

Maxím Górký

Pëtr Kropotkin

Few writers have established their reputation so rapidly as Maxím Górký. His first sketches (1892-95), were published in an obscure provincial paper of the Caucasus, and were totally unknown to the literary world, but when a short tale of his appeared in a widely-read review, edited by Korolénko, it at once attracted general attention. The beauty of its form, its artistic finish, and the new note of strength and courage which rang through it, brought the young writer immediately into prominence. It became known that Maxím Górký was the pen-name of quite a young man, A. Pyeshkoff, who was born in 1868 in Nizhni Novgorod, a large town on the Volga; that his father was a merchant, or an artisan, his mother a remarkable peasant woman, who died soon after the birth of her son, and that the boy, orphaned when only nine, was brought up in a family of his father's relatives. The childhood of Górký must have been anything but happy, for one day he ran away and entered into service on a Volga River steamer. Later he lived and wandered on foot with the tramps in South Russia, and during these wanderings he wrote a number of short stories which were published in a newspaper of Northern Caucasia. The stories proved to be remarkably fine, and when a collection of all that he had hitherto written was published in 1900, in four small volumes, the whole of a large edition was sold in a very short time, and the name of Górký took its place – to speak of living novelists only – by the side of those of Korolénko and Tchéhoff, immediately after the name of Leo Tolstóy. In Western Europe and America his reputation was made with the same rapidity, as soon as a couple of his sketches were translated into French and German, and retranslated into English.

It is sufficient to read a few of Górký's short stories, for instance, "Málva," or "Tehelkáš," or "The Ex-Men," or "Twenty-six Men and One Girl," to realize at once the causes of his rapidly-won popularity. The men and women he describes are not heroes; they are the most ordinary tramps or slum-dwellers; and what he writes are not novels in the proper sense of the word, merely sketches of life. And yet, in the literature of all nations, including the short stories of Guy de Maupassant and Bret Harte, there are few things in which such a fine analysis of complicated and struggling human feelings is given, such interesting, original, and new characters are so well depicted, and human psychology is so admirably interwoven with a background of nature – a calm sea, menacing waves, or endless, sun-burnt prairies. In the first-named story, you really *see* the promontory that juts out into "the laughing waters," that promontory upon which the fisherman has pitched his hut; and you understand why Málva, the woman who loves him and comes to see him every Sunday, loves that spot as much as she does the fisherman himself. And

then, at every page, you are struck by the quite unexpected variety of fine touches with which the love of that strange and complicated nature, Málva, is depicted, or by the unforeseen aspects under which both the ex-peasant fisherman and his peasant son appear in the short space of a few days. The variety of strokes, refined and brutal, tender and terribly harsh, with which Górký pictures human feelings, is such that in comparison with his heroes, the heroes and heroines of our best novelists seem so simple – so simplified, like a flower in European decorative art in comparison with a real flower.

Górký is a great artist; he is a poet; but he is also a child of all that long series of folk-novelists whom Russia has had for the last half century, and he has utilized their experience: he has found at last that happy combination of realism with idealism, for which the Russian folk-novelists have been striving for so many years. Ryeshétnikoff and his school had tried to write novels of an ultra-realistic character, without any trace of idealization. They restrained themselves whenever they felt inclined to generalize, to create, to idealize. They tried to write mere diaries, in which events, great and small, important and insignificant, were related with an equal exactitude, without even changing the tone of the narrative. In this way, by dint of their talent, they were able to obtain the most poignant effects; but, like the historian who vainly tries to be "impartial," yet always remains a party man, they had not avoided the idealization which they so much dreaded.

The stratum of society from which Górký took the heroes of his first short stories – and in short stories he appears at his best – is that of the tramps of Southern Russia: men who have broken with regular society, who never accept the yoke of permanent work, laboring only as long as they want to, as "casuals" in the seaports on the Black Sea; who sleep in dosshouses or in ravines on the outskirts of the cities, and tramp in the summer from Odessa to the Crimea, and from the Crimea to the prairies of Northern Caucasia, where they are always welcome at harvest time.

Far from his whining and complaining about the hard lot of his tramps, a refreshing note of energy and courage, which is quite unique in Russian literature sounds through the stories of Górký. His tramps are miserably poor, but they "don't care." They drink, but there is nothing among them nearly approaching the dark drunkenness of despair which we see in Levítóff. Even the most "down-trodden" one of them, far from making a virtue of his helplessness, as Dostoyévsky's heroes always did, – dreams of reforming the world and making it rich. He dreams of the moment when "we, once 'the poor,' shall vanish, after having enriched the Croesuses with the richness of the spirit and the power of life." ("A Mistake," I, 170.)

Górký cannot stand whining; he cannot bear that self-castigation in which other Russian writers so much delight, which Turgueneff's *sub*-Hamlets used to express so poetically, of which Dostoyévsky has made a virtue, and of which Russia offers such an infinite variety of examples. Górký knows the type, but he has no pity for such men. "What's all this talk about circumstances?" he makes "Old Izerghil" say.

"Every one makes his own circumstances! I see all sorts of men – but the strong ones – where are they? There are fewer and fewer noble men!"

In "Váreňka Olésova," Górký expresses all his contempt for the average "intellectual" of our own days. He introduces to us the interesting type of a girl, full of vitality; a most primitive creature, absolutely untouched by any ideals of liberty and equality, but so full of an intense life, so independent, so much herself, that one cannot but feel greatly interested in her. She meets with one of those "intellectuals" who know and admire higher ideals, but are weaklings, utterly devoid of the nerve of life. Of course, Váreňka laughs at the very idea of such a man's falling in

love with her; and these are the expressions in which Górký makes her define the usual hero of Russian novels:

"The Russian hero is always silly and stupid, he is always sick of something; always thinking about something that cannot be understood, and is himself so miserable, so mi-i-serable! He will think, think, then talk, then he will go and make a declaration of love, and after that he thinks and thinks again, till he marries... And when he is married, he talks all sorts of nonsense to his wife, and then abandons her." ("Váreňka Olésova," II, 281.)

Górký's favorite type is the "rebel" – the man in full revolt against society, but at the same time a strong man, a power; and as he has found among the tramps with whom he has lived, at least the type in embryo, it is from this stratum of society that he takes his most interesting heroes.

Some of Górký's tramps are, of course, philosophers. They think about human life, and have had opportunities to know what it is. He remarks somewhere:

"Every one who has had a struggle to sustain in his life, and has been defeated by life, and now feels cruelly imprisoned amid its squalor, is more of a philosopher than Schopenhauer himself; for abstract thought can never be cast into such a correct and vivid plastic form as that in which is expressed the thought born directly out of suffering." (31.)

Love of nature is, of course, another characteristic feature of the tramp, – "Konováloff loved Nature with a deep, inarticulate love, which was betrayed only by a glitter in his eyes. Every time he was in the fields, or on the river bank, he became permeated with a sort of peace and love which made him still more like to a child. Sometimes he would say with a deep sigh, looking at the sky, 'Good!' and in this exclamation there was more sense and feeling than in the rhetoric of many poets... Like all the rest, poetry loses its holy simplicity and spontaneity, when it becomes a profession." (II, 33-4.)

However, Górký's rebel-tramp, is not a Nietzscheite who ignores everything beyond his narrow egotism, or imagines himself a "super-man" the "diseased ambition" of "an intellectual" is required to create the true Nietzscheite type. In Górký's tramps, as in his women of the lowest class, there are flashes of greatness of character, and a simplicity which is incompatible with the superman's self-conceit. He does not idealize them so as to make of them real heroes; that would be too untrue to life: the tramp is still a defeated being. But he shows how, among these men, owing to an inner consciousness of strength, there are moments of greatness, even though that inner force be not strong enough to make out of Orlóff (in "The Orlóffs") or Iliyá (in "The Three") a real power, a real hero – the man who fights against those much stronger than himself. He seems to say: Why are not you, intellectuals, as truly "individual," as frankly rebellious against the society you criticize, and as strong as some of these submerged ones are?

In his short stories, Górký is great; but like his two great contemporaries, Korolénko and Tchéhoff, whenever he has tried to write a longer novel, with a full development of characters, he has not succeeded. Taken as a whole, "Thomas Gordéeff," notwithstanding several beautiful and deeply impressive scenes, is weaker than most of Górký's short stories; and while the first portion of "The Three," the idyllic life of the three young people, and the tragical issues foreshadowed in it, make us expect to find in this novel one of the finest productions in Russian literature,

its end is disappointing. The French translator of "The Three" has even preferred to terminate it abruptly, at the point where Iliyá stands on the grave of the man whom he has killed, rather than to give Górký's end of the novel.

Over and over again Górký returns to the idea of the necessity of an ideal in the work of the novel-writer. He says:

"The cause of the present opinion (in Russian society) is the neglect of idealism. Those who have exiled from life all romanticism have stripped us so as to leave us quite naked: this is why we are so uninteresting to one another, and so disgusted with one another." ("A Mistake.")

And in "The Reader" he develops his æsthetic canons in full. He tells how one of his earliest productions, on its appearance in print, is read one night before a circle of friends. He receives many compliments for it, and after leaving the house, is tramping along a deserted street, feeling for the first time in his existence the happiness of life, when a person, unknown to him, and whom he had not noticed among those present at the reading, overtakes him and begins to talk about the duties of the author. Says the stranger:

"You will agree with me that the duty of literature is to aid man in understanding himself, to raise his faith in himself, to develop his longing for truth; to combat what is bad in men; to find what is good in them, and to wake up in their souls shame, anger, courage – to do everything, in short, to render men strong in a noble sense of the word, and capable of inspiring their lives with the holy spirit of beauty. It seems to me, we need once more to have dreams, pretty creations of our fancy and visions, because the life we have built up is poor in color, is dim and dull... Well, let us try – perhaps imagination will help a man to rise above the earth and find his true place on it, which he has lost."

"Can you," the "Reader" goes on to ask, "create for men ever so small an illusion that has the power to raise them? No!" "All of you teachers of the day take more than you give, because you speak only about faults – you see only those. But there must also be good qualities in men; you possess some, don't you?... Don't you notice that, owing to your continual efforts to define and to classify them, the virtues and the vices have been entangled like two balls of black and white thread which have become gray by taking color from each other?"... "I doubt whether God has sent you on earth. If he had sent messengers, he would have chosen stronger men than you are. He would have lighted in them the fire of a passionate love of life, of truth, of men."

"Nothing but everyday life, everyday life, only everyday people, everyday thoughts and events. When will you, then, speak of 'the rebel spirit,' of the necessity of a new birth of the spirit? Where is, then, the calling to the creation of a new life? the lessons of courage? the words which give wings to the soul?"

"Confess you don't know how to represent life so that your pictures of it shall provoke in man a redemptive spirit of shame and a burning desire of creating new forms of life... Can you accelerate the pulsation of life? Can you inspire it with energy, as others have done?"

"I see many intelligent men round about me, but few noble ones among them, and these few are broken and suffering souls. I don't know why it should be so, but so it is; the better the man,

the cleaner and the more honest his soul, the less energy he has; the more he suffers and the harder is his life... But although they suffer so much from feeling the want of something better they have not the force to create it."

"One thing more. Can you awake in man a laughter full of the joy of life, and at the same time elevating to the soul? Look – men have quite forgotten good wholesome laughter!"

"The sense of life is not in self-satisfaction after all, man is better than that. The sense of life is in the beauty and the force of striving toward some aim; every moment of being ought to have its higher aim. Wrath, hatred, shame, loathing, and finally a grim despair – these are the levers by means of which you may destroy everything on earth. What can you do to awake a thirst for life, when you only whine, sigh, moan or coolly point out to man that he is nothing but dust?"

"Oh, for a man, firm and loving, with a burning heart and a powerful all-embracing mind. In the stuffy atmosphere of shameful silence, his prophetic words would resound like a tocsin, and perhaps the mean souls of the living dead would shiver!" (253.)

These ideas of Górký about the necessity of something better than everyday life – something which shall elevate the soul, fully explain also his last drama, "At the Bottom," which has had such a success at Moscow, but played by the very same artists at St. Petersburg, met with but little enthusiasm. The idea is the same as that of Ibsen's "Wild Duck." The inhabitants of a doss-house, all of them, maintain their ability to live only as long as they cherish some illusion: the drunkard actor dreams of recovery in some special retreat; a fallen girl takes refuge in her illusion of real love, and so on. And the dramatic situation of these beings with already so little to retain them in life, is only the more poignant when the illusions are destroyed. The drama is powerful. It must lose, though, on the stage on account of some technical mistakes (a useless fourth act, the unnecessary person of a woman introduced in the first scene and then disappearing); but apart from these mistakes it is eminently dramatic. The positions are really tragical, the action is rapid, and as to the conversations of the inhabitants of the doss-house and their philosophy of life, both are above all praise. Altogether one feels that Górký is very far yet from having said his last word. The question is only whether in the classes of society he now frequents he will be able to discover the further developments – undoubtedly existing – of the types which he understands best. Will he find among them further materials responding to the æsthetic canons whose following has hitherto been the source of his power?

BROMLEY, KENT, ENGLAND.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Pëtr Kropotkin
Maxím Górký

The Independent, Vol. 57, No. 2924, December 15, 1904, Creation of machine-readable version:
Judy Boss, 1996, November 1996 corrector Stephen Ramsay, Courtesy of Charles Scribner's
Sons, online source RevoltLib.com.

theanarchistlibrary.org