

THE RUSSIAN FISH-EPIC.

BY THE EDITOR.

THERE is a Russian fairy tale of a hero named Ivan on whom the demand was made to search for the Sultan's lost ring which had fallen into the sea and lay hidden there in a small casket. On his little magic hump-backed horse Ivan arrived in the middle of the ocean, and there he saw a whale that could not move because he had swallowed "a whole navy." A forest had grown upon his back and women were searching in his mustache for mushrooms. Ivan told the whale about his quest, and the whale called a meeting of all the fishes, but not one could give any information except the little perch, who as was his wont, happened to be engaged in a fight with some other fish. He discontinued the combat for a moment to hunt for the casket, and was successful in his search but found that he was not strong enough to lift it. Numerous shoals of herrings come to his aid but in vain. At last two dolphins lifted the casket out of the ocean, and Ivan received the desired ring.

With the discovery of the gem the whale's curse came to an end. He vomited up the navy which he had swallowed, whereupon he became able to move again, and the little perch betook himself once more to the pursuit of his enemies.

The fish occupies a more prominent place in Russian folklore than in that of any other country. In fact an animal epic has been worked out in Russia, and in it the little perch plays about the same part as Reynard the fox in the German fable, and Br'r Rabbit in Uncle Remus's negro tales. Though small, the perch is bold and aggressive. On account of his sharp spikes he is feared by the other fish, even the larger ones, and succeeds in banishing them from his empire. On the authority of Angelo de Gubernatis in his *Zoological Mythology* we summarize the story as follows:

This war of the little perch with its adversaries has had in popular Russian tradition its Herodotuses and its Homers who have

celebrated its praises both in prose and verse. In the third book of his stories Afanassieff gives the description of the judgment of the little perch (*jorsh*) before the tribunal of the fishes from a manuscript of the last century. The bream (*leçc*) accused the perch, the wicked warrior, of wounding all the other fishes with his rough bristles, and compelling them to forsake the Lake of Rastoff. The perch defended himself by saying that he was strong in virtue of his native vigor; that he was not a brigand, but a good subject, who was known everywhere and highly prized on the table by great lords who ate him with satisfaction. The bream appealed to the testimony of other fishes, and some of them bore witness against the little perch, who thereupon made complaint that the other fishes in their overweening importance wished to ruin him and his companions, taking advantage of their small size. The judges called also upon the bass, the eel-pout, and the herring to testify. The bass sent the eel-pout, and the eel-pout excused himself for not appearing, pleading that his belly was fat, and he could not move; that his eyes were small, and his vision imperfect; that his lips were thick, and he did not know how to speak before persons of distinction. The herring testified in favor of the bream and against the little perch.

Among the witnesses against the perch the sturgeon also appeared. He maligned the perch, alleging that when he attempted to eat its flesh he was obliged to spit out more than he could swallow. He complained also that one day when they were going by the Volga to Lake Rastoff, the little perch called him brother and deceived him in order to induce him to retire from the lake, saying that he also had once been a large fish, so large that his tail was like the sail of a ship, and that he had only become so small after he had entered Lake Rastoff. The sturgeon went on to say that he had therefore been afraid and had remained in the river where his sons and companions died of hunger, while he himself was reduced to the last extremity. Moreover he adduced another grave accusation against the perch, who compelled him to go ahead in order that he might fall into the fisherman's hands, cunningly hinting that elder brothers should go before the younger ones. The sturgeon confessed that he gave way to this graceful flattery, and entered into a weir made to catch fish, which he found to be similar to the gates of great lords' houses—large when one goes in, but small when one wishes to leave. He fell into the net and the perch saw him and cried out in derision, "Suffer for the love of Christ!"

The deposition of the sturgeon made a great impression upon

the minds of the judges, who gave orders to inflict the knout upon the little perch and to impale him in great heat, as a punishment for cheating. The sentence was sealed by the crayfish with one of his claws, but the perch declared the sentence to be unjust, spit in the eyes of the judges, jumped into the briar brake, and disappeared from the sight of the fishes, who remained lost in shame and mortification.

There is another version of this fish epic which differs considerably in all its details but the characterization of the perch is the same. Gubernatis relates it thus :

The turbulent perch entered Lake Rastoff and took possession of it. Called to judgment by the bream, he answered that from the day of St. Peter to that of St. Elias the whole lake was on fire, and cited in proof of this assertion that the roach's eyes are still red from the effects, that the perch's fins are also still red, that the pike became dark-colored in consequence and the eel-pout black. These fishes when called upon to testify either did not appear, or else denied the truth of these assertions. The perch was arrested and bound, but it began to rain, and the judgment place became muddy. The perch escaped, and swimming from one rivulet to another arrived at the river Kama where he was discovered by the pike and sturgeon who took him back to be executed.

The perch thus arrested and brought to judgment, demanded permission to take a constitutional for only one hour in Lake Rastoff ; but after the expiration of the appointed time he neglected to come out of the lake, and annoyed the other fishes in every way, stinging and provoking them. The fishes had recourse for justice to the sturgeon, who sent out the pike in search of the offender. The little perch was finally found among the stones ; but he excused himself by saying that it was Saturday, and that there was a festival in his father's house, and so he advised the pike to take a constitutional in the meanwhile and enjoy himself ; although the morrow would be Sunday, he promised to present himself then before the judges.

The analogy between the smartness of the perch and of Reynard the Fox is very remarkable.

Meanwhile the perch made his companion drunk and then shut him in a straw stack where the inebriated fish was left to die. On the morrow the bream came to take the little perch from among the stones, and to bring him before the judge. The defendant demanded an ordeal, a judgment of God. He advised his judges to put him in a net and if he stayed in the net, he would be guilty, but

if he came out he would be proved innocent. This they did, and the perch jerked about in the net so much that he escaped. The judges acquitted him, and gave him entire liberty in the lake. The story ended with many incidents of revenge which the perch took upon the other fishes, whereby he continued to prove his astuteness in constant efforts to prey upon them.