# STAG AND WOLF HUNTING IN FRANCE

By Vance Thompson

THERE is a theory abroad that the Frenchman, because he can dance and turn a compliment, can neither ride straight nor shoot clean. Of course, this is merely an international prejudice. Dull people will go on believing that all Englishmen beat their wives and all Yankees chew tobacco, and not even the comic papers can change their way of thinking. Mr. Pickwick's friends were English Sportsmen—of a kind; Tartarin and the cap-shooters of Tarascon were French sportsmen—of the same kind; but neither Dickens nor Daudet are very good authorities on the hunting of big game.

I have seen the London cockneys, armed to the teeth, trailed by dogs, shooting sparrows in the calm Surrey fields. My first shooting experience in France was about as stirring. It was years ago —more years than either you or I would care to reckon—when I was taking my first tramp through this pleasant land of France. One afternoon I was loitering at a little village north of Marseilles, waiting for the diligence—a yellow-bellied post-wagon—that was to carry me on my way. In front of the post-house were a few spindling and leafless trees, where the thrushes—the *grives* of the Midi—fluttered disconsolately. As I waited there, down the country road came two sturdy, black-bearded fellows with shotguns. The master of the post hailed them rapturously and fetched his gun, an old center-fire of that first year of 1862. Three thrushes had settled on the naked tree; each "sportsman" selected his bird, and, at the "One—two—three!" fired. One bird fell to the gun of 1862. The master of the post shouted with triumphant glee, opened the door of the house and whistled. There trotted out a little half-breed King Charles spaniel.

*"Rapportez!"*

Wagging his bushy tail the dog crossed the road and retrieved the game.

For many a year I jeered, as Daudet did, at these heroic sportsmen of the South, but after a while I discovered that Le Piste was not France, and that there is shooting and shooting.

There are in France forests that spread for leagues, wooded uplands and lean stretches of mountain land, where you may still find the stag and the roebuck, the wild boar, the wolf, and—now and then—the wildcat.

Of course, you may do better in the Tyrol, but in one respect *la chasse* in France is unsurpassed. Here it is, and only here, that the stag-hunt preserves its old dare-devil gaiety and the ceremony that lent it charm in the chivalric days of the long ago. I have hunted the deer in Germany, and have seen the Queen's staghounds loosed on the tame deer of Windsor; but until a notable day this year I did not know what *la grande chasse* meant. Before describing that golden day when an old stag, adept in wickedness, saved himself by driving out along the line of his own running a *daguet* (that is, a green two-year-old) let me give you a few preliminary and necessary details.

In France the stag is hunted. The man who shot a stag would find far less mercy than he who shot a peasant. One hunts him from afar, and may have many a good run without having seen the tip of an antler—the chase, after all, is the thing.

The hounds differ greatly in various parts of the country. The big white hounds of Vendée, the long-headed, black and white hounds of Gascony, the yellow and white hounds of Artois, all have their lovers; but the best packs—for instance, those of the Duchess d'Uzes and the Baron de Vaux—are cross-bred from the Saintonge and the foxhound.

For fifty years now this *bastarde de Saintonge* has been bred in France. Taller, slighter, deeper in the chest and better muscled than the English hound, he has retained the fine scent, the love for the bunt, and, indeed, all the good qualities, moral and physical, of his French ancestors. Other good crosses have been made,

notably that of the Gascon hound and the bloodhound (St. Hubert), but nothing quite equals these nervous but patient, big but quick, bastards of Saintonge, clean black and white, with mouths like bells.

As to the horses—well, no two men have ever agreed on a definite type of a good hunter. In France, no more than in England, is there a generic type. An Irish hunter is pretty good everywhere, and not first-rate anywhere. He seems to have no especial preference for the kind of country he is sent over. Of course, he is found—with his equally indifferent brother from Hungary—everywhere in France. Still, in the best French hunting stables you will find the thoroughbred, or half-blood, that has been trained for only his own kind of country. It is the theory of the "shoemaker to his last," admirable in matters of sport as in all others.

There were about forty guests at the château that day. The *veneur* had been out early in the morning with two of his oldest dogs and started a stag; after following him for a short distance, he called off the hounds and came back to the château. This was at eight o'clock. He reported that he had started a *dix-cors*, that is, a ten-antlered stag, seven or eight years old.

*Vue !*

By this time we had breakfasted—a hunter's breakfast with meat and wine—and had gathered in the courtyard. The stabling at the Château des Vaux, as everything else, is on a princely scale. There are two stables, one for the postilion and carriage horses; the other for the hunters. The hunting stables form a quadrangle round a huge courtyard which is roofed over with glass; the stable doors are of mahogany, with panels of beveled plate-glass; the interior fittings of mahogany and white marble.

The huntsmen were all in the livery of the hunt, blue, magenta and cream buff, and carried French horns. There were a number of ladies who drove to the meet in light wagons.

It was nine o'clock when we set out, and there was a six-mile ride, first along a white road and then through the forest, before we came to the place whence the *veneur* had stalked the stag three hours before.

We hunted with two instead of the three traditional packs of hounds, and the relays of horses were sent on with the second pack. Six hounds were loosed first, among them two old limehounds that had started the stag. The scent was cold, but at last they took it and went off, followed by the head huntsman.

Grouped in a little cross-roads of the forest we waited. Suddenly one of the dogs gave tongue; then another and another—*"Ils parlent! Ils parlent!"* and always we waited for the horn of Jean the *piqueur*—the whipper-in—who was with them. We listened for the notes of the *"lancé"* or the *"bién-allé"*—the old "he's off, well off!" that stirs the blood like a toxic drug. Nothing; a young dog or two shouting his folly; the women whispering their excitement; the clink of bridle-bits—the huntsmen had spread far and wide, half-circling the wood.

Suddenly far to the left a huntsman sounded the *Vue*—he had sighted the stag, and the brisk fanfare he blew through his French horn told us it was a *dix-cors*, doubtless the one old Jean had started at dawn. In a few moments the hounds were brought up coupled, the young dogs yelping with excitement. A fine pack, bastards of Saintonge, all aquiver from their big black ears to their pointed tails, leashed two and two. Well-trained, well under the whip,

they waited, although half-mad to go until the last couple was unleashed and the master dropped his whip, with *"a la voie, mes beaux!"* when they scattered to left and right.

Far to the right the old limehounds were giving tongue, and so the hunt started; the dim, green forest echoing to the baying of the dogs, the cries of the ladies, the swift rush of the horses, and, here and there, the triumphant horns pealing the Marquis de Dampierre's fanfare for the stag of ten antlers. Nor did I know until that day how profound a love for music your deer has. At the sound of the horn, old hunters say, he throws up his head and listens; then, if he hears the far-off baying of the hounds, he tears himself away, but he goes slowly, divided between love of music and fear of the pack.

He was old and ruse, this stag of ours; no trick of the woods was alien to him; he knew how to double like a fox, and running water did not deceive him in his speed. He took us twenty miles. None save the head huntsman had caught a glimpse of him, had seen him, as the saying is, *par corps*. But all of us had seen him *par le pied*. We had got down on all fours to study his pear-shaped hoof-marks, that never overlapped, as might have been the case with a younger deer.

Twenty miles; and the head huntsman began to puzzle over the tracks; side by side with the *dix-cors'* sharp trail were the rounder, lighter hoof-prints of a two-year-old, or perhaps a *hère*. Always the dogs went on and the hunt swept on, for getting on all fours to study the turf is not stag hunting.

By the time we came round to the relay of horses and hounds many a horse was winded, and the women and young dogs had trailed off somewhere in the background.

Another mile brought us out by a little stream. For a moment the hounds fumbled. Had he taken to the water? Had he gone up stream or down? Had he crossed? Suddenly the pack sets off in full cry, along the water's edge for a few yards, then at a tangent through the woods, and out into a field rough with the stubble of wheat.

Then again the horns sounded the *Vue*. He, the deer, was black, wet, panting, and going heavily, head down and back humped up as though he were carrying a hod; and always, his little tail quivering with a sort of nervous excitement that seemed in strange contrast to his dull going. He labored heavily across the open country; evidently he was making for a bend of the river to die in water as a stag should. But the fresh hounds, they had

Typical French Hound.

made scarcely seven miles, were hard on him. He threw himself down for a few moments. Then he staggered on, only to fall again.

And now the horns were sounding the *hallali*, the bravest music that ever rang out over a hunting field; the stag, as though he knew the time had come to die, got to his feet and faced the on-coming hounds. He stood square, his four legs straight; he tossed up his head and waited —for he's a proud fellow, your stag, and dies with his head up and his eye on his enemies. Were it not that his sides beat thick and fast he might have been the bronze statue of a stag. The hounds circled him, yelping; finally one of them leaped at his fore-legs. The stag broke through the circle, ran a few yards, stopped again and faced.

The hunters were bringing their horses over the clotted ground as best they could. The head huntsman and the master of the hunt—a marquis, white-bearded and old, but the straightest rider and the keenest sportsman in France—arrived just as the hounds, mad now and beyond control of the voice—were attacking him on all sides. The old marquis leaped from his horse to give the death-blow to the quarry.

We all approached on foot. The hounds were growling now; the horns kept up their savage clamor of the *hallali;* the stag waited—watchful, and, I like to

think, contemptuous of death, as well as of the little creatures who had hunted him down—and as he stood there, the marquis leaped through the circle of hounds, hamstrung him, and, not a second later, drove a hunting knife into his heart. The only sound the stag made was a gritting of the teeth—as he ground his jaws together in rage.

For a moment the dogs were allowed to mouth the stag; then they were leashed, and we had a chance to examine our quarry. A *dix-cors?*—no, not even a *dix-cors jeunement;* we had run down a *daguet,* that is, a two-year-old. And how had this happened? The head huntsman had his own theory; it was this: the old stag that we had started in the morning had led us the first fifteen miles, it may be; then he had started up this two-year-old and forced him to follow along the line of his running; miles of this double running had confused the hounds, and when upon coming to the river the old stag took the water, while the young one was bullied into running on, the hounds had naturally followed the only trail there was—that of the young stag. This was the *veneur's* theory, but the marquis said more wisely: "We have brought down a noble stag—evidently he gave up his life of his own free will, in order to save Monseigneur *Dix-cors,* who may have been his father."

"Or his uncle," said the nephew of the marquis; and with that we rode home.

From the meet to the kill we had covered twenty-seven miles, and we were fifteen miles from the château. We reached there in time to play a game of billiards—or chat with the women—before dressing for dinner; and, by the way, both in the billiard-room, the lounging-rooms and dining-hall, all the electric lights and wax candles were fixed in brackets or candelabra made of antlers; it was the "Château de Sport."

The ladies came down to dinner wearing the colors of the hunt, and the talk was all of horses' legs and hounds' noses, of the tracks of the *daguet* and the *dix-cors,* and the vengeance that should be taken upon a certain peasant, named Mathurin, who had strung a wire fence across a nasty corner.

After dinner there were billiards again and much talk, and old hunting songs sung and dancing.

At ten o'clock a blast from the French horns announced the last ceremony of the hunt—*la curée.* There are two kinds of *curées,* the warm, which takes place directly after the stag is killed, and the cold, which I am about to describe.

We descended then into one of the stable-yards, round which stood a score of lackeys with lighted torches. The huntsmen, who were expert on the horn, played the famous calls, appropriate to the moment—the "Veneurs de France," the "Curée D'Orleans," the "Bien Chassee," and many another joyous lilt of the hunt. The perfumed women in the flare of the torches looked prettier than women ever look by daylight.

We could hear the horses whinnying in the mahogany stables, and the dogs, both packs of them, yelping and howling in the kennels to the left.

By the light of the torches we could see a black mass lying in the middle of the courtyard. This was the offal of the stag covered with the skin, the head and antlers resting on top. There was a moment's silence; then one of the huntsmen stepped forward and blew the triplicate bugle notes of the "Honneurs du Pied"; and even as he blew, two lackeys came forward, each with one of the stag's forefeet on a silver salver. These were presented to the honored guests; a young count who had just come of age—and into his own—being one recipient, and I, as a foreigner, the other.

With this all the horns blared in chorus; the lackeys pocketing their tips of a louis apiece drew back and the hounds were loosed into the stable-yard. One of the huntsmen swung the head and antlers to and fro, adding to the wild excitement of the hounds and giving the buglers another occasion for waking the echoes. For a moment the din was tremendous. Then abruptly the horns were silenced and the skin was dragged away. It was a signal the hounds understood. They fell upon the offal and dined upon what they had chased. It was the end of the *curée;* the end of the day's hunt—all save the dance in the great hall, the gossip on the balconies, or the toddy in the billiard-room.

Whether you take your stag in the east of France or in the center—I do not know anything except by hearsay of the north—you have had a good day's work and a

good day's sport. This pacha of the forest runs well and stands well at bay; the country is pleasantly diversified, the forests are open, the hedges are not tricky, and the man who rides at 196 pounds may do very well with two horses. The run from meet to kill is usually between thirty and forty miles, though a stag started in the forest of the Duchesse D'Uzés in the Seine-et-Oise, not long ago, led for seventy-two miles before it took water and was brought down in the *étang de Holland.*

Of course, the sport one has depends largely on the country to be got over, but it seems to me there is something in French stag-hunting a trifle more exhilarating than the English game of hunting a flea-bitten fox across Leicestershire farmlands. And then it has a little of the lordly air—it calls back the purple days when the magnificent Louis went out with hound and horn to hunt these antique forests. It may be there is something theatrical in the stag-hunt; it is the sport of kings, and one expects with it more than the due measure of lime-light and orchestra. The pacha of the forest is hunted down with as much ceremony as accompanied the heretic hunts of the days of the Crusades.

The Death.

There is another fellow in the French woods, however, a seigneur of importance—this *messire Sanglier,* as they call him here.

He is a big fellow, the wild boar of France, longer in the leg and better tusked than his tamer brother of Germany. Indeed, here in these Gallic lands was his original habitat. The long-haired Gauls, who went to fight Cæsar, carried the boar's head spiked on a lance—it was at once their, flag and symbol. Nor since those days has there ever been a time when the man (who had, money) could not chase what Louis XI. called the "savage pork." I have mentioned the matter of money because the cost is tremendous. In these days only the Russian Grand Dukes, James Gordon Bennett, international bankers and a few declassed "countesses" can afford to go in for this royal sport.

In the first place, the wild boar here is really wild—not the half-tamed creature of the Saxon preserves; and, secondly, the necessary equipage of men and dogs would deplete the purse of any one except a millionaire, though, of course, certain peasants, armed only with home-made spears, heeled only by cur-bred dogs, bring down many a boar, for this hairy lord of the uplands is unprotected by the game laws of France.

An equipage such as that provided by Mr. Gordon Bennett for the Grand Dukes of Russia, cost at least $100,000 for the fortnight. For instance, there were from seventy to eighty hounds unleashed every day, and after the hunt there were taken back to the kennels at least twenty ill or wounded hounds, for the wild boar is kin to the extraordinary Englishman who got himself known as "Jack the Ripper."

Then the pace is killing on horses as well as dogs. A *ragot,* that is, a boar of three years old, will wear out several relays of dogs and horses before he turns, and even then he will probably make three kills for each of his tusks. In the last big boar-hunt in the forest of Ecouves, which is about ten thousand acres in extent, thirty-five boars were got, nearly one hundred dogs went down, three men were badly hurt and the cost in horseflesh could hardly be counted.

The boar-hunt begins at dawn, for the boar is an early riser; in fact, he is the first creature abroad in the woods. Then he is a nomad. He sleeps usually twenty miles away from where he breakfasts. A good *piqueur* is sent out before daylight to search the windward side of the forest; he searches especially the thickets where the boar may have lain or rooted; then, with an old limehound, he goes out on the trail. It is easy enough to tell the traces. The grown male, for instance, places the hind foot exactly where the front has fallen; the young boar steps short, while the female steps wide.

The boar gets his growth at two years, but, of course, the best sport is to bring down a *grand vieux sanglier,* that is, a "solitary," with two finger-lengths of tusks. He is old and wicked, this solitary; he wanders alone in the forest, and, it is said, he kills the females of his own kind, if they approach him; he runs well, and it is only after seven or eight hours of the chase that he gives head to the dogs.

The climax is when the boar turns. He is so well armed that the man who has a thrifty care for his hounds should be close at their heels. Expert as he may be, the hunter who can drive his spear into the boar's shoulder before a few of the pack have been ripped up or disabled, is a clever man; and if he brings off himself and his mount with unslashed skins he is by no means a novice.

Last January, the Comte du Temple, a former Deputy, an old soldier of the war of 1870, and a sportsman who has shot big game over half the world, invited me down for the boar-hunt he had organized in the forest of Orleans. Grim, little incidental duties interfered with that jaunt, but when I saw Monsieur Du Temple a few months later he told me the story of the killing of the *pigache,* that is—for it is only fair to interpret this French hunting slang—the cross-toed boar.

He was a big brute, over his seventh year, and had led them—or, rather, dodged them—for seven hours. They were going with the third relay of twenty hounds—Gascony hounds, blue or white with wine-colored spots, very fast, patient, rough-voiced and heavy flanked, but full of the dash and flourish that you only get in these old French races. It was twilight; they came upon the boar in a nasty thicket, where a stream cut the edge of the forest. The hounds circled, yelping; now and then making a dash. The boar came out slowly; he stood for a moment rubbing his back against a tree-stem and paid no heed to the dogs, though they ran at him bravely enough.

Monsieur Du Temple, spurring up, was twenty yards away when the *pigache* saw him. For perhaps a second he stood scratching his back; then, with a queer little grunt, he shot straight for horse and rider. In the forest of Orléans they shoot the boar. Monsieur Du Temple had a hammerless twelve-caliber pistol, which must have made it interesting. When the boar was within two yards he fired, aiming along the spinal-column. He thought he had missed, for the boar ripped his mount on the right shoulder, and man and horse went down.

When Monsieur Du Temple got to his feet he dragged up the Irish hunter, but the wild pig lay dead; he was probably dead, though he didn't know it, when he charged. That must have been a moment worth living; as I heard Monsieur du Temple describe it—it was in a quiet little den in Auteuil—I felt that I had been cheated of a pleasure that should have been mine.

And now one word of the wolf hunting in France. There are two kinds of wolf hunting-the chase and the *battue.* I have never hunted the wolf with horse and hounds in France, though my friends say it is the finest sport in the world, and the fact that the army officers go in for it so keenly is evidence enough; but I do know something about the *battue.*

It was in the West of France; there was an upland, nasty with rocky fissures that led up to a scraggly wood that had been timbered the year before; there was an inch and a half of snow on the ground, already soft, though the sun was hardly

over the tree-tops as we ascended the hill. There were three guns and about fifty men.

The *directeur* of the hunt had had his men out since midnight, and they had seen the tracks of four wolves—a three-year-old male, a female (they knew her by the fact that the entry to the den was warm—what a compliment is there, oh, my brothers, to the sex!) and two cubs.

Long before dawn they had split the woods in two in order to isolate the wolf. The she-wolf did not break cover; she stayed, probably, with her cubs. The wolf was isolated in a half of the woods, round which were ranged some forty tatterdemalion men with trumpets, horns, copper pans and—knives. They carried knives, these brave men, because they did not want to die for forty cents a day without making a fight for it.

It was not yet six o'clock when we, who were the three guns, came up. Somewhere in that four-acred square the wolf stood, sniffing the wind, in quiet. The morning air brought to his nostrils the sickening odor of that thing called man. Ferret and squirrel and bird, all sensing the same inquietude, hushed themselves or fled.

The wolf waited; his mind was busy with many things. Suddenly our host whistled the three calls that for years have meant "Wolf's here! wolf's here!" and the fifty ragged men, round three sides of the wood, began to clatter their copper pans and blow their tin trumpets and shout *"V'loo! v'loo!"*

The she-wolf shuddered down in her den, hushing her cubs and panting; but he—the rusty fellow—with eyes red with fear and rage—broke toward the free side of the square; and there stood three men with guns.

He came out running loose and long—a dirty, rusty, brown thing, that stepped swift and silent among the tree stems. And when three guns had brought him down, we shouted our triumph to the morning air. But somewhere, huddled in the furze and rocks of her cave, a she-wolf lay and debated about God's providence and said things and got no answer.

Hunting in France; it is an old, old sport; its atavistic roots go back to the days when the Gauls and their blonde she-beasts threw whetted stones in these woods. The generations of men have come and gone; always the wolf and the wild boar, the deer and the roebuck have kept them company. It will be many a day yet before man has made this a wilderness of civilization where only he can live.

I am writing these words in the forest of Rambouillet; to right and left of me President Loubet and his merry guests are potting hares and pheasants, even as Louis XIV. and Napoleon did here in the long ago; they are a little like Mr. Pickwick's friends—a little like Tartarin of Tarascon; but all the same, my brothers, there is big game in France.