

Alexis Maximovich Peshcov “Maxim Gorky” 1868-1936

The writer who became famous under the pen name of Maxim Gorky (Maxim Bitter) is one of Russia's Great Self-Taught. He lost his father (an upholsterer) at four, and his mother at seven. His entire formal schooling lasted for five months, at the age of seven; thereafter he learned from men and books; as a reader he was probably more omnivorous than even Samuel Johnson. The schooling was broken off by his being apprenticed to a shoemaker; two months later, after fearfully scalding himself, he was apprenticed to a draftsman. Here the pattern of his adventurous youth (save that it began earlier and was much harsher) becomes similar to the youth-patterns of such writers as Istrati, Kuprin, or our own Mark Twain or Jack London — although it should be definitely understood that Gorky is not the Russian Jack London, (Many of Gorky's works are, naturally, autobiographical, the reader is referred, in particular, to *Childhood and My Universities*.)

He became a scullion on a Volga steamer, where the chef, an ex-corporal and a great drunkard, but also very intelligent, taught him how to read and write, a great deal about books, and a little about cooking. Then came another spell at draftsmanship, engraving, icon-painting (and icon-peddling), apple-selling, working as a railroad watchman. At sixteen, in Kazan, he tried to enter school, but free education was not the fashion in Russia at the time. It was at this period that he had to earn his daily bread (literally) by working in a cellar bakery; besides learning to bake bread he mastered the ancient art of pretzel-bending. (A rereading of *Twenty-Six Men and One Girl* is suggested at this point.) Here, too, he was initiated into the revolutionary movement, and was first arrested in 1889.

Leaving Kazan, he tramped through all of the South and South-east of Russia. In 1890, at Nizhni- Novgorod (since renamed Gorky) he became law-clerk to M. A. Lenin, who did a great deal for his education, and whom Gorky always gratefully remembered as his greatest benefactor. In 1891 he again started off on his wanderings; this is the well-known Volga-boatman period, when he hauled barges together with another unknown, Fedor Chaliapin. Gorky had been keeping a diary since the age of ten, but now he began writing in earnest. And in 1892, while he was working at a railroad repair shop in Tiflis, *Makar Chudra*, his first story, was published under the now famous pen name in a local newspaper. In 1894 he returned to Nizhni, where he became a provincial journalist, and next year met Korolenco, who helped him break into the “thick-paper” magazines with *Chekhov*. Despite his increasing reputation he did not abandon journalism until, with the publication of his collected short stories in 1898, his success became overwhelming. He attained celebrity not only in Russia but abroad. In Petersburg (1899-1901) he became more active than ever as a revolutionary, and was the mainstay of the radical periodical *Life*, to which he contributed, among other things, *Thoma Gordeiev* and, above all, *The Song of the Stormy Petrel*, a poem prophesying the approaching revolution but bringing about the immediate suppression of the review and the author's arrest and banishment to Arzamas.

In 1902 *The Lowest Depths* was produced, under Stanislavsky, and attained enormous popularity not only in Russia but throughout the world. (It is here given, without any grace notes, as a living and enduring play.) In January, 1905, Gorky was arrested and confined in that forcing-bed of Russian literature, the Fortress of SS Peter and Paul, for taking part in a protest against Bloody Sunday* the opening of the Revolution of 1905), which imprisonment in its turn caused a World-Wide protest. After his release he did not at all desist, but took a very active part in the armed rebellion in the December of the same year in Moscow. In 1906, after a series of triumphant receptions in Finland and Scandinavia, he was met with ovations in New York. When it was discovered, however, that his wife (a great actress) was his wife only at common law, Gorky was unable to find a single hotel to put him up for even a night. The press (which edified all America with the Stanford White murder the same year) became a yelping, baying pack; the gentle William Dean Howells and that firebrand-under-wraps, Mark Twain, who had charge of a banquet in honour of Gorky, turned tail and scurried off on all fours — in interesting contrast to the gentle Chekhov and outspoken Korolenco who in 1902, when Gorky's election to the Academy of Science was rescinded, were not afraid to stand up on their hind legs and resign as Academicians as a protest against Nicholas II.¹

Gorky had pulmonary tuberculosis, which compelled him to live for long periods at Capri, he went there in 1907 and did not return to Russia until 1913 (The help he rendered when Messina was devastated by earthquake and tidal wave in 1908 was enormous, yet only a small part of the concrete good he did throughout his life) During World War I he was anti-militaristic, and in 1917 accepted the Revolution, although not without certain differences of opinion. From then to the very end of his life he performed miracles in preserving the existent Russian culture and bringing into being a new one.

In 1921 his health again compelled him to live in Capri, where, however, he remained as active as ever, he returned to Russia permanently in 1929; his forty-year jubilee as a writer was celebrated throughout the Soviets in 1932. There have been innumerable studies comparing and contrasting Tolstoi and Dostoevsky; a fascinating one could be written about Gorky and Tolstoi. Both loved their Russia; each one tried to save it in his own way. Tolstoi through passivity and spirituality, Gorky through action and practicality. Tolstoi made the grand but inutile gesture of renouncing his enormous royalties, Gorky spent his fabulous earnings as a writer in financing the revolutionary movement. But the most impressive difference is that there was no rupture in Gorky: Gorky the man kept growing in stature as an artist to the very end. You will find no story in Gorky preaching that the muzhik is badly off only when he has too much bread, or that if the muzhik will only keep a miraculous taper burning at the horse's tail if he's made to work on a holiday, something or somebody will see to it that the inhuman overseer will meet with a particularly messy, nasty death. As a writer, Gorky has been given as many labels as Polonius gave to the drama. He has been called a realist, a romanticist, a romantic realist, and a realistic romanticist. His popularity can hardly be accounted for by the novelty of milieu and characters in his early writings. Uspenski, Zlatovretski, and Levitov had written of the dregs of society before, although perhaps not appealingly or objectively, and such stories by no means preponderate in Gorky's work, although, regrettably enough, it is precisely for these stories of philosophical tramps and noble-hearted prostitutes that Gorky has become best known abroad. He himself disliked this early vein of his, these “truthful lies”. Gorky the humorist and, above all, Gorky the poet, with his affirmation of the grandeur and beauty of life, remains unknown outside of Russia, and his marvellous descriptions of steppe, sea, and sun remain the sole property of the Russians (It is a source of particular satisfaction to represent Gorky here with *The Clown*, in a light that will probably be novel to the reader).

Vulgarity, according to Gorky, was sworn enemy to Chekhov. And Gorky himself directed all his wonderfully keen and penetrating powers of observation, all his capacity for truth-telling, against what he was a sworn foe of, what he had the utmost detestation for, and regarded as the source of all vulgarity — *meshchantstvo* which is but mildly rendered by bourgeoisie.

Chekhov, in his *Sea Gull*, gave Russia a symbol of the receding past. Gorky, in his *Song of the Stormy Petrel*, offered a symbol of protest and revolt and his *Song of the Falcon*, loosed a symbol of faith in a glorious future.

¹ ^ It is a pity that Gorky's *The City of the Yellow Devil*, *A High-Priest of Morals*, *A King of the Republic*, etc., are hardly likely ever to appear in English.

The Clown by Maxim Gorky

Translated by Bernard Guilbert Guerne

One day, as I was going through one of the passages of a circus, I happened to look in at the open door of a clown's dressing room and, becoming interested in him, stopped. In a long frock coat, wearing an opera hat and gloves, with a slender cane under his armpit, he was standing in front of a mirror and, raising his hat with a beautiful gesture of his dexterous hand, was bowing and scraping before his mirrored reflection.

Noticing in the mirror my astonished face, he quickly turned around to me and said with a smile, pointing a finger at his face in the mirror:

"I — I! Yes?"

Then he moved aside; his reflection in the mirror vanished; he slowly passed his hand through the air and spoke anew:

"I no more! Understand?"

I did not grasp this by-play, became embarrassed, and went off, followed by his soft laughter, but from that moment on the clown assumed an unusual and disquieting interest for me.

He was an Englishman, middle-aged, with dark eyes, exceedingly adroit and amusing in the arena, in the center of the dark funnel of the circus. His smooth, spare face seemed to me significant and clever, while his ringing voice sounded mocking, well-nigh unpleasant in my ears when the clown, performing on the tanbark of the arena just like a huge tomcat, called out broken Russian words.

After those bows in front of the mirror I began shadowing him; during the intermissions I hung around the narrow door of his dressing room, observing him as he applied clown-white to his face or rubbed black and red grease paint off it as he sat before his mirror. No matter what he may have been doing, he always talked to himself or hummed, whistling some song that was always one and the same.

I saw him in the barroom drinking vodka in small sips, and heard him ask the bartender in broken Russian:

"What time?"

"Ten to twelve."

"Oh, that hard! But not hard is —" and he began to count: "*Od-din, duva, tiri, chertiri*. Most easy is *chertiri!*"

He tossed a silver coin on the zinc bar and went out into the street humming: '*Tiri, chertiri- — tiri, chertiri!*'"

He always strolled about by himself, while I tailed him like a detective, and it seemed to me that this man lived an especial, mysterious life and that he looked upon everything in a way that could never be mine. At times I tried to imagine myself in England: understood by no one, fearfully alien to everything, deafened by the mighty din of a life unfamiliar to me — would I be able to live with just as calm a smile, on terms of friendship only with myself, as this stalwart, graceful dandy lived?

I invented sundry incidents in which this Englishman played the role of a gallant hero, I adorned him with all the virtues known to me, and admired him. He reminded me of Dickens' people, obdurate in evil and good.

Once, in the daytime, as I was crossing a bridge over the Oka, I happened to see him sitting on the edge of one of the pontoons, fishing; I stopped and watched him until he was all through. Every time he hooked a ruff or a perch he would pull it out, bring it close to his face and whistle ever so softly into the fish's mouth, after which he would carefully take it off the hook and throw it back in the water. Whenever he baited his hook with a worm he would say something to it, and if a rowboat came out from under the bridge the clown would doff his small, brimless cap and bow amiably to the strangers — and, if he was answered, would pull a dreadfully astonished face, with his eyebrows raised high. In general he knew how to amuse himself and, evidently, loved to do so.

Another time I saw him up on a hill, in the small garden of the Church of the Assumption. He was looking down on the fair, which seemed driven in like a wedge between the Volga and the Oka; he was holding his slender cane and, running his fingers over it as if it were a flute, was softly whistling something. The muffled, confused din of a life alien to him was floating up from the Volga and the fair toward the sultry sky. Steamers, barges, rowboats crept with difficulty over the filthy water, over the iridescent petroleum blotches; whistles and metallic scraping reached his ears; somebody's broad palms were smacking the water, mightily and fast, while in the distance, beyond the bends of the river, there was a forest fire, and the dully red sun — shorn of its rays, a bald sun — hung motionless in the smoky sky.

Tapping his cane against the trunk of a tree the clown began singing, ever so softly, as if he were chanting a prayer: "*One, dawn, lawn, dear —*"

His face was pensive and serious, his eyebrows contracted; the strange sounds of his song evoked in me a certain apprehensive mood: I wanted to escort him safely home, to the fair.

Suddenly a surly, shaggy dog bobbed up from somewhere. It went past the clown, sat down two steps away from him on the dusty grass, and, after a prolonged yawn, gave him a sidelong look. The clown straightened up and, putting the cane up to his shoulder, as if it were a gun and not a cane, aimed it at the animal.

"Urrr," the dog emitted a low growl.

"Rrr-haow!" the clown answered it in excellent canine language. The dog got up and slunk away in a huff, while the clown looked back and, noticing me under a tree, winked at me amiably.

He was dressed like a dandy, as always, in a long gray coat with trousers to match; he had on a glossy opera hat and was beautifully shod, I thought to myself that only a clown, having dressed himself so aristocratically, could behave himself like an urchin out in public. And, in general, it seemed to me that this man, alien to everybody, deprived of his language, felt himself so free amid the bustle of the town and the fair only because he was a clown.

He trod the sidewalks like an important personage, without yielding his right of way to anybody, stepping aside only for women. And I saw that whenever anybody in the crowd brushed against him with elbow or shoulder he always, calmly and squeamishly, dusted off something with his gloved hand from the spot the stranger had touched.

The grave Russians and the others collided without paying much attention to the matter and, even when they ran full tilt into one another, face to face, did not excuse themselves, did not lift their caps or hats with a polite gesture. In the walk of these grave people there was something unseeing, something burden-laden; anybody could see that these people were in a hurry and that they had no time to give the right of way to one another.

But the clown strutted about insouciantly, like a gluttoned raven on a battlefield, and it seemed to me that he wanted to abash and annihilate everybody in his way by his politeness. This — or it may have been something else about him — provoked an unpleasant feeling within me.

Naturally, he saw that people are rude; he understood that, in passing, they insulted one another with vile oaths — he could not but see and understand this. But he passed through the torrents of humanity rushing over the sidewalks as though he did not see anything, and I thought angrily: "You're putting on an act; I don't believe you."

But I considered myself absolutely insulted when I once noticed this dandy helping a drunkard who had been knocked down by a horse to get up, placing him on his feet, and immediately thereafter, his fingers working ever so meticulously, peeling off his yellow gloves and throwing them into the mud.

The gala performance at the circus ended after midnight. It was the end of August; an autumn rain, as fine as powdered glass, was falling from the blade void over the monotonous rows of the fair's structures. The turbid blotches of the street lamps dissolved in the damp air. The wheels of the hired carriages rumbled over the worn cobbles of the roadway; the horde of gallery gods was yelling as it poured out of the side exits of the circus.

The clown came out into the street in a long, shaggy overcoat, with a cap to match, and his slender cane tucked under his armpit. After a look into the darkness overhead he

took his hands out of his pockets, turned up the collar of his overcoat, and, as unhurriedly as ever yet with brisk steps, started to cross the square.

I knew that he was staying at a hotel not far from the circus, but he was walking away from his quarters.

I could hear him whistling as I walked behind him.

Reflections of light drowned in the puddles amid the cobbles of the roadway; black horses overtook us, the water sloshing under the tires of carriage wheels; music poured torrentially out of tavern windows; women squealed in the darkness. The shiftless, dissolute night of the fair was beginning.

Young ladies floated along the sidewalk like ducks; they accosted the men, and their voices were hoarse from the damp.

There, one of them accosted the clown; in a bass that sounded like a deacon's she invited him to come along with her. He took a step back, snatched the cane out from under his armpit, and, holding it like a sabre, silently pointed it straight at the woman's face. She cursed and leaped aside, while he, without hastening his steps, turned a corner and went down a street that was as straight as a taut guitar string. Somewhere far ahead of us some people were laughing, feet were scraping over the bright sidewalk, and a feminine voice was painfully squealing.

A score of steps — and I saw, in the dim light of a street lamp, that three of the fair watchmen were fussing on the sidewalk, amusing themselves with a woman, taking her around, mauling and hugging her, and passing her from hand to hand. The woman was squealing just like a tiny dog; she stumbled, swaying as the huge paws pushed her, and the whole width of the sidewalk was taken up with the to-do of these drab, dank people.

As the clown walked up to them he took his cane anew from under his armpit, and anew began using it like a sword, quickly and deftly pointing it at the faces of the watchmen. They began to growl, heavily stomping on the bricks of the sidewalk but without making way for the clown; then one of them threw himself under his feet, calling out hoarsely:

"Grab him!"

The clown fell; the dishevelled woman made a headlong dash past him, adjusting her skirt as she ran and cursing hoarsely:

"Sonsabitches! Basta'ds!"

"Tie him up!" a voice commanded ferociously. "Ah-ha, so you'd use a stick, would you?"

The clown ringingly cried out something in a foreign language; he was lying face down on the sidewalk and his heels were kicking the back of the man sitting astride the small of the clown's back, twisting his arms backward.

"Oho, you devil! Lift him up! Take him away!"

Leaning against a cast-iron pillar supporting the roof of an arcade I saw three figures, closely linked in the darkness, going off into raw distance of the street — going off slowly and swayingly, as though the wind were impelling them.

The watchman who had been left behind had lit a match and, squatting on his heels, was searching for something on the sidewalk.

"Go easy!" he said, when I approached "Don't step on my whistle; I dropped it."

"Who's the fellow they took away?" I asked.

"Oh, nobody in particular!"

"What did he do?"

"He wouldn't have been took if he hadn't been up to something — "

I had an unpleasant feeling, a sense of injury; but just the same, I remember, I thought triumphantly "There, now!"

A week later I saw the clown again. He was rolling about the arena like a tomcat in motley; he shouted, he leaped about.

But it appeared to me that he was performing not so well as before, not so entertainingly.

And, as I watched him, I felt myself guilty in some way.