

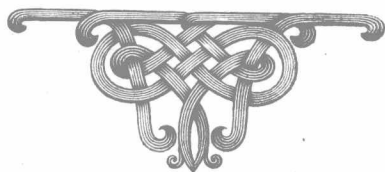




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**ГЕРОИ
НАШЕГО
ВРЕМЕНИ**



**ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ**

МОСКВА 1951

M. LERMONTOV

**A HERO
OF
OUR TIME**

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE

MOSCOW 1951

TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY MARTIN PARKER

PORTRAIT OF M. LERMONTOV
BY I. ASTAFYEV, 1883

ILLUSTRATED
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ILLUSTRATION TO *Maxim Maximych*
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CONTENTS

PART ONE

I. BELA	13
II. MAXIM MAXIMYCH	52

PECHORIN'S DIARY

I. TAMAN	67
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PART TWO

CONCLUSION OF PECHORIN'S DIARY .

II. PRINCESS MARY	83
III. THE FATALIST	164





THE FOREWORD is at once the first and the last thing in any book; it serves either to explain the purpose of the work or to justify the author before his critics. Ordinarily, however, readers are concerned with neither the moral nor the journalistic attacks on the author; hence they do not read forewords. Yet it is a pity it should be so, especially in our country. Our public is still so immature and simple-hearted that it does not understand a fable unless it finds the moral at the end. It fails to grasp a joke or sense in irony; it is simply brought up badly. It is as yet unaware that obvious invective has no place in respectable society and respectable books, that contemporary enlightenment has devised a sharper, almost invisible but nevertheless deadly weapon, which under the guise of flattery deals a true, unparriable blow. Our public is like the provincial who overhearing a conversation between two diplomats belonging to hostile courts carries off the conviction that each is deceiving his government for the sake of a tender mutual friendship.

The present book recently had the misfortune of being taken literally by some readers and even some magazines. Some were frightfully offended in all seriousness at being given a man as amoral as the Hero of Our Time for a model; others delicately hinted that the author had drawn portraits of himself and his acquaintances. . . . A threadbare witticism! But apparent-

ly Russia is so constituted that however she may progress in every other respect, she is unable to get rid of absurdities like this. With us the most fantastic of fairy tales has hardly a chance of escaping criticism as an attempt at libel!

A Hero of Our Time, my dear sirs, is indeed a portrait, but not of one man; it is a portrait built up of all our generation's vices in full bloom. You will again tell me that a human being cannot be so wicked, and I shall reply that if you can believe in the existence of all the villains of tragedy and romance, why should you not believe that there was a Pechorin? If you could admire far more terrifying and repulsive types, why are you not more merciful to this character, even if it is fictitious? Is it not because there is more truth in it than you might wish?

You say that morality will gain nothing by it. I beg to differ. People have been fed enough sweetmeats to upset their stomachs; now bitter remedies, acid truths, are needed. Yet you should not think that the author of this book was ever ambitious enough to aspire to reform human vices. May God preserve him from such boorishness! It simply pleased him to portray the modern man as he sees him and as he so often, to his own and your misfortune, has found him to be. Suffice it that the disease has been diagnosed; how to cure it the Lord alone knows!



PART ONE





I

B E L A

I WAS travelling along the post road from Tiflis. The only luggage in the carriage was one small portmanteau half-full of travel notes about Georgia. Fortunately for you the greater part of them has been lost since then, though luckily for me the case and the rest of the things in it have survived.

The sun was already slipping behind a snow-capped ridge when I drove into Koishaur Valley. The Ossetian coachman, singing at the top of his voice, urged his horses on relentlessly to reach the summit of Koishaur Mountain before nightfall. What a glorious spot this valley is! All around it tower formidable mountains, reddish crags draped with hanging ivy and crowned with clusters of plane trees, yellow cliffs grooved by torrents, with a gilded fringe of snow high above, while down below the Aragva embraces a nameless stream that noisily bursts forth from a black, gloom-filled gorge, and then stretches in a silvery ribbon into the distance, its surface shimmering like the scaly back of a snake.

On reaching the foot of Koishaur Mountain we stopped outside a *dukhan** where some twenty Georgians and mountaineers made up a noisy assemblage; nearby a camel caravan had halted for the night. I had to hire oxen to haul my carriage to the top of the confounded mountain for it was already autumn and a thin layer of ice covered the ground, and the climb was about two versts in length.

There was nothing for it but to hire six oxen and several Ossetians. One of them hoisted my portmanteau on his shoulder and the others set to helping the oxen along, doing little more than shout, however.

Behind my carriage came another pulled by four oxen with no visible exertion although the vehicle was piled high with baggage. This rather surprised me. In the wake of the carriage walked its owner, puffing at a small silver-inlaid Kabardian pipe. He was wearing an officer's coat without epaulettes and a shaggy Cherkess cap. He looked about fifty, his swarthy face betrayed a long acquaintanceship with the Caucasian sun, and his prematurely grey moustache belied his firm step and vigorous appearance. I went up to him and bowed; he silently returned my greeting, blowing out an enormous cloud of smoke.

"I take it we are fellow travellers?"

He bowed again, but did not say a word.

"I suppose you are going to Stavropol?"

"Yes, sir, I am . . . with some government baggage."

"Will you please explain to me how it is that four oxen easily manage to pull your heavy carriage while six beasts can barely haul my empty one with the help of all these Ossetians?"

He smiled shrewdly, casting an appraising glance at me.

"I daresay you haven't been long in the Caucasus?"

"About a year," I replied.

He smiled again.

"Why do you ask?"

* Caucasian tavern.

"No particular reason, sir. They're terrific rogues, these Asiatics! You don't think their yelling helps much, do you? You can't tell what the devil they're saying. But the oxen understand them all right; hitch up twenty of the beasts if you wish and they won't budge once those fellows begin yelling in their tongue. . . . Terrific cheats, they are. And what can you do to them? They do like to skin the traveller. Spoiled, they are, the scoundrels . . . you'll see they'll make you tip them too. I know them by now, they won't fool me!"

"Have you served long in these parts?"

"Yes, ever since Alexei Petrovich* was here," he replied, drawing himself up. "When he arrived at the line I was a sublieutenant, and under him was promoted twice for service against the mountaineers."

"And now?"

"Now I am in the third line battalion. And you, may I ask?"

I told him.

This brought the conversation to an end and we walked along side by side in silence. On top of the mountain we ran into snow. The sun set and night followed day without any interval in between as is usual in the South: thanks to the glistening snow, however, we could easily pick out the road which still continued to climb, though less steeply than before. I gave orders to put my portmanteau in the carriage and replace the oxen with horses, and turned to look back at the valley down below for the last time, but a thick mist that rolled in waves from the gorges blanketed it completely and not a single sound reached us from its depths. The Ossetians vociferously besieged me, demanding money for vodka; but the captain shouted at them so fiercely that they dispersed in a moment.

"You see what they are like!" he grumbled. "They don't know enough Russian to ask for a piece of bread, but they've learned to beg for tips:

* Yermolov--General Alexei Petrovich Yermolov, governor-general of Georgia from 1817 till 1827.

‘Officer, give me money for vodka!’ Even the Tatars are better; they’re teetotalers at least. . . .”

Another verst remained to the post station. It was quiet all around, so quiet that you could trace the flight of a mosquito by its buzz. A deep gorge yawned black to the left; beyond it and ahead of us the dark-blue mountain peaks wrinkled with gorges and gullies and topped by layers of snow loomed against the pale horizon that still retained the last glimmer of twilight. Stars began to twinkle in the dark sky, and strangely enough it seemed that they were far higher here than in our northern sky. On both sides of the road naked black boulders jugged up from the ground, and here and there some shrubs peeped from under the snow; not a single dead leaf rustled, and it was pleasant to hear in the midst of this lifeless somnolence of nature the snorting of the tired post horses and the uneven tinkling of the Russian carriage bells.

“Tomorrow will be a fine day,” I observed, but the captain did not reply. Instead he pointed to a tall mountain rising directly ahead of us.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Gud-Gora.”

“Yes?”

“See how it smokes?”

Indeed, Gud-Gora was smoking; light wisps of mist crept along its sides while a black cloud rested on the summit, so black that it stood out as a blotch even against the dark sky.

We could already make out the post station and the roofs of the huts around it, and welcoming lights were dancing ahead when the gusts of cold raw wind came whistling down the gorge and it began to drizzle. Barely had I thrown a felt cape over my shoulders than the snow came. I looked at the captain with respect now. . . .

“We’ll have to stay here overnight,” he said, annoyed. “You can’t journey through the hills in a blizzard like this. See any avalanches on Krestovaya?” he asked a coachman.