less, and knew nothing of what was going on around him. He was dreaming that he was an ordinary man once more, striding swiftly and merrily through the open country, a staff in his hand, bathed in sunshine, with the wide sky above him, as free as a bird to go wherever his fancy led him.

"My little son! My little Pavel! Answer me!" begged his mother.

"Don't bother His Lordship," said Sisoi angrily, crossing the room. "Let him sleep. Nothing to do there . . . what for! . . ."

Three doctors came, consulted together, and drove away. The day seemed long, incredibly long, and then came the long, long night. Just before dawn on Saturday morning the lay brother went to the old mother who was lying on a sofa in the sitting-room, and asked her to come into the bedroom; His Reverence had gone to eternal peace.

Next day was Easter. There were forty-two churches in the city, and two monasteries, and the deep, joyous notes of their bells pealed out over the town from morning until night. The birds were caroling, the bright sun was shining. The big marketplace was full of noise; barrel organs were droning, concertinas were squealing, and drunken voices were ringing through the air. Trotting-races were held in the main street that afternoon; in a word, all was merry and gay, as it had been the year before and as, doubtless, it would be the year to come.

A month later a new bishop was appointed, and everyone forgot His Reverence Pyotr. Only the dead man's mother, who is living now in a little country town with her son the deacon, when she goes out at sunset to meet her cow, and joins the other women on the way, tells them about her children and grandchildren, and her boy who became a bishop.

And when she mentions him she looks at them shyly, for she is afraid they will not believe her.

And, as a matter of fact, not all of them do.

(*1902*)

Maxim Gorky

(*1868–1936*)

Gorky, the most unassailable icon in the official account of Soviet literature and its central mystery, Socialist Realism, is an irritating bafflement to men of good will. Chekhov, as usual, is some comfort. In a letter written near the end of his life (February 1903) Chekhov said: "I agree . . . that it's hard to form an opinion of Gorky." And: "In my opinion there will come a time when Gorky's works will be forgotten, but he himself is not likely to be forgotten even a thousand years from now."* Chekhov was friendly toward Gorky. In 1902, when the younger writer was expelled from the Academy of Sciences for inciting factory workers to disobey the authorities, Chekhov resigned in protest. He did not, of course, live to witness Gorky's post-Revolutionary activities—his prodigious aid to starving writers and scholars, his much publicized association with Stalin, and his elevation to sainthood in the pantheon of Soviet literature. But with his usual prescience, Chekhov knew that persons of his own general temperament would never overcome an essential ambivalence toward Gorky or the feeling that the man, for better or worse, would ultimately prove more significant than anything he had written.

Gorky's real name was Alexei Maximovich Peshkov (the

* *Anton Chekhov's Life and Thought: Selected Letters and Commentary*, edited by Michael Henry Heim and Simon Karlinsky (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), p. 447.

name *Gorky* means "bitter"), and his social origin was many rungs below that of Chekhov. He spent his early childhood in conditions so squalid that cattle seemed fortunate by comparison. He was on his own from an early age and drifted through an extraordinary variety of jobs in the Russian hinterland (in one of them he was apprenticed to an icon painter). Reading his autobiographical trilogy (probably his best-sustained work), one concludes that the pseudonym was ill-chosen, for Gorky seems entitled to a great deal more bitterness than he actually displayed. His principal talent as a writer was for the sharpest possible observation of the people and events he had actually witnessed and, at least in his role as narrator, for a sustained sympathy toward men and women of all kinds. He had a gigantic gusto for life and—autodidact that he was—an almost excessive reverence for learning, the latter being coupled, by the usual paradox of his nature, with a kind of redneck suspicion of intellectuals.

He naturally welcomed the Revolution, but not the Bolshevik usurpers of it, concerning whom he wrote things so devastating that they could be published only after the collapse of Soviet power. He left Russia in 1921 for reasons of health, living first in Germany and then in his villa in Sorrento, but he continued to participate in the literary life at home. When he returned in 1928, his sixtieth birthday was the occasion for an enormous celebration. His death in 1936 is one of the more spectacular of the millions of enigmatic demises during the Stalinist terror. At one time the official version was that Trotskyite enemies of the people had arranged for Gorky to fall ill with influenza and then be killed by suborned doctors. The rumor that Gorky's murder had been ordered by Stalin is of course also alive. No one knows.

What is known is that Gorky could protect Isaac Babel (see p. 187), on the one hand, from the most powerful detractors, and, on the other, deny Osip Mandelstam (see p. 169) a pair of trousers from the emergency relief stores under his control. Gorky's pacifist soul responded to the Odessa Jew's depiction of the horrors of cavalry combat; but the Petersburg Jew's incomprehensible verbal magic was deeply suspect.

We can at least be grateful for the unlikely conjunction of a writer from the lowest depths, Gorky, with a writer from the pinnacle of the ancient nobility, Tolstoy. They were evidently fascinated with each other. No other picture of the sage of Yasnaya Polyana is quite so convincing as that glimpsed through the shrewd peasant eyes of Gorky, who was impressed but unafraid and, on the elemental level of man to man, loving.

RECOLLECTIONS OF LEO TOLSTOY

I

You can't help noticing that one thought more than any other gnaws at his heart—the thought of God. At times it seems that it isn't even a thought but a sort of effort to resist something that he senses above him. He would like to talk about this more often than he does, but he thinks about it constantly. I doubt that this is a sign of old age, some presentiment of death—no, I think it comes from his splendid human pride. Wounded pride, maybe. After all, if you're Leo Tolstoy, it's insulting to have to submit to something called a streptococcus. If he were a scientist he would certainly make the most brilliant hypotheses, enormous discoveries.

II

He has astonishing hands. They are ugly and knotted with swollen veins, but they are still uncommonly ex-

pressive and filled with creative power. Leonardo da Vinci probably had such hands. You could do anything with hands like those. Sometimes when he is talking he keeps moving his fingers, gradually clenching them into a fist, and then suddenly spreads them out at the very moment when he utters some wonderful, weighty word. He looks like a god—not the Lord of Hosts or some Olympian deity, but that old Russian god that "sits on a maple throne under a golden linden tree." Not terribly majestic, but probably shrewder than all the other gods.

III

He treats Sulerzhitsky* with all the tenderness of a woman. Chekhov he loves like a father, in that love you can sense the pride of a creator; but what Suler inspires in him is simply tenderness, an unflagging interest and delight that seem never to tire the sorcerer. Maybe there's something slightly comical in this feeling, like an old man's love for a parrot or a pug-dog or a cat. Suler is a sort of fascinating wild bird from some strange unknown country. A hundred men like Suler could change the face and the soul of some provincial town. They would beat its face in and fill its soul with a passion for inspired and stormy mischief. It's easy and amusing to love Suler, and I am surprised and angry at how casually women treat him. Of course it could be that their casualness is a skillful disguise for caution. There's no relying upon Suler. What will he do tomorrow? He might toss a bomb at someone or he might run off with some group that sings in taverns.

* Leopold Antonovich Sulerzhitsky (1872–1916) was trained as an artist and stage designer, though he was expelled from school for making revolutionary speeches. A devoted disciple of Tolstoy, he was entrusted by the master with organizing the emigration of the Dukhobors to Canada in 1898 and 1899. The proceeds from Tolstoy's last novel, *Resurrection*, enabled the religious sect to make the journey and escape persecution at home. At the time of his death, Sulerzhitsky was a director of the Moscow Art Theater.

The man's energy wouldn't run out for several hundred years. There's so much of the fire of life in him that he seems to throw off sparks like white-hot iron.

But once he really was furious at Suler. Leopold had a penchant for anarchism, and he would talk ardently and often on the subject of individual freedom, a subject that inevitably led Tolstoy to make fun of him.

I remember one time when Sulerzhitsky got hold of one of Prince Kropotkin's* little pamphlets and was set on fire by it and went about the whole day telling everyone about the wisdom of anarchism and driving everyone crazy with his philosophizing.

"Oh, Lyovushka, do stop, you're becoming tiresome," said Tolstoy in a vexed tone. "You're like a parrot forever repeating one word—freedom, freedom. But what does it mean? If you achieve freedom of the sort that you have in mind, how do you imagine the future will be? In the philosophical sense—bottomless emptiness, and in life, in actual practice—you'll be an idler, a beggar. If you're free in your sense of the word, what will bind you to life, to other people? Look at the birds—they're free, and yet they build nests. But you won't build a nest. You'll satisfy your sexual needs wherever the opportunity presents itself, like a dog. Think about it seriously and you'll see, you'll feel, that freedom in the ultimate sense is emptiness, boundlessness."

Frowning angrily, he was silent for a moment and then added, in a quieter tone: "Christ was free, and so was the Buddha, and both took upon themselves the sins of the world, they willingly entered into the prison of life on earth. And further than that no one has gone, no one. But you, but we—what of us? We're all looking for freedom from our obligations to our fellow man, but that is precisely what makes us human beings, that sense of our obligations, and if it weren't for that, we would live like animals . . ."

* Prince Pyotr Alekseevich Kropotkin (1842–1921) was a leading theorist of anarchism.

He smiled and said, "Still, what we're arguing about now is how we must live better. There's not too much sense in it, but not too little, either. Here you are arguing with me and you get so angry that your nose turns blue, but you don't hit me, you don't even swear at me. If you really felt yourself to be free you'd finish me off—it's as simple as that."

And after another pause he added, "Freedom—that is when everything and everybody agree with me, but in that case I wouldn't exist, because none of us has any sense of himself except in conflicts, contradictions."

IV

Goldenweiser* was playing Chopin, which inspired the following thoughts in Tolstoy:

"A certain minor German prince once said, 'If you want to have slaves you must compose as much music as possible.' That's true, a true observation. Music does blunt the mind. The Catholics understand this better than anyone. Our priests, of course, will never stand for Mendelssohn being played in church. There was a priest in Tula who assured me that Christ himself was no Jew, though he was the son of the Jewish God and a Jewish mother. This much he admitted, but he still said, 'He couldn't have been a Jew.' I asked him, 'But then how . . . ?' He shrugged his shoulders and said, 'That mystery passeth my understanding!' "

V

"The Galician prince Vladimirko was the very model of an intellectual. As early as the twelfth century he said 'with exceeding boldness': 'There are no miracles in our time.' Six hundred years later all the intellectuals are rehearsing the same refrain: There are no miracles, there are

* A. B. Goldenweiser (1875–1961) was a composer and pianist

no miracles. And the people, down to the last man, believe in miracles exactly as they did in the twelfth century."

VI

Tolstoy said, "The minority need God because they have everything else, and the majority because they have nothing."

But I would put it this way: The majority believe in God out of faintheartedness; only a few believe out of the greatness of their spirit.*

In a reflective mood he once asked, "Do you like Andersen's fairy tales?" "I didn't understand them when they appeared in Marko Vovchok's translation, but about ten years later I got hold of his book, read them through, and it suddenly dawned upon me with such clarity that Andersen was terribly lonely. Terribly. I don't know his biography. He seems to have been dissolute, traveled about a lot, but that only confirms my feeling—he was lonely. Especially because he addressed himself to children, though it's a fallacy to suppose that children have more pity on a person than grown-ups. Children feel no pity for anything, they don't know how to pity."

VII

He advised me to read the Buddhist catechism. He always talks sentimentally on the subject of Buddhism or Jesus Christ. About Christ his talk is unusually bad—his words are devoid of enthusiasm, emotion, any spark of real, heartfelt fire. I think he regards Christ as naive and pathetic and although (at times) he admires him, he scarcely feels any love for him. It's as though he feared that if

* In the margin of the printed text Gorky wrote: "In order to avoid misunderstanding, I should add that I regard religious writing the same way I do artistic writing—the lives of Buddha, Christ, and Mohammed I see as novels in the mode of fantasy."

Christ walked into a Russian village he would be laughed at by the girls.

IX*

He reminds one of those pilgrims who spend their lives trudging over the earth, leaning on their staff, covering thousands of versts from one monastery to the next, one pile of relics to the next, horribly homeless and strangers to everyone and everything. The world is not for them, nor God either. They pray to Him out of habit, but in their heart of hearts they detest Him: Why does He drive them from one end of the earth to the other, why? People are nothing but stumps, roots, stones in your path—you run up against them and at times they hurt you. People would never be missed. Yet, you sometimes enjoy the startled look on a man's face when he realizes how unlike him you are, how little you agree with him.

X

"Frederick the Great put it very well: 'Everyone must save himself *à sa façon.*' He also said: 'Debate as much as you like, so long as you obey.' But when he was dying he confessed: 'I'm tired of ruling slaves.' So-called great men are always terribly contradictory. This is forgiven them along with every other sort of stupidity. Not that being contradictory is stupid; a stupid man is stubborn but he doesn't know how to be contradictory. Yes—Frederick was a strange man. He merited his fame as the greatest emperor the Germans ever had, and yet he couldn't stand them. He even disliked Goethe and Wieland."

XI

Speaking yesterday evening about the poems of Balmont, he said, "Romanticism is nothing but the fear of looking

* Sections VIII and XVII have been omitted.

truth in the eye." Suler didn't agree with him and, lisping with agitation, read some more of the poems in a very emotional way.

"Lyovushka, that isn't poetry—it's chicanery, nonsense, it's pointless 'word-weaving,' as they called it in the Dark Ages. Poetry is not artificial. When Fet wrote

I know not yet what I shall sing;
I only know the song is there.

he expressed the genuine, the people's feeling for poetry. The peasant doesn't know either what he's going to sing—O, the river-o—and so on; but it turns out to be a real song, straight from his heart, like a bird's song. These new poets of yours make everything up. These stupid French things called *'articles de Paris'*—that's exactly what your word-weavers are up to. Nekrasov's trashy verse is also made up."

"And Béranger?" Suler asked.

"Béranger is altogether different! What do we have in common with the French? They are sensualists. The life of the spirit is not so important for them as the life of the flesh. The first thing in every Frenchman's mind is woman. They're a worn-out, decayed people. Doctors say that consumptives are all sensualists."

Suler began to argue with the forthrightness that was so characteristic of him, spluttering a multitude of thoughtless words. Tolstoy looked at him, and said with a broad smile, "You're as capricious today as a young woman who needs to get married and has no suitor."

XII

The illness has made him even drier, it has burnt out something that was in him, with the result that he has become inwardly somehow lighter, more transparent, more receptive to life. His eyes are still sharper, his glance—penetrating. He listens attentively, just as though he were calling to mind some forgotten thing or as though he were

confidently waiting to learn something new, hitherto unheard-of. At his estate, Yasnaya Polyana, he had struck me as a man to whom everything was known and who had nothing further to learn—a man for whom all questions had been settled.

XIII

If he were a fish he would of course swim only in the ocean, never visiting the inland seas, especially not the fresh water of rivers. Here he is surrounded by schools of freshwater fish who find what he says neither interesting nor useful, but his silence doesn't frighten or touch them. And he is a master of the impressive silence, like a real hermit who shuns the things of this world. Though he talks a good deal on the topics which he feels obliged to discuss, one still senses that there are many more topics on which he keeps silent. There are things one tells to no one. He no doubt has thoughts that frighten him.

XIV

Someone sent him an excellent version of the tale of the boy baptized by Christ. He took pleasure in reading it aloud to Suler and Chekhov—he's an astonishing reader! The part where the devils torture the landowners struck him as highly amusing, and this somehow annoyed me. He is incapable of feigning, but if that wasn't feigning—it's all the worse.

Then he said, "Look how wonderfully the peasants tell a story. Everything is simple. Few words, but much feeling. True wisdom needs few words—like 'God have mercy.' "

But it is a savage story.

XV

His interest in me is ethnographical. In his eyes I am a person from a little-known tribe—that's all.

XVI

I read him my story "The Bull." He laughed a great deal and praised me for knowing "the sleight of hand of language."

"But you arrange words clumsily. All your peasants speak with great intelligence. In real life their talk is stupid and awkward—you can't understand right away what it is a peasant is trying to say. They do this on purpose. Underneath the stupidity of their words they hide their wish for the other man to express himself first. A good peasant will never let you know right away what he's got on his mind. He doesn't gain anything by that. He knows that people treat a stupid man simply, without any tricks—and that's just his aim. But you—you stand there revealed in front of him and he immediately sees all your weak points. He doesn't confide in people: A peasant is afraid of telling his own wife his innermost thoughts. But the peasant you write about wears his heart on his sleeve. In every story there's some sort of solemn assembly of wise men. And they all speak in aphorisms, which is also false. Aphorisms are alien to Russian."

"But what of the proverbs and sayings?"

"Those are different. They aren't freshly coined every day."

"But you yourself often speak in aphorisms."

"Never! . . . And then you prettify everything, people and nature, but especially people! Leskov did the same—a foolish writer, full of mannerisms, and no one reads him today. Don't submit to anyone, don't be afraid of anyone, and everything will be fine."

In one of the notebooks of his diary, which he gave me to read, I was struck by a strange aphorism: "God is my desire."

Today when I was returning the notebook to him I asked him what that meant.

"An unfinished thought," he said, squinting at the page. "I must have meant to say, 'God is my desire to know

him.' No, that isn't it . . ." He laughed, rolled the notebook into a tube, and thrust it into the wide pocket of his blouse. His relations with God are very vague. Their relationship sometimes seems to me like that of "two bears in one den."

XVIII

About science.

"Science is gold bullion turned out by some fradulent alchemist. You try to simplify it and make it accessible to all the people and all you're doing is minting a heap of counterfeit coins. When the people understand what this money is really worth they aren't going to thank us."

XIX

We were strolling in the park of the Yusupov estate* and he was telling me the most wonderful stories of how the Moscow aristocracy lived. A big old Russian peasant woman was working on a flower bed, bent double, exposing her elephantine legs and shaking her ponderous breasts. She held his attention for a while.

"All that magnificence and wild living was supported upon exactly this sort of caryatid—supported not only by the work of the peasants, not only by the quitrent they had to pay, but, in the plainest sense of the word, by the people's blood. If the nobility had not from time to time mated with such mares as this, it would have died out long ago. You can't squander your strength the way the young men of my day squandered theirs without having to pay for it. But many of them, after they'd had their fling, married some girl from among the house serfs and produced good litters. So that, here too, it was peasant strength that saved them. You can see it everywhere. Half the stock of the aristocracy had to spend its strength upon itself, and

* The estate of the Yusupovs bordered on Gaspra, the estate of Countess Panina, near Yalta on the southern coast of the Crimea, where Tolstoy was staying in 1901–2.

the other half had to dilute itself with thick blood from the peasant village, and that blood itself also got diluted. That helped."

XX

He is fond of talking about women and does so often, like a French novelist, but always with that Russian peasant crudeness which (at first) made such a disagreeable impression upon me. Today in Almond Grove he asked Chekhov, "Did you chase ass a lot when you were young?"

Chekhov, with an embarrassed grin, stroked his little beard and mumbled some indistinct answer. Tolstoy, gazing out to sea, said, "I was a tireless f——."

This he uttered in a sorrowful tone, though the last word in his sentence was a pungent peasant expression. That was the first time I noticed how simply he used such a word, as though he knew of no word that might replace it. And all similar words issued forth from his bearded lips with such simplicity and naturalness that they seemed to have lost somewhere their soldierly coarseness and dirt. I recall my first meeting with him, when he discussed my stories "Varenka Olesova" and "Twenty-Six Men and a Girl." Judged by ordinary standards, what he said was one "indecent" word after another. I was embarrassed by this and even offended—I thought he regarded me as incapable of understanding any other form of speech. I understand now that it was stupid to be offended.

XXI

He was sitting on a stone bench under some cypresses. A small, gray, dried-up old man, he still looked like the Lord of Hosts, though a little tired, and was having a good time trying to whistle in time with a finch. The bird was singing deep in the dark green foliage, and he was peering into it, his eyes screwed up and his lips pursed in a childish way as he whistled clumsily.

"What a fierce little bird! Listen to him bash out that tune! What sort is it?"

I told him about the finch and its jealous nature.

"One song his whole life long . . . and jealous! Man has hundreds of songs in his heart, but he's criticized for being jealous . . . is that fair?" He said this in an abstracted way, as though talking to himself. "There are moments when a man tells a woman more than she ought to know about him. He tells her and forgets it, but she remembers. Perhaps jealousy comes from some fear of abasing one's soul, the fear of humiliation and ridicule. The dangerous woman is not the one who holds you by the p—— but the one who holds you by the soul."

When I remarked that this seemed to contradict his own story "The Kreutzer Sonata," a wide beaming smile spread across his whole beard and he said, "I'm no finch."

On our walk that evening he suddenly said:

"Man endures earthquakes, epidemics, the horrors of disease and every sort of spiritual affliction, but throughout the ages his most tormenting tragedy has been, is today, and forever will be—the tragedy of the bedroom."

He smiled triumphantly as he said this. He sometimes smiles in the broad, tranquil manner of a man who has overcome some terribly difficult thing, or who has suddenly been relieved of a long, gnawing pain. Every thought fastens itself upon his soul like a tick; either he pulls it off at once or else he allows it to suck its fill of his blood and fall off of its own weight, unnoticed.

Once he was talking very entertainingly about the Stoics when he suddenly stopped, shook his head, and, frowning sternly, said, "*Knitted*, not *knitten!* The adjective from *weave* is *woven*, but there's no such word as *knitten* . . ."

That sentence clearly had nothing to do with the Stoics or their philosophy. Noticing my perplexity, he nodded his head in the direction of the door to the next room and hastened to explain: "Someone in there said '*knitten* blanket.'" Then he went on, "But Renan just spreads out some sort of sickly sweet gossip . . ."

He often said to me, "You tell a story well, in your own words in a strong, not a bookish manner."

But he almost never failed to notice some lapse of style, and then he would say in an undertone, as though speaking to himself: "Here you've used the native Russian word *podobno* [like] but right next to it you've used the borrowed word *absolyutno* [absolutely] where you could have used the native *sovershenno* for the same meaning . . .!'

At times he would reproach me: "You describe someone as a *rickety subject.* Surely you don't think one can put side by side two words from such different stylistic levels? That's no good . . ."

His sensitivity to the formal aspects of language struck me at times as almost painfully intense. Once he said, "In a book by X, I came across the words *koshka* [cat] and *kishka* [gut] in a single sentence . . . revolting! I nearly vomited!"

Sometimes he would speculate: "What's the connection between *podozhdyom* and *pod dozhdyom?*"*

He would talk about Dostoevsky's language more often than any other: "His style is inelegant and even deliberately ugly—I'm convinced it was deliberate, just showing off. He would flaunt it. In *The Idiot* one of his phrases runs 'In the impudent pestering and *prading* of his acquaintance' where he deliberately distorts the word *parading* simply because it's a foreign, Western word. But you can also find unforgivable blunders in Dostoevsky. His idiot says, 'The donkey is a kind and helpful *person,*' but no one laughs, even though such language must provoke laughter or at least some sort of remark. He says that in the presence of three sisters who were fond of making fun of him—especially Aglaya. This is regarded as a bad book, but the worst thing in it is that Prince Myshkin is an

* "We shall wait" and "in the rain." Except for near homophony, there is no connection. The following paragraph, containing some complex speculations about Russian words, has been omitted.

epileptic. If he were in good health, his warmhearted naïveté and his purity would touch us deeply. But Dostoevsky lacked the courage to make him a healthy man. And he didn't like healthy people, anyway. He was sure that if he himself was sick, the entire world was sick . . ."

He was reading Suler and me a version of the scene in *Father Sergius* where the hero succumbs to temptation—a pitiless scene. Suler puffed out his cheeks and began to squirm uneasily.

"What's the matter with you? Don't you like it?" Tolstoy asked.

"Well it's terribly cruel, like something out of Dostoevsky. That rotten girl, with breasts like pancakes, and everything. Why couldn't he have committed the sin with a beautiful, healthy woman?"

"That would have been sin without any justification. But this way you can justify the sin by his pity for the girl—who would want her the way she is?"

"I don't understand that."

"There's a great deal you don't understand, Lyovushka—you aren't very sharp."

The wife of Andrei Lvovich came in and the conversation was broken off. When Suler and she had left for another part of the house, Tolstoy said to me, "Leopold is the purest man I know. He's the same way: If he were to do something bad, he'd do it out of pity for someone."

XXII

Most of all he talks about God, the peasants, and women. About literature he rarely speaks, and then skimpily, as though literature had nothing to do with him. He feels toward women, in my opinion, an irreconcilable enmity and loves to punish them—all, that is, except those of rather limited character like his own Kitty or Natasha Rostova. Is this the hostility of a man who has failed to experience

all the happiness that he might have done, or the hostility felt by the soul against the "degrading passions of the flesh"? But it is hostility, cold hostility, like that in *Anna Karenina.*

On Sunday he spoke very well about the "degrading passions of the flesh" when he was talking with Chekhov and Yelpatevsky* about Rousseau's *Confessions.* Suler wrote down what he said, but then when he was making coffee he burned his notes in the fire. Another time he burned Tolstoy's opinions on Ibsen and mislaid his notes on the symbolism of the marriage ceremony, about which Tolstoy had said some very pagan things, agreeing in part with V. V. Rozanov.†

XXIII

This morning some peasants of the Evangelical Baptist sect came from Theodosia to see Tolstoy, and he spent the whole day talking rapturously about peasants.

"They came in—both such strong, solid fellows—and one says, 'Well, here we are, unbidden' and the other says, 'And God grant we leave unbeaten.' " And he laughed like a child, shaking all over.

After lunch on the terrace he said: "We'll soon cease to understand the people's language altogether. Where we say 'the theory of progress,' 'the role of personality in history,' 'the evolution of science,' 'dysentery,' and so on, the peasant says, 'Murder will out'—and all the theories, histories, and evolutions become pitiful and ridiculous, because the people don't understand or need them. But the peasant is stronger than us, he's got more vitality, and the

* S. Y. Yelpatevsky (1854–1933), a Populist writer, revolutionary, and medical doctor, left literary portraits of Tolstoy, Chekhov, Gorky, and others.

† Rozanov (1856–1919), a leading philosopher and critic, theorized about the central role of the sexual instinct in the nature of man. He is the author of a notable study of Dostoevsky, to whose former mistress he was married.

same thing might happen to us that happened to the Attsur tribe. Someone told a scholar, 'The Attsurs have all died out, but there's a parrot here that knows a few words of their language.' "

XXIV

"With her body a woman is more honest than a man, but her mind is full of lies. Still, she doesn't believe herself when she lies—Rousseau lied and believed it."

XXV

"Dostoevsky wrote about one of his insane characters that the man lived in order to wreak vengeance on himself and others for the fact that he had spent his life in the service of something he didn't believe in. He was writing about himself: That is, he could have been writing about himself."

XXVI

"Some of the expressions in Holy Scripture are amazingly obscure. What, for instance, is the meaning of the words: 'The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof'? That isn't from the Bible—that's some sort of popular-science materialism."

"You've explained these words somewhere," said Suler.

"And much good came of it . . . 'A ton of talk for an ounce of sense . . .' "

And he smiled cunningly.

XXVII

He loves to ask difficult, tricky questions:

"What do you think of yourself?"

"Do you love your wife?"

"What do you think of my son Lev—does he have any talent?"

"Do you like my wife?"

It's not possible to lie to him. Once he asked me, "Do you like me, Alexei Maximovich?"

This is the sort of mischief that one expects from one of the heroes of Russian folklore; Vaska Buslaev, that mischief maker from Novgorod, played such tricks in his youth. He keeps "probing" and testing, just as though he were getting ready for a fight. It's interesting, but I don't much like it. He's a devil, and I'm only an infant, and he ought to leave me alone.

XXVIII

Perhaps a peasant is nothing more to him than—a bad smell. He always notices it and can't help talking about it.

Last night I told him about my battle with General Cornet's widow, and he laughed until the tears came and his chest began to ache and he kept on peeping in a thin little voice: "With a shovel! On her ———! A shovel right across her a——! Was it a wide shovel?"

Later, when he'd recovered, he said in a serious tone, "Still, you were generous with your blow—another man would have struck her on the head for that. Very generous. But you understood that she desired you?"

"I don't remember . . . I don't think I did . . ."

"What! It's obvious! Of course she did."

"I wasn't living for that at the time . . ."

"It doesn't matter what you were living for! You aren't much of an asshound, that's clear. Another man would have made his fortune from that incident, become a man of property, and died a drunkard along with her."

After a pause he said, "You're funny. No offense, but you're funny. And it's very strange that, with all your right to be bitter, you're still a kind man. Yes, you might be bitter. You're strong—that's good."

And after another pause, he added thoughtfully, "I don't understand your mind—it's a very complicated mind; but your heart is intelligent . . . yes, an intelligent heart."

NOTE: When I was living in Kazan I entered the service of General Cornet's widow as yardman and gardener. She was a young Frenchwoman, plump, with the tiny feet of a girl. She had amazingly beautiful eyes, which were restless and always wide with greed. Before her marriage I think she worked in a shop or as a cook or perhaps even as a "woman of pleasure." She would be drunk from early morning and would come into the garden dressed in nothing but a chemise with an orange-colored robe thrown over it and a pair of red morocco slippers of Tartar design and with a thick mane of hair, which hung in careless strands about her rosy cheeks and shoulders. A young witch. She would stroll about the garden singing French songs and watching me work and from time to time would go up to the kitchen window and call out:

"Pauline, bring me something."

This "something" never varied—a glass of wine with ice in it.

On the ground floor of her house three young women, the Princesses D.-G., were living like orphans. Their father, a general, had gone off somewhere and their mother was dead. Mme. Cornet conceived a dislike for these girls and tried to oust them from their apartment by all sorts of mean tricks. She spoke Russian poorly but she swore magnificently, like a seasoned wagon driver. I hated the way she treated these harmless girls—they were so sad, frightened, and helpless. One day around noon two of them were strolling in the garden when suddenly the mistress, drunk as ever, came out and began to scream at them to chase them from the garden. They began to leave quietly, but Mme. Cornet stationed herself in the gateway and, plugging it up with her person like a cork, she addressed them with some of those grim Russian words that make even horses shudder. When I asked her to stop swearing and allow the young ladies to pass, she screamed:

"I know you! You are climbing to zeir weendow when is night!"

I got angry and grabbed her by the shoulders and

pulled her away from the gate, but she broke away and, turning to face me, threw open her robe, lifted her gown, and screamed:

"I am bettair zan zeez mouses!"

At that I became really furious. I spun her around and hit her bottom with the shovel so hard that she leapt through the gate and ran about the yard in the utmost astonishment, screaming, "O! O! O!"

After that I got my passport from her confidante Pauline—also a drunk but a very shrewd old woman—took the bundle of my belongings under my arm, and had started out of the courtyard, when Mme. Cornet, standing in the window and waving a red kerchief, called to me: "I no call police—is all right! Leesten! Come back—don' be afraid!"

XXIX

I once asked him, "Do you agree with Poznyshev* when he says that doctors have killed, and are still killing, hundreds of thousands of people?"

"And is that something that interests you very much?"

"Very."

"Then I won't tell you!"

And he grinned and twiddled his thumbs.

I remember in one of his stories a comparison between a country horse doctor and a medical doctor.† The horse doctor says, "But words like 'glanders' and 'staggers' and 'blood-letting'—are they really any different from 'nerves' and 'rheumatisms' and 'organisms' and so on?"

And this he could write after the discoveries of Jenner, Behring, and Pasteur! There's a mischief maker for you!

XXX

How strange that he should love to play cards. He plays seriously, excitedly. And his hands become so nervous

* The principal character in Tolstoy's "The Kreutzer Sonata."

† "Polikushka" (1863).

when he takes cards in them that you would think he was holding live birds, not dead bits of cardboard.

XXXI

"Dickens said a wise thing: 'We are granted life under the absolute condition that we defend it with all our courage up to the last moment.' In general, however, he was a sentimental, wordy writer and not awfully clever. But he did know how to construct a novel better than anyone else, and of course better than Balzac. Someone said, 'Many are smitten with a passion for writing books, but few are ashamed of them afterwards.' Balzac wasn't ashamed, and neither was Dickens, though they both wrote their share of bad books. Still, Balzac is a genius—there's no other name for him than genius . . ."

Someone brought him Lev Tikhomirov's pamphlet "Why I Ceased Being a Revolutionary."* Tolstoy picked it up from the table and waved it in the air as he said:

"Everything he writes about political assassination is good—that there's no clear idea behind this form of struggle. The only idea behind it, says this reformed murderer, is the anarchic absolutism of one individual, and contempt for society, for humanity. That's right. Except that 'anarchic' is a misprint—he meant 'monarchic.' It's a good, true idea, one that all terrorists stumble over—I'm speaking of the honest ones. The born murderer won't stumble. There isn't anything that would trip him. But he's nothing but a murderer who got in with the terrorists by accident."

XXXII

He can sometimes be as self-satisfied and unbearable as some fundamentalist preacher from the other side of the

* Tikhomirov was a member of the People's Will Party, which was responsible for the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. He was later pardoned by Alexander III and became a reactionary and monarchist.

Volga, and that is terrible in a man who is one of the great spiritual forces of this world. Yesterday he said to me: "I'm more of a muzhik than you are—I feel more like a muzhik."

Good God! He shouldn't boast of that, he really shouldn't!

XXXIII

I read him some scenes from my play *The Lower Depths.* He listened carefully and then asked:

"Why do you write this?"

I explained as best I could.

"You're forever attacking everything like some gamecock. And another thing—you always want to cover up all the chips and cracks with your own paint. Remember where Hans Christian Andersen says: 'The gold leaf will wear off but the pigskin remains.' And our peasants say: 'Everything passes, truth alone lasts.' Better not paint things over, or it'll be worse for you in the end. And then too, your language is so bouncy, so tricky—that's no good. You should write more simply. Ordinary people speak very simply; sometimes it even seems incoherent, but it's still good. You'll never hear a peasant ask, the way some learned young lady once asked, 'Why is a third larger than a fourth when three is always less than four?' Don't use tricks."

The way he spoke, you could see he was very unhappy, that he didn't like what I'd read him at all. He was silent for a while, then, looking past me, he said in a gloomy tone of voice:

"Your Old Man is not a sympathetic character—his goodness is not believable. As for the Actor, he's all right, he's good. Do you know my *Fruits of Enlightenment?* I've got a cook in that play who is like your Actor. It's hard to write plays. The Prostitute is also good. There must be some like her—have you seen them?"

"Yes, I have."

"One can tell that. The truth can't be faked. But you

say an awful lot in your own voice as author. That's because you don't have any characters—all your people have one face. It must be that you don't understand women—they don't come off at all, not one. No one remembers them . . ."

Andrei Lvovich's wife came in to call us to tea. He got up and left so quickly that you could see he was glad to come to the end of that conversation.

XXXIV

"What's the most frightening dream you ever had?"

I rarely dream and hardly ever remember them, but there were two dreams that stuck in my memory, probably forever.

I dreamed once of a scrofulous, putrid sky, greenish-yellow in color, with flat, round stars giving off no rays, no light, like sores on the skin of someone with a wasting disease. A kind of slow, reddish lightning slid around amongst them like some sort of snake, and when it touched a star, the star would swell up like a balloon and burst without making a sound. It would leave behind a dark spot like a puff of smoke, which would quickly sink into the rotten, watery sky. So, one after the other, all the stars burst and vanished and the sky became darker and more terrifying; then it seemed to boil up and explode into lumps that began to fall on my head like some runny gelatin, and between the lumps I could see shiny black roofing iron.

Tolstoy said, "Well, you got that from some learned book, you were reading something about astronomy, so you had a nightmare. How about the other dream?"

The other dream: a snowy plain, smooth as a sheet of paper, not a hill nor a tree nor a bush anywhere, just here and there a birch rod or two sticking up out of the snow. Across the snow of this dead wasteland, from one horizon to the other, there was a road that you could hardly see, like a yellow stripe, and along this road went a pair of gray felt boots, walking very slowly, with no one in them.

He raised his shaggy, wood-demon brows and stared fixedly at me, thinking.

"That's . . . horrible! Did you really dream that or make it up? There's something literary about this one, too."

And he suddenly seemed to get angry and began to talk in a stern tone of voice, tapping his finger on his knee:

"But you're not a drinker, are you? You don't look as if you ever drank much. But there's something drunk about these dreams. There was a German writer named Hoffmann, and he'd have card tables running down the street—that sort of thing. Well, he was a drunk—or an 'alaholic' as our literate cabbies would say. Empty boots walking—that really is horrible! Even if you did make it up—it's good! Horrible!"

A smile suddenly spread across his whole beard so that even his cheekbones gleamed.

"Wait, just imagine this: Suddenly on Tverskaya Street there's a card table running along with curved legs and its leaves flapping up and down and puffs of chalk dust coming out of it, and you can even see the figures on the green felt. That's because some tax collectors have been playing vint on it for three days hand running and the table can't take it and has run away."

He laughed and I suppose he must have noticed that I was a little put out by his not believing me.

"You're insulted because I found your dreams literary? Don't be offended. I know that people sometimes think up things unconsciously, completely unacceptable things, and then it seems they dreamed them and didn't make them up. One old landowner told of how he dreamed he was walking through a forest, came out onto the steppe and saw before him two hills, and they suddenly turned into a woman's tits. And a dark face rose up between them that had two moons like walleyes on it in the place of eyes, and he was standing between the woman's legs and right in front of him was a deep, dark ravine sucking him in. His hair began to turn gray after that and his hands started to shake and he went abroad to take the water cure with Dr.

Kneiper. That was just the sort of dream he deserved to have—he was a real hell-raiser."

He clapped me on the shoulder.

"But you're not drunk or a hell-raiser—so what are you doing with such dreams?"

"I don't know."

"We don't know anything about ourselves!"

He sighed, narrowed his eyes, and added in a quieter voice:

"We don't know anything!"

When we were strolling this evening he took me by the arm and said, "Boots walking along—eerie, right? Nobody in them and they march along—hup, two, three, four—the snow crunching underneath them. Oh, that's good! Still, you're very literary, very literary! Don't be angry, it's just that it's bad and you'll have trouble with it."

I doubt that I'm more literary than he is, but he seemed to me a cruel rationalist today, no matter how he tried to soften the blows.

XXXV

He sometimes strikes me as a person who has just arrived from some distant place where people have different ways of thinking and feeling and treating one another—and they even move differently and speak a different language. He sits over in the corner, tired and gray, as though he had the dust of some other earth sprinkled over him, and stares fixedly at everyone with the eyes of some mute alien.

Yesterday just before dinner he appeared in the parlor in exactly this state, just arrived from somewhere far away, sat down on the sofa, and, after a moment's silence, rocking back and forth and massaging his knees with his hands, suddenly said:

"There's much more to come—oh yes, much more to come."

Someone (I forget who), about as tranquil and stupid

as a flatiron, asked him, "Your remark—what was it about?"

He fixed him with a piercing gaze, bent still lower, and, glancing toward the terrace where Dr. Nikitin,* Yelpatevsky, and I were sitting, asked:

"What are you talking about?"

"About Plehve."†

"About Plehve . . . Plehve," he repeated the name slowly and meditatively as though he had never heard it before, and then he gave himself a shake like a bird fluffing its feathers, laughed quietly, and said:

"Something silly has been going through my head all day. Someone told me he'd read this on a tombstone:

> Beneath this stone Ivan Egoriev sleeps;
> A leather merchant he, who many skins of sheeps
> Tanned well, was kind, but died,
> And left his wife with nary a single hide.
> He was but young, and might of done much more,
> Yet God him took, and shut the Heavenly door
> Early Saturday morning of Easter week.

and so on— there was more."

He was silent for a moment and then, smiling and shaking his head, added:

"There's something about human stupidity—if it isn't wicked—that is very touching, even sweet. There always is . . ."

They called us in to dinner.

XXXVI

"I don't like drunkards, but I know people who, when they drink, become interesting and acquire a sort of wit, subtlety, and richness of thought and speech that they

* D. V. Nikitin (1874–1960) was the Tolstoys' house physician from 1902 to 1904.

† V. K. Plehve (1846–1904) was one of the most notorious reactionaries in the government of Nicholas II.

would never have when sober. At such moments I bless the existence of wine."

Suler used to tell the story of how he and Tolstoy were walking down Tverskaya Street when they noticed in the distance two cuirassiers headed toward them. Their brass armor glinting in the sun, their spurs jangling, they walked along in step as though they were two parts of one creature, and their faces shone with the self-satisfaction of strength and youth.

Tolstoy began to rail against them:

"What magnificent idiocy! They're nothing but circus animals trained with a stick . . ."

But as the cuirassiers passed them he stopped and followed them with an admiring gaze. Enraptured, he said:

"How beautiful they are! Ancient Romans, eh, Lyovushka? Strength, beauty—oh, my God! How wonderful that is, a handsome man—how wonderful!"

XXXVII

One hot day he overtook me on the lower road. He was headed toward Livadia, riding on a quiet little Tatar horse. Gray, shaggy, wearing a white, mushroom-shaped hat of light felt, he looked like a gnome.

He reined in his horse and struck up a conversation with me. I walked along at his stirrup and said, among other things, that I'd had a letter from Korolenko.* Tolstoy shook his beard angrily:

"Does he believe in God?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know the most important thing. He believes, but he's ashamed to admit it in front of atheists."

He spoke in a grumbling, capricious way, and screwed up his eyes in vexation. It was clear that I was holding him back, but when I was about to take my leave he stopped me:

"Where are you off to? I'm riding slowly."

* V. G. Korolenko (1853–1921) was a novelist, journalist, and editor.

He resumed talking:

"Your Andreev*—he's also afraid of the atheists, but he believes in God, too. God terrifies him."

At the edge of the estate of Grand Duke A. M. Romanov three of the Romanovs were standing in the road in a tight little group and talking: the master of the Ai-Todor estate, Georgi, and, if I'm not mistaken, Pyotr Nikolaevich from Dyulber—all of them big, fine men. A one-horse carriage blocked the road, and a saddle horse stood across it, so that Leo Nikolaevich couldn't pass. He fixed a stern, expectant glare on the Romanovs. But they had already turned their backs on him. The saddle horse pawed the earth and shifted somewhat to one side, allowing Tolstoy to pass.

When he'd ridden for about two minutes in silence, he said:

"They recognized me, the idiots."

And a minute later:

"The horse knew that one makes way for Tolstoy."

(1919)

* L. N. Andreev (1871–1919), short story writer and novelist, was the author of *The Seven That Were Hanged* (1908).