

Russian School-Mistresses. (1)

An interesting pamphlet has lately been published by an author who adopts the pseudonym of "Schédo-Ferroti," on the subject of "Popular Instruction in Russia." Its chief aim is to show that in spite of all that has been done — on paper — to provide for the education of the Russian people, but very small results have been attained, so far as the enlightenment of the lower classes is concerned. This failure, says the writer, is to a great extent to be accounted for by the difficulty that is universally experienced in finding efficient schoolmasters. In the year 1865 Russia nominally possessed, it seems, as many as 21,420 parochial schools, and since that time many others have been added to the number. But the existence of many of these establishments is merely nominal. In one district, containing 130,000 inhabitants, for instance, at the end of last year there were scarcely four schools in real working order. The funds required for the establishment of 47 new schools had been voted, but out of that number 21 had never even been opened, simply because the requisite teachers were not forthcoming. In another district, two villages, containing respectively 2,723, and 1,476 inhabitants, possessed only one school apiece, and the number of pupils attending the two schools put together was only eight.

This is not very encouraging, but the writer proceeds to state facts which are still less so. Even if it be granted, he says, that much has been done within the last few years to bring education home to the lower classes in Russia, and that advantage has to some extent been taken by the Russian peasant of the means and appliances placed within his reach, still it must be confessed that the people have not benefited to any appreciable extent by the change. If the official reports are to be believed, thousands of Russian men of all ages have lately learnt to read and write; but, in spite of all that says M. Schédo-Ferroti, the Russian common people have become "more brutal, more drunken, less industrious, and less scrupulous with regard to family duties and civic obligations, than they were before they took to being instructed." And for this he accounts by the fact that, although the men may have learnt to read and write, they have not been educated in the proper sense of the word, not having been placed under masters competent to deal with the subjects; and as to the women, they have not even learnt as much as the men. He suggests, therefore, that in the first place better instructors should be found for the existing schools; and, in the second place, that an organized effort should be made to induce the peasants to send their girls to school as well as their boys; for at present that is not the case. The number of boys who are learning to read and write is deplorably small, but it is large compared with that of the girls who are receiving even the slightest amount of instruction.

The position of the Russian woman has long been a very painful one. One of the finest of the poems of Nekrassof, the chief living Russian poet, commences with a description of the sorrows of the great masses of his countrywomen. "Ages have passed," he says, "and everything else in the world has been often changed and improved. But God has forgotten to alter the dreary lot of the peasant woman. And so the old type of the strong and beautiful Slavonian woman has deteriorated. Poor victims of fate! you have suffered unheard. You have never made known to the world the voice of your complaining. You have passed silently through a terrible struggle, and now we see in you the very embodiment of lifelong fear and suffering." Undoubtedly the Russian peasant women too often have a look of the kind which the poet describes, an expression such as one might expect to find on the persons who have been subjected to much hardship, and who have lived in the perpetual expectation of punishment—a worn and anxious look, and an air as though of

premature old age. Much of this is doubtless due to the severity of the climate, with its cutting wintry blasts and its scorching summer suns; but though the weather may tan the skin and account for its unpleasantly wizened appearance, it would be unfair to charge it with all the restless suspicion of the eye, all the melancholy curve of the mouth. Much of that must be considered the result of neglect and unkindness. Even where the husband has not been brutal, he has almost to a certainty been contemptuous. For not only has the peasant been in the habit of treating his wife as a slave, but he has always looked down upon her in all good faith as a very inferior animal. This masculine contempt has been in part accounted for by the custom prevalent among the peasants, in the days of serfdom, of going away from their villages to the towns, in order to procure the *obrok*, or sum of money annually due to their lords. The man went forth into the world, and experience enlarged his mind, or at least expanded his circle of ideas; but the woman remained at home, confined within a very narrow range of thought, knowing nothing of what was going on at a distance from her own little village, never seeing new faces, never hearing an unfamiliar voice. Now that the peasant is a freeman, he has no longer any *obrok* to pay; but the habit of roaming about the country has been confirmed, and he is likely to keep it up. When the husband returns from his travels he naturally comes to the conclusion that his wife is even more foolish than he had always supposed her to be, and he is more than ever convinced of the truth of those opinions which have given rise to a great number of popular proverbs, such as "A woman's hair is long, but her mind is short." "Don't go talking with women; every one knows that women are fools." A hen isn't a bird, nor is a woman a human being." "A dog is wiser than a woman; it doesn't go barking at its master."

It is true that while the Russian woman is young and good-looking she may manage to exercise some influence over her lord, and master, and even to keep him away for a time from the *Kabak*, the pot-house in which he laps himself in what are to him the pleasures of Elysium. But as soon as she loses the fast-fleeting charm of personal attractiveness, all power passes away from her for ever, and she becomes a mere slave, little better than a beast of burden, obliged to obey the behests of one who is too often a brutal master. If she were intellectually, as she is morally, her husband's equal, if not his superior, there might be some chance for her. But, unfortunately, even if the village has provided the means of education, there is little chance of her having been able to avail herself of them. The man may have gone to school; it is almost certain that the woman has not. In olden days, it is true, the peasants were on the same dead level of ignorance, whether they were styled "souls" or not—that is to say, whether they were male or female chattels. But during the reign of Nicholas a number of popular schools were set on foot in the villages, and ten years ago, according to Gerebtsof, the number of pupils frequenting them was in the proportion of 923 to every hundred thousand inhabitants. It is true that in Germany the number of pupils would have been 8,888, but still the figures showed that progress had been made. Since that time the schools have become much more numerous, and the number of boys attending them has grown larger every year. But as far as the peasant women are concerned, very little progress has been made, for the official tables show that the number of girls frequenting the primary schools is about one-eighth of the number of the boys who attend them. From this fact it seems fair enough to draw the conclusion that "the gulf which now divides the man of the people from his wife will become still wider in ensuing generations, if nothing be done to close it.

The reason which the peasants allege for refusing to send their girls to school is twofold. In the first place, they say that they distrust the schoolmasters; in the second, they declare that they cannot see of what use reading and writing will be to their daughters. So far as the teachers are concerned there is some excuse for such a refusal. Most of the schoolmasters are exceed-

(1) *Lettres sur l'Instruction populaire en Russie, adressées à Monsieur le Comte D. Tolstoi, Ministre de l'Instruction publique.* Par D. K. Schédo-Ferroti. Leipsic and Berlin. 1869.