

AN ELK-HUNT ON THE PLAINS.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY GEORGE INNESS, JR., AFTER SKETCHES BY THE AUTHOR.



THOUGH untold numbers of elk, as the American red deer, or wapiti, is generally called, still roam the wild hill-lands of the West or seek refuge in the timber districts of its less mountainous regions, the swift advance of civilization has swept the elk from the plains and has made elk-hunting on those wide and timberless tracts a thing of the past.

But fifteen or sixteen years ago, when the author was stationed as an American cavalry-officer at North Platte barracks, at the junction of the North and the South Platte rivers, it was a different tale. The elk country lay to the north of us, with a slight preponderance of the larger herds towards the east. The herds were generally found along that net-work of streams known as the various forks of the Loup, and the nearer to the head of the Loup one hunted, the more numerous they became, though among the lakes and marshes and high rolling sandhills of Nebraska, just west of the Loup's head-waters, they again disappeared. As a hunting-district this region was almost entirely monopolized by military parties and by such people as were escorted by them; for nearly all of it was on the great Sioux reservation, and, in consequence of the small war parties of Sioux that constantly infested it, was extremely unsafe.

In the fall of 1873 I was told that a number of distinguished and titled people would be at the post in a few days, with the usual papers from high officials that would entitle them to every consideration they could ask for and we could grant. Above all things, they wished to go on an elk-hunt to the northward, and I was asked to take command of the little escort. Hunting and scouting was the principal field duty of the frontier stations, and the former only differed from the latter in that it was volunteer work so long as enough volunteers could be found; but since a hunt for buffalo or elk counted as "a tour of field duty," we never wanted for volunteers.

Our visitors arrived in good time, and we soon made ready for the hunt. With two six-mule teams to haul our ten days' rations and forage, and with other necessary outfits, we got away one fine forenoon in early October, with the air so crisp and clear that half the

horses of our troop of thirty or forty danced along as if going to a tournament, and not on a trip that would bring them back with hanging heads. Where we crossed the line of the railroad for the last time—for we had been winding along it for four or five miles—we partly loaded our wagons with discarded railroad ties, to serve us as fuel. On the banks of many of the streams of this part of the country no firewood, not even a twig, can be found; and nothing can be more cheerless and disconsolate to a little troop of cavalry that has marched all day in the cold than to reach, in the bleak evening, a stream where it is evident that camp must be made and find no sign of wood as far as the eye can reach. But add to a soldier's hard-tack and bacon his regulation quart of hot coffee, and he will be satisfied with his repast.

Our course, after leaving the railroad, was over what might be called the semi-sandhills of Nebraska, or the sandhills covered with grass, the only turf or soil being that formed by the grass roots. The longer a road is used through such a country, the worse it gets. Wagon wheels soon cut through the thin turf, and it becomes a road of sand. Another is then started alongside, and so on indefinitely, until the first is once more grown up with grass and fit to be used again. Along these roads sunflower stalks are particularly prone to grow (they really do wherever the ground is stirred up), and from a slight elevation it is often possible to trace by them an old, abandoned road for many miles.

Our first camp was made on the South Loup, so near its head that one could jump across the stream, and in a barren tract of low, flat country, where the grass grew a little higher in the valley than on the hills, and a few willow brakes marked the course of the stream. Three wall tents in a line indicated where the officers and the visitors slept, and twice as many "A," or "wedge," or common tents, twenty or thirty yards away, showed where the men were sheltered. Between the two camps, tied to the picket-line,—a long rope stretched from wagon wheel to wagon wheel,—the horses munched their oats and corn in their nose-bags, with a sentinel walking at each end of the line. One of the greatest pleasures of a frontier camp is a roaring fire, with its flames climbing into the sky;

but with us wood was too scarce for that. Two half-smothered fires for "kitchens" were all we had. If the chances for Indians were good, military hunting parties always placed a picket of a trusty corporal and from three to six men on the hill a half-mile from and overlooking camp; but a party of our size (about thirty-five in number) is avoided by the few war parties prowling around on the confines of civilization trying to get the scalp of a herder or a stray pony or two. Tracks seen early in the evening, just before camping, had shown that wild horses were in the vicinity, and this made us keep our own horses close to the picket-line; otherwise they would be "lariated out." For wild horses snorting near camp in the dead of night are likely to cause a stampede, and few things are more disastrous to a cavalry command. Any trifling thing may cause a stampede when the herd is scattered out to graze,—the howling of a coyote, a keen flash of lightning, the noise of a big weed carried by the wind, or, as happened in one case, the violent coughing of the sentinel stationed near the horses to keep them quiet.

In a small party like ours, all the stated military calls are laid aside. Even "taps" is omitted; and one by one we dropped asleep, till nothing was left to the ear but the dull pacing of the sentinels or an occasional deep-drawn sigh from some horse at the picket-line. Before dawn the next morning the party was routed out of bed so as to be able to start by sunrise, and the usual preparations for breaking camp were begun,—fortunately by the light of a full moon just sinking in the west. An unfledged recruit, sleepy from having talked too late the night before, dug his fists into his rebellious eyes, and, glinting around, asked for the tenth time if the party were not to start at sunrise. Being gruffly answered in the affirmative by his uncommunicative tent-mate, he gazed listlessly through the tent-flaps to the west, and said, shiveringly, "I'll be danged if they hain't made a mistake! that's the moon, and not the sun."

The early sun saw the little caravan moving northward in the chill morning air. The officers and visitors were ahead, with ten or twelve troopers, while from half a mile to a mile behind, with an equal number of soldiers, came the two wagons, the two little parties being within ample supporting distance should anything of a serious nature happen. Small companies of flankers of from one to three men were thrown out on both sides of the road from a quarter of a mile to a mile from it and slightly in advance of the main party. These flankers are always composed of the best hunters and trailers among the soldiers, and the

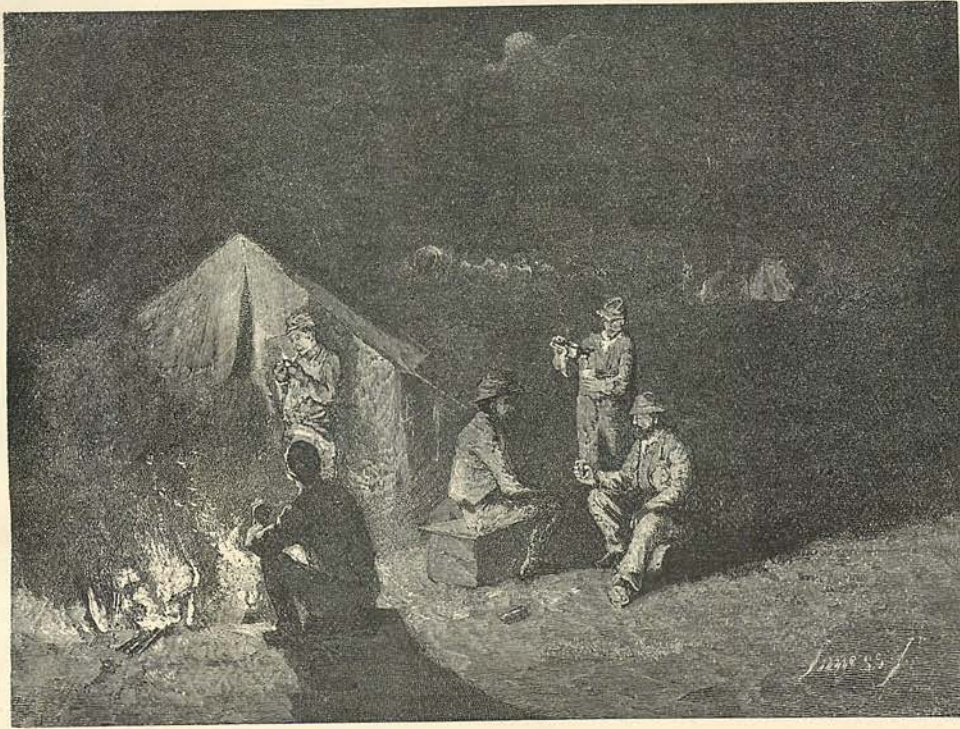
flanking was done because that day's march was supposed to bring us to a possible elk district, and elk are apt to turn back if from an elevation they catch sight of a road ahead of them. Such trails as these retreating herds might make only flankers would be likely to find. Coming near a road in a valley or on a flat plain they are much more likely to cross it; but if a person will take the trouble to study the trail on both sides of the road, he will notice how the elk will fight shy of civilization. The incoming trail may show that they have scattered out over the grassy districts for grazing, and here and there a place will be seen where they have been lying down resting; but as soon as the road is crossed, if it is not an old, abandoned one, the scattered trails converge into one of Indian file, which may be traced at times for three or four miles before the herd shows signs of grazing or being in an easy frame of mind.

That day's march, of from twenty to twenty-five miles, brought us to a picturesque little stream erroneously called the Dismal, which had received this inappropriate title from having been first seen at its mouth, where it empties into the Middle Fork of the Loup in a truly melancholy way. The Indian name of Cedar is much more applicable, however, for its steep banks are here and there covered with patches of cedar, that make it a pleasant-looking stream. It cuts so abruptly through its almost cañon-like bed, that one hardly sees it until it is right under his nose. I remember belonging to the expedition that made the "government road" that cuts across it. It was a hot day in July, and about the hottest part of the day,—2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon,—and we had been marching in the sandhills since morning. Our teams were tired out, and stopping the entire command in a hot little hollow between the hills, we sent one of the best guides ahead to find, if it were possible, the best and shortest road to the first stream to the south. He had not disappeared over the crest in that direction twenty seconds, when he was seen coming back, most persons who had heard his orders supposing that he was returning for something he had lost or left behind. But he reported that the Dismal had been found about two hundred yards ahead, and within half an hour we were all engaged in the pleasant occupation of making camp.

Our hunting party also camped on this stream, and a large amount of wood was secured for the night's camp-fire. On mild nights it was always burned in a huge fire in front of the tents, but when it was uncomfortably chilly, the wood was put into the little Sibley stoves inside the tents, which on the very coldest day can be made warm and cozy

if there be plenty of dry wood. A Sibley camp-stove is simply a great sheet-iron funnel, turned upside down, and furnished with enough small stove-pipe at the neck to protrude from the tent. This funnel is about three feet high, and two feet across the bottom, and in its conical sides is cut a door large enough to admit small stove-wood. The hearth is the earth or sand

A few tracks of elk had been seen not far from camp, and although they were three or four days old, it was decided to spend one day in giving the vicinity a thorough inspection. An excellent method of beating up a country to determine the presence of game is to send out four parties of two to five hunters each at an angle of forty-five degrees to the direction



AROUND THE CAMP-FIRE.

of the tent floor, and a piece of tin or sheet-iron through which the stove-pipe projects is fastened to the tent roof. Thus fixed, it is comfortable in a wall tent even with the thermometer at twenty-five to thirty degrees below zero. Filled with cedar wood, the stove has a most annoying way of dropping sparks on the canvas roof and burning holes through it, although there is but very little danger of the tent catching afire unless a very strong wind is blowing; even then it is hardly worth any great precaution. When the smell of burning cotton is noticed by the occupant of the tent, looking up he will always see a little circle of fire, from a quarter to a third of an inch in diameter, vividly outlined against the black sky outside, and showing where the spark has fallen. It is always put out by inserting the little finger as far as it will go, and then withdrawing it, all being done with a quick thrust and recover that does not burn one's finger.

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of the stream, all of them, when reaching a certain distance to be agreed upon, say four, five, or even ten, miles, turning to the left or right at the same angle. This brings two parties on the river who turn and hunt back along it to camp. The other two parties hunt parallel to the river from their turning-points until directly opposite camp, when they turn in directly for it. A diagram of such a plan will show that the country has received a pretty good examination by the time all parties are in camp. Of course such a plan depends somewhat on the kind of game to be hunted, and as I have given it is particularly applicable to elk. If only "white-tailed" deer are wanted, there is no great use in leaving the valleys of the streams or the little partly wooded pockets running out from them. If "black-tailed" or mountain deer are wanted, only the hills need be scoured.

Our first day's regular hunt was planned on this method, and after the other three parties



ON THE LOOKOUT.

had taken their choice, there was left for the doctor and me and our attendant a south-east course of six or seven miles to the right, which would make us hunt parallel to the Dismal, which there runs from west to east. It was understood by all four parties that if any small band of elk were seen it would be given chase by the discoverers, but if large, it would be allowed to rest until the morrow, unless circumstances forced an immediate attack. Any small game that fell in the way, as any kind of deer, antelope, etc., would fall a prey at once, if the hunter were only a good-enough shot. Our course was over rolling hills covered with the autumn's somber colors of brown and drab, a most fortunate hue for the elk, almost the same shade, and we had to watch with keen eyes and good field-glasses to prevent our stumbling on top of our game or getting so close that they would get our "wind." By the time we turned back to hunt parallel to the river we had seen nothing but a few old tracks, and as the breeze was now blowing in our faces, thereby increasing our chances of success, at the doctor's suggestion we separated about four hundred yards apart, hoping that we might pick up a black-tailed deer or antelope, their tracks being fresher and much more numerous than the few elk signs we had found. Our man was placed about half-way between us and a little to the rear, to communicate from one to

the other should it be deemed necessary. We had hardly gone a mile on our new course when I discerned a yellowish-brown mass of creatures on the hillside from six to eight hundred yards away. At first I supposed they were elk, but the glass showed them to be a band of eight or ten antelope. Beckoning to the man to approach me cautiously, I dismounted, and, leaving my horse standing, ran forward a couple of hundred yards to a low ridge. Seeing that I could get no closer without considerable manœuvring, and fearing that the doctor might frighten them, I took aim at the most conspicuous fellow in a bunch of them and fired. After a quick scattering dash to the right and then one to the left they seemed to collect their senses and made off through a little gap in the hills, allowing me one more shot "on the wing" as they disappeared. I thought I had been unsuccessful, but the man, looking through the glass, saw a bunch of brown on the ground that "looked mightily like a dead antelope," and we trotted over to find his conjecture true. We dismounted, cut the animal's throat, and bled him by throwing his hindquarters up-hill on the slope, and I was just sending the man after the doctor, when he appeared on the crest, having heard the two shots. There was the usual formula of questions under such circumstances,—“Where is it shot?” “How far did you shoot him?” “How many

were they?" etc., etc. All of these were answered but the first, and the man got down to settle that apparently simple problem. But the longer he looked the more mystified we all became; and when the carcass was thrown behind one of the saddles no one was the wiser, the doctor even going so far as to say that the antelope might have been frightened to death. Reaching camp late that evening, we found that none of the others had seen any game during the day, which made us feel a little more pride about our slight capture. The doctor brought up the subject of the singular killing, which revived in each one a dozen similar instances. We had not finished, when a sharp rap at the tent-flap was heard, and the head of the hunter who had been with us that day appeared. With a grin he said: "Lieutenant, the cook has found out where the antelope was shot." Each one present, in his own eager way, asked for an immediate report, and the hunter continued with the information that the bullet had gone through the gullet, and when he cut it with his hunting-knife to bleed the animal, he had not noticed it. When he started to look it up, the slashed throat precluded all apparent possibility of another wound in the same place.

The most important problem of the chase, however, was what to do as the result of the day's investigations, and we were not long in determining to break camp next morning, and move over to the Middle Fork of the Loup, some twenty miles to the northward, where the prospects were supposed to be better. In fact, this stream was our main objective point in starting out, but the Dismal was always worth giving a fair trial, and in some instances had proved to be better hunting-ground than the main stream. As we approached the Middle Loup the next afternoon, a few scattering snow-flakes were falling softly around us in the gloomy weather, but as a light fall of snow was exactly what we wanted, we saw them more with pleasure than with regret. Too deep a fall, however, was more to be deplored than none at all. Just as camping was nearly completed, an over-zealous flanker, who had pushed his excursions some three or four miles to the westward, put in an appearance, and reported that not only had he seen abundant signs of elk (we ourselves had crossed a small, fresh trail that day), but had seen the animals themselves on the crest of a distant hill. He had made no unusual efforts to ascertain their numbers, for fear of frightening them, but judging from the trail which he had crossed, he had estimated the herd to number from five hundred to a thousand. As he was a trusty trailer and hunter, his statements sent our thermometer of hunting-excitement up to fever

heat. All the evening was employed in getting ready and making the most formidable preparations for the next day's chase, and I was appealed to by the novices for information of all kinds, as if I were a Kit Carson or a Daniel Boone. Ordinarily the horses are fed half their forage at night and half in the morning, whether they be on full or reduced forage; but in this case the rule was departed from, and the "elk" horses received three-quarters forage at night and a quarter forage in the morning. As the weather threatened to be stormy, the horses were blanketed so that none would feel stiff and chilly on starting the next day. Even the mules were given extra feed, to prevent these noisy creatures from breaking forth in stentorian brays, as they are very likely to do when a little hungry and there is any semblance of feeding going on around them. Some energetic soldiers get up early in the morning and spend a good while in a thorough grooming of their horses, which no doubt freshens them for a lively dash of a few miles. The question of arms and ammunition was settled by our being armed with the government Springfield carbines, although a far superior weapon for these horseback chases are any of the trustworthy kinds of magazine guns. Even the old Sharp's carbine was better, because when heated by rapid firing to a point where it would no longer eject the cartridge shell by the usual methods, the open guard could be brought down on the pommel of the saddle with a vehemence that brought out the shell or broke the guard, and ninety-nine cases in a hundred it would be the former. With the Springfield carbine, however, the rider was *hors de combat* under the same circumstances. In hunting game on horseback, the cartridges are taken from the belts, given a good cleaning, and the number that it is expected will be used on a single run—from twenty to thirty—are placed in the right-hand side-pocket of a loose-fitting sacque coat. I know of no improvement on this very simple method. With a Sharp's carbine I have in this way used sixty cartridges in a single run after buffaloes. We went to bed early, with good intentions of rising early for the fray, but, as generally happens, we did not get a wink of sleep till well past our usual hours. We were up in good time, however, for the simple reason that the night sentinels had orders to look after that; and although at first many yawned and stretched in the cold night air, fully an hour before daylight, it was not long before all were thoroughly awake and keener than ever for the sport.

We hurried through our breakfast of half-cooked antelope steak and hot coffee, and when daylight streamed through the dark-gray



A HERD OF ELK.

eastern clouds it saw our little party of about a dozen moving up the valley of the Middle Loup, talking in whispers and closely filing after one another in sets of two. The wagons had orders to follow in about an hour, and sooner if they heard firing; and the mules were being watered and hitched up as we "pulled out" of camp. As the wind was in the south, I thought it best to follow the valley of the Loup to a point directly opposite the place where the herd had been "raised" by the sergeant the day before, and then make squarely for it. When we struck the trail, we could follow it up until we overtook the game. The sergeant had seen the herd so late the evening before, and we had started so early, with a dismal, dreary night and a light fall of snow in our favor, that I had but few doubts of finding it soon after we left the river. One amusing incident of our march will show how narrowly our well-arranged plan escaped utter failure. While riding alongside of me when within about a mile of our point of turning out from the valley, the judge, a venerable Nimrod with white hair that had taken nearly sixty winters to bleach, but with an enthusiasm for the sport of a man of half his years, saw a large pair of fine elk-

horns in the high valley grass near a clump of willow brake about forty yards away. He expressed a desire to examine them more closely, and I sent a trumpeter back to pick them up. He left the ranks to do so, everything, for reasons that are manifest, being done in as noiseless and subdued a manner as possible. When the trumpeter was within about ten yards of the horns, the owner of them, a noble buck five or six years old, with a snort that startled every one jumped high into the air, and with a bound started for the main herd, leaving us all too astounded to know what to do. Seeing the main column, he wheeled abruptly around, and, dashing across the Loup, made to the northward. Had this animal reached the main herd, as he at first attempted to do, our fun would have been ended for that day. It was a great temptation to shoot at him, and the trumpeter, forgetting all the surroundings, started to pull his pistol and fire; but his rearing horse, half frightened out of his wits, by wheeling and plunging prevented him from doing so.

I remember, on another hunt after elk in the Nebraskan hills, planned on the same method as this, that when nearing the herd

of elk that we had pretty definitely located, and while crossing the "pocket" of a cañon liberally wooded or "brushed" with wild plums and rose-bushes, a couple of white-tailed deer jumped up just beyond the clump, from forty to fifty yards away, and remained in full view

bush on the crest of the hill a third of a mile away. The bush proved to be the fine antlers of a young buck, and when we had crept a little higher we saw twenty or thirty other elk about him, some of them lying down and plainly outlined against the white snow. When



THE EXPECTANT HORSES.

until we had ridden by. They were so close that any one of the party could have easily killed them. Not till we had passed did they run away. There were a number of experienced hunters in the party who had often hunted this wary animal, and every one acknowledged it to be the boldest effrontery ever shown by that species of deer. Surely these two must have known how fatal to our success with the elk the sound of a gun-shot would have been at that moment.

After the incident of the elk-horns we advanced up the valley of the Loup for nearly a mile; then turning abruptly southward against the wind, we began to ascend a long winding acclivity up through a little valley where luxuriant grass grew as high as our stirrups. Looking ahead even a couple of hundred yards, we could see stripes of darker green cutting at all angles through this grass, and advancing warily we saw the tracks of elk in the light covering of snow. Our party huddled together in the ravine while two of us dismounted and slowly crawled up the slight ascent. About two-thirds of the way up we saw a moving

we had returned and mounted our horses again there came the difficult feat of winding around through the lowest levels and depressions and gaps, and at the same time making headway towards the game while keeping completely out of their sight. Another ravine was reached, and once more two of us dismounted and crawled forward to the crest to get a view of the situation. It was also necessary to do so rapidly, for it was perfectly evident that the outlying members of the herd were close by, and the snorting and snuffing of a horse might send them away with the speed of the wind. I felt perfectly satisfied, before I got half-way across the slope, that a substratum of sand makes a much better support for a covering of snow for crawling purposes than can ever be found in the thick growth of the prickly-pear of the plains, although on this particular slope Nature seemed to think otherwise. Nearing the crest of the ridge, I secured a "tumble-weed" or "rolling-weed,"—one of those globular perennials of the plains that when dead is pulled up by the wind and goes rolling around over the prairies at the mercy

of the blast,— and, keeping it in front of my face, took a careful view ahead.

Not more than a hundred yards away was a fine grouping of game that would have delighted the heart of Landseer, and certainly delighted mine. Slowly retreating until the friendly ridge once more covered us, we crawled back through the cactus to rejoin

fell home in their chambers. All the horses' ears were as rigidly set towards the crest about a hundred yards away as if they were a charge of fixed bayonets, and the red, dilated nostrils, the fixed eyes, and the heaving breasts showed that they, too, felt all the excitement of their masters. We had arranged our plans the night before, and now we hur-



IN THE MAIN HERD.

our horses and our impatient comrades. As I mounted, I said briefly that our time was at hand and the battle not far off. I believe the horses knew this better than the men, for as I came crawling back through the snow every equine ear in the party followed me as closely as if I had a bushel of oats in my possession; and when I mounted my own little sorrel he was trembling from head to foot, and he lay his nose against my knee as if to gain information in his own peculiar way. Every horse in that platoon knew as well as every man what was ahead of him,—and better, too, for all of them had been in those exciting chases more times than two-thirds of the party. The only noises that broke the hush of the still morning were a few hurried whispers and the ominous clicks of the breech-locks as the cartridges

ried to carry them out. Down the hollow of the ravine the hunters, separated from one another by a space of from three to four yards and facing the ridge that hid us from the unsuspecting elk, were stretched like a skirmish-line, while I rode out in front of the center of the line just far enough to be easily seen by all. Looking hurriedly along the little line, I saw that all were ready, with the loaded carbines pointing in the air, the butts resting on the right thighs, and a couple of spare cartridges in each man's hand. Raising the butt of my carbine high in the air as a signal for starting, I took a half-dozen steps forward at a prancing walk, brought the carbine down to a level, and the line took up a trot for a dozen yards. Then I raised the carbine muzzle up and the party broke into a long, swinging gallop. Half-way

across the frosted slope, the carbine was raised to full arms-length, and we burst over the ridge at a gait that "Hanover" or "Iroquois" might envy, and with an unbroken line worthy of the *Cent-Gardes*. The swift impetus carried the sweeping crowd half-way from the ridge to

there was a singular silence, incongruous with so much rapidly varying excitement; for orders had been given that not a whisper should be heard till the elk had broken in an organized run in a definite course. As the western wall of elk-horns opened in that direction,



AT CLOSE QUARTERS.

the sleepy elk before the latter gained their feet, and by the time the dumfounded brutes had "bunched," — the first act of an affrighted herd, — we were right in among them. Many of the older hunters dropped their carbines across their saddle-bows, and pulling their revolvers delivered a deadly fire at blinding range. Dashing through this little bewildered herd like a gust of wind, the hunting party swung to the left of the slope of the long ridge where, from a hundred and fifty to two hundred yards away, the main herd had "bunched," six to eight hundred, if not a thousand, strong. With all the rough rattle of shots, the hard hitting of horns against horns, and the drum-like clatter of the hoofs,

with a princely buck at the head, there went up from us a yell that clove the very clouds, and scattered the band only to bunch again. That shout delayed them hardly three seconds, but that three seconds made a success of the hunt, and before it ended we were among them, every citizen and soldier now his own individual commander, and responsible for his own success. Far down on my right the marshal's carbine had been knocked from his hand by the horns of a plunging buck, while near me, on the left, a burly Würtemberger corporal, with empty, smoking pistol, brought the barrel down like a club on the head of an elk that was trying, in the crush, to push its way directly over his horse. The elk fell to the ground



SNOW-BALLED BY THE HERD.

stunned. It was hand to hoof and horns for a brief second or two, and then the great surging mass broke to the westward, and the long chase began. It had been all our way so far, but to the assistance of the herd there now came one of the most unexpected allies that even an old hunter could imagine. It was the soft snow, that up to this time had helped us in tracking them; for, as the herd surged ahead, there came from their feet one of the most persistent showers of snow-balls, of iron-like consistency, that any one was ever called on to face, and was surpassed only by those thrown by the horses themselves, which, strung out in disorder, the men and horses in the rear had to face as well. Every ball that struck a horse delayed him. One man, struck

on the head, was disabled from managing his reins, while another, struck full in the face, had his upper lip split open to the teeth. Many followed his example and withdrew from the battle. The chase over, the party slowly assembled near the bodies of the first victims, and the two wagons with a number of men putting in an appearance from camp, we retraced our steps to it, each one recounting his personal adventures.

It was growing dark as the sergeant in charge of the wagon party rapped at my tent and reported: "The wagons are in with the carcasses of nineteen elk, and I am satisfied we have gotten them all, sir." The next day we started for home.

Frederick Schwatka.



THE ARTIST.

SLEEP is an artist of the night,
 With moods of mirth or pain,—
 Dreams are his pictures dark and bright,
 Etched swiftly on the brain!

William H. Hayne.