

A DAY'S SPORT IN ALBANIA.



NEVER see in the newspaper a list of successful candidates for commissions without a feeling of regret that the lads should have lost one of the best stations that the British officer ever did duty in.

It was worse than unkind, it was downright cruel, to give up the Ionian Islands to Greece. I suppose that the great statesman who perpetrated the deed would explain that a standing army is kept up for the defence of the possessions, colonies, and dependencies of Great Britain, instead of the possessions, colonies, and dependencies being maintained for the benefit of the standing army, and he would be logically right, as usual.

But still the expense of "protecting" the Ionian Islands was not large, and the benefits conferred on the inhabitants were very great; and the vast majority of foreign stations garrisoned by our troops are quite purgatorial. Gibraltar's one advantage is the facility of getting out of it; Malta is a horrible hole; China is a pestilential fever-trap. That men who are not downright fanatics in shooting should be able to live for months together in an up-country station in India, without going melancholy mad, shows that military Mark Tapleys are plentiful. And when a regiment does get a spell at home, a considerable portion of its time is wasted at Aldershot, a wilderness so dull that officers who cannot afford perpetual jaunts up to London have to take to gardening.

There ought to be a few prizes amongst so many blanks. There *is* Canada, and there *was* Corfu.

The climate, the scenery, and the fruits of Paradise, combined with the pleasures demanded by man's fallen nature—namely, a good opera, continual balls and concerts, and excellent shooting—that is my recollection of the place twenty years ago. In the island itself quail, woodcock, snipe, golden plover, and wild duck were plentiful in their seasons, while on the main coast larger game was also to be shot by those who would take some trouble, and adopt the right measures to get at it.

Communication with the neighbouring islands and the main land was kept up by means of small yachts from eight to twenty tons' burthen, manned by native sailors who knew every creek and shoal, and let out by the month at so reasonable a rate that even the poorest subalterns could enjoy their yachting (and in those seas it is indeed a pleasure) by clubbing together and taking a cruise by turns, two or three at a time.

Southern Albania is a sea of mountains, rolling down from snow-capped Pindus to the coast; the lower hills are steep, rocky, and barren, but the valleys between are filled with trees and brushwood, and these woods are frequented by roebuck and wild pigs; here

also a description of jackal lies in wait all day, till the shades of evening warn him that it is time to steal out, for a raid amongst the flocks that pick up a precarious subsistence on the mountain-sides. But to get a shot at these animals is a matter of some difficulty. To stalk the roebuck, or steal upon the wild boar in his lair, is impossible, the underwood is too thick for that. You might hear the creature scurrying away through the bushes within half a dozen yards of you, but you would not be able to see it. The only chance is to drive them out of the cover, but how is the ordinary traveller to get beaters? Supposing he managed to collect a few Albanian shepherds together, no promises of high pay would induce them to force their way through the dense bushes; if they attempted it they would soon leave their picturesque petticoats behind them, and the Albanian loves his petticoats almost as much as his long, embossed, inlaid, useless pistols. I expect that the wild animals dwelling near the coast opposite Corfu are as pleased "as pigs" that there is no English garrison on the other side of the strait, for I do not see well how they are to be molested.

The way we managed for beaters was to put a number of soldiers into dresses of corduroy, or some such tough stuff, and take them over. Capital fun they thought it, and so it was for everybody.

One of these expeditions is impressed on my memory from the fact of the success of a friend who was not generally happy in his sporting essays, being somewhat short-sighted and absent, and not very enthusiastic about anything but art.

The party had been arranged for some days before; the beaters told off and put under the command of an athletic corporal, whose knowledge of woodcraft was such that he must have been a keeper's assistant—or a poacher—in his civilian days; arrangements of duty made; the yachts' crews warned to be in readiness; guns and rifles got ready; and the messman of each regiment informed of the number for whom he would have to provide the materials of Irish stew for the trip.

An hour before daybreak all the yachts were laden with passengers, almost every one of whom was whistling; for it was nearly a dead calm, and the vessels, with all sail set, hardly moved through the water. The effect of this general incantation in the dark stilly night was most peculiar. One would have thought that an enormous flock of migratory birds had just arrived, and were fussily expressing their bewilderment as to where they would find quarters. However, the superstitious were confirmed, and the sceptics silenced, for with the first streaks of dawn a nice breeze sprang up, sending the little fleet careering through the water, the track of each vessel being traced in fire till the increasing daylight caused the phosphorescence to pale and fade away.

"If one could but fix those cross-lights upon canvas!" sighed Vandeyck. The real name of my friend was far more Saxon, but he once solemnly drank to the memory of the great painter, on the anniversary of

his birth or death, at mess, and was called Vandyck ever after.

His regret was soon drowned in rapture. Have you ever seen a Mediterranean sunrise? There are not many sights worth going a thousand miles to witness, but that is certainly one of them. A flush of gold in the east, increasing, spreading, turning to orange in the zenith, reflected faintly in the west—Bah! my pen can no more convey an idea of the gorgeous fires that blaze over the heavens, and are reflected in the sea, turning ships and islands into jewels, and realising for the awe-struck spectator the heaven of the Apocalypse, up to the moment that the sun rises, glorious and majestic, out of the waves, than it can give a notion of Handel's music to one who has never heard it.

The passage was a quick one, and the day yet young when the slowest boat dropped anchor in the Bay of Gomenizza. Smoke rose from every deck, and the odour of many breakfasts was wafted over the scene. While these were preparing, the entire expedition jumped overboard. You might have imagined it a Pacific scene, with the natives swimming off from the shore to investigate a newly arrived flotilla.

Shortly afterwards every yacht sent forth a little dingey, overcrowded with men, who sat noses and knees together, not knowing what to do with their guns. There were many narrow escapes, but not one upset; and soon the whole party were mustered, and *en route* for the nearest cover.

Some carried rifles, others shot-guns, loaded either with bullets, or with slugs sewn up in leather, the finger of an old glove being the most convenient envelope; and balls and concerts were so frequent that soiled white kids were plentiful. There were no breech-loaders in those days, and conical bullets were just beginning to supersede the spherical.

It was odds that Vandyck committed manslaughter before the day was over. Some one had lent him a heavy single-barrelled rifle, with a trigger so light that it was almost a hair. This weapon went off once as he scrambled out of the cabin after breakfast, and again as he landed from the dingey. But there was method in his madness: it was a senior officer of his own regiment that he nearly shot on each occasion.

The two most experienced Nimrods organised the arrangements, and posted the guns.

The first place we were to try was a deep ravine, with thick wood at the bottom, from which, on the right and left and at the farther end, the mountainsides rose steep and bare—so steep, indeed, that it was a problem how the loose blocks of rock which covered them—for it seemed to have rained boulders—kept their places instead of rolling to the bottom. At the entrance of the gorge was an expanse of marsh-land, over which we picked our way from the sea.

The plan of operations was to station the whole party at about equal distances on the hill-tops enclosing the ravine, so that the animals, when driven out of cover, must have a *cordon* of guns to break through. We were particularly enjoined not to fire at hares or small game of any sort, lest we should scare

the pigs and roebuck back into the wood; and then we were dismissed to climb to our respective posts.

Half an hour's law was given us to get in position; at the expiration of which time the line of beaters entered the cover, two or three guns following to take any game that might head back through the line.

It was a fine panorama that stretched before the eyes as one sat on a boulder, waiting for results. The little bay, with its miniature fleet at anchor; beyond, the deep blue Mediterranean, with the islands of Corfu, Paxos, and Anti-Paxos rising out of it in calm beauty; on the other side, the mountains, swelling pile above pile up to Pindus; and immediately below, the mass of trees and shrubs, from which the shouts and cries of the hidden beaters ascended. Woodcocks flitted away before them, dropping into cover further on. Hawks rose high in air, and sped away to undisturbed groves. Hares ran scuttling up the hill-sides, and away over the brow, under the very muzzles of our guns, without provoking a shot; though, as time wore on without any larger game breaking cover, the temptation to have a pop at them waxed greater and greater.

At length a small deer came bounding up, turning the blocks of stone which impeded his progress with marvellous dexterity. Crack, crack, crack! went rifles in all directions, far and near; and bullets, glancing from the boulders, came humming and whistling about most unpleasantly; but no one was hurt, the roebuck sharing in the general immunity. Indeed, he was a small mark for a single bullet, and the rocks sheltered him. The best marksman, armed with a rifle, could not have hit him with a snap-shot, going at that pace in such ground, without luck to aid him. But as he reached the crest of the hill, the little deer passed within forty yards of a double-barrelled smooth-bore, loaded with slugs, and down he went.

"Jackal on the right!"

Another fusillade, under which the mangy wretch succumbed.

So it went on. About half a dozen more roebuck, and two or three jackals, ran the gauntlet—some being hit, and others making good their escape.

But pork was our great ambition, and pork would not show. Now and then shouts of "Look out!" "Pig on the right!" "Pig on the left!" arose from the cover; but the sagacious animals preferred turning about and charging back through the line of beaters to coming out into the open. The guns in rear seemed to have the best chance, but the underwood was too thick: they heard the grunters, but could not get a shot. At length, when the wood was nearly beaten out, something black made its appearance on the hill-side at the farthest end of the *cul de sac*—something which could not breast the hill with the activity of the other creatures, but made its way up in a slanting direction along the side. Poor piggy! what a storm of bullets raged around him! The rule was that whoever first hit an animal, however slightly, could claim him; so everybody who was within range at all had a blaze on the off chance. Piggy ran through the leaden shower for about twenty yards, when he stopped, and rolled down

the hill till he fell into a hollow, and there he lay crouched. Half a dozen men were round him in a minute, including the triumphant marksman who claimed him, and who now advanced with a most truculent-looking hunting-knife.

"Take care!" cried some one who had experience. "He is not half-dead; you will get ripped, like Adonis. Let us put another bullet in him."

"No, no, you will spoil my pork! I have been told how to kill a pig—longitudinally, not across."

And so the youth had his way, and took his first lesson in pork-butchery. It was not a very hazardous exploit, for the pig was little more than half-grown, with no tusks to speak of.

A sow of the same size, probably a sister, was next driven out and shot, and then that patch of cover was cleared.

So the party, which had been gradually converging, assembled and moved off to another wood, some two or three miles distant, and we were all posted round it in a somewhat similar manner. Only this was not so easy to beat out thoroughly as the other; the valley was broader, the hill-sides less abrupt, and the trees and bushes straggled half-way up them, and even in places to the top; so that an animal had a chance of stealing away unperceived; or, at any rate, he would only be seen by one or two at a time, and not have to run the gauntlet of the whole lot. When all was ready, the beaters, who had fed and rested while we were climbing to our appointed places, entered the cover, and the whole thing began over again.

Vandyck found it monotonous. At first he had been considerably excited, but as hour after hour passed, and nothing to shoot at came within five hundred yards of him, his ardour cooled; and now, giving up the idea of slaying a pig with his own hand as a forlorn hope, he thought he would take a sketch. So he deserted his post in the most shameful manner, leaving a gap in the *cordon* through which any amount of game might escape, and wandered about looking for a good "bit."

He soon came upon a little glade which took his fancy greatly: from the crest of a low rock upon which he was standing, he looked upon a tangle of arbutus-shrubs and olive-trees, through which the sunlight shimmered down soft and mellow. Woodcutters had been there at some time, not recently, and had thinned the grove-corner considerably—cutting down more timber than they cared to carry away, indeed, for piles of rudely-sawn beams were stacked there.

Having chosen his position, Vandyck sat down on a rock, lit his pipe, laid his rifle by his side, took out pencil and drawing-pad, and began his sketch. The shouts and occasional shots in the distance told him in what direction his friends were, and when they ceased it would be time enough to hurry off to join them. No fear of being lost, so he worked away in confidence.

He had drawn his general outline, and was filling in the principal tree, when he saw one of the bushes move, and pausing, heard a grunt, deep, bass, masculine—another grunt, softer, feminine—and there came

into full view a fine old boar, whose black coat was grizzled, and his wife. Evidently disturbed by the beaters and the firing, they were on the move, but not in such a hurry that they could not afford time to grub up any particularly succulent root they might smell, the existence of which they notified to each other in a connubial manner, by grunting. Coming up to the felled timber, the old boar stopped and looked at it. With enemies afoot, such an opportunity of whetting his tusks was not to be neglected, and he proceeded to whet them accordingly, offering such a shot as tyro seldom had to try his prentice hand at.

Vandyck laid drawing-pad and pencil down, and softly took up his rifle, raised it, took a steady aim at the shoulder of the boar, that was not more than twenty yards off, and pressed the trigger. Twice that morning had the provoking piece gone off when it was not wanted, and now it absolutely refused. What could be the matter? Oh! in the flurry of his excitement, he had forgotten to cock it. So he pulled back the hammer. At the click, the boar paused and listened, while Mrs. Boar scuttled off to a bush. She was right, for what her lord heard was a sharp report, and simultaneously something hit him so hard that he staggered, and then, trying to run away, his legs refused their office and he fell. He lay dazed and puzzled for a few minutes, and then he saw a man approaching him. This was Vandyck, who had clambered down from his crag and reloaded. The brave old boar, when he thus found himself face to face with his foe, pulled himself together, struggled to his legs, and charged; but a stream of fire flashed upon him—he received another blow, seemingly harder than the first—fell again—grew faint—lost consciousness—died.

In the meantime the hunt had gone on much as before; several more roebuck had been shot, and *chevreuil*, in various forms, threatened to figure in the *menu* of every mess in Corfu for some time to come. Two or three jackals had likewise been destroyed, but no other pig, though more than one had been sighted and missed, fell to the guns.

When the woods had been worked through, it was late in the afternoon, and time to return to the boats. So the party collected together, and Vandyck was missed. Shouts and shots at last brought forth a response, and without any long search, we found him finishing a sketch of the animal he had shot.

Beaters were called up, the legs of the boar were tied together, a pole passed between them, and he was borne in triumph to the shores of the bay; Vandyck following close behind, and receiving all congratulations with a condescending air which seemed to say, "Oh, when you have had experience, and studied the habits of the animal as much as I have, you may shoot a wild boar yourself; who knows?"

The boar looked very large when spread out in butcher fashion, and hung up in the rigging of the yacht. His flesh tasted less like pork than veal, with a sort of pheasant flavour about it. His skin decorates the studio of Vandyck, who has given up soldiering and gone in seriously for art.

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