

WOLF HUNTING in RUSSIA

By Dr E. J. Dillon



Illustrated by EDMUND J. SULLIVAN.



T was my first visit to Russia, and fearing that it might also be my last, I was determined to make the best of it. Ever since, as a tiny schoolboy, I had read a highly coloured description of the adventures of a dauntless bear hunter, it was the cherished wish of my heart to walk in the footsteps of the hero of that thrilling romance and bravely do battle with bears, tigers and wolves; and though my faith in the story had long since evaporated, the wish it had engendered was still as strong as of yore. Fortunately the conditions under which I was paying my first visit to Russia were peculiarly favourable to its realization. I was to be the guest of a Russian gentleman of English education and refined tastes who possessed vast estates in

various parts of the Northern Empire; whose stables boasted the swiftest and most beautiful horses in the country, whose kennels were renowned for the best breeds of dogs, whose immense forests were literally alive with bears, wolves, elks, and wild boars, whose full fed rivers swarmed with speckled trout and half a dozen interesting species of fish peculiar to Russian waters.

Eager for the joys of this hunter's paradise I made no stay in either of the capitals, but rushed through the country at express speed. Even Nischny Novgorod, the great mart of the Eastern world, had no attractions for me that could vie with the allurements of wolf-hunting; so taking my berth in one of the very comfortable steamers that ply between that city and the Caspian, I set out for the favourite country seat of my friend and future host in the district of Bogvestgday, one of the most delightful abodes in all Russia; the house being something between an Imperial palace and an Elizabethan mansion. The windows command a noble wood, a magnificent English park and a beautiful stream. The park with its stately old oaks and its emerald coloured grass; the tempting tennis-lawn covered as with a green velvet carpet; the garden, full of bright coloured flowers, not merely aristocratic exotics but also such humble, homely acquaintances as stocks, sweet williams and lobelias were balm to my ruffled spirit. And I sorely needed something to calm and soothe me after having driven a distance of eighty miles from the landing-place on the Volga in a vile vehicle



A FAMILY OF WOLVES.

of torture termed a *tarantass* through the canvas roof of which my devoted head was periodically punching superfluous skylights.

On the evening of the second day, as my host and myself were comfortably seated before the spacious fire, after dinner, watching the changing pictures amid the leaping

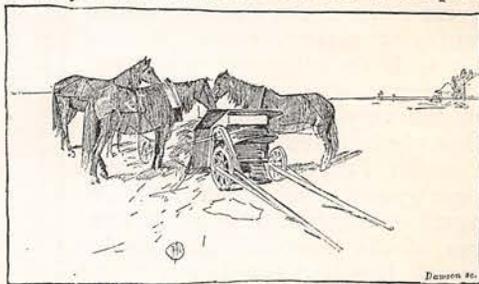


THE WOLF-CALL.

flames of the pinewood, smoking fragrant cigars and thinking or rather delightfully dreaming aloud, our thoughts somehow drifted to wolf lore. "We must get up a wolf hunt at once, you know," exclaimed my host jumping up and ringing the bell. "Of course you are aware that there are many ways of hunting the wolf in Russia; some very curious and exciting, others as tame as target practice. It all depends on the proportion in which danger is blended with pleasure and the wolf is a very bad hand at contributing the element of danger. You will find the whole thing wofully tame just now, though it will be genuine wolf-hunting, not merely wolf-shooting; there is no desperate riding, no risking of life and limb over bullfinches, hollows and such like obstacles to progress, with breathlessly mute hounds dashing through hedges and flying high gates as if they had wings like the monsters of Assyrian art. Fillip," he said, turning to a fine strapping peasant who had just entered the room and was standing at a respectful distance in an attitude of adoration, "go and find out at once from the peasants when and where they last saw wolves prowling about, as I want to arrange a hunt. Look sharp!" "Sloo-shaycoo" (I hearken), was the servant's reply as he

leisurely left the room. I expected to see him return after the lapse of an hour or two; but it was late next morning when we learned from this mercurial messenger that the peasants had encountered wolves a week before in the Mneemee forest some dozen miles off.

We set out for the place that same afternoon, the host, Mr. L. the manager of his estates, who was an English University man, a Russian law student, and myself, in order to accompany the head huntsman whose duty it was to assure himself of the presence of wolves, by howling. In wolf-hunting there is seldom such a thing as a sure find; you must first send out your man—usually the head huntsman—to play the equivocal part of detective or rather *agent provocateur*. This he does by entering the forest and uttering a most dismally realistic howl, as if he himself had become a werewolf and were making desperate efforts to regain his human shape and voice. As a rule the unsuspecting animal howls back a blood-curdling acknowledgment, and sometimes honours the call in person.

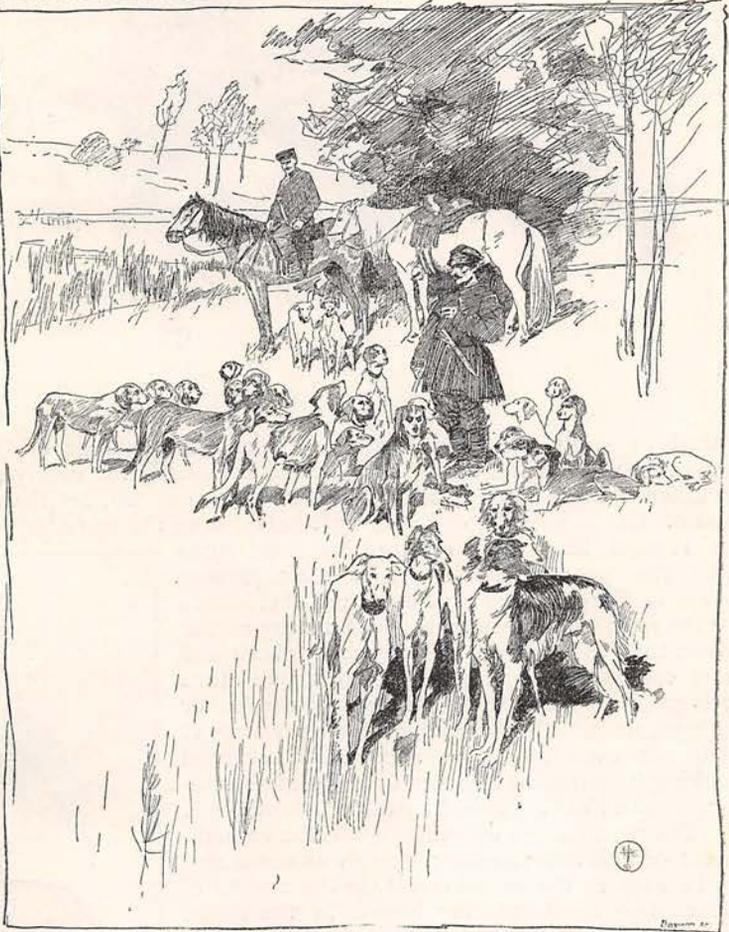


THE DOLGOOSHA.

The roads were tolerable; my mount—a lively bay mare—was everything that could be desired and the scenes we passed were new and interesting if not precisely cheerful. The road at first traversed broad stretches of fields bereft of corn, then wound round the base of some low mounds, on the slopes of which the flax had been laid out in rows to dry, and then bending suddenly round took us through a chaotic village at the entrance to which stood the eternal placard setting forth the number of souls living in the dirty decayed cabins of which the solitary street was composed. So and so many "souls," ran the legend; but to judge by the social and sanitary conditions that prevailed, it was evident that only the most material souls conceivable had any chance of holding out long in these hideous haunts. Once and once only we got a glimpse of a large farmhouse belonging to a rich peasant who had systematically robbed his neighbours for years; his horses were coming home for the

night with amulets round their necks, in the efficacy of which the Russian peasant believes as firmly as in his own existence. Shaggy, bony, undersized animals they looked, for which an Englishman would not offer even a guinea a piece—at least until he had seen with what surprising strength and miraculous powers of endurance, leanness and dwarfishness are compatible.

Scarcely was the farmhouse out of sight when the law student, M. Zakonoff, announced in a tone of seriousness that it was useless for us to advance any further—as there were no wolves in the forest, at least none for us, for he had just espied a hare cutting across the field in a direction at right angles to our path—an infallible sign in Russia that our enterprise was doomed to failure. Heedless of this prophet's superstitious forebodings, we ascended a low hill and dashed across the shallow valley that separates it from the forest beyond, and as we pulled up on the fringe of the forest our ears were pierced by a dismal dreary howl suggestive of the commingling of the lament of a dying dog with the wailing of an Irish Banshee. It needed the solemn assurance of the host himself to persuade me that this was the voice of the master of the hunt, who after having kept it up for a few minutes paused for a reply, which never came. "I told you that that hare foreboded failure," remarked the law student. "Hush! there it is at last," I ventured to exclaim, as a feeble sound was borne to our ears.



HUNTSMEN WITH GONTSCHY AND BORZY DOGS.

We listened with bated breath for a moment and then the manager of the estates declared that the sound resembled the barking of a dog. "It is certainly not a wolf," said the huntsman; "they do occasionally howl in such a way as to imitate the barking of a dog, but never when they are replying to a howl. That's a genuine dog, I'll swear." Just as the host was requesting him to content himself with simply affirming, an old man with rubicund visage, purple nose and flowing beard appeared on the scene, walked deliberately up to us and volunteered the information that wolves had indeed been met with here a week since, but that they were gone. He knew however of another happy family about thirty versts further off in the forest, near Kytchenovo.

We returned home a trifle disheartened but determined to repair next day to Kytchenovo and free that forest from a few of the wolves that infested it. As soon as we got home my host sent for the head cook and gave orders to have provisions and tents in readiness by noon of the next day for a two days' camping out; and he told me to prepare for roughing it a little.

Next day while at lunch a terrible thunderstorm broke loose upon the country threatening all our plans, but at two o'clock it was over and an hour later the *dolgoosha* (a longish vehicle like a carpenter's bench with side seats on either side) drove up to the door, and having taken our wraps, we started for Kytshenovo.

The roads seemed made of jelly laid over an endless series of dried up river beds,

the bridges being maliciously left out of the arrangement. I was first shaken till I was one mass of pains, aches, stitches and bruises, and then, as the *dolgoosha* made a sudden plunge into an abyss, I was shot out into the road with my companions, where we lay for a moment half buried in the mud and the sere and yellow leaves that added to its consistency. I was therefore in no fit



IN THE FOREST—"WAITING."

mood to study the characteristics of the Tartar village of Oveno, which with its tolerably clean, warm houses that extend irregularly for nearly three miles, seemed to betoken a somewhat greater degree of ease and comfort than Russian hamlets can boast. But in no village, Tartar or Russian, does the traveller ever perceive anything to remind him that during the long ages that the people have spent in their present seats in Europe they have ever had the leisure or the need to address themselves to any nobler work than the arduous task of keeping body and soul together; there are no picturesque stone bridges, no ivy covered ruins of castles or abbeys, no beautiful reminders of the presence of man nor even any such substantial, cheerful looking buildings as brighten up an English landscape with tints mellowed by the brush of Time.

The next village we came to was the embodiment of filth and squalor; there was not a soul to be seen in the broad street, in the middle of which two dead cats lay buried in the slush, making the atmosphere positively pestilential. A destructive fire was raging at the other end of the village, and around it all the inhabitants of the place were gathered. One house was already burnt down, the second was one mass of flame, and the fire was rapidly spreading to the third; yet not a hand was raised to arrest its ruinous progress. The wailing of women, the whining and laughing of children, ejaculatory prayers, terrible oaths, ribald remarks and the crackling of the wooden rafters were the sounds that deafened our ears. A few rickety tables and chairs and half-a-dozen big bundles tied up in dirty rags and representing the entire property of the victims were lying in the middle of the road.

My host shouted out to one of the peasants, who approached with a servile but wistful look as if he expected a money offering: "Why on earth don't you put out the fire?" he began. "Have you no buckets?"



"I SHOULDERED MY GUN, TOOK AIM, AND FIRED."

"Sure your excellency deigns to know that it isn't buckets as is wanting."

"Well it isn't strong arms either, I fancy. Why don't you go to work then?"

"Your grace wouldn't have us fly in the faces of God and His Holy Mother? We've sinned enough on our souls without adding that black crime to them. Wasn't it God's own lightning as set Petroff's house on fire a couple of hours ago? and bad as we are this blessed day there's not a man in the village as would raise his sinful hand to undo God's holy work."

My host raised his hand and waved it despairingly, and we drove on.

"It's mere loss of time to reason with them," he explained; "they would as soon commit suicide *en masse* as put out a fire that God had kindled with His lightning."

I was still engrossed by the train of thoughts that this piece of real Russian life had started, when we entered Kyschenovo, where the under-huntsman met us, telling us that he had hired a number of peasants to act as beaters for the sum of fifteen copecks each (5*d.*) a day, and offering to take us by a short cut across country to the encampment, which was three miles distant. The sun had already left the horizon and a soft breeze which had sprung up since then was gently fluttering the foliage of the trees; the twilight had followed the daylight and the masses of dark colour in the forest deepened into the blackness of night. Taking a lantern, our guide led us through meadows and fields in which we were continually slipping, stumbling and falling, till we came to an open space on the fringe of a forest, where we saw a number of fixed and moving lights, smelt a strong odour of savoury food and heard the chatter of busy men. This was our encampment.

It consisted of a Kirgheez tent for the sportsmen, and two plain tents, of which one was allotted to the servants, and the other served as kitchen and larder. This was the first time that I had seen a real Kirgheez tent, and the impression it made upon me was highly favourable in a great measure—as I had afterwards reason to know—because there were no real Kirgheez inside of it. The interior looked cozy and inviting, and the furniture (consisting of provision-boxes joined together and covered with a snow-white cloth, so as to do duty for a table, soft Caucasian carpets covering the ground, Persian and Armenian rugs tastefully hung round the walls, a large stove on one side, stools and boxes covered with carpets and destined to supply the place of chairs, and four camp beds distributed at equal distances from the stove) was lighted up almost *a giorno*. After a sumptuous repast that seemed a curious commentary on a Russian's idea of "roughing it," and a delicious smoke, we turned in for the night, while the head huntsman went to his tent to have a few hours' sleep before howling.

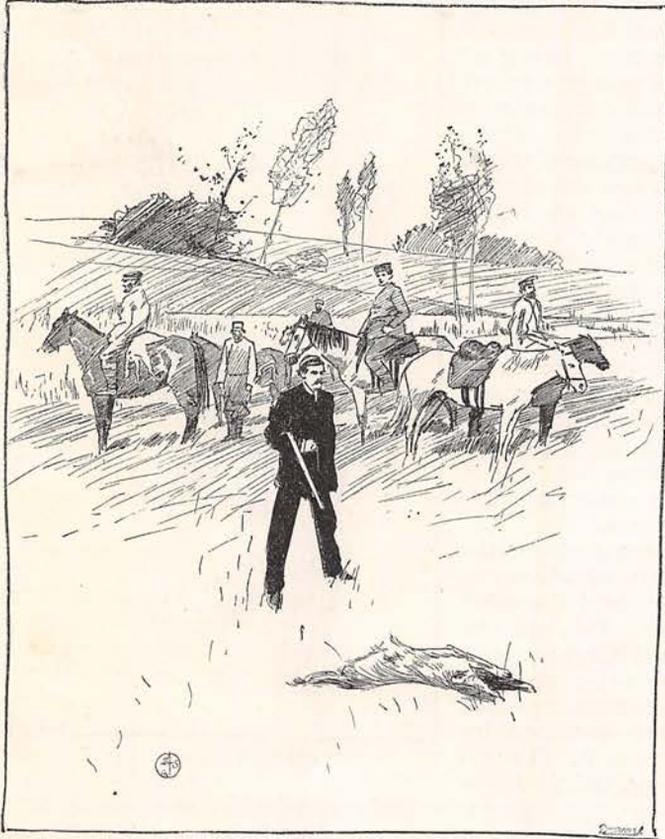
It seemed to me that he soon returned and woke us up, but in reply to my question he told us it was already six o'clock, that the wolves had replied to his howling, and that he was ready to take the dogs round so as to enter the wood from the other side. We turned out at once and went outside to perform our ablutions *al fresco*. It was a glorious autumn morning; the air was bracing and exhilarating, the mists were beginning to lose their opaqueness, the sun struggling hard to dissolve them into airy gold fume. Before we had quite finished our light breakfast the beaters appeared, armed with long sticks and poles, and departed along with the huntsmen. Strictly speaking, we could have dispensed with beaters, but their services were deemed desirable in order to prevent the wolves from escaping to another wood which was inconveniently near.



"LOO, LOO, LOO, LOO, LOO!"

We had two different breeds of dogs with us ; the famous *borzy* (the Siberian wolf-hound, of much more slender build than the Scotch deer-hound, but an excellent animal for all that, and, for short distances, the fastest dog in creation), of which we had six leashes ; and the no less famous *gontschy*, of which we had ten couples, some of them white and black with a strain of the English fox-hound in their composition, and others black and tan, descended from the race of old Russian *gontschys* now nearly extinct.

Soon after the departure of the dogs and beaters we also moved forwards, the law student, Mr. L., and four peasants on horseback, the host and myself on the *dolgoosha*. The head huntsman met us at the spot agreed upon, and assigned to each one his place—an open space for those in charge of the dogs, while the host and myself were



THE CONQUERING HERO.

stationed in the thick of the forest at a considerable distance from each other. With beating heart I took my stand and, expecting every moment to see the wolf canter along, kept my unsteady finger dangerously near the trigger of my gun. I could think of nothing, see nothing, hear nothing but wolves ; the bark of a far-off birch, the branches of a shrub, a large ant-hill, all assumed the shape and form of wolves. Frequent disappointments, however, soon freed me from feverish expectation, eagerness was succeeded by indifference, and I became observant of other things besides signs and symptoms of the wolf's approach. Suddenly the welcome notes of the huntsman's horn rang out like joy bells in my ears. Instinctively I raised my gun to fire, but dropped it on reflecting that it meant only that the dogs had been let loose, and that the hunt had begun in real earnest.

No longer daring to give reins to my wandering thoughts lest I should be taken unawares, I strained my sight and hearing to the utmost ; but neither saw nor heard anything to reward my efforts. Soon however the loud barking of dogs presumably at a short distance from where I stood made me start. It was evident that they were on the track of the game and that the last act of the tragedy was about to begin. Immediately afterwards I distinctly heard the beaters, but not more distinctly than the beating of my own heart, in the frequent intervals of dead silence, and my excitement reached its highest pitch when the loud *loo, loo, loo*, of one of the horsemen announced that he had sighted a wolf and was setting his dog at it. Before I could draw any practical conclusion for my own guidance from this intimation, I became aware of a series of quick pit-pats on the dead but crisp autumnal leaves and the forcing aside of bushes and branches on my right hand followed by the apparition of a fine old wolf rushing by at a fair speed at about thirty yards in front of me. This, it was clear, was not the wolf upon which the dogs had pounced, but another, the direction he was taking was from right to left, and a few seconds more would bring

him opposite me at a distance of about twenty yards. I shouldered my gun in a twinkling, and just as he was in front of the spot where I stood, took aim, and fired. When the smoke had cleared away the gray old prowler was on the ground, and running up I found that I had broken his back, but as he was still breathing heavily, I drew my dagger and pierced him to the heart.

Flushed with success I dispensed myself from obeying the strict orders given me and leaving my post moved towards the open space, where I could command an excellent view of my friend, Mr. L., who was holding his dogs in leash, a long straight dagger hanging at his side. Very soon a wolf cantered up towards him, evidently unaware of the presence of the sportsman who was stationed behind a stately oak; but descriing him when very near he made for the open. But just as he was passing Mr. L., that gentleman set up a full-toned *loo, loo, loo*, letting slip his dogs who sprang eagerly forward, making tremendous bounds after the wolf. The hounds were gaining upon the quarry every moment, and before it had gone a hundred yards Dogonyai (Catchup) overtook it, making an attempt to seize it by the neck, but the wolf with a sudden snap and a savage snarl repulsed his chicken-hearted foe. It was curious to observe how brave each dog looked until he reached the wolf when he visibly shrank from tackling him unaided. Thus Dogonyai would hesitate to make the decisive spring, even though Oogar was but half a yard behind on the other side. Their efforts were manifestly directed to a simultaneous attack, which the wolf by snapping now to the right, now to the left effectually prevented for a time. At last, just as Oogar had received a momentary repulse, Dogonyai screwing his courage to the sticking point, seized the wolf by the neck and both rolled over in the snow. A moment later the other two dogs had also made the impression of their teeth in his neck. Mr. L., who had been following close all the while on his spirited Turcoman steed, flung himself off the saddle like a professional circus-rider, threw himself bodily on the wolf seizing it with his left hand by the neck and dealing with the right hand a blow which I presumed to be a dagger stroke. A moment later the wolf lay dead on the ground.

Five minutes afterwards the sound of the horn rang loud and cheerily on the morning air, notifying the end of the hunt. On comparing notes we found that we had done a fair morning's work: the host had killed one wolf, Mr. L. another, and I the third—three out of a family of seven—the remaining four had escaped into a neighbouring wood through the line of beaters.

Thither we followed them half an hour later, sending round the dogs and the beaters, and performing each one his part as before. But we saw no wolves. As our hopes of success were fast ebbing and our appetites for lunch growing rapidly keener, a magnificent elk, bounding gracefully onwards, stood suddenly still on perceiving us, eyed us quietly for a moment and was gone. Deeply regretting that we were not prepared to give the noble quarry a fitting reception, we adjourned the hunt and repaired with ravenous appetites to Kytshenovo and our Kirgheez tent.

