home. If by the valley of Nant, then we should pass some grass slopes to which the chamois descend for their evening meal.

Owing to the lateness of the hour we chose for our course a very direct path, although the most difficult. It was a way of steps by which we could descend more than twelve hundred feet. There was no danger, as the steps were solid, but we must dare to look far out into space as we progressed at a very sharp angle downward.

Descending thus in single file the rolling of stones was heard in the direction of a neighboring ridge. All looked for a while without success; finally the father with his glass counted seventeen chamois at play in the midst of great fallen rocks. The way to reach that place was well known to him, and he decided on an attempt to approach them alone.

Giving to our care all of his trappings, except his rifle, he left us. But a short time was needed to arrive at the first stones; his feet seemed to feel the ground before the pressure of the body came upon it. Hidden behind a block he waited a favorable time, then sinking near to the ground he worked his way to another shelter; thus with varying movements, here and there, he progressed toward the game. At times he moved forward when extended at full length on the ground. In the whole three-quarters of an hour not a stone rolled from under him; no noise betrayed his presence. The chamois believed themselves in security, and continued to play; but the hour was near for retiring to their resting places. The father did his best to advance rapidly, and was soon at a point indicated to us a place sufficiently close to the chamois, but they had been gradually withdrawing and were several hundred feet from there. He con-

tinued to move farther on. We watched his progress with an attention constantly heightening in intensity. The critical moment arrived; one chamois gained the entrance to a passage and passed from our sight; a second, a third, followed. The father had disappeared, but at this instant came the report of his rifle. We saw the troop speed toward the passage and they were gone, leaving, however, one of their number on the rocks.

The sun was setting. The dark mountains across the valley projected their forms in shadows upon the base of ours; it was necessary to continue our downward course.

Leaving the father to follow with his prize, we descended rapidly, when suddenly, far below us, two chamois crossed our path at lightning speed. They soon turned at a right angle to their course and ascended a slope parallel to our descent, thus gaining a high cornice where I had not supposed that there was a practicable route for them. They were superb; I had never before seen such speed or more audacious movements. The leader, a large animal with long legs, took seemingly impossible bounds, and had a movement like that of an acrobat in mid air. The other, with nimble feet, kept close in his tracks. At the instant of their passing into the sunlight the son exclaimed, "There is your sultan!"

It was a marvelous sight—the flight of those gazelles against the flame—lit flanks of the precipice.

We watched them as they sped away, a little above the line of the shadows, and their forms, gilded by the sun's rays, now stood clearly out from and then mingled with the purple of the rocks. Their movements on that narrow shelf seemed like a glowing and a suddenly passing vision.

The father rejoined us with a nearly full-grown male chamois across his back. Its coat was dark brown and dun colored. There were those large gazelle-like eyes and the black gracefully set and rapidly-curving horns, with their needle-like points for use in combats with his rivals or in conflict with the vultures of the Alps. Our hands could now touch all these, and the successful hunter could feel that he had won this prize by the exercise of his highest skill. The chalets of the herdsmen in the valley of Nant were soon reached; there upon the grass we drank a refreshing glass of milk, and without more delay took the route down the valley by the side of the torrent.

Here and there the stream disappeared under rich foliage, or rushed downward between enormous rocks covered with rhododendrons; then it flowed amid verdure odorant with flowers.

To me this valley recalled many pleasant memories; it had a power to dissipate all depressing thoughts. We two unsuccessful hunters, full of life's youthful hopes, were soon in the best of moods, trusting that in the near future would come opportunities in which to show our fitness for some vocation in life.

