

THE BEGGING TRADE IN RUSSIA.

BY A RESIDENT IN MOSCOW.



AMONG the many trades plied by the peasant population of the Government of Moscow we find that of begging, with an organisation and character so original, that certain facts concerning it, collected on the spot, may not be devoid of in-

terest to the general reader.* The word "beggar" usually brings before the mind's eye the image of some unfortunate human being, deprived in one way or other of all means of earning his or her daily bread. To the strong man, able to apply his strength to work of any kind, begging seems ignoble; and yet, in the Government of Moscow, in the centre of industrial Russian life, there are places where begging formed from of old, and now forms, a distinct trade, practised by the young and old of both sexes, independently of any degree of worldly wealth they may possess. Such places are the bailiwick of Zaponorsky, in the district of Bogorodsky; and the bailiwick of Weyshgorodsky and part of Simboch-offsky, in the district of Vereïsk. This latter radius bears the general name of Schouvaloffshin, and its inhabitants are usually known as Schouvalikoffs, because they were for more than a century the serfs of the Counts Schouvaloff, the ancestors of the present Russian Ambassador at the English Court.

Schouvaloffshin consists of fifty-two villages, lying close together, and, according to the last census, each with a population of 4,348 souls. Agriculture is now, as it was formerly, the chief occupation of the inhabitants; not only the culture of different kinds of grain, but extensive onion crops forming important items in their revenues. The onion fields demand copious manuring, and enforce the necessity of raising cattle. As a general rule, the material condition of the Schouvalikoffs in no way differs from that of the other peasant populations of the district. In many ways, indeed, they possess advantages which their neighbours do not: low fertile prairies along the river Protva, vacant seigneurial lands where their cattle may graze at leisure, abundant woods, and the vicinity of three large towns—Borovsk, Mojaïsk, and Vereï. And yet begging, as a trade, only appears among the peasantry who were formerly the serfs of the Schouvaloff family;

in adjacent villages, belonging to other landed proprietors, there is no trace of it. How is this to be accounted for? Direct indications as to the primitive conditions of peasant trades in general can rarely be come at, particularly if the trade has been carried on "from of old." "We had to feed ourselves somehow," say the peasants when you ask them why such-and-such a trade, and no other, sprang up in such-and-such a place. "The land alone, without a trade of some kind, is never enough." In conversing, however, with the old and aged among the Schouvalikoffs, we have gleaned facts which partly explain the matter. "A hundred years ago or more," runs the tradition, the peasantry of the localities in question, besides being tillers of the ground, were also carpenters, and went "on their rounds" into the Western Border, where the begging trade was spread to a considerable extent. It was a new business to them, but they had every opportunity of becoming familiar with it; and after the war of 1812, when their dwellings were burnt down and their fields laid waste, they turned to it themselves, unwillingly at first, until they found "what a profitable trade it was." They were encouraged also by the fact that theirs was no regular feudal service: they never saw their absent masters, who generally held high posts in St. Petersburg, and after 1812 the peasantry had invariably no one to look to but the German land-steward. He did not care what their occupations were, provided they fulfilled the heavy obligations laid on them; and these obligations might always be got over for certain sums of money. The burden of the statute labour was little felt; but the absence of any local earnings, the necessity of paying the poll-tax with ready money, the withdrawal of all regular solicitude on the part of the proprietor, and the winking of the German land-steward—these were the circumstances which led to the introduction and development of begging in this part of Russia. Such deep root did it take in Schouvaloffshin that the repressive measures afterwards resorted to by the local administration neither abolished it nor weakened it. Such measures were: prohibition of all passports for residence in large towns, confinement in bridewells for vagrancy, despatch to respective homes under military escort, and so forth. But they did not check the spread of begging, and only brought about the by-word—"There is never a prison where you won't find a Borovsk thief and a Vereïsky beggar." This is comprehensible when we remember that the Russian peasant, once grown accustomed to a trade, sticks to it most tenaciously until a more profitable one turns up. Bad crops and long years of scarcity forced the villagers of Monakoff, for instance, to have recourse to begging, and soon they looked on it as their legitimate trade. But fifteen years ago waggon-making somehow made its way to them, proved more profitable than

begging, and soon supplanted its ancient rival. Indeed, even in Schouvaloffshin begging has been decreasing for some time past, and its substitute is forest-wood-sawing and the hauling of the timber to the nearest railway-station. Some of the richer peasants have even gone to St. Petersburg and started as draymen and droschky-drivers. What has been most prejudicial to begging is the fact that "the trade has spread. Before the French war it was unknown, and now every corner of Russia has beggars enough of its own. In old times a good beggar would bring home of a winter from 100 to 200 roubles; for the last few years the same beggar will only fetch from fifty to seventy-five; and as for this year, some of them could hardly get their horses dragged home by Carnival time." From this we see that the falling-off in the profits has been serious; and yet, at the present moment, not less than one-half of the fifty-two Schouvaloffshin villages still carry on the trade.

Let us now say a few words about its organisation and technology. In autumn the peasants start for Moscow, Borovsk, Mojaïsk, Vereï, or any other adjacent town, to sell their onions. On the road they manage to find out from the corn-traders in which governments the harvest has been most abundant, and after selling their onions and collecting all necessary information, they form themselves into gangs of from ten to twenty persons. Each gang musters from five to ten waggons, and must contain individuals of all ages—men and women, boys and girls. This latter regulation is strictly adhered to, in order that there should be a just distribution of labour and profits throughout the whole trade. They get half-yearly passports at the office of the district bailiff, and set out for different governments, each gang going, of course, in a different direction, in order not to awaken the distrust of charitable donors by crowding into one locality. The aged among them attribute their necessitous position to old age and infirmity; the women to having small, helpless children on their hands; the children are all orphans; and the grown men tell a tale of "the Fire," in which izba, cattle, and everything perished. They generally go to Little Russia, to the Baltic Provinces (especially Finland), and to Poland. As the Finns do not understand Russian, the Schouvalikoffs generally provide themselves with begging letters, written in the German tongue, in which the great misfortune that forced them to have recourse to begging is described. Should their course lie through governments annually resorted to by crowds of holy pilgrims (Government of Voronège, for instance), they prepare false documents supposed to come from ecclesiastical dignitaries, authorising them to collect for the building of a church, or for holy oil to burn before the embossed pictures of miracle-working saints. About the end of October their preparations are over, and they start by "the first winter-road." On arriving at the spot where they intend to commence operations, they branch off in different directions, in groups of twos and threes, first coming to an understanding about meeting again in a week or two at the nearest town, to sell whatever they may have had time to collect. On

driving up to a village their horses are left on the highway, and the beggars trudge from door to door, asking for charity in Christ's name "for the poor burnt-down." Corn, barley, coarse homespun linen, money, and old clothes are given to them. There are experts who maim themselves, or dress up in half-burnt fur jackets or smock-frocks, without even a shirt beneath them, and ascribe all this to the effects of "the Fire." Many of them, just before entering a village, give the children they have with them a whip-lashing, in order that real tears and sobs may more effectually soften the hearts of the charitable public. Travelling along the highway, the Schouvalikoffs see from afar a long train of sleighs—a little business may likely be done. So the octogenarian of the party is stretched in a little sledge, a piece of matting thrown over him, and when the sleighs come alongside, the drivers and occupants are implored, with tears and moans, to give a little help towards burying "the poor old father" (or grandfather), "who has died on the way." I knew a peasant, Alexis Egoroff by name, who led about his wife on a chain, and told the sad story of how she had gone mad. He always had a crowd of listeners, and the woman did her best to corroborate her husband's statements. She beat her head against the walls, tried to crawl into the stoves, stooped on all-fours to drink out of cattle-troughs, and always finished up with a rush at her husband to strangle him! This line of conduct resulted in such bountiful donations, that in a year or two the aforesaid peasant built himself a fine izba, cultivated a large field of onions, and lived comfortably with his wife, "whom he knew to be a clever woman," he said, "when he married her." The Russian beggar trade demands a spirit of combination, a dexterity, and quick-wittedness worthier a better cause. There are Schouvalikoffs, it is said, who buy children from nurses in founding hospitals, mutilate them, and go about with them, collecting alms for "the poor, foolish natural."

The gangs all return home before Easter by the "last" winter-road, and remain at home until the end of autumn. Only very old men and women, quite unfit for field labour, or families who have for some reason or other quite abandoned husbandry, follow the begging trade all the year round. Of such there are very few, for in spite of begging and all itinerant trades, "the bit of land at home" is always the main-stay. Besides the Gang Association there exists a Capitalist Organisation, consisting of manager and hired labourers. The peasant Anton Cemenoff, for instance, hires six boys (apprentices!) every winter, and sends them "trading" to different places, assigning to each his task. The task is to gather from five to ten old shirts per diem, according to the age and capacity of the boy, and should the task not be fulfilled the apprentice undergoes heavy punishment. The exclusive business of the manager is to sell these gathered rags in Moscow. Parents willingly give out their children to such apprenticeship; for not only under an experienced master do they receive good wages—from ten to twenty roubles a winter—but they learn the art of the trade, and may themselves afterwards become "experienced

beggars." That is the main point; for they say, "No girl of decent family will marry a beggar who does not know his trade."

I have said that during the last five or six years the earnings of the Schouvalikoffs have been greatly on the decrease; still, even now, on an average, every grown beggar can make forty roubles a winter, besides keeping himself and his horse. The fodder for the horse is, in their opinion, of the greatest importance. The horse fed on charity feeds long and well, fattens speedily, and on coming home would sell for double what he would have done had he not been taken out. The horses of the peasant householders who do not follow the beggar trade cannot get through half as much work in the summer as the beggars' horses do. This circumstance is of great importance to them, for agriculture is the chief business of the summer, and their onion fields demand a great deal of very careful tillage. In this manner the beggar trade lends a helping hand to peasant agriculture, and, as a general rule, the beggar *ménage* looks prosperous. Their domiciles and out-houses are in good repair; they have more cattle than their neighbours, and no arrears on their land. The worst feature of the trade, in the opinion of the peasantry themselves, is that it leads to drunkenness, thanks to which the most skilful beggar can never rise even to moderate well-being. "The more he gathers the

more he spends in drink." Neither is respect for the property of others much developed among them. Indeed, many of the Schouvalikoffs look on petty thefts as misdemeanours in no way derogatory to their dignity; but this is by no means the case with all.

An oppressive feeling weighs down the honest man's heart when he contemplates begging organised into a regular trade. How great must be the moral fall of those who calmly turn to parasitism as a means of existence, and look upon begging, whining, and lying, not with contempt but with respect! It is clear that this is one of the sickly phenomena of social life in Russia, one which they are striving to eradicate, and against which their most effective weapons are schools. Within the last two years the Vereïsky Local Board has provided funds for the building of four school-houses—the first ever seen in the land of the Schouvalikoffs; and if the children attend them the whole winter through, that alone will keep them from going a-begging. But four schools are not enough for sixty villages; and if, besides reading and writing, some useful trade were taught in these country schools, it would enable them to give up begging all the more speedily. As to repressive measures, in the existing state of things they simply lead to nothing. "Were we forbidden to beg," say the peasants, "we might starve."

STONE STEPS AND WOODEN STAIRS.

By BEATRICE LEIGH HUNT, Author of "Two Points of View," &c.



CHAPTER THE EIGHTH.

HE sun had been beating in through the dirty windows of Victor's office in Hanover Square with such a steady heat that the blinds, whose colour was in keeping with the windows themselves, had been lowered. But even now there seemed to be a glare in the room, which in spite of its spaciousness felt close this afternoon, and made the rumble of traffic in Regent Street and Oxford Street seem oppressively continuous. Amongst the litter of papers on Victor's writing-

table there lay an unfinished letter, from the completion of which he had turned during a conversation with a man whose shabby clothes, large forehead, and backward sweep of fair hair proclaimed his calling, and his position in it. The door of the room was opened, and one of the office-boys entered and

handed Victor a slip of paper, just as he and his visitor rose at the termination of the interview. The German musician was not aware of the colour deepening suddenly in Victor's face, although his eyes were fixed upon it with meek expectancy.

"Then you shall hear from me in the course of a few days," said Victor. "Good afternoon."

His visitor now withdrawing, Victor was left for a moment alone, so surprised at the idea of the entrance which even now he was watching for, that he could hardly tell whether he anticipated it with pleasure. In less than half a minute Edith's figure appeared, and, as the door was closed behind her, she stood with her eyes on Victor. She looked courageous, as if she saw that there was a danger to face, but did not for one moment shrink from facing it.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit, Miss Holman?" asked Victor, feeling a strange effort to greet Edith with any suitable, self-possessed word.

"I have come because I want to ask you a question," she answered quickly, for she in her turn felt a growing trepidation as he advanced and shook hands, and felt, too, that in speed lay her greatest power. A moment's pause ensued, during which it seemed to Edith as if the room grew unbearably hot. Victor's eyes were fixed upon her face, and in the sight of that