Through Russia

[Illustrated]



Maxim Gorky

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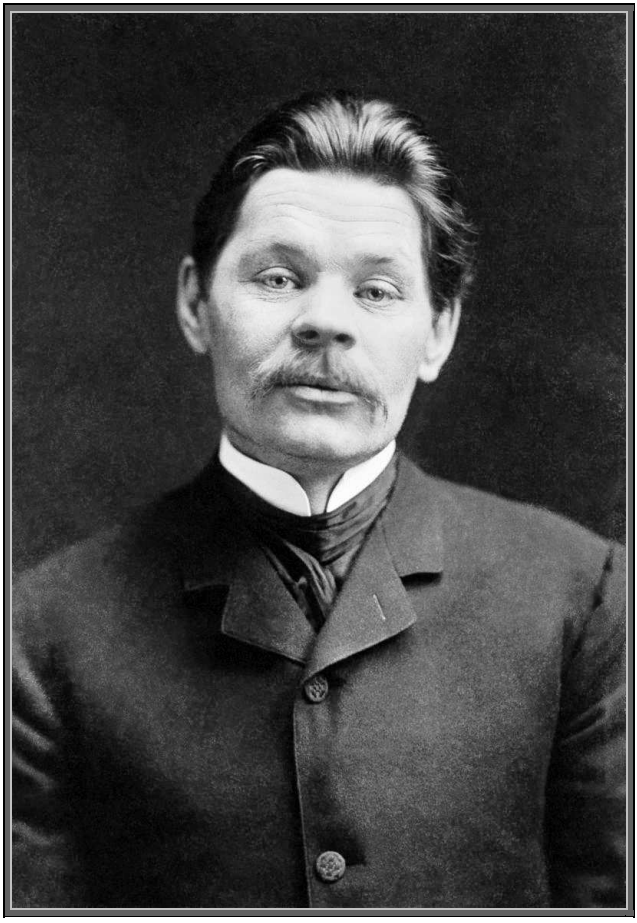
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About Author:

(Maxim Gorky)

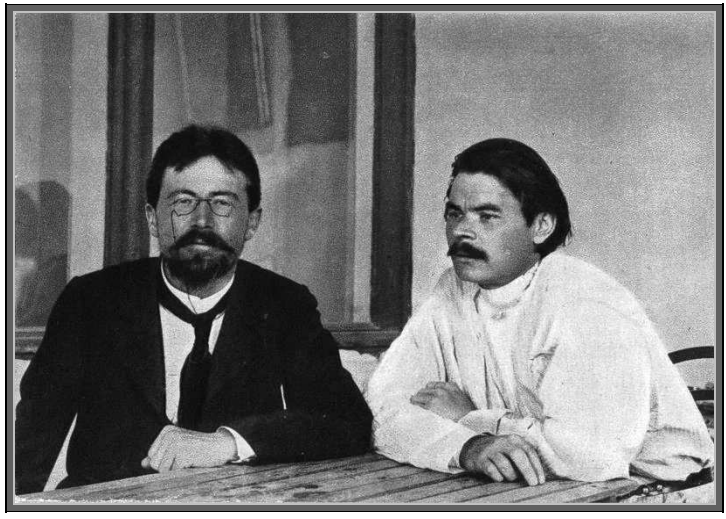


Aleksey Maksimovich Peshkov (1868 –1936), better known as Maxim Gorky, was a Russian/Soviet author, a founder of the socialist realism literary method and a political activist. From 1906 to 1913 and from 1921 to 1929 he lived abroad, mostly in Capri, Italy; after his return to the

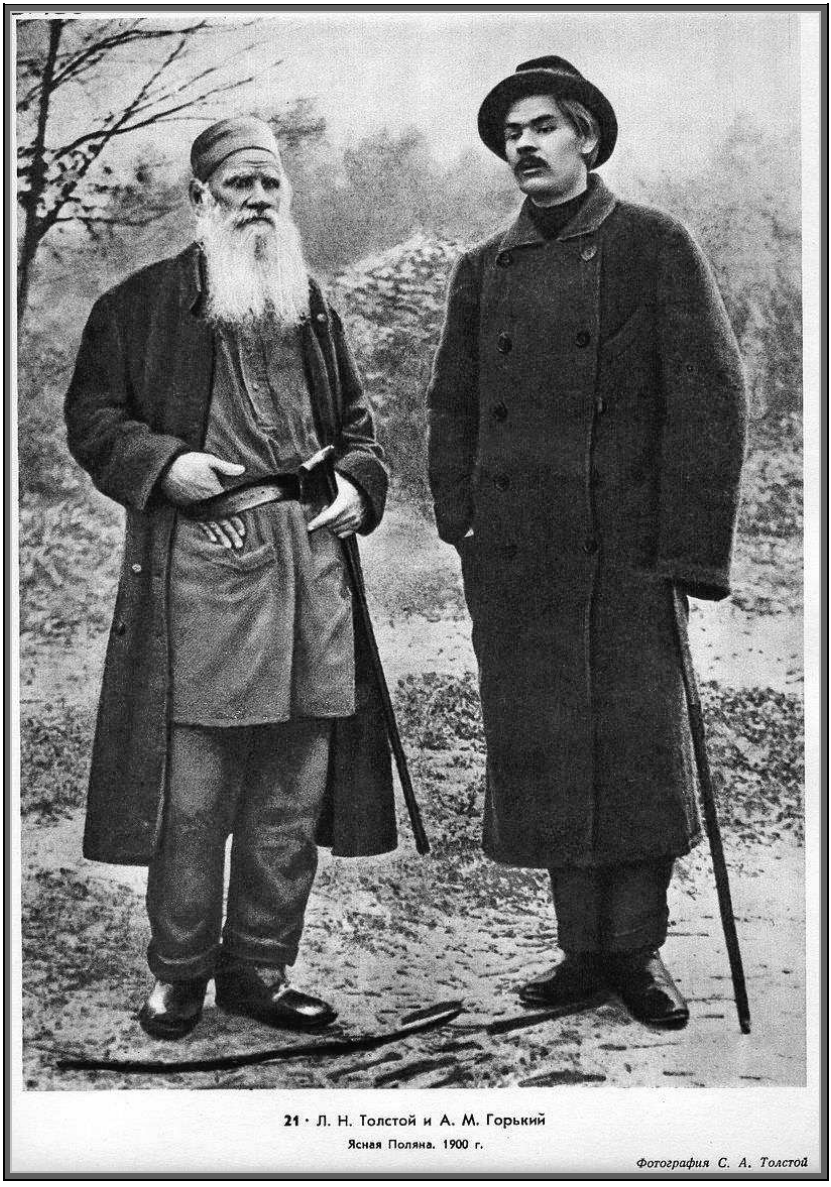
Soviet Union he accepted the cultural policies of the time, although he was not permitted to leave the country.

He was also a five-time nominee for the Nobel Prize in Literature. Around fifteen years before success as a writer, he frequently changed jobs and roamed across the Russian Empire; these experiences would later influence his writing. Gorky's most famous works were ***The Lower Depths*(1902), *Twenty-six Men and a Girl*, *The Song of the Stormy Petrel*, *The Mother*, *Summer folk* and *Children of the Sun*.** He had an association with fellow Russian writers Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov; Gorky would later write his memoirs on both of them.

Gorky was active with the emerging Marxist social-democratic movement. He publicly opposed the Tsarist regime, and for a time closely associated himself with Vladimir Lenin and Alexander Bogdanov's Bolshevik wing of the party. For a significant part of his life, he was exiled from Russia and later the Soviet Union. In 1932, he returned to Russia on Joseph Stalin's personal invitation and died there in June 1936.



Anton Chekhov and Gorky. 1900, Yalta



21 · Л. Н. Толстой и А. М. Горький
Ясная Поляна. 1900 г.
Фотография С. А. Толстой

Leo Tolstoy with Gorky in Yasnaya Polyana, 1900

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Some Other Books Maxim Gorky:

- *Mother* (1907)
- *Creatures That Once Were Men* (1918)
- *Twenty-six and One and Other Stories* (1902)
- *The Man Who Was Afraid* (1901)

THE BIRTH OF A MAN



The year was the year '92—the year of leanness—the scene a spot between Sukhum and Otchenchiri, on the river Kodor, a spot so near to the sea that amid the joyous babble of a sparkling rivulet the ocean's deep-voiced thunder was plainly distinguishable.

Also, the season being autumn, leaves of wild laurel were glistening and gyrating on the white foam of the Kodor like a quantity of mercurial salmon fry. And as I sat on some rocks overlooking the river there occurred to me the thought that, as likely as not, the cause of the gulls' and cormorants' fretful cries where the surf lay moaning behind a belt of trees to the right was that, like myself, they kept mistaking the leaves for fish, and as often finding themselves disappointed.

Over my head hung chestnut trees decked with gold; at my feet lay a mass of chestnut leaves which resembled the amputated palms of human hands; on the opposite bank, where there waved, tanglewise, the stripped branches of a hornbeam, an orange-tinted woodpecker was darting to and fro, as though caught in the mesh of foliage, and, in company with a troupe of nimble titmice and blue tree-creepers (visitors from the far-distant North), tapping the bark of the stem with a black beak, and hunting for insects.

To the left, the tops of the mountains hung fringed with dense, fleecy clouds of the kind which presages rain; and these clouds were sending their shadows gliding over slopes green and overgrown with boxwood and that peculiar species of hollow beech-stump which once came near to effecting the downfall of Pompey's host, through depriving his iron-built legions of the use of their legs as they revelled in the intoxicating sweetness of the "mead" or honey which wild bees make from the blossoms of the laurel and the azalea, and travellers still gather from those hollow stems to knead into lavashi or thin cakes of millet flour.

On the present occasion I too (after suffering sundry stings from infuriated bees) was thus engaged as I sat on the rocks beneath the

chestnuts. Dipping morsels of bread into a potful of honey, I was munching them for breakfast, and enjoying, at the same time, the indolent beams of the moribund autumn sun.

In the fall of the year the Caucasus resembles a gorgeous cathedral built by great craftsmen (always great craftsmen are great sinners) to conceal their past from the prying eyes of conscience. Which cathedral is a sort of intangible edifice of gold and turquoise and emerald, and has thrown over its hills rare carpets silk-embroidered by Turcoman weavers of Shemi and Samarkand, and contains, heaped everywhere, plunder brought from all the quarters of the world for the delectation of the sun. Yes, it is as though men sought to say to the Sun God: "All things here are thine. They have been brought hither for thee by thy people."

Yes, mentally I see long-bearded, grey-headed supermen, beings possessed of the rounded eyes of happy children, descending from the hills, and decking the earth, and sowing it with sheerly kaleidoscopic treasures, and coating the tops of the mountains with massive layers of silver, and the lower edges with a living web of trees. Yes, I see those beings decorating and fashioning the scene until, thanks to their labours, this gracious morsel of the earth has become fair beyond all conception.

And what a privilege it is to be human! How much that is wonderful leaps to the eye-how the presence of beauty causes. the heart to throb with a voluptuous rapture that is almost pain!

And though there are occasions when life seems hard, and the breast feels filled with fiery rancour, and melancholy dries and renders athirst the heart's blood, this is not a mood sent us in perpetuity. For at times even the sun may feel sad as he contemplates men,

and sees that, despite all that he has done for them, they have done so little in return… .

No, it is not that good folk are lacking. It is that they need to be rounded off—better still, to be made anew.

Suddenly there came into view over the bushes to my left a file of dark heads, while through the surging of the waves and the babble of the stream I caught the sound of human voices, a sound emanating from a party of "famine people" or folk who were journeying from Sukhum to Otchenchiri to obtain work on a local road then in process of construction.

The owners of the voices I knew to be immigrants from the province of Orlov. I knew them to be so for the reason that I myself had lately been working in company with the male members of the party, and had taken leave of them only yesterday in order that I might set out earlier than they, and, after walking through the night, greet the sun when he should arise above the sea.

The members of the party comprised four men and a woman—the latter a young female with high cheek-bones, a figure swollen with manifest pregnancy, and a pair of greyish-blue eyes that had fixed in them a stare of apprehension. At the present moment her head and yellow scarf were just showing over the tops of the bushes; and while I noted that now it was swaying from side to side like a sunflower shaken by the wind, I recalled the fact that she was a woman whose husband had been carried off at Sukhum by a surfeit of fruit—this fact being known to me through the circumstance that in the workmen's barraque where we had shared quarters these

folk had observed the good old Russian custom of confiding to a stranger the whole of their troubles, and had done so in tones of such amplitude and penetration that the querulous words must have been audible for five versts around.

And as I had talked to these forlorn people, these human beings who lay crushed beneath the misfortune which had uprooted them from their barren and exhausted lands, and blown them, like autumn leaves, towards the Caucasus where nature's luxuriant, but unfamiliar, aspect had blinded and bewildered them, and with its onerous conditions of labour quenched their last spark of courage; as I had talked to these poor people I had seen them glancing about with dull, troubled, despondent eyes, and heard them say to one another softly, and with pitiful smiles:

"What a country!"

"Aye,—that it is!—a country to make one sweat!"

"As hard as a stone it is!"

"Aye, an evil country!"

After which they had gone on to speak of their native haunts, where every handful of soil had represented to them the dust of their ancestors, and every grain of that soil had been watered with the sweat of their brows, and become charged with dear and intimate recollections.

Previously there had joined the party a woman who, tall and straight, had had breasts as flat as a board, and jawbones like the jawbones of a horse, and a glance in her dull, sidelong black eyes like a gleaming, smouldering fire.

And every evening this woman had been wont to step outside the barraque with the woman in the yellow scarf and to seat herself on a rubbish heap, and, resting her cheeks on the palms of her hands, and inclining her head sideways, to sing in a high and shrewish voice:

Behind the graveyard wall,
Where fair green bushes stand.
I'll spread me on the sand
A shroud as white as snow.
And not long will it be
Before my heart's adored,
My master and my lord,
Shall answer my curtsey low.

Usually her companion, the woman in the yellow scarf, had, with head bent forward and eyes fixed upon her stomach, remained silent; but on rare, unexpected occasions she had, in the hoarse, sluggish voice of a peasant, sung a song with the sobbing refrain:

Ah, my beloved, sweetheart of mine,
Never again will these eyes seek thine!

Nor amid the stifling blackness of the southern night had these voices ever failed to bring back to my memory the snowy wastes of the North, and the icy, wailing storm-wind, and the distant howling of unseen wolves.

In time, the squint-eyed woman had been taken ill of a fever, and removed to the town in a tilted ambulance; and as she had lain quivering and moaning on the stretcher she had seemed still to be singing her little ditty about the graveyard and the sand.

The head with the yellow scarf rose, dipped, and disappeared.

After I had finished my breakfast I thatched the honey-pot with some leaves, fastened down the lid, and indolently resumed my way in the wake of the party, my blackthorn staff tiptapping against the hard tread of the track as I proceeded.

The track loomed—a grey, narrow strip—before me, while on my right the restless, dark blue sea had the air of being ceaselessly planed by thousands of invisible carpenters; so regularly did the stress of a wind as moist and sweet and warm as the breath of a healthy woman cause ever-rustling curls of foam to drift towards the beach. Also, careening on to its port quarter under a full set of bellying sails, a Turkish felucca was gliding towards Sukhum; and, as it held on its course, it put me in mind of a certain pompous engineer of the town who had been wont to inflate his fat cheeks and say: "Be quiet, you, or I will have you locked up!" This man had, for some reason or another, an extraordinary weakness for causing arrests to be made; and, exceedingly do I rejoice to think that by now the worms of the graveyard must have consumed him down to the very marrow of his bones. Would that certain other acquaintances of mine were similarly receiving beneficent attention!

Walking proved an easy enough task, for I seemed to be borne on air, while a chorus of pleasant thoughts, of many-coloured recollections, kept singing gently in my breast—a chorus resembling, indeed, the white-maned billows in the regularity with which now it rose, and now it fell, to reveal in, as it were, soft, peaceful depths the bright, supple hopes of youth, like so many silver fish cradled in the bosom of the ocean.

Suddenly, as it trended seawards, the road executed a half-turn, and skirted a strip of the sandy margin to which the waves kept rolling in such haste. And in that spot even the bushes seemed to have a mind to look the waves in the eyes—so strenuously did they lean across the riband-like path, and nod in the direction of the blue, watery waste, while from the hills a wind was blowing that presaged rain.

***

But hark! From some point among the bushes a low moan arose—the sound which never fails to thrill the soul and move it to responsive quivers!

Thrusting aside the foliage, I beheld before me the woman in the yellow scarf. Seated with her back resting against the stem of a hazel-bush, she had her head sunken deeply between her shoulders, her mouth hideously agape, her eyes staring vaguely before her, her hands pressed to her swollen stomach, her breath issuing with unnatural vehemence, and her abdomen convulsively, spasmodically rising and falling. Meanwhile from her throat were issuing moans which at times caused her yellow teeth to show bare like those of a wolf.

"What is the matter?" I said as I bent over her. "Has anyone assaulted you?"

The only result was that, shuffling bare feet in the sand like a fly, she shook her nerveless hand, and gasped:

"Away, villain! Away with you!"

Then I understood what was the matter, for I had seen a similar case before. Yet for the moment a certain feeling of shyness made me edge away from her a little; and as I did so, she uttered a prolonged moan, and her almost bursting eyeballs vented hot, murky tears which trickled down her tense and livid features.

Thereupon I turned to her again, and, throwing down cooking-pot, teapot, and wallet, laid her on her back, and strove to bend her knees upwards in the direction of her body. Meanwhile she sought to repel me with blows on face and breast, and at length rolled on to her stomach. Then, raising herself on all fours, she, sobbing, gasping, and cursing in a breath, crawled away like a bear into a remoter portion of the thicket.

"Beast!" she panted. "Oh, you devil!"

Yet, even as the words escaped her lips, her arms gave way beneath her, and she collapsed upon her face, with legs stretched out, and her lips emitting a fresh series of convulsive moans.

Excited now to fever pitch, I hurriedly recalled my small store of knowledge of such cases and finally decided to turn her on her back, and, as before, to strive to bend her knees upwards in the direction of her body. Already signs of imminent parturition were not wanting.

"Lie still," I said, "and if you do that it will not be long before you are delivered of the child."

Whereafter, running down to the sea, I pulled up my sleeves, and, on returning, embarked upon my role, of accoucheur.

Scoring the earth with her fingers, uprooting tufts of withered grass, and struggling to thrust them into her mouth, scattering soil over her terrible, inhuman face and bloodshot eyes, the woman writhed like a strip of birch bark in a wood fire. Indeed, by this time a little head was coming into view, and it needed all my efforts to quell the twitchings of her legs, to help the child to issue, and to prevent its mother from thrusting grass down her distorted, moaning throat. Meanwhile we cursed one another—she through her teeth, and I in an undertone; she, I should surmise, out of pain and shame, and I, I feel certain, out of nervousness, mingled with a perfect agony of compassion.

"O Lord!" she gasped with blue lips flecked with foam as her eyes (suddenly bereft of their colour in the sunlight) shed tears born of the intolerable anguish of the maternal function, and her body writhed and twisted as though her frame had been severed in the middle.

"Away, you brute!" was her oft-repeated cry as with her weak hands, hands seemingly dislocated at the wrists, she strove to thrust me to a distance. Yet all the time I kept saying persuasively: "You fool! Bring forth as quickly as you can!" and, as a matter of fact, was feeling so sorry for her that tears continued to spurt from my eyes as much as from hers, and my very heart contracted with pity. Also, never did I cease to feel that I ought to keep saying something; wherefore, I repeated, and again repeated: "Now then! Bring forth as quickly as ever you can!"

And at last my hands did indeed hold a human creature in all its pristine beauty. Nor could even the mist of tears prevent me from seeing that that human creature was red in the face, and that to

judge from the manner in which it kept kicking and resisting and uttering hoarse wails (while still bound to its mother by the ligament), it was feeling dissatisfied in advance with the world. Yes, blue-eyed, and with a nose absurdly sunken between a pair of scarlet, rumpled cheeks and lips which ceaselessly quivered and contracted, it kept bawling: "A-aah! A-a-ah!"

Moreover, so slippery was it that, as I knelt and looked at it and laughed with relief at the fact that it had arrived safely, I came near to letting it fall upon the ground: wherefore I entirely forgot what next I ought to have done.

"Cut it!" at length whispered the mother with eyes closed, and features suddenly swollen and resembling those of a corpse.

"A knife!" again she whispered with her livid lips. "Cut it!"

My pocket-knife I had had stolen from me in the workmen's barraque; but with my teeth I severed the caul, and then the child gave renewed tongue in true Orlovian fashion, while the mother smiled. Also, in some curious fashion, the mother's unfathomable eyes regained their colour, and became filled as with blue fire as, plunging a hand into her bodice and feeling for the pocket, she contrived to articulate with raw and blood-flecked lips:

"I have not a single piece of string or riband to bind the caul with."

Upon that I set to, and managed to produce a piece of riband, and to fasten it in the required position.

Thereafter she smiled more brightly than ever. So radiantly did she smile that my eyes came near to being blinded with the spectacle.

"And now rearrange yourself," I said, "and in the meanwhile I will go and wash the baby."

"Yes, yes," she murmured uneasily. "But be very careful with him—be very gentle."

Yet it was little enough care that the rosy little homunculus seemed to require, so strenuously did he clench his fists, and bawl as though he were minded to challenge the whole world to combat.

"Come, now!" at length I said. "You must have done, or your very head will drop off."

Yet no sooner did he feel the touch of the ocean spray, and begin to be sprinkled With its joyous caresses, than he lamented more loudly and vigorously than ever, and so continued throughout the process of being slapped on the back and breast as, frowning and struggling, he vented squall after squall while the waves laved his tiny limbs.

"Shout, young Orlovian!" said I encouragingly. "Let fly with all the power of your lungs!"

And with that, I took him back to his mother. I found her with eyes closed and lips drawn between her teeth as she writhed in the torment of expelling the after-birth. But presently I detected through the sighs and groans a whispered:

"Give him to me! Give him to me!"

"You had better wait a little," I urged.

"Oh no! Give him to me now!"

And with tremulous, unsteady hands she unhooked the bosom of her bodice, and, freeing (with my assistance) the breast which nature had prepared for at least a dozen children, applied the mutinous young Orlovian to the nipple. As for him, he at once understood the matter, and ceased to send forth further lamentation.

"O pure and holy Mother of God!" she gasped in a long-drawn, quivering sigh as she bent a dishevelled head over the little one, and, between intervals of silence, fell to uttering soft, abrupt exclamations. Then, opening her ineffably beautiful blue eyes, the hallowed eyes of a mother, she raised them towards the azure heavens, while in their depths there was coming and going a flame of joy and gratitude. Lastly, lifting a languid hand, she with a slow movement made the sign of the cross over both herself and her babe.

"Thanks to thee O purest Mother of God!" she murmured. "Thanks indeed to thee!"

Then her eyes grew dim and vague again, and after a pause (during which she seemed to be scarcely breathing) she said in a hard and matter-of-fact tone:

"Young fellow, unfasten my satchel."

And whilst I was so engaged she continued to regard me with a steady gaze; but, when the task was completed she smiled shamefacedly, and on her sunken cheeks and sweat-flecked temples there dawned the ghost of a blush.

"Now," said she, "do you, for the present, go away."

"And if I do so, see that in the meanwhile you do not move about too much."

"No, I will not. But please go away."

So I withdrew a little. In my breast a sort of weariness was lurking, but also in my breast there was echoing a soft and glorious chorus of birds, a chorus so exquisitely in accord with the never-ceasing splash of the sea that for ever could I have listened to it, and to the neighbouring brook as it purled on its way like a maiden engaged in relating confidences about her lover.

Presently, the woman's yellow-scarfed head (the scarf now tidily rearranged) reappeared over the bushes.

"Come, come, good woman!" was my exclamation. "I tell you that you must not move about so soon."

And certainly her attitude now was one of utter languor, and she had perforce to grasp the stem of a bush with one hand to support herself. Yet while the blood was gone from her face, there had formed in the hollows where her eyes had been two lakes of blue.

"See how he is sleeping!" she murmured.

And, true enough, the child was sound asleep, though to my eyes he looked much as any other baby might have done, save that the couch of autumn leaves on which he was ensconced consisted of leaves of a kind which could not have been discovered in the faraway forests of Orlov.

"Now, do you yourself lie down awhile," was my advice.

"Oh, no," she replied with a shake of her head on its sinuous neck; "for I must be collecting my things before I move on towards—"

"Towards Otchenchiri"

"Yes. By now my folk will have gone many a verst in that direction."

"And can you walk so far?"

"The Holy Mother will help me."

Yes, she was to journey in the company of the Mother of God. So no more on the point required to be said.

Glancing again at the tiny, inchoate face under the bushes, her eyes diffused rays of warm and kindly light as, licking her lips, she, with a slow movement, smoothed the breast of the little one.

Then I arranged sticks for a fire, and also adjusted stones to support the kettle.

"Soon I will have tea ready for you," I remarked.

"And thankful indeed I shall be," she responded, "for my breasts are dried up."

"Why have your companions deserted you?" I said next.

"They have not deserted me. It was I that left them of my own accord. How could I have exposed myself in their presence?"

And with a glance at me she raised a hand to her face as, spitting a gout of blood, she smiled a sort of bashful smile.

"This is your first child, I take it?"

"It is… . And who are you?"

"A man."

"Yes, a man, of course; but, are you a MARRIED man?"

"No, I have never been able to marry."

"That cannot be true."

"Why not?"

With lowered eyes she sat awhile in thought.

"Because, if so, how do you come to know so much about women's affairs?"

This time I DID lie, for I replied:

"Because they have been my study. In fact, I am a medical student."

"Ah! Our priest's son also was a student, but a student for the Church."

"Very well. Then you know what I am. Now I will go and fetch some water."

Upon this she inclined her head towards her little son and listened for a moment to his breathing. Then she said with a glance towards the sea:

"I too should like to have a wash, but I do not know what the water is like. What is it? Brackish or salt?"

"No; quite good water—fit for you to wash in."

"Is it really?"

"Yes, really. Moreover, it is warmer than the water of the streams hereabouts, which is as cold as ice."

"Ah! Well, you know best."

Here a shaggy-eared pony, all skin and bone, was seen approaching us at a foot's pace. Trembling, and drooping its head, it scanned us, as it drew level, with a round black eye, and snorted. Upon that, its rider pushed back a ragged fur cap, glanced warily in our direction, and again sank his head.

"The folk of these parts are ugly to look at," softly commented the woman from Orlov.

Then I departed in quest of water. After I had washed my face and hands I filled the kettle from a stream bright and lively as quicksilver (a stream presenting, as the autumn leaves tossed in the eddies which went leaping and singing over the stones, a truly enchanting spectacle), and, returning, and peeping through the bushes, perceived the woman to be crawling on hands and knees over the stones, and anxiously peering about, as though in search of something.

"What is it?" I inquired, and thereupon, turning grey in the face with confusion she hastened to conceal some article under her person, although I had already guessed the nature of the article.

"Give it to me," was my only remark. "I will go and bury it."

"How so? For, as a matter of fact, it ought to be buried under the floor in front of some stove."

"Are we to build a stove HERE? Build it in five minutes?" I retorted.

"Ah, I was jesting. But really, I would rather not have it buried here, lest some wild beast should come and devour it… Yet it ought to be committed only to the earth."

That said, she, with averted eyes, handed me a moist and heavy bundle; and as she did so she said under her breath, with an air of confusion:

"I beg of you for Christ's sake to bury it as well, as deeply, as you can. Out of pity for my son do as I bid you."

I did as she had requested; and, just as the task had been completed, I perceived her returning from the margin of the sea with unsteady gait, and an arm stretched out before her, and a petticoat soaked to the middle with the sea water. Yet all her face was alight with inward fire, and as I helped her to regain the spot where I had prepared some sticks I could not help reflecting with some astonishment:

"How strong indeed she is!"

Next, as we drank a mixture of tea and honey, she inquired:

"Have you now ceased to be a student?"

"Yes."

"And why so? Through too much drink?"

"Even so, good mother."

"Dear me! Well, your face is familiar to me. Yes, I remember that I noticed you in Sukhum when once you were arguing with the barraque superintendent over the question of rations. As I did so the thought occurred to me: 'Surely that bold young fellow must have gone and spent his means on drink? Yes, that is how it must be.'"

Then, as from her swollen lips she licked a drop of honey, she again bent her blue eyes in the direction of the bush under which the slumbering, newly-arrived Orlovian was couched.

"How will he live?" thoughtfully she said with a sigh—then added:

"You have helped me, and I thank you. Yes, my thanks are yours, though I cannot tell whether or not your assistance will have helped HIM."

And, drinking the rest of her tea, she ate a morsel of bread, then made the sign of the cross. And subsequently, as I was putting up my things, she continued to rock herself to and fro, to give little starts and cries, and to gaze thoughtfully at the ground with eyes which had now regained their original colour. At last she rose to her feet.

"You are not going yet?" I queried protestingly.

"Yes, I must."

"But—"

"The Blessed Virgin will go with me. So please hand me over the child."

"No, I will carry him."

And, after a contest for the honour, she yielded, and we walked away side by side.

"I only wish I were a little steadier on my feet," she remarked with an apologetic smile as she laid a hand upon my shoulder.

Meanwhile, the new citizen of Russia, the little human being of an unknown future, was snoring soundly in my arms as the sea plashed and murmured, and threw off its white shavings, and the bushes whispered together, and the sun (now arrived at the meridian) shone brightly upon us all.

In calm content it was that we walked; save that now and then the mother would halt, draw a deep breath, raise her head, scan the sea and the forest and the hills, and peer into her son's face. And as she did so, even the mist begotten of tears of suffering could not dim the wonderful brilliancy and clearness of her eyes. For with the sombre fire of inexhaustible love were those eyes aflame.

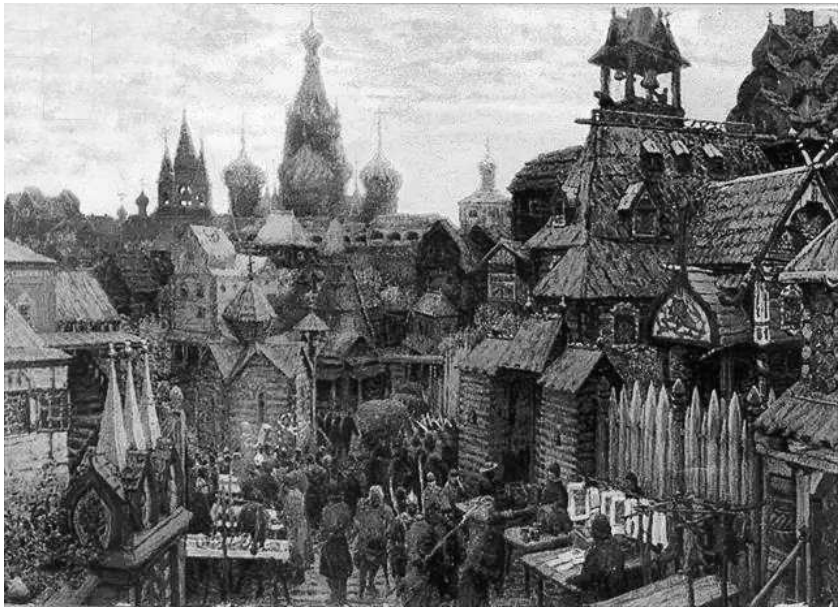
Once, as she halted, she exclaimed:

"O God, O Mother of God, how good it all is! Would that for ever I could walk thus, yes, walk and walk unto the very end of the

world! All that I should need would be that thou, my son, my darling son, shouldst, borne upon thy mother's breast, grow and wax strong!"

And the sea murmured and murmured.

THE ICEBREAKER



On a frozen river near a certain Russian town, a gang of seven carpenters were hastily repairing an icebreaker which the townsfolk had stripped for firewood.

That year spring happened to be late in arriving, and youthful March looked more like October, and only at noon, and that not on every day, did the pale, wintry sun show himself in the overcast heavens, or, glimmering in blue spaces between clouds, contemplate the earth with a squinting, malevolent eye.

The day in question was the Friday in Holy Week, and, as night drew on, drippings were becoming congealed into icicles half an arshin long, and in the snow-stripped ice of the river only the dun hue of the wintry clouds was reflected.

As the carpenters worked there kept mournfully, insistently echoing from the town the coppery note of bells; and at intervals heads would raise themselves, and blue eyes would gleam thoughtfully through the same grey fog in which the town lay enveloped, and an axe uplifted would hover a moment in the air as though fearing with its descent to cleave the luscious flood of sound.

Scattered over the spacious river-track were dark pine branches, projecting obliquely from the ice, to mark paths, open spaces, and cracks on the surface; and where they reared themselves aloft, these branches looked like the cramped, distorted arms of drowning men.

From the river came a whiff of gloom and depression. Covered over with sodden slush, it stretched with irksome rigidity towards the misty quarter whence blew a languid, sluggish, damp, cold wind.

Suddenly the foreman, one Ossip, a cleanly built, upright little peasant with a neatly curling, silvery beard, ruddy cheeks, and a flexible neck, a man everywhere and always in evidence, shouted:

"Look alive there, my hearties!"

Presently he turned his attention to myself, and smiled insinuatingly.

"Inspector," he said, "what are you trying to poke out of the sky with that squat nose of yours? And why are you here at all? You come from the contractor, you say?—from Vasili Sergeitch? Well, well! Then your job is to hurry us up, to keep barking out, 'Mind what you are doing, such-and-such gang!' Yet there you stand-blinking over your task like an object dried stiff! It's not to blink that you're here, but to play the watchdog upon us, and to keep an eye open, and your tongue on the wag. So issue your commands, young cockerel."

Then he shouted to the workmen:

"Now, then! No shirking! Is the job going to be finished tonight, or is it not?"

As a matter of fact, he himself was the worst shirker in the artel [Workman's union]. True, he was also a first-rate hand at his trade, and a man who could work quickly and well and with skill and concentration; but, unfortunately, he hated putting himself out, and preferred to spend his time spinning arresting yarns. For instance, on the present occasion he chose the moment when work was proceeding with a swing, when everyone was busily and silently and wholeheartedly labouring with the object of running the job through to the end, to begin in his musical voice:

"Look here, lads. Once upon a time—"

And though for the first two or three minutes the men appeared not to hear him, and continued their planing and chopping as before, the moment came when the soft tenor accents caught and held the men's attention, as they trickled and burbled forth. Then, screwing up his bright eyes with a humorous air, and twisting his

curly beard between his fingers, Ossip gave a complacent click of his tongue, and continued measuredly, and with deliberation:

"So he seized hold of the tench, and thrust it back into the cave. And as he turned to proceed through the forest he thought to himself: 'Now I must keep my eyes about me.' And suddenly, from somewhere (no one could have said where), a woman's voice shrieked: 'Elesi-a-ah! Elesia-ah!'"

Here a tall, lanky Morduine named Leuka, with, as surname, Narodetz, a young fellow whose small eyes wore always an expression of astonishment, laid aside his axe, and stood gaping.

"And from the cave a deep bass voice replied: 'Elesi-a-ah!' while at the same moment the tench sprang from the cave, and, champing its jaws, wriggled and wriggled back to the slough."

Here an old soldier named Saniavin, a morose man, a tippler, and a sufferer from asthma and an inexplicable grudge against life in general, croaked out:

"How could your tench have wriggled across dry land if it was a fish?"

"Can, for that matter, a fish speak?" was Ossip's good-humoured retort.

All of which inspired Mokei Budirin, a grey-headed muzhik of a cast of countenance canine in the prominence of his jaws and the recession of his forehead, and taciturn withal, though not otherwise remarkable, to give slow, nasal utterance to his favourite formula.

"That is true enough," he said.

For never could anything be spoken of that was grim or marvellous or lewd or malicious, but Budirin at once re-echoed softly, but in a tone of unshakable conviction: "That is true enough."

Thereafter he would tap me on the breast with his hard and ponderous fist.

Presently work again underwent an interruption through the fact that Yakov Boev, a man who possessed both a stammer and a squint, became similarly filled with a desire to tell us something about a fish. Yet from the moment that he began his narrative everyone declined to believe it, and laughed at his broken verbiage as, frequently invoking the Deity, and cursing, and brandishing his awl, and viciously swallowing spittle, he shouted amid general ridicule:

"Once-once upon a time there lived a man. Yes, other folk before YOU have believed my tale. Indeed, it is no more than the truth that I'm going to tell you. Very well! Cackle away, and be damned!"

Here everyone without exception dropped his work to shout with merriment and clap his hands: with the result that, doffing his cap, and thereby disclosing a silvered, symmetrically shaped head with one bald spot amid its one dark portion, Ossip was forced to shout severely:

"Hi, you Budirin! You've had your say, and given us some fun, and there must be no more of it."

"But I had only just begun what I want to say," the old soldier grumbled, spitting upon the palms of his hands.

Next, Ossip turned to myself.

"Inspector," he began…

It is my opinion that in thus hindering the men from work through his tale-telling, Ossip had some definite end in view. I could not say precisely what that end was, but it must have been the object either of cloaking his own laziness or of giving the men a rest. On the other hand, whenever the contractor was present he, Ossip, bore himself with humble obsequiousness, and continued to assume a guise of simplicity which none the less did not prevent him, on the advent of each Saturday, from inducing his employer to bestow a pourboire upon the artel.

And though this same Ossip was an artelui, and a director of the artel, his senior co-members bore him no affection, but, rather, looked upon him as a wag or trifler, and treated him as of no importance. And, similarly, the younger members of the artel liked well enough to listen to his tales, but declined to take him seriously, and, in some cases, regarded him with ill-concealed, or openly expressed, distrust.

Once the Morduine, a man of education with whom, on occasions, I held discussions on intimate subjects, replied to a question of mine on the subject of Ossip:

"I scarcely know. Goodness alone knows! No, I do not know anything about him."

To which, after a pause, he added:

"Once a fellow named Mikhailo, a clever fellow who is now dead, insulted Ossip by saying to him: 'Do you call yourself a man? Why, regarded as a workman, you're as lifeless as a doornail, while, see-

ing that you weren't born to be a master, you'll all your life continue chattering in corners, like a plummet swinging at the end of a string!' Yes, and that was true enough."

Lastly, after another pause the Morduine concluded:

"No matter. He is not such a bad sort."

My own position among these men was a position of some awkwardness, for, a young fellow of only fifteen, I had been appointed by the contractor, a distant relative of mine, to the task of superintending the expenditure of material. That is to say, I had to see to it that the carpenters did not make away with nails, or dispose of planks in return for drink. Yet all the time my presence was practically useless, seeing that the men stole nails as though I were not even in existence and strove to show me that among them I was a person too many, a sheer incubus, and seized every opportunity of giving me covert jogs with a beam, and similarly affronting me.

This, of course, made my relations with them highly difficult, embarrassing, and irksome; and though moments occurred when I longed to say something that might ingratiate me, and endeavoured to effect an advance in that direction, the words always failed me at the necessary juncture, and I found myself lying crushed as before under a burdensome sense of the superfluity of my existence.

Again, if ever I tried to make an entry as to some material which had been used, Ossip would approach me, and, for instance, say:

"Is it jotted down, eh? Then let me look at it."

And, eyeing the notebook with a frown, he would add vaguely:

"What a nice hand you write!" (He himself could write only in printing fashion, in the large scriptory characters of the Ecclesiastical Rubric, not in those of the ordinary kind.)

"For example, that scoop there—what does IT say?"

"It is the word 'Good.'"

"'Good'? But what a slip-knot of a thing! And what are those words THERE, on THAT line?"

"They say, 'Planks, 1 vershok by 9 arshini, 5.'"

"No, six was the number used."

"No, five."

"Five? Why, the soldier broke one, didn't he?"

"Yes, but never mind—at least it wasn't a plank that was wanted."

"Oh! Well, I may tell you that he took the two pieces to the tavern to get drink with."

Then, glancing into my face with his cornflower-blue eyes and quiet, quizzical smile, he would say without the least confusion as he twisted the ringlets of his beard:

"Put down '6.' And see here, young cockerel. The weather has turned wet and cold, and the work is hard, and sometimes folk need to have their spirits cheered and raised with a drop of liquor. So don't you be too hard upon us, for God won't think the more of you for being strict."

And as he thus talked to me in his slow and kindly, but semi-affected, fashion—bespattering me, as it were, with wordy sawdust—I would suddenly grow blind of an eye and silently show him the corrected figure.

"That's it—that's right. And how fine the figure looks now, as it squats there like a merchant's buxom, comely dame!"

Then he would be seen triumphantly telling his mates of his success; then, I would find myself feeling acutely conscious of the fact that everyone was despising me for my complacence Yes, grown sick beyond endurance with a yearning for some thing which it could not descry, my fifteen-year-old heart would dissolve in a flood of mortified tears, and there would pass through my brain the despondent, aching thought:

"Oh, what a sad, uncomfortable world is this! How should Ossip have known so well that I should not re-correct the 6 into a 5, or that I should not tell the contractor that the men have bartered a plank for liquor?"

Again, there befell an occasion when the men stole two pounds' weight of five vershok mandrels and bolts.

"Look here," I said to Ossip warningly. "I am going to report this."

"All right," he agreed with a twitch of his grey eyebrows. "Though what such a trifle can matter I fail to see. Yes, go and report every mother's son of them."

And to the men themselves he shouted:

"Hi, boobies! Each of you now stands docked for some mandrels and bolts."

"Why?" was the old soldier's grim inquiry.

"Because you DO so stand," carelessly retorted the other.

With snarls thereafter, the men eyed me covertly, until I began to feel that very likely I should not do as I had threatened, and even that so to do might not be expedient.

"But look here," said I to Ossip. "I am going to give the contractor notice, and let all of you go to the devil. For if I were to remain with you much longer I too should become a thief."

Ossip stroked his beard awhile, and pondered. Then he seated himself beside me, and said in an undertone:

"That is true."

"Well?"

"But things are always so. The truth is that it's time you departed. What sort of a watchman, of a checker, are you? In jobs of this kind what a man needs to know is the meaning of property. He needs to have in him the spirit of a dog, so that he shall look after his master's stuff as he would look after the skin which his mother has put on to his own body. But you, you young puppy, haven't the slightest notion of what property means. In fact, were anyone to go and tell Vasili Sergeitch about the way in which you keep letting us off, he'd give it you in the neck. Yes, you're no good to him at all, but just an expense: whereas when a man serves a master he ought, do you understand, to be PROFITABLE to that master."

He rolled and handed me a cigarette.

"Smoke this," said he, "and perhaps it'll make your brain work easier. If only you had been of a less awkward, uncomfortable nature, I should have said to you, 'Go and join the priests; but, as things are, you aren't the right sort for that—you're too stiff and unbending, and would never make headway even with an abbot. No, you're not the sort to play cards with. A monk is like a jackdaw—he chatters without knowing what he is chattering about, and pays no heed to the root of things, so busy is he with stuffing himself full with the grain. I say this to you with absolute earnestness, for I perceive you to be strange to our ways—a cuckoo that has blundered into the wrong nest."

And, doffing his cap, a gesture which he never failed to execute when he had something particularly important to say, he added humbly and sonorously as he glanced at the grey firmament:

"In the sight of the Lord our ways are the ways of thieves, and such as will never gain of Him salvation."

"And that is true enough," responded Mokei Budirin after the fashion of a clarionet.

From that time forth, Ossip of the curly, silvered head, bright eyes, and shadowy soul became an object of agreeable interest for me. Indeed, there grew up between us a species of friendship, even though I could see that a civil bearing towards me in public was a thing that it hurt him to maintain. At all events, in the presence of others he avoided my glance, and his eyes, clear, unsullied, and fight blue in tint, wavered unsteadily, and his lips twitched and as-

sumed an artificially unpleasant expression, while he uttered some such speech as:

"Hi, you Makarei, see that you keep your eyes open, and cam your pay, or that pig of a soldier will be making away with more nails!"

But at other times, when we were alone together, he would speak to me kindly and instructively, while his eyes would dance and gleam with a faint, grave, knowing smile, and dart blue rays direct into mine, while for my part, as I listened to his words, I took every one of them to be absolutely true and balanced, despite their strange delivery.

"A man's duty consists in being good," I remarked on one occasion.

"Yes, of course," assented Ossip, though the next moment he veiled his eyes with a smile, and added in an undertone: "But what do you understand by the term 'good'? In my opinion, unless virtue be to their advantage, folk spit upon that 'goodness,' that 'honourableness,' of yours. Hence, the better plan is to pay folk court, and be civil to them, and flatter and cajole every mother's son of them. Yes, do that, and your 'goodness' will have a chance of bringing you in some return. Not that I do not say that to be 'good,' to be able to look your own ugly jowl in the face in a mirror, is pleasant enough; but, as I see the matter, it is all one to other people whether you be a cardsharper or a priest so long as you're polite, and let down your neighbours lightly. That's what they want."

For my part I never, at that period, grew weary of watching my fellows, for it was my constant idea that some day one of them

would be able to raise me to a higher level, and to bring me to an understanding of this unintelligible and complicated existence of ours. Hence I kept asking myself the restless, the importunate question:

"What precisely is the human soul?"

Certain souls, I thought, existed which seemed like balls of copper, for, solid and immovable, they reflected things from their own point of view alone, in a dull and irregular and distorted fashion. And souls, I thought, existed which seemed as flat as mirrors, and, for all intents and purposes, had no existence at all.

And in every case the human soul seemed formless, like a cloud, and as murkily mutable as an imitation opal, a thing which altered according to the colour of what adjoined it.

Only as regarded the soul of the intelligent Ossip was I absolutely at a loss, absolutely unable to reach a conclusion.

Pondering these and similar matters in my mind, I, on the day of which I speak, stood gazing at the river, and at the town under the hill, as I listened to the bells. Rearing themselves aloft like the organ pipes in my favourite Polish-Roman Catholic church, the steeples of the town had their crosses dimly sparkling as though the latter had been stars imprisoned in a murky sky. Yet it was as though those stars hoped eventually to ascend into the purer firmament above the wind-torn clouds that they sparkled; and as I stood watching the clouds glide onward, and momentarily efface with their shadows, the town's multifarious hues, I marked the fact that although, whenever dark-blue cavities in their substance permitted the beams of the sun to illuminate the buildings below, those buildings' roofs

assumed tints of increased cheerfulness. The clouds seemed to glide the faster to veil the beams, while the humid shadows grew more opaque—and the scene darkened as though only for a moment had it assumed a semblance of joy.

The buildings of the town (looking like heaps of muddy snow), the black, naked earth around those buildings, the trees in the gardens, the hummocks of piled-up soil, the dull grey glimmer of the window panes of the houses—all these things reminded me of winter, even though the misty breath of the northern spring was beginning to steal over the whole.

Presently a young fellow with flaxen hair, a pendent underlip, and a tall, ungainly figure, by name Mishuk Diatlov, essayed to troll the stanza:

"That morn to him the maiden came,
To find his soul had fled."

Whereupon the old soldier shouted:

"Hi, you! Have you forgotten the day?"

And even Boev saw fit to take umbrage at the singing, and, threatening Diatlov with his fist, to rap out:

"Ah, sobatchnia dusha!" ["Soul of a dog."]

"What a rude, rough, primitive lot we Russians are!" commented Ossip, seating himself atop of the icebreaker, and screwing up his eyes to measure its fall. "To speak plainly, we Russians are sheer barbarians. Once upon a time, I may tell you, an anchorite happened to be on his travels; and as the people came pressing around