



M. GORKY

*My  
Apprenticeship*







**М. ГОРЬКИЙ**



**В ЛЮДЯХ**

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ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ  
НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ

*Москва*



M. GORKY



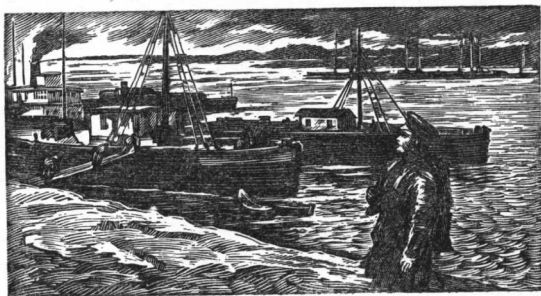
MY APPRENTICESHIP

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I

SO HERE I am—an apprentice. I am the “boy” in a “stylish footwear” shop on the main street of the town.

My master is a round little creature with a bleary face, greenish teeth, and bilge-water eyes. It seems to me that he is blind, and I make faces at him in the hope of confirming this.

“Don’t screw up your mug,” he says to me quietly, but firmly.

I hate to think that those murky eyes see me, and I don’t believe they do—perhaps the master just guesses that I am making faces.



"I told you once not to screw up your mug," he insists even more quietly, scarcely moving his thick lips.

"And stop scratching your hands." His dry whisper seems to come crawling after me. "Remember—you are serving in a first-class shop on the main street of the town. The boy should stand at the door stiff as a stachy."

I have no idea what a "stachy" is, and I cannot resist scratching my arms and hands, which are covered to the elbow with red blotches and ulcers—the itch-mite burrowing mercilessly under my skin.

"What was your job at home?" asks the master, glancing at my hands.

When I tell him, he shakes his bullet head, all pasted over with grey hair, and says hurtfully:

"Scavengering—that's worse than begging, worse than stealing."

"I stole too," I announce, not without pride.

At that he leans on his palms like a cat on its paws, fixes me with vacuous, starting eyes, and hisses over the counter:

"Wh-a-a-t! You say you stole?"

I explain how and what.

"Well, we'll let that pass. But if you go stealing my boots or my money, I'll have you in jail before you ever come of age."

He says this very calmly, but I am frightened, and dislike him all the more.

Besides the master, there are two assistants in the shop: my cousin Sasha (son of Yakov), and the senior assistant, a slick, slimy, ruddy fellow. Sasha wears a brown frock coat, a starched shirt front, and a cravat, and he is too proud to notice me.

The day grandfather brought me to the master and asked Sasha to help me learn the business, Sasha frowned importantly and said:

"First he'll have to learn to obey me."

Grandfather put his hand on my head and gave it a push.

"Obey him," he said. "He's above you in years and position."

Sasha rolled his eyes impressively:

"Remember grandfather's words!"

From the very first day he took ruthless advantage of his seniority.

"Stop goggling, Kashirin!" the master warned him.

"I—I wasn't," answered Sasha, dropping his head, but the master was not through with him:

"And don't pull in your chin—the customers may take you for a goat."

The senior assistant laughed ingratiatingly and the master stretched his ugly lips, while Sasha, blushing furiously, ducked under the counter.

I disliked such talk. These people used so many strange words that sometimes it seemed to me they were speaking a foreign tongue.

Whenever a lady entered the shop, the master would take his hand out of his pocket, lightly touch his moustaches, and glue on a saccharine smile which covered his cheeks with wrinkles without changing the expression of his vacuous eyes. The senior assistant would draw himself up, his elbows pressed to his sides, his hands flapping fawningly. Sasha would blink in the effort to hide his bulging orbs, while I would remain at the door furtively scratching my hands and watching the ceremonial of the sale.

The assistant always spread his fingers in an amazing manner when kneeling before a lady to try on shoes. His hands would be all aquiver, and he would touch the leg as if afraid of breaking it, although it was usually a fat leg, resembling a droop-shouldered bottle turned upside down.

Once one of the ladies squirmed and kicked out her toe, saying:

“Oh dear! How you do tickle!”

“That’s just out of politeness, ma’am,” was the assistant’s quick rejoinder.

It was comical to see him hovering about the ladies and I had to turn away to keep from laughing. But I could never resist the temptation to turn

back, so ludicrous were the shop assistant's devices. And it seemed to me that never in my life could I make my fingers stick out so politely, or fit shoes to other people's feet so deftly.

Often the master would retire to a little room at the back of the shop and call Sasha, leaving the senior assistant alone with a customer. I remember his once touching the instep of a large blonde and then drawing his finger tips together and kissing them.

"Oh, what a naughty fellow you are!" giggled the woman.

"Ah-h-h-h!" said he, smacking his lips.

I laughed so hard that I grabbed the doorknob to keep from falling; the door opened, my head banged against the glass, and the glass fell out. The assistant stamped his foot at me and my master rapped me over the head with his heavy gold signet ring. Sasha tried to tweak my ears, and that evening as we were going home he warned me severely:

"You'll get the sack if you behave like that. What was so funny anyhow?"

Then he explained that the more enchanting the ladies found the shop assistant, the better for business.

"Even if a lady doesn't need shoes, she'll buy herself an extra pair just to get another look at a

nice man. Can't you understand that? There's no teaching you anything!"

His words offended me. No one in the shop had ever tried to teach me anything, least of all Sasha.

Every morning the cook, an ailing, cantankerous woman, would wake me up an hour earlier than my cousin. I would heat the samovar, bring in wood for all the stoves, scour the dinner pots, and brush the clothes and clean the boots of my master, the senior assistant, and Sasha. At the shop I swept, dusted, made tea, delivered packages, and then went home to fetch the dinner. While I was busy with these chores, Sasha had to take my place at the door, and finding this beneath his dignity, he would shout at me:

"You lout! Me having to do your work for you!"

Accustomed as I was to living an independent life in fields and woods, along the banks of the turbid Oka, or on the sandy streets of Kunavino, I found my present existence boring and irksome. I missed Granny and my friends, I had no one to talk to, and I was chafed by the false, seamy side of life as I now saw it.

Frequently the ladies would leave the shop without buying a thing, and then my master and his two assistants would become indignant.

"Kashirin, put away the shoes!" the master would command, pocketing his saccharine smile.

"Had to poke her snout in here, the pig! Got tired of sitting home, so the old fool decided to do the shops! Oho, if she was my wife, wouldn't I show her a thing or two though!"

His wife was a lean, black-eyed woman with a large nose, who shouted and stamped her foot at him as though he were the serving-man.

Often, after seeing out a lady with polite bows and gracious remarks, the master and his assistants would say filthy, shameful things about her, making me want to run out into the street, catch up with her, and tell her what they had said.

Naturally I knew that people were inclined to say nasty things behind your back, but it was particularly exasperating to hear these three speak about everybody as though they themselves were the finest people on earth and had been appointed to pass judgment on all others. They envied most people, praised no one, and knew some unsavoury bit of gossip about everyone.

Into the shop one day came a bright-eyed, rosy-cheeked young woman wearing a velvet cloak with a black fur collar. Her face surmounted the fur like an amazing flower. She became even prettier when she had thrown her cloak over Sasha's arm; diamond drops glittered in her ears and her

graceful figure was shown off to advantage by a tight-fitting, blue-grey gown. She reminded me of Vasilissa the Lovely, and I was sure that she must be at least the wife of the Governor. They received her with particular deference, bowing before her like fire worshippers and muttering honeyed words. All three of them rushed madly about the shop, their reflections flashing in the glass of the show-cases, and it seemed as if everything were flaming and fusing and would presently assume new forms and contours.

When she left, after having quickly selected an expensive pair of shoes, the master clicked his tongue and hissed:

“The hussy!”

“In a word—an actress,” murmured the shop assistant superciliously.

And they went on to tell each other about the lady’s lovers and the gay life she led.

After dinner the master lay down to take a nap in the little room at the back of the shop. Removing the back from his gold watch, I dripped some vinegar into the works. It gave me the greatest pleasure to see how, on waking, he entered the shop with the watch in his hand, muttering:

“What do you think of that—all of a sudden my watch takes to sweating. Such a thing never

happened before. Sweating, mind you! Perhaps that's a bad sign, eh?"

Despite the bustle in the shop and all the work at home, I went about in a stupor of boredom and kept thinking ever more often: "What could I do to make them get rid of me?"

Snowy people sped past the doors of the shop. They seemed to be latecomers at a funeral who were now hurrying to the cemetery, trying to catch up with the coffin. Dray horses jerked their carts through impeding snowdrifts. Every day the bells of the church behind the shop pealed drearily, for the season was Lent. Their incessant ringing was like pillow-blows over the head—painless, but stunning.

One day while in the yard unpacking a new case of goods, I was approached by the church watchman, a lopsided old man, soft as a rag doll and tattered as though he had been mauled by dogs.

"Would you be stealing me a pair of galoshes, my lad?" he asked.

I said nothing. He sat down on an empty packing case, yawned, made the sign of the cross over his lips, and repeated his request:

"Would you now?"

"It's wrong to steal," I informed him.

"But it's done. Come, lad, out of respect for my years."



He was pleasantly unlike the people who surrounded me. He seemed so sure I would steal, that I consented to slip him a pair of galoshes through the window.

“Good,” he said calmly, and without any particular satisfaction. “You wouldn’t fool me now, would you? All right, all right, I see you’re not one to fool people.”

For a minute or two he went on sitting there scraping the toe of his boot over the wet, dirty snow, then he lighted his clay pipe, and all of a sudden gave me a fright:

“And what if I be fooling *you*? What if I take those same galoshes back to the master and say you sold them to me for half a ruble, eh? The cost is over two, and you sold them for a half. Just for a little pocket money, eh?”

I looked at him dumbly, as though he had already done what he threatened, and he kept on talking quietly, nasally, his eyes on his boot, his head wreathed in blue smoke.

“What if it’s the master himself as sicked me on: ‘go try out that boy of mine—see how much of a thief he is.’ What then?”

“I won’t give you the galoshes,” I said angrily.

“You can’t get out of it now, once you’ve promised!”