THE
MILWAUKEE MONTHLY MAGAZINE.

Vol. IX.——*APRIL*, 1875.——*No.* 52.

RUSSIAN FABLES.

Kirlof, the Russian fabulist, says Ralston, the translator, was always vexed to see people trying to do what they were unfit for; and he had very little respect for the industry of idiots or the good intentions of fools. Strivings which to other eyes might appear highly meritorious, seemed to him remarkably valueless; and he embodied his opinion in several fables, as, for instance, in that of

THE APE.

THE APE.

"Early one morning, a peasant was laboriously ploughing his lot of ground, and toiling so hard that his limbs were bathed in sweat. The peasant worked with a will; and so every one who went by called out to him, 'Bless you, friend! All honor to you!' This made a certain ape jealous. Praise is tempting; how can one help craving for it? The ape determined to set to work; so it got hold of a huge log, and just didn't it worry itself about it! The ape's mouth becomes full of trouble [*i. e.*, it has enough to do]; and it lifts the log up, and rolls it first this way and then that; now it hugs it, now it drags it along. The sweat streams off the poor creature; it pants, and at last it becomes all but breathless. But in spite of all this, not a soul gives it an atom of praise. And no wonder, my dear! You work very hard, but what you do, isn't of the least use."

The disadvantages of indiscreet imitation are still more forcibly pointed out in the tale of

THE MONKEYS.

"In Africa, where the monkeys are plentiful, a number of them were sitting in a wood one day, and watching a hunter who was rolling about on the grass amid his nets. The monkeys quietly poked each other in the ribs, and began to remark in a whisper, 'Just look at that fine fellow there! Really, it looks as if there were no end to his tricks. See what somersets he throws now, and how he seems to be turning himself inside out; and now see how he rolls himself up into a ball so completely that one can see neither his hands nor his feet. We are already up to almost everything; but such talents as these have never been displayed here before. My dears, it wouldn't be a bad idea if we were to follow his example. He seems to have amused himself enough. Perhaps he will go away, and then we will instantly——' Well, he really has gone away, and, what is more, he has left his nets for them. 'How now!' they cry. 'Is this an opportunity for us to neglect? Let us proceed to make a few experiments!'

THE MONKEYS.

The sweet creatures came down from the the trees. For the benefit of the welcome guests, a number of nets have been carefully spread down below. The monkeys begin to throw somersets, to roll upon the nets, and to entangle themselves in them. They gibber, they squeal—their joy knows no bounds. But, alas, when it comes to getting free from the nets, woe falls upon them; for their host, who has been watching his time, comes up to his guests, bag in hand. Fain would they take to flight, but not one of them could get away; and so the hunter lays his hands on them one after another."

For a certain class of critics, eager to detect and swift to comment upon the occasional weakness of their superiors, Krilof had a hearty dislike, and this he expressed in many forms, and, among others, in the following fable of

THE EAGLE AND THE FOWLS.

"Wanting to take a good look round at its ease, an eagle flew, one fine day, into the upper regions of the air, and there floated about in the birthplace of the thunder. When at last it descended from those cloudy heights, the royal bird settled on a barn in order to take breath. To be sure, it wasn't a very becoming perch for an eagle; but kings have their whims. Perhaps it wished to confer dignity on the barn—perhaps it couldn't find such a resting-place as befitted its dignity; as, for instance, a lofty oak or granite rock, whatever its fancy may have been, at all events it didn't retain its seat long, but soon flew across to another barn. A tufted brood hen, which saw that, began to chatter to her gossip thus: 'Why ever are eagles held in such honor? Surely it cannot be for their flight, neighbor mine? Why, upon my word, if I felt inclined, I myself could fly as well as that from one barn to another. We will not be such fools any longer as to imagine that eagles deserve more honor than we do. They have no more eyes nor feet than we have; and you yourself have just seen that they fly as close to the ground as if they were barn-yard fowls.' Tired of hearing such nonsense, at last the eagle cries, 'You're partly right, but not entirely. Eagles may sometimes descend even below the level of domestic fowls; but such fowls as those can never soar into the skies."

The next two fables have a historical interest. The first is called

THE HARE AND THE CHASE.

"Uniting one day, in full force, the beasts make a bear prisoner. Straightway they drag it out into the open field, first strangle it, and then begin to divide it among themselves. Up comes the hare, forsooth, and begins to nibble at bruin's ear. 'Hallo! you squinter there!' the others cry out, 'where on earth have you come from?. No one saw you at the chase.' 'Really, now, brothers,' answered the hare, 'who was it, I should like to know, who drove the bear out of the wood? Why, I frightened our stout friend out of his wits, and drove him afield right into your mouths.' This bragging was a little too palpable to take any one in, but it seemed so amusingly impudent that the hare received a bit of the bear's ear in return for it. Braggers may get laughed at, it is true, but they often come in for a slice of luck at a division."

It has been said that Krilof meant this hare for Austria, which profited not a little by what the other powers had done to overthrow the power of Napoleon I. But this can hardly be the case, inasmuch as the fable appeared in the very midst of the war for the independence of Germany. But it is very likely that after Austria had profited largely by what took place at the Congress of Verona, the applicability of this fable to her acquisitiveness became very apparent. One criticism on this fable is too amusing to be passed over unnoticed. Izmailof remarks, with perfect truth and gravity, that hares are not flesh-eaters, and that therefore the hare is erroneously represented by Krilof as nibbling at the bear's ear. What would the severe critic have thought of Charles Lamb's asking the little girl he met one day carrying a hare, whether it was her own hare or a wig?

The other fable Ralston renders into verse, preserving in the translation the

number of lines and rhymes which the original has, for he had a prejudice against all paraphrases and amplifications. It tells how

"The Swan, the Crab and the Pike one day
To draw a certain load combined,
And yoked themselves together with equal mind;
Each one pulled with a will; but the load wasn't set in motion.
To move so light a load for them was mere child's play.
But—the Swan towards heaven winged its way;
The Crab would do nothing but back; and the Pike made straight for the ocean—
As to which was right and which was wrong, that cannot by us be judged:
But up to the present day the load not a single inch has budged."

At the commencement of the Crimean war, Mr. Sutherland Edwards informs us, Russia asserted that the alliance between France, England, and Turkey, could never lead to any practical result. "In illustration of this idea, a swan, a crab, and a pike, each in its own way a water animal, were represented in the act of drawing a load, or rather of attempting to do so, for the load remains stationary. Beneath the engraving was printed the fable from which the notion was taken.

The subject of education affords the theme for the fables we are next about to quote. The first, called "The Ducat," was written by Krilof at a time when a great number of new schools were being opened in Russia, in which the influence of the French teachers, whom he so cordially detested, made itself felt to a considerable degree. With Alexander's accession to the throne, a great impulse was given to the progress of enlightenment and education in Russia. Three universities were thoroughly reformed, two more were set upon a new footing, and three high schools, twenty-six gymnasiums, and eight district schools were founded. Between the years 1800 and 1812, more than three hundred educational establishments of different kinds were opened. Naturally enough, great difficulty was found in providing them with efficient teachers, and therefore it was found necessary in many cases to apply to those French professors whom Krilof accused of undermining the patriotic and religious principles of their pupils. It was about that time that he wrote "The Ducat." Beginning by asking whether what is ordinarily called civilization does not often tend to the introduction of luxury, and the corruption of morals, he proceeds to couch his own opinion on the subject in the form of a story:

"A peasant, who was just such a blockhead as may be easily discovered everywhere, found a ducat lying on the ground. The ducat was covered with dust and dirt; but still he had half a dozen handfuls of copper money offered him in exchange for it. 'Stop a bit,' thinks the peasant, 'they will give me twice as much by-and-by. I have hit upon a plan which will make them do all they can to get it out of me.' Straightway he takes chalk and sand and gravel and pounded brick, and sets himself vigorously to work, rubbing the ducat with brickdust, rattling it and the gravel together, and grinding it with the chalk and sand. What he wants is to make the ducat shine like fire; and really a fiery glow soon begins to manifest itself upon the ducat's face. Unluckily, the operation reduced the weight of the metal; and so it resulted in the ducat becoming decidedly less valuable than before.

The story of the "Tub" is of a somewhat similar nature. Krilof always laid great stress upon the absolute necessitty of having children properly educated while their minds were plastic, and of carefully guarding them against the evil influences which are so liable to corrupt young hearts. At the time when the fable was written—the year 1814—the minds of the rising generation in Russia were greatly affected by the mystics on the one hand, and by the sceptics on the other. Between the two, Krilof thought an immense amount of damage was likely to be done to the good sense and the religious feelings of his countrymen; and his anxiety induced him to devote several of his fables to the subject, and among others the following:

THE EAGLE AND THE FOWLS.

THE TUB.

"A certain peasant asked a neighbor to befriend him,
And for a day or two an empty tub to lend him.
Such offices as this are friendship's dues—
A loan of money one may well refuse;
Friendship's all right, but money—there's the rub!
But who on earth could grudge his friend a tub?
The tub comes back again; and into it once more
Its owner hastens with anxiety to pour
A pail of water; as it was before,
So now it seems all right. No—here's one thing gone wrong—
The tub has been, for two or three days long,
Used to contain potato-brandy, and so strong
A smell of spirits breathes from every pore,
So brandy-smitten is it to the core,
That everything they put in it at once gets spoiled.
The owner does his best; sometimes he has it boiled;
Sometimes he has it scrubbed, then hangs it out to dry—
Does all he can to cure it; but a year goes by,
And even he at last must own that he is foiled.
To scald the odor he's vainly toiled,
Vainly he's done his best the nauseous taint to scrub away.
Now nought remains to be done—except to throw the tub away."

Ralston has rendered it in verse in order to give some notion of its form—its leading idea not having much originality to boast of, but seeming to be an extension of some well-known lines of Horace—the converse of which is to be found in Moore's statement that

"You may break, you may ruin the vase if you will,
But the scent of the roses will hang round it still."

By way of conclusion, we may quote a fable which derives special interest from the fact that Krilof composed it as a token of his gratitude towards the Empress Dowager Maria Fedorovna, for the kindness she had shown during the period of an illness by which he was for some time prostrated. When he began to recover from the attack, she invited him to pay a visit to her palace at Pavlosk, saying that he would recover more quickly under her care. One day while he was there he left "in one of the albums placed in the Pavilion of Roses, for the amusement of the visitors," as a proof of his appreciation of the delicate kindness with which his imperial hostess had treated him, the following pretty litttle poem, styled

THE CORN-FLOWER.

"A Corn-flower which grew in a retired corner, suddenly became feeble, and almost withered away. With drooping head it sadly awaited its approaching end, whispering to the breeze, meanwhile, in mournful tones, 'Ah me, if the day would but break, and the radiant sun would but light up the scene, it might be that even I might revive.' 'How simple you must be, my friend!' observed a Beetle, who happened to be digging close at hand. 'Do you suppose the sun has nothing else to do but to see how you are getting on, and whether you are blooming or fading? You may be quite sure that it has neither leisure or inclination for that. If you had flown about like me, and learnt to know the world, you would have been aware that it is entirely to the sun that the meadows and the corn-fields owe their life and their happiness. Its heat lends warmth to the tall oaks and cedars, and from its influence the fragrant flowers derive their wondrous beauty. But those flowers are quite different from you. They are so rich and rare that Time itself grieves to mow them down. But you are neither beautiful nor fragrant, so don't annoy the sun by your importunity. You may be quite sure it won't waste a ray upon you, so give up striving for what is impossible, and just fade away quietly!'

THE HARE AT THE CHASE.

But the sun arose and illumined the face of nature, spreading its rays widely abroad over the whole kingdom of Flora, and the poor Corn-flower, which had begun to wither during the hours of darkness, was fully revived by its celestial light.

"O ye, on whom Fate has conferred dignity and grandeur, let the sun of which I have spoken set you an example. Its rays benefit all things alike, whether they fall upon the blade of grass or on the cedar, and everywhere it leaves behind it happiness and prosperity. Therefore it is that its image shines in every heart, like the clear light which dwells in orient gems, and all things that be invoke blessings upon it."