

Twenty-six Men and a Girl

by Maxim Gorky

We were twenty-six men, twenty-six living machines locked in a damp cellar where from morning to night we kneaded dough, making [kringles](#) and crackers. The cellar's windows opened to a brick-lined hole, green with moisture; the frames bolted from outside with thick iron grating, and the sunlight could not pierce the glass, covered in flour dust. Our boss hammered the windows with iron so we could not give a piece of his bread to beggars, or to our comrades who had no work and were starving. Our boss called us swindlers and gave us for lunch instead of meat – tainted tripe.

Life was stuffy and tight in a stone box under a low heavy ceiling, coated in soot and cobweb. It was hard and sickening in thick walls, spotted in dirt and mold. We rose at 5:00 AM, unrested, and – dull, indifferent – by 6:00 we were making kringles from dough our comrades made while we slept. And all day at a table from morning to ten at night, shaping elastic dough and rocking to and fro so as to not go numb, while others kneaded flour with water. All day sadly purred boiling water in the pot where kringles cooked; on the stove the baker's shovel hit fast and angrily, flinging slippery boiled dough on hot brick. Morning to night wood burned in the oven and flared, reflecting red flame on the workshop wall, as if silently laughing at us. The huge oven looked like the deformed head of a grotesque monster – as if thrust out of the floor, opening its wide mouth full of blazing flame, breathing hot fire at us, looking to our endless labors with two hollows on its forehead that were its air-holes. Those two air-holes were as eyes – the pitiless and impassionate eyes of a monster; they always looked with the same dark glance, as if tired of gazing at slaves, expecting nothing human of them, detesting them with the cold scorn of wisdom.

From day to day in flour-dust, in dirt our feet dragged in off the yard, and in thick sultry stench we wrought dough and made kringles, basting them with our sweat, and with keen hatred we hated our labors; we never ate our handiwork, preferring black bread to kringles. Nine facing nine, we sat at a long table endless hours, mechanically moving hands and fingers, so used to our work that we did not follow our motions. By now we had so long studied each other that each knew the wrinkles on his comrades' faces. We had nothing to say, we were used to that, were all times silent, unless swearing – for one can always find a reason to rail at a man, especially a comrade. But we rarely swore – how can a man be guilty, if he is half-dead, if he is like a stone idol, if all feelings in him are stifled under the weight of toil? Silence is terrible and torturous to only those who have no more to say, but, to those who have not started to speak – to them silence is simple and light. Sometimes we sang, and our songs began like this: amidst the work someone would breath a heavy sigh as a tired horse, and softly sing out one of those

drawn-out songs of a mournful-tender tune that always lessens the burden on the singer's soul. One would sing, and at first, we silently listened to his lone song, and it would die and fade under the close ceiling of the cellar, like a small campfire on the [steppe](#) on a damp autumn night when a gray sky hangs over the earth like a lead roof. Then to the singer joined another, and now two voices quietly and mournfully swam in the stifling heat of our tight pit. Then abruptly several voices joined, – it would rise as a wave, grow stronger, louder, as if to split the dark, heavy walls of our stone prison ...

Then sang all twenty-six, loud, long-practiced voices filled the workshop, the song was cramped in it: it hit on the stone walls, moaning, crying, chafing hearts with quiet tickling pain, pricking old wounds and waking sentiment ... A singer would heavily and deeply sigh; another abruptly would cut the song and listen long as sung his comrades, until again joining his voice in the common chorus. Another thoughtfully would cry, "Ahh!" – sing, close his eyes, and maybe to him the thick wide wave of sound as a road to somewhere to the distance, lit in bright sunshine – a wide road, and he saw himself walking on it.

The oven flame yet flickered, still the baker's shovel hit on brick, water purred in the pot, and the fire's reflection on the wall still trembled, silently laughing ... And we sang out words others wrote to our sorrow, the heavy yearnings of living men cut off the sun, the grief of slaves. So we lived, twenty-six men, in a cellar of a large stone building, – as place so hard to live, as if all three stories had been built on our shoulders ...

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Aside from songs, we had something good, beloved of us, which maybe replaced the sun. On the second story was an embroidery shop, and there amidst many girls lived the sixteen-year-old seamstress Tanya. Every morning to the door-window of our workshop she pressed her small, rosy face with sky-blue, happy eyes; her clear friendly voice cried to us:

"Little prisoners! Give me some kringles!"

At that clear sound we would all spin our heads and gladly, good-naturedly look at her clean girlish face, kindly smiling at us. It warmed us to see her nose flattened to the glass, her small white teeth shining under rosy lips opened in a smile. Shoving each other we rushed to open the door, and, – there she was, cheerful, sweet, would walk in, holding out her apron, standing before us, her head just cocked, all smiles. A long thick braid of chestnut fell cross her shoulder, lying on her chest. We dirty, dark and ugly men, looked up to her, – the threshold was four steps above the floor – gazed at her, raising our heads and wishing her good-morning, special words – they were only for her. In conversation with her we had voices softer, jokes lighter. For her – everything special. From the oven the baker pulled a shovel of the crispest and ruddiest kringles, adroitly tossed them in Tanya's apron.

We warned her, “Watch the boss doesn’t catch you!” She would roguishly laugh, and merrily shout to us:

“Goodbye, little prisoners!” – and quickly vanish, like a little mouse.

And that was all ... but long after we spoke kindly of her – the same as yesterday, and before, as she, and us, and everything about us, was the same as yesterday, and before. It’s very hard and torturous, when a man lives and about him nothing changes, and if that doesn’t completely kill his soul, the longer he lives, the more torment is the immobility of his surroundings. We always spoke so crudely of women that at times we ourselves were disgusted at our shameless words, and this is clear, for the women we knew maybe didn’t merit different speech. But of Tanya we never spoke ill, no one touched a finger on her; she heard no loose jokes off us. Perhaps it was because she never stayed long: a flash in our eyes like a star falling from the heavens, then she vanished, and perhaps as she was small and very pretty, and all beauty provokes reverence, even in crude men. And more – while our penal servitude made us as stupid oxen, we still remained men, and could not live without an object of worship. Better than her there was not among us; except her no one acknowledged us living in the cellar, – no one, though dozens lived in the building. Finally, – probably most important – we saw her as somehow ours, as one who lived only thanks to our kringles; we took it duty to give her hot kringles, and it became as a daily sacrifice to an idol, a sacred rite that each day bound us closer to her. Aside from kringles, we gave Tanya much advice – to dress warmer, not to run fast on the stairs, and not to carry heavy bundles of wood. With a smile she listened, answered in a laugh and never obeyed us, but we were not offended: we only wanted to show that we were concerned for her.

Often she came to us with various requests, asking, for example, to open the heavy door to the cellar, or to chop wood, – with gladness and even pride we did all these, and all else she wished.

But when one of us asked her to repair his only shirt, she disdainfully snorted, replying, “Indeed! I should, as if!”

We laughed heartily at the silly fool, and made no more requests of her – we loved her, and that was all. A man always wishes to lay his love on someone, although sometimes he chokes, sometimes sullies, perhaps he poisons the life of one close, when in loving, does not respect her. We had to love Tanya, for there was no one else for us to love.

At times one would start to reason as such: “Why do we so pamper the kid? What about her is so wonderful?” We make such a fuss of her!”

The man who had chosen to so speak was quickly silenced – we had to love someone, we found her and loved her. That which we twenty-six loved had to be unshakable for each of us, as our holy relic, and all who opposed this was

our enemy. Perhaps what we loved was insufficient, but it was all us twenty-six had. And as such, we always want what we loved to be holy to our fellows.

Our love is no easier than hate, and maybe that's why some arrogant men believe hate more flattering than love – but why do they not reject us, if that is so?

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Aside from making kringles, our boss had a bun bakery: it was in the same building, divided from our hole by a wall, though the bun-bakers – they were four – held themselves apart from us, seeing their work cleaner than ours, and thus seeing themselves better than us. They never came to see us, scornfully laughing at us when meeting outside; we didn't visit them: the boss forbade it, fearing we would take to stealing buns. Envyng them, we didn't fancy the bun-bakers: their work was easier; they made more; were better fed; they had a spacious, bright workshop; they were so clean, so healthy – as opposed to us. And we – so yellow and gray: three had syphilis; a few had scabs; one crippled by rheumatism. On holidays and off-days they dressed in jackets and squeaky-clean boots; two had accordions, and all went to carouse in the city park, – we in dirty tatters, on our feet cast-offs or [bast shoes](#); the police wouldn't let us in the park – how could we like those bun-bakers?

Once we learned that a bun baker took to drink, the boss dismissed him and had already hired a new one, and this new one – a soldier, went about in a satin waistcoat, and wore a watch with a gold chain. We were curious to see such a dandy, and in hopes of catching sight of him, at times one after another of us would would run to the yard.

But he himself showed up in our workshop. With a kick to the door he opened it, leaving it ajar, stood on the threshold smiling, saying to us:

“God save us! How you doing, boys?”

Frosted air, streaming through the door in smoky clouds swirled about his feet. And there he stood on the threshold, looking at us from above, and under his blond twisted mustache shone bright strong yellow teeth. His waistcoat indeed was special – dark-blue, sewn in flowers, all shining, the buttons of a sort of red stone. And there was the watch-chain ...

Handsome he was, that soldier, so tall, healthy, with ruddy cheeks, and large, bright eyes with a friendly, clear look. On his head he wore a white firmly starched cap, and, from under a spotless clean apron poked sharp, fashionable clean boots.

Our baker politely asked him to close the door; he did this in no hurry and began to ask us of the boss. We vied with each other to tell him that the boss was a rascal, a wretch, and a torturer – all that could be and was needed to say

of him, but cannot be here written. The soldier listened, twisting his mustache, surveying us in his soft, bright gaze.

“And you have many girls round here,” he suddenly said.

A few politely laughed, others made wry faces; someone told the soldier a few skirts were floating round.

“Use ’em?” he asked, winking.

Again we laughed, quiet and abashed laughter. Many wished to show the soldier some kind of daring, manly feat, like his. But none could, not one. One confessed as much, quietly saying:

“But how for us?”

“N’yes, for you that’s hard!” the soldier confidently replied, fixedly gazing on us. “With you, there’s something, ... not quite right, ... you don’t have the bearing, ... the look, I mean! A woman – she likes a look in a man! For her the body real, solid ... that all is – to form! And she likes some muscle. An arm, – like this!”

From his pocket the soldier pulled an unsleeved right arm, bare to the elbow, showing it to us. The arm was white, strong, covered in shining gold hair.

“In your legs, chest – in all you need strength. And as well, a man should be dressed proper, and wear fine clothes. You see, women simply love me. I don’t call, don’t beckon, and in bunches of five they fall all over me.”

He sat on a flour-sack and long talked of how women loved him, of how gallant he was with them. After he left and the door squeaked behind him, we were long silent, thinking of him and his tales. Then abruptly all spoke at once, and it was instantly clear that we all liked him. So simple and decent – came in, sat, and talked. No one came to us, no one talked to us, so friendly ... and we spoke of him and his future successes with the seamstresses, who, on meeting us outside either resentfully pursed their lips or walked straight at us as if we were not there. When outside we only gazed longingly at them, or when they walked by our windows – wearing fine caps and fur coats in the winter, and in hats sporting flowers in the summer with their colorful umbrellas. Between ourselves how we spoke of those girls that, had they heard, they would have boiled with shame and insult.

“Err, ... hope he doesn’t corrupt little Tanya,” the baker abruptly said in a concerned tone.

We were struck silent at these words. Somehow we forgot about Tanya: the soldier’s strong, handsome figure cut her off from us. Then began a loud argument: some said Tanya would not so lower herself; others held that she could not withstand him; a third group resolved in the case he went for her,

we should break his ribs. Finally all settled to watch after the soldier and Tanya, and to warn the girl that she be careful of him. This ended the argument.

About a month passed. The soldier baked buns, went out with the seamstresses, and often dropped in on our workshop, though of his conquests he said nothing; he merely twirled his mustache and licked his lips with relish.

Every morning Tanya came for kringles, and, she was happy, sweet and friendly as always. We touched on the soldier with her – she called him a “goggle-eyed calf” and other amusing nicknames; this calmed us. We were proud of our girl, seeing how the other seamstresses went for the soldier. Tanya’s relations to him raised her above the rest, and we, as if guided by her, began to behave coldly towards the soldier. We grew to love her even more, and with still more joy and kindness met her in the mornings.

One morning the soldier dropped by a bit drunk, sat and began to laugh, and when we asked at what he was laughing, he explained:

“Two were fighting over me ... Lidka and Grushka. H-how they tore each other! Ha ha! One after the other’s hair, on the porch floor, one on top the other ... ha ha ha! Scratching each other’s faces, tearing ... hilarious! Why can’t these women fight honest? Why do they scratch? Ehh?”

He sat on a bench, so healthy, so clean, so happy, sat and laughed nonstop. We were silent. Somehow we did not then like him.

“N-now, how is it I have such luck with the girls? A scream! Just wink, and – she’s naked! The Devil with it!”

His white hands, covered in shining hair, rose and fell to his knees, loudly smacking them. He looked at us with a cheery amazed glance, as if he honestly couldn’t comprehend his luck with women. His fat ruddy face shone in contentment and joy; he kept licking his lips.

Our baker abruptly and angrily struck his shovel on the stove, and snapped sarcastically:

“Doesn’t take much strength to fell a fir, but let’s see you down a pine.”

“What’s that? You talking to me?” asked the soldier.

“Yes, you ...”

“Of what?”

“Nothing ... begone!”

“No, you wait! What you talking about? What ‘pine?’”

Our baker did not reply. He quickly worked his shovel in the oven, throwing in boiled kringles, hooking the ready ones, loudly tossing them to the boys on the floor threading them on [bast](#). Somehow he forgot the conversation with the soldier. But the soldier fell into a sudden rage. He stood and walked to the stove, risking impalement on the shovel handle, convulsively whipping through the air.

“No, you tell me – what you talkin’ about? You insulted me. Me? No woman can resist me, n-not one, no! And you spoke such insulting words ...”

He honestly seemed insulted. It appeared his self-respect was founded on his ability to seduce women, and maybe, outside that skill there was nothing alive in him, and it alone let him feel a living man.

There are people whose most valued possession in life is some disease of the soul or flesh. They carry it at all times, and live but for it; suffering from it, they feed on it. They complain of it to others and so gain attention of their fellow-humans. For it they gain sympathy, and, without it – they have nothing. Excise that disease, cure them, and they will be miserable, for they will have lost their sole sustenance – they will be empty then. At times a man’s life is so poor that he must cultivate a vice and live by it, and one may say, often some are addicted to vice out of boredom.

The injured soldier thrust himself at the baker and roared:

“No, you tell me – who?”

Abruptly turning, the baker shot back, “Tell you?!”

“Well?”

“You know Tanya?”

“Well?”

“Her! Try your luck.”

“Me?”

“You!”

“Her? To me – nothing!”

“We’ll see!”

“You’ll see! Ha ha!”

“You, she’ll ...”

“A month!”

“Good God you’re a braggart, soldier!”

“Two weeks! I’ll show you! What girl? Tanya! Nothing!”

“Now begone, ... you’re in the way.”

“Two weeks, and that’s it! What, you ...”

“Begone, I’m telling you!”

Our baker fell into sudden rage, brandishing his shovel. The soldier jumped back in surprise, silently looked at us, quietly, ominously remarking, “We’ll see!” – and left us.

During the argument we were silent, caught up in it. Now the soldier had left, an uproar broke out.

Someone shouted at the baker:

“That’s bad business you started, Pavel!”

“Get to work!” the baker angrily shot back.

We felt the soldier had been stung to the quick and danger threatened Tanya. We felt this, but at the same time embraced a burning, delightful curiosity – what would happen? Could Tanya stand against the soldier? Almost everyone assuredly cried:

“Tanya? She’ll stand! Muscles won’t take her”

We intensely wanted to test our idol’s strength, straining to prove to each other that our idol was strong, and would emerge victorious. Now we wondered if we had sufficiently provoked the soldier, that he would forget the argument and his conscience and needed more pricking. Our lives took on a nervous strain, as we had never before lived. For whole days we argued. We grew strangely smarter, came to more and better speak. It seemed as if we were playing a game with the Devil, and the stake on our side – Tanya. When we learned from the bun bakers the soldier had started to “make a go” for Tanya, it was such a terrifyingly exciting life, and didn’t even notice when the boss took advantage of our agitation to increase our work by fourteen [poods](#) of dough a day. Tanya’s name never left our lips. Each morning we waited for her with particular impatience. Sometimes it seemed to us, that she would come – and not be the old Tanya, but somehow different.

To her we said nothing of the argument. We asked her nothing; conducting ourselves with our accustomed love. But into that conduct had stole something new and alien to our old feelings for Tanya – and that new thing was sharp curiosity, like a steel knife ...

“Boys! Time’s up today!” said the baker one morning as he started work.

We knew full well without his reminder, but still started.

“Watch for her, she’ll be in soon!” continued the baker.

Someone shouted in a tone of regret, “It’s not a thing one’s eyes can catch!”

Again flared a loud, lively argument. At last today we would know how clean and moral was the vessel in which we had placed our best. That morning we first felt that we were playing a dangerous bet, and the test of our god might destroy her for us. All this time we heard the soldier was persistently dogging Tanya, but no one had asked her how she regarded him. And on time she continued to show up every morning for kringles, just as always.

And that day we soon heard her voice:

“Little prisoners! I’ve come ...”

We quickly admitted her, and at her entrance met her with unexpected silence. All eyes on her, we didn’t know what to say to her, what to ask her. We stood before her, a suspicious, silent crowd. She was apparently surprised at the reception; she abruptly paled, grew unsettled, and in a strained voice asked:

“Err, why are you so ... different today?”

“And you?” the baker sullenly shot back, his eyes fixed on her.

“Well, give me the kringles, quick.”

Never before had she hurried us.

“No rush!” the baker replied, not moving, not pulling his eyes from her face.

Abruptly she turned and vanished out the door.

The baker took his shovel, and turning to the oven, calmly intoned:

“That means he’s done it! That soldier, the rascal!”

Like a flock of sheep bumping each other, we walked to the table, listlessly setting to work. Shortly someone said:

“But, well, maybe ...”

“No more of that!” the baker shouted.

We all knew him a smart man, smarter than the rest of us. In his shout we understood his certainty of the soldier’s victory. We felt depressed, unsettled.

At lunch at twelve, in walked the soldier. He was, as always, clean and dandified, and as always, looked us straight in the eye. We felt awkward looking at him.

“W-well, honored gentlemen, you want me to show you a soldier’s feat?” he said in proud irony. “Now you head out to the threshold and look through the cracks ... got it?”

We walked to the door and, crowding each other, pressed to the cracks in the wooden planks that looked to the yard. We didn’t have to wait long. Soon Tanya came walking fast, her face preoccupied, jumping puddles of mud and melted snow. She vanished behind a cellar door. Then, whistling, not hurrying, to the same walked the soldier. His hands were in his pockets; he twirled his mustache.

Rain was falling, and we saw drops striking pools, puddles rippling as they hit. The day was gray, wet – a very rotten day. Snow still lied on the roofs, on the ground patches of mud. The snow on the roofs was covered in a dark-brown, dirty film. Rain slowly fell. We waited, cold and uncomfortable.

The soldier was the first to leave the cellar; slowly he walked cross the yard, twirling his mustache, hands in pockets – as always.

Then – out came Tanya. Her eyes ... her eyes gleamed joy and happiness, her lips – smiling. She walked as in a dream, unsteady, shaking ...

We could not be silent. All at once burst out the door, leaped to the yard, whistling, yelling at her, spiteful, loud, vicious.

Seeing us she started, and stood as rooted in the mud below her. We surrounded her and gloated continually, swore at her, insults, shameless things.

This we did not loud, not hurrying, for she had no exit. She was surrounded, and we could jeer her as we wished. Unsure of why, no one hit her. She stood amidst us and turned her head now here, now there, listening to our insults. And we – ever louder, ever stronger threw at her filth and poison.

The color drained off her face. Her clear blue eyes, a moment ago so happy, opened wide. Her breath heaved, her lips trembled.

And we surrounded her, taking vengeance, for she had robbed us. She belonged to us. We had given her our best, be it beggar's crumbs, but it was ours. We were twenty-six, and she was one, and we could give no pain to equal her guilt! How we reviled her! Silent, she looked at us with wild eyes, her whole body trembling.

We laughed, we howled, snarled ... from somewhere others joined us ... Someone pulled her jacket-sleeve.

Abruptly her eyes sparkled. Slowly she raised her hands to fix her hair, and loudly, but calmly said straight in our faces:

“Oh, you miserable prisoners!”

And she walked straight at us as if we were not there, and as such, no one stood in her way.

And once out of our circle, not even turning round, she proudly and contemptuously spat:

“Oh, you scum. You swine, you reptiles.”

And left – straight, beautiful, proud.

We stood in the yard, in the mud, as rain fell from a gray sky with no sun.

Then we too silently shuffled to our damp stone hole. As before – the sun never shone through our window, and Tanya came no more!