

HUNTING A TAPIR.

BY ALLEN CHAMBERLAIN.



OUR of us were gathered to a little feast in honor of a friend who had lately returned from toilsome engineering work in the wilds of Central America. He was a keen sportsman, and a close observer, and had given a number

of interesting descriptions of wild life, when a chance remark turned the conversation upon big game. Many questions and answers followed, until at last he remarked that "as we seemed bent upon pumping him dry anyway, he might as well spin a yarn, and be done with it." He continued as follows:

"We were in a rough country, and my 'pard' and I divided the work of keeping the camp supplied with meat. Sometimes it was a turkey or a monkey, and occasionally we would try together to stalk a deer, but those fellows were too few and far between. At rare intervals some larger game would come within our range. For instance, there was a puma that annoyed us for a week once, by raiding our provisions every night, while we were located on the Rio San Francisco. We laid for him, and got him. Four men to one poor lion. Then there was the old alligator—the natives respectfully called him Commodore—who used to sun himself on the river-bar just above Greytown. He never did us any harm, but then, the natives told us that in the course of his life—something over 100 years, I wouldn't dare to say how much—he had eaten seventeen men, and this alone was provocation enough to cause us to resolve upon his extermination.

"We adopted the old 'Commodore's' invulnerable hide as a target, and every morning we used to pop at him while the cook was making coffee. We never hit him, and I have an idea that he used to enjoy the fun as much as we, for when a ball would strike in the sand close beside him, sending a veritable shower-bath of granulated shells in his

face, he would extend his chronic grin into a gigantic smile. Suffice it to say that he is still alive, or was when I sailed from Greytown.

"If you want a hunt in which there shall be a refreshing combination of real sport and just enough of the dangerous element to make it exciting, go to Central America and find a tapir. Ah! that was game, big game, and the morning that I shot my first tapir was one of the most eventful in my whole career.

"We had been working up a line along the valley of the Rio San Juan, and having struck a rather difficult piece of swamp-land we were kept within a few miles of the point where we started in for over a week. Game was not very plentiful, and having had our fill of monkey stew and parrot fricassee (which I may say are all very well in their way), all hands began to clamor for something heavier. My 'pard' suggested venison, but Ansel, our Carib guide, informed us that there were no deer in that locality. So we dropped the question for a few days and lived on canned beans and corned beef by way of variety, but this only served to whet our appetites to even keener edge for something fresh. At last, one morning, Ansel said to us at coffee, 'I dream ob danta las' night, boss. Fo' two nights I dream danta. Ef I dream danta to-night we shoot danta to-morrow fo' shoo, sah!'

"This was a cue for my 'pard' and me. Danta! Why on earth hadn't we thought of danta before? And without waiting for Ansel to dream again, we determined to hunt a danta the following morning.

"Right here I will interrupt my narrative, and say a word or two about this curious animal. He is more commonly known as the tapir by the general public, but the natives call him *el danta*. In color, size, and form he resembles somewhat a baby elephant, his trunk being rather shorter than that of his African and Asiatic cousins. He has the thick, tough skin of the elephant, all bristling with sparse, coarse, black hair, and the small, bead-like eyes of his

Oriental relative. Unlike the elephant, however, he has no tail, and instead of the broad, flapping ears, he has a pair of aural appendages like those of a clipped bull-terrier. His body is heavy and fat, supported on short, stumpy legs, and averages in weight about eight hundred pounds.

"Now the work on the line had to be carried on just the same, for the wet season was pressing on and in a few weeks we should be shut out from that swamp tract for several months by the freshets. We therefore decided, in council of two assembled, that one of us was all that would be needed on the line for one day, and we would draw lots then and there to see who should hunt and who should labor. With unusual good fortune the hunt fell to me, and I believe the anticipation of the promised sport acted as an incentive to labor and good spirits, for I accomplished more that day and felt less fatigued than I had in an equal time for many moons before.

"That night I turned in early, for we were to start before daylight in the morning, and with my thoughts full of danta I fell asleep. Believing thoroughly in Ansel's theory of prophetic dreams, I was determined to 'dream danta' that night myself so as to insure success should Ansel fail. The result was altogether startling, but none the less assuring.

"It seemed to me that I must have dreamed pretty much all night, for in my slumbers I traveled hundreds of miles, back to the United States. I thought that the hunt was over, that I had killed a mammoth tapir, for which feat of prowess I had almost instantly gained a world-wide celebrity, and that I had accepted an invitation to return to New York and lecture upon the danta under the auspices of the Cooper Institute. I was just alighting at the City Hall, feeling mightily important, amid loud, prolonged cheers and the last discordant clashes of a brass band, when I was rudely awakened to a realizing sense that the only resemblance to a brass band within many hundred miles was the fist full of tin dippers which the negro cook had been rattling in my ears, and the only shout audible was his everlasting morning salutation of 'Mawmin', boss! carfee, boss!' with which I had been awakened every day for months and months.

"Before I had finished my pint of that vile concoction which goes by the name of coffee in the South, my two companions of the hunt appeared in the doorway of the tent, Ansel, the foremost, saluting, and assuring me that we could not fail to find and kill our game to-day, as he, too, had 'dreamed danta.' Therefore, while munching my last piece of pilot-bread, I followed them down to the dugout by the river.

"It was still bright starlight, and the huge full moon of the tropics threw a farewell stream of silver light across the tree-tops on our side of the river, showing the opposite bank an apparently unbroken wall of dense jungle. Ansel, the Carib, took the stern paddle, Leocardio, a full-blooded Ometepe Indian, the bow, while I, wrapped in my blanket amidships, nursed my rifle across my knees. With a few powerful strokes we shot directly across the river and, diving into that wall of jungle, entered one of those little tributaries which feed the larger stream at every mile or two. Here all was darkness, the tall trees on either hand shutting out what was left of the light of the fast-sinking moon; but the Indian, with an eye like a cat's in this Egyptian blackness, spied out and evaded or jumped the innumerable sunken logs which lay across the stream. Thus we shot silently ahead without a word or sound of any kind to break the loneliness. At length we left the woods and wound along through a low swamp for some two miles, and at last reached a broad grass swamp covered for several acres with tall reeds through which the stream ran narrowly. Passing through this in turn, my guides ceased paddling just on the outskirts of the swamp, where the ground began to rise, and pushed the canoe in among the tall reeds, thus completely concealing both canoe and men.

"As we lay waiting for our prey, with naught but the vault of the heavens visible beyond our blind of grass, the stars began to fade out one by one, and the first faint gray of dawn appeared, heralded by the usual tropical signal of coming day, the howling of hordes of Congo monkeys—an uproar which the novice might easily mistake for the cries of a hundred lions and tigers in desperate encounter.

"Thus we lay for a few moments, when Ansel softly touched my arm and, with

a warning signal to be quiet, directed my attention to the opposite bank. After listening a moment, I distinctly heard a rustling noise among the reeds, as if some large animal were pushing his way through the tall grass. Leocardio had heard it too, and turning, whispered cautiously in Spanish, 'viene el danta.' I was now all eyes and straining every nerve to get a peep at the game. As he emerged from the edge of the rushes there was scarcely light enough to get a good shot, and knowing his fondness for a morning tub, at which he generally spends at least half an hour, and as we were well to leeward, thus preventing all possibility of his scenting us, I waited for a more auspicious moment. In the uncertain light, and half hidden as he was among the reeds, the fellow looked as big as an elephant. After a moment's hesitation, apparently for a reconnaissance, he came out upon the bank, and with a long-drawn wheeze slipped contentedly down into the water.

Here he stood about half submerged and all the while keeping up a most distressing asthmatic wheezing. Naturally I began to get just a bit anxious for a shot and commenced to pull myself together for action. Crawling up from the bottom of the canoe on to my knees I began peering about among the reeds for a sight at the beggar, and in my eagerness leaned a little too far out on one side, almost capsizing the craft before I realized that I was not on board a ship and must be careful. In the sudden jump that I made to right the canoe, unluckily my foot struck against a paddle, making a most uncalled-for racket. I could have torn my hair with rage at my carelessness, but at that instant, with a loud snort and a splash the tapir rushed for the bank, and, forgetting all else save the fact that my game was getting away, I seized my Winchester and sprang to my feet. Now I could see him clearly, scrambling as fast as he could with his short stumpy legs to scale the slippery bank, and fearing lest he should succeed and get away, I brought up my rifle to shoot. In my excitement I had forgotten to pump up a cartridge into the chamber, and the result was that the gun only snapped. By this time the tapir had given up all hope of climbing the bank, and turning, swam rapidly down-stream with only the tip of his

short black snout above the water. With a yell and a great clatter of paddles the men urged the canoe from the reeds and we were after him in hot pursuit. But that danta swam remarkably fast for one so large, and it required a lot of well-applied muscle to overtake him.

"When we had come within twenty feet of him I again tried my luck, and fired at the black spot on the water. The first shot missed, but another hit, when instantly the danta turned and, raising his head farther out of water, swam directly for the canoe, his little black eyes glistening viciously, clearly showing that he meant blood. It didn't take me long to pump another cartridge into that rifle, but he was nearly alongside by the time that I was ready for him, so that the muzzle almost rested on his head when I fired. This finished him, and with one final snort he threw up his head; nearly capsizing the canoe,—for we had drifted directly on to him—and sank slowly out of sight. A few bubbles rose to the surface, nothing more. The spot where the carcass had sunk was very nearly in midstream and in about twenty feet of muddy water. Scarcely had the huge black body disappeared beneath the surface when Leocardio, after quickly divesting himself of his scanty clothing, plunged after it. After a few seconds he rose to the surface and informed us that he had located the body on the bottom. How he had been able to see anything down in that dark water I never was able to understand, and I have sometimes been led to believe him almost superhuman, for he would find his way through the jungles on leson the blackest night, almost as readily as by day.

Having regained his breath, Leocardio dived again, this time taking with him the long painter of the boat, made of plaited thongs. Again he rose, bringing one end of the rope with him, while the other he had made fast to one of the danta's hind legs. With great care not to upset our craft, all hands then manned the rope and drew our victim to the surface. With considerable difficulty the carcass was towed ashore and taken into the canoe, his weight loading the little shell almost down to the gunwale.

"Well pleased with the morning's sport we started back toward camp in the

clear, broad daylight. Silently we drifted down the stream the death-like stillness of the jungle only broken by the scream of an occasional macaw, startled at our approach. As we swung around one of the many short, sharp bends there loomed up before us another danta, looking even bigger than the one in the canoe.

There he stood beneath the bank, his fat sides sleek and glistening after his morning toilet. Our recognition had been mutual and instantaneous, and without waiting for any further salutations, with one terrific wheeze and snort he started for the short. In a twinkling he was up the bank, and as I sprang ashore I could hear him crashing through the thick underbrush, which soon wholly concealed him. I was forced to abandon the pursuit, and as all hands had arrived at a ravenous point, we agreed to run into camp as soon as possible.

"Even if one bags no game on a trip of this sort, he feels amply repaid for his early rising and hard work by the rich feast of form and color which Nature

in that land sets before his eyes with a lavish hand. Speeding down-stream, we shot under huge cables of twisted vines, forming natural bridges from bank to bank, and depending from the tree-trunks overhead the tropical hanging baskets stooped toward us. Along the banks grew scarlet passion-flowers, while flocks of brilliant and unceasingly noisy macaws flew hither and thither across the stream, their long tail-feathers streaming after them, adorned with all the iridescent colors of the rainbow.

"Coming into camp my partner and the rest of the men ran round to ask what luck, and amid exclamations, grunts, and tugs, we succeeded in hoisting up on shore what Leocardio then pronounced to be the biggest danta he had ever seen. In an incredibly short time the men had the carcass dressed, and—this is not a fish yarn—the hide was almost an inch in thickness, but the meat was as tender as the finest beef, albeit a trifle gamier in flavor, and a darker shade in color. After that we did not want for meat for many days."



A SHOT AT CLOSE QUARTERS. (p. 27.)