

MEMOIRS
OF A
REVOLUTIONIST

BY
P. KROPOTKIN



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NOTE

THIS book probably would not have been written for some time to come, but for the kind invitation and most friendly encouragement of the editor and the publishers of "The Atlantic Monthly" to write it for serial publication in their magazine. I feel it a most pleasant duty to express here my very best thanks for the hospitality that was offered to me, and for the friendly pressure that was exercised to induce me to undertake this work. It was published in "The Atlantic Monthly" (September, 1898, to September, 1899), under the title, "The Autobiography of a Revolutionist." Preparing it now for publication in book form, I have added considerably to the original text in the parts dealing with my youth and my stay in Siberia, and especially in the Sixth Part, in which I have told the story of my life in Western Europe.

P. KROPÓTKIN.

BROMLEY, KENT, October, 1899.

INTRODUCTION

THE autobiographies we owe to great minds have generally been of one of the three following types: "So far I went astray; thus I found the true path" (St. Augustine); or, "So bad was I, but who dare consider himself better?" (Rousseau); or, "This is the way a genius has slowly been evolved from within and by favorable surroundings" (Goethe). In all these forms of self-representation the author is mainly occupied with himself.

In the nineteenth century the autobiographies of men of mark are very often shaped on these lines: "So talented and attractive was I; such appreciation and admiration I won!" (Johanne Louise Heiberg, "A Life lived over in Recollection"). Or, "So talented was I and so worthy of being loved, but yet so unappreciated; and these were the hard struggles I went through before I won the crown of fame" (Hans Christian Andersen, "The Story of my Life"). In these two classes of life-records, the author is occupied only with what his fellow men have thought of him and said about him.

The author of the autobiography before us is not intent upon his own capabilities, and consequently describes no struggle to gain recognition. Still less does he care for the opinions of his fellow men about himself; what others have thought of him he mentions only once, with a single word.

There is in this work no gazing upon one's image. The author is not one of those who willingly speak of themselves; he does so reluctantly and with a certain shyness. There is here no confession that reveals the inner self, no

sentimentality, and no cynicism. The author speaks neither of his sins nor of his virtues; he enters into no vulgar intimacy with his reader. He does not say when he fell in love, and so little touches upon his relations with the other sex that he even does not mention his marriage; we learn only incidentally that he is married at all. That he is a father, and a very loving one, he finds time to mention but once in his rapid review of the last sixteen years of his life.

He is more anxious to give the psychology of his contemporaries than of himself. One finds in his book the psychology of official Russia and of the masses underneath, of Russia struggling forward and of Russia stagnant. And he strives to give the history of his contemporaries rather than his own history. The record of his life contains, consequently, the history of Russia during his lifetime, as well as the history of the labor movement in Europe during the last half-century. When he plunges into his own inner world, we see the outer world reflected in it.

There is, nevertheless, in this book, analogous with Goethe's aim in "*Dichtung und Wahrheit*," a representation of how a remarkable mind has been shaped; and, in analogy with the "*Confessions*" of St. Augustine, we have the story of an inner crisis which corresponds with what in olden times was called "conversion." In fact, this inner crisis is the turning-point and the core of the book.

There are at this moment only two great Russians who think for the Russian people, and whose thoughts belong to mankind, — Leo Tolstóy and Peter Kropótkin. Tolstóy has often told us, in poetical shape, parts of his life. Kropótkin gives us here for the first time, without any poetical recasting, a rapid survey of his whole career.

However radically different these two men are, there is one parallel which can be drawn between their lives and

their views of life. Tolstóy is an artist, Kropótkin is a man of science; but neither, at a certain period of his life, could find peace in continuing the work to which he had brought great inborn capacities. Religious considerations brought Tolstóy, social considerations brought Kropótkin, to abandon the paths they had first taken. Both are filled with love for mankind; and they are at one in the severe condemnation of the indifference, the thoughtlessness, the crudeness, and brutality of the upper classes, as well as in the attraction they both feel for the life of the down-trodden and ill-used man of the people. Both see more cowardice than stupidity in the world. Both are idealists, and both have the reformer's temperament. Both are peace-loving natures, and Kropótkin is the more peaceful of the two, — although Tolstóy always preaches peace and condemns those who take right into their own hands and resort to force, while Kropótkin justifies their action and was on friendly terms with the terrorists. The point upon which they differ most is their attitude toward the intelligent educated man and toward science, which in his religious passion Tolstóy disdains and disparages, while Kropótkin holds both in high esteem, although at the same time he condemns men of science for forgetting the people and the misery of the people.

Many a man and many a woman has accomplished a great life-work without having led a great life. Many people are interesting, although their lives may have been quite insignificant and commonplace. Kropótkin's life is both great and interesting.

One will find in this volume a combination of all the elements out of which an intensely eventful life is composed: idyl and tragedy, drama and romance. The childhood in Moscow and in the country, the portraits of his mother, sisters, and teachers, or of the old and trusty servants, and the many pictures of patriarchal life are done in such a

masterly way that every heart will be touched by them. The landscapes, the story of the unusually intense love between the two brothers, — all this is pure idyl. Side by side with these things there is, unhappily, plenty of sorrow and suffering: the harshness in family life, the cruel treatment of the serfs, and the narrow-mindedness and heartlessness which are the ruling stars of men's destinies.

There is variety and there are dramatic catastrophes; life at court and life in prison; life in the highest Russian society, with emperors and grand dukes, and life in poverty, with the working proletariat, in London and in Switzerland. There are changes of costume as in a drama, the chief actor having to appear during the day in fine dress in the Winter Palace, and in the evening in peasant's clothes in the suburbs, as a preacher of revolution. And there is, too, the sensational element that belongs to the novel. Although nobody could be simpler in tone and style than Kropótkin, nevertheless parts of his tale, from the very nature of the events he has to tell, are more intensely exciting than any part of those novels which aim only at being sensational. One reads with breathless interest of the preparations for the escape from the hospital of the fortress of St. Peter and St. Paul, and the bold execution of the plan.

Few men have moved, as Kropótkin did, in all classes of society; few know all these classes as he does. What a picture! — Kropótkin, as a little boy with curled hair, in a fancy dress costume, standing by the Emperor Nicholas, or running after the Emperor Alexander as his page, with the idea of protecting him. And then that other picture: Kropótkin in a terrible prison, sending away the Grand Duke Nicholas, or listening to the growing insanity of a peasant who is confined in a cell under his very feet.

He has lived the life of the aristocrat and of the worker; he has been page de chambre of the Emperor and an impecu-

nious writer ; he has lived the life of the student, the officer, the man of science, the explorer of unknown lands, the administrator, and the hunted revolutionist. In exile he has had at times to live upon tea and bread as a Russian peasant, and he has been exposed to espionage and murder plots like a Russian emperor.

Few men have had an equally wide field of experience. Just as Kropótkin is able, as a geologist, to survey prehistoric evolution for hundreds of thousands of years past, so too he has assimilated the whole historical evolution of his own times. To the literary and scientific education which is won in the study and in the university (such as the knowledge of languages, belles-lettres, philosophy, and higher mathematics), he added at an early stage of his life that education which is gained in the workshop and the laboratory, as also in the open field, — the study of natural science, military science, fortification, machines, and factories. His intellectual equipment is universal.

How this active mind must have suffered when he was reduced to the inactivity of prison life ! What a test of endurance, and what an exercise in stoicism ! Kropótkin says somewhere that a morally developed personality must be at the foundation of every organization. That applies to him. Life has made of him one of the corner-stones for the building of the future.

The crisis in Kropótkin's life has two turning-points which must be mentioned.

He approaches his thirtieth year, the decisive year in a man's life. With heart and soul he is a man of science ; he has made a valuable scientific discovery. He has found out that the maps of Northern Asia are incorrect ; not only that the old conceptions of the geography of Asia are wrong, but that the theories of Humboldt are also in conflict with the facts. For more than two years he has plunged into laborious research. Then, all of a sudden, he sees on

a certain day flash upon him the true relations of the facts; he understands that the main lines of structure in Asia are not from north to south or from west to east, but from the southwest to the northeast. He submits his discovery to test, he applies it to numerous separated facts, and it stands the test. Now he knows the joys of scientific revelation in the highest and purest form; he feels how elevating is their action on the mind.

Then comes the crisis. Sorrow follows, because these joys are the lot of so few. He asks himself whether he has the right to enjoy them alone. He feels that there is a higher duty, — to do his part in bringing to the mass of the people the knowledge already gained rather than to work at making new discoveries.

For my part I do not think that he was right. With such conceptions Pasteur would not have been the benefactor of mankind that he has been. After all, everything, in the last resort, is to the benefit of the mass of the people. I think that one does the utmost for the well-being of all when one achieves the most intense production that one can. But this fundamental notion is characteristic of Kropótkin; it gives his essence.

And this tendency of his mind carries him further. In Finland, where he has gone to make a new scientific discovery, as he comes to the idea — which was heresy then — that in prehistoric times all Northern Europe was buried under ice, he is so much impressed with compassion for the poor, the suffering, who often know hunger in their struggle for bread, that he considers it his highest, absolute duty to become a teacher and a helper of the great working and destitute masses. Soon after that a new world opens before him, — the life of the working classes, — and he *learns* from those whom he intends to *teach*.

Five or six years later the crisis appears in its second phase. It happens in Switzerland. Already during his

first stay in that country Kropótkin had abandoned the group of state socialists, from fear of an economic despotism, from hatred of centralization, from love for the freedom of the individual and the community. However, it is only after his long imprisonment in Russia, during his second stay among the intelligent workers of western Switzerland, that the conception, which has floated before his eyes, of a new structure of society more distinctly dawns upon him as a society of federated associations, coöperating in about the same way as railway companies, or the postal departments of separate countries, coöperate now. He knows that he cannot dictate to the future the lines which it will have to follow; he is convinced that all must grow out of the constructive activity of the masses, but for illustration's sake he compares the coming structure with the guilds and the mutual relations which existed in mediæval times, and were worked out from below. He does not believe at all in the distinction between leaders and led; but I must confess that I am old-fashioned enough to feel pleased when Kropótkin, by a slight inconsistency, says once in praise of a friend that he was "a born leader."

The author describes himself as a revolutionist, and he is surely quite right in so doing. But seldom have there been revolutionists as humane and as mild as he is. One feels astounded when in one passage — where he speaks of the possibility of an armed conflict with the Swiss police — a fighting instinct appears in his character, as it exists in the characters of all of us. He cannot say precisely whether he and his friends felt a relief at being spared a fight, or a regret that the fight did not take place. This expression of feeling stands alone. He has never been an avenger, but always a martyr.

He does not impose sacrifices upon others: he makes them himself. All his life he has done it, but in such a way that the sacrifice seems to have cost him nothing, so

little does he make of it. And with all his energy he is so little vindictive that of a disgusting prison doctor he only remarks: "The less said of him the better."

He is a revolutionist without emphasis, and without emblem. He laughs at the oaths and ceremonies with which conspirators bind themselves in dramas and operas. This man is simplicity personified. In character he stands comparison with any of the fighters for freedom of any country. None have been more disinterested than he, none have loved mankind more than he does.

But he would not permit me to say in the beginning of his book all the good that I think of him, and should I say it my words would outrun the limits of a reasonable Introduction.

GEORG BRANDES.

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NOTE ON THE PORTRAITS

The frontispiece portrait of P. Kropótkin is from a photograph (about 1886) by Nadar, Paris. The one facing page 210 shows him at the age of twenty-two, and is from a photograph by Bergamasco, St. Petersburg. That of his mother, Ekaterína Nikoláevna Kropótkin (facing page 12), is from a painting.

MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONIST

PART FIRST

CHILDHOOD

I

Moscow is a city of slow historical growth, and down to the present time its different parts have wonderfully well retained the features which have been stamped upon them in the slow course of history. The Trans-Moskva River district, with its broad, sleepy streets and its monotonous gray-painted, low-roofed houses, of which the entrance-gates remain securely bolted day and night, has always been the secluded abode of the merchant class, and the stronghold of the outwardly austere, formalistic, and despotic Nonconformists of the "Old Faith." The citadel, or Kreml, is still the stronghold of church and state; and the immense space in front of it, covered with thousands of shops and warehouses, has been for centuries a crowded beehive of commerce, and still remains the heart of a great internal trade which spreads over the whole surface of the vast empire. The Tverskáya and the Smiths' Bridge have been for hundreds of years the chief centres for the fashionable shops; while the artisans' quarters, the Pluschkha and the Dorogomilovka, retain the very same features which characterized their uproarious populations in the times of the Moscow Tsars. Each quarter is a little world in itself; each has its own physiognomy, and lives its own separate

life. Even the railways — when they made an irruption into the old capital — grouped apart in special centres on the outskirts of the old town their stores and machine-works, their heavily loaded carts and engines.

However, of all parts of Moscow, none, perhaps, is more typical than that labyrinth of clean, quiet, winding streets and lanes which lies at the back of the Kreml, between two great radial streets, the Arbát and the Prechístenka, and is still called the Old Equerries' Quarter, — the Stáraya Konyúshennaya.

Some fifty years ago, there lived in this quarter, and slowly died out, the old Moscow nobility, whose names were so frequently mentioned in the pages of Russian history before the times of Peter I., but who subsequently disappeared to make room for the newcomers, "the men of all ranks," called into service by the founder of the Russian state. Feeling themselves supplanted at the St. Petersburg court, these nobles of the old stock retired either to the Old Equerries' Quarter in Moscow, or to their picturesque estates in the country round about the capital, and they looked with a sort of contempt and secret jealousy upon the motley crowd of families which came "from no one knew where" to take possession of the highest functions of the government, in the new capital on the banks of the Nevá.

In their younger days, most of them had tried their fortunes in the service of the state, chiefly in the army; but for one reason or another they had soon abandoned it, without having risen to high rank. The more successful ones obtained some quiet, almost honorary position in their mother city, — my father was one of these, — while most of the others simply retired from active service. But wheresoever they might have been shifted, in the course of their careers, over the wide surface of Russia, they always somehow managed to spend their old age in a house of

their own in the Old Equerries' Quarter, under the shadow of the church where they had been baptized, and where the last prayers had been pronounced at the burial of their parents.

New branches budded from the old stocks. Some of them achieved more or less distinction in different parts of Russia; some owned more luxurious houses in the new style in other quarters of Moscow or at St. Petersburg; but the branch which continued to reside in the Old Equerries' Quarter, somewhere near to the green, the yellow, the pink, or the brown church which was endeared through family associations, was considered as the true representative of the family, irrespective of the position it occupied in the family tree. Its old-fashioned head was treated with great respect, not devoid, I must say, of a slight tinge of irony, even by those younger representatives of the same stock who had left their mother city for a more brilliant career in the St. Petersburg Guard or in the court circles. He personified for them the antiquity of the family and its traditions.

In these quiet streets, far away from the noise and bustle of the commercial Moscow, all the houses had much the same appearance. They were mostly built of wood, with bright green sheet-iron roofs, the exteriors stuccoed and decorated with columns and porticoes; all were painted in gay colors. Nearly every house had but one story, with seven or nine big, gay-looking windows facing the street. A second story was admitted only in the back part of the house, which looked upon a spacious yard, surrounded by numbers of small buildings, used as kitchens, stables, cellars, coach-houses, and as dwellings for the retainers and servants. A wide gate opened upon this yard, and a brass plate on it usually bore the inscription, "House of So and So, Lieutenant or Colonel, and Commander," — very seldom "Major-General" or any similarly elevated civil rank.

But if a more luxurious house, embellished by a gilded iron railing and an iron gate, stood in one of those streets, the brass plate on the gate was sure to bear the name of "Commerce Counsel" or "Honorable Citizen" So and So. These were the intruders, those who came unasked to settle in this quarter, and were therefore ignored by their neighbors.

No shops were allowed in these select streets, except that in some small wooden house, belonging to the parish church, a tiny grocer's or greengrocer's shop might have been found ; but then, the policeman's lodge stood on the opposite corner, and in the daytime the policeman himself, armed with a halberd, would appear at the door to salute with his in-offensive weapon the officers passing by, and would retire inside when dusk came, to employ himself either as a cobbler, or in the manufacture of some special snuff patronized by the elder male servants of the neighborhood.

Life went on quietly and peacefully — at least for the outsider — in this Moscow Faubourg Saint-Germain. In the morning nobody was seen in the streets. About mid-day the children made their appearance under the guidance of French tutors and German nurses who took them out for a walk on the snow-covered boulevards. Later on in the day the ladies might be seen in their two-horse sledges, with a valet standing behind on a small plank fastened at the end of the runners, or ensconced in an old-fashioned carriage, immense and high, suspended on big curved springs and dragged by four horses, with a postilion in front and two valets standing behind. In the evening most of the houses were brightly illuminated, and, the blinds not being drawn down, the passers-by could admire the card-players or the waltzers in the saloons. "Opinions" were not in vogue in those days, and we were yet far from the years when in each one of these houses a struggle began between "fathers and sons," — a struggle that usually ended

either in a family tragedy or in a nocturnal visit of the state police. Fifty years ago nothing of the sort was thought of; all was quiet and smooth, — at least on the surface.

In this old Equerries' Quarter I was born in 1842, and here I passed the first fifteen years of my life. Even after our father had sold the house in which our mother died, and bought another, and when again he had sold that house, and we spent several winters in hired houses, until he had found a third one to his taste, within a stone's-throw of the church where he had been baptized, we still remained in the Old Equerries' Quarter, leaving it only during the summer to go to our country-seat.