

# The Fog

*by Maxim Gorky*

The city is wrapped in a yellowish-grey humidity; it might be likened to wet smoke, if such a thing were possible. Five paces in front of you the moisture seems so dense, even solid, you would think there can be no air there, that it must have been swallowed up by this grimy vapour. But you walk into it as into any other mist, except that you find it hard to breathe and your eyes are helpless. The sounds of the vast city are all strangely merged into a muffled, colourless, opaque roar; only rarely do you hear the blare of automobile horns, still more rarely human voices, and that perhaps only because you are expecting them. The peal of bronze bells loses its fluid resonance; it does not die away slowly but breaks off abruptly, as if after every stroke a hat had been clapped over the belfry. The sirens on the river carry a note of dejection, as if the steamers were tired or afraid to navigate in the fog.

Dripping taxis, carts and horses glide out of the mist and slip back into it as if greased with oil; people, damp and strangely silent, their coat collars turned up, their hands thrust in their pockets, their necks craned forward, move toward one another at a gait indicative of a desire to avoid accidents. The fog envelops them in a semi-opaque film, and in it a man looks like a yolk within the white of an egg.

Two old ladies crouch against a damp wall, struggling with a large black umbrella; in trying to open it they jab its end into the side of a little fat fellow; he lets out a roar and the two old ladies, like mechanical toys, throw up their hands simultaneously and in a similar manner, trembling and emitting phrases consisting of nothing but interjections.

The walls of the houses and the windows of the shops are covered with beads of moisture. Everything is softened, as if made of dirty ice which is melting. Your imagination takes fantastic turns: perhaps, unforeseen by the astronomers, the sun has suddenly exploded and melted the dead moon, and its fluid mass, cooled to the temperature of new milk, has dripped down and enveloped the earth in a gaseous stifling humidity, infecting it with a mysterious damp rot; this vast city, with its millions of inhabitants, has begun to melt too, and soon its brick, glass, metal and wood will all silently begin to flow in thick turbid streams, and will also begin to evaporate and turn into greyish-yellow fog . . . .

But the people of this city lightly dispel the grim play of your excited fancy. The first to sober you are the policemen, monumental beings all cast of one material, who act mechanically, calmly and confidently. On all the streets the policemen are the same, and you are filled with respectful surprise at the power with which the culture of the "aristocratic race"—the most energetic plunderers of the world—dehumanizes people and achieves "uniformity in multiplicity."

That mighty lever of order, the hand of the policeman, summons carriages, automobiles and loaded carts out of the fog and sends them back again, inspiring confidence that the doom of this city has not yet come. Motor cars glide smoothly up to the doors of houses and shops filled with light and dry warmth, and out of them step too rigid or too rounded gentlemen wearing top hats or other

diverse-shaped headgear; they politely and imperiously offer their arms to exquisite ladies, who, with laughter and exclamations which cannot be denied musicality and with squeamish grimaces on their porcelain faces, set their dainty feet on the damp asphalt or stone of the pavement, and the shops swallow them up, like a gourmand swallows oysters.

What an abundance there is in this city of footwear, clothing, linen, hats, furs, leather goods, portmanteaux, cigars, pipes, walking sticks, crockery, fishing tackle, sports guns, toys for children and adults, watches, gold ware, jewels! A dazzling abundance. And they all glitter so powerfully that the question of the right of the ladies and gentlemen to the use of them pales in their enticing glow.

Particularly multifarious and plentiful are the comestibles. Their diversity sets one pondering on the progress of gastronomy, on the development of the culinary art, on the refined wisdom of the stomachs of highly-cultured people. In the windows of the provision shops are proudly displayed the tribute of all the lands, seas, lakes, forests and rivers of the world. Fresh, smoked, salted and canned meat, fish, crab, game, vegetables, fruits, spices, sauces, cheeses, sausages, pastry, confectionery, biscuits, cake, chocolate, cocoa—all these are gathered probably in thousands of tons, and all this the ladies and gentlemen will have to masticate, digest and turn into manure for the soil . . . .

Along a deserted street lined with uniform houses, each of three storeys with three or four windows to a storey, swiftly strides through the fog a long-legged individual in the costume of a Scotchman: a cap with two ribbons at the back of it, a rusty much-worn jacket with a patch coming away on the right elbow, a short skirt reaching to the knees, the legs bare from knee to ankle, and the feet clad in huge down-at-heel shoes. Under his arm is tucked a bagpipe which he presses against his side with his left elbow, and as his red hands noiselessly finger the keys the treble reed emits a gay, piercing, high-pitched melody, which the base reed seconds in a monotonous muffled drone. The face of the musician is ashy and gaunt, the cheek-bones sharply protrude, drawing the skin so tight as to form red patches, the boney nose droops into red angrily-bristling moustaches, and the chin is also covered with coppery bristles. The deep-set eyes peer forth with unusual sharpness from their sockets, and the bluish pupils seem to be swimming on the surface of the inflamed whites, swimming and glittering—one would almost say that the eyes were red-hot. The musician makes eighty-three swift strides beneath the windows of four houses, then turns at the corner of a wealthy street and, with the persistence of a madman, returns swaying on his beat, the torn patch on his elbow fluttering as if it were trying to break loose. He inflates his cheeks, twitches his moustaches, and fills the bag with wind, then, removing the reed from his lips, he coughs hackingly and expectorates, never for a moment stopping in his stride. He must keep on walking because the police forbid him to stand under the windows of happier people and disturb their repose with his music. But he may play as long as he keeps on the move: for the subjects of the King of Britain, that classic land of compromise, are free men. The musician coughs and expectorates clots of dark blood, and, as though unwilling to trample on the blood with his dirty shoes, he spits not on the pavement, but on the greasy walls of the houses. One does not think he does this deliberately, but one has a presentiment that, having made another dozen strides, he will collapse from hunger and fatigue.