

A RUSSIAN WOLF HUNT.

BY TOM BOLTON.

DURING the winter of '82 business complications made it necessary for me to take a journey into a wild and remote part of Russia. The house with which I was connected had had some very unsatisfactory dealings with one of its branches, and things had come to such a pass that a visit from a member of the main establishment had become imperative.

It was late in January when I had to make my start, and the weather had been unusually cold. I could travel 750 miles out of my journey of 1,000 by rail; but the balance of the trip would have to be made by sledges, not a very rapid or convenient mode of transportation, though it has the advantage of enabling the traveler to regulate his time as he feels disposed. Being extremely fond of field sports, and knowing that the section of country I was going to visit would, in all probability, contain plenty of game, I carried my Colt's breech-loading shotgun and a fine Winchester repeating rifle, with a good store of ammunition for both.

Well, I arrived at the end of my railroad journey without any accident or incident other than the regular daily skirmishes for meals and hot tea at the not overclean stations. We were fortunate in having a clear line, no snow having fallen for over a week—rather a remarkable circumstance in Russia—so we were not compelled to dig out any snowbanks, though this form of amusement is by no means unusual. The morning after my arrival at Udalla I sent to make arrangements for a sledge at the posting-station. This was soon done, and in an hour I was clear of the town and fairly started on the second half of my long journey.

In Russia the sledges are generally roofed over—especially those used for traveling—somewhat after the fashion of our buggies, and are very low, so that, provided there are plenty of rugs and furs, one can make a trip comfortably enough, and even sleep at his pleasure. The picture in the mind of travel of this description is of three horses abreast, gayly dashing along in fine style; but in my case the actual facts were very different. Before we had gone two *versts* from Udalla, the road became very bad, for the snow was deep

on each side of the track, and though the track itself was broken, the snow was in great lumps. Over these the sledge thumped and banged, while the horses stumbled and floundered along as best they could. The driver, meanwhile, consoled himself by alternately cursing the horses, the road, and his bad luck at having to come out, with an occasional *vogtd* at me for a crazy Englishman who wanted to kill something so badly that he had to go hunting in the dead of winter; my language and *impedimenta* giving rise to various unfounded rumors, while every one speaking English is put down as an Englishman by the peasantry in this part of Russia.

We reached the post-station, at the end of our first day's travel, long after night-fall. After a hot supper, I continued my journey all night, taking a number of naps, but no regular sleep, because, as soon as I began to doze, I would imagine my ribs to be a corduroy road, and my vertebræ a troop of army mules crossing it and kicking off flies. However, I managed to get along tolerably well, all things considered, and had the satisfaction of knowing that my unfortunate driver was having considerably the worse time of the two.

During the fourth day's journey, while we were passing through a very extensive forest, several wolves came out into the road and followed us a mile or more, but at quite a respectful distance. Their number was too small to cause me any uneasiness, though my driver did not at all like their presence, and the horses betrayed their alarm by their evident desire to hurry along. One large black fellow tried to get up some excitement, and howled most dismally, so I made my driver stop, while I got out my heavy Smith & Wesson revolver. Taking a rest over my left elbow, I let fly at his shoulder as he stood sideways to me, and had the satisfaction of seeing him stumble forwards, and take to the timber again with his friends at his heels. My driver told me that a sledge had been attacked by wolves on this very road a couple of winters before, and both horses and passengers eaten up, but that the wolves had been rather scarce since.

I had heard much about wolf-hunting as practised by the Russians of the Steppes,



WE ENTERED AN OPEN SLEDGE WITH THREE HORSES HARNESSSED ABEAST.

viz., driving a sledge through the woods and over the plains with a piece of meat dragging behind to attract the wolves, thus giving the hunters in the sledge an opportunity to kill them. I had promised myself to try this plan and have some sport in spite of the fact that my driver told some blood-curdling tales of the fierceness of the wolves when banded together and made desperate by hunger.

It was nearly night on the fifth day, before I arrived at my destination, and, as may be imagined, I enjoyed a good night's sleep, as well as a much better supper than I had been having.

The following morning I had to attend to the business that had brought me so far. I soon discovered that only prompt action would save us heavy losses, so I at once discharged the local manager, as well as two collectors, whose honesty I had cause to suspect. This threw much work on my hands, so I had very little time at my own disposal. However, I managed to make the acquaintance of a Captain Komanoff, who owned a small estate in the neighborhood, and who was devoted to sport in all its branches. When I mentioned my desire for a wolf hunt to him, he laughed and said he had been on several, and had generally had good sport. He added that he would arrange to go with me whenever I should be ready.

In the course of ten days I had the rather complicated affairs pretty well in hand, and as there had been a damp fall of snow, followed by a frost, I concluded I could spare time for my hunt. Accordingly, I

notified Komanoff, and one clear, calm night we entered an open sledge, that is, one without any top, and with three good horses harnessed abreast, set out.

I carried my shotgun, with a bounteous supply of cartridges loaded with small buckshot, thinking it a better weapon than a rifle to use at night, while Komanoff had an army carbine, carrying a large-sized ball, with which, he told

me, he had killed many a bear and wolf. Each of us was also armed with a revolver and heavy hunting-knife. The driver whom we had engaged for the night had a couple of pistols and a knife in his belt, and as he was a plucky fellow and had hunted (or been hunted by) wolves before, we were pretty well prepared for anything. Ivan (the driver) took care that we also had a small basket of lunch and a bottle of brandy, so we were quite in the humor to make a night of it.

The snow was well crusted over, and easily bore our horses, thus making a hard, level surface to travel over, also reducing the chances of a capsizing, which, if one were pursued, might give the sport a very different ending from that intended. When well out from the village and near the edge of the timber, the bait (in this case a quarter of a calf, well rubbed with asafoetida and bound with straw) was thrown over and



RUSSIAN WOLVES.

allowed to drag at the end of a stout cord about forty feet behind us.

It was certainly a grand night, the moon being at the full, and the reflection on the snow made objects almost as clearly discernible as in the daytime. Far up on the northern horizon the Aurora Borealis alternately flashed and paled, now throwing up bars and rays of violet and gold, and again diffusing itself over the heavens in a soft but ever-changeful glow.

We had been riding slowly along for a couple of hours, when Komanoff remarked:

"I am afraid we shall have our trip for nothing; the wolves don't seem to be about to-night, and yet this wood is a famous place to look for them."

"Don't be uneasy, Captain," said Ivan; "I am going to make a circle and cross our track again, and I think you will have some shooting yet."

The words were hardly spoken before we heard, far off to our right, the long-drawn, sepulchral howl of a wolf. He had evidently struck our trail, and the veal smelled good, so he was yelling for his friends. The team was at once stopped, while we listened and heard several more howls in response. The horses heard them too, and at once showed their fear by an attempt to get away, but Ivan had them well under control, and only permitted them to walk, not wishing to blow them before the beasts began to gather.

"I see a wolf," said Komanoff; "look away back these on our track, right under the moon. Ah! and there are several more; I think they will come along now."

Looking back, I saw several black objects coming out of the timber, which we knew to be wolves, and the way they increased in size showed they were following us at full speed. Every now and then several more would dart out of the woods and join our pursuers; but not a sound was heard, for wolves, unlike dogs, run mute. We now prepared to receive them, and we removed our heavy outer coats so as to allow us a better chance to shoot. The horses were allowed to trot, though it was all Ivan could do to hold them, as they were pulling the sledge by their bits, whilst they showed by their rolling eyes and quick backward glances, their extreme terror.

Our friends in the rear now numbered fully twenty, and to my surprise they came rushing boldly on, as though we were no more to be feared than some timid deer which they had cornered.

When they had come within thirty yards

I gave the foremost my right barrel and instantly followed it with my left among the pack. I saw the leader's tail go up as he plunged forward on his head, and Komanoff exclaimed that two more had dropped to my second shot. I fully expected that the rest would scatter in all directions, but they did nothing of the kind; they simply fell upon their defunct companions and tore them to pieces almost before they had done kicking, and then immediately resumed their pursuit of us.

When Komanoff saw this he looked rather grave, and told Ivan it would be well to head for home. "For," said he, "when they eat each other in that manner, it's a sign that they are starving, and should a large pack gather, we would have a poor chance of escape."



THEY FLUNG THEMSELVES ON THE OUTSIDE HORSE.

Accordingly, Ivan let his team go along at an easy gallop. The wolves were again coming along in hot pursuit, and were almost in range, when Ivan uttered a shout, and the horses made a sudden swerve, so that the sledge was nearly upset. Komanoff and I were thrown in a heap in the bottom, his gun being discharged by his fall, fortunately without doing any damage. Quickly recovering ourselves, we saw that a fresh and large pack of wolves had come out of the woods, and had nearly run into us, causing the team to bolt at full speed. I fired right and left into the thick of them (they were only a few yards away), while Komanoff began to empty his revolver.

This fusillade checked them for a few moments, till our original pack had come up

and joined them. Then, having devoured the slain, they came for us again with redoubled vigor, their appetites having evidently been sharpened by the taste of blood. As they closed upon us we fired as rapidly as we could load, but without alarming them at all, only a few stopping to bury the dead (in their stomachs), while the main body tried to come up with our horses and sledge.

Komanoff now cut our bait loose, for we had had all the fun we wanted. As the wave of wolves, as one might say, rolled up over it, we fired into the thick of it, and, as they were in a dense mass, must have done considerable execution. But they were only delayed a moment, and on they came again, their long, tireless gallop soon bringing them up with us.

It was indeed a fearful sight, and enough to shake the stoutest nerves. There was that vast pursuing horde, crazy with hunger and wild with lust of blood, dashing after us relentless as death. Their long black bodies swept over the snow, the hindmost constantly leaping over the foremost in their eagerness to press on, their eyes a-shine, with great flecks of foam on breasts and sides, while the glimpses we caught of their long white teeth showed us just what our fate would be should there be an accident to team or vehicle. Komanoff turned to me and said: "If they ever pass us and leap on the horses we are dead men. Keep cool and shoot only those that try to pass on your side and I will do the same on mine."

So we dashed on for a mile or so, keeping up a rapid fire, and shooting a number of our dusky friends. They were thoroughly in earnest, and made repeated attempts to get at our horses, but so far we had been able to foil them, when suddenly a big gray fellow dashed past on Komanoff's side (who missed him), and flung himself on the outside horse. Ivan shot at him as he did so, but the horse swerved and stumbled, breaking both traces before he could recover himself. The wolf fell as the ball struck him, but our team was now almost unmanageable, and we were liable to be upset at any moment. Fortunately Ivan kept his head, and succeeded in turning his horses towards a deserted charcoal-burner's hut, which he knew, and applied his whip lustily, so we dashed forward with renewed speed.

"I know where he is going," said Komanoff, "but our chance is poor unless the door be open; but it's our only hope

now, therefore be ready to jump the instant I do. Take you the arms, while I help Ivan with the horses."

A short distance farther and we sighted the cabin. The door was ajar, and as we pulled up I tumbled out the guns, robes and lunch-basket, and with a revolver in each hand faced our pursuers.

Our sudden stop and the rapid crack of my pistols seemed to confuse the pack, and checked them long enough to enable my companions to cut the horses loose. They instantly dashed off through the forest, a portion of our hungry assailants after them in hot pursuit, whilst we ran into the house and barred the door in the faces of those that remained. In a few seconds there was a perfect cloud of wolves round us, some of them frantically digging at the walls, and others trying the door with their teeth. Fortunately it was a stout one, or this story would never have been written,

After resting a little, we found a chink or two in the walls through which we could shoot, and again opened fire. After we had knocked over some twenty-five or thirty of them, the survivors drew off, though they still continued to prowl round and fight over the bones of the dead, for all we shot were instantly devoured by their companions. Meanwhile we had contrived to start a fire, and having eaten our lunch we lit our pipes and waited for day to break, thinking then our savage foes would raise the siege. In this hope we were not disappointed, for as the morning light became clear the wolves sneaked off one by one, casting, however, many wistful glances in our direction. We gave them a few parting shots by way of farewell, and as soon as the sun was fairly up we came out of our house of refuge and started on our five-mile tramp for home.

We had not proceeded far, however, before we met a well-armed company of men coming to look for us, as one of the horses had reached home, and they judged from his condition, as well as the cut harness, that we were in a scrape of some kind. We arrived home safely, and after a good sleep were none the worse for our adventure. The other two horses, however, never turned up, but their bones were found in the forest the following spring not far from the hut, just where the poor animals had been pulled down.

This experience cured me of all desire for wolf hunting, and though I spent several months at the post, and had plenty of sport, I never cared to see a wolf again.