

## The Living Tolstoy

*Reminiscences of Tolstoy, by Maxim Gorky. New York: B. W. Huebsch.*

"THIS man is godlike." So Gorky wrote of Tolstoy, and believed. But never did a young man with reverence in his heart look his god straighter in the eye. The majesty of Leo Nikolaevich is never forgotten by Gorky; but neither is his humanity. And it is this supreme respect for the real—both the body of fact and the soul of it—that gives extraordinary expressiveness to these quick notes.

What was Tolstoy like? Gorky never for a moment writes like a Tolstoyan, which he emphatically was not. He writes with disgust of the regular disciples. "I always thought that these people infected the Yasnaya Polyana house, as well as the great house of Countess Panin, with a spirit of hypocrisy, cowardice, mercenary and self-seeking pettiness and legacy-hunting." "They all have boneless perspiring hands and lying eyes." So it was not as a Tolstoyan that Gorky came to the old man. "Many tried to please him, but I did not observe that they did it well or with any skill. He rarely spoke to me on his usual subjects of universal forgiveness, loving one's neighbor, the Gospels, and Buddhism, evidently because he realized at once that all that would not go down with me. I greatly appreciated this."

What would "go down" with Gorky was Tolstoy in relation to literature, in relation to Russia, in relation to men and women, in relation to life and death. These are the things that Gorky discloses. But first of all we can pick out the human figure of Tolstoy, very unlike those Millet-like pictures that the pious disciples put over on us. Tolstoy was ill when they met in the Crimea. He was no longer the Tolstoy of Yasnaya Polyana—"a man who knew everything and had nothing more to learn—a man who had settled every question." "The illness dried him up still more, burnt something out of him. Inwardly he seemed to become lighter, more transparent, more resigned. His eyes are still keener, his glance piercing. He listens attentively as though recalling something which he has forgotten or as though waiting for something new and unknown." In this mood he seemed remote, like a god, but an immensely clever god with keen little eyes and devouring inquisitiveness and malice and craft—"like a god, not a Sabaoth or Olympian, but the kind of Russian god who 'sits on a maple throne under a golden lime tree,' not very majestic, but perhaps more cunning than all the other gods." And again, when not inquisitive or malicious or caressing, "he gives one the impression of having just arrived from some distant country, where people think and feel differently and their relations and language are different. He sits in a corner tired and gray, as though the dust of another earth were on him, and he looks attentively at everything with the look of a foreigner or of a dumb man."

Curiously enough, he "seemed a small man, but knitted and knotted out of very strong roots deep in the earth. . . . He seemed a very ancient man, master of all his surroundings; a master-builder who after centuries of absence has arrived in the mansion built by him." He walks quickly, like a young man. And two things are memorable, his eyes and his hands. "He has wonderful hands—not beautiful, but knotted with swollen veins, and yet full of a singular expressiveness and power of creativeness." "I remember his keen eyes—they saw everything through and

through—and the movement of his fingers, as though they were perpetually modelling something out of the air, his talk, his jokes, his favorite peasant words, his elusive voice. And I see what a vast amount of life was embodied in the man, how inhumanly clever he was, how terrifying."

One simple way in which he made himself terrifying was by his remorseless personal questions. He could be formal. "When he liked, he could be extraordinarily charming, sensitive, and tactful." But "he likes putting difficult and malicious questions."

"What do you think of yourself?"

"Do you love your wife?"

"Do you think my son, Leo, has talent?"

"How do you like Sophie Andreyevna [Tolstoy's wife]."

"To lie to him is impossible."

"He is the devil," exclaims Gorky, "and I am still a babe, and he should leave me alone." This sensitiveness Tolstoy upset in another way, by his talk of woman. "Of women he talks readily and much, like a French novelist, but always with the coarseness of a Russian peasant. Formerly it used to affect me unpleasantly. Today in the Almond Park he asked Anton Tchekhov:

"'You whored a great deal when you were young?'"

"'Anton Pavlovich, with a confused smile, and pulling at his little beard, muttered something inaudible, and Leo Nikolaevich, looking at the sea, confessed:

"'I was an indefatigable . . .'"

The "salty peasant word" is left out, but Gorky declares elsewhere, not in regard to Tolstoy's bold words, but his hot feelings, "I always disliked what he said about women—it was unspeakably vulgar, and there was in his words something artificial, insincere, and at the same time very personal. It seemed as if he had once been hurt, and could neither forget nor forgive."

He laughs until he cries, this very human god, at Gorky's account of the General's wife who "wanted" him and whom he hit with a broad shovel on the bottom. But this jovialty of Tolstoy goes with his being moved to tears at the thought of a drunken woman, ("it cuts me to the heart when I remember something horrible"). It also goes with his formidable baronial attitude, not only in his dislike of contradiction and his initial patronizing of Gorky, but also in his "disproportionately overgrown individuality" and his way of referring to all writers "exactly as if they were his children."

He could love. There is his love for Tchekhov, who is a charming figure in these notes. And there is his enraptured acceptance of peasants. But Gorky sees in his attitude toward Christ mere sentimentality, "no enthusiasm, no feeling in his words, and no spark of real fire." And as for God, "he reminds me of those pilgrims who all their life long, stick in hand, walk the earth . . . The world is not for them, nor God either. They pray to him from habit, and in their secret soul they hate him—why does he drive them over the earth, from one end to the other? What for?"

As to his cleverness, his simple expressiveness, his salience, the "indefinable beauty of his speech," the "play and light of his eyes," Gorky leaves little doubt. And he also leaves little doubt that Tolstoy was at once a person who willed to believe and who did not believe. "He was never happy, never and nowhere, I am certain of that: neither 'in the books of wisdom,' nor 'on the back of a horse,' nor 'in the arms of a woman' did he experience the full delights of 'earthly paradise.' He is too rational for that and knows life and people too well . . . 'I have never lived—

I can not live—for myself, for my own self; I live for show, for people.” And this lonely god, perhaps because lonely, could be cruel and almost sadistic in his treatment of Gorky as an artist. It was in his novels that he had the gift (or is it the illusion?) of compassion.

To convey so much in so short a book is a nice illustration of Gorky's own courageous expressiveness. After all, the “remorseless explicitness” of most biography and criticism is of no use at all. In legal documents it is all right to be remorselessly explicit, and in druggists' prescriptions, and cooking recipes and directions for visiting the suburbs. The object in such documentation is to point out the particular details that must be observed among a host and confusion of details. But in an attempt to convey character nothing is less important than the explication of say, the subject's sisters and cousins and aunts. These details are utterly innutritious. Equally innutritious are the usual momentous “facts” as to where Yasnaya Polyana is and who Countess Panin was and what the Metropolitan of Moscow said about Tolstoy in 1889. The essence is the man who, first of all, would appear to our own senses, and, secondly, would reveal himself in his talk and tone and mood. These are the things by which we judge our wives and children and friends and rivals and associates—the things, that is to say, which create emotion. And because Gorky is an artist, not a legalist or a dry-as-dust or a pedant, he puts us in possession of his own emotions about this great man, and renews for us the horrible emotional problem of greatness with overweening individuality as against the ordinary quietness, furtiveness and objectionableness of the human cockroach.

Emotions are as powerful as strong horses, as solid as granite. This is Gorky's realization. And because he respected his emotions regarding this old Titan of Russia, we have now one of the most real of biographical contributions. And yet most editors and publishers would have felt that these were mere fragments and would have howled for the circumstantiality of “fact.”

F. H.

## Beyond the Horizon

*Beyond the Horizon, by Eugene O'Neill. New York: Boni and Liveright.*

THE authentic drama in America, the drama of the valiant Little Theatres and the dusty first editions unsold on publishers' shelves, is developing two distinct tendencies toward realism, the one subjective, almost subconscious, as in some of Alfred Kreymborg's plays, the other objective and romantic as in the dramas of Eugene O'Neill.

It is the fashion to speak of romanticism as though it had been hatched and incubated by the early Victorians, had reached with them a respectable old age and been buried with fitting honors in Westminster Abbey. The truth is the Victorians were not romanticists but sentimentalists. The age of Victoria ushered in an age of intense commercial activity incompatible with romance, but as wistfully eager for a public alliance with sentiment as any wealthy grocer for a beautiful and aristocratic wife. Sentimentality and big business, like sentimentality and politics, mutually assist and sustain each other, and this is even more true of our own than of the Victorian age. We Americans, master-merchants of the world, are an exceedingly sentimental people—witness our popular ma-

gazines and the noble appeals in the editorials of our daily newspapers. But as for the Romance of Big Business—that is one of the ready-made phrases we keep in the labeled jars of our minds.

Romanticism is the will to beauty without any retarding consideration. It is as ageless as death or love or avarice. It is the fertilizer of life as well as of art, the infusion without which creation becomes a sterile and brittle thing, lacking the virility to perpetuate itself.

Eugene O'Neill is a romanticist who takes one by the scruff of the neck and holds one's nose to reality. His is a spirit stark, eager, alive. Even in his most photographically realistic plays, *Before Breakfast* and another one-act drama where the crushed seaman dies in his reeking quarters, one feels he has not only a hold but an agonizing clench on life. Yet it is not life as some of the great Scandinavians and Russians have given it—life that has not only passed through the senses but through the inmost essence of a single consciousness to emerge in a great and terrible art. For this it is too minutely reproduced in its physical and accidental manifestations, such as dialect. The life of the spirit alone will bear faithful reproduction without either becoming “lurid” or losing its impressiveness. And this perhaps only because the in-vision of even the greatest artist is not strong enough to discover spiritual minutiae; unlike the camera it cannot see too much.

The theme of the three-act drama, *Beyond the Horizon*, is the old unappeasable hunger of the wandering spirit that is always at odds with those who are content to burrow in some settled patch of earth. The brothers, Andrew and Robert Mayo, typify these opposing forces. Andrew is the pioneer who attaches himself firmly to that which surrounds him and which he, having no comparison of a richer inner life, finds complete and satisfying. Unlike Robert, driven always toward some shifting and elusive Grail, Andrew only pulls up roots with the definite hope of a more durable replanting. While Robert is the eternal poet-adventurer who rides after his own dreams, unaware that he himself projects before him like a lantern the gleam that he follows. “You have it or you don't,” he says, explaining his obsession to Ruth on the eve of a three years' trip on a tramp steamer to the Orient. It is the appeal of Ruth, loved by both brothers, and by all authority of nature a mate for Andrew, that induces Robert—hopelessly unfit for such a well-made socket of earth—to stay on the farm and marry her. Andrew, the loss of his first love souring home for him, goes off on the tramp steamer in his brother's place. For this he gets the curse of his father. The old man whose farm has become his religion and who owns no God but earth, is left like some angry priest who sees an acolyte's back turned on the sacred fire.

In the second act we see the slow withering of personality. The old man Mayo is dead, and Robert, his gleam almost blackened out without the winds of the world to blow on it, struggles ineffectually with the ruin about him. After a scene of recrimination, Ruth—her vanity outraged by the failure of her man to win the community's approval for the only values she or it comprehends—makes an advance to Andrew who is unbelievably obtuse. Andrew, unsensitive, hardy as spear-grass, is the only one of the disrupted human things who has prospered. But at the last he too is denourished, no longer sturdy, firm-rooted, but run to the very stalk of enterprise—“gambling with the thing that he had created.”