

Comrade

a tale

By Maxim Gorky

I

Everything in this town was strange and incomprehensible. Its many churches raised their varicoloured cupolas skywards, but the walls and chimneys of the factories rose above the bell towers, and the churches, obscured by the heavy façades of business houses, were submerged in the lifeless labyrinth of stone walls like fantastic blossoms amid a heap of dust and debris. And when the church bells summoned to prayers, their metallic cries fell upon the iron of the roofs and were lost amid the narrow canyons between the houses.

The buildings were immense and frequently handsome, but the people were ugly and always contemptible; from morning till night they bustled about like grey mice, scurrying along the narrow, crooked streets of the town and searching with avid eyes, some for bread, others for amusement. Still others, standing on the crossroads, kept a hostile and watchful eye on the weak to see that they humbly submitted to the strong. The strong were the wealthy and everyone believed that money alone gave man power and freedom. All of them desired power, for all were slaves, the luxury of the rich evoked the envy and hatred of the poor, and for no one was there sweeter music than the clink of gold, and hence every man was another man's enemy and one and all were ruled by cruelty.

Sometimes the sun shone over the town, but the life was always dark and the people were like shadows. At night they lighted a myriad of bright lights, but then the hungry women came onto the street to sell their caresses for money, the odour of diverse rich foods assailed the nostrils and everywhere silently, hungrily blazed the resentful eyes of the starving, and a muffled moan of misery, too weak to cry aloud in anguish echoed faintly over the town.

Life was dreary and full of anxiety, all men were enemies and all men were in the wrong, only a few felt righteous but they were as coarse as animals, they were crueller than all the others....

Everyone wanted to live and no one knew how, no one could freely follow the path of his desires, and every step into the future caused an involuntary glance back at the present, which with the powerful, relentless hands of a greedy monster halted man in his tracks and enmeshed him in its viscid embrace.

Man paused helplessly in pain and bewilderment as he beheld the ugly grimace on life's face. Life gazed into his heart with thousands of sad, helpless eyes and beseeched him wordlessly, whereupon the bright images of the future died in his soul and man's groan of impotence was submerged in the uneven chorus of groans and cries of miserable, wretched people tortured on the rack of life.

There was always dreariness and anxiety, sometimes terror, and the dark gloomy city, with its revoltingly symmetrical heaps of stone that blotted out the temples, stood motionless, surrounding the people like a prison and giving back the sun's rays.

And life's music was a muffled cry of anguish and wrath, a soft hiss of hidden hatred, a menacing roar of cruelty, a sensual scream of violence....

II

Amid the gloomy turmoil of sorrow and misfortune, in the convulsive grappling of greed and want, in the morass of pitiful egotism, a few solitary dreamers went unnoticed about the basements where dwelt the poor who had created the wealth of the city; spurned and derided, yet full of faith in man they preached revolt, they were rebellious sparks of the distant flame of truth. Secretly they brought with them into the basements small but always fruitful seeds of a simple yet great teaching, and now sternly with a cold glitter in their eyes, now gently and lovingly, planted this bright burning truth in the heavy hearts of the slave-men, the men turned by the will of the brutal and avaricious into blind and dumb tools of acquisition.

And these dark, downtrodden people listened distrustfully to the music of the new words, a music their weary hearts had desired dimly for so long, and gradually they raised their heads, extricating themselves from the web of cunning lies with which their powerful and greedy tormentors had entangled them.

Into their lives so full of a dull, suppressed resentment, into hearts poisoned by so many wrongs, into minds muddled by the flashy wisdom of the powerful - into this hard and miserable existence saturated with the bitterness of humiliation - a simple radiant word was flung.

“Comrade!”

It was not new to them, they had heard it and uttered it themselves, but until then it had had the same empty, dull sound as all the familiar, hackneyed words which to forget is to lose nothing.

But now it had a new ring, strong and clear, it sang with a new meaning and there was something as hard, sparkling and many-faceted about it as a diamond.

They accepted it and uttered it cautiously, gently, cherishing it tenderly in their hearts as a mother her babe she rocks in its cradle.

And the deeper they penetrated into the radiant soul of the word, the brighter and finer it seemed to them.

“Comrade!” they said.

And they felt that this word had come to unite the whole world, to raise all men to the summits of freedom and weld them with new bonds, the firm bonds of respect for one another, respect for man's freedom.

When this word took root in the hearts of the slaves, they ceased to be slaves and one day they declared to the city and all its mighty:

“Enough!”

Whereupon life stopped, for they were the force that set it in motion, they and none other. The water ceased to flow, the fires died, the city was plunged in darkness and the powerful were as helpless as infants.

Fear possessed the souls of the oppressors and suffocating in the stench of their own excrement, they stifled their hatred of the rebels in fear and amazement at their power.

The spectre of hunger haunted them, and their children wailed piteously in the darkness.

Houses and churches, enveloped in gloom, merged in a soulless chaos of stone and iron; an ominous stillness held the streets in the grip of death; life stood still, for the power that gave it birth had grown aware of itself and the slave-man had found the magic, invincible word to express his will - he had freed himself from oppression and had seen his own power - the power of the creator.

Those were days of misery for the mighty, for those who had believed themselves to be the masters of life; the night was as a thousand nights, so thick was the gloom, so pitifully meagre and timid the lights that flickered in the dead city, and that city built in the course of centuries, the monster that had sucked the blood of men, rose before them in all its abominable ugliness, a pitiful heap of stone and wood. The sightless windows of houses looked out hungrily and gloomily onto the streets, where the true masters of life now walked with a new vigour. They too were hungry, hungrier indeed than the others, but the sensation was a familiar one, and the suffering of their bodies was not as acute as the suffering of the masters of life, nor did it dim the flame that burned brightly in their souls. They burned with a knowledge of their own power, the promise of coming victory shone in their eyes.

They walked the streets of the city, this dismal cramped prison of theirs where they had been scorned and derided, where so many injuries had been heaped upon their souls, and they saw the great significance of their labour, and this made them conscious of their sacred right to be the masters of life, the makers of its laws, its creators. And then with a new force, with a dazzling radiance the life-giving, unifying word sounded:

“Comrade!”

It rang out among the false words of the present as glad tidings of the future, of the new life that awaited all and everyone. Was it far or near, that life? They felt it was for them to decide; they were approaching freedom and they themselves were postponing its coming.

III

The prostitute, but yesterday a half-starved animal, waiting wearily on the squalid street for someone to come to her and cruelly purchase her caresses for a pittance - the prostitute too heard that word, but smiling embarrassedly she did not dare to repeat it. A man came up to her, one of those who had never crossed her path before this, he laid his hand on her shoulder and spoke to her as one would speak to a kinsman:

“Comrade!” he said.

And she laughed softly and shyly so as not to weep with gladness such as her bruised heart had never known before. Tears, the tears of a pure, new-born joy glistened in her eyes that had yesterday stared brazenly and hungrily at the world. This joy of the outcasts who had been admitted into the great family of the world's toilers shone everywhere on the streets of the city, and the dim eyes of its houses looked on with growing malevolence and coldness.

The beggar to whom but yesterday the sated had flung a miserable coin to rid themselves of him and salve their conscience, he too heard this word, which was for him the first alms that had caused his poor poverty-corroded heart to beat with joy and gratitude.

The cabby, an absurd fellow whom customers had prodded in the back so that he might pass on the blow to his starved, exhausted nag - this man accustomed to blows, his senses dulled by the rattle of wheels on the stone pavements, he too, smiling broadly, said to a passer-by:

“Want a lift....Comrade?”

Whereupon, frightened by the sound of the word, he gathered up the reins ready to drive quickly away, and gazed down at the passer-by, unable to wipe the happy smile from his broad, red face.

The passer-by returned his look kindly and said with a nod:

“Thanks, Comrade! I have not far to go.”

Still smiling and blinking his eyes happily, the cabby turned in his seat and set off with a loud clatter down the street.

People walked in compact groups on the pavements, and like a spark the great word that was destined to unite the world was tossed back and forth among them:

“Comrade!”

A policeman, bewhiskered, grave and important approached a crowd gathered around an old man addressing them on a street corner, and after listening to him for a few moments, said slowly:

“It's against the law to hold street meetings....disperse, gentlemen...”

And, pausing for a second, he lowered his eyes and added softly:

“Comrades...”

On the faces of those who bore this word in their hearts, who had invested it with flesh and blood and the strident sound of a clarion call to unity – on their faces glowed the pride of youthful creators, and it was clear that the strength they so lavishly invested in this word was indestructible, inexhaustible.

Against them grey, blind mobs of armed men were already being mustered, forming themselves silently into even lines – the wrath of the oppressors was about to descend upon the rebels who were fighting for justice.

And in the crooked, narrow streets of the great city, among its chill, silent walls built by the hands

of unknown builders, a great faith in the brotherhood of man was spreading and maturing.

“Comrades!”

Here and there fire burst forth that was destined to flare up into the flame that would envelop the earth with the strong bright feeling of the kinship of all men. It will envelop the earth and scar it, reducing to ashes the malice, hatred and cruelty that disfigure us, melting all hearts and merging them in a single heart, the heart of upright, noble men and women linked in a closely-knit friendly family of free workers.

On the streets of the dead city the slaves had built, on the streets of the city where cruelty had reigned, faith in man, in his victory over himself and the evil of the world, grew and gathered strength.

And in the chaos of uneasy, joyless existence, like a bright, merry star, a torchlight into the future, shone that simple, heartfelt word:

“Comrade!”