

RUSSIAN FIELD SPORTS.

BY W. OLIVER.



ALTHOUGH each year the number of tourists visiting the Russian capital increases, only a few of them participate in the country sports, interesting as those

sports must be to the visitor. Shooting is to be had near St. Petersburg at all seasons of the year, and a well-varied, if not a large bag can be secured by any good shot willing to hunt for his game. The usual plan is to leave St. Petersburg on the eve of some holiday by the night train, when a slow run of a couple of hours will bring the sportsman into a wild country. After bedding down in a village *traktir* or camping out in the forest for a few hours the hunting is commenced and continued almost without a pause until the ground is left for the ride to the station in the evening.

There are two shooting seasons in Northern Russia, the summer and the winter. The former is the best for bird shooting, while in the autumn and winter the drives for hares, foxes, elk, bear, wolf, etc., are more successful. The summer duck shooting on the Finnish frontier, half an hour by road from St. Petersburg, is often very good, and at greater distances from the capital birds are plentiful. Good blackcock, hazel hen and woodcock shooting is to be had between St. Petersburg and Schlüsselburgh upon ground easily reached by the Neva steamers, but the purely Russian hunting party prefer to make the journey by road, a rough, uncomfortable and expensive mode of traveling, and therefore not to be commended if the ground can be reached by rail or steamer.

Unlike some American and British sportsmen, who endeavor to make a shooting trip a luxurious outing, the Russian shooter delights to rough it, to leave the sensuous ease of the capital and plunge into the forest as a peasant, to sleep on the floor or the oven, to eat black rye bread and drink milk, and to weary himself as quickly and as completely as possible. There are some who

take a middle course, accepting the accommodation provided in a Russian village and supplementing the provender with canned meats, white bread and drinkable spirits brought from the capital, but unless the guest of some nobleman or first-class hunting club of St. Petersburg, the visitor will find no spread luncheon, liveried lackeys or court etiquette.

In Russia light are the fetters of state etiquette, and the official, whether military or civil, is anxious to escape the trammels of an irksome civilization and assume the abandon, the nonentity of peasant life; and so we see the colonel, the state musician and the young *chinovnik* of the civil service discard their uniform, assuming the sheepskin jacket and top boots of the peasant and driving behind a country *troika* in a springless cart to the forest, where for a time at least they can forget that they are the servants of an autocracy and indulge that passion for the chase common to all men. And so they drive along, lying on straw in the bottom of the cart or seated upon a hard plank, jolting over ruts and stones, possibly enduring the torture of a jog-trot over a corduroy road and enjoying these discomforts because they are self imposed. On the way they will pull up at a wayside *traktir*, dirty, rough and pest ridden; they will drink tea from common glass tumblers, sit at a bare and rickety table in a room reeking with filth and odorous of long-worn sheepskins and Russian leather; they will ride on late into the night and sleep upon the brick oven in the only room of a peasant's hut, or lie out on the bare, wet ground in the forest, waiting for dawn.

Then, accompanied by a forester, they walk along the bed of a rivulet with the water up to their knees, and with upturned face and strained eyes watch for the blackcocks to whose "singing" they are listening. These wary birds can only be approached with impunity when, incensed with passion, they respond with a challenge to the love notes of a rival bird; blind to everything except their opponent they may then sometimes be approached near enough to be taken with the hand, or the sportsman may follow a bird about

the forest for hours without obtaining a shot. To vary the proceeding the attendant forester will whistle for the *rapchik* or wood partridge, whom he will easily call into range. The peasants either trap or net these birds or shoot them with a small calibre muzzle loader charged with an infinitesimal pinch of powder and a single No. 4 shot; it is not often that the town sportsman will give his attention to such small game. In the evening there is the flight of woodcock to be waited and watched for, and when the sun goes down the sportsman, tired out with unaccustomed exercise, drives back to town, asleep in the rumbling vehicle, his string of birds beside him and his faithful setter, pampered and house fed, as weary and sleepy as his master.

In the autumn there are some sportsmen fond of stalking or "still hunting," who will go into the forest attended by a single peasant, track and bring to bay the elk, the lynx or the bear. But these sportsmen are not so numerous as those who, being members of clubs, take part in the large drives on preserved estates. These drives are continued all through the winter, and although the birds are less plentiful after October, the surround always includes a large number of hares, some foxes and, if the sportsman receive a good position, he will have the opportunity for some good shooting and determine the killing range of his gun, as the large hares in their winter coat are not killed at ordinary ranges with anything smaller than No. 3 shot, even with a close shooting gun.

The winter bear shooting is *par excellence* the Russian shooting worth staying into midwinter to see.

The bear is to the Russian peasant what the pig is to the Irish tenant—the one thing by which he can raise money. The Russian sportsman who would not buy a "pig in a poke" invariably purchases his bear in a forest and secures himself against deception by buying his animal by weight.

When winter sets in the woodmen look out for the bear spoor, and mark the spot in which Bruin—lethargic from cold—decides to make his winter quarters. If possible a glimpse of the bear is obtained, but his size is always exaggerated by the vendor. Someone in the village, generally the oldest inhabitant, or *staritsa*, knows some person employed in one of the larger towns, and he is written to and in-

formed of the fact that the village has a bear or bears for sale. He addresses himself to the gun shops, hotels, or calls upon well-known sportsmen and offers his animal, the price varying according to the size of the bear and his accessibility.

There has been much chicanery practiced both by vendors and purchasers of bears, but at the present time, with a well-worded contract, it is impossible for anyone but a novice to be greatly cheated. So the sportsman, having decided upon the locality to which he will go, whether it be a day's sledge drive from the capital, or a few hours by rail and a short drive, makes his bargain, and the contract duly signed, and hand money paid as earnest of the purchaser's intention to fulfill the contract, he waits until a favorable holiday shall enable him to hunt up his purchase.

A pleasant party can be made up if five or six sportsmen, sharing expenses, purchase half a dozen bears lying within easy driving distance of each other, so that with two surrounds all may be taken in the one day. Such purchases can often be made in the Valdai Hills, four hours by rail from St. Petersburg, and the sportsmen, clothed in double furs and well provided with weapons, reserve a coupe and amuse themselves with a game at "wind" or "skat" during their dreary train ride. There is absolutely nothing to interest the traveler outside of the car. The country through which he passes, could he see it through the frost-covered, double-glazed windows of the heated car, would soon pall upon him. Fir forest, birch wood, occasional clearings of a few acres, a village at long intervals, a station buffet about every four hours, a straight, level, snow-covered track, along which the train slowly travels through the dark night.

Arrived at his station, a mere stopping place on the line, he will see peasants with lanterns waiting his arrival, who will aid him with his guns and impedimenta, and guiding him across the track lead him to the sledges they have brought for the party. Only one passenger besides the driver is allowed in a single horse sledge, and the procession formed the sportsmen are conveyed quickly to the village, where the largest hut is placed at their disposal. After drinking tea from the *samovar* of the *khosainn*, or proprietor, the party get to rest on a shakedown,

or lie on the warm flue from the stove. At daybreak in the morning tea is again prepared, the sledges are got ready and the party set out for a drive to the lair of the bear, usually not far distant from the quarters he occupied at the beginning of the winter.

There is sure to be some talk with the vendor ; his bear has moved repeatedly, and he has had to watch and mark him to his new lair, or his beaters do not like the cheap price at which he sold him, and he wants more. But all this is only talk, necessary because it is customary, and it need not alarm the visitor. The drive is perhaps a long one, up hill, down dale, over curious snow and icicle hidden bridges, through isolated villages, across bleak moorland, in the depths of the fir forest or along a road skirted with the snow-laden silver birch ; but as the visitor approaches the village which owns the bear he will be met by peasants anxious to begin the sport or curious to see the sportsman. As the sledges draw up in the centre of the village the populace cluster round the visitors, criticise their appearance and await employment as beaters by the *staritsa*.

A pretty scene is this, the rough-hewn sledges with their steaming ponies, the glistening snow, the rude huts with their picturesque entrances and the dark fir forest in the background. The rough energy of the youths anxious for a place at the drive, the expectant faces of the peasants, with anxious eyes peering from beneath shaggy brows and enormous fur caps ; the pleasing countenances of the young girls, as they gaze wonderingly at the strangely gotten up sportsmen in fancy furs or embroidered sheepskins ; the old men who look on sorrowfully, regretting that they can no longer share in the sport, and the self-satisfied air of the mothers watching their sturdy infants as they roll in the crackling snow ; the commanding presence of the *staritsa*, as with unceasing talk he harangues the beaters, all aid in fixing upon the memory of the beholder a scene as easy to recall as a view of Epsom Downs on Derby Day or the first glimpse of Carnival.

When the beaters have been chosen and they, with many voluntary helpers, stride with quick steps toward the forest, the sportsman again takes his sledge and a short, quick drive into the silent forest brings him within a short walk of his stand. The sportsmen for more distant

positions silently glide past him over the deep, soft snow, and he knows that hundreds of beaters are at that moment as silently approaching their positions. The huntsman having stationed the shooters walks quickly round the horseshoe inclosure formed by the beaters and, finding all properly placed, fires his gun as a signal. The beaters respond with vociferous shouts and beat the trees with their long poles. Bruin awakes, and with a quick scrambling gait slinks off, as he thinks, into the silent forest, but in reality toward the line of sportsmen who, still as statues, await his coming.

You hear the crack of a rifle followed by a savage roar and the breaking of the dead underwood—then again all is still for a moment; but the quiet is broken by the renewed yelling of the beaters, and you know that the bear is in the surround and wilt surely make another attempt to break away into the forest. Perchance you see him as with his quick shambling gait he hurries noiselessly through the forest, but for a few seconds only : he is quickly lost to sight in the thick growth ; but by the repeated firing to the right you know that someone sees him and has him at close quarters. The firing ceases, the sportsman stationed next to you calls that the " chase is ready ; " you pass on the signal and hurry to view the game and congratulate the sportsman to whose rifle it has fallen.

Loud vociferations from a small crowd of beaters attract you to the dead bear, and while you gauge his weight you cannot but hear the imprecations lavished upon the dead *vaska* by the quickly-increasing crowd of peasants. The sportsman who has shot the bear now gives instructions as to its removal, and the throng make their way toward the sledges, while the sportsmen prepare for a drive to the next beat. This is but a repetition of the first, unless the surround be a larger one and includes several bears or a mother with cubs, in which case the hunt is more exciting.

In the evening the villagers celebrate the successful hunt with feasting and music, while the sportsmen again take to their sledges for a long drive through the forest by night, in order to catch the early morning train to St. Petersburg.

It is a cold, cheerless drive, with no one but your driver with whom to speak, and you quickly weary of the dark forest and the monotonous trot of the ponies,

which they only vary by a canter down the hills and steep slopes. It may happen that your sledge is overturned, but by night this affords no amusement, as your ludicrous position is not seen by your companions and contact with the frozen snow is not pleasant. And so through the quiet forest and the deserted villages you make your silent way, your horse choosing his road, your driver merely indicating the pace at which he is to travel. It is possible that in the early morning or in the dead of night you may meet, far from any village, a small sledge heavily laden with forage, drawn slowly and painfully along by a small and lame pony and driven by a diminutive youth. He will pull into the snowdrift to leave the road free for your party to pass, and as you go by him you may guess what manner of person it is who in Russia fall easiest prey to the wolves.

Such, then, is the bear hunt, as it may be seen by any visitor to Russia, and as practiced by the large majority of sportsmen. There are some sportsmen, among them several Englishmen resident in St. Petersburg, who prefer to hunt the bear without a tribe of beaters, and these sportsmen generally go into the forest attended by their huntsman and often follow a wounded bear for hours or until stopped by darkness, and even then resume the chase at the earliest moment, for it is a point of honor with the Russian still hunters to bring their game to bay, and it is rare that a wounded animal ultimately escapes, so eager are they in their exertions to sustain the reputation of being a dead shot. Shooting of all kinds is to be had, and if the stranger has no sporting friends in the capital he should call at the branch establishment of the well-known English gunmaker, W. W. Greener, whose manager there will be able to say where shooting can best be obtained at short notice. At Moscow the stranger must visit the Sporting Club, a very fine building near the governor general's palace, and where each night in one of its 200 finely-decorated rooms a coterie of sportsmen may be found discussing their special hobby.

On open nights the reception rooms are filled with a brilliant gathering bent upon social amusement, but it will not take the visitor long to discover the retreat of those who make shooting their leading pastime. Moscow is a better centre for the sportsman than St. Petersburg, and in addition to the large game shooting he may join in coursing parties or spend a day with the Hawking Club. South of Moscow bears are less numerous, but wolves, lynx and elk are plentiful, while only the wolf is found in the extreme south. Stalking bustards affords the shooter a welcome change from the thick forest shooting of the north.

Angling is not generally practiced in Russia. In Finland it is the national summer sport, but the number of native-born Russians who devote themselves to the mysteries of the gentle craft is small indeed.

Hawking has been revived in Moscow and a club was founded under the patronage of Prince Oldenburg, at the capital, but with the death of its president last year it became virtually extinct, Falconry is the pursuit of the indigenous princes of Caucasia and is followed as a sport in Syr-Daria and other trans-Caspian governments. Coursing the hare with Persian greyhounds, or the fox, stag or wolf with the fine Russian staghound is a popular sport, but unfortunately rarely to be seen near any railway station and is consequently beyond the reach of the ordinary tourist.

Wolf tracking is a winter sport, monotonous and unexciting. The visitor, unless he can ride like a Cossack, will derive no enjoyment from this method of circumventing the pest of the country. Other outdoor sports, as skating, ice yachting, trotting, horse racing and steeplechasing have a large number of votaries, and the rowing and sailing clubs of St. Petersburg are numerous enough to satisfy the most enthusiastic waterman, and of pigeon clubs (live birds and American inanimate targets) there are several at the larger towns, the members of which wilt be anxious to try their skill against any gentleman willing to compete with them.

