



## HUNTING THE CHAMOIS.

THE hunting of the Chamois is one of the most perilous of human undertakings: no chamois hunter ever dreams of any other death than that of falling from the brink of a precipice, or of being buried in some chasm beneath the treacherous snow; yet with a knowledge of every danger, and a conviction of the fatal end, no one who has ever embraced this desperate mode of life can give it up: it is in fact a kind of infatuation, produced like that of a gambler by alternate hopes and fears, disappointment and success, each felt in its most intense degree, and keeping up in the mind an excitement to which every other seems poor and insipid. Wherever the chamois flees, there must the hunter follow, along ledges of rock, by the brink of abysses where the footing is barely sufficient for the hoof of the animal he chases: up the rugged sides of precipices, where to slip is death inevitably, or from one point of rock to another by a leap which madness would alone attempt—such is his course. All he carries besides his gun is a bag of provisions, an iron-shod staff to assist in climbing or leaping, and an axe to cut steps in the towering parapets of ice; his shoes are furnished with a number of iron points studded over the soles, to lessen the danger of slipping: thus provided, he spends days and nights among the mountains, and often returns to his cottage no more.

Its time of feeding is morning and evening, when on the green slopes afar the herd may be often seen with their young ones gambolling like playful kids. The hair of this animal is thick, long, and coarse, serving not only as a protection against cold, but as a provision

against the bruises to which we may conceive the creature to be perpetually liable. Its hoofs are admirably adapted for security, being so formed as to avail themselves of every little roughness or projection, either of the naked granite or the icy glacier. The horns, rising just above the eyes, are black, smooth, and straight, for two-thirds of their length, when they suddenly curve backwards in a hook. The size of the chamois is equal to that of a large goat; its colour is dark chestnut brown, with the exception of the forehead, the sides of the lower jaw, and the muzzle, which are white.

The chamois is one of the most wary of antelopes, and possesses the power of scenting mankind at an almost incredible distance. Even the old and half-obliterated footmarks, which a man has made in the snow, are sufficient to startle the sensitive senses of this animal, which has been observed to stop in mid career down a mountain side, and to bound away at right angles to its former course, merely because it had come across the track which had been left by the steps of some mountain traveller. Like all animals which live in herds, however small, they always depute one of their number to act as sentinel. They are not, however, entirely dependent on the vigilance of their picket, but are always on the alert to take alarm at the least suspicious scent, sight, or sound, and to communicate their fears to their comrades by a peculiar warning whistle. As soon as this sound is heard the entire herd take to flight. It is worthy of notice that the sentinel must possess the power not only of announcing danger to its friends, but also of indicating the direction from which it comes. Facts of this nature, of which there are abundance on record,



A PERILOUS CHASE.

prove that although the sounds of animal voices appear to us to be without definite signification, they yet possess the capability of communicating ideas to others of the same species.

When their attention is aroused by anything suspicious, they have a habit of gazing fixedly in the direction of the object which has excited their alarm, and will remain still, as if carved out of the very rock on which they stand, halting in one fixed attitude for almost an incredible length of time.

Their ears are as acute as their nostrils, so that there are few animals which are more difficult of approach than the chamois. Only those who have been trained to climb the giddy heights of the Alpine mountains, to traverse the most fearful precipices with a quiet pulse and steady head, to exist for days amid the terrible solitudes of ice, rock, and snow, and to sustain almost every imaginable hardship in the pursuit of their game,—only these, or in very rare instances those who have a natural aptitude for the sport, and are, in consequence, soon initiated into its requisite accomplishments, can hope even to come within long rifle range of a chamois when the animal is at large upon its native cliffs.

Mr. Lowther, of Wolvesey, during his *séjour* among the Alps, determined to try the experiment of domesticating some of these creatures, hitherto considered, by the natives, the most difficult to tame of all animals in that mountainous region. He brought four of them to England, and may be said to have succeeded, for they were gradually familiarized to his house and people, to whom, from their novel and curious habits, they afforded much interest and amusement.

“A *femme de chambre* belonging to the establishment they were most particularly attached to, and she to them; on a certain day, one of them strayed away for some time, and much regret arose in consequence, but the maid was indefatigable in searching for her truant

favourite, and was, at length, fortunate in reclaiming the wanderer, who, on descrying her, trotted after her footsteps, obeying the enticing cry of ‘*Lalotte, Lalotte,*’ the name which had been given him.

They are stated by Mr. Lowther to have been particularly inquisitive and curious in their habits, prying into everything that was brought into the château; the cook's basket, the tradesman's wares, and the charcoal-man's bags. Of this last personage they were always indignant, and would pretend to make fight against him; but on his approach would leap with great agility, and to a great height, upon any wall, ledge, or projectment that offered itself and would sustain them, returning invariably to the charge when the man of fuel turned his back, or retrograded. Indeed, they would never suffer themselves to be touched; a finger not having yet reached them. They would admit of the hand being softly brought near their persons, but immediately as it arrived within an inch of their head or body, they would vault, suddenly and lightly, from the proffered contamination. To the gardener and coachman they were amazingly gracious, and would, apparently, take great delight in seeing the one sow his seeds and delve his soil, and the other clean his carriages and groom his horses; in fact they became quite pets with all parties, and seemed to forget their wild haunts and mountain dwellings in the warmer and less terrific asylums of civilized man.”

As the hind legs exceed the fore limbs in length, the chamois is better fitted for the ascent of such steep ground than for descending, and never exhibits its wonderful powers with such success as when it is leaping lightly and rapidly up the face of an apparently inaccessible rock, and taking advantage of every little projection to add impetus to its progress. Even when standing still, it is able to mount to a higher spot without

leaping. It stands erect on its hind legs, places its fore-feet on some narrow shelf of rock, and by sudden exertion draws its whole body upon the ledge, where it stands secure.

In some of the timbered valleys of the Tyrol roedeer were very abundant, but two severe winters in the last decade very nearly annihilated them. After preserving them for several years, they have again increased in number. Very curious are some of the game laws, which date from the year 1709. According to them, the imperial grant which conveyed these sporting privileges to the peasants of a certain valley, conditioned that the right to shoot and to participate in the "Hochjagd" (or noble sport) was to be confined to twenty-six persons, the rights being granted, not to the individual, but to the house and property of which he was the owner, and such privileges to change ownership either as inheritance or by sale, together with said ownership of the house. These twenty-six peasants, mostly young fellows the sons of the real owners, follow the chase in a very sportsman-like though primitively simple manner. All moved by an ardent spirit of sport, they form a little body of trained stalkers, bold, good cragsmen, and inured to all the hardships of the Alpine chase conducted in the most primitive of forms. Of the twenty-six there are always three doing keeper's duty to prevent poaching; or, if those whose turn it is to remain for one week in the mountains are unavoidably prevented by pressing domestic duties, they have to furnish competent deputies or pay to the common exchequer of the hunt a certain fine, which is used for the pay of others who do duty for them. At the commencement of the shooting season the twenty-six settle definitely how many head of each kind of game may be killed, and this decision everybody obeys. All game must be

brought to the headman, who weighs it and despatches it to the distant railway station, from whence it reaches its market. Half of the proceeds belongs to the man who killed it, together with the skin and antlers or horns. The other half is put into the exchequer, and at the end of the season is divided equally among the twenty-six. In the season of 1874 the twenty-six killed upwards of 300 head of chamois, stags, and roebuck. Two seasons later, after two severe winters, the entire bag was less than sixty. Since then game has again been picking up rapidly. At present the value of one share is estimated at about £100 (for Tyrol and its simple population a large sum), the annual proceeds of the exchequer giving about three or four per cent. on the capital sum (the usual interest for money in Tyrol), even to those shareholders who have not fired a shot. Those, of course, who have killed much make a handsome profit. It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that pecuniary benefits are the sole moving impulse. One and all are deeply attached to their old rights; and when two or three years back the Emperor desired to purchase the shooting—offering, I believe, a sum much exceeding the price at which shares are bought and sold among themselves—they unanimously declined the offer. And it would be an unfortunate day for the valley which witnessed a change of ownership, for the young generation, all keen sportsmen, would assuredly turn poachers, and many a life would be sacrificed in the unavoidable affrays between them and the keepers; as it is, not a few of the older men in the valley, and also some of the younger ones, can tell tales of poaching, and can show scars and bullet wounds received when trespassing upon the well-guarded neighbouring preserves owned by royal personages.