

The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER
MARY CARUS.

VOL. XIX. (NO. 9.)

SEPTEMBER, 1905.

NO. 592

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THE LAST SERMON.

BY EDUARD BIEDERMANN.

Frontispiece to The Open Court.

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MAXIME GORKI.*

I.

GORKI'S work is the logical end of the literary and social movement of the nineteenth century in Russia, the natural and evolutive outcome of Gorgol's *Dead Souls*, of Tourguéniev's *Tales of a Hunter*, of Dostoïevsky's *House of the Dead*, of Tolstoi's *Popular Tales*.

Russian criticisms are almost all laudatory, apologetic, breathlessly enthusiastic. Whether from conviction or unconscious crowd-following impulse, the admirers give wild applause. Scarce are those who, while exclaiming "bravo!" stop to take breath and insinuate a few restrictions in their *vivats*.

Gorki's most incontestable merit is to have introduced into literature characteristic types of the most numerous class in Russia, the people. His glory is to have given us a lifelike picture of the new power on which Russia—advisedly or ill-advisedly—has been relying for a long time, on which all her hope, all her future depends.

* * *

Maxime Gorki (Maxime the "Bitter")—a pseudonym for Alexeï Maximovitch Pechkov—was born at Nijni-Novgorod, in 1869. His father, an upholsterer, against his father's will, married the daughter of a former *bourlac*, a Volga bargeman. He died in 1873, during the cholera epidemic. The mother of the future novelist married again, and soon eight year old Alexeï was sent out to a shoemaker as apprentice.

* This article consists of portions selected from a chapter of Ossip-Lourie's *La Psychologie des romanciers russes du XIXe siècle*, translated by Amélie Sérafon. Russian proper names have not been changed to the more familiar English forms but are left in the French transliteration as originally used by the author.

Gorki inherits a pensive sadness from his mother, and his violent temper from his father. Of an uneasy nature and left to his own devices, he changed his trade several times and ended by enlisting in the army of vagabonds, composed in Russia of work haters, ex-government clerks, former students, and moujiks whom scarcity of land drives from their villages; in short, of the dregs of society, all great vodka-drinkers, without any determined trade; at times laborers, at times thieves, ready for anything, capable of anything. Henceforth Gorki knows nought but the highway; and has for companions only vagabonds whose lives contain no secret from him—and he has understanding for none but scamps. He explores the banks of the Volga, the waters of which stir his imagination. Everywhere he observes, stores up visions, fills his memory with images, enriches it with models, with original types. Gorki's condition is truly pitiable; he becomes, by turns, cook on a steamer, vender of *krass* (cider) and bargeman. The realm of ideas is absolutely foreign to him: some intermittent reading of Gogol, of the verses of the popular poet Kolsov here and there, of Stenko-Razine's history, or episodes from Russian history, and that is all. At the age of seventeen, by some chance he finds himself at Kazan, a university town. Here he becomes acquainted with the students who undertake to educate him, and, while working at a baker's Gorki reads the books they lend him. "The bakery was in a basement the windows of which were beneath the level of the street. There was little light, little air, but much dampness and flour-dust. An enormous stove occupied nearly a third of the kitchen. The smell of yeast pervaded the unwholesome atmosphere. The smoky ceiling, the gray day together with the fire of the oven produced a light fatiguing to the eyes."

But of what importance is it to Gorki? He makes friends with another journeyman-baker, a vagabond like himself, a true artist in his line. "You should have seen him handle a seven-pood block of dough! At first as I saw him dash the raw loaves into the oven faster than I could get them out of the trough, I always feared he would throw them on top of one another. But I felt real admiration for him, after he had taken out three ovens full, without one of the hundred and twenty crisp, beautiful loaves being damaged." Kononov loved his work, raved over it, was sad when the oven wouldn't bake properly or when the dough wouldn't rise. On the other hand, he was happy when the loaves came out of the oven all round and even, just brown enough, with a thin crisp crust.

He would take the finest loaf from the shovel and throw it from one palm on to the other, exclaiming: "What a beauty!"

"After the work," Gorki relates, "we would stretch out on our backs in the yard, and contemplate the abyss over our heads. By degrees, the blue sky drawing us to its depths would invest our souls. . . . We lost the feeling of existence and were swimming in the secrets of the heavens. . . . We were in a condition of half-sleep and contemplation. . . . We would remain thus for whole hours together, and when we went home this communion with nature had refreshed our hearts. . . . In those days, the destinies of humanity occupied my thoughts. I strove to prepare in my own self an active and powerful force; I considered myself an important person, indispensable to the general life."

Gorki often read popular tales aloud to Konovalov.

"How strange it is," said the latter, "a man has written a book—it is but paper—and still it is a book! Those men live, and see life, and absorb all the pain of life. Their eyes must be extraordinary eyes! They look at life, a sorrow comes to them, and they pour their sorrow into their books! But that does not relieve them for their hearts are touched and you could not drive sorrow from them even with fire.—So they drink. The author dies, his book remains and is read."

Konovalov thought that those who write books should be encouraged "because they understood more than other people. I, for instance, who am I? A beggar, a drunkard. There is no reason why I should live. Why am I on earth, of what use am I to any one? I possess nothing: neither shelter, nor wife, nor child, and I feel no desire. I live and am lonesome. Why? I do not know. Something is lacking,—a spark."

Gorki began to read assiduously the books that the students lent him. The contact with the realm of ideas resulted in an attempt at suicide. Gorki was eighteen. His frail poet's soul was not prepared for intellectual light and the shock was too severe. But his friend Konovalov, the incorrigible vagabond, was there and said to him: "It is very wrong for you to have this mania for cities. Life is rotten there. There is neither space nor light. You are an educated man, you know how to read, what need have you of other men? Leave the cities. Books? One is not in this world only to read books. All that is nonsense. Buy some, put them into your bag and tramp! Would you like to go to Tashkent, to Samarkand? We shall go by the Amour river, don't you want to? There is nothing better than to wander about the world. You walk and

see new things and think of nothing. The wind blows in your face, and it seems as though it had lifted all the dust from your soul. You are free; nothing hinders you. If you are hungry you work for fifty kopeks. And you walk on. In this way we shall see many things."

And Gorki heard the voice of the highway and understood that "his place was not in intellectual circles." He left Kazan, revisited the banks of the Volga, visited the Caucasus, went as far as the Black Sea. Here, railroad official; there, laborer; he earned his living, talked to his fellow-travelers, observed much, saturated his mind with the beauties of nature. In 1892, he became acquainted with Vladimir Korolenko who revealed him to Russian literary men. Our vagabond began to write. His first tale "Makar Tchoudra" (1893) had some success. "It was night," Gorki relates, "when I issued forth from the house where, to a private circle, I had read my first printed story. I had received a great many compliments and, pleasantly affected, I was walking slowly along the deserted street, feeling for the first time in my life with such intensity, the delight of living. It was in February; the night was clear and the sky cloudless, woven with a rich tissue of stars; a bracing wind was blowing on the earth covered with an abundant and vapory raiment of fresh-fallen snow. The boughs of the trees reaching over the walls, cast on my way intricate arabesques of shadow; the snow-flakes glittered, dazzling and soft under the blue and caressing light of the moon. Nowhere was there a living being to be seen, and the creaking of the snow under my tread was the only sound that disturbed the solemn silence of that night, so present to my memory. . . . I was thinking: It is pleasant to be of some consequence on this earth among men."

Gorki writes much, produces tales and stories just as the apple-tree brings forth apples. His first volume of *Narratives* was published in 1896 in St. Petersburg. Criticism seemed rather doubtful, but the literary public gave this volume a warm welcome, and twenty-four thousand copies were sold in eight months. The life-like reality of the characters, the depth, energy, and picturesqueness of diction, very soon procured the author warm admirers.—Since Tourguéniev's *Tales of a Hunter* no such thing had been seen. The characters, conjured up in a realistic vision, delighted the readers.

And Gorki keeps on writing: he has published six volumes of short stories while continuing his vagabond life. The Kremlin at Moskow, the islands of the Neva, and editorial rooms, are un congenial to him. He must have the highway with its tramp-philos-

ophers. Often, after an enthusiastic reception from students and literary people, Gorki says to all: "Good bye, brothers, I am off," and again takes up his endless wanderings.

II.

Maxime Gorki is a prolific and creative writer; his gift for observation is very powerful, and with him, creative imagination gushes forth like a flowing spring; there are true sobs in his unequal but always plastic, voluptuous, feverish and animated style. He knows how to conjure up in a few lines, a whole world of sombre or brilliant, gay or tragic images; how to bring forth the flow of ideas amid the tumult of metaphors. Though the form is of the romantic school, the thought is realistic; he does not analyze, but only sketches, draws, depicts. Always remaining within the limits of reality, Gorki, with rare exceptions, keeps up to a truly poetical pitch; he possesses the emotive gift to a wonderful degree. His language is rough and violent but sonorous; his descriptions are vigorous and lively. He conjures up life with a remarkable intensity; he sees life everywhere. Nature herself seems eloquent to him; he attributes to her a living force, and believes that she feels and understands. Nature plays the most important part in his narratives; all his thoughts, all his sentiments, refer to her, he uses her to make poetical and philosophical comparisons, he confides his griefs, his thoughts to her. . . .

"... The wind was caressing the powerful salty bosom of the sea, the sunbeams were warming it, and it sighed, fatigued by their ardent caresses. . . . Towards the misty horizon it extended perfectly calm and its transparent waves were breaking softly against the noisy and lively shore.—Radiant under the sunlight, it beamed, dazzling, great, strong, yet gentle, and its breath refreshed the workers on the shore who were striving to embank the liberty of its billows. . . . The sea seemed to pity men; centuries of existence had made it understand that the real culprits are not those who build. It knew that they are but slaves and that the fight against elements whose vengeance is ever ready, is forced upon them.—They toil; their blood and sweat is the cement of all that is done on earth. They, too, are an element, and that is why the sea looks kindly upon the work that they will not profit by. The little gray larvæ which exhaust the mountain are like the drops of the waves that first fall against the inaccessible rocks of the bank, urged on by the sea's eternal desire to enlarge its dominion, and are first to die, breaking against them."

Whenever Gorki remains true to himself, whenever he conjures up the world which he knows out and out—the world of vagabonds—he is remarkable. He has lived their life, and lives it still. Often it is his own story he tells; he knows how to animate his heroes, and thanks to him, we know their thoughts, their language, gestures, and aspirations—we watch them live. However, some of Gorki's narratives produce an almost weird impression. The setting is certainly always picturesque and the images are always lifelike; but all those highways, all those public houses and tramps finally overstimulate our nerves and sharpen our sensitiveness. The Russian soul sighs out a sort of painful song which goes to our hearts.

Most of Gorki's characters are devoid of moral sense. Hatred, vengeance, and anger have possession of their hearts. One of the favorite pleasures of his heroes is to beat their wives. Sometimes, a sunbeam, a burst of kindness will light up those rough hearts, lighten and pacify the troubles of their grieving souls.—

The characters in the "Orlov Family," Grischka and Matrena, are both young, in love with and proud of one another. Grischka is strong, passionate, and handsome; Matrena is fair and plump with flashing gray eyes—a buxom girl. They love each other, but are so bored with life! They have hardly any impressions or interests which might have given them now and then the possibility of taking a rest from each other's company, and have satisfied the craving of the human mind to torment itself, to think and to worry—in other words, to live. If the Orlovs had had any object in life, their life would have been easier. They had grown accustomed to each other, knew all each other's words, all each other's gestures. Day followed day and brought nothing into their existence that might have made a diversion. Sometimes, on holidays, they would go and call on other simple people, like themselves; sometimes others visited them; they ate, drank, and often had fights. Then the dull days would begin to pass by slowly, one after the other, like links of an invisible chain, making life heavy for them with work, tediousness, and an absurd irritation towards each other. By way of diversion they would often fight, and the neighbors would furnish an interested audience.

"You will kill me," exclaims the wife, all out of breath.

"That is nothing!" says the man soothingly, with concentrated anger, but quite sure of his right. The public lean out towards the Orlov window, seized with a frantic desire to witness the details of the struggle.

"He is astride her back"... "her nose is all bloody"... the

nearest cry out with delight. The yard is full of noise, laughter, and jokes.

After the fight, Orlov remains silent in a corner, without looking at any one. No one comes near him, for they know that at that moment he is a wild beast. His wife is lying all bruised on the floor; she groans and he feels that she is a martyr. He knows it. He even knows that she is quite right and that he is wrong, and that increases his hatred; for together with this knowledge, a furious and obscure feeling is seething in his heart, stronger than this consciousness.—Everything is muddled and painful inside him, he sinks down beneath the heavy burden of his inmost sensations, knowing of nothing else but a half a bottle of brandy to relieve him.

Often Orlov will groan:

“What a life! Continual work and then endless tiresomeness, tediousness, then again work. My mother brought me into this world by God’s will. There is nothing to say against that! I learned a trade, but what for? Are there not enough shoemakers without me? I remain in a cellar and I sew, then I shall die, and after that? What is the meaning of all that? And why must I live, sew and die?”

“You had better not drink that nasty brandy; you would live happier and such thoughts would never enter your head,” Matrena humbly suggests.

“With your wooden words you are nothing but a devil’s doll! Rack your brains a little: why may I not drink, since it is my pleasure?”

Matrena was coming near him with caressing and loving look, trying to meet his eye, and nestling close up to his breast.

“Now all we have to do is lick each other like calves, isn’t it?” said Grischka dully, pretending he wished to repulse her, but she nestled closer and closer to him. Then the shoemaker’s eye would light up; he would throw his work on the ground, and taking his wife on his knee, would kiss her long and repeatedly, sighing with all the power of his lungs, and, speaking in an undertone, as though he feared some one might hear his words:

“Ah, Motria! We don’t live together as we ought to, we snap at each other like wild beasts, and why? Such is my fate. Man is born under a certain star, and that star is fate. How can I help my disposition? You are right and I am wrong. . . . and the more you are in the right, the more I want to beat you. . . .”

“If a child would come to us, we should be better off; we should have a diversion and something to think of.”

"Well, what are you waiting for? Have one then."

"Yes, but with such blows as you give me I cannot. . . . you hit me too hard. . . . If only you wouldn't kick me!"

"Can any one pay any attention at such times where to strike, and with what? Besides I am not an executioner, I do not beat you for pleasure, but because of anger. . . ."

"Where did this anger come from?"

"It is my fate! Look, am I worse than others, than that fellow from Little Russia for instance? Still he does not have this anguish. He is all alone, hasn't a wife, nor anybody. I should have burst without you. And he, nothing! That fellow smokes his pipe and smiles contentedly! I remain in this hole, and work all the time and I have nothing of anything. And even you—you are my wife—what is there of any interest about you? a woman like the rest. . . . I know everything about you. . . . Such a life, I tell you! So I go to the saloon—"

"Why did you marry?"

"Why? The devil knows why! I had much better have turned tramp. . . ."

"Then go and give me my liberty," declares Matrena ready to cry.

"Where would you go?" asks Grischka with an important air.

"That's my business."

"Where?" and his eyes flash fiercely.

"Don't make a row."

"Perhaps you have your eye on some fellow? Speak!"

"Let me go!"

He has her already by the hair; he is in a rage and beats her mercilessly. And half an hour after, "Come my deary dove, forgive me!"

And Matrena is ready to pay for these words with her bruised sides; she is crying, but only for joy in the expectation of caresses.

Now the cholera comes. The Orlovs get acquainted with a medical student who tends the sick people with remarkable disinterestedness in spite of the ignorance and ill-will of the peasants. They both join in nursing the sick.

One day the doctor tells Orlov that he is the man they need. That transforms the shoemaker completely. . . . He does more and more to please the doctor. Under the influence of all the combined impressions this new form of his existence gives him, a strange and enthusiastic state of mind develops within him. He has a passion for doing something that will attract the attention of all to himself;

that every one, struck with astonishment, will be obliged to recognize the force of his individuality. It is an ambition which by degrees becomes a craving for the accomplishment of generous deeds. Stimulated by this desire, Orlov executes all sorts of dangerous feats. For instance, he alone, without waiting for help from his comrades, drags with great difficulty some corpulent patient from his bed to the lazaret, or tends the dirtiest patients. But all that cannot satisfy him; he desires something grander; that yearning torments and exasperates him. Then he unburdens his soul to his wife because he has no one else:

"My soul burns—It requires space that I might freely bring all my force into action. Oh, I feel indomitable force within me! If, for instance, the cholera could assume the figure of a hero, of Ilia Mourometz* himself, I would attack him! 'Come on for a deadly fight! Thou art a force and I, Grischka, am another; we shall see who gets the best of it!' And I should strangle him, or fall myself. A cross on my grave and an inscription: 'Grigory Orlov has delivered Russia from the cholera.' I want nothing more. I would throw myself on a hundred knives, but I want it to be of use, some good for life must come of it.

"You see people such as the doctor, the student, who work wonderfully. They ought to be dead long ago with fatigue. You think it is for money. Money has nothing to do with it; it is for love of humanity. They pity mankind, so they have no pity left for themselves. Everybody knows that Michka is a thief, yet they take care of him and are pleased and laugh when he can get up again . . . I also wish to experience that joy. . . ."

When the hospital is closed, Orlov begins to drink and beat his wife again, and falls back to his old ways. . . .

Many among these people are convinced that if they are what they are, it is because man is not allowed to do as he chooses. "What is necessary, is strength," says one of the characters in "Thomas Gordieev," "for it bends steel and steel is a resisting metal! In resistance alone resides the value of man. . . .his resistance to the pressure with which life bears down upon him. If he comes out of the fight victorious, I congratulate him! If he does not succeed, he is a fallen creature!"

"You perhaps think that man is free to act as he wishes? Mistaken, little brother! Tell me what you will do to-morrow? You will never be able to! You cannot say whether you will go to the right or left. That's how it is."†

* A legendary hero of Russia.

† "Jemelian Pilaïe."

All these vagabonds are better than they seem, in spite of that instinct for crime and liquor-drinking, for they are all poisoned by alcohol, from father to son. To intoxicate themselves is the only liberty the czars graciously afford their millions of subjects. The latter indulge in it tremendously. Alcoholism is the chief cause of physical and moral decay in Gorki's vagabonds.

Old Tsergueï* believes she understands the cause of the dullness of Russian life: "I see that men do not live, but simply put up with existence, and exhaust all their strength in it. And when they have cheated themselves, having spent their time uselessly, they begin to complain about fate. Fate has nothing to do with it. Each man makes his own fate. I see numbers of men, but no strong men. Where are they? Mere thought will never remove a stone from the road. To the one who does nothing, nothing will come. Why do we exhaust our strength with thinking and lamenting? Arise! let us make straight for the forest and hew it down."

No one rises, no one moves, the black forest remains untouched. Here and there a cry of revolt, but a blow from the knout or *nahaika*, and all relapses into a morbid silence; gloom gathers and Russia becomes sadder and more sombre.

But the charge of Cossacks, even deadly shooting, will not stop the run of historical events.—

Gorki has shown in what the new power on which Russia has been reckoning for such a long time consists. His task as a novelist is done: he closed the literary nineteenth century in a worthy manner. Others will now have the task of freeing that power of its morbid elements, of setting it in motion, of starting it in the right direction. That is no longer the novelist's business. No more arabesques, no more lessons nor pictures, no more teaching nor theoretical ethics—but examples! action! "The way! show us the way!" shouts young Russia.

Will Gorki point out that way? His name has almost a symbolic meaning. He is the incarnation of the sufferings, the misery, the aspirations of the people from whose ranks he rose.—Will he know how to avail himself of his fame to gather round his personality the crushed masses and lead them to the work of social justice, to liberation and, if need be, to revolt?

*In the story of that title.