

# A Life of Coppers and Kopeks

**"Foma Gordeyev," by Maxim Gorky, translated from the Russian by Margaret Wettlin (Delta. 279 pp. Paperback, \$1.95), the first novel by the erstwhile dean of Russian letters, describes an alienated man seeking identity in an oppressive, capitalistic society. "Chekhov" is the most recent work by Ernest J. Simmons, an author and lecturer.**

By ERNEST J. SIMMONS

A CRITICAL commonplace about Gorky is that, of the various literary genres he attempted, he succeeded least well in the novel. There can be no doubt that his literary eminence rests largely upon his best short stories—with their disciplined construction and cruel realism unspoiled by his penchant for romantic effects—as well as upon his autobiographical writings and his wonderful recollections of Tolstoy and Andreyev, where his powers of observation and brilliance of characterization are unsurpassed. Gorky's long series of novels, however, deserves an extensive re-evaluation, for his achievements in this form are nearly always interesting and sometimes quite superior. Any such study would have to begin with his first published novel, "Foma Gordeyev" (1899), which has now been made available in a new translation with a perceptive introduction by Professor F. D. Reeve.

Gorky never did anything better in fiction than the early chapters of this book, which are devoted to a portrayal of a provincial merchant, Ignat Gordeyev, who, having worked his way up from the bottom, amasses a fortune, lives hard, glorifies success, and scorns the weak. Ignat's crude philosophy of the self-made man may be summed up in his assertion ". . . we all live to get, not to give."

The ostensible hero of the novel, however, is Ignat's son, Foma, heir to his father's business and wealth. In certain respects the story of Foma's rebellion against everything Ignat represented is strikingly modernistic: he is an alienated man seeking identity in an oppressive society where "a man is capital and, like the ruble, he is made up of worthless little coppers and kopeks." After a prolonged and

anguished effort to find himself in this money-mad world, to discover, as he says, some meaning in life, Foma escapes into ruinous debauchery. At the end of the novel, in a superb climactic scene, Foma publicly denounces a large gathering of these fat and venal merchants, who then have him put away as insane.

Unlike his father, however, Foma is hardly a convincing character, for Gorky appears to be describing as the son's psychological motivation what he has not felt himself—a practice that Tolstoy criticized in Gorky. Foma's cunning old godfather, Mayakin, is a much more convincing character: despite Mayakin's cynical nature, his proud defense of this merchant society, with its oversupply of scoundrels, compels belief.

Gorky's besetting artistic sins, which he managed to control in his best short stories, ran rife in his novels. One of these is his immoderate love for philosophizing about the meaning of life, indulged in to excess by the leading characters in "Foma Gordeyev." Another fault, for which the artistically precise and economic Chekhov—to whom "Foma Gordeyev" is dedicated—reproved Gorky, is descriptive flamboyance and the use of superfluous words. There is a great deal of both in this novel.

For Gorky, however, "Foma Gordeyev" was an auspicious beginning in the novel. It contains several admirable characterizations, and its vivid picture of the merchant society of a provincial town is hardly equaled in Gorky's subsequent novels that concentrated on this milieu.

**HOMESPUN SAGA:** To quote an old Yip Harburg lyric, "Virtue is its own revenge." If the statement needs backing up, read *"The Moonflower Vine,"* by Jetta Carleton (Simon & Schuster, \$4.95), a first novel that may well prove to be fiction's answer to seconal.

The setting is in the backwoods of Missouri. The narrative concerns Matthew Soames, a schoolteacher, and Callie, his illiterate but loving wife, and their four daughters. Everybody loves everybody; not cloyingly, mind you, but constantly, with the average stresses and strains. One daughter dies and another marries the deceased sister's husband; Matthew de-

velops a crush on a student; Callie stumbles (only once) on the path of virtue with a traveling salesman; but nothing occurs that could actually be confused with gripping plotwork. In that department, "The Moonflower Vine" is as flat, clean, and barren as a Kansas skyline.

The publishers of this saga of homespun humdrum are hailing Mrs. Carleton's novel as this year's "To Kill a Mockingbird." They couldn't be more wrong.

—HASKEL FRANKEL.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING AN ARTIST:

The perfect artist, unambitious except for his art, in love with nature, scattering his loving sketches to the winds, and painting his masterpieces just as he dies of consumption—in Paris—is the protagonist of *"The Hidden Mountain,"* by Gabrielle Roy, translated by Harry Binsse (Harcourt, Brace & World, \$3.95). The story opens in the Arctic wilds of Canada, where Pierre Cadorai is exploring the uncharted tributaries of the Mackenzie and Ungava, sometimes with a fellow-trapper for companion, more often alone. He meets a girl, Nina, but girls are not for artists, and he leaves her to his companion, Big Steve.

His canoe overturns in a rapids and he loses the sketches of a decade, but presses on to encounter the perfect subject, a mysterious mountain that says to him: "Since until now no man has seen me, did I in truth exist? As long as you have not been held captive in another's eyes, do you live? Are we alive if no one has ever loved us?" But Pierre lingers so long to paint the mountain that winter and hunger overtake him. In a frenzy he kills a stricken caribou, and again loses most of his sketches.

Now it is his turn to be discovered. An art-loving old French missionary not only gives him a show but sends him to Paris. And in Paris, of course, he finds out that "a work of God is not a work of art" and—too late—that what lies unexpressed within a soul is "the only death."

It isn't really as corny as that. The writing is sensitive and spare. Insights into nature, even into human nature, abound. But the concept of the perfect artist, this one at any rate, just doesn't ring true. It's too high-minded, too sexless, too humorless, too *dull*. I've known hundreds of artists, and while not one of them bore much resemblance to Joyce Cary's Gully Jimson, even Gully, the frenetic clown, is preferable to this sad young *wandervogel*—and closer to the elusive prototype.

Perhaps a halt should be called to novels about The Artist, at least when

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## Once in Love with Lou

**"My Sister, My Spouse: A Biography of Lou Andreas-Salomé," by H. F. Peters** (Norton. 320 pp. \$5), brings to life the latter-day Circe whose admirers included Nietzsche, Freud, Rilke, and Wedekind. Joseph P. Bauke edits *Germanic Review*.

By JOSEPH P. BAUKE

THE LITERATURE of the later nineteenth century is singularly rich in fascinating women, but no fictional heroine can match the life of Lou Salomé for excitement. The daughter of a czarist general, she grew up in St. Petersburg in an imperial setting fit for a spectacular movie, quit Russia when she was barely twenty, and then spent years crisscrossing Europe. Brilliant and beautiful, she moved through the intellectual circles of several countries with Circean charm. The geniuses among her victims survived the encounter and turned the experience into art; lesser men came to inexorable ruin in her wake. No one could ever forget her, and some, in a most melodramatic fashion, preferred suicide and even castration to life without Lou. When she died in Göttingen twenty-six years ago, the solid citizens of the little university town were rather relieved that "The Witch" was dead. The Nazis confiscated her estate, for Lou had been indiscriminate enough to consort with Sigmund Freud, the founder of "Jewish" psychoanalysis. It did not matter that the patron saint of the Third Reich, Friedrich Nietzsche, had been among her first lovers—her memory was officially obscured.

Now an American professor has conjured up this latter-day Lilith in an unforgettable biography that bids fair to remain the definitive account. Drawing on original sources and interviews with surviving friends and acquaintances, H. F. Peters details her story with as much objectivity as one can hope for. He is likely the first man to look at her that way, and on occasion he too succumbs to the spell Lou cast on the opposite sex. This is no criticism of his method, for no biographer can hope to retrace the very private paths of a beautiful woman and arrive at findings to satisfy pedants insisting on footnoted proof. The alternative is silence or gossip, and in Lou's case the latter is

preferable. Wisely, Mr. Peters has refrained from a lengthy analysis of Lou's psyche, and concentrated instead on the effect she had on men. He takes great pains to "flesh out" the characters who played parts in her life.

Mr. Peters can call on some of the most august names in German letters to make his point. Nietzsche dropped his philosophic hammer and courted her with an abandon quite unbecoming to the inventor of the superman. Whether or not one agrees that Lou was the archetype of which that blond beast was the idealized copy, there is no denying the fact that she upset the frail philosopher's routine more than any other woman. The poet Rilke, almost young enough to be her son, fared better with his attentions and may well have been her first successful lover. Rilke readers might object that Mr. Peters unjustifiably exploited poetry for

biographical information, but his account of the affair proves once more that Rilke's ethereal voice belonged to a man of flesh and blood.

The most perceptive passages in the book are those on Lou's relations with her husband, Professor Andreas of Göttingen University. The undercurrent of excess, quietly and persistently present in all her loves, is glaringly manifest in this, her most respectable union. The marriage lasted for over forty years, yet Andreas died without ever having been granted the privileges of a husband. Mother, mistress, and madonna to many, she could never be anyone's wife.

Lou Salomé was a prolific writer, and some of her judgments on art and artists show prophetic insight. Mr. Peters gives these pursuits their due consideration and emphasizes Lou's ability to out-talk her intellectual friends. One of them, the dramatist Hauptmann, was literally scared away by her wits. To Frank Wedekind, on the other hand, she appeared as a kind of earth-goddess, an embodiment of the life force itself, and his vampiric heroine Lulu was inspired by Lou.

Though her combination of beauty  
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—From the book.

Lou Salome, Paul Ree, and Friedrich Nietzsche in Lucerne, May 13, 1882.