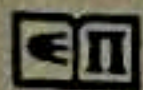


MAXIM GORKY



CHILDHOOD



PROGRESS PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW

M. GORKY

CHILDHOOD



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PREFACE

In 1892, when the first work bearing the pen-name Maxim Gorky appeared, its author, the Nizhni-Novgorod workman Alexei Peshkov, was twenty-four. By that time he had lived through so much, had suffered so much in the harsh school of life and gained from it such rich experience that few writers among his predecessors and contemporaries could compare with him in this respect. Nor are there many writers who have worked their way up to the heights of world culture as swiftly as he has done.

Gorky's life story is too well known to need retelling. I would merely remind the reader that several years before he began his literary career, which made his name famous in every corner of the globe, the nineteen-year-old youth, who worked in a bakery in Kazan at the time, attempted to commit suicide. What impelled him to do this? Was it because he was driven to despair by the hopeless drudgery of life in a dark stuffy basement, which resembled a prison cell and which was later described in Gorky's stories *Konovarov*, *Twenty-Six Men and a Girl* and others? No, the young man had worked before this as a dock labourer, a farmhand and a barge hauler. The treadmill life, the back-breaking toil and poverty were all too familiar to him since childhood. It was not this that made him attempt suicide. He had read many books which spoke about the possibility of "reorganising the social order" and the possibility for people to win freedom. He believed in this and thought he had been successful in inspiring this belief in others, in the people who worked with him in the prison-like basement. But when the student disturbances broke out in Kazan (a leading part in them was played by young Lenin, the future great friend of Gorky), these same workmates of his urged him to join them in attacking the students.

Deeply shaken, experiencing an intense revulsion, he was at a loss for words to show them how horrible this was. It was then, in a fit of despair, that the shot rang out on the high bluff overlooking the river Kazanka.

Had that bullet, aimed at his heart, found its target, we would have known nothing about Alexei Peshkov and there would have been no writer by the name of Maxim Gorky. His life would have been cut short as had many a young life in those grim times of rampant reaction which came in the wake of the fruitless "going-among-the-people" movement and the abortive revolutionary uprisings. The bullet missed the heart, however, and pierced a lung, and the young man came to in a hospital. He came to himself to see around him the very workmates who had caused him all that mental agony. Now in their faces he read concern for himself, sympathy and reproach inspired by their love for him. And it dawned on him that it was not these men who were bad, it was the conditions that condemned them to a life of darkness and ignorance. It was shameful, therefore, to give way to despair. Life could and should be altered. But to do that one had to know life better, to know one's people and one's country, and find such words, such ideas and ideals which would rouse people to action.

Ever since then none of life's trials could break Gorky's will. And life had many trials, sufferings and dangers in store for him—more than enough for a hundred men. In 1891-92, Russia was hit by an appalling national calamity—famine, which drove millions of peasants from their homes in the Volga and central provinces and sent them trudging the roads leading south in whole families, whole villages. Lev Tolstoi, Chekhov, Korolenko and other Russian writers devoted considerable energy towards organising relief for the famine-stricken population. Gorky was not yet a writer, he was one of the famine's victims—together with them he passed through the Ukraine, Crimea and the Caucasus. Often he was beaten within an inch of his life and run in by the police as a "suspicious character". Altogether, he lived through so much that it is difficult to understand how he survived. But instead of plunging him into despair, as it did before, all this tended to rouse in him a growing feeling of

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protest and a surge of energy. This was when he started to write.

For several years the writings of young Gorky appeared mainly in provincial Volga publications, and although his fresh and vivid talent immediately attracted the attention of distinguished writers, his name had not yet become widely popular. All this changed when, in 1898, there appeared his first small volumes of collected *Sketches and Stories*, which had a tremendous success and placed him alongside the literary celebrities of his day. Gorky's novel *Foma Gordeyev*, published a year later, excited almost as much interest as Tolstoi's *Resurrection*. And when this was followed by Gorky's short novel *The Three* and by his debut in the field of dramaturgy (especially his great philosophical drama *The Lower Depths* which was a sensational success), his fame spread beyond the bounds of his own country and became world-wide.

Gorky's first successes, however, gave rise to the first legends about him, and these legends grew apace with the growth of his fame. Many critics declared that the phenomenal popularity of the young author was due not so much to the force of his talent as to the sensational interest which his unusual background had aroused. This was not true. His success had begun before the facts of his life became known, and it was this success that led to the publication of biographical information about him at the end of the 1890s. Many critics ascribed his popularity to the fact that he wrote about declassed characters and expressed their feelings and moods, their anarchistic striving after "absolute freedom" of the individual, their contempt of the "mob", of morality, of all social obligations, which was in keeping with the ideas of Nietzsche. This again was untrue. Gorky did describe tramps, described them with extraordinary vigour as no one else had succeeded in doing before him, but he never shared their anarchistic aspirations and was from the very outset a passionate opponent of Nietzscheism. True, like Nietzsche, he hated bourgeois philistinism, but whereas Nietzsche's concept of philistinism included the people (this led him to extremely reactionary conclusions), Gorky regarded philistines as the chief enemies of the people, of the masses from whose midst he himself had risen and

Russia, and his slaving as an apprentice in the slums of Kazan. It was here that Alexei Peshkov, who later took the pen-name of Maxim Gorky, had his pitilessly grim "university education" which tempered his will and determination to fight every form of injustice and strengthened his fervent wish to "change the world". In his struggle he was always sustained by the knowledge that "through the layer of life's leaden vilenesses, the shoots of the bright, healthy and creative were triumphantly sprouting, that the kind and human was growing, stimulating unshatterable hope that we would yet be revived to a radiant, human life".

In the present series, Gorky's trilogy comes out in two volumes: Volume 1 *Childhood*, and Volume 2 *My Apprenticeship and My Universities*.

Boris Byalik, a major Soviet specialist on Gorky, has written the introduction, and B. A. Dehterev, People's Artist of the R.S.F.S.R., has provided the illustrations.



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