

THE KINGLY TROPHY

Col. Askins Finds That Even On The Royal Hunting Grounds, Ibex Don't Come Easy.

BY COL. CHARLES ASKINS



After 14 days of incessant stalking, of mountain climbing, of toil and heart-breaking effort, with disappointment and mishap, with a steadfast determination, I at long last had the game in my sights. The scene was the Sierra de Gredos of central Spain, and the game was the more-than-elusive Spanish ibex. With Andres, Dionisio, and Max Borrel, I lay in the very tops of the Pico Almanzor, the highest mountain in the range, and there at 325 yards was a truly kingly, magnificent animal—the *Capra pyrenaica*, the Spanish ibex.

I had not essayed the peaks, trod the low valleys, nor yet scaled the precipitous cliffs to develop a case of buck ague. The glorious old billy had not seen us. He stood statuesque, his mammoth sweep of horn silhouetted against the stormy sky. He offered the perfect target.

It had been a long and exhausting search for the Spanish ibex, unquestionably the most difficult and certainly the most prized of the European trophies. The Spanish ibex is found only in the Gredos Mountains, a range approximately 100

miles west of Madrid. Here in a range of mountains that stands apart from the Pyrenees, the giant range that separates the Iberian Peninsula from the rest of Europe, and here for reasons that only God knows, the ibex has existed. There are claimed to be some ibex in Switzerland and in the Caucasus Mountains of Russia, and while there may be small remnants of the herds in the soviet mountains, those remaining in Switzerland are rare indeed. There is a first cousin of the ibex called the tur, and it is truly the Russian breed.

The lengthy, tiring, and sometimes frustrating search for the elusive billy goat had begun in a somewhat obtuse way. The Duke of Luna, an intimate of the *Caudillo* Franco, had casually mentioned to me one day that the deer shooting around Cordoba was excellent. "If you want to shoot one of our big stags just tell me and I'll arrange it." These deer are what the Germans call their *hirsch*, an animal with a horn formation like the American wapiti and with a body size that ranges well above 250 pounds.

It was not long after this seemingly casual invitation from the duke that I called him. He was chief of the division of *turismo*. I told him I would be glad indeed to drop down around Cordoba and hunt one of the lordly stags. His response was instantaneous and most agreeable. "You will be interested to know that Don Nicolas Franco, the ambassador to Portugal and, as you are well aware, the *caudillo's* brother, also wants a *venado* (stag). If you could pick him up at El Pardo, the Franco palace, he will ride down with you."

This was a most unusual twist and one that delighted me. I knew very well that if I hunted with one of the Francos, the shooting was bound to be pretty good.

Don Nicolas Franco, three years senior to the *caudillo*, was a most likable and agreeable companion. We had a chauffeur and went along for the uppermost of six hours chatting about our shooting interludes.

Although the Duke of Luna had spoken of Cordoba, ancient stronghold of the Moors through 500 years of occupation, we did not touch the historic city. We swung wide at Puelonuevo and, angling southeastward, wound up after darkness at a tiny village called La Venta de Cardeña. Here was a veritable castle, and the host, Don Patricio Palomar de Cardeñas, stood at the entrance to his palace. Lined up at his elbow was a detachment from the local *guardia civil*, the provincial police. You don't have the ambassador to Portugal and the dictator's brother come to call every day.

The next morning, long before the crimson Spanish sun had cut through darkness and shadow about the



The Spanish ibex inhabits the beautiful but rugged Gredos Mountains of Spain. Hunters must often spend days scaling remote cliffs and peaks to bag a fine billy.

great house, we were astrid. The *haciendado* had assembled a sizeable army. These were the *ojeadores*—the beaters—and for the hunters there were saddled horses each held by a groom.

We mounted up and cantered off into the gloom of the cork forest. Spain provides a good portion of all the cork in the world, and the country about Cordoba is a solid jungle of this remarkable wood. As we rode, we passed countless *campes* of the cork people, the peasants who strip the valuable bark from the trees. This is done quite scientifically so that the tree is not killed.

Ordinarily in a *monteria* (hunting party) such as this, there would be at least 10 or 15 hunters, but this was a very special occasion. And with Franco's brother as the honored guest, the guns only consisted of the four of us—Don Patricio, his brother Don Jaime, the ambassador, and myself. I felt just especially lucky, and rubbing my hands in anticipation, I knew very well I was going to be in for a delightful day. There was only one precaution, I assured myself. I must be double careful not to kill a stag bigger than that of the exalted guest.

We halted finally after a full two hours of cantering in a narrow valley that debouched onto a flat, the whole area covered by the indubitable cork wood. The ambassador was situated at the very mouth of the valley, and I was across from him at a distance of about 325 yards. The brothers were ensconced a quarter-mile on down the valley. I had the feeling somehow that they were not so much keen on bagging a great *venado* as they were in seeing to it that the royal guest did all right.

It took the beaters a long time to close in on us. They, of course, had made the considerable march on foot, and a roundabout one it was. But finally I could hear them raising a right hearty hullabaloo, what with shouts, banging on pans, and cracking the trees with clubs. Directly, a fox, a sly grayish fellow, came slinking by. Then there was a flurry of little roebuck. Ordinarily considered takeable, the *corso*, as he is called by the Spaniard, was passed up so that the gunfire would not tend to spook the primary game.

Very directly, a great-jowled boar trotted down the valley. Not at all alarmed, his ivory glistening in the morning sun and his hackles raised, he looked a good three feet in height. I was deeply tempted to lace one into him but Don Patricio, my host, had specifically forbidden any shooting except for the great *ciervo*, the red stag. I held my fire.

The drive produced none of the wanted game. The ambassador took the failure with complete equanimity.

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The Kingly Trophy

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The author saw many small bands of Spanish ibex, but it took 14 days to pull off a successful stalk in the rugged Gredos.

"We'll enjoy better luck on the afternoon beat," he said. By this time, it was the noon hour, and a sumptuous repast appeared from the kitchens at the Palomar manor. Everyone gorged himself, and after an hour's siesta, we remounted and this time rode for 60 minutes through the interminable cork timber.

Again we were arranged, but this time there was no convenient valley to act as a natural funnel for the drive. The ambassador was situated on a low hill that extended toward the southwest; I was at least a quarter-mile beyond and had a view for at least 600 yards. The brothers Palomar were off somewhere, walking with the beaters. I suspected, for they were by this time plainly anxious about the hunt.

The *ajedadores* had eaten and forgoing the siesta had been rounded up and moved out by the captain of the hunt. We had scarcely gotten well situated on our stands when I heard the clamor of their coming. Directly, a whole *mélange* of game came. There were three foxes, a dozen roebuck, and an old sow with a litter of five half-grown piglets. Then a deer appeared, and another, and finally there were three of them. But they were all does—"hinds" the English call them.

I heard the ambassador's double express 8mm speak twice. And about that time, trending very quietly and with side glances to right and left, a handsome *hirsch* waltzed out of the cork forest. He was not 100 yards from my stand. My shot from the .300 Savage struck him behind the fore-shoulder, ranging forward. He ran for perhaps 20 feet and piled up.

I strolled down to the ambassador's stand and found him standing proudly over a 12-pointer, truly a splendid specimen. I congratulated him and told him I had also been lucky. I was relieved to go to my stag and find he was only a 10-pointer,

with horns quite as widespread, quite as long, and certainly just as heavy of beam as those of Don Nicolas Franco's stag but lacking those two extra points.

Homeward bound the next morning, I took advantage of the situation to hint to Franco's brother that I would surely like to collect the highly prized *Capra pyrenaica*. It should be explained that the Gredos Mountains constitute a sort of royal game refuge, and only invited guests are privileged to hunt the ibex.

The ambassador smiled but did not offer to intercede for me. But a week later, Max Borrel, director of National Caza y Pesca (a department within the bureau of tourism), called me and said, "Can you leave tomorrow for the Gredos? The Duke of Luna says you may take one of Franco's *Capras*." I was delighted, and the next day I gathered up Max, a most ardent hunter himself, and we journeyed off to the *Parador* de Gredos.

These *paradores* are state-owned resort hotels. They are scattered over Spain, most of them located in old renovated castles noted for good quarters, excellent food, and fine service, and they usually have spectacular vistas. The *Parador* de Gredos, hidden away in the rocky vastness of this mountainous country, may very possibly have the most breathtaking panorama of all. I was delighted with my good fortune.

Borrel, master strategist of the hunt, told me at dinner the first night, "This is an easy touch. We'll be back here by late evening tomorrow with your *Capra*." Fourteen days later, with at least 100 torturous miles behind us, with one horse lame and a guide with a severely wrenched back, we still had not registered.

"I believe you are a *jinx*," Max said to me. "You are some kind of a hoodoo. The Duke of Luna is going to be sure I am just goofing off out here. No one has ever taken so long to kill one of these animals."

It was not that we could not find the game. We saw ibex every day, most of the time in bands of three or four to herds of as many as 20 animals. And while most of the goats were nannies and kids, there were billys, too—and some of them looked like trophy heads. But when it came to stalking these wary old studs, we met with poor success.

The Gredos are solid mountains but certainly not the Swiss Alps. The slopes are precipitous, the rock slides dangerous, and the snow in the upper reaches a steady drain, but all could be negotiated. We took horses, but once we were five or six miles from the *parador*, we dismounted and left the animals with a groom and went it afoot. Old Andres, oldest and most knowledgeable of the guides, told me in his country Spanish, "The oldest and best of the *Capra machos* (billys) only feed at night. In that way, they live to be very old. If you want to take a really worthwhile trophy, you must spend the night on the Pico Almanzor."

I talked this over with Max, and he snorted. "That old man is always giving me that *cuento* (story). I don't believe it."

But after 10 days of steady trekking, days during which we moved the scene of our activity some 12½ miles to the westward and later essayed a series of stalks some nine miles to the north and still with no luck, I told our master hunter, "Look, lets give old Andres a chance. Suppose we take our bedrolls and a little *comida* (food) and camp out on the Pico Almanzor, just to see if he has anything there." Borrel looked at me like I had lost my mind, but finally he grudgingly nodded agreement.

We rode away from the *parador*, journeyed by a circuitous route to the north face of the highest peak in the range, turned the mounts back to the groom, and with old Andres and Dionisio breaking the trail, climbed throughout a long afternoon into the very topmost crags. There we searched out a scanty rock overhang and made camp. It was a cold night. There was no wood, so there was no fire.

My watch said 4 a.m. when I awakened. The guides were already astir. We ate frugally of the hard Spanish bread and the excellent goat cheese, had a pull at the bottle of Marques de Riscal vino, and scampered off to overlook a great rock slide that cascaded for 1,000 feet down the west face of the great promontory.

"There are the *dicños* (beasts) rimming the top of the slide," the old guide whispered. And sure enough, with the glasses I headed them. There were seven, and every head was a record-book ibex. It was barest light, the shadows below the crest as stygian, as murky, as impenetrable as the depths of the Black Sea. But along the ridge top, the great horns stood out against the first dim light of the newborn day. The third ram from the front was the kingly one. I squirmed around into a comfortable position and made ready to shoot. A hand touched my shoulder.

"Do not shoot the third ram," Max said to me. "We save all the biggest *Capras* for Franco." I was utterly thunderstruck. Here I had been stalking these animals for a full two weeks, and the Spaniard had never said that we were to save the real old busters for the *caudillo*. I half arose, thoroughly disgusted.

His hand restrained me. "I should have spoken before this. I did not think we'd ever find an old *macho* the size of that one. Take the last *Capra* in the file."

The game was approaching our position, moving slowly and making an occasional switchback as they negotiated the rock slide. I swung up the binoculars and had a look at the last goat in the file. He was an excellent head but certainly no gold-medal ram.

The sights settled on his shoulder, and as the rifle spoke, the ibex pitched forward. He fell 100 feet, bounced, then dropped another 100 feet. The 180-grain bullet from the .300 had penetrated his heart. ■