

A RUSSIAN COURTSHIP.



A RUSSIAN PRIEST.

maladoi chilavek (young fellow) has a heart tucked away somewhere under his *blusa*, but in his love-making—or rather, in his wooing, which is quite a different thing in Russia—it is not his habit to take this part of his anatomy into account. He is much too prosaic for that. Dan Cupid is as blind in Muscovy as he is in England (though one can scarcely think that the same limited wardrobe will suffice him), and the peasant who wishes to make a good matrimonial bargain is naturally wary of such a counsellor. He regards with easy good-humour the transaction of taking unto himself a wife, and seldom dreams of letting the image of his betrothed come between himself and the enjoyment of a due allowance of *vodka* (brandy). Marriage, in his theory of the Cosmos, has nothing to do with poetry or passion, with rapture or despair. It is merely a bargain, which it behoves a man to make at an early period of his life, the hopes and fears connected with the bargain being mainly those, not of the heart, but of the pocket and its contents.

Let us suppose that a well-to-do peasant, good-humoured enough in his way, and not a whit more mercenary than his neighbours, has a mind to be married. His first step is to see that his wardrobe is in order, and that he is otherwise supplied with all that befits a man in his position—a house to live in being by no means a needful item; as where this is lacking, the bride can be taken to his father's house. He then makes out a list of everything that he possesses, whether in the way of clothes, money, or provender, and takes this to the *Swatta*, who is an important person in every village. This *swatta*, or intermediary, is simply an old busybody, who takes a delight in finding out all about her neighbours' affairs. The type is sufficiently well-known to other nations, but it has remained for Russia to recognise her peculiar gifts, and use them for the benefit of the community at large.

THOSE who read this article with the hope of gaining insight into a pursuit closely connected with love and sentiment must prepare themselves for disappointment. It is only fair to state, however, that the business-like couples with whose affairs we are about to deal belong for the most part to the peasantry, or to the lower middle classes. No doubt the Russian

The suitor is received with smiles, and with that air of significant mystery which befits a *swatta*. After hearing his account of himself, and noting points which he has obviously misrepresented—for the Russian tells lies with the most engaging simplicity, and is less confused than his hearer when found out—she produces her list of eligible maidens, with portraits of those whose looks are in their favour. This list supplies the information that each damsel possesses so many table-cloths, so many gowns, so much lace, so many pairs of shoes, and the like. Needless to say, it will go hard with any girl who does not happen to be in favour with the *swatta*, for that old functionary has really a good deal of power. Theoretically leaving a youth perfect freedom of choice, a clever *swatta* is often able, by nods, hints, and ejaculations, to make him decide upon any *barishna* (young lady) she happens to have in her mind.

Satisfied at last, the peasant, either with the downcast air of one who is going "cheap," or with the happy confidence of *quid pro quo*, names the girl whose belongings have won his heart. She may be one of those whose portraits he has seen; quite as likely she is not. Whoever she is, the *swatta* is pretty certain to admire the wisdom of his choice. How much more sensible is he "than the young *dourak* (fool) who went to a *swatta* in another town, and chose a *barishna* who had scarcely any flesh upon her bones—one whose very face seemed to say, '*Diety*



RUSSIAN PEASANT GIRL.

minyа chaska chiu' ('Give me a cup of tea'). The barishna that is now chosen is a little pigeon indeed. She is of all others the bride for a man of taste. Ah, *Stoopi!* what has he been about? He is stealing her little *golubtchika* (darling) of a bride!" etc.

Pleased with these compliments, the suitor ends the interview by entrusting the swatta with his portrait



BETROTHED PEASANTS.

and the list of his worldly goods. The girl is then consulted, and if she is satisfied an introductory meeting is arranged. With regard to this meeting, it is hard to think that there is not a little sentiment in the girl's heart at least. Katerina must differ very much from her English sister Kate if the glamour which surrounds Vaseli or Jakoff when he comes a-wooing is solely dependent on his possessions. In villages, indeed, although the swatta is always in requisition, the young people must know one another by sight at least, and there is more chance of an attachment subsisting between them than in large towns.

If the first interview is satisfactory, the relatives talk the matter over, inquiries are made, and a date is fixed for the *Bogmalitwa*, or betrothal. This bogmalitwa (literally, God's blessing) takes place in the house of the bride, and is rather a picturesque little ceremony. High up in one corner of the room is the Icon, an image of the Virgin or of some favourite saint. The image is close to the ceiling; and suspended by three chains in front of it is a lamp, either of silver or of ruby-coloured glass, according to the means of the

householder. Beneath this stands the priest, attired in his robes, and with the lamplight streaming down upon his long hair. Hitherto there has been a little subdued talking among the relatives present, but this is now hushed, and all are expectant as the mother of the bride and the father of the bridegroom advance, the one leading her daughter, the other his son, towards the priest. In a few simple words the lovers plight their troth. The priest solemnly pronounces his blessing, gives a short prayer, and three times makes the sign of the cross over the betrothed couple. He then takes the girl's hand and puts it into that of her future husband, telling him to kiss her. This kiss ends the ceremony, and is the signal for general congratulation. The wedding-day is usually three weeks after the betrothal, a period of six weeks being considered a long engagement.

The betrothal being over, and the wedding within measurable distance, our subject is practically ended, but one cannot help wondering whether, like the prince and princess in the fairy tale, the peasant and his bride are likely to "live happy ever after." There are several ways of considering such a question, but perhaps the truest reply would be that, as a marriage without affection excites less hope in the contractors, there is more indifference amongst married people in Russia than in England, and less chance of either direct happiness or unhappiness. If there are fewer faithful husbands and wives, there are fewer wife-beaters and husband-poisoners. It is not so harrowing to the feelings that Vaseli should never care for Katerina as it is that Tom has ceased to adore the woman he once loved so well; and light-hearted Katerina can always console herself with Jakoff.

In cases where love really follows marriage, the *Muzhik* and his wife live as merrily and carelessly as a pair of children. Constantly in the open air when the season admits of it, they seem to inhale from their Mother Nature some of her own brightness and vigour. The young wife helps her husband in the labours of the field. They sing at their work, unmindful of the day when muscles will be relaxed and faces withered. Visitors to Russia often return with dismal accounts of the grossness, the moral degradation, of the peasant's life. It is for a Tolstoi to see the life with other eyes. In "Anna Karénina" he shows unmistakably how Love, which makes the world go round for some of us to all so sorrowful a tune, can change the despised life of the peasant into something idyllic in its beauty. "Levin," the great novelist tells us, "had often looked with interest at this life, had often been tempted to become one with the people, living their lives; but to-day the impression of what he had seen in the bearing of Vanka Parmenof towards his young wife gave him for the first time a clear and definite desire to exchange the burdensome, idle, artificial, selfish existence which he led for the laborious, simple, pure, and delightful life of the peasantry." With a fervent wish that they have before them just such an existence as herein depicted, we will take our leave of Vaseli and Katerina.

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