

A RUSSIAN VILLAGE.

AN ARTIST'S SKETCH.

BY VASSILI VERESTCHAGIN.

LAST summer I passed a few weeks in a village—a small settlement of some fourteen or fifteen houses—that had been burnt out about a year before, and was just being built up anew.

Right behind the village corn-kilns passed the Moscow-Jaroslav Railroad, as well as the causeway, the latter being well kept and bordered by four rows of birches.

The village's chief adornment is the old wooden church dedicated to St. John the Baptist. It had also taken fire at the

the roof and cupola are entirely out of place, and are decidedly worse than the ancient wooden tiles which they have replaced. But we must still be grateful that this monument of the seventeenth century has not been levelled, that another structure has not been erected in its place—one of those imitations of Roman architecture, with porticos, Corinthian pillars, and such like absurdities now so dear to the hearts of the Russian clergy and nobility. All the repairs and renovations in the church are, besides, seen very plainly, so that it will be very easy to restore its original form.

A peculiar odor of antiquity lingers about this church. First of all there is the church-warden's old woman, who with some primitive hook begins to pick at the hole in the entrance door; whether it is that the old woman is somewhat blind or the mechanism faulty one cannot say. Anyway she picks and picks at it long and persistently, until the bolt springs up; then she unlocks a padlock, and grumbling, no one knows at whom or at what, lets you in to the staircase. These stairs lead not to one of those delightful porches that in the stone churches of Jaroslav are ornamented and painted over, but to a wooden gallery that borders the building on its northern and western sides. Here it is that such people as have come too early for service remain waiting; here it is that any one tired or taken unwell in church comes out to get rested; here it is, again, that the local peasants, as well as wanderers and pilgrims, assemble for a talk at the end of the service. Along the gallery there is a great number of little lifting windows, which make the place very fresh and breezy in the summer; in short, this is one of the testimonials to the delicate attention with which former builders treated the worshippers—an attention that has gone out of fashion.

As a sample of the ancient way of building we may take, for instance, the porch of the stone church of John the Baptist in Jaroslav. That porch borders the church on three sides; everywhere along the arched windows run benches



CHURCH OF ST. JOHN THE BAPTIST.

time of the conflagration, but was saved by the combined efforts of all the peasants. This church was built in the second half of the seventeenth century, in the reign of the Tsar Alexeï Mikhaïlovitch. It is very original and interesting outside as well as inside. A short time ago it almost toppled over to one side, which was not to be wondered at, since its foundation was as narrow as the keel of a boat. Happily, though, the church-warden, a clever peasant, did not hesitate to spend his own money to save the church. He interfered in good time, put the church on a brick foundation, erected brick supports, and now the building is good for another two hundred years.

It is true that the new foundation has raised the church somewhat, that the whitewashed brick supports are unsightly, and that the iron sheets covering

with colored designs; the vaults as well as the walls are painted over with instructive scenes from the Old and the New Testament, accompanied by fitting inscriptions. All those benches are occupied long before the beginning of services on the eve of great holidays, while at the feast of the patron saint of the church the porch is chock-full of worshippers come from afar. These people pass even the night there, sleeping on carpets and mats furnished by the church. Some come on the eve of the holiday from a distance, say, of fifty versts,* and bring their children and folks along, their chief care being not to miss the matins. Is it handy for such people to put up at an inn, to get up almost at midnight, disturbing others, and exposing themselves to hardship? Here on the porch they take their nap on some matting spread on the floor, then get up in time to attend divine service. Now let any one try to enter a modern church out of the hours of service, even be it in stormy weather, and he will certainly be turned away without ceremony.

But let us return to the village church. The door leading to the church is of a very remarkable form, resembling a holy images case surmounted by a Byzantine ogive arch, which is composed of a yellow garland in relief on green background. The door itself is also painted green, and has an immense lock of a delightful design nailed on red leather. The enormous key is turned thrice in the lock, giving out a sound each time to the accompaniment of the grumbling of the old woman.

One would now expect to enter the church; but no, there is yet another large padlock, put up for safety's sake.

* About thirty-three miles.

The ceiling of the church, one discovers on entering, is an ancient one in ogive style. The walls likewise have escaped renovation. The *ikonostass* separating the altar from the main church has not the *naïveté* of shelves with holy images that we find yet in many old wooden



AT THE CHURCH DOOR.

churches of the north of Russia; but still this one is simple enough: it consists of four ranges of holy images running along the wall, and joined by narrow boards quaintly painted.

Some of the holy images here are of good enough execution; therefore it is to be regretted that they are almost covered with offerings of gold cloth, silk,

beads, false stones, and all kinds of rubbish, that does not enrich the church, but only serves to hide the images of Christ, the Virgin, and the saints. The entire character of the *ikonostass* is affected by these offerings, which convert it into a giddy display of multicolored pieces of goods bestowed on the images in accordance with the well-known precept, "Offer to God what you do not need yourself." The absurdity of adorning holy images in this way is strikingly illustrated by a crucifix which is stationed to the right hand of the choir. The crucifix is a large one—almost of natural size—and one of the zealous champions of church gorgeousness had the body covered with gold cloth from the belt down to the feet, so that now the Crucified is hanging literally in petticoats. It was also an excess of zeal on the part of the warden to varnish the images too abundantly.

"Fairly good holy images thou hast here, granny; keep them in good order," said I to the old woman.

"I know it—I know it, benefactor," answered she. "Others have been here before thee—'old believers,' I heard they were. They offered me a thousand apiece for these two if I would only give them up. 'But where is the purse to hold so much money?' I answered."

Behind the right choir is the prior's place, the church formerly having belonged to a monastery. Therefore, very likely, even now at service men occupy one side of this church, and the women the other.

It must be said, however, that divine service is very seldom held in this church—never more than a few times each year—as the church has no priest of its own, but is annexed to a neighboring parish.

"If he would only come and sing a little to us now and then, our Father Nicholas," complains the granny about the priest. "But no, he would not sing to us—not he. What is to be done with him? Taken all in all, he would not sing here even ten times a year; that is the kind of priest he is." But immediately after this complaint, in direct contradiction of it, granny would state that "nothing but pecuniary loss comes from the service here, because the men of the village are more apt to go to church in town, where the saloons are side by side with churches; and, with women alone, where is the income?... Just see: coal

must be provided for the service, and incense, and red wine for the communion. . . . Well, then, how are you to make both ends meet?... Now conduct service if you can!" To that "communion wine" the old warden treated me once: I found it to be pure.

The warden, Pietr Mikhaïlovitch, an old man of seventy-eight, was at death's door a short while ago. On my arrival I found him taking some sort of innocent mixture of the kind ordinarily prescribed by physicians in order to humor the patient or quiet their own consciences. Following my advice, the old woman made her husband drink a hot decoction of dried raspberries, covered him up well, got him in a perspiration, rubbed him thoroughly down, and the old man felt so much better after the treatment that he soon went about as usual, complaining of nothing but deafness and an occasional headache.

Yet not long ago the old man made up his mind that he wanted to take a steam bath; nothing would dissuade him from it, and he did. It was with great difficulty he dragged his feet off. I went to see him as soon as I heard that he had been brought out of the steam bath half dead. "Look here, grandfather," said I to him, "why didst thee go to the steam bath before thee recovered entirely?"

"What is to be done? could not stand it; I had to get steamed," mumbles the old man.

"Well, many are the things that thee would like to get at. . . See, now, thy feet don't carry thee."

"Could not be helped; a long, long time I had it on my mind, and now I did it," replies grandfather, in his weak, broken voice.

Occasionally I would send a small quantity of Don wine to the old man, and he enjoyed it so well that once, under its influence, he smartly drove out on a cart to the hay fields. "Here we are! . . . Good is thy wine," would he say to me, "but the price must also be a good one."

Pietr Mikhaïlovitch is not of poor peasants. He was quite well off before the first conflagration, some fifteen years before, and he used to go every year to Petersburg, where his children carried on a business of their own.

Pietr Mikhaïlovitch is not on good terms with his priest, and he never lets slip an opportunity to indirectly reproach Father

Nicholas with greediness, to which the other—also a very respectable man—from his side responds by calling the warden a caviller, accusing him of having drawn away in favor of the church some seven hundred rubles (nearly \$350), the interest from which formerly reverted to the local clergy.

"He got the wheels greased up, you know, in the Consistorium; he is a master-hand at that, is Pietr Mikhaïlovitch; so he got the money drawn away from us; and such a good lump of money as it was! I alone used to get eight rubles [four dollars] a year for my part; no trifling sum that, considering our condition!" . . .

I watched this priest as he was going the rounds of the peasants' houses, collecting sour cream and eggs, on the last day of the Lent* preceding St. Peter and St. Paul's day.

I could not understand at first what it was he was doing. Clad in an old cassock, the white underwear plainly exposed beneath it, the old man carried a pail in one hand and a wooden bowl in the other; going from house to house, he would knock at the door of each, and peep in at the windows. At first I thought he had been kept out late and was asking for a night's lodging. But no; after knocking vainly at one peasant's house, he passed on to another, and then still to a third. Eventually women carrying trifling donations began to come out from the back yards, some making gestures which seemed to explain why it was that the donation was so small; some to kiss the priest's hand; some others to simply bow to him and pour their sour cream into his pail, laying down a couple of eggs in the bowl. The priest did not once lose patience, and such peasants as did not answer his summons at his first knock brought out their offerings to him on his return trip. In place of sour cream I sent him out a ruble of money; and the good man put down his pail, and taking off his hat, crossed himself thrice at the church.

Father Nicholas did not complain of the peasants, but remarked to me that they were much weighed down by poverty. "No little money is spent on drink, and that is a truth," he would say; "but then, if we let the holidays out of the

count—the only days when they might be taking a drop too much—one has to wonder, indeed, what it is that they only live upon. Poorly, very poorly off are our peasants!"

One would not be far amiss, though, in setting down this poverty to the general drinking, which in this village is as firmly rooted and as thoroughly carried on as in other points of Russia.

The people here mostly raise vegetables; very little grain is sown; as to potatoes, peas, and chiccory, there are large quantities of them here. This village is only three versts distant from the city of Rostov, and all over this neighborhood chiccory is called the "Rostov coffee," and dealers in that kind of product are known as the "chiccory kings."

Labor in this locality is still more of a heavy task than is grain harvesting in other places. Here the pea crop and the hay crop are at the same time ripe. These parts are renowned for their peas. They must be not only gathered, but shelled, and all this must be done on time, because small sweet-peas fetch as much as forty and fifty kopecks* a pound, whereas the price of full-grown peas is a trifling one—some five or ten kopecks.

In the year of my visit dealers paid forty-three kopecks a pound at first for the best kind of peas; later on, they gave forty and thirty-eight kopecks a pound; and if we judge by the example of previous years, when all the peas were ripe the price would have to come down to twenty-five kopecks a pound. Then the peasants are glad to sell even at this small figure, since the whole business of buying peas and sending them off to Moscow is in the hands of a few persons, who usually agree between themselves not to pay more than a certain price; and no matter how a peasant woman tries to get a better price, no matter how many buyers she applies to, she will nowhere get a kopeck more for her peas than the dealers dictate.

If only the peasants were able to come to an understanding among themselves—were they to agree to work together, to combine in harvesting as well as in selling—they would surely be able to force the dealers to pay them the highest current price at the time being. Unluckily, though, no agreement of such a kind is to be thought of where peasants are con-

* The Greek Church prohibits the use of milk and eggs no less than that of meat during Lenten times.

* A kopeck—half a cent.

cerned; they are sure to quarrel over the business, and then to throw up the whole thing. Thus it comes about that goods selling in Moscow, say at eighty kopecks, can be got by dealers at half this price, and that only a few hours from the capital.

Quarrels prevail not only between different households, but even in the very midst of families living under one roof.

ration of the peas; first they are scalded, then they are dried three times over—and here great care is to be taken that the peas do not get yellow, and lose their green color. If they turn yellow, they immediately come down in price.

Of evenings all sit down before the house and get to work shelling peas, with the help of two hired women assistants,



A RUSSIAN TYPE.

Now in our house, for instance, the grandmother—a brisk and still lively old woman of seventy-five—sided with one of her daughters-in-law against another, and they went so far that eventually nothing would do but they must divide all their possessions; even the iron sheet serving to dry peas was cut in two—spoiled on purpose—so that it should not serve any one. If one party to the quarrel gets its peas burnt a trifle, its opponents are happy; if a young ox belonging to one dies, the others rejoice, saying, "See now how God chastises him!" Yet at the same time they are all of them really good and very considerate people.

There is no little work over the prepa-

who usually sing all the while. The men generally gather together and engage in the same work of shelling peas by the bailiff's house, on which occasion whiskey is served—to brace them up to work, probably. The result of it, however, is that oftentimes, as the peasant women are singing, the young folks joking and laughing, there will break in the noise and shouts of half-drunken men; then it requires hard work to pull asunder such as are most boisterous, and even with this it is not always possible to avert an occasional blow on somebody's face.

Generally all work assiduously, except children, who eat peas unceasingly: if a child happens to come across a large pod

containing a dozen peas and more, "What a large pod!" he says; "I must eat it"; then, striking a pod of two or three peas, he says, "There's a small one; surely it must be disposed of." A puffy pod, maybe, comes along, and then a flat one—each one in turn finds its way to the child's mouth. Many are the jokes in the circle; these mostly originate with granny, who, among other things, used to say, "No matter how much land a man gets, he will not get rich on it, but only hunch-backed."

Although the people get up early, they go to bed rather late. Work ceases only at dusk—generally when the shepherd is driving off the horses to pasture for the night. That last task is by no means a light one; it is so easy for the shepherd to go to sleep a wink or two, to get a little careless, and let the horses stray away a bit;* and see! before you know it, they will be sure to get into the fields. One night, it was said, much wheat was trodden down. Of course the owners of the damaged fields bring in a complaint. Who shall be made to pay them? This is matter for the Mir to decide.

Among the horses there is one spotted in yellow and white—a somewhat frisky animal. From the time when that horse was bought he would let no one manage him; the only way to overcome him was to ride him into deep water; but as soon as he set foot on firm ground again, that horse was sure to throw his rider and hurt him. It was found, later on, however, that the young rider's mother knew how to master this horse. In her hands the animal would give himself up willingly. When the old woman would catch that horse, though—we saw it with our own eyes—she would stroke him, caress him a long time, even talk to him. Was not that, after all, her secret for taming him?

The summer of this year in its first part turned out to be very rainy. The peasants, who wanted to get to haying, as well as myself, with my sketches begun by sunlight—all of us were looking forward anxiously to every coming day. Usually I tried to guess the weather by the way the sun would set and the clouds would be disposed, and sometimes my guesses would be amiss. Yet the peasant women of our house generally guessed

* There are no fences about fields in Russia.

aright by watching what cow would walk in foremost as the herd would be driven home of an evening: if a red cow would be walking in front of the others, a fine day was to be expected; did a dark cow take the lead, the next day would hardly turn out to be a clear one. As there are no popular signs without some reasonable foundation, so it must be supposed that this one is also backed up by some hidden reason. It is possible that the impressionability, nervousness, and briskness of a cow's movements must be to some extent regulated by the cow's color, which, in countries with perfected methods of cattle-breeding, is always adapted to the climate and the general conditions of the soil. Thus in travelling over Holland one does not see in that damp, foggy climate any other than black-and-white cows.

I was living with my wife in a roomy house, where at first we were somewhat annoyed by vermin, but with the aid of Persian camomile powder we soon got rid of the nuisance; as to the other unavoidable fellow-lodgers in a village house, the water-bugs, we got used to them: they don't sting any one. Concerning the rest, we got on quite well and comfortably, and the daughter of one of the mistresses of the house waited on us with so much zeal and such thorough attention that it would indeed be rare to find anything that would come up to it in towns nowadays.

Provisions had to be brought over from the town of Rostov, but fish we could get on the place. In our river Ishnia eel-pouts were caught as well as crucians and crawfish; the last tumbled of themselves in the weels set for them, or into ordinary baskets, while the eel-pouts, when not caught in the same manner, were hit with harpoons, or else simply caught by hand. "The principal thing to do is to take good hold of the eel-pout's head," our laborer, Alexander, who was also our principal fisherman, used to say in answer to my inquiries as to how does he succeed in catching such a lively fish with his hands. Yet still it was not clear to me how I was to "take good hold of the eel-pout's head"; to me it looked very much like the proverbial catching of a bird by "putting salt on its tail."

The fish and crawfish were delicious, and not at all dear; thus, for instance, for twenty kopecks we used to get several eel-pouts, one of which would bring the scales down

at two or three pounds, say; large crawfish could be had at two kopecks apiece. As to the milk, we could not have fared any better; we used it in all kinds of preparations, a bowl of it, holding a couple of quarts, costing but five kopecks. Communication with town was somewhat troublesome, since there was but one cabman in the place, and though he lived next door to us, he liked to make difficulties, so that we generally had to send a boy for a cabman to town, and that was very agreeable to the youngster, who for some ten kopecks went on his errand running and jumping.

Our house was one of the few that escaped burning at the time of the conflagration, and most likely it was saved by the shady willows that grow all around it. This was one of many occasions on which the usefulness of trees was demonstrated, yet still the peasants are very unwilling to bother themselves about trees; even if they plant them, they won't water and look after them, and so the trees perish.

The fire occurred at night, and, as usual, from a trifling cause. A tipsy peasant, lighting his pipe, set fire to his house and the whole village. Probably that peasant felt his guilt very keenly; at least he disappeared from the village right after the fire, went to earn his living elsewhere, and was not seen for a whole year, although he still sends occasional remittances in support of his wife and children. It is interesting to note that on that very day this same peasant, in common with others, helped to put out a fire in a neighboring village. Together with the rest, he got drunk there on the wine to which they were treated in gratitude for their assistance; and having saved their neighbors', this peasant came home and set fire to his own village.

As stated already, there was another conflagration in this same village some fifteen years previous to that; and at that time the peasants lost still more than they did lately. Every summer and fall "the red cock" (as they call a conflagration) sweeps along unrestrainedly all over the northern part of Russia, and so used is the peasant to this fact that, noticing the smoke or reflection of a fire in the distance, he only scratches himself and says, "There, now! the fires have set in already."

As I have mentioned, right behind the

village passes the railroad, and the wedding of the railroad watchman, which took place this summer, was an event indeed for the whole village. And what gossip was set on foot by the occurrence! At first all were in a flurry because the wedding was intended to take place in the Church of St. John; then the priest of the bride's parish set everybody talking because he refused to comply with certain formalities, so as not to let such a good thing slip out of his hands; and after all, the young people had to be married at that priest's church. Again there was something else that set tongues a-wagging. The bridegroom, a brave workman receiving twenty rubles a month salary, had a defect in one eye, whose lids presented such an unattractive appearance that the young man constantly wore dark goggles. It turned out that the bride happened to thoroughly find out that defect in her spouse only on the day following their marriage, and had the foolishness to complain of it to her girl companions. How people laughed then at the bride's tardy fastidiousness! There was not a house in which her mortification was not laughed at and talked over threadbare. Our granny, for instance, in shelling peas once launched such a cutting and funny joke concerning the squeamish bride that we could not restrain ourselves from laughter.

Not far from the railroad passed the causeway, which swerves here toward Perejaslav-Zalieski—a place not reached by the railroad. It is a pity that the birches bordering the causeway are so neglected. No one ever thinks of replacing a dead tree, so that empty places run sometimes from six to twelve hundred feet along the roadway. Large numbers of people of all descriptions pass along this causeway; a good many of them are pilgrims of both sexes, who take this road going north and returning as they proceed to the Solovetskoï monastery. It is at this point also that people turn off to the side when going to visit the holy places of Rostov.

I myself loved the causeway chiefly because under the birches here I used to gather mushrooms, my wife making a delicious soup of them. There were not many mushrooms to be found this summer, since the ground in all the neighboring small woods was thoroughly submerged. Berries were not very plentiful either.

Provisions were not high with us, nor were they as low as in other country places. For instance, we had to pay from thirty to forty kopecks for a fowl; beef was ten kopecks and fish four kopecks a pound. Of course prices would have been still lower were it not for the railroad, which swallows up all the place produces, and carries it off to such large centres of consumption as the neighboring city of Jaroslav and the somewhat more distant Moscow.

All work in the fields is carried on in common by the village Mir, and many are the disputes and even quarrels on such occasions. Mowing time comes on, say. On the eve of the day when the work is to begin, the bailiff makes the call, blowing his horn, and all the peasants assemble at his house in the evening. Here they hold a council, at which everything is talked over and settled: at what point to set out, where each man is to work, and all that kind of thing. Nevertheless, when morning sets in, there is again much discussion over the question as to where each one is to stand, and where to begin mowing. But once work is started, all becomes still, and it does one's heart good to see how not only men, but women and girls, swing their scythes. Once in a while one would notice some exceptionally smart mower, who, having distanced all his companions, would stand grinning and cracking jokes at the slowness of the laggards, or with some passer-by that had stopped to look at them.

There is no school in the village, and children used to go to school to a neighboring village; but that school has also been closed, so that there is now no place where children may be taught. There are a good many illiterate people among the grown-up folks, chiefly among women, and consequently there is much superstition; great is the faith in signs and charms. On one occasion, for instance, a swallow flew in at our entrance door, and began beating against the walls and the ceiling, trying to find an outlet; seeing this, our girls got in a flutter, so great was their certainty that some misfortune was impending. As to the patron saint of the Church of John the Baptist, the people hold him outright to be the father of thunder, and no sooner does a storm draw near than all turn to him with prayers to avert lightning, to cast off his wrath, and exert his

good-will on the people's behalf. With the first peals of thunder our housewives hasten to light the image lamps before the "ikons," so as to pacify God and the interceding saints.

What tricks cannot be played on these people of ours! what are not the devices at hand to frighten them! Our landlady told us once herself how she and her daughter were scared by a passing gypsy. "She got at us and began to bother us as we were sitting before the house. 'I can do anything with you,' says she. 'I can make you either happy or unhappy. I can this very minute call down fire from heaven on you. I can make cold water boil at my bidding. . . Don't you believe me, now? Well, then, let me have a glass of water; I will show you,' says she. Well, we gave her a glass of water, and she began blowing at it and mumbling over it; then, we notice, she takes a pinch of something with her fingers out of her pocket and throws it into the water, and sure enough that very moment the water gets to boiling and boiling! . . . Now we have seen it with our own eyes, so we tell you the truth. The gypsy ordered that water thrown away; 'otherwise,' says she, 'it may set the house on fire.' Well, she asked then if I had not some dress to give her, and so I gave her an old 'sarafan' of mine, and Sasha here gave her a kerchief for the head. I gave her twenty kopecks besides. But, would you believe it? this would not satisfy her. 'Give me sixty kopecks more,' says she, 'otherwise dire misfortune will befall you.' I wellnigh lost my head then; did not know what to do with her, and so sent Sasha for granny, hoping the other would help us out. Granny came, and sure enough she straightway set out to drive off the gypsy. And how mad that gypsy got then! 'You will remember me,' says she. 'You would not give me a trifle now, yet there will come a time when you will be ready to give up much, but it will be too late then.'"

Even in telling us of that occurrence our worthy landlady was evidently still under the influence of the gypsy's threats, and was dreading revenge at her hands. But when we put some Sedlitz-powder in water in her presence, causing the water to effervesce, then only, and not before, she believed our assurance that the gypsy played a trick on her, and that no dire misfortune is to befall her for refusing the sixty kopecks.