

CHILDREN OF ALL NATIONS: THEIR HOMES, THEIR SCHOOLROOMS,  
THEIR PLAYGROUNDS.

## IX.—RUSSIA AND POLAND.



COME, oh, spring! oh,  
lovely spring!  
Come with hope  
and come with  
treasure,  
Come with waving  
flax, and bring  
Corn abundant,  
dance and plea-  
sure."

RUSSIAN SONG.

Thus sings the  
Russian mother  
as she swings

the hammock-like cradle in which the baby is sleeping, and rejoices that the long cold winter is past, and the beautiful summer is at hand.

The children rejoice, too, and run out into the first rains of the season, and laugh and dance and sing songs in their praise, as English children do when the first snow-flakes fall. Snow is no novelty to them, but after the long hard frosts of winter, rain is, and they know that it foretells the loveliest, though shortest, time of the year.

In some parts the young girls assemble on the banks of the rivers, when the ice is breaking, and joining hands, move backwards and forwards in graceful measure, entreating spring not to delay

its coming; and on the first of May children and parents wander into the woods for a long stroll, and returning, bring with them buds and green boughs and young flowers.

The Russian spring is short—so short, that in times gone by it was not classed among the seasons at all. It comes with a bound, and has scarcely time to bid the trees awake from their winter sleep, and the flowers spring up amid the meadow grass or by the banks of the brook, before it is away with a bound. Not before it has recalled the birds, however: the cuckoo, the lark, and the swallow. On given days, according to the Russian calendar, all appear, one after the other, returning, as the legend says, from Paradise, and bringing its warmth with them.

Every season has its songs. When the children have sung in praise of spring, they welcome summer, with its hot, long days, in which in northern Russia, for a short time at least, the sun scarcely sinks below the horizon; then autumn, then winter; but

the songs of autumn and winter are sad, the former grieving for the departure of the birds, the leaves, and the flowers, the latter telling of children lost in the snow, or hugged to death by the shaggy bear, or devoured by the hungry wolf.

The children of rich Russians are very much petted, their homes luxurious. The young nobles are seldom sent to school, but have tutors and governesses at home.

These tutors and governesses are natives of France, Germany, and England, and as the children hear these languages spoken from their earliest years, and are besides gifted with a more than usual share of the power of imitation, they find no difficulty in speaking foreign languages, which they generally know much better than their own. As long as they are small the little nobles look very pretty, especially the boys, who are dressed in all manner of picturesque costumes. Their *caftans* (coats or dresses), of embroidered Persian silk or of velvet, or of Circassian goat or camel-hair fabrics, are bound round the waist with gorgeous sashes, in which little three-hilted dirks are placed.

Caps and turbans of all descriptions and colours cover their curly little heads, and boots, scarlet, yellow, black, topped with red or white, and furnished with small gilt spurs, adorn their feet.

The little girls in the towns are dressed after the Paris fashions, but at their country seats they, too, take to the pretty national costumes.

Children are not children long in Russia. They soon become little gentlemen and ladies; the boys are put into grand uniforms, and enter the military schools or become imperial pages, when the principal study of a great many consists in bowing with grace, dressing splendidly, and spending money; the girls in helping their mothers to entertain guests, and in lounging about the sumptuous drawing-rooms.

To be just, though, we must mention that a number of boys and girls of the better classes are shaking off their indolence, and seem determined to show what the children of Russia are really capable of.

A number, especially the sons of merchants, are sent abroad for their education, and many go to the schools of their own country, which are governmental, and on the whole of recent date. Of course there are very good ones among them, but there is a lack of good teachers. Till of late years the best were sent to Poland—not out of special love to the Polish children, but because Government, having forced the Poles to become Russian, had an interest in educating them in its own way, in order to imbue them as quickly as possible with Russian ideas.

As a rule, the Russian children are kind and friendly: rather too quiet according to our ideas. They do not indulge in fun, they do not even cuff or fight each other, and their favourite amusement is swinging. They learn politeness and hospitality from their fathers, who think they have duties to all who have partaken of their bread and salt, which are placed on a silver salver on the table of the hall of every house, ready for every guest, and who, when they say "Come and take your herring with me" (equivalent to our "Come and take your bread and cheese with me"), mean it. This politeness, though, only displays itself towards their equals; their servants and the *tchornī narod* (black people), as the lower class is called, cannot boast of much being shown them. Formerly, when they were serfs, they were very roughly, and even cruelly, treated. The stick was constantly used, the barbarous knout much too often, and pig and dog were the favourite expressions by which they were addressed.

The little Iwan of the present day, born in freedom, has a great chance of becoming something better than his poor father and grandfather, who had no life of their own to speak of, but were kicked and beaten at the will of their *barin* (master), and, worse than that, sent to Siberia if they rebelled.

Iwan's father has not a pretty little hut; it does not remind us in the least of an English cottage.

The *mouschik* (peasant) builds it himself, and his only tool is his axe. His *izba* (cottage) is made of logs of wood; the crevices are filled up with weeds and soil, the floor is made of manure and earth mixed, and great heaps of soil are piled up round the walls outside to keep the cold out. There is one great stove, or hearth, which heats the one room by day and serves for a bed for the older people at night. The little children's hammocks are slung to the rafters around the stove, and there is a kind of rough bench by the wall, which serves as bed for the older children if the family be large.

But the *mouschik's* family is seldom large, especially since the custom of each "race" living together in two or three *izbas* in one *dvor* (yard) is falling into disuse. By "race" all the connections of a family were understood: father, mother, grandparents, great-grandparents, uncles, aunts, cousins, and children. All lived in a patriarchal way under the rule of one, very often the great-grandfather, who ruled his large family to the best of his ability and according to Russian custom, with the help of the stick. The tale we have all heard of the old man who was found seated by the side of the road crying, and on being asked what ailed him, replied that his father had beaten him for throwing stones at his grandfather, must have had its origin in a Russian village.

Little Iwan is not spoiled. As he has to learn to accustom himself to bitter cold and privations of every kind, he begins his education early, and it is very often the only education he gets, for the national village schools, though sometimes spoken of, are not much known of in reality. Some few there are, and some private schools exist, instituted and endowed by kind-hearted people; one or two Sunday-schools are also trying hard to make their way; but on the whole the *mouschik's* child has little opportunity of learning to read or write.

His principal education is Spartan-like. He is taught to endure cold and every hardship. After the pope of the village (all priests are called popes) has christened him—which he does by dipping him three times in water, repeating a kind of formula to exorcise the evil spirit, and then expectorating on the floor, to show that the evil spirit is exorcised and can be mocked at with impunity—little Iwan spends his child-life, with the exception of his brief summers, in the over-heated, unhealthy atmosphere of the dirty room, crowded with vermin of all kinds, in which his hammock is slung, or in the snows outside his cottage door, in the bitter cold of a Russian winter, which is often so severe that wine and all

provisions freeze, and money and metals, if touched, burn the fingers and take the skin off, as if red-hot.

The *izba* I have described has generally a chimney, or hole, for the smoke to make its exit by (which, however, is often stopped up in winter for the sake of warmth), and a small window, sometimes glazed, more frequently covered with dried fish-skin. Poor and dirty as this *izba* is, the *izba* of a Polish peasant is still more wretched, the Jewish hovels especially being mere mud-heaps,

disturbed by a morning visit from their next door neighbours. Now they are hurriedly making up for lost time, the elder one plaiting the younger sister's hair while their visitor with the baby in her arms tells them that she has been up a couple of hours already, and that her brother who stands near with his mountain stick has just come back from the forest on the hillsides, where he has been helping his father to fell trees.

If the *mouschik* be well off, of course his *izba*



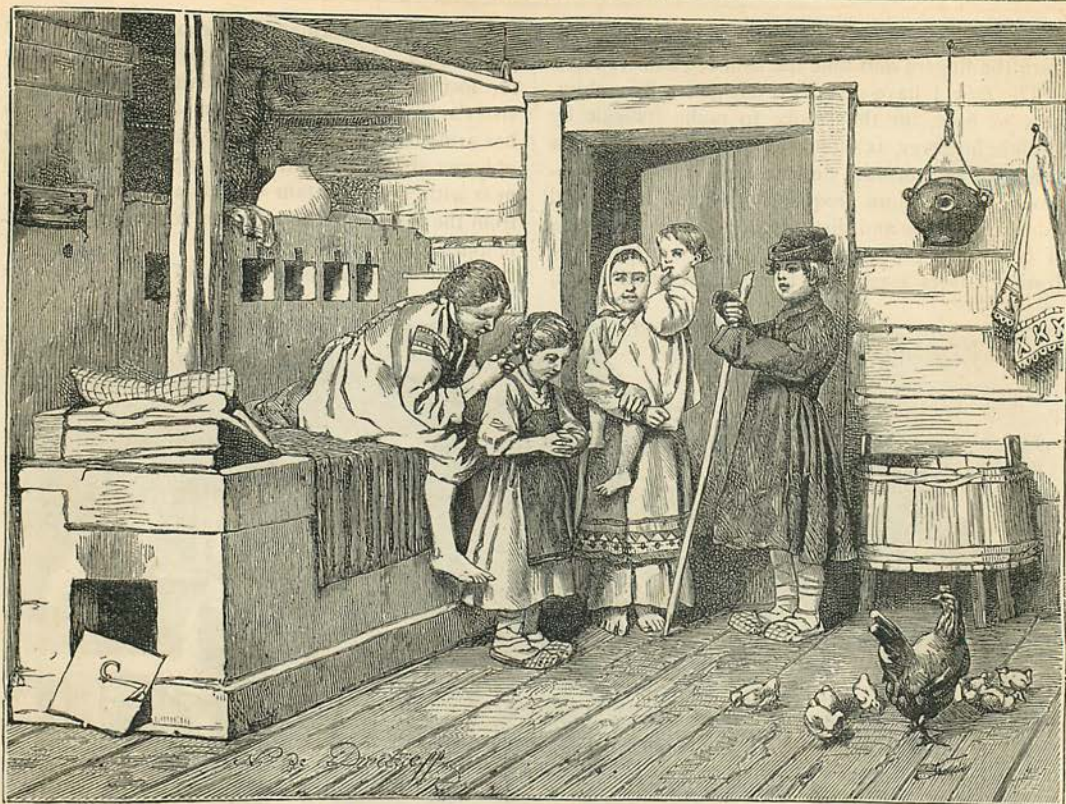
POLES LISTENING TO A WANDERING MINSTREL. (See p. 150.)

without chimney, without window, often without hearth.

Of course, some of the huts are cleaner than others, according to the nature of the families that live in them. The Russian *izba* represented in our picture on the next page, for instance, simple though it be, and notwithstanding that it is the general home of children and fowls, has a certain air of comfort, and the washing-tub near the door shows that the mother, who is away working in the fields, has some regard to cleanliness. The two little girls have taken advantage of their mother's absence, and have indulged in an extra nap on the hearth, in which they have been

has more pretensions to comfort. There may be two windows, and an old screen at one end of the room may half conceal a greasy old sofa kind of bed. Then there will be a painted chest or box, containing the treasures of the family, a gay dress or two, some coins, &c. But there is no sign of whitewash or paint on the brown log walls, and whole armies of big spiders and *tarakans* (black-beetles) crawl about in every direction.

Iwan does not mind the spiders and tarakans; he does not even suspect that they are not absolutely necessary to existence; he does not much care for anything, not even the stick: for does not the proverb say, "A boy or man who has been well



IN A RUSSIAN "IZBA" OR COTTAGE. (See p. 149.)

beaten is worth two who have never been beaten" and another, "It is only the lazy masters who don't beat their servants?"

The little *mouschik* is taught to be very clean—once a week. The Russian creed requires him to bathe every Saturday, and he does so religiously, but does not see much water between times, and sleeps by night in the clothes he wears by day. Even the Russians of better families often content themselves with a dry polish instead of a wash.

Little Iwan's bath would be a trying thing for an English child. First he is steamed till he is half suffocated in a hole under the stove, or in one of the vapour-baths constructed in rude manner in all Russian villages. Then he crawls out, and his mother half drowns him with pailfuls of hot water. Then she pours ice-cold water over him, or sends him out to have a roll in the snow; after which little Iwan dresses with pride, having had all the cleaning he will get for a week.

From the noble to the peasant, all the Russians are fond and proud of their boots. The story is told of a Polish minister who never wore his more than twice, and then hung them up in a handsome

hall to exhibit to his friends and acquaintances. One of these, a gentleman of another country who had just been travelling through Poland, and had witnessed the miserable condition of the peasants, exclaimed on seeing them: "Ah! now I know why the peasants in Poland go barefoot: all their boots are stored up at the minister's house."

Yet, miserable as the condition of many of the Polish families is, merry scenes are not wanting, dances in the long winter nights and songs in the summer evenings. As in Russia, music, especially when it is sweet and sad, exercises a powerful influence on all, and the old wandering minstrel is never without an attentive audience when, laying his hat and stick on the ground, and seating himself on the rustic bench by the cottage door, he plays his musical instrument, or sings a national song. The peasant comes to his door to listen, the girl stands with a pail in each hand, and forgets to fetch water from the well, the neighbours assemble, the children group themselves around, and the old man is sure to be rewarded with a cup of *quass*, a piece of black bread, and a night's lodging.

The numbers of boots, and especially little

children's boots, that hang in rows in the *gostin-noï dvor* (bazaars, or shops) of the different towns is a sight to behold ; and even the *mouschik*, if he be pretty well off, and make some pretensions to gentility, has a couple of pairs in his house, which the different members of the family wear by turns, and which they are very careful to take off if surprised by a shower, and sling over their shoulders to prevent them getting dirty. If a *mouschik* be too poor to buy boots, he wears *lapti*—great shoes made of birch basket—or goes barefoot. If in the winter he wear wooden shoes, he is careful to stuff them with straw or wrap paper round his feet.

Winter is altogether a terrible time for the poor *mouschik*. The children of rich parents enjoy it. They do not feel its rigors within their double-windowed, treble-doored houses ; they have plenty to eat and drink at their first and second breakfasts and dinner (and here I must mention a very pretty custom they have of kissing their parents' hands after each meal, as if to thank them for it) ; and when they go out they are well wrapped up in soft warm furs. Then there is the sleighing, either in their own lovely little sledges or the large ones in which their parents drive ; or they have a dance at home in the pleasant room where the *samovar* is dispensing its comforts.

The *samovar*, the great brass tea-urn, is to be found in all Russian families. The tea, of which the Russian drinks great quantities, is called *tchai*. This word is derived from the Chinese word, so it is probable that the Russians got it from the first direct from China ; it is often mixed with ginger in cold weather, and is much better and healthier than the *vodni* (brandy) that the poor *mouschik* drinks in great quantities to keep the cold out. It, however, does not keep the cold out, but helps him to freeze all the sooner.

To shorten the long winter evenings, the young girls and children of a village meet

in the largest *izba*, to spin and sing songs, and tell tales.

Later on the boys and young men come too, and they all have a dance to the sound of the *balalaika* (the Russian lute). The songs they sing are all mournful, and breathe superstitions, hopes, or fears, but they are full of poetry and deep feeling.

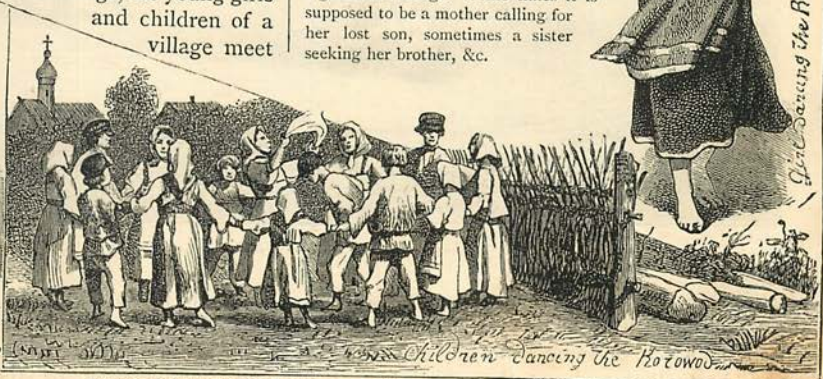
The following is a sample of them, translated literally :—

The cool spring bubbles, the cool spring plays  
In the meadow green, in the warm sun's rays,  
And the Tschumak comes with his thirsty herd :  
But the oxen bellow,  
They will not drink ;  
Foretelling sorrow, their heads they sink.  
He says :—" Oh ! oxen grey, ne'er more  
I'll lead you to the Crimean shore.  
Sad ye have made my joyous heart,  
So young, so young from life to part."

And Sunday came, 'twas early day  
Dead, dead the youthful Tschumak\* lay.  
Deep and wide with an iron spade  
They dug a grave, and him in it laid ;  
And on the hillock-- 'twas fair to see—  
They planted a blossoming elder-tree.  
Flew past the cuckoo, † the mother bird—  
Far around her cry was heard :  
" Cuckoo ! my son ! my eaglet young !  
Give me thy hand : thy right hand strong !"  
" Oh gladly, mother, mother mine,  
Both my hands would I place in thine ;  
But neath the sods they have  
laid me low,  
And the damp cold earth will  
not let me go."

\* The Tschumaki are young men and boys, who go to the Crimea twice a year with their oxen to bring back fish and salt.

† The cuckoo is a favourite bird among the Russians, and has a great share of attention paid it in their legends and songs. Some times it is supposed to be a mother calling for her lost son, sometimes a sister seeking her brother, &c.



RUSSIAN CHILDREN DANCING. (See p. 152.)

Boy dancing the Tressaka

Children dancing the Rozovica

While the songs—which have been called, on account of their mournfulness, the tears of Russia—are being sung the cup of *quass* goes round

soup made of beef and sour cabbage or beet-root, and then, to the light of the *loutchines* (a kind of torch made of resinous wood), they dance one



SCENE AT A RUSSIAN FAIR. (See p. 153.)

(*quass* is thin beer, made of barley-meal, salt, and honey); perhaps if it be a special occasion, the patron saint's day of some little boy and girl (for they celebrate that, and not their birthday), they may indulge in their favourite dish *börsch*, a

of their favourite dances, perhaps the *tressaka*, which reminds us of our heel and toe polka, or the *roosrala*, with its graceful movements of arm and handkerchief, or the *korowod*. This last dance is not so pretty in an *izba* by torchlight—

though the red dresses that the girls wear look picturesque there—as in the open air on a summer evening. The young people form a ring, and taking hands, move round, singing national songs. Two boys or young men then enter the ring, and by gestures and expressive movements accompany the song; then they choose partners, who also dance a variety of figures, some of which are very graceful. Next the girls throw their handkerchiefs over their partners' heads, and take them prisoners, and then the dance ends. After the dance all go home, and this is often the occasion of terrible calamities. Many and many a time whole parties are frozen when only going from one *izba* to another. In the driving snow-storms they may lose their way, and after wandering for hours, find themselves in the same place from which they started. Children may drop down noiselessly in the snow, overcome with the drowsiness that precedes death. Or sometimes toes and ears and noses may be frozen. In the daytime, if Iwan Iwanovitch sees Dmitri Dmitrivitch's nose getting blue, he runs up to him with a handful of snow, and begins rubbing the said nose as hard as possible, but in the night Dmitri the son of Dmitri's nose may get as blue as it likes; Iwan cannot see it, and can only take precautionary measures with his own.

I must now say a word about Russian fairs and festivals, which are looked forward to by all Russian children with great delight.

These festivals and fairs begin in the Easter week, when young willow-branches are dipped in holy water, and the cattle struck with them, the people exclaiming, "God bless you, and give you health!" This takes place on Palm Sunday. Next comes "Pascha," the Easter festival. After that the festival of the *russalki*, or river nymphs, who remind us of the Loreley of Germany. Then a festival in honour of the birth of John the Baptist, called by the people "Iwan Kupalo," because it falls on the same day on which homage was done in former times to the "god of harvests" of that name. Following this comes the "Petrowki," a kind of harvest feast. On this day, before service commences in the dome-crowned church which forms the centre building of a Russian village, an ox is slaughtered; after service it is eaten. In the evening the children dress in masquerade.

Then comes the Jurjew (George's day), which is celebrated twice in the year: on the 23rd of April and the 26th of November.

But it would take us too long to mention all the festivals and fairs that take place in the great country of all the Russias: to describe fully the village fairs, with their mixture of Orientalism and barbarism; the tiara-like head-dresses of some of their young girls, and the vulgar-looking red handkerchief with bright yellow spots that is tied round the heads of others; the gorgeous large-patterned shawls and stuffs that the smiling salesman declares he is giving for nothing, the immense beads that he calls precious stones, the picture-books (a great novelty) with which he makes friends with the children, &c. &c. So we will content ourselves with naming the Swjatki, a kind of necromancing time, devoted to superstitious customs, fortune-telling, &c., which falls on our Christmas week; the Wassili evening, our New Year's Eve; and the chief of all, the Russian Carnival, or Butter-week (*Massljaniza*), which finishes up the winter festivities. The preparations made for this festival, especially in St. Petersburg, are many. The merry-go-rounds, the "mountains," as the artificial sleigh-drives are called, the boat-swings, the menageries, theatres, cake and bon-bon booths, fill the largest square of the city. Men in peasants' dress, and with immense false grey beards, act as clowns, or do their best to divert spectators by relating droll anecdotes, or making very poor jests and jokes. Children and grown-up people ascend the wooden steps that lead to the top of the mountain, and then slide down in small sleighs, amid shouting and peals of laughter, or they sing, or ride in the merry-go-round, or drink tea; and when Alexander Alexandrovitch and Marie Fedorovna, and our old friend Iwan have had their fill of amusement, they go home to eat the *blini* (pancakes made of butter, flour, and cream), without which no Butter-week would be complete.

These *blini* are eaten by rich and poor. The rich boy spreads them with caviare, the poor boy eats them with butter or sour cream, but both boast of the number they have consumed during the carnival, as the English child sometimes boasts of the mince-pies that have fallen to his share in Christmas week.

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RUSSIAN BOOTS. (See p. 150.)