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SAVAGE SVÁNETIA

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VILLAGES OF MULACH AND MUGAL.

SAVAGE SVÂNĀNETIA

BY

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IN TWO VOLUMES—VOL. II.



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CHAPTER VIII.

USHKÛL.

UNTIL we reached the long tableland, beyond which lay Mookmer and Ushkûl. our road, ever since we left Kutais. had wound through a densely wooded country. a land of boulder-strewn ravines and rapid mountain torrents, lying dark and cool in the shadow of dense forests. Now all this was

changed. We were on the crest of a high tableland, sloping gradually away towards and beyond Ushkûl. Round us stretched great fells of short grass, studded with a small orange-coloured crocus, and trees for the time ceased to be a feature in the landscape.

Having passed the round hill which seems to block the road to Mookmer, and its two blackened towers (the first Svânetian buildings we had seen), we came suddenly upon the river Ingour, still small and brook-like, not having long left the side of its parent mountain, Namquam.

Along the bank of the Ingour stretch the three hamlets which compose Mookmer; villages at first sight composed not of huts or houses, but of half-ruined factory chimneys,—factory chimneys without smoke and without ugliness; straight square towers standing each by itself, without order or any regard to symmetry. Round the base of each

tower grows, fungus-like, a low stone shed or two. In the village there were no roads, scarcely any tracks. The bridge across the Ingour was too bad for our beasts to cross, though a little barrier across the middle would seem to imply that truant goats and pigs still attempted the passage. But the river was shallow still, so the men found a ford close at hand.

As usual on entering a village, we asked for the priest, knowing that here, as elsewhere, comfort other than spiritual is generally to be found with the clergy. But there was only one priest in Mookmer, and he lived three versts away, at the other end of the chain of hamlets. One glance at the place we were entering was enough to convince us that most of our dreams of comfort indulged in *en route* would never be realised here. Still we did expect when Simon II. offered to house us and take care of us that we should at least have a roof over our heads.

At the far end of Ushkûl, having climbed through heaps of boulders and waded little streams to get from house to house, we found Simon's paternal mansion. From the midst of two or three irregular heaps of unmortised stones, varying in height from four to seven feet, rose one of the characteristic towers of Svânetia. On the face of one of the low huts were fastened about fifty of the off fore-paws of bears in varying stages of decomposition, some bleached and white with long exposure, some green with damp, others (one or two) looking as if they had been added during the present season. A low doorway (made by the removal of a dozen stones or so), destitute of any door, opened on a heap of refuse, the collection of years. Mercifully for these filthy householders, the snow that buries their villages for nine months in the year carries away most of the refuse which they neglect to remove, purifying and saving

them from the results of their disorderly sloth. Opposite this doorway was a heap of big boulders, and under these Simon II. spread my bourka, and politely requested our party to wait whilst he went to see his father and consult with him as to the propriety of receiving us into their den.

It was now about three ; there was still no immediate prospect of breaking our fast, and hope deferred was not the only thing that made our hearts sick. A thin, spiteful rain began to fall, so that as we drew our bourkas round us, and crouched up against the boulders, our first impressions of Svânetia were anything but rose-coloured.

After over an hour of this miserable waiting, a lean-looking heifer strolled casually out of the bear-slayer's doorway and took stock of us from the top of the family mixen. A few bundles of rags, accompanied by half a dozen brats, came round the corner and

looked at us. From the way the bundles slapped the brats we thought they must have been mothers, but as they stayed for a quarter of an hour and never spoke, of course they could not have been anything so feminine.

An old man with a very white beard, and beyond comparison the dirtiest thing in nature, was the next to ascend the mixen. This was the mighty bear-slayer ; and as one looked at the poor shrunken old wretch, it was hard to believe that he had ever been the Nimrod men reported him. But dirty or clean, he was the master of the only hovel we were likely to get housed in that night ; so that I at once went to him on his dung-hill as courteously as I would have done to a prince on his throne, and tried to make him understand all the respect that we ought to have felt for him as a master of the craft of which we were only humble 'prentices. I don't think he understood much of what I

said to him, but he shook hands suspiciously, looked with a good deal of contempt at my 'Express' rifle, satisfied himself that the bearskins were fresh, laughed grimly at the partly stuffed chamois head, which I had carried with much care from Lapûr, and then shuffled off again into his den. But the inspection had been satisfactory, and about 3.30 we were taken round to another door, and ushered into the best room in Ushkûl, which Simon II. had been preparing for us.

Three rough blocks of stone piled together made a primitive stairway out of the deep mud outside to the level of the room. A kind of shutter, now withdrawn, closed the doorway at night. Within was an irregular mud-floor about twelve paces square. In a slight depression in the middle of it stood a table of slate on three legs for baking maize-cakes on, while under it were the red ashes of a wood-fire. There was no chimney to let the

smoke out nor any window ; but the wide crevices between the stone slabs of which the walls were built were wide enough to remedy both defects ; while light, as well as wind and weather, found free access to the interior through the roof of smoke-blackened hazel-wands, overlaid with rough stones and slates.

The uncertain light and smoke hid all details from our eyes for a while, but gradually, as we got more accustomed to our surroundings, we saw that we shared our apartment with about half a dozen men ; an old crone busy over a corn-bin, getting out maize to grind for our long-delayed meal ; a young girl (her satellite, and Simon II.'s wife), and several varieties of the lower order of animals. Besides the corn-bin, there was an extraordinary piece of furniture, which looked like a coffin on four legs. This was the pride of the house, the family four-poster, the nuptial couch to which Simon II. had

recently brought his young wife ; but it was so small that I should think it would only hold one at a time. On its head a cockerel was sitting, while his family pecked about the floor and quarrelled with two half-starved curs for the crumbs. The Svâns (indeed, Caucasians generally, I think) are no dog-lovers ; all the poor brutes we saw of the canine race being timid as jackals, and as ravenous.

From under our feet every now and then came strange sounds, which we found to proceed from a cow-shed, in which the cattle and the old man lived.

Close against the front door was the tower of defence, an extremely solid building of large rough stones, with tiny slits in it at every story, built not for light, but for loop-holes, through which the defenders could fire upon their foes. A little rickety ladder hung against its wall, by which to ascend to the only means of entrance into the tower ; and

as the mutton for which we were waiting was still alive, Frank and I persuaded our host to take us up to see the interior of his fortress.

With some difficulty we scrambled up to the entrance, and with bent heads crept in. Once in, we were told not to move for a while until Simon got us a light, and we did not regret our obedience when the light of his pine torch showed us a floor of holes, with here and there a rafter. From the floor above hung a quantity of game skins, principally chamois and ibex, whilst in a corner was a great pile of their bleached bones. On the next floor was a collection of horns which made our mouths water. Everywhere long strings of chamois and ibex horns were arranged in rows, and on the next floor the same sight met our eyes. Here and there, too, hung the gall bladders of bears and ibex, the former almost the only horse medicine these people use, the latter being kept for all

manner of stomach complaints amongst themselves.

The Svâns are very particular about their trophies of the chase, and, dearly as they love money, don't seem to care much about parting with any considerable quantity of the horns in their possession. Once a year, each of the hunters who goes into Kutais takes with him a few of the best of his ibex horns, for which he gets a fair price from the cup-makers and Asiatic merchants of that town; but if you want to see his collection of horns at home, you must go with him up into his tower, for the Svân has a superstition that if his trophies are seen by daylight outside his own walls, his luck in the chase will cease.

When we came down from Simon's museum, that little savage had gone up considerably in our estimation, and our spirits rose in spite of our hunger at what we now looked on as the sure prospect of good sport.

In our absence the old man of the house had got a shake-down of hay ready, and Platon had bought a young pig, the sheep of the village being exorbitantly dear.

It seemed a long time to dinner still, so Frank lay down on the hay and tried to sleep away evil hours of waiting, and I was about to follow his example when an apparition in a gaudy red shirt came to see us. This was Georgi, to whom we had irreverently given the name of Irving, when we first met him on the way to Mookmer. He, it seemed, had been christened originally by our interpreter's father, who was a priest of Radcha, and for that reason was anxious to entertain us and show us his house. Frank wouldn't come, but as I could not sleep, Platon and I followed our friend to his house.

On the edge of a little precipice of perhaps one hundred feet, looking down on the Ingour, was a threshing floor, surrounded by the usual

stone hovels and tower. Here our friend got us a couple of boulders and a bit of a sledge, and made a seat for us. Then he went to ground in one of the stone heaps. As he didn't come out for some time, I suggested to Platon that as it was excessively cold, we had better follow him indoors, but was informed that such a course would give great offence, as we were already in what constituted the reception-room, and when you came to look at a Svân's house it was, as a rule, only the outside that you saw. I didn't see much to admire in the outside, but when our friend reappeared with three large bowls full of fragments of cream cheese, a handful of salt, and half a dozen hot maize cakes, I felt that there were compensations in this world for most things. By-and-bye a jar of sour spirit made from rye was added, and then our host and Platon talked as only Caucasians can talk over a square meal, while I thanked

heaven devoutly that I didn't know a word of their language, and so in diligent silence managed to put away two bowls of cream cheese to their one. The whole thing seemed to me a good arrangement ; for when the edge of my appetite was somewhat blunted, and Platon and Georgi had talked themselves nearly hoarse, I was able over a pipe to glean a little of the pith of the conversation from my interpreter. Like all conversations in Russia and the Caucasus, it had commenced with, 'Are you married?' 'How many children have you?' 'What are you worth?' &c., questions all of a practical nature and going straight to the point at once.

As Georgi was the richest man in Ushkûl, his answers may be worth recording. Baptized and brought up in a village of Radcha, he had come back like a true Svân to his mountains, with their poverty and hardships, as soon as he could. He had married when

he was thirty, and built him a hut. His wife, of whom we caught a glimpse, was no beauty. I don't think any of the Svân women are : but she seemed well dressed for one of her race, and in her ears were earrings of silver, as large as English bracelets, through which the plaits of her hair were drawn.

In the early summer, before the snow had left the land round his home sufficiently free from snow, for agricultural purposes, Georgi was in the habit of crossing by one of the passes which mountaineers alone know, and can travel, into the neighbouring and comparatively lowland region of Radcha. Here he got a little work and picked up a few roubles until the snow had so far gone that his eleven dissatines of land at home were again bare and fit to work upon. Then he returned to Ushkûl ; and when after four or five months' time he threshed out his barley on an already frozen threshing floor, he had

on an average some 450 pouds of barley to show for his year's farming. This he kept for home use and ground as he wanted it. If there should by any chance be more than was required for home use he made a kind of vodka out of it ; and as no licence is required for the sale of spirits, and there are few rivals in Ushkûl, he made it pay handsomely. Besides his fields, he owned nine diminutive cows, six bullocks, and three horses. He and his lived for the most part on oat cake or rye bread and fresh cheeses. As Georgi was a good hunter, this diet was sometimes supplemented by a chamois or ibex from the mountains ; but when this occurred there were so many to share the feast that the meat did not last long. A little coarse tobacco grown by himself in good years, and bought from Radeha in other, together with the red linen shirt in which he received us and his wife's silver earrings, were his household luxuries ;

and with these Georgi was the richest man in Ushkûl, and more contented than many of the sons of civilisation on 10,000*l.* per annum.

When we went back to Simon's, the bear-slayer's, we found a large party gathered together ; the youthful porker slain ; and inside the hut a number of wild-looking forms flitting about in the firelight, busy with the preparations for the feast. It was no new thing to us to find that having bought our pig at a high price, and after much haggling, the very fellows who had sold it to us had now invited themselves to supper to eat it. No matter how big a beast you kill or buy, there is never anything left for the morrow, and long before morning that pig was a thing of the past. How late our guests stayed I don't know ; but though letter-writing on the floor, with an inquisitive Svân to hold a torch for you to write by, rather handicaps the pen of the readiest writer, my home budget was

finished and Frank in dreamland, whither I speedily followed, when the little supper party was still in full swing.

Poor Platon, our interpreter, never recovered from that supper ; and having suffered agonies of indigestion during the rest of our travels, almost his last words to me were on parting at Sukhoum, ' We did have hard times, sir, but except for that pig of Ushkûl I wouldn't mind going through it all again ! ' A bed of Svânetian hay, on the mud floor of a Svânetian bedroom, after a supper of Svânetian pork, is not productive of prolonged slumbers, so that even if the family chanti-cleer had not greeted us with a shrill good morrow from his perch at the foot of the four-poster, we should probably still have been early risers.

The morning had hardly broken when with soap leaves in our hands we wandered out hot and feverish in search of a tub ; but

early though we were, we seemed to be the last astir. Out over the bridge going up into the hills were half a dozen herds of goats, each herd tended by small boys, of from six to ten years old. Babies almost though they were, each of these little goatherds carried a long kinjal (Caucasian dagger) at his waist, and when I laughed at their being armed beyond their years, I was told in all seriousness that the weapons were carried for use and not for show, that not a boy that wore the kinjal but was skilled in its use and ready and willing to show his skill. Thanks to the custom of the blood feud, every man who strays beyond the limits of his own village must learn how to keep himself with his own hands from danger.

Along the roads round the base of the hill that backs Ushkûl, three or four sledges were being dragged by bullocks to the owner's farm. In front strode the owner himself,

guiding and urging the clumsy and stupid brutes along the rugged track. On the sledge, in a single shift and no shoes, poised on the bare framework of poles which made the sledge, was in every case a wee boy, son of the farmer probably, who, balancing himself as the crazy vehicle bumped over the uneven places, shrilled at the beasts in his childish treble, and during the day lived with them and watched them while the father was at other work.

A young Svân begins life early, and has to make himself of use almost as soon as he can talk. Though never so hard worked as our English peasant, he begins life earlier and works to the end, from the days of infancy when his father first takes him to mind the bullocks, to those last days, when too old almost to stand upright, he lies all day in the sun on the threshing floor, and earns his share of the rye-cake by plucking up the blades of

grass that have sprung up through the hardened soil. This was how our old friend the bear-slayer passed his days.

But Ushkûl is not a place to spend much time in, and when we had made out that the little birds which built in every roof were redstarts ; that they and the grey wagtail divided the whole of the bird life of the place between them ; when Frank had won the villagers' esteem by some capital practice at a mark high up the hillside, we began to be very weary of our resting-place, and long anxiously for our horses and guides.

Simon and Vassili, men of Radcha, had left us in sorrow the night before, not considering themselves safe among the Svâns, thinking that they ought to be back with their families and flocks, and hankering not a little, I fancy, for the comparative comfort of Gebi. But they left us with regret, and I don't hesitate to say that any Englishman who follows in our steps

will only have to declare his nationality to find in them ready and excellent servants. Of course Platon quarrelled with them before starting, but then that was his way ; and to me the marvel of our travels was that one of the many he rated like hounds did not turn and give him the thrashing he often deserved.

About midday, I think it must have been, when Frank and I managed to get breakfast, and soon after that the horses were brought — two sorry-looking screws, but reputed to be wonderful mountaineers, and able to travel the difficult road before us, or rather behind us ; for, much against the grain, we found that we had to return on our tracks to the debatable land between Radcha and Svânetia to find tûr.

Platon we decided to leave behind us to guard our property, and, if possible, get it housed at the priest's at the other end of the

village. For his maintenance we left him three roubles—not a great sum for a week's sojourn in a strange place, but still more than he managed to spend.

Our hunters were Simon the Second, clad in a goatskin and an old pair of flannel drawers of mine, and a big black-bearded Svân, the roughest fellow and best sportsman I have yet seen in the Caucasus. To his tender mercy Frank was committed.

I hate a man who beats a horse, but I own it to my shame, I could find no twig tough enough for my chestnut that day, and there was just this excuse for me, that, though persistent thrashing could only get a crawl out of him, the moment you ceased to shout or use your stick he would stop. Frank's horse was a little better, but there was not a great deal to choose between them, and, though once his pipe was lighted Frank was much more cheery and patient than I was, like

myself he soon took to walking in preference to riding. No wonder!

Once, going up a bank, under some thick overhanging trees, he saw that his long rifle slung across his shoulders was bound to catch, but it was too late to save himself, as his mount had no mouth, and the harder he pulled at it the more obstinately it forced him into the trees. So he was 'Absalomed' by his rifle.

Not long after this his horse stuck hopelessly in a bog, whereupon its rider had to be helped out first, and then we all four lent a hand in extricating the beast. But when, after this, my mare, who was in front, put her hind leg over the edge of the mountain path, and it seemed for several miserable seconds that she could not possibly recover herself, Frank wisely followed my example, and gave up all idea of riding.

From that time forward such paths as the two horses were driven along had, I verily

believe, never been traversed by horses before. In vain I begged the men to leave the horses or send them back. They were too lazy to carry the blankets themselves, and preferred to risk their animals. Along some of the grass slopes—slopes too steep to stop on, if you were once off the track—the way was so narrow that with alpenstocks to help us the journey was a difficult and nervous one for pedestrians. The poor brutes were trembling with fright, and that to such an extent that in itself made an accident almost certain.

Along the very worst part of the path while we held one horse the men took the other, one man leading and two holding it up or easing its descent by hauling on its tail.

In this way the second day passed, the first having brought us but a very little way on our road, thanks to a heavy rainstorm,

which kept us wet and miserable, shivering in wet blankets under a big stone on the hill-side, within a dozen versts of our starting-point.

That was a wretched night and a cold one, though we were so near the fire that my blanket was burnt in two places, and the crown of my cap the same. But about four o'clock the second day, what I had foreseen overtook us. As we were crossing through a thin forest on a frightfully steep mountain side, where there was no sign even of a track, the chestnut made a mistake. Simon, its owner, had the poor beast by the head and another fellow was clinging to its tail. Several efforts the old horse made to right herself, and Simon clung gallantly to her head, but she had got her quarters down hill, and the saddle-bags, light though they were, having slidden down over her quarters, over-weighted the mare. For a moment she went

staggering back, Simon at great risk still holding on, then with a heavy lurch she lost her footing ; Simon barely let go in time to save himself, and the poor old slave went crashing through the scrub, in bounds like those of a big pebble thrown down hill. I never expected to see anything resembling that horse again, and yet when it lodged against some fallen timber between the pine trees, and we had crept carefully down to where it was lying, the poor beast was not only still alive, but the only apparent injury it had received was a broken shoulder. Of course death would have been no worse, but it seemed incredible that such a fall should have left so many bones intact ; and as if to make the thing more wonderful, though all the stronger things in the saddle-bags were broken, a bottle of native whisky had escaped contact with everything in the descent, and was still unbroken.

Poor little Simon sat down by his horse and cried, and though when we had got the poor beast a little lower down into a small basin where, in long lush grass, it could lie within reach of water, he seemed to hope and believe it would recover, he was too inconsolable even to drink vodka.

As the horse could by no means follow us, nor indeed ever recover, Frank and I wanted to shoot it and put it out of its misery. Of this the Svâns would not hear, so very unwillingly we had to leave it where it lay, and with heavy hearts and loads not the lighter for our loss, we finished the day's tramp in moody silence. Bears' tracks were all round us, and if her fall did not kill the chestnut I confidently expected the bears would.

As we subsequently discovered, I was wrong; for four days the old horse was still alive, and though the shoulder was unmis-

takably broken, she looked certainly none the worse for her four days' desertion. I fancy that, though the Caucasian bear certainly does eat flesh occasionally, he is not carnivorous from choice; and where berries and fruit are as plentiful as they were round Zaskoora, animal food has no charms for him.

Our camp that night was in one of the nests at the foot of a big pine tree, of which you see so many in the forests at the foot of the Svânetian mountains.

It was a gloomy evening for us, as in addition to our being without an interpreter, and not speaking a dozen words of the Svân tongue, the men were rough, brutal, not civil to us, and quarrelsome and depressed amongst themselves. There certainly was not much pleasure in this part of our travels, but having wasted so much time in a fruitless pursuit of tûr, I had come to that state of mind when a man will suffer anything rather

than give in, and one single tûr's head fairly obtained would have sent Frank and myself back to Ushkûl happy and contented, and anxious only to find the nearest road out of Svânetia.

CHAPTER IX.

ZASKOORA.

WITH afternoon sunlight on the pines beneath ; with the long day's climb behind you, and your hardly earned game at your feet, nothing looks more lovely than the snow peaks, their belts of pine forest, and the thickly wooded foothills from which the white column of your camp-fire's smoke ascends. But when a man, with limbs of iron and leathern lungs, wakes you about midnight ; when the fire has gone out, and the chill of morning has got hold of your half-rested body, the ragged white peaks look cruel and far off against the sky-line ; and cursing your

folly you begin to wonder why you could not have bought your tûr's head in Regent Street and only left your snug bedroom for a good English breakfast at 8.30 A.M.

Luckily the hardships of sport are like the chill of the morning tub, only to be dreaded so long as you linger on the brink, but full of fresh life the moment you make the first plunge, and resulting in a glorious glow and a healthy appetite for the comforts of life and breakfast when the hardships or the tub have been endured. The first football match of the season, when you have once passed five-and-twenty, is something of a trial ; a course of training under Messrs. Ned Donnelly and ' Bat ' Mullins, with a likelihood of a severe hiding from a thirteen stone man in public to wind up with, is not quite the form of amusement that a sybarite would choose ; but a really hard day's mountaineering on bread and water, beginning at midnight

or thereabouts, and ending at dark, is a rougher form of pleasure and comes much nearer the point where pain and pleasure meet, than either football or boxing.

A Svân has no idea of waking you by degrees. It is not as it is at home, first your shaving water, then a younger sister and her scales—finally, the effective summons of the breakfast bell, by which time you have come back by easy stages from dreamland; but here a rough hand shakes you out of your blanket almost into the wood ashes, and in five minutes from your waking start and shiver you must be *en route*, with all your stiffened muscles on the stretch.

The ten roubles I had promised Simon, if I should be lucky enough to secure a good ram, made him terribly wide-awake and eager that first morning at Zaskoora; so though it was still dark night, with as yet no pretence of approaching dawn, I had to sit up and

change my flannels for my shooting coat in the raw night air, shuddering as I put on the wet stockings and mocassins of the day before. This done, the rifles unslung from the boughs above, and the candle end we had dressed by stowed away with the provisions under a pine root, we took two dampers each from the goodly pile of maize cakes which the third man had made while we slept, and were ready to begin the day's work.

Whilst I was shaking myself into my things, Georgi, the other Svân hunter, was trying to wake Frank, but that usually best-tempered of Britons having with great difficulty been persuaded to open his eyes, saw that it was still night, whereupon he rapped out such a rattling broadside of monosyllables that Georgi fairly bolted. The last glimpse I got of camp, my chum's wrathful visage was again growing placid among the pine roots, his two months' beard bristling defiance from

the entourage of flannel under-garments which he used as a nightcap, while the cook and Georgi, sitting up on their hams on the other side the fire, smoked and watched him in silence as they might watch a bomb-shell likely to burst at any moment in their midst.

No wonder Simon was anxious to make an early start for the peaks. if he meant us to be there by dawn, as, so far were we from the main mountain, and so dense was the forest on the foot-hills, that two good hours' hard work barely carried us to the beginning of our climb. To my mind this blundering in the dark, amongst the dense vegetation, wet and slippery with chilly night dew, is the worst part of the day's work, and I felt comparatively content when we had gained the short grass of the higher ridges still white with hoar frost.

As usual the dense thickets of angelica

were beaten down and traversed in all directions by bear slides, and on our way up through the woods on the lower hills we frequently came on spots where chamois had taken their afternoon siesta. But we saw neither bear nor chamois; and Simon, agreeing in this with all my other guides, assured me that in the region haunted by *târ* you never find chamois.

Our way lay along the edge of a great wall of rock, rising higher and higher until it reached the base of the highest crags. Below us, between our precipice and another, a glacier rolled its frozen waves down to the distant valley.

Just as the first dawning light crept over the snows above us, we gained the furthest edge of brushwood, and from almost the last rhododendron bush we passed I flushed one of the black mountain pheasants which I saw years ago in Daghestan.

As we got among the barren stony slopes and beneath the snow peaks, the familiar whistle of the Caucasian snow partridge caught the ear from time to time. These birds are smaller than the snow partridge of Daghestan, and are, so my friend Mr. Seebohm tells me, found only in the Caucasus, for which reason, and because they live only at great heights, but little is known of them and their habits. Had they lived in any other place but the favourite haunts of the mountain goat I might have spent some time in pursuit of them for the pot, and so learnt more of them; as it was, though they were round me in numbers every early morning which I passed on the peaks, fear of alarming better game kept my fingers off the trigger, and I never killed a single bird. They seem to live wherever the tûr do, in places barren of all vegetation, never showing themselves much after dawn, though in that respect their habits are not so marked as

those of their cousins in Daghestan, but this is probably owing to the comparative scarcity of the lammergeier and other big birds of prey in Svânetia and their great numbers in Daghestan.

The snow partridge never seems even in winter to come much below the level of the wood line; the lowest elevation at which I ever saw one being about four thousand feet. At Lapûr in August I saw several coveys of young birds, strong, and well able to fly, clucking and chattering on the moraine, from which you could hardly distinguish them. Their cry when disturbed is a kind of whistle, and this too seems to be their call note, but they have another note, used apparently for conversational purposes amongst themselves when excited or feeding. The cock bird has a habit of spreading his tail, fan-shaped, over his back, and executing a kind of step dance like the old black cock, but I was rather sur-

prised to see him performing this spring love dance so late as the end of August.

I know no part of the Caucasus where this bird is so abundant as in the ranges between Svânetia and Radcha, and as neither man nor beast seems to prey on them to any considerable extent they are not likely to decrease. The Svâns say the birds feed on the droppings of the different kinds of mountain goat, but this can only form a small item of their diet, although wherever the tûr have been feeding, the hollows where the partridge has been dusting will not be far off. The birds' flight reminded me of that of the lesser bustard, only that if anything it is more steady and a great deal stronger. They run like French partridges, and seem from the way they sometimes drop and lie flat amongst the débris to trust not a little to the similarity of colouring existing between them and the rocks around for concealment. The Svâns

account them the most delicate eating in the world, but then I have heard them say the same of an old buck chamois, so that I don't think their opinion would weigh with an epicure.

At last, when we had gained the highest point in our ridge, Simon made signs to me to lie down. Be sure I did not fail to understand him at once; an hour or two ago I wanted to call a halt, but seeing how the light was increasing had not ventured to suggest such a thing.

Taking the telescope my guide began to survey the few green spots amongst the snow and rock around us. What you say when you feel angry in Svânetian I don't know, but whatever it is that was what Simon said pretty often and with a great deal of genuine feeling as soon as he looked through the glass.

Here had we been toiling for nearly five

hours up the side of the glacier farthest from camp to get to a point from which through the glass we could get an excellent view of about sixteen tûr feeding in a hollow where a schoolboy could have stalked them, but to get to which now would have taken us nearly all day, and yet was only two hours' climb from camp. Of course it was no good thinking of it, as these beasts invariably feed up into the highest summits before midday. So we sat and watched them for a while, eating our breakfast of maize-cake, and resting ourselves in wind and limb as we did so, and lamenting the luck which had led us up the wrong side of the ravine. Then, again, for about an hour we kept still upwards, climbing amongst a very chaos of mountain ruins and sharp-edged strata, until we were tired of trying any longer to patch up our worn-out sandals.

All at once from the mountains the other side the camp a shot rang out as clear and

distinct as if it had been fired not many hundred yards from where we stood. 'Thank goodness, Frank is amongst them,' I muttered, 'I wish I was with him.' Again and again the rifle woke the echoes until I began to think the camp must have been attacked. When at last the shooting ceased Simon and I jumped up and recommenced our climb as if we had only just started. The others were having sport—our turn could not be far distant.

About nine our turn came. We were peeping over a ridge into the gorge beneath when Simon's quick eye caught sight of a herd crossing a moraine below us. One by one they came upon the scene, following each other slowly in our direction, three and twenty of them in all. The sight of them, after all my weary climbs and vigils, made me more shaky than I ever remember to have felt before, and I think I had then for the

first time an attack of that ' buck fever,' which men generally suffer from on being first entered to big game. But from the line the tûr were taking it was evident that if I meant to do any good I must not lie where I was watching them any longer ; and, indeed, snatching up his gun, Simon bolted down our side of the ridge as hard as he could run.

Keeping under cover of the boulders, and making wide circles round several small hills and peaks, he ran me to a standstill over a course that I could not walk on, alpenstock in hand, without stumbling. Time after time my foot went over the edge and sent the stones clattering down below. But stones are always falling here from natural causes, so that unless the goats either see or wind you, a displaced stone more or less matters little.

Twice I came down, catching my kneecap a blow that made me sick, on an old wound caused by collision with a gate in the hunting

field. The palms of my hands, hard as they were, were torn and bleeding; and though I was willing in spirit I had to come to a crawl at last utterly done, faint and trembling like a girl. Simon turned and saw me, and I never saw a man's face so lighted up by excitement as his was in my life. He dared not speak; all he could do, though beside himself with the desire to get me on, was to wave his arms about, frantically kissing his hand to me, and with eyes and gestures imploring me to make another effort.

How I got another run out of myself I don't know. If I had stumbled in that last hundred yards I must have gone altogether, I felt too weak to cling to anything for a moment. Dropping beside Simon I lay still for a few seconds, and then creeping a foot or two higher, peered over the edge of the little snow slope on which we lay.

About eighty yards from me was a rock

some thirty feet high, and round this one by one the whole herd was coming at a slow trot across the flat pass which our position commanded. I waited for a bigger beast than the rest to come in sight, and then resting my elbows on the snow took careful aim. But it was no use. My sights rocked like aspen boughs, and the back sight was so blurred that I could barely see it. Putting my rifle down, I dropped my face in my hands, shutting my eyes and trying to recover steadiness and sight. When I tried to draw a bead again the last of the herd was passing me so that though my hand still shook wofully I was obliged to fire.

The first shot missed altogether, sending the goats' heads into the air for a moment and nothing more. But my second barrel was fired with greater steadiness, and a fine old ram dropped, trying to drag his quarters after the now flying herd in vain. Slipping in a

third cartridge I thought my ram needed no *coup de grâce*, so I took one of the last of the herd as he gazed back from an eminence about two hundred yards away, and hit him well forward but evidently too high up. He vanished over the brow of the hill, and I rose to finish my first victim.

Unluckily, just at that moment, another herd of tûr, disturbed by my shots from a neighbouring valley, sprang up the face of the cliff above into sight. I think there were about ten of them, not like our first herd composed only of young bucks and does, but every one of them big old bucks with splendid horns. They were too far to shoot and too thoroughly well aware of our proximity for us to hope to stalk them, besides which, they were going best pace up an incline which would beat most mountaineers, to the unattainable crags above.

When we turned to pick up our wounded I

found to my vexation that Simon had not seen my first tûr fall, and as the place where he fell was difficult to get at, refused for some time to accompany me, being bent rather on following the second, which I knew was hit only very slightly. So I went alone, but when, though my tûr was no longer there, I showed Simon the great gouts of blood which covered the stones, and he himself afterwards picked up a piece of bone half the size of my little finger which my bullet had knocked out of the poor beast, he was keen enough in pursuit. From the look of the bone I fancied the bullet had broken a hind leg, thus laming, and for the moment paralysing, the tûr by the shock. Like all these goats when wounded our tûr had gone straight upwards, and though the great drops of blood made tracking him easy, the path that was easy for him on three legs was too difficult for us on two.

There was still a kind of needle which rose sheer above us, and to the summit of which there could be but one way up or down. Up here the tûr had but just climbed, and up this Simon fairly refused to follow him. I make no pretension to great skill as a rock climber, but I could not give up my ibex like this, so I left Simon, and using my hands more than my feet crawled a little higher.

There comes a point though when the will to do is useless if the flesh is weak, and being utterly unable to make a spring that this three-legged dying goat had made, leaving a great splash of blood on the rock from which he had sprung, I sat down, and half sitting, half clinging, passed as wretched an half hour as need be while the shifting armies of mist swept between myself and my hunter, making my way down too difficult to attempt. When they had cleared away and I had got back again to Simon, we searched in vain for some

other way up, and in vain for my other tûr. Luck in the matter of tûr seemed against me, and it was with little hope that I consented to a further exploration of the range on the chance that some herd which might have been feeding far below was still unscared by my shots.

Two or three ridges had been crossed and a deep gully lay between us and the next. To cross this gully there were two ways open to us, either to make a circuit of a couple of versts, or nearly that, over a moraine below, or else to ascend to the top of the ridge and creep across a difficult expanse of steep bare rock. We chose the latter, as being much the shorter of the two.

Across the rock, though it was ticklish work, all went well, but when we were half way over, what we thought had been soft snow proved to be a little snow-field, hanging almost perpendicularly against the wall of the rock and as hard as ice on the surface. Simon

suggested turning back, and did all in his power to dissuade me from crossing it, but as he expressed his own ability to cross I made up my mind to follow him rather than make the long journey round. So digging footholds with his alpenstock as he went, Simon led the way until we were half across.

Here one of my feet slipped, and before I knew what had happened I heard a scream from the Svân and found myself gliding easily but at an awful pace down the slope. In a moment I knew all was over with me, and in that moment I learnt how man's mind can work when it is wound up to its full power of concentration. I saw the whole shape of the slope like a man's legs with the left one cut off at the knee, and there an end, with a drop of perhaps 500 feet on to the iron edges of the rocks beneath. The other limb of the snow slope was too long for me to know what was at its end, but it could be no worse

than the shorter one. Every story of Swiss mountaineering which I had ever read flashed through my brain, and sticking to my alpenstock I drove the point with both hands into the snow between my legs in front of me. But though the haft was of seasoned boxwood, it snapped so short and suddenly that I never felt the shock of it. Clinging to what was left, I now saw just at the crutch of the two legs a big stone welded into the snow.

Using my broken stick with all my might as a pole, I tried to punt myself away from the short road to destruction towards which I was rushing headlong, and so succeeded that getting my foot against the stone, before I could draw another breath I was whirling off the end of the longer limb into a bed of snow beneath.

Clean out of sight I sank, but though breathless, shaken, and blinded, I crawled out again in a few moments practically unhurt,

and deeply grateful to the Providence that had saved me.

The story of such a slip takes a long time telling, but though my slide was perhaps a hundred yards long, from the time I knew I was underway to the time I reappeared from my snow covering could not have been more than a matter of moments. And yet with the fear of death before me, my mind could not only provide what was best for my own safety, but review my past and think of the future of those at home. After that it did not seem hard to me to understand the possibility of that Mind of the universe, which knows all our thoughts and at one moment of time has in Its infinite grasp what was, and what is, and what is to come.

Singing out to the Svân not to come down I proceeded to climb up the edge of my enemy the snow slope, and having got to the place where we had begun our line of foot

holds, crossed again and this time in safety, though the entreaties of my frightened guide worried me enough all the way across to have made a second slip quite a possible contingency.

We saw no more game that day ; and weary and heart sick, though not with my tail between my legs, since I left most of that on the snow slope, I got back to camp just as Frank and Georgi were finishing their first instalment of mutton chops and maize cakes.

Frank, it seemed, had only gone as far as the top of some high grass bluffs, three hours' climb perhaps from camp, where he and Georgi sighted a herd of tûr about 200 yards off in a hollow below them. Not being used to his rifle, and being shaky from the fact that during his climb he had put his shoulder out and had some difficulty in getting it in again, Frank had not done well in his shooting, but at any rate he had beaten me ; and though his

tûr was too small to make the horns worth keeping, for that very reason it furnished us with an excellent supper, which we both greatly needed.

Alas ! the supper was all too good for the interests of sport, and next morning nothing would induce Simon to stir before dawn, in consequence of which we missed the morning chance at tûr on the high peaks. The only signs of our game which we could find for some time were the horns of a grand old ram, visible to Simon (and Simon only) over the top of a boulder about half a mile off, roughly speaking. But though I spent a quarter of an hour trying to make the beast or his horns out with my telescope I failed, though by that time we had found another herd sleeping on a ledge in a very exposed and unapproachable place, some half a day's climb from where we were.

To attempt to stalk either the single beast

seen by Simon or the herd would be, so Simon said, waste of time and worse ; but as he knew the only feeding ground on this side the peak on which we happened to be, he had strong hopes of our getting a shot if we waited near the only approach to that ground until evening, when the herds come down from their resting places to feed.

The way to our place of vantage lay over what I may fairly describe as a flight of stone heaps, looking as if half an hour's climb would more than suffice to get to the top of them. Not for the first time did I find appearances deceptive in these high places. At the end of a couple of hours we were still some distance from the top of the last stone heap, and we had been going steadily, without lingering, ever since we started.

When at last we reached the end of our ascent, we proceeded to make ourselves as comfortable as possible for the day, but when

once the glow induced by the climb had worn off, the wind from the snowfields almost cut us in halves.

The tûr were in sight of us whenever we chose to peep over the ridge at the back of which we lay, and though their path to the feeding grounds lay right past us, they were so far off and the wind so much in our favour, that we could smoke and talk in safety.

Just below us lay a patch of snow of some few acres in extent, and here about mid-day I noticed a couple of small butterflies playing in the sunlight, where it shone brightest on the snow. As I used as a boy to collect butterflies, I was very interested in these little creatures, so at variance with all their surroundings. I don't think there was a flower of any kind within half an hour's climb of where we were ; from the snow over which they were disporting there was hardly a blade of grass in sight, and yet they seemed

as merry in the cold gleam on the snow as if they had been in a land of summer flowers. Try as I would, I could not catch either of them, and though I got a good look at them now and then, I was unable to identify them as anything I had seen before. They appeared to be about the size of a large skipper, whose flight theirs resembled, and their wings on the upper side were a kind of rose-brown (if there be such a colour), marked and spotted with some darker shade. I was sorry I had not a net with me, but who could expect to meet with butterflies where we were ?

However, about mid-day, their gambols and our comfort were brought to an end simultaneously by the descent of a storm of sleet which had been gradually creeping within range of us for some time past. This made everything as miserable as possible, so when we could see our way down, Simon and I descended into a gorge where we and our doings should be well

out of sight of our game ; and having collected as many bits of dead rhododendron scrub as we could find, we made ourselves a tiny fire. But though what we found had evidently given up all idea of living at such a height many years ago, we found so little, and it burnt so badly, that the fire only served to warm the stones we sat on, and the little flames seemed frightened of the cold and gloom all round.

A good wrestling bout and other athletic amusements, such as putting the stone, jumping and leapfrog, warmed us more ; but Simon, being a little man, got the worst of it, and not seeing the fun of always coming first in contact with the stony places, refused to play any more. So once more we sat and waited.

After a while Simon said that in another hour we might expect the beasts to come down ; so putting out our fire, we climbed back to our ambushade. Peering through

the stones, we satisfied ourselves that our fire had not been seen, the tûr were still at rest on their ledge.

After half an hour's watching, there seemed to be a stir amongst the herd ; one by one they got on to their feet ; surely now they were coming our way. But Simon, who knew more of tûr than I did, did not like the look of things, and Simon was right ; for in another minute, after all staring down on to the glacier below, up went their heads, and away they went higher and higher to the very top of the ridge, and so over to safer resting-places out of our sight and reach. We could not explain their conduct, but we could curse our luck, and as we clambered down into the valley of the glacier we did so heartily.

To see a long vigil such as ours robbed of its reward so unexpectedly is exasperating in the extreme. Moreover, we had waited so

long for the tûr to come down, that the evening mists were already making our descent unusually difficult. Worse than that, Simon lost his way, and in a really thick darkness we now found ourselves on a set of bare rocks, overhanging the glacier, rocks which the rain had made doubly slippery and the darkness doubly dangerous.

Simon, good mountaineer as he was, could not always keep his feet, and unable to see a step before me, with nothing to hold on to, and the memory of yesterday's slide fresh in my mind, I began to feel horribly shaky.

Every now and then I lost sight of Simon altogether, and had to blunder on and trust to luck to lead me in the right direction. When I found him again, I don't know that things mended much, for if anything he was in a worse 'funk' than myself. Altogether, when we at last gained the glacier—hot, bruised, and awfully ill-tempered—I felt convinced that I

knew something of the worst side of hunting mountain game.

A long tramp down the gentle slope of the glacier brought us to a point where the comparatively good going on the ice was changed for a steeper descent amongst big boulders and rocks which filled up the channel worn by the glacier and its streams down to the valley below.

As it was quite dark now, every step was taken at hazard, and about every sixth step brought a little toe in collision with a sharp-edged rock, twisted an ankle more or less, or sent the whole man on his face. But though one-half the least of the raps dealt our shins, knee caps, or funny bones would have elicited some very nervous English or Svân at another time, we were now so savage and inured to pain that we took our punishment in silence.

By-and-bye a light gleamed from amongst

the ragged rocks in front, and Simon looked a little anxious until I slipped a couple of cartridges into my 'Express.' Then we went forward and found the cause of our second day's failure.

Just as we were hoping for the tûr to come down in our direction, two Svâns from some other village than Ushkûl had arrived at the bottom of the glacier, and lighted their camp fire in a little tumbledown shed in full view of the herd we were watching. Hence their flight and our disappointment.

It was very late that night when Simon and I dragged our weary limbs into camp, and so disgusted with our failures were our guides, that I was obliged to yield to the pressure of public opinion and consent to return to Ushkûl on the morrow.

As for Frank, I owe him thanks for having stuck to me so long as he did, for no man ever hated anything more heartily than

he did the hardships of mountaineering; and I don't think he would have given much for the finest ram in the Elbruz mountains if it had to be procured at the expense of so much hard fare and hard work as we went through for nothing. But if their hunters' life is a hard one, what a terribly hard life must the mountain goats' be, high up in the utter barrenness of the most inaccessible peaks, alone with the ice and snow, winds and tempests!

The Svâns tell you that in the winter the tûr is so starved that he eats his own long coat off his back, and comes down in the spring gaunt, starved, and bald. In stormy weather, when the mountains are hidden in snow or sleet, instead of coming down to the warmer valleys, the tûr goes straight away to his lair on the very highest peak of his native mountain, where, safe from the approach of his enemies, he is content to face the bitterness of the weather close huddled with his

comrades under the lee of some sheltering rock.

Over the camp fire on Friday night, it was agreed that Simon and I should be off early next morning, and making a wide detour amongst the hills where Frank had killed his tûr the day before, cross a range of pine-clad ridges, and so strike the trail to Ushkûl along which Frank and Georgi would proceed at leisure.

That night, in spite of the work of the day before, Simon and I slept little. Simon wanted his ten roubles and I wanted my tûr. The rest of our party were sleeping sound and well, when we threw on another log or two to keep the fire up for them, ere my guide and I started on our last tramp at Zaskoora.

Twice or three times we came on the fresh track of bears ; once we cut the trail of a whole family party, which had been supping on black currants in the valley ; but though we

went very silently we never saw anything of the bears themselves.

Hill after hill we climbed, never speaking, both determined to succeed if success was to be won by continued endeavour ; but every new view that opened before us was void of the only thing that could have made it look beautiful in our sight. About ten o'clock Simon lay down and said he could not go any further, and must rest. So we rested and ate our last maize-cake in silence and sulkiness. Another long tramp took us off these high grass hills (where at an elevation of I should think about 5,000 feet, I found a little willow wren, dead apparently from cold), and brought us into the most beautiful mountain pine forest imaginable.

Everywhere thick soft moss grew on narrow step-like ledges, from which rose tall, shady pines, under which the chamois might rest during the heat of the day. Tiny cas-

cedes and mountain streams shone here and there, splashing over the ledges or welling up through the deep dark moss.

The whole place seemed made as a noon-day paradise for chamois, and that it was haunted by those for whom it was so fit innumerable paths and deserted forms on the ledges bore ample testimony. As we peeped over into a little gorge, whose sides were of white gravel, the sullen look vanished from Simon's face, and beckoning to me to follow he began to crawl cautiously back from the edge. His quick eyes had noticed fresh tracks made in the earlier morning by a herd of chamois at play on the gravel slope, and he guessed rightly that they would be asleep not far from their playground.

Creeping on hands and knees from ledge to ledge, Simon leading the way, and using his eyes for both of us, we proceeded for several hundred yards round the face of the rocks.

By the way he suddenly flattened himself behind a projecting rock, I knew he had sighted the game ; but as any advance on my part would have caused some slight noise, I denied myself the pleasure of a peep at them, and followed Simon back to a bear slide through the pine trees, down which we 'treboggled' on our backs with considerable silent rapidity.

Another peep, in which again I had no share, resulted in a second shorter slide, and then creeping along a fallen pine tree, which lay at right angles to the slope, my leader made signs for me to come alongside.

On a steep slope, shut in and shaded by pines, and not twenty-five yards from where we crouched, stood a young chamois, not a fawn, but a yearling buck, I should think, the last of the herd, which we caught glimpses of as they moved slowly away from the open through the pines on the opposite side.

Raising my rifle I took a quiet aim, intending to kill my beast as neatly as possible, but before I could pull trigger or even align my sights, another report startled the chamois, and sent him in a couple of bounds out of sight. My first impulse was to send Simon after the chamois he had missed, and I colared him in the first moments of my rage, with that intention. But second thoughts were best ; to thrash a Svân may not be difficult at the moment, but unfortunately you are never safe from his bullet for the rest of your life, after you have thrashed him ; besides, without Simon I could never have found my way back to Ushkûl. So in bitterness of spirit I ordered him to take the shortest road to the village, stubbornly refusing to accede to his request that I would say nothing of his escapade to the other Svâns.

When we struck the home road, it was about two o'clock, and we had not gone far

before we came upon three human forms prone on their backs in the sunniest spot they could find. The unbroken musical accompaniment to which they were sleeping testified to our silent approach and the soundness of their slumbers, but failed to soften our hearts towards them. When we were once more *en route*, the sleepers wakened, and our burdens shouldered; the sunshine left us, and the whole sky having turned black, and the wind chill enough to freeze our fingers to our rifle-barrels, a regular deluge came down upon us.

For awhile we crouched under bushes trying to keep dry, and believe the storm would soon be over, but as cloud after cloud swept up from behind the hills, we gave up hope and dry clothes in favour of a thorough soaking and a forced march to a certain hut of Georgi's on the way to Ushkúl. Here we stripped and dried ourselves as well as we could, and were considerably astonished to

find in this half-built and deserted place, half a day's march from any other habitation, quite a fine lot of fowls and an abundance of rustic tools left to take care of themselves. But towards one another the Svâns are marvelously honest, and though many a tired and starving Svân camps at this hut for the night, it never occurs to him to help himself to the tools or kill a fowl and say the foxes did it.

Next day, Sunday, we sneaked back into Ushkûl, crestfallen and hungry, to find Platon installed in the priest's house in the first of the hamlets of Mookmer, where we hastened to join him.

My thoughts were gloomy ones as I lay resting on the priest's floor that night, for I had done all I knew to deserve success, and my tûr's head was still as distant as ever. As for Frank, I dare not for the present mention the detested beast in his hearing. All I could

get out of him was an entreaty to leave Svânetia as speedily as possible, and a reminder that I was pledged to see him safely back in Berkshire by November 1st.

CHAPTER X.

AT THE RECTORY, USHKÛL.

It was not only because he was a priest's son that our wily interpreter, Platon, always made straight for the house of the holy man in every village that he entered. Though in the wilds of Svânetia the officers of the church are not so well cared for as they are elsewhere, still even here a very marked difference exists between the utter barbarism of the flock and the comparative comfort of its pastors.

The priest of Mookmer was a very fine fellow, and he must have been a man of considerable nerve and self-control to have

existed so long as he had done in the position he held when we knew him. His house was built like the houses of Radcha (or most of them) of a lower storey of rough stones, used for the cattle or horses for the most part, and above that a timber edifice with a balcony outside, approached by a rough external ladder.

As we got off our horses, and scrambled down the hill to his house, the priest and Platon came to meet us, and give us a cheery welcome—a welcome which perhaps lost just a little of its effusiveness when it became apparent that we brought no meat with us, except such scraps as might still be clinging to the hide of Frank's mountain kid. The priest was the biggest man we had yet seen, and stood, I should think, a good six feet four or five in his leather socks, and was, moreover, an extremely heavily-built man even for his height.

There were two rooms at the back of the balcony, one (the front one) used generally for the whole needs of the priest, his friends, and his family, and the other, a little den into which we did not penetrate. In the big room a row of boards on trestles, covered with rough matting and a patch-work feather mattress of great antiquity and doubtful cleanliness, offered repose to all and sundry.

At the farther end of the room was an open stove where all the cooking was done, and to the right of it a small cupboard in which the priest kept all his treasures and the insignia of his office, *i.e.*, a book of services and a Bible, two tumblers and a teapot, a pen and ink and a pipe. We soon had the teapot and the tumblers out, and as we still had a little tea left, we invited the Rector and his wife to partake with us. Of course the lady refused, and the priest himself only agreed to take what we left; but meanwhile he and his

wife set to work to prepare maize cakes for us, and it was quite an open question whether the big man six feet five or his little wife was most nimble or at home in the house work. Thanks to their joint endeavours our tea was soon ready, and once we were well at work on that meal, the priest went out to procure the means of giving a grand supper of meat and vodka to ourselves and any of the Svâns who considered themselves invited. Of course we paid for the provisions, and we used invariably to ask our host and his family to share whatever we had ; but we always found, in addition to the somewhat large families which assembled round our hosts, a crowd of other visitors of whom we knew nothing, who invited themselves to these suppers of ours. In fact, our party was only limited by the quantity of meat to consume.

Now, in the priest's house, at any rate, you would imagine that beyond the curious

among the inmates of the house, you would find no one to molest you. On the contrary, here in Mookmer, we were no more safe from the molestations of the crowd than we should have been had we camped in the main thoroughfare outside our host's door. We literally could not get room to clean our guns, so great was the crush round us, and when the priest's wife wanted to get to the door of her husband's house that she might go out and get water, she had to creep along over the beds, because there was no room for her to pass out elsewhere. Once or twice the priest expostulated, but very feebly, as if he knew it to be utterly useless, and when I suggested that he should at the very least order the children and young lads out, he explained to me that these Svâns had no notion that they were intruding; everybody's house in the village was public property in some sort; no one dreamed of such a thing as privacy at Mook-

mer ; and if he attempted to turn out the invaders *vi et armis*, as he was very well qualified to do, he would probably be shot for his pains.

I never in my life saw a place in which there was such an utter absence of all authority and discipline as in these Svânetian villages. The priest seemed to have no power at all over the people ; when I talked to some of them, through our interpreter, of the Russian authorities, they laughed them to scorn ; once only, in Simon's case, I saw some deference paid to a father's authority, but that, I fancy, was only a blind to empty our purses from two sides at the same time, by paying father and son for the same services ; and to counterbalance this I saw a day after, a boy about ten turn on his mother with curses, and a hand on his kinjal, and so drive her away, triumphing in his disobedience. As to their reputed loyalty and obedience to

their own princes, my readers can judge of that for themselves when I describe our stay at Betcho.

The uncivilised Svâns seem to me to have already got what the Nihilists are seeking for, a democracy in which no man is greater than another ; no man fears or worships a God, but each is a law unto himself ; all men are equally rich or rather equally poor, and no one either wields or submits to authority.

When our pipes were lighted after supper, I pulled out my note-book, and began to try to draw out our host. He was a man of Radcha, the next province, and consequently one who had once lived a life much more nearly resembling the life of civilised humanity than that he was now leading. He had already passed, I think he said, eleven years of his life in Svânetia, and meant to pass a good many more there, until indeed his two boys should have ceased to be an expense to him.



WARRIOR OF GOORI.

WARRIOR OF LESGHIA.



It gives you an idea of the kind of man you may often meet in Russia, when you consider that the sons of our worthy host, born among these savage Svâns, having passed their childhood amongst the hardships and poverty of the village life of Mookmer, were then, the one a young officer of artillery, and the other studying for some profession at one of the great Russian universities. What wonder that men whose lives are so full of such startling contrasts, and whose purses are of necessity too empty to enable them to lead the new life into which they are plunged, lose their heads and become crazy with the follies of Nihilism or any other violent and revolutionary gospel which they encounter on the threshold of their new lives!

As our host seemed a man of considerable education for a Caucasian village priest, and as he had had ample opportunities of judging of the people amongst whom his lot was cast,

I shall take the liberty of narrating all he told me of the Svâns and Svânetia, without attempting to correct any mistakes he may have made, since I know of no one who can be considered a much better authority than my informant.

That Svânetia is so wonderfully uncivilised still is due, he said, to its geographical position, hemmed in on all sides by mountains, the passes over which are few and difficult, and indeed only available for three months in the year. When these three months are over those who are in Svânetia when the snow falls must stay there for nine months, until the snow has thawed again, and even then the roads are very bad indeed.

Moreover, most of Svânetia lies at such a height that the winters are long and severe, and very little indeed will grow in the land. Down the Ingour, through the district of Lekéra, Nature is a little more bountiful, but

where we now were, in Mookmer, neither wheat nor wine nor tobacco, nor any other thing which can make glad the heart of man, can be induced to grow. So there are no traders to introduce civilisation or spread the news. Once in Lachmûl I met a pedlar from far-away Djuaria, and he, so the people said, was the only merchant of any sort who visited them.

I found villagers in my travels who had hardly heard the rumour yet that the late Czar had been foully murdered, and refused to believe that another Czar already filled his place. Throughout Svânetia the villages are small and for the most part far away from each other; in many cases so placed that in winter they become isolated, not only from the rest of the world but from each other also. As for the influences of religion upon the people they are limited in the extreme, and schools they have none.

Money is hardly ever used by the Svâns, and many were our troubles from the impossibility of changing the three rouble notes (in which our order on the Kutais bank had been paid) into smaller money. All their payments amongst themselves are made in kind, and they are so suspicious of paper money that they will refuse a note if it be at all torn or old.

In each long straggling series of hamlets there is a priest of the Greek Church, and a very small square building of stone and plaster, which would perhaps hold two dozen people, does service for a church. Small as it is, it is ample for the congregations which attend it. My friend the priest attributed the building of all the churches throughout Svânetia to Queen Tamara, before whose time nothing certain seems to have been known of Svânetia. When Tamara appeared on the scene Svânetia voluntarily adopted her as its

queen, and she first sent priests into the land, built churches and a number of small fortresses at such places as Glola in Radcha and Ushkûl in Svânetia, where their ruins still remain. But when Tamara died Svânetia severed itself from Georgia ; the priests died out or were killed, and as no more came from the outer world Svânetia went for a while priestless.

But in time another race of priests arose from amongst the Svâns themselves, apparently self-elected, or at any rate chosen only for their external fitness for the office. The Svâns had observed that in most cases the salient points in the person of a priest of the Greek Church of Russia were a fine voice, a fine beard, and long hair, worn as in most of the old paintings of our Lord. Hence it happened that any fellow who had a longer beard or a louder voice than his neighbour was chosen priest, and conducted the services of the church as well as his memory of old

times enabled him to. Of this order were the priests found in the land when Svânetia, at a comparatively recent date, became subject to Russia.

No wonder that in these times of amateur clergy strange and barbarous customs crept into the church of Svânetia, many of which still remain, in spite of the fresh importation of properly qualified priests from other parts of the Caucasus and Russia. For instance, our host told me that the Svâns allow no women to enter their churches; that if they should do so they are liable to be stoned, unless they are willing to pay a heavy fine instead. The Svâns believe that Providence will resent the presence of women in churches, and visit the villages in which the offenders dwell with plagues of rain and other misfortunes.

The men of the villages are allowed to go to church twice a year—on Easter Day

and on the Xrestchénia (*i.e.*, the sixth day after New Year's Day) ; if they go oftener than that it is only for a funeral or at the peril of being stoned or fined for their indiscretion. Moreover, no man may go unless he has a good coat on his back ; and as a matter of fact every feast day and every Sunday the priest has the church to himself. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday are kept as holidays, no work being done by any of the community from Thursday at sunset to Monday at sunrise.

But the priest is far from having whole control over the church. On the contrary, he can only go thither on certain occasions, and cannot admit any stranger. The key of the church is kept by a body of six selected villagers, and whenever the priest wants to hold a service he has to get one or more of the church-guard to accompany him and let him in. Once in, the key-bearer shuts the

door on the priest and keeps guard over the door until the service is over. Then the guard lets the priest out, locks the door behind him, pockets the key, and goes home.

Sitting by the fire turning over the maize cakes, as the priest told me of the ways of his flock, was a young Svân girl of about twelve, whose face of mute wonder as she kept a timid but watchful eye on the strangers was intelligent and interesting, even if not absolutely pretty. Seeing that I was noticing the child the old priest told me that she was no daughter of his, but a hand-maiden and *protégé*, who had entered his service until she should be old enough to marry her *fiancée*.

Marriage in Ushkûl is not as a rule an event in the early life of either men or maidens. Having a hard life before them in a stern and unfruitful country, the natives seldom incur the responsibilities of married life before they have reached the comparatively ripe age of

thirty. Herein they differ widely from their neighbours of Georgia and Armenia, whose maidens are often given in marriage before they are fourteen, and sometimes as young as twelve. But if the Svâns do not marry young they do not lose much time in betrothing themselves.

As soon as it is known that a girl has been born to any one in the village, any young man who as yet has no affianced wife may go in person or send his father for him to the hut of the girl's parents. As there is rarely more than one room in a Svân's hut, and possibly no other piece of furniture besides the heavy wooden cradle, there is no difficulty in finding the baby. Entering the room and approaching the child, without staying to parley with the parents, the suitor or his proxy takes from his breast one of the little figured bullets used by these people for their rifles, and either fastens it with a string

round the child's neck or merely drops it into the cradle alongside the little one. From this moment, whether she will or no, whether her parents consent to or disapprove of the match, the giver of the bullet has a claim on the child's hand when she attains a proper age ; and should the parents make any resistance to that claim they become liable to pay an excessively heavy fine to the bridegroom, or render themselves legitimate objects for the blood feud at the hands of the young man and all his belongings.

The earliest age at which Svân girls are allowed by their people to marry is fifteen. But all the matrimonial arrangements in Ushkûl seem to be of the most irregular character. Bigamy is common. Two of the men in the group round the old priest and myself were guilty of this offence, and both cases were similar. As children the two men had been engaged by their parents to women already

grown up. The women had waited for their baby bridegrooms and grown old in waiting. When the bridegroom was old enough to marry the woman of his father's choice he had done so, rather than incur his father's displeasure and the risk of being shot or fined by his wife's relatives. Thus having been considerate of other people's feelings in the first place, he thereafter held himself free to consider his own, and immediately added to the wife chosen for him by his elders another and a younger one of his own choice.

Sometimes, too, a Svân indulges in what may be called a probationary marriage—that is to say, he falls half in love with some village lassie, but not feeling quite sure of her temper or the durability of his affection, he takes her on a year's trial; and if at the end of that time she has made him the father of a fine boy and never indulged in 'nagging' or curtain lectures, he on his part makes the matrimonial

arrangement a permanent one. But should she show temper, cease to take the trouble to make herself attractive, or burden the would-be father of stalwart sons with a useless daughter, then the partnership is dissolved, the young lady looks out for another husband, and her father, brothers and cousins derive a good deal of excitement and exercise from the chase of the quondam husband with rifles, kinjals, and other deadly weapons. For in spite of all that Russia has done and can do, the old custom of the blood feud, if not as lively as ever, is still very far from extinct. Hardly a guide engaged by us during our stay in Svânetia but had some village which was forbidden ground to him, some family or other that was lying in wait for a quiet shot at him. Generally our guide had carried off somebody else's wife, and the somebody else naturally resented the affront.

Svâns do not seem to approve of open

violence—hand to hand fights are not their strong points ; but a quiet shot at an unsuspecting enemy has great attractions for them. Still the rifle is not the only weapon used in these family jars, as we saw when a little later we met our hunter Georgi's brother, a fine-looking mountaineer, whose right hand had been cut off at the wrist by a blow from a kinjal in a free fight at Ushkûl about a month before our arrival. Though there are no doctors in Ushkûl, the loss of his hand had had no evil effect on the man's general health—the stump seemed in good condition ; and as he had received a compensation in cattle and money from the aggressor, as well as the woman the theft of whom had been the *casus belli*, Georgi's brother seemed happy and contented.

In every other province in the Caucasus Russia has appointed foresters, men whose duty it is, amongst other things, to levy a kind

of game licence on the natives. In Svânetia as yet no forester has been able to establish himself, and I don't envy the first half dozen men who undertake the unpopular office.

But though the Svâns still practise the blood feud and refuse to recognise any authority which presumes to interfere with their sporting rights, they have given up some of the worst of their old evil ways. For instance, in the memory of men still living they were in the habit of saving themselves any little trouble or expense incidental to the maintenance of female children by filling the mouths of all their hungry girl babies with a handful of hot ashes. One meal of this kind was generally found to suffice for the strongest infantine constitution ; and thus when the Svâns grew up and wanted a wife or a house-keeper, they just slipped over into Radcha or some other neighbouring district and carried

off the first young woman who suited their fancy and came in their way.

At the present day the Svâns pay a tax to Russia of one rouble thirty kopecks per annum for each family—a tax excessively light when compared to the eight roubles per annum levied on every family, rich and poor alike, in the neighbouring government of Radcha. But in Radcha the government does something in return for the tax levied; the roads are kept in excellent repair, and the laws are so enforced as to be strictly respected throughout the province. As there are no roads worthy the name in Svânetia, and no one seems to believe in the existence of laws, I am bound to confess that, light as it is, the Crown tax of one rouble thirty kopecks is quite as much as the Svâns ought to be expected to pay for the privilege of being governed.

The family circle in Svânetia is in most cases a large one for a single home, as, until

the head of the family dies, it never resolves itself into fresh groups on the marriage of the sons. Honesty is the chief virtue of the Svâns—honesty, that is, in small things. It may well be that to carry off a flock of sheep from Radcha, leaving the shepherds dead at the foot of the pass, would seem a virtuous act to any native of Mookmer, but petty larceny is not among their vices. Careless as Frank and I were, we never had any single thing stolen during the whole time we were in Svânetia. As for morality amongst the women, that is a thing little known in the Caucasus, and less likely to be met with in Svânetia than elsewhere.

The Svâns have no games, no mental culture, to all intent and purpose no religion, no houses better than dens ; they don't work much when they can, and there are at least nine months of the year when they cannot work if they would. They have no strong

drinks, and tobacco is hard to get, so that except for their hunting they can only fill up their time by sleeping, indiscriminate love-making, and the blood feuds consequent thereon. A man who has had no share in a blood feud is as little thought of as an unscarred student at Heidelberg, and they are perfectly careless of the wrath of Russia, consequent on any fatal results from their favourite pastime, well knowing that it would not be worth the while of the Government to pursue a single Svân in his native mountains, and perfectly useless even if attempted.

When at last death overtakes a Svân, the women of his village make moan for him, weeping and wailing like the mourners at an Irish funeral; but amongst the men tears are held dishonourable, so that the men of his kindred or acquaintance only show their sorrow by accompanying the corpse from the door of the dead man's house to the church or

grave. Forming a procession of from twenty to thirty, his companions follow their dead fellow, carrying their alpenstocks over their left shoulders, and keeping up a chorus of 'wai ! wai !' as they march. I never happened to see a graveyard in Svânetia that I remember ; but often and often came on a cairn on the hillside or in the forest where a bullet or a false step had put an end to some mountaineer's life. A short prayer and a tiny pine tree torn up in passing was left by each of my native followers at these cairns whenever we passed them.

Unfortunately before I had elicited half the information which I wanted, my interpreter and the priest of Ushkûl had got into a deep argument on the subject of the future of the Caucasus and Russia itself. Amongst other things I learnt that my interpreter was one of a set of young men, natives of the Caucasus, who, having themselves tasted of

the good fruit of education, had formed a society and raised a fund for educating a few of the peasant children of their country, in the hope that by this means civilisation might spread among the mountain villages. They had achieved no great things as yet, but still it was something to boast of, that ten children every year had a good education given them by this little band of intelligent patriots. Of Russia they had much to say, but most of it was of the same kind that we hear every day and read in every paper. One thing only struck me. These men, not very learned men possibly, but still men who knew Russia better at any rate than we English do, laid the blame of most of Russia's misery and political agitation not to her want of a constitutional government, but to the want of home life among the Russians; not to the corruption of the official classes, but to the infidelity of Russian women. Though I have

heard the story repeated wherever I have been, I can only hope it is over-coloured ; but if it should be true, it is little wonder that men who can have no trust in their wives, can feel no safety in their home relations, and have but little faith in the showy religion of their own church, become discontented and dangerous members of society.

In the Caucasus before the war, Caucasian women were as famed for their purity as for their beauty, and the erring maid or faithless wife when detected, lost friends and relatives, was hunted from her native village, and had to hide her shame amongst strangers, even if her life was spared to her. Now if the natives are to be believed all this is changed, and if two married women fall out, the chances are that the first taunt hurled from one at the other will be, ‘Why, you ugly shrew, you’ve got a husband, poor fellow, but not a single lover to your name.’

But the inhabitants of the Caucasus at the present day are no longer pure Caucasians for the most part, and the fragments of conquered races are perhaps more apt to imitate the vices than the virtues of their conquerors.

Whether the priest or Platon had the last word in that long midnight chat I never learnt ; my allowance of tobacco had long been exceeded, and the night was more than half spent when I left them still talking, as only Caucasians can talk, every limb keeping time to their tongues in the excitement of the discussion, and joined my feeble note to the deep chorus that had for a long time past proclaimed the restful slumbers of the other inmates of the room. Before I turned in I went out on the balcony to satisfy myself about the weather ; and as the sky was clear, and in the shed below three horses were already tied up, waiting to carry us on our

journey at daybreak, I closed my eyes with the conviction that for once there would be no hitch in our arrangements, no delay at starting.

CHAPTER XI.

A SVÂNETIAN COURT.

THE first glance at the outside world when I woke from my lair on the floor of the priest's house at Ushkûl dissipated half my rosy hopes of the night before. When they were discussing Ushkûl, the natives had claimed for their village that it lay higher above the sea-level than any village in Svânetia, if not in the entire Caucasus, hence the winter came upon them sooner than on their neighbours. Now, as I looked from the balcony across the patches where the uncut crops still stood, the snow fell thick and fast; and though it was only the 18th of September, all the country

was already white with the first fall of winter. This was bad enough, and made us doubly anxious to get away from bleak, miserable Mookmer to Betcho, where the Svânetian prince held his court, and thence to the lower country by the Ingour, where there would still be some few more weeks of hunting ; but when we endeavoured to hasten our departure we were told that the owners of the horses had determined to cry off their bargain, and would not let their horses go. The impudent rascal who owned two of the beasts came up at the moment, took no notice of our protestations, but having under false pretences fed and housed his cattle at our host's for the night, now mounted one of them and rode coolly away, laughing at our impotent rage.

After he had gone Simon, the son of the bear-slayer, arrived with his white-headed old father, who, having been led up to me, fell on his knees, and, embracing my legs, began to

kiss them with much energy. Not being used to this sort of thing, I remonstrated with the old fellow, and found that he had come to appeal to our generosity to compensate him for the loss of the horse which had fallen down the cliff at Zaskoora. He admitted that the fault was not ours, that we had advised his son not to take the horse on ; but for all that, as we had brought misfortune on him and bad weather on the village by hunting, unclean strangers that we were, in the Mookmer hunting fields, he begged us to give him something to buy another horse with. We could not help feeling sorry for the old fellow, so though we made a good deal of the extravagance of his demands, Frank and I gave him about double what he expected, and sent him away, praying probably that he might always find Englishmen to hire his old screws. But it was not the old bear-slayer alone who attributed the bad weather to us ;

and after what I had heard of stoning and fines the night before, a glance at the scowling faces crowding about us made me additionally anxious to get away. The priest did all he could. No man ever worked harder for strangers than he did for us, and when the horses had been obtained, and he had with his own hands tied on the last of our bundles, we drank in our stirrup cup the health of one of the best friends we met in Svânetia.

In cases like this, where we had been staying in the house of a priest or other educated person, we found that though our host would be offended at the offer of any remuneration, a present made to his wife would never be refused, even if couched in the simple form of rouble notes. Throughout the Caucasus, the wife never seemed to me on the same social level as her husband, but looked on herself and was by others regarded rather as we should regard a housekeeper.

It took half a day to obtain horses for us and to convince the native horseboys that they had at last reached the utmost bounds of our patience and our paying powers. On such occasions as these, when Platon and I were busy haranguing the obstinate and attempting to wheedle the relenting, Frank, being unable to understand the conversation, generally performed the *rôle* of sleeping partner to perfection, and in so doing showed his wisdom. But neither of us fared sumptuously at such times ; indeed, it was always from one discomfort to another, and our spirits were none of the highest when we started from Mookmer, the snow falling rapidly and melting as it fell, our black bourkas gripped tightly under our chins, and the screws beneath us left to take care of themselves as best they could. The road was vile, but beautiful. Lovely scenery and good roads never seem to exist naturally together.

For some hours our road lay along the sides of hills almost worthy the name of mountains, which overlooked the course of the Ingour, after which we got down lower into a region of pine belts, where for the present no snow had made the landscape miserable. Every now and again we came upon a log hut, better built than any houses we had yet seen, and like in shape to the châteaux of Switzerland. These were the scattered houses of a riverside hamlet called Kâla.

If ever I travel through Svânetia again, I am resolved that though a horse may carry my packs, no legs but my own shall be trusted to carry my person. I don't think I am a nervous horseman, but the inclines, bestrewn with rocks and slippery with melting snow, down which we were expected to ride on weak-kneed beasts, tried me sorely.

Once, in a river bed amongst boulders as high as my nag's shoulder, I got a really bad

spill in the dark, my rifle going one way, and all my other impedimenta going other ways, leaving me, with knees and funny bones numbed with pain, to grope about and collect my belongings as best I could. The men were too far ahead in the dark to call to them for assistance, so I had to help myself and trudge on uncomplainingly, and I still pray, as I prayed then, that those Russians who have the charge of the roads in Svânetia, and into whose pockets the Crown money goes, may be condemned to ride through eternity in Tartar saddles on Svânetian nags, over the break-neck ways they have been paid to neglect.

Just before my tumble we had passed the important village of Ipari, built, as these villages all seemed to be, in detachments. The first storey of the village, some eight or ten towers and their surrounding huts, was built right on the edge of the Ingour. The

next storey and largest of the three was a quarter of an hour's climb up the hill, and apparently half an hour's climb above that, on the very summit of the range, was a third small collection of houses, which completed the village called collectively Ipari.

Once during the day we stopped in a clearing on the mountain side to eat a crust of bread and turn our animals loose to forage for themselves. No Svân thinks of giving his horse a feed during the day's journey, so it is little to be wondered at that the poor beasts insist on feeding at every step on whatever chance herbage comes handy. Having crossed the hills of Ipari, we looked into a valley through which ran a small river, to which our horseboys gave the name of Tchala. At the northern end of the valley were the peaks and glaciers whence the stream issued, and grim mountain giants,

hoary with ice fields and glaciers, dominated and saddened the whole view.

On the opposite side of the river to that on which we stood the banks sloped gradually up for about a third of a mile, until they reached a tableland which, with a few unimportant breaks, continued the whole length of the valley. On this tableland were a succession of hamlets all built of grey stone and protected by tall white towers, much battered by private feuds or the later inroads of the Russian. The tableland had been cultivated too, but for the most part the crops were down now, and anything more grim and grey than the whole scene it would be hard to conceive.

What the land must be like when the stream is frozen and every village cut off from its neighbour by snowdrifts; when winter takes all the cheeriness out of the sky, and hides every vestige of vegetation, buries

half the huts and makes escape hopeless, and life devoid of occupation, with fuel hard to get and food scarce, is known providentially only to the dwellers in the land. The scene was cheerless enough now as the dusk set in, though Mugal and Mulach were still in their summer days of comfort and plenty.

Rosemary and juniper bushes were the most noticeable of the plants which grew by our roadside, and a prickly bush covered with berries of a bright rose red colour, very beautiful to the eye and very acid to the tongue. 'Kvadzakoori,' the natives called it, and they told us it was greatly prized for making into liqueurs. By the time we had reached the last of the hamlets of Mulach it was dark, and there were but few lights in huts.

It was too late to go further, and we were tired and hungry, but when we sought for a roof to shelter us or food to eat, we were once

more painfully reminded that we were in Svânetia.

An unpleasant kind of moisture—half rain, half snow—was falling, our weary horses stumbled at every step, our limbs were sore and ached, and as for our appetites, I know of no word strong enough to use in describing them. In this plight we rode into a kind of yard amongst the houses of Mulach, and sent out a messenger with our letters of introduction to find us shelter and a dinner; but the Elder was away from the village—Elders in Svânetia always are; no one else could read, and the only two houses which still contained a light and waking inhabitants showed anything but a hospitable or friendly spirit towards us.

So we stood, the centre of a hungry pack of dogs, who kept skirmishing round our calves in a way to make us shudder, while first one messenger then another came back to

us with the cheerless story of no food, no fire, no shelter to be obtained for that night. The faint-hearted amongst us suggested a night, *sub Jove frigido*, and as it had to be done, proposed that we should begin at once; but a lively opposition, whose imagination dwelt fondly on the flesh-pots of Svânetia, held out against this heresy.

All things come to those who know how to wait, and in the end a man of Mulach, the secretary of the village Elder, adorned with a brass medal as big as a cheese-plate, came all unwillingly to us. The sight of a real three rouble note brought him back to comparative liveliness; and before we had had time to completely freeze in the courtyard, we were led into a long low shed, in which a fire, fed by fragments of the rafters from the roof, &c., burned merrily on the floor. Here we supped somewhat meagrely; but if we did not feed well, no one could have taken exception to our

slumbers ; and when we woke and shook ourselves clear of the dust of Mulach, we forgot our troubles in the anticipation of reaching Betcho before nightfall.

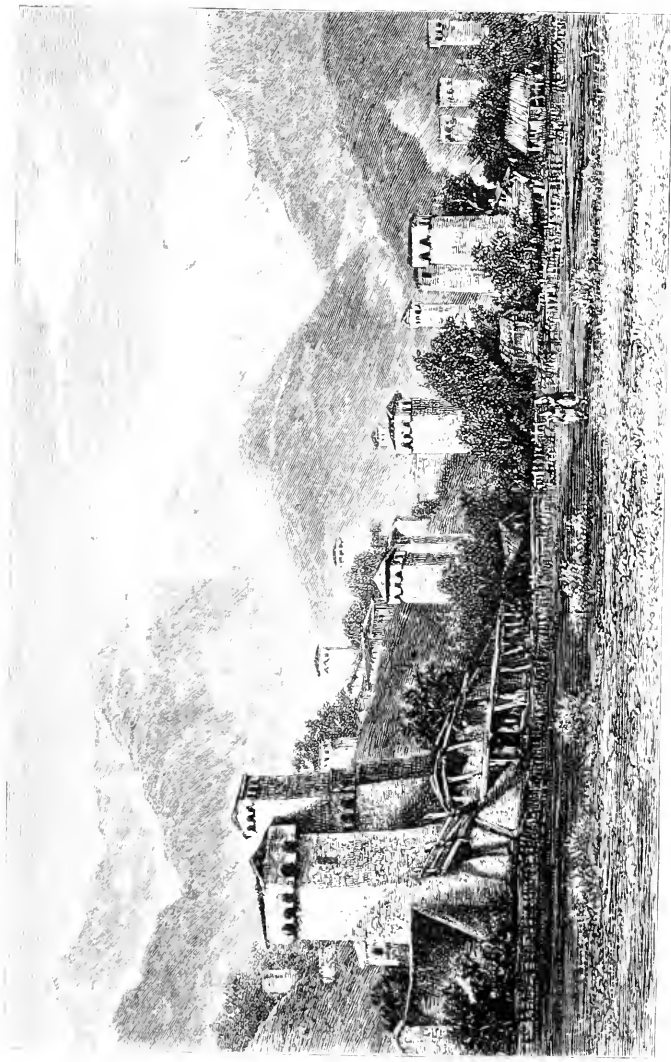
The second day of our journey from Ushkûl to Betcho was much like our first. A couple of ridges surmounted and a few villages passed through, all so much alike that in describing one you describe them all. Mestia, Nenjar, and Latáli were the names of them, and the general character of all three was that of a village of tumble-down hovels of grey-stone, interspersed with tall white watch towers, battered and ruined by internecine wars and the more recent attacks of Russia, built on the most level part of the slope of some hill at whose foot the shallow stream of some small glacier-born river rolls its grey waters.

All round the immediate vicinity of the village the poor soil of the hillside is portioned

out into little square plots, yielding a scanty supply of rye or barley to the villagers, and all round roll range upon range of barren hills, while at the end of the glen towers the white mass of some giant snow peak.

In summer the scenery is so stern and wild that its beauty hardly impresses you so much as its savage sense of desolation. But what the lives of these villagers must be like when winter has shut them away from the world, and a black wintry sky frowns down on the silent waste of snow-shrouded mountains, it is difficult indeed to conceive. Often in such glens fuel is not near at hand, and food is always scarce.

Wine or spirits, to cheer the heart of man, they have none ; books there are none ; and for at least eight months no news can come to them from the world without. Lucky for the men if they are hunters, for then they at least may while away a few of the



VILLAGE OF MESTIA.



dreary days of winter, but for the rest it must be a terrible time.

At Nenjar we saw a rather interesting church, built of stone and plaster. It was so small that if it would hold a score of people standing it could do little more. On three sides of it were windows, long and narrow, set in what somewhat resembled the Norman arch, familiar in England. All round the exterior of the building ran a kind of cornice of mural painting, fairly well preserved and originally well executed. On the side most worn by weather was a half obliterated design, which may have been originally meant for the Virgin, with on her left a picture of a saint of the masculine gender mounted on a red deer rampant. Another of the designs represents a fight between a knight on horseback and the devil. The devil is distinctly coming by the worst of it, for his head is bleeding from a sabre stroke just dealt by the

knight, and moreover one of the devil's horns has got knocked off. He is depicted as retaliating by thrusting a torch into the eye of the knight's destrier. Behind the knight are three Red-cross brethren in full armour, such as was worn by the Crusaders, with shields on their arms and swords over their right shoulders. The devil has for second a single knight armed with a scimitar. Another painting represents the hero of the three pictures with a monster at his feet, supposed to be a whale, and in his hand this time the knight wields a scimitar in place of his good sword. It was explained to us that the pictures all represented the life and history of Amuran or Job, and the three knights were his three companions in arms, of whom the principal was Osib. One of the pictures looked to me a great deal more like the old story of St. George and the dragon. No one in the village knew whom the pictures were

painted by or when they were painted, except in a general way that the chapel was probably built in the time of Queen Tamara, and by her orders. We were refused admission to the interior, but a glance through the windows from an extemporised platform on Platon's shoulders convinced me that we lost little by this.

The last big village passed by us on our way to Betcho was Latâl, or Latâli as the natives call it, a rather pretty and very ancient village, which seems to centre round a gigantic walnut tree. All the world of Latâli seemed busy thrashing out the newly-gathered grain, and in every compound at the back of each villager's hut, the solemn oxen were dragging the wooden sledge over the ears of corn, while father or mother led the patient beasts, and a half naked youngster screamed to them orders and encouragements from his perch on the sledge behind. But though the village seemed

rich and busy, it was only after a protracted search and a liberal promise of reward, that we managed to collect a few moist and indigestible dampers made from rye and sand in equal proportions, apparently relics of the villagers' early breakfasts.

At Latâli we saw the first instances of goître which we had met with in the Caucasus, though from that date until we left the course of the Ingour the occurrence of this hideous malady was not infrequent. The natives ascribe the disease to the evil effects of snow and snow water, partaken of too freely by the hot and thirsty amongst the mountains.

From Latâli to Betcho there was little to vary the monotony of our route. Of course we had another chain of hills to ascend and descend, but by this time, except as an excuse for five minutes' breathing space, we rarely stopped to admire the view.

We had got rid of all the troubles of

mending and re-stuffing our sandals with mountain grass, for our sandals had long since left us shred by shred, until none remained, nor any leather to make more with. My feet were cut and bleeding, and in places festered ; so that never did pilgrim long for the shrine which was to be the goal of his journey more ardently than I did for Betcho. And there at last it lay, this summer residence of the prince of this land of wearying mountains, not a grand place as the simple Svâns had painted it to us, in which their prince lived in feudal state, but a collection of miserable wooden shanties, most of them with the roofs off, built on an uneven little plain where grass and boulders struggled for predominance, and neither roads nor walls marked out too plainly where man might or might not wander.

At the entrance to the village, which had won itself a name as a watering-place, whose

mineral waters possessed all manner of curative properties, was a well, full of water, whose stench was bad enough to support its claims to any degree of medicinal excellence; but though the water was there and a bucket for the sick man to help himself out of, the bucket was rusted with disuse, and over the surface of the healing pool had grown a scum so thick that we did not care to break through it.

Betcho itself lies on the banks of an affluent of the Ingour, or more properly speaking, perhaps, on the banks of one of the sources of that river. The part of the town in which we first entered was of a temporary nature in a measure, being set apart for the residence of the Russian judge, who resides here in the summer, and for the visits of the prince of the country. In the winter both these magnates betake themselves to warmer and more hospitable climes.

But up a glen to our right front as we

entered Betcho lay a village large in comparison to most of those we had hitherto met with. Here the inhabitants were permanent settlers, and not mere migrants like those who lived in the wooden shanties round the court-house.

But there is one monarch who always looks down on Betcho, winter and summer, with unchanging fidelity, and lends a beauty to the miserable collection of hovels, for which their inhabitants may well be grateful. I have seen in my time many mountains, but to my mind none can compare to glorious Ushitba, the highest peak save Elbruz in Svânetia, and like Elbruz, hardly within that province though just on its confines. The peak rises clean and steep, not losing much of its height of 17,500 feet by a gradual ascent, and when I first saw it, with the rose lights of declining day on its masses of snow, towering right over the squalor and insig-

nificance of Betcho, it looked to me a type of the country whose loveliness is almost beyond compare, while its denizens are incomparably the most destitute of culture amongst men. The Russian agronome, whom I afterwards met in Betcho, informed me that the whole of the cone of Ushtba is composed of granite and granolite.

But beautiful as Ushtba is in the glory of an autumn sunset, it was not a prince of mountains that we sought at Betcho, but a prince of mountaineers, whose tall form we now discerned in the distance, the centre of as motley a group of retainers as ever thronged around their chief.

The prince's house was a trifle better than the rest in Betcho, a one-storied wooden building with a balcony round it, and here the prince and a kind of deputy-governor lived together, and day and night a mob of rough retainers thronged in the balcony or

slept in and about the base. As we looked the sitting came to an end, and the crowd parting gave place to the prince and his court, who slowly made their way from the balcony to the judge's house.

Platon, our interpreter, had been at school with the judge, so that meeting the group *en route* we got presented there and then to the prince as English strangers wandering in Svânetia for sport. Nor were we unkindly received, although the hour of our presentation was ill chosen, the prince being just then on his way to dinner.

In person this gentleman, who alone seems to possess the respect and fear of his people, is tall, beyond the average, almost six feet three or four, I should think, and must, when younger and in good training, have been a very fine man. But, like so many of the richer Caucasians, he cares nothing at all for sport, and as there is little else to live for in

the Caucasus, I should fancy his time must hang heavy on his hands. He was dressed in the long toga of the country, a kind of skull cap on his head, and soft leather slippers pointed and upturned on his feet. His court consisted of the judge, a clever, good-natured little Caucasian from Radcha, more Russian than Caucasian, in the oldest frock coat in the world, a battered billycock hat, and an old towel tied round his neck, and some half-dozen other minor officials, paid but poorly, I fear, to drag out their existence in exile at Betcho.

The prince, after a few minutes spent in catechising Platon, called one of his numerous henchmen, a wild, handsome ragamuffin, all red shirt and brass medals, with a moustache which he might easily have tied round his neck had he been so inclined, and bade him take us in charge and find quarters for us. Then we made our adieux and left the great

man to dine, rather envying him his good luck in having a dinner to go to.

Our quarters, when found, were not perhaps as luxurious as those which we had pictured, thanks to the force of contrast, when bivouacking on the bare hillside ; but though our windows only contained a couple of panes apiece, and the deficiencies in glass were hardly made up in boards ; though the floor was too filthy to tread on, and the shelf which formed our bedstead somewhat of the narrowest, we were consoled by the thought that the roof was weatherproof, and there was a fireplace if only we could collect fuel.

For a long time the crowd released from attendance on the prince thronged us to such an extent that we could do nothing more than submit to sit still and be stared at ; but at last a change came, and with it a message that the prince, having dined, felt rather un-

well, and could not give us an audience until next day.

For a couple of hours Platon had been away foraging for food and firewood, and though between us we did manage to get up a fire, no food could be obtained for love or money. In despair we were contemplating a supperless retirement to bed when notice reached us of an improvement in the prince's health and a request that we would waive ceremony, excuse his calling on us, and come over to his house to see him. Nothing loth we put on our best clothes (*i.e.* changed our mocassins for boots, and washed our faces), and walked over to the balcony, where we found our host ready to receive us. All round him and in his courtyard thronged about a hundred of the most unsafe-looking savages eyes ever beheld. No fear of royalty kept their tongues from wagging freely, nor any sense of decency restrained their hands from

molesting each other. Only in the balcony itself they took their caps off and spoke softly, until they lost their tempers, when they shouted as freely at their prince as he at them.

How we thanked heaven that amongst the ceremonies of visiting in Svânetia it is held necessary to set some slight refreshment before your guest I need hardly say, when it is remembered that we had not had a square meal for a couple of days! It was not a grand repast, but cheese and claret are things not to be despised by the starving, and the way I treated that light refreshment would have made anyone less kindly disposed than the prince, determine that my first meal at his table should be my last. When the pangs of hunger had been somewhat allayed, we fell to talking, but protest as I would nothing could convince my new friends that love of sport alone had brought me to

Svânetia. But then there were no sportsmen amongst my questioners.

When the prince's mother died, and he wanted meat to feast the funeral party, he had chosen our friend of the red shirt and two others, and sent them into the mountains to slay tûr and chamois for his guests, and in due course they had come back bringing three tûr with them. These men he now assigned to us, and promised that the day after the morrow they should conduct us to a place where tûr were plenty, and whence we should bring back at least a couple of the heads we were seeking. This sounded well, but the sportsmen's tongues seemed to me too fluent to belong to men of the right sort, and I was not mistaken.

Whilst we sat talking and smoking in the balcony the crowd outside acted as the chorus in a Greek play, and from time to time commented on or confirmed every remark the prince made.

Though I fancy the prince is mainly dependent on a tithe of the flocks and herds in his kingdom—a tithe only paid in kind—for his subsistence, he yet feeds daily at his table at least a hundred and fifty retainers, who do little to earn their food, save by swelling the train which lends an air of importance to their lord's progress from place to place. The tithe of cattle is collected in a very rough and ready way by agents of the prince's, and I should think that many a chamois was not more difficult to obtain than the sheep or goat with which the mountain shepherd pays for the privilege of being governed.

Whilst we sat in the balcony we commanded an excellent view of the royal kitchen, built gipsy fashion on the lawn at the back of the house, and saw many of the items which went to form the morrow's dinner arrive. From somewhere beyond the hills a peasant and his wife would trudge into sight. By-

and-bye they would join the crowd outside, and then some one of the retainers shouted out that So-and-So wanted to speak with the prince. The prince shouted his willingness to receive his visitor, whereupon the woman forced her way into the balcony, while her husband, cap in hand, stood without. Rising, the prince gave her his hand to kiss, and put a great deal of real grace and majesty of manner into his simple reception of his subject. Then, after a few minutes' converse, he would accept her offering of a basket of cream cheese or a couple of chickens, say half a dozen words to her good man, and so dismiss them.

Twice during our stay greater guests arrived, ladies of neighbouring magnates, riding on ambling steeds, and protecting, somewhat needlessly, their sun-proof complexions by the use of enormous gingham umbrellas.

When we left the prince it was only with a promise that after breakfast next day we would come to him and match our rifles against a beautiful little Berdianka of which he was justly proud, and after our shooting match dine with him at the judge's at 2 P.M., the fashionable hour in this part of the world. As we had secured some native whiskey and tobacco, and screwed up courage to kick all but about half a dozen of the greatest amongst our uninvited visitors out of our tiny room, we spent a fairly happy night.

Moreover, our reception by the prince had exercised a favourable influence on Platon, thanks to which, after a very serious and quarrelsome argument, we managed to restrict his expectorations and those of his friends to our outer chamber. This beastly habit of the Caucasus, and, indeed, of Russia too, as far as I have seen, caused us more unpleasantness than all our hardships put together, and

the worst of it was that to remonstrate with the offender invariably meant to hurt his feelings and make an enemy of him.

When the morning came and the sun looked in through our one pane of glass, happy Frank only acknowledged his arrival by turning his back on the window and rolling off into further fields of peaceful slumber, but for my unluckily constituted nature this was out of the question, so I made my way through half a dozen sleepers to the outside of the house.

Though it was not very early no one was stirring in the village, and though I wasted a couple of hours in a visit to the river, in collecting fuel and washing some of my linen, there was no further sign of waking life either within the house or without at eight o'clock. At nine, as all still slept, hunger overcame my sympathy for my happier fellows, so that poor Platon got turned out of his blanket and

sent to look for food. At eleven none had been procured. None was to be had in the village, and the bread for the prince's household had not yet been made. The judge sent us one damper, his last before dinner-time, and shortly after passed our hut with a friend or two, stretching his legs before going to work for the day

Breakfast is a meal that no one eats in Betcho, for if he is a great man a cup of tea, if a poor man a nip of vodka is luxury enough for a Svân. At two he feeds for the first, and except in some cases where cards necessitate late hours, and a supper at midnight, for the last time in the day. Shops of course there are none, either at Betcho or any other village in Svânetia, and everyone is so entirely self-dependent that no one makes any more bread than will just suffice for the immediate needs of his own family. So, though we got at about eleven thirty eggs and a couple

of fowls for rather less than two shillings the lot, we were obliged to make one small damper provided by the good-natured judge appease the hunger of three men.

How we envied the prince who, they tell us, whenever he deigns to walk through a village in Svânetia, is assaulted by the damsels of the place, whose custom it is, coming behind him, to embrace his neck and atone for their assault by presents of creature comforts of bread and wine, cheese, fowls, &c.

About twelve o'clock a message came to us, that the prince was ready to receive us on his verandah, and begged us to bring our rifles, revolvers, and any other curiosities of civilisation which we might happen to possess. Arrived in the verandah, the prince seized on the bourka (blanket) of one of his hapless retainers, and sent the owner off to the hillside opposite the house to put up the blanket as a mark for our rifles.

The prince had a good supply of ammunition and no use for it, so I determined not to attempt to compete with him as a marksman, as my five and twenty rounds had to last me back to Kutais. When the bourka had been arranged to the prince's satisfaction one of the gentlemen in goatskins approached from the courtyard, and driving his dagger into one of the pillars of the verandah, made a rough and ready rest for the prince's Berdianka. Considering that he knew the range and his weapon, our host did not make very wonderful practice, but after about a dozen shots he made a hole in the bourka which I failed to do with the two cartridges which I consented to waste, shooting with a rifle sighted for 250 yards, at a mark about 500 yards distant. Frank's 'Peabody' made better shooting than my 'Express' at this long range, and I had to be content to let them think the little 'Express' a useless tool, trusting that a reasonable shot at

game within the little rifle's range would ere long alter their opinions.

One custom about this primitive court struck Frank and myself as full of a provident care for the wants of frail human nature. Two tall fellows, in rough goatskin garments, with peculiarly prominent tails to them, followed the prince indefatigably wherever he went, and one bore in his hand a bottle of red wine and a tumbler, while the other carried all the material necessary for the making and lighting of cigarettes. These two court officers, held no sinecure, ought not to be abolished, and deserved their salary. I feel pretty sure these officers will not be considered unnecessary during the present prince's lifetime.

In the intervals of our shooting match the bearers of presents were received and dismissed ; once or twice people arrived who had causes of complaint against each other, and when this was the case their dispute was

referred to the prince, who decided between the disputants, and in all cases his decisions seemed to be accepted as final. When angry, or obliged to administer punishment to any of his subjects, one of his court told me that the prince just cuffed the offender as a father would his child, and though a Svân would not stand a blow from the Czar, he would make no resistance to and feel no humiliation at receiving a score of blows in public from his own prince.

The prince, together with the judge and all the members of Betcho society, dined together at the judge's house, a Government building, which being somewhat better than its neighbours, was raised to the honour of club-house, as well as being the seat of justice. Here Frank and I dined well for the first time since we had left Kutais, and met, moreover, a very pleasant set of people in the members of the Government Expedition sent from Tiflis,

for the purpose of reporting on the agricultural capabilities of Svânetia.

Having seen perhaps more than my share of the results of card-playing years ago in Southern Russia, I never care to take a hand at 'preference' or any other of their games, so whilst the princes and mighty ones grew hilarious over their successes, or unbecomingly savage over their losses, I retired to a corner with a Monsieur Schemanovsky, agronome to the Government of the Caucasus, from whom I elicited, over a glass of tea and a multitude of cigarettes, some scraps of information regarding the products of the country.

Even the Government at Tiflis seems to know but little of this its last acquired province of the Caucasus. Poor and inaccessible as it is, it has never seemed to the conquerors worth while to take much notice of it. Now and again it has given them serious trouble, as when the thirty-five Svâns of one of the villages near

Ushkûl held 10,000 Russians at bay until artillery tumbled their little castles about their ears ; but Svânetia yields nothing worth taking out of the country, barely enough to keep its scanty population from starvation through the long winter. The people themselves too are very nearly useless for military purposes : for in addition to being difficult beyond measure to bring into that discipline necessary for soldiers, these mountaineers, hardy though they are at home, die off with terrible rapidity if brought down to any of the military stations in the lowlands or on the Black Sea coast.

From Ushkûl to Lachamûl the crops are wheat, grown in very small quantities, oats and barley being the chief objects of the agriculturist's care. Millet is grown, and small crops of peas and beans, with a little flax, are sometimes found in favoured spots. Tobacco of a very coarse kind is grown in the smallest possible quantities with much diffi-

culty, but cannot be grown from seed of plants produced in Svânetia. Pears and apples of a dwarf and almost worthless kind are also grown, but not being in great request go for the most part to feed the bears.

In the forests grow the pine (*Pinus silvestris*), a tree which the people call 'pixta,' translated by my dictionary, Siberian silver fir, and, according to my friend, 'Abies' of botanists; the red fir (*Pinca excelsa*), and the juniper. Beech, maple, ash, aspen, silver birch, walnut, and hazel form the main part of the low-lying woods, in which raspberry canes and currant bushes provided refreshment for us and for Bruin. Amongst the flowers we noticed three varieties of crocus, some white campanulas, a beautiful kind of daisy like that which English children call the 'ox eye,' save that the petals surrounding its yellow centre are pink instead of white, wild scabious, lilies, whose flowers had

fallen before our arrival, and vast quantities of larkspur and blue gentian. Wherever there was room for it on the lower slopes of the hills, a plant with huge hollow stems and broad leaves (*Angelica officinalis*) blocked the way and poured its gathered dewdrops down our necks, while higher up rhododendron thickets and bilberries had the ground to themselves. Of ferns we saw very few, the commonest being *trichomanes*.

In variety of minerals Svânetia is rich, though none of the mines would pay for the working, they say. The ordinary rocks are argillaceous schist, but granite occurs in places. Copper is found near Betcho ; a little silver and lead is distributed all over the district ; near Ushkûl there is a small quantity of tin and a considerable amount of serpentine and porphyry. Gold is said to be found in the mountains between Mulach and Ushkûl, and also by the course of the Ingour below

Lachamûl, but there is no coal in Svânetia. You will be told probably at Tiflis and Kutais that valuable jewels are to be picked up, set in the rough rings of the Svâns of Ushkûl, Lachamûl, and other remote villages ; but though Frank and I urged Platon to bring to us all people possessed of jewellery of any description, we never saw anything more like a precious stone than a few beautiful rock crystals, which the owners did not care to part with, believing them to be diamonds of immense value.

Really so far as I could ascertain the only exports of Svânetia are the grand horns of the tûr, which are made into drinking cups at Kutais, and a large number of marten skins, taken for the most part in the forest of Lekéra during the winter.

CHAPTER XII.

SNOWED UP.

WE were to have started from Betecho at dawn, for what both had agreed was to be positively Frank's last hunt for tûr in the mountains he so heartily hated. The prince had been confident in his auguries of success at the card party of the night before, and as he was everywhere looked on as the one man to whom all things were possible in Svânetia, and had ordered his best hunters to escort us to the best hunting ground of which they knew, even my scepticism had in some measure given way to hope. But disappointments began early. First, neither horses nor men were

ready, when, long after dawn, my own party was ready for them had they been in waiting, and we were unable to bring the prince's influence to bear on his sluggish followers, until about eleven o'clock he was himself up and about. When at last we had managed to interest him in our behalf, he could not understand my impatience, and it was long ere I could bring him to see that to-morrow morning would not do every bit as well as to-day. And when he did bestir himself, not all his power, showing itself outwardly in loud and unmitigated abuse of his phlegmatic following, managed to procure horses for us before sundown. Then of course no one wanted to start, but seeing how delays were natural attendants at a court, I would not be let or hindered, and left Betcho hurriedly, determined to sleep at a village called Latâli on the other side one of the ranges which hemmed in Betcho.

It was a steep ride, and a toilsome one up the long slope which led to the summit, but though the men were silent and sulky, the scene was one which silence suited well. The tall trees, straight and white in the moonlight, seemed climbing the mountain side in closely serried ranks, their upturned roots half wrenched from the scanty soil here and there by wind and tempest, twisting and writhing through white light and half shadow like the serpentine growths in Doré's weird pictures, while every here and there a gap in their ranks gave us a glimpse of the moonlit majesty of Ushiba's cold beauty.

When we wound our way down a water-course into Latâli the village was dark and silent, so that we found our way into the open court-yard set apart for travellers, unannounced and unwelcomed. There were four walls round a small square of bare earth, with no roof save an awning at one corner, and

here we kindled our fire and tethered our horses.

In a few minutes our men had unearthed some of the denizens of Latâli, and one of them, a handsome old village Elder, asked me to come into his house, which opened out of the yard, and see the tûr horns collected by his sons, while his wife cooked a supply of bread for our expedition. In a low cave-like dwelling, lit by the brilliant but uncertain flicker of a wood fire on the floor, sat the handsomest woman (by firelight) I think I ever saw. Anything more beautiful than those dark eyes, lit by an occasional flash from the embers, I never beheld ; and though her occupation was the humble one of bread-making, she did it gracefully and nimbly, as the ninety odd loaves made and baked for our consumption before daybreak amply testified. For these and a flask of native whiskey, the flask a kind of terra-cotta jar so large that one man could

carry nothing besides it, we paid not quite ten shillings ; and though daylight on a subsequent occasion showed us that our patriarch was very dirty, and our lady-baker sallow and growing an enormous goitre, nothing could efface the memory of their ready service and the romantic picture man and wife presented, when the goitre was hidden and the kindly flames showed only what was comely in that dark interior. On a rafter above the flames were about a dozen pairs of tûr horns, blackened with the deposit from the smoke of many wood fires, but when cleaned the handsomest horns I had yet seen.

There are it seems two kinds of tûr in the Caucasus, as indeed Mons. Radde afterwards informed me, and the horns we saw here belonged to the second and rarer kind, whose horns bear deep indentations at regular intervals all along the upper surface, like those in the horns of an ibex. The ordinary tûr's

horn is nearly smooth. When we had seen all he had to show us we took the old man to our camp fire and gave him and our men some whisky to put them in good temper for the morrow, and then rolling ourselves in our rugs prepared for an early start next morning, as our men vowed that unless we could get out of the village without meeting anyone we should have no luck in our hunting.

Our party consisted of three guides and our three selves, the guides being Red Shirt, the hunter of the prince, and two local men picked up at Latâli. Before the men slept, however, they went away somewhere to make a contract amongst themselves as to the division of the blood money they were to receive in case Frank or myself killed a *târ*, and having made their contract deposited their prayers and a half kopeck (not quite a halfpenny) between them, in front of an eikon at the village Elder's. A four hours' climb in the morning took us out

of sight of Latâli, and brought us to the last rivulet we were likely to see for several hours, so here we sat down, loosed our horses, and breakfasted. Alas ! that Svâns consider whiskey is as suitable for breakfast as for supper. They did not drink much of it, but what they did bore very unpleasant fruit before long.

Horses were really more trouble to us than help after breakfast, and only Platon—who hated to use his own legs and had no mercy on his beast—attempted to keep his seat. Frank, who always thought of his horse as soon as he did of himself, walked the whole way, though no one loathed that long climb as he did. Weary, and heartily sick of the whole expedition, he kept plodding mechanically up hill, so that when we all sat down to light our pipes and get our breath on a huge fir which barred our progress up hill, he, not noticing the halt, kept on and was lost to

sight. He was thus saved a row which very nearly ended in murder.

Ever since he had taken that morning nip at breakfast Red Shirt had been very bump-tious and intractable, and now entered on a very hot discussion with one of the hunters of Latâli anent the geography of the place whither we were going. The man of Latâli having been born in the neighbourhood ventured to say that as a native he ought to know more about these mountains than Red Shirt. Red Shirt at once losing his temper called Biasir a liar, and Biasir nothing loth returned the epithet. Till then I had listened lazily, only thinking the two ill-tempered fools were indulging in that wordy war common to all Eastern races, but to my horror no sooner were the words out of Biasir's mouth than Red Shirt's kinjal was out of its sheath, and flashing under his enemy's arm tore through his shirt, missing his chest by what must

have been the least possible fraction of an inch.

I had seen Caucasians angry before, but these two fellows, now their blood was up, seemed in a very different mood, and I realised that their prince was right when he told me they were the most recklessly irritable of men.

With a look that was full of the devil, Biasir stepped back, and, putting up his rifle, would have shot his man at half a dozen paces, and so added another to the list of blood feuds with which he and his fellow villagers are busied ; but luckily I was in time to wrench the weapon from him, while the little Georgi from Latâli flung his arms round Red Shirt and kept him quiet.

There were two others with us at the time, but they seemed either too startled or too indifferent to render any assistance. As I had possessed myself of Biasir's rifle, I felt

pretty safe about him, but Red Shirt still kept raving and handling his knife.

Threatening to shoot any one who attempted to offer violence, I now tried to frighten the men into a more peaceful mood ; and, ordering Platon to bring me the whiskey jar, proceeded to pour out its contents on the ground. If this course had no other effect, it diverted the thoughts of the belligerents momentarily from their quarrel, and all parties were loud in their prayers that I should not waste the precious fluid. But I was firm, reserving only just enough for myself and friend. Then I set the party in motion again, and though there were evil looks and a great deal of muttered thunder all that day and the next, there was no further open outbreak between our hunters during the expedition. Perhaps the threat that I would refer the case to the prince on my return to Betcho kept the fellows quiet.

During the day Biasir and I, partly for the sake of sport, and partly to keep him out of harm's way, made a long detour; but though we saw one chamois, we got no shot. Frank's party saw a bear moving through the scrub in front of them, but never got a good view of him.

That night we slept curled up most uncomfortably amongst the roots of a huge pine-tree, whose boughs were so thick and so weather proof, that though the rain came down in earnest during the night, none touched us. On the third day we reached our camping-place at the foot of the snow peaks, wherein the tûr were said to dwell.

Our den was in a small cave some four feet high, the blackened roof of which gave signs that it had often been used by hunters before. Besides the traces of fire, there were other proofs of prior occupation by man in the shape of the bones and head of a tûr, a

birch-bark tray for kneading bread in, and a rustic pipe cut out of hazel, and furnished with a stem of currant wood. These and such like necessaries are to be found in almost every considerable cave about these mountains ; and having been made by hunters when using the caves, the various utensils are looked on as sacred, and left as public property for the use of all sportsmen who may succeed the makers of them ; and however hardly pushed a Svân may be for a pipe, nothing will ever induce him to annex one which forms part of this cave property.

As Frank did not feel inclined for hard work, the arrangement for the first day's hunt was that Red Shirt and I should attempt to gain the top of the ridge at about its centre (it was shaped like a bay), while the best climber amongst our guides tried to gain the same point by starting at the extremity of one end of the bay, his object being to

drive any tûr along the top of the ridge, so as to pass me when I should have attained my position in the centre.

We left the cave at 3.30, and it was not really broad daylight when we got on to the snow. I never had a harder day than that was. The snow was so soft and so deep, that it was almost impossible to force one's way upward. At every stride you sank over your knees into the drift, and no step seemed to take you further. Besides, the position was not free from danger, for every now and then we sank almost out of sight; and it seemed that it required very little to bring down the cliffs of soft feathery snow that frequently hung right over us in a sudden avalanche, from which there could be no escape.

When at length we gained the top, we all lay down in the snow, too spent to do anything for some time to come; but the biting wind soon took out of us the glow

earned by severe toil, and added freezing cold to the miseries of our watch.

Meanwhile, our companion on the lower spurs had been busy, and we could hear from time to time his rifle echoing amongst the peaks, as he tried to drive the game our way. But save for one far-off view of a very large tûr making for the topmost crags half a mile away, we could not get a glimpse of anything even with a telescope. We heard afterwards that though the driver had seen no less than three distinct herds, they had all eluded us both by taking to the top of an isolated peak between us and him, where, though he had them in full view, and cut off from retreat on all sides, he had been utterly unable to approach within range, and equally unable to stir the wily beasts from their sanctuary either by cries or firing at them.

And now the question with us was whether we should return as we had come,

or descend on the other side of the range, following the new track of a herd in the snow, with the chance of coming upon them lower down, and the certainty of food and fire in a village at the mountain's foot. The rapidly thickening clouds gave us our answer. If we did not mean to be cut off from Frank and the rest of our party for days, and perhaps weeks, it behoved us at once to return as we had come before the snow made the road back impracticable. It was a disappointment to leave the fair land before us unexplored ; but as those below could not come to us, we were bound to go to them, and we went.

The road down snow-fields is pleasant enough, and the pace at which we were enabled to go without any fear of a slip was exhilarating. Once down there was daylight enough for another essay ; so, tired though we were, we climbed, counting our steps as

we went for very weariness, to the top of a lower spur of the ridge.

I never saw a more quaint formation than that of the rocks at the top of this ridge, all of them huge slabs of stone set on edge, until they resembled nothing so much as a vast series of gravestones. Clear of this cheerless track, we descended into a series of slopes on which rhododendron bushes grew, and here just at dusk a rush in a thicket of angelica drew my attention, and next minute I sighted a chamois at gaze at us from the top of a small eminence two hundred yards away. The darkness and the distance required a careful aim ; and I was doing my best to make sure of meat for supper, when Biasir, unable to restrain his impatience, fired from behind me, missed, and gave my chamois the signal for instantaneous flight. And this was all my reward for a frightfully hard day's work. Nor was it over yet.

By the time we reached the river at the mountain's base it was quite dark, so that we could not find our way through the woods of the foot-hills to our cave, which lay just above the tree line. The men wanted to lie down where we were, but I was too hungry to listen to them; and, tired as I was, felt ready to make another effort for food, fire, and a blanket. So, striking a watercourse, we blundered up it, fighting our way in the dark through thick overhanging boughs, until I regretted that I had not yielded to my men's suggestions. But at the end of two hours an opening was gained, and another thirty minutes brought me my reward—two dampers of maize-bread, a pipe, and leave to roll myself in my blanket, amongst the rocks and rocklets, as near the embers as I dare lie.

The next day was Sunday, I think, but whether or not, it was a day of rest and re-

pentance, as were two other days thereafter, for when we looked out from our hole in the rocks all nature was hid in a shifting veil, snow on the peaks, and heavy drenching rain in the valley.

So here we were mewed up, on a short allowance of bread, with nothing to read, little to talk about, nothing to do, and not room by two feet to stand upright in. If we would not be frozen we must keep up a fire, and if we would not be blinded by wood-smoke we must let the fire out and submit to be frozen. As we had no changes of garments, when we wanted to go out we took off our clothes and stood outside to wash in the considerable stream which ran down over the roof of our prison. Frank amused himself making pipes, I learnt bread-making until the maize was all gone ; the men for the most part smoked or slept, and to eke out our rations ate very sparingly.

But at the end of the second day it was decided that an effort must be made, and early next morning the rain having a little abated, two of our men started for a neighbouring village for food. The next day we too made an effort, and met our messengers on the road back to Betcho, not far from the place at which we had camped on our way up. So great was our joy at our release from the cave, that though our bed was under a great pine, through whose glorious branches the red sparks went roaring up to mingle with the snowflakes that fell to meet them, we spent quite a merry night of it, and thanks to that grand old tree, woke warm and dry in the morning.

The mountain slopes being too slippery to ascend, some demon put it into Biasir's head to say that he knew a track which followed the river's course round the foot of the ridge, which, though longer than that over the

summit, was much easier and would bring us back to Betcho almost as soon. Unluckily we listened to him, and if we reached Latâli that night it was only by the last effort of desperation. As for path, of course there was none. Eventually we got on to a very narrow chamois track over the slippery steep sides of the mountain, strewn with an unstable carpeting of pine-needles. Every step was made in fear and trembling, and when about once every half mile we came to a bare and precipitous surface of black rock rendered slippery by the still falling rain, our hearts were in our mouths until we got off the dangerous spot again. Every now and then too we had to wade waist deep through the cold waters of the rapid stream below, or break our shins over a hundred yards of boulders. It was the last straw that broke the camel's back, and I don't think that the offer of the best hunter man ever crossed

would have induced Frank to make another expedition into tûr-haunted mountains.

Wherever we went we saw traces of game. Bears had been before us all up the bed of the river ; chamois evidently abounded on the hillsides ; round the outskirts of a village which we gained before reaching Latâli, the pear trees even in sight and hail of the houses had been stripped by Bruin ; and yet with persistent ill-luck we never came across a single head of game, though we were all far too dispirited to be a loquacious or noisy party.

When, after a week's absence, we crept back into Betcho, having after much toil and privation obtained one day's unsuccessful stalk, I agreed with Frank in thinking the pursuit of the tûr a somewhat overrated amusement, and set to work at once to secure an escort to take my companion back to a region of comparative peace and plenty, in

which he might await me, whilst I attempted to do what I had come for, viz., penetrate the forest of Lekêra, going from Lachamûl to Djuaria, and so home by Sugdidi.

CHAPTER XIII.

AT THE EDGE OF THE FOREST.

‘Now, old fellow,’ quoth Frank after a somewhat prolonged sleep on the morning after our short cut back to Betcho, ‘I’ll just ask you to do about half an hour’s work for me this morning, as I can’t make these idiots understand, then I won’t bother you any more for some time to come. Thank the Lord, I’ve done with tûr and mountaineering!’ So Platon and I went out among the people, and bargained for horses and convoy to take Frank back to Kutais.

The prince was going to Kutais himself shortly, and offered kindly enough to see my

friend back safely. But he was not ready to start for a day or two, and Frank stoutly refused to pass one hour more in Betcho than he was absolutely obliged. I believe in very truth he was more than half afraid that in a weak moment I might again tempt him into those mountain miseries he had learned so thoroughly to hate.

With some little trouble we found men and horses—men, moreover, of a somewhat better class than the rest—who knew Kutais well, and having made them thoroughly understand, at Frank's urgent request, that he was to be fed *en route* three times a day at least, and always to have meat at two meals out of the three, we felt fairly comfortable on his account, and began to look after our own affairs.

Our first difficulty appeared the most serious one. For the second time we had run short of money, and how we were to fill our

purses again at Betcho was a problem not easy of solution. But my kind friend the agronomer came to my rescue, and though he had nothing but my own account of myself and my promise of payment to rely upon, offered unasked to lend me about an eighth of the whole coined wealth then in Betcho.

Don't be alarmed at my extravagant needs, kind reader! at that moment I don't fancy Betcho could have produced fifty pounds between prince and population combined. You see, as the Svâns pay in kind for most of their purchases, money is in little request amongst them, and what the richer residents might own was safe in the banks at Tiflis and Kutais.

This is the second time in my travels in the Caucasus that, being short of money, I have had considerable sums lent me by men whose acquaintance with me dated back only a few days. I think this says much for the

generous confidence of the people, and their appreciation of English honesty.

As I write, it occurs to me that though the money was repaid by me to the gentleman indicated by my friend as his banker in Kutais, whose receipt I still hold, I have never since heard from this friend in need, and if he should ever read these lines, I should be glad to hear that he got his own again in safety.

Having thus obtained the sinews of war, Frank and I parted the same evening, Platon and I turning our heads to the forest, towards which we intended to ride one stage by moonlight before resting for the night, and Frank prepared to start next morning for Kutais.

The road chosen by my companion's guides was an easier and more direct one than that by which we had come to Betcho ; but in spite of all I had said to them they did not spoil their

charge's appreciation of the comparative civilisation of Kutais by too much luxury *en route*.

Though they passed daily through villages these fellows never managed to reach them at such time as to enable them to pass the night under a roof, and for the most part Frank had to camp out. Besides this, taking advantage of his ignorance of the language, the guides continually extorted from him money for food and whiskey, so that from the time he and his party started until they reached the goal of their journey, a large proportion of his followers were generally drunk—so much so indeed that in crossing one river, one or more of these drunken horsemen rolled helplessly from their saddles into the cool flood at their feet.

Glancing through Frank's rough log, I find that the instructions as to food resulted in *menus* such as this :—' Tuesday, 5.30 A.M.

“ Got up early, because it was so beastly cold and uncomfortable on the stony bank where we slept. The chalk stones seemed to find out every soft place in your body, and if you shifted your position down you rolled off the bank altogether. Rained too all night. Breakfasted on white cheese, walnuts, unripe pears, and a pipe. No bread this morning.”

At other times the party seems to have made short work of a sheep and several gallons of whiskey. But in course of time they reached Kutais, Frank leading by several hours, I believe, having grown sick of the way the men dawdled by the roadside, and trusting to his own bump of topography to lead him safely back. At Kutais he found friends who could speak English; and there for the present, in a clean shirt, with clean shaven chin, regular meals, and no confounded companion to break in upon his little naps at all unseasonable hours, let us leave him.

The road from Betcho to Etséri, the royal village of Svânetia, at which the prince has his regular home, is perhaps the worst and most beautiful four hours' ride in this country of beauty and discomfort combined. By moonlight the scenery was lovely in the extreme; but three falls, horse and man together, during the ride made me see more stars than I thought necessary to complete the perfect beauty of the heavens.

At Etséri we (Platon and I) had a kind hostess waiting to receive us, in the person of the priest's wife, an aunt of my interpreter, and a very loving one I should say from the warm greeting she gave us. The priest was away, but he must be a man far better off than his brethren in this part of the Caucasus, for nowhere else had we seen such comfort as in the neat log hut, with its trim garden, wherein we lodged that night.

Etséri is far and away the richest and best

placed village which I met with between Oni and Djuaria, being on a very gradual slope on the hillside, having a good southern aspect, and being less shut in by the neighbouring mountains than most of its fellows. At Etséri there are as many as two hundred and twenty houses, and as the families are not split into different households, at any rate until the death of the head, each house may at a moderate computation be considered to hold fifteen people. This would give a population of considerably over three thousand, as against about one thousand at Betcho.

In vegetable produce Etséri stands alone amongst the villages of the country side, a very marvel of fertility, producing carrots, cucumbers, and even melons and tomatoes.

Needless to say, the inhabitants of Etséri think no little of their village and themselves as dwellers therein. Customs they have, too, peculiar to the royal village I am told, as for

instance, that from earliest infancy no children born in it are ever allowed to go barefoot, and they are more strict than the rest of the world in other matters of etiquette, such as their resolute refusal to incur disgrace by riding a bare-backed horse. As producers the Etséri people beat all their rivals, and really manage to manufacture a very good kind of cloth, not unlike flannel, some tolerable felt, excellent soap (from grease and wood ashes), abominable bees'-wax candles, and worse vodka.

Etséri is a place of considerable antiquity too, having been for many hundred years the place of burial for the reigning princes of the province. Amongst other relics we were shown a tiny toy telescope, with plain glass lens, and an engraved brass cup, said to be two hundred years old, found in a leaden coffin, containing also a quantity of silken women's garments, which had been accident

ally discovered at the burial of the present prince's wife.

Having rested well and thoroughly at Etséri, we started at about nine next morning with our kind hostess's good wishes thick upon us, and a very substantial souvenir of Etséri cheer ready in our pockets for future consumption. Fortune had made up her mind to smile on us again, so that riding easily along in the sunshine by a comparatively good road, I was not a bit surprised to find the game we had sought under all manner of difficulties come now to meet us on the high road.

We were rounding the corner of a pine-covered precipice about two miles from the village of Lachamûl when Platon, all excitement, whispered, 'A bear, sir, a bear!' For a moment I did not see her, but dismounting, I peered over the edge of the path into the valley between our hill and the next.

There, at the bottom, ran a swift mountain stream, over which the men of Lachamûl had built a rough log bridge, and across this, with all the air of peaceable pedestrians by the king's highway, an old she-bear, grim and gaunt, was leisurely walking, accompanied by two strapping sons very nearly as big as herself, and dressed in the deep brown fur of a yearling's coat. I envied those cubs their jackets and meant to have them, but my first business was with the old lady now leading back her sons from the pillage of some wretched Svân's maize field to fancied security in the rocks.

It was a long shot, quite the full range of my 'Express' I fancy, as the old bear climbed slowly up the face of the opposite rock, but the bullet told hard on her, and I was foolish to waste a second shot on her; but then I could not see, as my men did, that I had caught her clean behind the shoulder.

But for all that she struggled gamely up hill, growling and looking angrily about her.

The next bullet broke her spine and brought her by a succession of tremendous somersaults into the stream beneath, where she stuck under the bridge, temporarily damming the current with her body.

But the cubs had got too far before I could get another sight of them as they dodged amongst the timber, and not having on my sandals, my attempts to get near them amongst the slippery rocks were lamentable failures. As they were left together, the youngsters would take very good care of themselves and get clear away; but had I had the luck to have used my second barrel on one of them, the other would in all probability have lost his head and taken to a tree, where we could have added him to the number of the slain.

Two woodmen, attracted by the shots,

came to our assistance in the operation of skinning, so that Platon and myself entered Lachamûl not long after mid-day, carrying our spoils with us. Lachamûl is the last village before you enter upon the forest district of Lekéra, and it is from Lachamûl, the Ultima Thule of Svânetia, that the few hunters and growers of maize who venture into the forest go down.

When we reached the village, it was empty and silent. The houses were closed and scarcely a cur barked at us as we passed through its streets. All the men were afield and most of the women with them, busily utilising what remained to them of open weather. Trophies of the chase adorned the plaster which covered the walls of one or two of the best huts in the place. Here and there a fine tûr's horn stood out from one of the crevices in the wall, and here and there a bear's paw nailed to the doorway bore testi-

mony to the powers of the Nimrod who dwelt within. But at present, inhabitants Lachamûl had none, so that we were fated to waste half a day waiting in this deserted village until those from whom we might obtain guides and horses, to say nothing of food, should return from their labours.

Like all other villages, Lachamûl had its lout, a good-looking ne'er do weel, who presently appeared on the scene, gossiping and loafing in the sun with a couple of idle women. From none of these could we get the least help or information, and being perfectly idle himself, our useless efforts to be up and doing roused much merriment in the loafer's mind. This he proceeded to display by caricaturing all my gestures, and at last became so intolerably offensive that I fairly lost my temper, and as I could not catch the brute, picked up a good-sized rock and heaved it at him. As it only just missed him, he

took the salutation in very bad part, and with quite a changed face came straight at me with his knife out. I began to think I was in for an awkward business, but the sight of my revolver kept him off for a time, and when the rest of the men came back, he was cowed and cooled down. If there had been a few of his companions near when the quarrel took place, I should probably never have come back to tell the tale, and it would have served me very well right. I have no sympathy with people who can't keep their tempers and put up with the rough manners of uncivilised men. I suppose the supper with the priest's wife at Etséri had disagreed with me. Bilioussness and irritability are generally synonymous terms.

Towards evening the villagers began to return, and I soon had men enough around me and my bearskin. The letter from their prince was a good introduction to them, but the fresh trophy and the story of the two long

shots as told by the woodcutters was a vast deal more useful to me.

The villagers had most of them come down from the pine forests, where they had been hewing wood, or from their fields between Lachamûl and Etséri ; but by-and-bye, as we all stood gossiping in the twilight, a long file of weather-stained men, white with the dust of travel, came plodding silently up the course of the valley of the Ingour from the opposite direction.

Each man's back was bent beneath a heavy load, and each seemed to follow mechanically in the other's steps, too tired to so much as look around until his course was completed and his burden tossed off his shoulders in the midst of the gossiping group.

The news soon spread that some of the men from Lekéra had come in, and friends flocked out to welcome them home. These were the chief workers of the Lachamûl hive,

and many were the wives, daughters, and female friends who offered their cheeks to the weary ones, and many the men who wrung them by the hand.

One old fellow who seemed to have more face-cloths to lift (*i.e.* faces to kiss) than any of the rest, took a particular interest in our party, and after he had got a draught of mineral water he disappeared into his house for a few minutes, after which he returned to us, bearing a small melon and a gourd full of a pleasant flavoured liqueur made from a little black berry like the elder berry, which grows in this neighbourhood.

From this time until we reached Djuaria, Keesermann, for so our friend was called, took entire charge of me, and seemed to regard me as his special property. Indeed, I grew to have quite a filial regard for the little old man of the hills, with his keen eyes, grey beard, and wonderful voice.

Keesermann's voice was the quaintest part of him. A very small man, his voice was preternaturally gruff and deep ; a kind of growl, indeed, but so low that unless you were very near him you had to listen keenly to catch his words. But he was the most wonderful walker ; his bright eyes guessed your wishes ere they were half formed, and a smile twitched at the corners of his mouth as regularly in bad times as in good. Altogether, Keesermann is the first person I should recommend a traveller to ask for at Lachamûl.

When we had been installed in that well-ventilated abode of dirt and darkness called the 'cancellaria' (in Lachamûl a mere loft over a cattle shed, without windows or door) ; when the great jar of whiskey had been brought and a fire lighted on the floor, our guests began to troop in. The first to smell the tempting spoil from afar was that hoary

elder, the 'starchina' of the village, who, when he had been wanted eight hours before to transact a little business was declared to be at Betcho. But the spirit jar brought him back at once.

A circle having been formed round the fire, we began to seek for information, to make inquiries about horses, and arrange about guides. After the cup had been round the circle twice, guides were promised and horses offered almost for nothing, while tûr were declared to exist in numbers about three versts off, and to furnish the staple food of the village. But when the jar was empty, and no full one appeared likely to replace it, truth began to creep out by degrees.

Keesermann alone volunteered to accompany us to Djuaria; mules could not travel the road between that village and Lachamûl, much less horses; and as for tûr, there were lots at Nanskera, four days' marching from

the village in a direction at right angles to our route, but nearer than that no man knew where we were likely to find any. As for deer and boar, with which we had heard that the forest teemed, it was quite true that when the snow lay deep in the very middle of winter many were tracked and killed, but whither they went or where they hid themselves in summer no one knew.

A good many of our dreams of sport were dispelled that night, but in the morning, having a definite end in view, Platon, Keesermann and I shouldered our loads—blankets, rifles, change of clothes, food, &c.—dividing the things equally amongst us, and started down the Ingour like men who, having far to travel, are not so foolish as to start fast.

Considering that the road through the forest of Lekéra is almost if not absolutely the only way into Svânetia from the outside world which is at all practicable in winter, it is

inconceivable that neither the natives nor the Russians should have taken the trouble to make that road fit to travel upon.

The Svâns at Lachamûl, believing me to be a man of influence, instead of a mere traveller, begged me to represent to the government at Tiflis that for a thousand roubles the road might be made such that horses could travel on it ; that this thousand roubles would confer inestimable benefits on the whole of Svânetia, and that without this road the inhabitants, at any rate of Lachamûl, were often in sore danger of starving.

Everything that the Svâns require beyond the coarsest of bread they must carry on their own shoulders from Djuaria to Lachamûl. Salt, without which man cannot live, is one of their heaviest burdens and sorest needs. It is not too much to say that unloaded any man must be in good condition, and at least a fair mountaineer, with a steady head, to in

any sort compass that walk in three days ; loaded these men do the distance in about five, but a life spent in such walks would not be a very long one.

Still as I tried to make the Svâns understand, they have little right to ask for help from others if they will make no effort for themselves. If for a couple of months the men of Lachamûl and the villages round it would devote the three days of the week they now keep as idle, listless holidays to road-making, they would require no help from outsiders. But this they will never do.

The way from Lachamûl through the forest follows the course of the Ingour, keeping for the most part to its left hand bank down stream. Just below the village we crossed the river, now far different from the small stream at Ushkul. For the whole of that day and several other days its waters of dark sea green, boiled and fretted beneath our

path, hemmed in, angry, deep and narrow between two ranges of high grey crags, densely covered with forests of the noblest pines, merging near the margin of the stream into a border of tamer-looking forest trees.

Now and again the rocks that imprison the fretting river withdraw, and for a few hundred yards the green waters roll out in a broad and comparatively peaceful flood, while on either side some few acres of land lie on a gentle slope not far above the river's brim.

Here you find the maize 'tchalashes,' as the Svâns call them; villa residences of adventurous settlers from Lachamûl, who, having built themselves good log huts of the pine trees round, plant all the level land with maize and spend their whole summer with their families in guarding their little crop from that great thief, Bruin.

Such a tchalash we reached late on Friday

night, and right glad were we to see the roof of the hut just showing above the tall spear-like heads of a luxuriant maize crop. Nowhere, I should think, does the maize grow finer than on the Ingour, and not the worst dish in the world for a hungry man is a green head of this corn baked amongst the wood embers. At least so we thought when we followed Imât the settler into his tent and accepted a head apiece to stay our stomachs until dinner time.

These summer settlers on the Ingour have a far better life of it than their brethren of the villages. Their houses are not, properly speaking, habitable, but they are wind and rain proof; and after living amongst the stone heaps of Ushkul, these wooden huts look quite comfortable by comparison. We had arrived at Imât's hut in the very nick of time too, for only now was he returning from offering the head of a chamois killed yester-

day, before the praying place of his little settlement.

In the hut we found Mrs. Imât preparing venison for her lord and for us, and I'm not quite sure that the cook of the hut on the Ingour was not fairer than our pretty baker at Latâli. Mrs. Imât was a real Circassian, not a Svân, and one of the few of that much-praised race whom it has been my luck to see. I should think she stood over six feet (she certainly seemed to tower over my head), was blue-eyed and ruddy, with regular features, but a voice, alas! so harsh and loud that it seemed to go through you.

CHAPTER XIV.

KERAR.

THAT night at Imât's hut, on the Ingour, when our pipes were lit, the talk turned on chamois and tûr as usual. The reward I had been offering to the guide who should be lucky enough to conduct me on a successful hunt made Imât prick his ears at once. 'Ten roubles if I can take him to within one hundred yards of a tûr, and twenty if he kills a big one; why, I'll take him to a place where he can kill half a dozen to-morrow,' exclaimed our host, letting his pipe tumble into the ashes in his excitement.

It was not Imât's assurances of success—I had had far too many of those already—it

was not even the fresh venison I had just eaten, but it was the last despairing effort of hope almost extinguished that made me resolve once more to turn away from my path, and once more to submit to the hardships of tûr hunting, if haply I might at the eleventh hour crown my efforts with success.

Platon was anxious to get back to Kûtai's and comfort, and, sooth to say, my weary limbs and sore feet pleaded strongly on his side ; but for all that it was decided to start on Saturday morning on 'absolutely the very last' wild goat chase.

Keesermann, our guide from Lachamûl, was to precede us along the forest route to Djuaria, awaiting us at his own little settlement, a day's journey further on. When Saturday morning broke, of course the rain was falling. Rain invariably did begin to fall in Svânetia when I wanted fine weather for a wild goat hunt.

In spite of the rain, Platon, Imât, and myself started for Kerar, up the course of a mountain stream, which had cut for itself a deep bed in one of the gorges which ran at right angles to the main chain of mountains on the right bank of the Ingour. Two months' use had taught us to look on the bed of a stream some two to three feet deep as the natural substitute for a highway in this part of the world, nor did constant rain incommode us much. Perhaps, if you are wet at all, it is better to be wet all over. It was rather annoying though, that when we reached a point in the gorge which commanded a good view of likely spots for chamois or other game, a cold blast of wind invariably swept huge volumes of thick mist into the pass, which rolling over us in great white waves effectually hid the view.

About mid-day we had reached a point at which our watery pathway had become a

very tiny rill, and the forest trees still round us were the last of their kind on the mountain side. Above us great grass bluffs rolled up to the foot of the peaks, now hidden from view in a snowstorm.

Just within the edge of the forest Imât found us a skeleton hut, and a large pile of rough planks, which we very soon slipped into their places, and in half an hour's time had our house built, our fire burning, and breakfast ready. Although the rain kept falling, and it was too late in the day to do much, Imât and myself decided to make an effort to procure meat for our Sunday dinner.

A couple of hours on those grass bluffs at Kerar taught me that for pace Imât was about the best man I had yet seen on a hill-side. Whilst he and I lay panting near the top, a stone came rattling down on the other side of the bluff. Crawling up quite to the top, we peered over at the other side where,

about two hundred yards below us, a herd of some seventeen chamois were standing like statues, ready to bolt at the next alarm. Before I could raise my rifle the whole herd was in full flight, but a breathless run gave me a second chance at them lower down.

Though only one of my two shots told, I was comforted by seeing that though thoroughly frightened the chamois had not yet seen me even when I fired at them. Guessing the point they were making for, and running doubled up across the top of the ridge, I suddenly came face to face with the whole herd.

It was a quaint sight, the row of white faces and sharp ears staring silently at me over the top of the ridge. So still were they all for the moment, and their bodies so completely hidden, that for a second I scarcely believed my eyes. Then the line broke up and wheeled again into headlong flight, which

made nothing of boulders and precipices. But curiosity is not the weakness of woman only, and the frightened beasts could not resist the temptation to take one look back at the strange creature that had so terrified them.

What a lovely mark that chamois made, standing just a few feet above the rest of the herd, feet all together and head turned back over his shoulder to gaze. Not a broadside shot, nor offering too large a mark, but showing just the right part of his body to the sportsman and standing out in such bold relief against the sky that a miss at one hundred and fifty yards would have been impossible. Imât set up a shout like a fool, when the buck pitched right through the herd below, and went rolling half a day's march down the hill at a pace which looked dangerous for the integrity of his horns. After this, by still following the herd, I got

another very long shot, at about four or five hundred yards, and, to my own surprise, wounded a third chamois. But though wounded the little beast was far from bagged, and it took Imât and myself over an hour to stalk within range of him.

When we had made our point, we had a small piece of swelling ground between us and our game. Taking my rifle I proceeded to worm my way to the point from which I expected to get my shot, but though I knew I must be quite close to him, I could not see the chamois anywhere. So I crept on and on down hill through the thin grey grass, wondering where the little beast had got to and what was the matter with Imât, whose grimaces and contortions suggested an impending attack of convulsions.

The next moment a pair of black and grey ears rose about six feet in front of me, and a pair of frightened brown eyes looked

right into my face. A trifling irregularity in the ground had so far hidden the unconscious animal from me in my prostrate position, but Imât had had a full view of it ever since I started on my crawl; and knowing I was well within range, and fearing some mischance if I insisted on getting too close, had almost incurred a fit in the struggle between his desire to warn me of the chamois proximity and his fear of alarming game. But when with a rush that chamois was on its legs and round the corner of a rock on which my harmless bullet flattened, I felt glad that I did not understand Svânetian.

A second shot, at a longer range, again wounded the chamois, and then followed the most exciting chase I have ever had. I had so few cartridges now left that I wanted to save those I had as much as possible, and I fully believed that my last shot would be sufficient. But though Imât and I could

always get to within two hundred yards, we were unable to approach any closer, and at last I had to make up my mind to waste another cartridge. This time my bullet took effect behind the shoulder, and the chamois rolled over, apparently dead at last.

Imât and I scampered over the rocks to lay hold of him, when, to our intense disgust, he got up again and commenced a rapid flight down hill. Up hill even he could travel no longer, but by means of one sound hind leg, and a number of involuntary somersaults, he still got down hill too fast for the now reckless Imât.

The way we ran and tumbled amongst those rocks, now getting so much way on that we could not stop ourselves, then coming down all in a heap and sliding bear fashion on our sterns, nearly rivalled the extraordinary progress of our game, and had it not been for a well-aimed boulder, hurled by

Imât, some of the bones of that chamois would probably still be hopping down hill, with what was left of his hunters' somersaulting and tumbling after him.

'There, sir ; now that he is dead you'd better take him on your shoulders and go on to camp. I'll try to bring in the others,' said Imât, so we tied up the legs which had so long set us at defiance, and I began my climb home.

Those who have killed chamois and carried them home for themselves know what a difference the weight of the game on your back makes in the difficulties of the way, how if you get your shoulders the least bit too far back their weight is too much for your knees, and down you come on your spine.

It was getting very dark indeed when I got to the last slope above the camp, and I had once or twice been very near leaving my game behind me. In front lay a long stretch

of weed-covered steeps, down which I thought my burden might very well precede me. So I put him down and set him going, carefully marking the spot at which he stopped. Then I followed him at my leisure; but though I thought I went straight to him I searched for half an hour before I could find him, and then it was only thanks to Imât's keener eyes that the beast who had nearly beaten us on one leg did not elude me altogether when dead.

There was great triumph in camp that night when we towed in our game, and Platon had plenty to do that Sunday cleaning the heads, on my account, and the other chamois' bones on his own.

On Sunday the floodgates of heaven were opened, and the rain poured down upon us in good earnest. Our hut, which did very well in fine weather, was no more watertight than a sieve, and the rain had moreover dislodged a large clan of black ants, two-thirds of an inch

or more in length, who, leaving their hollow tree, swarmed unwelcome guests into our circle, biting us fiercely whenever we ventured to resent the intrusion. So we deserted the hut towards evening, and sought a cave higher up the mountain, where at least we could keep dry and should be nearer the haunts of the tûr if a change in the weather should favour our plans on the morrow.

The cave was one through which a swollen little mountain stream gurgled, and though the music of the water lulled you to sleep there was always a danger, owing to the sloping nature of your bed, lest in your dreams you should become too nearly acquainted with those melodious waves. Personally, I erected a small barricade between myself and the water, and I fancy the others followed my example.

Monday was a day of storms. Howling wind and incessant rain made sport an im-

possibility, and our Svân (like all his people skilled in the signs of the sky) declared that we should have no more open weather for a week at least. So, sorrowfully, I gave up my last hope of killing a tûr, and ordered a return to Ipar, if possible, before our watery highway grew too large and wild for us to follow.

On our way back we had a rather startling example of the changes wrought by atmospheric agency on the rocks around us, for whilst we were scrambling down the little torrent in the narrowest part of the gorge, a tremendous crash behind made us all start involuntarily, while a shower of spray went up as if a shell had burst in the water near us. A second glance showed us a great mass of rock which had yielded at last to the undermining powers of the rain, and leaving its position amongst the crags overhead had fallen into the bed of the torrent, blocking up its channel and diverting its course.

About half a minute sooner and the piece of rock would have stopped our course quite as effectually as it had done that of the mountain stream.

After this little incident we all three made the best use of our legs in our anxiety to get away from those beautiful rain-drowned crags.

At the mouth of the glen we stayed to pay tribute to the owner of the grazing and sporting rights of this district, and in answer to Imât's shrill jödel, a wild-looking ruffian in a linen shirt, no hat or boots, but hair and beard enough to make amends for any small deficiencies in dress, came bounding down the rocks and through the stream as if he was as much at home among the mountains as a chamois.

He was an old savage, too, but age did not seem to have made him afraid of sharp rocks or wet feet, and he was so grateful for the quarter of venison which we gave him, that I

suspected his rights as owner of the property were not always respected. He told me that he paid a few roubles a year to the Tiflis Government for the sole right of grazing his cattle and felling timber in this valley, and as nobody else wanted to fell the timber or had cattle here to graze—as, moreover, he seemed to fell no timber himself—I fancy the Government got the best of the bargain.

At Imât's hut we rested awhile, and then as the weather seemed settled for at least a week's steady rain, Platon and I abandoned all idea of keeping ourselves dry, and simply set our whole hearts on getting to Djuaria as quickly as possible.

Englishmen in the last seven years have learnt a good deal about rain, but for all that to know what the skies are really capable of, they should see a good steady storm on the Ingour. The showers were so heavy that they seemed to form thick veils of shifting

water, through which for a time nothing at a distance was visible. When the veil occasionally parted the scenery was superb, the Ingour rushing between such narrow limits that, though we were following a track several hundred feet above the dark green flood, we could toss a pebble from one precipitous rocky wall to the other.

On either side the ranges of forest-clad mountains stretched away ridge behind ridge to an apparently infinite distance, whilst every now and then from amongst the pines high up on the mountain side, a shaft of grey rock, taking often the outlines of some ruined keep of bygone days, would shoot up many hundred feet above the forest ; so high indeed were some of these isolated spires of rock, that the one or two pines upon their crest looked merely like a bunch of ostrich plumes.

On our way we saw a strange group of human beings on the farther side of the

river. A column of smoke first drew our attention, and when we got closer we could see a man and woman with some three or four half-naked children bivouacking in a tree by the edge of the stream. I don't know what kind of tree it was, but the branches all divided near the root, forming a sort of cup in which these people had kindled a fire. The branches they had drawn together again above them, and overlaid them with an old bourka, which formed a more or less waterproof roof for their quaint cage.

The man came out when he saw us, and with the generosity of the poor, took one of the ears of maize from his little hoard, and roasting it while we chatted, waded waist deep into the stream, unusually broad just here, and threw it across to us. I was sorry I couldn't make him some return, but there was no way from us to him for many a verst.

I think we only passed one little maize

clearing all that day, and that apparently deserted.

I had very nearly an end put to my travelling before I finished this day's work, thanks to the never-ceasing rain. About a hundred yards of our path lay across the face of an extremely steep bed of slate, where at some earlier day a landslip had taken place, clearing a bare track right through the forest down to the river's brim.

It was an ugly ruinous-looking piece of hillside, and the pathway was about as bad as it could be, a mere succession of narrow footholds on the steep and slippery slate. When I was half way across this, and heartily thankful I had got so far without making a false step, a big stone came skipping past me, and as I looked up to see where it came from there was a roar and a rattle, and showers of stones of all sizes, from respectable pebbles to things as large as millstones, came hurtling round

my head. Far away above me a miniature landslip had taken place, and for a moment it rained boulders all round me.

I fairly lost my head and thought it was all over with me, for if one of the stones had touched me I should next moment have been racing the boulders in frantic leaps to the river below. For a single breathing space I stood with my head tucked in and my muscles knit in. I presume, the vain hope that if hit, I might be able to keep my place. Then I turned and bolted, first one leg slipping off the path—then the other; but thanks to the pace and to the Providence that had kept the stones from hitting me, managed to reach the other side of the bare patch in safety.

When I got to the other side and saw the showers of stones still racing down in great leaps to the river I could not understand how I had escaped, and sincerely felt for poor Platon, who, with hat off, was saying un-

wonted prayers and looking forward dismally to his own turn to cross. However, the stone shower was soon over, and in spite of the difficulties of the path so was Platon.

Just before dusk a jödel from the other side called our attention to a clearing, in the midst of which, on a platform erected to shoot bears from at night, stood our old friend Keesermann. Of course he wanted us to come to him, but as there was said to be another maize patch within a mile of where we were, and as it was five miles round by the bridge to Keesermann's, we decided to stay at the nearer shelter and let Keesermann, who had not done so much walking as we had that day, come to us.

The maize field at which we stayed was the least pretentious of any of the farms we passed in the Ingour valley. High up amongst the forest trees there happened to be a tableland of twenty acres or so.

Here, amongst the charred stumps of the trees, grew the finest crop of maize I have ever seen ; and after much shouting a handsome young fellow came along through the tall shafts of the maize, his long locks of black hair hanging wet and heavy on his bare shoulders, and only a pair of loose linen trowsers reaching to his knee to redeem him from the charge of nakedness.

To our inquiry as to shelter he gave but a doubtful answer, offering, however, to show us where he lived. In and out amongst his crop he led us until we came to a tiny shed roughly thatched with timber, in one compartment of which dwelt a goat, and in the other himself and his sister, a beautiful child of about twelve.

The shed was entirely open on one side, and more or less so all round, but better shelter was not to be had, so we secured it gladly. He and his sister contentedly shared

the goat's quarters, and the girl busied herself roasting maize, while I stripped and got into some tolerably dry flannels which I had kept rolled up in my bourka.

Platon simply wrung what water he could out of his garments, and then sat in his wet shirt as near the fire as possible, and let his clothes dry on him.

By-and-bye Keesermann arrived with the heartiest welcomes and a bigger bundle than ever on his back, wherein he had stowed away cheeses, capsicums, bread, and all manner of good things, as well as a big gourd of home-made liqueur. for our supper. What with Keesermann's supplies and a haunch of chamois, we gave our host and ourselves quite a banquet, and laughed at the rain.

CHAPTER XV.

DJUARIA.

IN spite of our good supper we did not let the grass grow under our feet next morning, and were out in the soaking rain again at dawn. For rain of course it still did, and if anything more heavily than ever. Our clothes were beginning to follow the example of the hills, and slowly to break up under the influence of constant soaking. Sandals we had none now, but we bandaged our feet up in rags of some kind. I know the last of Frank's two towels (used to carry our tea about in as long as we had any) was worn out on my feet in those last two days to Djuaria.

At the bridge which crosses to Keeser-

mann's abode his whole family was awaiting his distinguished foreign friends, and came up to kiss my hands and present baskets of cheese and grapes, apples, and a great box of birch bark full of beautiful white honeycomb. Altogether they brought us of their best, and gave us ample proof that Nature is more kindly to man along these lower reaches of the Ingour than she is higher up near dreary Mookmer and Lachamûl.

Wherever we went to-day we found traces of Bruin ; his tracks were along the soft sands of the river-bed ; no one used the paths we were on with such frequency as he did, and at every maize-field bells, clappers, and other musical instruments, worked for the most part by water, kept up a constant din to warn him off. By the ravage he had committed on all sides I should guess that he had learned to look on the bells with indifference if not with absolute affection, as guiding him to his supper.

At the bridge too we were joined by another party of wayfarers, bound like ourselves for Djuaria—of which town every day brought us some fresh news. Above all things it was the great wine market of the country side, and nowhere was such wine made as there. Altogether it was a town to be thankful for.

Our new companions were two fine-looking men and a little girl of about nine, who was going from her native valley of the Ingour to pay her first visit to civilisation at the home of her aunt, near Kutais, and the poor little maid would have to do the whole distance on foot. But she was quite equal to the position, and with the exception that her father carried her over one or two of the worst places, and over the dizziest of the rickety log bridges which we came upon *en route*, the child did the journey as well as any of us.

The road had now become a much better

one than heretofore, and ran much nearer the river, which was rapidly widening into a very considerable stream, its waters having been reinforced by those of the Nanskera, which flows into it from the southern slopes of Elbruz.

The event of the day was our meeting with a party of Svâns going back to Svânetia from the neighbourhood of Sugdidi. We found them huddled under a stone by the roadside ; eleven as miserably destitute mortals as you could find anywhere. They had none of them any sandals ; they had barely a garment a piece of any kind to wear ; they were emaciated by fever and hunger, and yet, as they smoked the only two pipes they possessed in turn, they seemed fairly cheerful still.

Poor devils ! They were all of them youngsters under twenty, and were just going back to their native land, after having learnt their first lesson in the ways of civilisation. They

had, it seems, gone down to Sugdidi early in the spring, and sold all the marten skins which they had collected in the forest of Lekéra during the winter. Anxious to add to their earnings before returning to their villages they had engaged themselves to a contractor near Sugdidi, who had set them to work digging out the foundations of a road he was making through a marsh there. They told us that as from the first they were entirely in his hands he had worked them as he dared not work the natives of the place, keeping them employed waist deep in muddy trenches until all had fever, and some died of it. Then, after six weeks' work, they were obliged to give up the job before it should kill them all, and on some excuse or another this brutal taskmaster had dismissed them without a kopeck of their pay.

Possibly, by some legal quibble the contractor was justified in refusing to pay these

men for their labours, but whether that were so or not these poor untaught Svâns had no notion how to obtain justice even if obtainable. So, with their winter's gains gone, and their constitutions shaken by six weeks' unrequited labour, they were on their way home to tell of the glories of civilisation, and spread the gospel of honesty as taught them by the Russian contractor.

We offered to try to get justice for them if they cared to come back with us, but luckily probably for all parties they had had enough of the towns, and preferred to starve at home for the future. We gave them roubles enough to keep them at any rate in bread until they reached their homes, and earned their thanks and the unremitting attention of their fellow-countrymen who were with us for the rest of our journey by so doing.

That night we stopped at a tchalash,

called, I think, Totan, where bears were said to be so numerous as to seriously threaten the entire destruction of the maize crops.

The old settler, who was most heart-broken about his farm, had unluckily nearly blown his eye out in attempting to guard his property, his gun having burst in his hands when firing at a bear. His whole face was horribly mangled, but beyond an application of bears' grease he did nothing to his wounds.

In our character of sportsmen anxious to slay those 'who wrought him such annoy' the old man gave us a very hearty welcome, and for the night stopped the working of his bells, clappers, the mouths of his two sons, and all other musical instruments about the place.

Unluckily the rain kept on, the sky was covered with clouds, there was no moon, and altogether we should have had to be very close indeed to hit a bear that night. But as the old fellow evidently thought our courage was

on the wane, when towards midnight we could hear the dry maize stalks by the edge of the forest being slowly scrunched by a party of bears, the father of the little girl and myself turned out.

The Svân had on a cap of white canvas, such as the Russian soldier wears, but though I kept almost on his heels, as he led the way amongst the maize, I could not always keep him in sight. If I had lost him I should have had to make a night of it in the maize field, for it was too dark to find one's way unassisted through a labyrinth of maize stalks, where any step might lead you over the edge of a precipice into a river a hundred feet below, or at the very least send you on your head over a tree which, though felled, the farmer had been too lazy to remove.

There were, so far as we could tell, three bears together at the point whither we were directing our steps, and an examination next

morning showed that our guess was accurate—an old bear and two small cubs having formed the party.

At last we were so near the brutes that I began to expect we should run into them in real earnest, and in the stillness of the night we could hear every sound they made. But try as we would we could not distinguish any outline against the tall crops beyond.

We tried everything we knew to get a view of the marauders, and if the Svân with me believed in half the stories he told me of a bear's comparative fearlessness and ferocity on a dark night, he showed a great deal more foolhardy courage than I would have cared to show had I been imbued with a like belief.

But I confess to an honest contempt for Mr. Bruin, so far as his fighting goes. In himself, as he really is, I love the old forest droll, with his little round ears, comic good-

natured face, and cunning ways. The fashion in which he robs the maize fields is funny. First he sneaks down in the dusk to the point furthest from the hut, and then encircling the stalks with his sturdy arms gathers regular sheaves of maize and piles all his harvest in a heap in the middle. When he thinks he has made a large enough pile he lies down on the heap and eats his supper at leisure.

We interfered no doubt a good deal with the movements of Mrs. B. and her family that night, and several times we heard them sniff their contempt and move off a little way from our neighbourhood, but they certainly did not seem so anxious to get away from us as they would have done had we met them by daylight.

Finding all our efforts useless we gave up the attempt, and returning to the hut set the bells, boys, clappers, &c. all in motion again,

and no doubt Bruin finished his night more pleasantly than he began it.

Though we lay down to rest late that night we were up betimes in the morning, for through the drenching rain fancy vouchsafed us a rosy vision of comfort and plenty, clean clothes, and toil ended at Djuaria ere nightfall. So incessant had the rain been for the last week that our clothes were absolutely rotten from damp, and our whole bodies had the soft sodden look of washerwomen's hands. It was no use to try any longer to keep anything dry, for even my bourka had succumbed, and was no longer waterproof.

But as we neared the end of our journey the settlers' houses grew more numerous, maize gave place in some measure to other crops, and several times during the day we passed regular bee farms, where the whole of the enclosures round the houses were full of big black thatched hives.

All our spirits began to rise as our enemies, the mountains, dwindled around us, until at last the great river at our feet had spread to a quarter of a mile in width and the last low hills had run down into the flat ; another mile and a half would take us round the low headland in front, and at last give to our grateful eyes a vision of Djuaria, the city of our longings, the land of oil and wine, writ in such large and hope-inspiring letters on our maps.

So we quickened our pace almost to a trot, and Platon was singing a song for very merriness of heart ; the child too was full of laughter and high spirits, and we all raced for the first view of Djuaria. But surely there was some mistake ?

From the low wooded hill on which we stood we gained a view of a flat low-lying country, covered with thickets of scrub and small woods, through which ran a broad, untidy-looking river in three or four great

arms, covering and wasting for agricultural purposes over a verst and a half of land from bank to bank.

For five or six versts the view was unbroken, but save for four small houses and a few ragged-looking maize fields, there was no visible sign of Djuaria. Still our friend the Svân kept assuring us that we were within a verst of the centre of the great town, and a wayfarer who met us at this point confirmed the statement. This wayfarer, bare-footed and bare-headed, in rags for clothes, was the last of the swindled Svâns who, in the vain hope of recovering something from the wreck of his year's work and hopes, had stayed behind his comrades to seek the help of the law; and now, poor wretch, bankrupt of wealth, hope, and faith was following his comrades back to Lachamûl. As I watched his figure disappear, plodding dejectedly off into the land of forest and mountain, rain, and semi-

starvation, I turned my back on Svânetia with a shudder, determined to make the best of Djuaria, and be content.

We found a cancellaria on the further side the river, in crossing which, on an infamous bridge, I nearly lost my worthy interpreter, and here we threw down our burdens and began to inquire for the town. Poor Platon was too ill from the exposure of the last few days to be much good, and men seemed as scarce as their habitations. The starchina of course was away, so our letters were useless, and everyone else seemed in hiding from the rain.

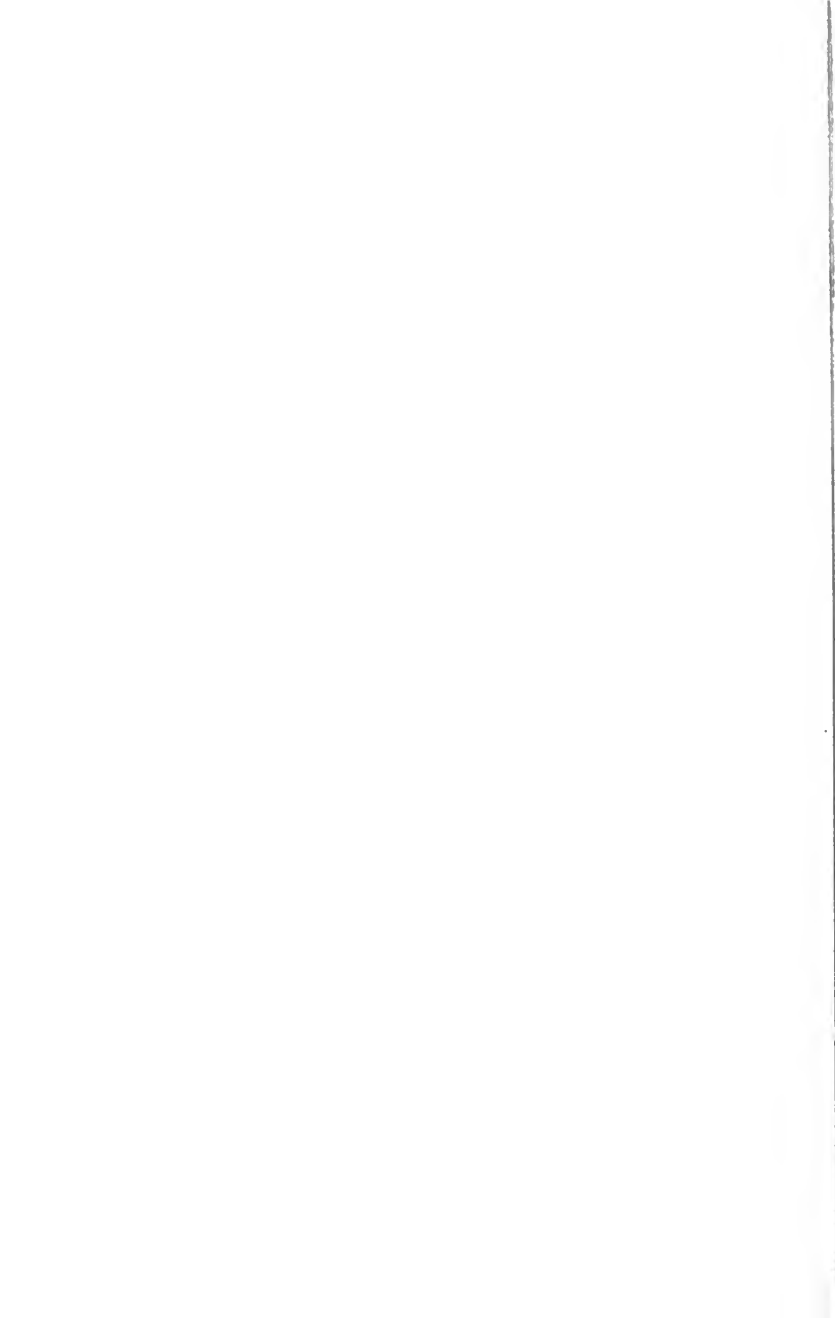
The only house we could find contained a widow, who took us for brigands or some such evil characters, and no amount of persuasion would gain us admission to her fire-side. We were beginning seriously to think that we should have to pass our night in the balcony of the cancellaria, when a man we had

bribed to help us came with a message from the chief peasant of the neighbourhood, inviting us to his house.

Though no village was in sight, our guide told us to pick up our things and follow him. The hut was only a few hundred yards away, and in another ten minutes we were entering one of the thickest of the little coverts which were scattered over the plain. Once inside the limits of the covert, we found ourselves in a good-sized village, in which trees and houses kept up a perpetual struggle for the mastery, and subsequent investigation taught us that every covert and thicket in the plain round us concealed its little group of human habitations; so that though from the hill above only five houses are visible in the five versts of country round the river's brim, there are in Djuaria, within two or three versts of the hill, at least one hundred houses. That in which we now found ourselves was a solid well-built place, belong-



VILLAGE OF MOULAH AND OUEBA MOUNTAIN.



ing to a wealthy peasant, whose daughters came and brought me a bowl of hot water, took the sandals off my lacerated feet and washed and anointed them with bears' fat. I don't think even the dry clothes and good food which followed were more welcome than this considerate attention.

We had still two or three days' travelling before us, but of this we made light, for all the remaining miles that lay between us and the railway at Novo Senachi were to be done either on a horse or on wheels. Our hard times were over, and we rejoiced in the fact.

From Djuaria to Sugdidi, a capital horse-road takes you over a country flat and uninteresting at the best of times, and when we did the journey next day we could hardly see before us for the rain that beat all day into our faces.

At Sugdidi, though there are fine houses and even palaces, that of the Prince of

Mingrelia being really an important building, there is not a decent chop-house or eating den of any kind in the place. The officials who do the Government work are apparently always out of town or asleep, and may not be roused ; so that it takes almost as long to get podaroznas and other necessaries for leaving Sugdidi as it takes to get there.

When we did effect our exit from this torpid town, where fever has turned at least every other man to a yellow, shrivelled, and shivering mummy, it was already dark, but spite of darkness and rain, to be endured in an open cart, we turned a deaf ear to the protestations of our driver, and hurried on to Novo Senachi, where we had determined to catch the nine o'clock train up to Kutais next day

At midnight a broken bridge stopped our way, but at four next morning we found means of continuing our journey, and at nine

the same day threw ourselves into a first-class carriage on the Poti-Tiflis line. I admit as a rule I consider second or third-class carriages quite good enough for me, and much better suited to the capacity of my pocket than the gorgeous and becushioned firsts, but on this occasion the craving for comfort was so strong on me that I plunged to the extent of a first-class ticket to Kutais.

At Rionski, the junction for Kutais, the first person I met was Prince A., chief of the *jeunesse dorée* of Kutais, on his way up to Tiflis with his bride. His hearty greetings made the officials stare a good deal, and secured me more civility than my rags would otherwise have commanded. And I was indeed no fitting inmate for a first-class carriage. My feet I had vainly tried to get into a pair of shoes, and failing that had to content myself with ragged sandals and linen swathings. My stockings had no calves to

them, and an old pair of hunting cords I wore were hardly decent. Two flannel jerseys of doubtful character showed through the rents and over the collar of my ragged Norfolk jacket, and my cap was so burnt that it was a question whether the holes or the cloth covered the largest space. My beard was ragged and unkempt like my hair, and my skin roughened and stained by constant exposure. I hope Prince A. explained to his charming bride that all Englishmen are not in ordinary life of the same stamp as the ragged vagabond at Rionski.

At Kutais the hotel-keeper and his friends turned out to welcome me back, but even their sense of courtesy could not restrain the laugh that rose to everyone's lips at my woe-begone aspect ; and when (anxious to get a change of clothes and a razor) I sought my room, I found Frank had taken the key from the landlord, who had kept it for us for two

months, had then carefully locked our room, pocketed the key, and gone off snipe-shooting to Poti.

I hope I may be forgiven the short anathema which I uttered when, having kicked the door open, I found Frank had been equally careful with regard to the locks and keys of the cupboards and drawers within the room.

But by the time I had taken a Turkish bath—an operation which, if the subject thereof likes it, may be drawn out to any extent—and had found a hair-cutter willing to cut my hair for double the ordinary price, which was not exorbitant, considering the amount he had to remove, Frank and the keys were hurrying to join me in answer to my telegram.

CHAPTER XVI.

WITH THE SUKHOUM BOAR HOUNDS.

As there seemed no likelihood of hearing from the Prince of Mingrelia for some little time, Frank and I determined to run up to Tiflis for a few days' shopping and sight-seeing, leaving our Tiflis address with the jolly old innkeeper of Kutais. As I have in another book described Tiflis, I don't intend to devote any time to an account of our stay in that town.

Our days were spent in hunting up the best amber and Astrachan sheepskins which we could find in the different shops and bazaars, and probably after a great deal of

bargaining we paid more for our purchases there than we should have done at home.

The Viceroy, to whom I had a letter of introduction, was especially kind to me, and the three or four days of comparatively civilised life after our evil times in Svânetia were very welcome.

When our purchases had been made, and our purses nearly emptied, we returned to Kutais, where we found a very kind letter from the Prince, in which he regretted that the recent heavy falls of snow had rendered all sporting operations in his mountain preserves impossible.

So now we knew definitely that we must give up all idea of securing a tûr before our return to England; and though I was quite ready to make another effort to bring my pursuit to a successful issue, it was no small consolation to know that we had not once more to harden our hearts, and go through

another course of mountaineering and semi-starvation.

The remaining week or two of our stay we hoped to spend at Golovinsky, and then, one of us at least looked longingly forward to a speedy return to the cheery hunting fields of the O.B.H. As soon as we could, we got down to Poti, where much against our will bad weather kept us prisoners for a day or two.

But at Poti there is some very fair snipe-shooting, so Frank and I spent our time pretty merrily on the swamps round the old lake which joins the Rion. The worst part of these expeditions was the difficulty of getting to our ground, the only way being by water, and the only conveyance a long narrow canoe, made of a single log, scooped out like a trough and propelled by a paddle.

The natives all swim like fish at Poti, and as they wear very little clothing, they care nothing for an upset, but for us, with

our guns and ammunition, an accident had more terrors. I frankly confess that I passed a very *mauvais quart d'heure*, sitting tight in one of these unsteady craft, while the water crept gradually along its inside until I was the centre of a small flood.

Most of the snipe we shot were young birds—indeed, I think all were; and, beyond snipe, we got nothing except a quail or two and a bittern, which when cooked was one of the very best birds I ever ate. When at last we got a steamer to Batoum we left Poti with the least possible regret.

Batoum is the only place in the Caucasus that seems to have grown at all since I was last in the country (1879), and Batoum has grown and is growing fast. It is already a large and flourishing town—many of the houses well built, some of the shops excellent, and at least one first-rate hotel in course of construction.

The Russians, I am told, are spending much money and labour on the construction and extension of military works about the town, and ere long Batoum will be a strongly fortified and first-rate port.

At Batoum wind and weather were again unfavourable to our voyage to Golovinsky, so that we were obliged to spend day after day waiting for a steamer that never came, until very little more time for sport was left us. Moreover, since there was very little sport to be had near Batoum, except in a swamp where the Mussulman population of the town seemed invariably to pass the greater part of the morning, my friend and I spent a good deal of our time at the hotel, so that ease and good feeding softened our hearts and made us a trifle disinclined for further hardships.

Any long expedition into the hills round Batoum is out of the question, as those hills are full of bandits, as bold and grasping as

those of Greece. No one appears to be safe half a dozen miles from the town.

When a steamer at last arrived, we found that owing to the bad weather we should not be able to make a stay at any of the small ports, and the nearest point to Golovinsky at which we could be landed would be Sukhoum Kaleh.

So at Sukhoum we landed, together with a general of the Russian army, who had come to make an inspection of the battalion stationed at that port. Luckily for us this general was a genial, kind-hearted gentleman, who felt for our many disappointments, and was determined to help us all he could. Thus, instead of making his review, and the shooting parties organised by the officers in our honour, clash with and frustrate our plans, the general managed to hold his review early, and forward our sport for the rest of the day.

Everyone at Sukhoum was as kind as

Russians can be, and none can be more hospitable than they. On the day after our arrival, after breakfasting with the officers of the battalion, we were provided with horses, and in company with about a couple of dozen other chasseurs, for the most part military men, betook ourselves to the valley between the first and second range of low hills at the back of the town.

The weather was simply superb, though intensely hot, and the rich autumnal tints of the wooded hills, which were set round a bay of the bluest and calmest sea in the world, made a gorgeous picture, a strong contrast to the scenes of our late travel, where snow-clad mountain peaks and dark pine forest stood out in bold relief against a cold, clear sky.

For my part I think I liked the sterner picture best, for here the air is so enervating that if only Circe still dwelt in her ancient haunts, and came to you with a bottle of Bass

and a pipe of bird's-eye, poor human nature would hardly be strong enough to resist her.

I confess that when I started on our first drive at Sukhoun I looked on my rifle as a rather unnecessary encumbrance, but the bright spirits of the party made me feel that if the shoot was not a success, the picnic could not be a failure.

The pack which met us two or three miles from the town was of the most varied description. There were big rough-coated hounds, such as the shepherds of Southern Russia and the Caucasus keep to guard their flocks, straining at their collars and viciously anxious to fight anything and everything which came near them. There were hounds not unlike our own fox-hounds, and there were a couple of well-bred little French bassets.

The huntsman was a sergeant of the regiment, and his whips were a couple of sturdy non-commissioned officers. The master's office

was shared, perhaps a little to the detriment of sport, between the different owners of hounds, for be it understood the hounds were not one pack, but the contributions from half-a-dozen different kennels. Every one was furnished with a hunting-horn, at least all the owners of dogs carried these musical instruments.

The meet was under a huge walnut tree, so large that all our great following of men and dogs seemed comfortably shaded beneath its spreading limbs.

At the meet waiting for us was a princess of the country, who to her admirable address as a horsewoman added a keen love of the more dangerous forms of sport. Fair and young, with a fund of bright spirits and ready raillery, she was a welcome addition to our party ; but may she forgive me if she ever reads these lines, when I admit that the first sight of her bonnie face and trim hunting costume sent my last hope of sport to the

winds, and a closer inspection of the dangerous little rifle she carried made me form the dastardly resolution, that let him who would take care of her, I would put myself out of range of any stray shots. It is no doubt a stupid prejudice on my part, but I never could get over the conviction that Venus ought to let Cupid do all her shooting for her.

The ground to be shot over was a stretch of low hills and shallow valleys, covered knee deep in brown ferns, and frightfully thorny briars. Here and there a clump of forest intervened, and in these clumps the going was simply impracticable without a free use of the kinjal.

One reckless dragoon attempted to ride through the first tract of the kind, but a mesh of wild vine had him under the chin before he had gone many yards, and the horse growing restive the gallant warrior was as neatly

‘Absalomed’ as any man need wish to be. After this all the horses were sent back, and the guns followed the old colonel on foot, and were told off one after another to their respective places. My post seemed as promising as need be, for at my feet was the junction of two paths which the wild swine had trampled through the jungle and at my back was a large fig-tree, the terminus probably of these two lines. All round was a dense wall of briars and thorny things, whose Russian names were longer than their thorns, so though I have a vivid memory of the latter, the former are unluckily forgotten. By-and-bye there was a sound of horns, and then intense silence.

After a while some hounds gave tongue and carried a line apparently right past where I was standing, but keen as my watch had been I saw nothing either then or thereafter.

Two or three times at different parts of the beat I heard the hounds give tongue, and several shots were fired, but nothing came my way, and small wonder, for the two soldiers who had been stationed near me as stops, having tired of the task after the first five minutes, were noisily employed in collecting figs off the tree in my rear. Sticks and stones were freely used ; and at last one fellow not being able to get a bough down by these means, and being too lazy to climb, betought himself of his musket. His capital idea was received with applause by his comrade, and a couple of shots immediately followed, raising no doubt a pang of envy in some distant sportsman's mind, at the confounded luck of those fellows by the fig-tree. Though they may not have known it before, those two soldiers found out immediately after their escapade, that the unfortunate Englishman whose sport they were spoiling knew a good

deal of the vulgar tongue of the Russian and could use it to some purpose.

After having seen in what manner my neighbours used their rifles, I was not the least surprised to find that though thirty or forty shots had been fired, nothing had been bagged.

Once, when the hounds seemed farthest from me, I had glanced down the narrow path in front of me, lying on my belly to do so, and had caught sight in the dim obscurity of three beasts, who followed one another slowly across the path, carrying their heads like hounds trying to pick out a line. For a moment I thought they were pigs, and had taken aim at the biggest of them, but the fear of killing a hound overcame me, and I let them go.

When I crept down the path afterwards and found I had let three young boar walk quietly past me, at about thirty yards off, I

was not in the best of humours ; but anything is better than hurting a hound.

Jackals seemed to abound, but to shoot these little rascals as they twist and turn in thick covert is not easy work with an 'Express,' and not one was killed in the three days we were out ; and though the hounds were in full cry at their heels almost all day and every day, they never managed to ' chop ' one.

Towards evening the sport rather improved, although all discipline had long since fled. In the early part of the day, men had been posted all round the country to be beaten, and only the huntsman and whips followed the dogs, which were put in at the furthest point down wind. But as the heat decreased and the sportsmen's patience waned, every man did as seemed best to him.

The hounds were divided. Three or four were pegging away after jackals in the lower country towards the sea, another lot had got

some pigs on foot amongst the ferns and briars of a basin in the hills, where grew quite an orchard of fruit trees, and still another division of the pack had got some roe deer on foot.

Frank and some one or two others were well placed for the roe, and had the doubtful pleasure of missing them two or three times as their heads glanced along above the top of the deep fern at distances varying from one to three hundred yards.

As for me, I had been placed in the drive before in such a very den of thorns that I had been unable to extricate myself in time to join this last drive, and now found myself left out of the hunt. However, I was not alone, and I am inclined to think that a certain prince and myself, having secured our horses, had much the best of the fun ; for having gained the place where the dogs were hunting the boar, we tied up our cattle and had a really

merry run with the dogs on foot. But we never saw the boar, and the last half hour of that noisy day I spent much to my own satisfaction, feasting on ripe figs on a limb of the tree which bore them, quite convinced that however excellent Russian soldiers might be at their own trade, with our host the gallant old colonel to lead them, they had' as little idea of carrying a drive to a successful issue as have Easter holiday-makers of stag hunting.

The bag that day was one roe deer, shot by the colonel, and the best hound of the pack, shot clean through the shoulder, the best shot made all day if only the hound had been the boar he was mistaken for. In mercy to his feelings the name of the dog-shooter shall not be recorded here, but I sincerely hope he won't forget the debt of gratitude he owes the kindly old colonel for the gentle way in which he treated his offence.

As the days crept on, and the bad weather still kept us storm-stayed at Sukhoum, even the cordial kindness of our military friends failed to console us for our prolonged stay amongst them. All hope of a visit to Golovinsky vanished, and both Frank and myself became decidedly nervous about our health.

At last, one day, we heard from the telegraphists that a steamer would really call at Sukhoum next morning, and though the hour of its departure from that port was 3 A.M., we were down on the shingle in the grey light with our packages around us, in time to catch the boat. Not until we had got ourselves and our belongings on board, and said good-bye to Platon, did we experience any feeling of security, convinced that now we were once more within a measurable distance of railways and other connecting links which join the civilised world to the Caucasus.

From that moment until our arrival in

England all went well with us, though wherever we passed we witnessed traces of the stormy weather which had been visiting Europe this month.

Between Odessa and the Austrian frontier all the forests through which the railroad passed presented a pitiable spectacle. For three days a heavy rain had fallen, and a bitter frost had congealed the drops as they fell. Hence every tree and every telegraph wire had collected round itself a massive coating of ice, of which the weight was intolerable.

On the fourth day a perfect hurricane had swept over the land. The wires, which had not already succumbed to the pressure of their icy load, now fell, dragging the posts with them in their fall; and as for the forests, I can only compare them to fields of ripe wheat which a wild rainstorm has beaten to the ground. It was not so much that the great trees were snapped or uprooted, but their

forms were contorted and twisted as if they had been screwed out of shape by some gigantic hand, and then bent earthwards till they bowed their heads upon the ground.

Of course the Channel passage was about the worst bit of sea voyage we had encountered since we left England; and altogether homesick Frank was not one whit more ready than my sea-sick self to admit that in all our wanderings we had never been so pleased to arrive anywhere as we were to arrive at Victoria.

THE END.



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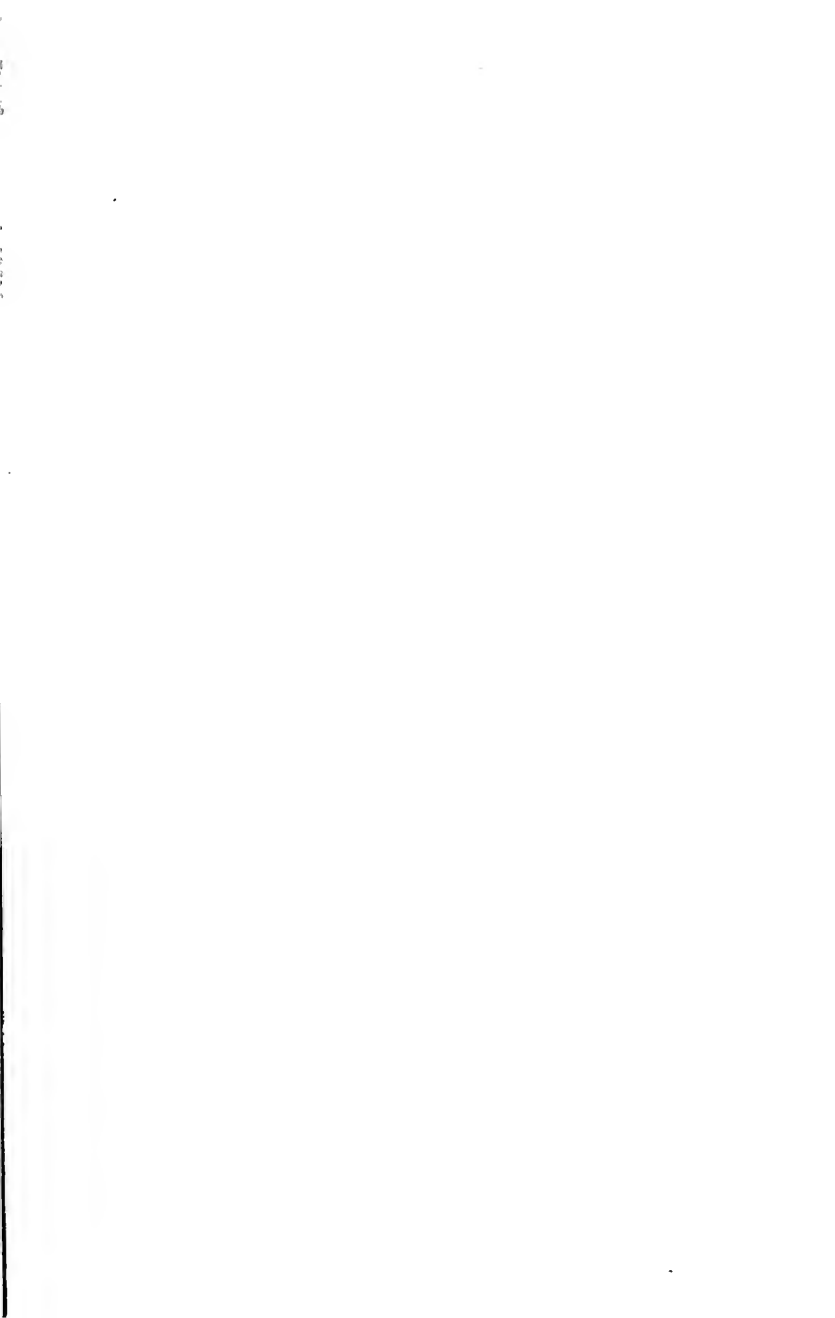
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