

From REMINISCENCES OF V. G. KOROLENKO

by Maxim Gorky

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[These reminiscences are contained in a speech made by Maxim Gorky in 1918 in Petrograd at a meeting held to mark Korolenko's 65th birthday.]

With the name of V. G. Korolenko I associate many fond memories but understandably I can touch upon them only briefly here.

I first met him I believe in 1888 or 1889. Upon arriving then in Nizhni Novgorod, from where I do not remember, I learned that the writer Korolenko, recently returned from exile in Siberia, resided there. I had already read stories signed by that name, and I remember them evoking a new impression which did not accord with the one received from the literature of the Populists, a study of which was in those days considered a must for every young person roused to an interest in public life.

In their journalistic writings the Narodniks were frankly telling you to "see just so, think so", and this appealed to many persons who were accustomed to the idea of being led. To every reader, on the other hand, who was the least bit discerning, it was clear that Korolenko's stories in no way set out to coerce either the mind or the senses.

At that time I moved in the circle of "radicals", as the remains of the Narodniks called themselves, and in that circle Korolenko's work had not met with much favour. His story "Makar's Dream" was read, but his other works were treated sceptically, placed in a row with Anton Chekhov's small gems which, needless to say, had utterly failed to evoke a serious attitude from the radicals.

To some the new approach in portraying characters from the people in the stories "Following the Icon" and "The River Plays" seemed to betray in the author an objectionable scepticism. "In the Night", going against the grain of the rationalists, gave rise to a good deal of harsh and bitter criticism.

The radicals were opposed by the *Kulturtragers*, persons who set out on the arduous task of reappraising old beliefs, and who were at loggerheads with the radicals. It was as "good-for-nothings" that the radicals referred to the *Kulturtragers*. These "good-for-nothings" regarded V.G. Korolenko's work with watchful interest, and held a high opinion of its lyric beauty and keen perception of life.

Essentially it was people of kind heart taking issue with persons of inquisitive mind. And today the total irrelevancy of this dispute stemming from the prejudices of enlightened persons is more than obvious, for Korolenko had equally much to offer both to people of the heart and of the mind. Nevertheless, there were many

persons at the time to whom the new writer's revision of the long-established and accepted judgments and opinions concerning the Russian people seemed to be alien, distasteful and hostile to their cherished idol of a sacred tradition.

Resentment was roused by Tyulin, the main character of the story "The River Plays", a type that all knew well in life, yet who was utterly unlike the standard fictional *muzhik*, such as Polikoushka, Uncle Minai and others beloved by the intelligentsia—the idealists, sufferers, martyrs and truth lovers with whom Russian literature so densely peopled the poverty-stricken and squalid villages. Much as this Vetluga loafer was unlike the fictional *muzhik*, he bore a staggering resemblance to the Russian character in general, a hero for an hour, stirred to action only at a moment of great peril and even so for a brief spell.

I remember well the heated arguments around Tyulin—was he a peasant in the flesh or the invention of the writer? The *Kulturtragers* maintained that he was a true and real type, powerless to build new forms of life and devoid of the propensity of expanding his intellectual faculties.

"With a type like that European forms of statehood are not to be achieved soon," they said. "Tyulin is Oblomov in peasant garb."

The radicals on the other hand, screamed that Tyulin was an idle figment, that European culture was no model to follow and that Polikoushka and Uncle Minai would produce a culture more original than that of the West.

These heated arguments and sharply opposing opinions awakened in me a keen interest in the man who had the power to stir people's minds and hearts, and, having written something like a poem in prose which I believe I called "Song of the Old Oak", I took the manuscript to Korolenko.

His appearance surprised me greatly, for Korolenko did not correspond to my idea of a writer or a political exile. For what reason I do not know, but I imagined the writer to be lean-looking, highly strung and voluble. Korolenko, on the other hand, was stocky, amazingly calm, with a healthy face framed in a thick, curly beard, and clear, keen-sighted eyes.

Nor did he resemble the political exiles among whom I already had wide acquaintance: they seemed to me to be invariably somewhat embittered and just a trifle vain about their experiences.

Korolenko was serene and utterly unaffected. As he turned the pages of my manuscript, lying in his lap, he brought home to me with astonishing clarity, graphically and briefly, that I had written a poor poem, and what was in fact wrong with it. His words sank deeply into my mind:

"In our youth we all incline towards pessimism. I hardly know why—perhaps because we want so much and achieve little...."

I was amazed at his subtle grasp of the mood which had prompted me to write "The Song of the Old Oak", and I can remember how ashamed and embarrassed I was at having taken up his time in reading and criticising my poem. It was the first time I showed my work to a writer and I was extremely lucky to hear such apt and devastating criticism of it.

I repeat that I was forcibly struck by Korolenko's plain and clear speech; the people among whom I lived spoke the recondite and ponderous language of magazine articles.

Shortly after this first meeting with Korolenko I left Nizhni Novgorod. I returned three years later, after having tramped through central Russia and the Ukraine, roaming and living in Bessarabia, the Crimea and the Caucasus. Having

seen and experienced much, I had gleaned a wealth of impressions and felt like a rich man who does not know what to do with his riches, one who foolishly squanders his treasures, throwing them around for anybody who has a mind to pick them up.

I did not so much relate my impressions as ask of what moment and value they were.

In such elated spirits I once again met Korolenko. Sitting in his small, crammed dining-room, I spoke of my deepest anxieties—of the searchers for truth, of homeless and vagrant Russia, of the hard life in the squalid and greedy villages.

V.G. listened with a thoughtful smile in his clever bright eyes and asked suddenly:

"Have you noticed that all the seekers after truth roving on the big roads are greatly enamoured of themselves?"

I had not noticed it, to be sure, and was amazed at the question.

V.G. added:

"And to tell the truth, they are terrible loafers...."

He said this good-humouredly rather than condemningly, which only added weight and meaning to his words. His whole figure and every gesture spoke of serene strength, and the attentiveness with which he listened committed one to speak briefly and to the point. His good eyes and their thoughtful glance weighed the intrinsic worth of your words, so that willy-nilly you demanded from yourself pithy words that could most aptly describe your thoughts and feelings. I departed from him with quite an inkling of what distinguished his stories about human beings from the stories of other people. Before it had seemed to me, as to many others, that the impartial voice of a truthful artist was the voice of indifference.

However, Korolenko's thoughtful remarks concerning the Russian peasants, monks and seekers after truth revealed him to be a man who did not set himself up to be a judge of people, but loved them with his eyes open and with the kind of love that brings small joy and a good deal of pain.

That year I started contributing little stories to newspapers, and on one occasion, moved by the death of A.S. Gatsissky, a Nizhni-Novgorod man, who had been a prominent figure in enlightenment, I wrote a kind of fantastic piece in which peasants spoke over an intellectual's grave in grateful terms about his life.

Meeting me in the street, V.G., smiling good-humouredly, said: "Well, that was poorly devised. I see no point in writing such pieces."

Evidently he followed my work. My calls were not frequent but practically every time we met he had something to say about my stories.

"You made a mistake in publishing 'Arhipand Lyonka' in the newspaper *Volgar*, it could have been brought out in a magazine," he said.

"You are too verbose when you should be terse and succinct."

"Don't embellish people...."

His counsel and criticism were always brief and to the point, containing just the kind of guidance I needed. I received many good tips from Korolenko and a good deal of attention. And if for various unavoidable reasons I had not availed myself of his help, the fault and the regret are mine.

It is well known that my association with the country's leading magazines began with his help.

[M. Gorky has in mind his story "Chelkash" written under the impression of a talk with Korolenko and brought out with his help in the magazine *Russkoye Bogatstvo* (Russian Wealth). Hitherto Gorky's stories had appeared in the provincial press only.]

In conclusion I should like to say that over the twenty-five years of my literary work I have seen and known practically all the leading writers, and had the great honour of knowing, too, a colossus like Lev Tolstoy.

To me V.G. Korolenko stands apart from them all, holding his own singular position, the importance of which has to this day been inadequately appreciated. I find personally that this prominent and beautiful writer has told me a great deal about the Russian people which no one before him was capable of saying. He uttered it in the subdued voice of a sage who knows full well that all wisdom is relative and that there is no eternal truth. But the truth expressed by the character of Tyulin is an immense truth. In this character we are given a historically true type of a Great Russian—a man who has now broken free from the strong chains of the dead past and can build life as he wants to.

I believe that he will build it as he finds it fit for himself and I know that in the prodigious task of building the new Russia the superb contribution of V.G. Korolenko, a most honest Russian writer, a man of big and powerful heart, will find deserving appreciation.

Maxim Gorky