

M. GORKY



CHILDHOOD

1950

FOREIGN LANGUAGES
PUBLISHING HOUSE

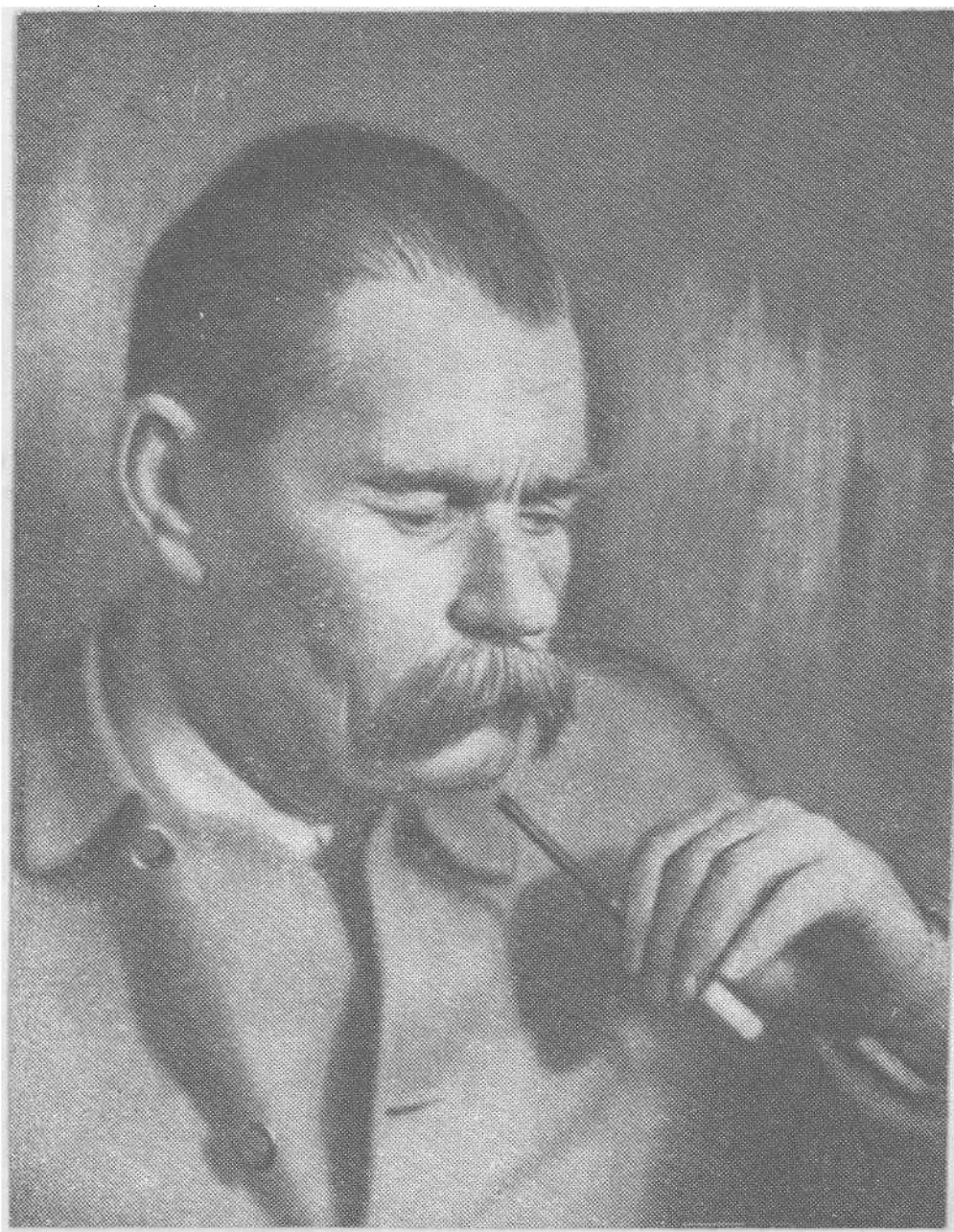
Moscow

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Sh. Toporov

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY MARGARET WETTLIN

DESIGNED BY
E. KOGAN

***DEDICATED
TO MY SON***



1

ON THE FLOOR beneath the window of a small, dusky room lay my father, remarkably long and all dressed in white; the toes of his bare feet were strangely widespread, and the fingers of his gentle hands, now quietly crossed on his breast, were likewise distorted. The dark discs of copper coins closed his laughing eyes, his kind face had become livid, and I was terrified by the glint of his set teeth.

My mother, in a red skirt but little else, was kneeling beside him, combing back his soft hair with the black comb I had used as a saw to cut through the rind of watermelons. She kept muttering something in a deep, hoarse voice; her grey eyes were swollen and seemed melting into large tears.

My hand was being held by my grandmother—a roundish woman with a large head, enormous eyes, and a funny, fleshy nose. She was all soft and dark and fascinating. She too was weeping, but in a peculiar way that formed a pleasant accompaniment to my mother. She trembled all over and kept pushing me towards my father, but I hung back, hiding behind her skirts. I was afraid and uncomfortable.

I had never before seen grownups cry and did not understand the words my grandmother kept saying to me:

“Go take your leave of your daddy. You’ll never see him again. He’s died, my darling, before his time, before his hour. . . .”

I had just recovered from a serious illness, during which my father—I remember that

very well—had come and played with me merrily. But suddenly he disappeared and his place was taken by this strange woman who was my grandmother.

"Did you have to walk far to get here?" I asked her.

"I didn't walk, I rode. You don't walk on the water, you fig," she answered. "I came down from the Lower,* higher up."

This sounded very funny and mixed up: higher up in our house lived some bearded, painted Persians, while in the cellar lived an old yellow-skinned Kalmyk who sold sheepskins. You could descend by sliding down the banister, or by somersaulting if you fell off—I knew this well enough. But where did the water come in? She was all wrong and crazily mixed up.

"Why do you call me a fig?"

"Because you're so big," was her laughing retort.

* "The Lower" is the English translation of "Nizhni"—short form of "Nizhni-Novgorod."—*Trans.*

She had a kind, bright, lilting manner of speech. From the very first day she and I became great friends, and now I was anxious that we both get out of this room.

My mother upset me. Her tears and wailing filled me with unwonted alarms. I had never seen her like this before: ordinarily she was a stern woman, who wasted no words. She was clean and smooth and large as a mare; she had a firm body and exceedingly strong hands. But now she was unpleasantly swollen and dishevelled. Her clothes were torn, and her hair, usually piled into such a neat, bright cap on top of her head, was flowing over her bare shoulders and into her eyes, with one braid swinging into my father's sleeping face. I had been standing in the room for some time, but not once had she so much as glanced at me, absorbed as she was in combing my father's hair and weeping.

The soldier who was on duty glanced into the room, along with some dark-faced muzhiks.

"Hurry and lay him out," cried the soldier irritably.

The window was hung with a dark shawl which blew out like a sail. Once when my father had taken me for a ride in a sailboat there had come an unexpected crash of thunder. My father had laughed, pressed me between his knees, and cried:

"That's all right, don't be afraid, son!"

Suddenly my mother sprang up heavily, then fell on her back, her hair streaming over the floor, her sightless face livid, her teeth clenched like those of my father.

"Lock the door—take Alexei out," she gasped in an awful voice.

My grandmother pushed me aside as she rushed toward the door.

"Don't be afraid, good people!" she cried. "Don't touch her! Go away, for the love of Christ! It's not the cholera! It's the birth pains beginning! Take pity, good people!"

I hid behind a trunk in a dark corner, from where I could watch my mother writhing on the floor, moaning and grinding her teeth, while my grandmother crawled about, murmuring tenderly and happily:

“In the name of the Father and the Son! Try to bear it, Varyusha!* Holy Mother of God, merciful patron. . . .”

I was terrified. They kept moving about on the floor near my father, groaning and crying and bumping into him, but he lay there motionless, seeming to laugh at them. This kept up for a long time. Several times my mother struggled to her feet, only to fall back again; my grandmother bounced in and out of the room like a great black ball; suddenly a baby cried in the darkness.

“Thank God,” breathed my grandmother. “A boy!”

She lighted a candle.

I must have fallen asleep in the corner, for I remember nothing else.

My next vivid recollection is of a deserted spot in a cemetery on a rainy day; I was standing on a slippery mound of earth gazing down the hole into which they were lowering

*The suffixes -sha, -yusha, -oshka, -ochka, added to proper names convey a feeling of intimacy and affection, e.g.: Varya—Varyusha, Alexei—Alyosha. —*Trans.*

my father's coffin. The bottom of the hole was filled with water and frogs—two of them had jumped onto the yellow lid of the coffin.

The only people at the grave were the dripping guard on duty, two grumpy muzhiks with spades, my grandmother and I. All of us were bathed in a fine spray of rain.

"Dig it in," said the guard, moving away.

My grandmother wept, covering her face with the ends of her shawl. The muzhiks bent over and threw the first spadefuls of dirt into the hole. The water splashed and the frogs began to leap against the walls of the grave, but the clumps of earth beat them back.

"Get away, Alyosha," said my grandmother, taking me by the shoulder. I slipped out of her grasp, because I did not want to go away.

"Oh Lord," she sighed, in a tone which left some doubt as to whether she was complaining about me or the Lord. For a long time she stood there silent, with lowered head; even when the grave was entirely filled in she kept on standing there.

The muzhiks packed the earth with the backs of their spades; a wind rose and drove the rain away. Grandmother took me by the hand and led me to a distant church standing among a forest of dark crosses.

"Why don't you cry?" she asked me when we were outside the cemetery. "You ought to cry."

"I don't feel like it," I said.

"Well, if you don't feel like it, you needn't," she answered quietly.

It was most surprising that she should have told me to cry. I rarely cried, and then only when my feelings were hurt—never from bodily pain. My father had always laughed at my tears, but my mother had shouted:

"Don't dare cry!"

After that we rode in a droshky down a wide, muddy street between dark red houses.

"Won't the frogs get out?" I asked.

"No they won't, God bless them," she answered.

Neither my mother nor father had ever spoken the name of God so frequently and with such familiarity.