



Dead aurochs

CHAPTER IV

CAUCASIAN AUROCHS

BY ST. G. LITLEDALE

BOS BONASUS is the scientific name for the aurochs, the great ox that roamed in bygone ages over the whole of Europe : its remains are found in Spain and Great Britain on the west. How far east it ranged I cannot say, but when on the Upper Irtysh in Siberia, close to the Mongolian frontier, I obtained a skull which had been dug up from the river bank. Like the American bison, it has been driven from the low ground forests and open plains, and has tried to find refuge in a secluded mountain range ; and thanks to the inaccessibility and impenetrable nature of its chosen retreat it is still to be found, though in very limited numbers, in as wild and savage a state as it was in the days of Cæsar. In the forest district of Bialowicza in

Lithuania, belonging to the Emperor of Russia, there are a number of them living under very efficient protection ; but the Caucasus is the only place where they are still found absolutely wild. On my first visit to the Caucasus in 1887, the natives told me about the aurochs, and, fired with the idea, I made several attempts to get one ; but we were too late in the year, and were, so our guides informed us, in imminent danger of being snowed up in the mountains, so we had to leave without my ever seeing a fresh track. Mrs. Littledale and I returned the following year, and for three months not a week passed without my making two or three excursions after the aurochs. We were camped just about the timber-line at an elevation of (approximately) 6,000 feet, and we only found their track in the densely timbered valleys below. There were no means of getting our camp pitched lower down, for the valleys were quite impassable for horses, and even if possible it would have been questionable policy, as such extremely shy and retiring animals would certainly not have remained within a feasible distance of our tents. The only way we got into the country at all was by following up a ridge : when the ridge ceased to be practicable then we had to stop. In the early morning I used to descend into the timber, sometimes trying the higher ground, on other days the lower ; and I frequently crossed the valley and up the other side, which entailed a descent of about 3,000 feet, a similar ascent up the corresponding side, and the whole thing over again on returning to camp. We rarely saw a fresh track. The aurochs seemed to love a level piece of ground, perhaps because when the ground was level there was always a swamp with facilities for wallowing, or because, being originally a plain animal, some latent hereditary instinct made them feel more at home there than on the steep hill-side. But whenever we were able through an opening of the trees to look down and see a level spot, we used to make straight for it, because we found from experience that if there were any of the animals near at hand we should find traces of them there, and if there were no tracks then it was almost useless spending any more

time in that neighbourhood. I had with me Tcherkess hunters—we had not a Russian in the party that trip—and they worked very hard to get me a shot at a dombey, the Tcherkess name for the aurochs. We found places where they had stripped the bark off rowan trees, both the bark and berries evidently being a favourite food, and where they had grazed on the bracken one afternoon we thought we heard some below us.

The wind being right, we lay down for a couple of hours in the hope that they might come towards us. Presently we heard the snapping of twigs getting nearer and nearer. I made myself a little peep-hole through the bracken and cocked the rifle; about sixty yards off I saw some young fir-trees sway about as an animal forced its way through, and there stood before me, not the aurochs I had hoped for, but a young stag. He sauntered past within forty yards without getting our wind, and we then crept in the direction where we imagined the aurochs were, for the hunters were positive it was not the stag they had heard. The two men were barefooted and I wore tennis shoes, but the bracken was dead, and with all our care it was impossible to go through it without making some little noise. Suddenly there was a disturbance as of an omnibus crashing through the branches, but we saw nothing; and that was the nearest I got to an aurochs on that expedition. The same weary plodding through dense timber brush and bracken, and every evening the same story, a tired frame and a clean rifle, was continued week after week till the natives told us that unless we wished to leave our baggage behind we must get out of the mountains.

The autumn of 1891 saw Mrs. Littledale and myself back in the Caucasus, and on our arrival we immediately inquired for our old hunter. He had embraced and kissed me fervently on both cheeks at parting, and we looked forward to seeing that fine old man again. He had snow-white hair, but his springy walk and keen eye made me hope that I too, at his age, might still be able to toddle along with a rifle after big game. But he had gone, emigrated with some

thousands of his tribe to Turkey. The best of our new hunters was a Lesghian, who spent most of his life in the mountains, and it would have been better for him if he had spent it all there, for he only came down to the settlements to get vodka, and there he would remain till his last rouble had vanished.

We had occasion to pass through a village in changing our shooting ground, and once in the village it took us three clear days to get our Russian followers out of it; baking bread, buying sheep, changing ponies, all in turn were pleaded. At last we were ready, but the Lesghian did not show. When he arrived he was ridiculously drunk; his drunkenness taking the form of excessive politeness. If either Mrs. Littledale or I spoke to him, off went his cap and he bowed nearly to the ground. Near the village we crossed a river with some difficulty; directly he saw us well started in the water, back he doubled for the village. I recrossed at once and captured him. I thought it would keep him out of mischief if he led a baggage pony. He objected, pointing out that he was over forty, and that one of the Russians was a younger man, who ought to lead the pony. I shook my head, and said he was much too young to be trusted, but that, as I was over forty too, I arranged that he and I should lead the pony alternate versts.

I agreed, at his earnest desire, to let him have my alpenstock when he had not the pony; if he said he was tired and sat down I said it was the very thing I was dying to do; when he wished to carry my field glasses I took a fancy to pack his rifle, and so the farce went on; Mrs. Littledale was in fits of laughter at us. But he was worth the trouble, and knew more about the habits of the game than all the rest of them put together. Before we camped that night he was himself again, and he had no other opportunity of breaking out; once or twice he expressed a wish to go down to look after his bees, and we appealed to his feelings by telling him he was the only trustworthy person in camp, and that Mrs. Littledale would not feel safe were he to leave. Little presents of tea and quinine

kept him contented till we broke up our party. As an instance of a curious custom in the Caucasus, I relate the following circumstances. I had had bad luck in losing a wounded beast or two, and the Lesghian told me the rifle wanted washing. I let him look through the barrels, which were bright as silver, for never under any circumstance do I go to sleep without first cleaning my rifle. He said it looked clean, but it wanted washing. After wounding and losing a stag, the Lesghian insisted on returning to camp. He said I might fire at all the animals in the whole Caucasus, but until my rifle was washed we should get nothing. To humour the man we retraced our steps, and I asked him to cure the rifle ; he said we must wait till the morning, and then get water from different streams before any animal had drunk, or man had washed in it. The Russian hunters were equally confident of the necessity, so the following day they brought water from three different springs, carefully boiled it, and then washed out the rifle with the hot water. Whether it was owing to their fetish, or to my having substituted solid for hollow bullets, I express no opinion, though the hunters were less modest, but from that time forth I lost no more wounded beasts.

Early one August morning, with my two best hunters, I made another attempt after zubr (this being the Russian name for aurochs). We struck right down into the timber, making for a mineral spring, where we hoped to find tracks. On our way we passed and examined another small spring and found nothing fresh, but on reaching the lower spring we came on the track of a bull that had drunk there the previous evening. We followed his trail as quickly and silently as we could. The tracks showed that he had gone up the hill and had been browsing about there, and we found a comfortable bed which he had scraped out for himself in the pine needles, under a big pine with low spreading branches. We now redoubled our precaution ; the head hunter went first, tracking ; I, with the other man carrying the rifle, kept a sharp look-out ahead. Several hours passed, and we were still steadily creeping

through dense pine woods, when the aurochs dashed out of a thicket, and down a watercourse, barely allowing us a glimpse; but soon I saw about a hundred yards off, ascending the other bank, a great ungainly brown beast. There he was at last—'everything comes to him who waits.' What struck me most during the moment that I was bringing the rifle up was not his size, but the extreme shortness between his knee and fetlock. Bang, bang, went the double Express, the first bullet catching him through the ribs, as he was sideways on, the other just by his tail as he disappeared into the brush. I made record time down that hill, jumping fallen trees, and loading as I went. How I escaped a broken leg I don't know, but I got below him, and saw the beast coming down, evidently very sick. Again, again, and again, I let him have it. I ran up to within forty yards, and when he saw me he lowered and shook his head, but he was too far gone to do more. Not wishing to spoil his skull, I waited till he turned and gave him his quietus behind the shoulder; he ran twenty yards and fell on his back into a deeply cut watercourse. As we stood on the bank looking down at his great carcase, it struck me as strange that such an ungainly beast, without excessive speed or activity, with eyes and ears small in proportion to those of a stag, should have managed to survive at all in this thickly populated Europe of ours, his very existence being only known to comparatively few people. As he lay I took the following measurements:

	ft.	in.
From nose to root of tail	10	1
From top of hoof to top of withers	5	11
Circumference of leg below the knee	0	10
" of the knee	1	4
" below the hock	0	10½
" round the hock	1	7
Girth of body	8	4

The last measurement, girth of body, is a little uncertain, as the beast was lying huddled up, I could not get the tape underneath him, and therefore had to measure one side and then double it.

The Lesghian and I prepared to sleep out. We gralloched the bull, and a difficult and dirty business it was, as his carcass had dammed up the rivulet, and we were working up to our knees in water and blood. We took some of his rump steak, cut it into little chunks and skewered it alternately with lumps of fat on a long stick carefully trimmed. When cooked it looked and smelt so delicious that I would not then have traded those kabobs for the best dinner Delmonico could turn out. I was very hungry, and fell to with a will: the will was there but not the power. One might just as well have tried to chew a stone. Even the hunter was beaten. He tried again with liver, but as I draw the line at that, I omitted supper, and looked forward to what the morrow might bring forth. Early next morning the men came with food, &c. We cut down some small trees, barked them, and got them partially under the aurochs, then tying ropes to a horn and to each of his legs, all hands hauled first at one leg then at another, making fast the slack gained with each haul, until by degrees we got him out of the stream on to the bank. We then skinned him and cut the meat roughly off his skeleton. His bones were all carefully put into sacks. The skin, bones, and a little meat formed a heavy load for three ponies, which the men had managed to bring from camp somehow. That afternoon and the two following days we were busy drying and preparing the skin and skeleton. Having been successful with the bull, I thought I would try to get a female, so we pursued the same tactics and I eventually shot a cow, whose skin and skeleton we also preserved. Some weeks after that, I found myself face to face with a grand old bull, bigger than my first victim. We were hidden in the bush and he stood in the open wood, and grand indeed he looked. I laid my rifle down, for the temptation was great, and I would not have slain him for 1,000*l*. I took off my cap to him out of respect for a noble representative of a nearly extinct species. I had got what I wanted, and mine should not be the hand to hurry further the extermination of a fading race for mere wanton sport. I shot the aurochs for the

express purpose of presenting them to the British Museum, where I have every reason to believe they are extremely appreciated.

The aurochs of Europe is closely allied to the American bison (*Bos americanus*), but surpasses it in size. Its legs and tail are larger, and its hind quarters not so low. The mane is much less developed, composed of shorter hairs, and not extending so far back as in the New World species, in which, besides, it is of a black colour.