WITH MAXIM GORKY IN THE ADIRONDACKS: BY JOHN SPARGO

WHEN the machinations of a venal “yellow” metropolitan newspaper stirred a storm of hypocritical protest against the welcome to Alexis Maximovitch Peshkoff, the famous Russian writer, and his gentle and accomplished wife, they found welcome and refuge from the storm in the home of Mr. and Mrs. John Martin, on Staten Island. Long identified with social and political reform movements, for years the leaders of the Fabian movement in this country, Mr. and Mrs. Martin did not hesitate to receive the ostracised visitors into their home.

The summer home of the Martins lies in the heart of the Adirondacks, some twelve miles from Elizabethtown, on a beautiful plateau close to Hurricane Mountain. Mrs. Martin, an American lady of culture and wealth, with a profound faith in the social ideals of the Collectivists, hoped to rekindle the spirit of social enthusiasm for which the famous Brook Farm stood in the days of Ripley, Greeley, Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller and others—that famous group of earnest men and women who embraced the teachings of the gentle French Utopist, Charles Fourier. Accordingly she designed her beautiful home to meet the needs of a little community of writers, artists, teachers and social thinkers of all schools of thought, whose vacations should be inspiring and profitable as well as pleasant and restful. She called the place “Summer Brook Farm,” and an annex camp used by the community “Arisponet.” For some time the communal life was a glorious success, after which, for several reasons, it was abandoned.

During the past summer the great Russian novelist and revolutionary leader has lived, together with Madame Peshkoff, their adopted son, and a fellow exile, at Summer Brook; Peshkoff, or “Maxim Gorky,” as he prefers to be called, working under an intense strain, anxious only for Russian freedom and devoting every penny
of his earnings to that end. Probably the best-paid living writer, drawing immense royalties from his novels and plays, he regards it as perfectly natural for him to turn over practically the whole of his income to the cause for actively serving which both he and his wife are exiles with the dread death sentence recorded against them.

Generally Gorky worked from morning till night, taxing his powers of endurance to their uttermost limits, careless of life itself, if by its wanton sacrifice the cause of Russian freedom might be advanced. Sometimes, indeed, he would exhaust himself, or the ills of his beloved country would so oppress him that literary work became impossible. In such moods, he would pace up and down his room like a baffled beast in an iron cage, morose and silent, his only relaxation being the catching of flies and their liberation. Standing by the window, gravely and gently catching flies of the large “blue-bottle” variety, he would open the window and release them, his face beaming with pleasure, and shouting in triumph at their free and rapid flight to liberty. The freedom of the flies was for him a symbol of the freedom for which the Russian people are struggling against the bureaucracy, and which they must inevitably win. “See! So shall Russia enjoy freedom!” he cried exultingly. If ever a man lived whose life was wholly consecrated to an ideal, Maxim Gorky is such a man—and his ideal is freedom for Russia and for all mankind.

I had heard of his life at Summer Brook; I had seen how shy and sensitive he is among strangers when I met him in New York; I did not, therefore, expect to find him at Summer Brook when I reached there on the second day of September in response to an invitation to join in a week’s conference of social reformers. When I arrived, mud bespattered, wet, cold and hungry, after a before-breakfast drive of twenty miles, I was not surprised nor disappointed to learn that Gorky had moved to the adjacent camp, Arisponet.

But he came over to Summer Brook one evening nevertheless—with Madame Peshkoff, their adopted son and a fellow exile, a musician of great talent, who had served the revolutionary movement well as its agent d’armes. As we gathered in little groups on the porch awaiting the supper bell, four figures appeared silhouetted against the black clouds of the impending storm which stretched from the mountain peaks—three men and a woman, and I knew the tall, splendid figure to be that of Gorky.
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After supper we all gathered in the comfortable living-room of the log cabin, the light of glowing embers in the great open fireplace upon the many-tinted bark of the log walls, and the circle of earnest listeners, making a picture which no one of those present is ever likely to forget. Probably every one there was anxious to hear something from Gorky about Russia, about the existing situation and the outlook for the immediate future. But nothing could induce Gorky to satisfy that desire: he was sullen and silent whenever Russia was mentioned. As one watched his prematurely old face—he is only thirty-eight—furrowed deep with anguish and care, and saw the look of one who bore the agony of his people in his own soul, it was evident that the subject was too sacred in his mind to be discussed before such an audience. His eyes seemed to speak reproach: "You are not Socialists; most of you are mere reformers—you can not understand." We discussed philosophy, the old question of utilitarianism, Gorky joining in it half-heartedly, with a bored expression. The language difficulty rose, too, as a barrier to intelligent intercourse. The son, shy and silent, drew into a corner, leaving Madame Peshkoff to translate the Russian into French, which Mrs. Martin, in turn, translated into English. Frankly, it was not a success.

LIKE most educated Russians, Madame Peshkoff understands English perfectly and speaks it sufficiently well to be intelligible. She lacked the courage, however, to attempt its use before such a critical gathering. As I had never seen her before, I naturally availed myself of the rare opportunity to study the woman whom a thousand newspapers and journals had dubbed "a common actress." A beautiful woman of thirty-five or six, looking at least a dozen years younger, Madame is a great, not a "common," actress. Her voice is the most melodious I have ever heard, either on the stage or off; her face wonderfully beautiful, telling its own story of sweetness and purity. Her deep, full eyes, flashing with wit now and then, tell of her quick intelligence and boundless human sympathy. In a word, her whole presence radiates sweetness and refinement, and gave me, at least, an added sense of reverence for womanhood. Of her love for and devotion to her husband there can be no question. At Summer Brook, and later at Arisponet, I found myself wishing the American people might see the woman upon whom hypocrisy, goaded by an unscrupu-
lous press, had tried to cast its slime. If ever love were pure and holy, surely that of these brave Russian revolutionists is!

The truth is that Madame Peshkoff is a lady of refinement and aristocratic lineage, who is universally loved and respected in Russia. For ten years she has stood at the head of the stage in Russia, where, be it known, the drama is upon a higher plane than we in America dream of. Nowhere in the world, it is safe to say, is the drama more exalted than in Russia. A woman of wealth, she has literally given her all to the people’s cause. When, quite lately, she received a cable informing her of a legacy of some sixty thousand roubles, to which her claim had been sustained by the courts, she promptly cabled the whole amount to the Revolutionary Committee. She has, by the way, been the financial head of the movement for a long time. “We would, both of us, gladly give our lives for the great cause,” she said to me. “Why, then, should we hesitate to give all the money we can earn?”

It was fortunate for me that when, several days later, I made my way to Arisponet it chanced to be a time when Gorky was not working upon his new novel, then nearing completion, and which he expects will prove more successful than anything he has hitherto written. Had it been a working-day, I was told, our “long talk” would not have been of more than a few minutes’ duration, for Gorky is very jealous of his working time. He goes to his desk immediately after breakfast and is not seen by the family again until lunch time, when he appears for a few minutes only, going back to work until the evening meal, when he reappears again for a few minutes. Then he returns to his work and keeps on till far into the night.

THE large living-room of the old Community, barren of ornament, the rough bare pine boards never having been covered, served as living-room and study. The side benches were literally covered with new Russian books and magazines, mostly, I learned, of a scientific and philosophical nature. An upright piano in one corner of the room was the only sign of pleasure or luxury to be seen. Madame, I soon learned, was housemaid, cook and her husband’s typist, copying all his pen-written manuscripts upon a typewriter provided with Russian characters. Once more the difficulties of language seemed to melt away, Madame speaking English the whole evening, and acting for a large part of the time as interpreter between
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Gorky and myself. "Socialists can always understand one another," she explained.

I had hardly been seated with Gorky a minute, and barely lit the cigarette he offered me, when I was introduced to a phase of his life I had not heard of. With a polite excuse, he bounded up from his seat, seized a long-handled butterfly-net and began chasing a large moth, which he eventually caught and chloroformed. He is a keen student of natural history, and during his stay in America has made a fine collection of native butterflies and moths, which he showed me with great enthusiasm—rather, it was Madame who showed them to me while he went bounding over the room after more specimens. He asked about American naturalists, and was much interested by an account of John Burroughs and his work. He spoke again of my recent book on Socialism, and of his intention to get it translated into Russian.

For a long time indeed it was Gorky who led the conversation. He felt keenly that, owing to unforeseen causes, he had been out of touch with the active proletarian movement. He wanted to know about American Socialism, expressing a fear that there exists a tendency to measure its growth by votes instead of by its spiritual development, its devotion to the ideal. My explanation of the mechanism of the Socialist movement, the party organization, means of propaganda, the party press, and the growing hold of Socialism upon the literary class seemed to interest him greatly. He plied me with questions about Mr. Hearst and his political ambitions, and apparently regarded the editor-politician as a charlatan. Over and over, he expressed his profound regret that the mass of the people, especially people of radical sympathies, should be daily reading the Hearst papers, which he described as "exceedingly vulgar, and low panders to ignorance." Even the most reactionary papers in Russia, like the Novoe Vremya, for example, are much superior in moral tone to the Hearst papers—"those gutter rags," he said. Indeed, the whole tone of American journalism is lower than that of Europe.

A MERICAN ignorance of Russia astounds both Gorky and his wife. It was Madame who told me, laughing till tears came to her eyes, how an educated American lady had gravely "explained" to her that "Mr. Pickwick is a character in a novel by Charles
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Dickens, an English writer.” Americans do not seem to realize that the works of the best English and American writers, old and new alike, are more widely read in Russia than in England or this country. Gorky was astonished to learn that the works of several Russian sociologists and political scientists had not been published in English. In Russia, translations of English and American works, as well as of French, German and Italian books, are very soon published, and widely circulated in spite of the censorship. He asked me concerning the circulation of several American recent sociological works, concerning which I was able to give him the approximate figures. I was astounded to learn from him that some of these have had a much larger circulation in Russia than in this country. A book like Kautsky’s “History of Socialism,” of which only a section has been translated into English, and that having a circulation of only a few hundred copies in this country—he told me that two editions of the complete work were issued in Russia, one each in Warsaw and Odessa, each edition consisting of twenty-five thousand copies. These editions were circulated in spite of the police. A later edition, used in Warsaw, was seized by the police and burnt—“cooked, rather,” said Gorky laughing, “for the government has devised a plan of reducing all confiscated books to pulp, extracting the ink by chemical process, and sending the pulp to the mint to be made over into paper for banknotes.” I shall never forget the twinkle in Gorky’s eyes and his feigned lament, as he said, “Who knows but that the hundred-rouble note may have been a page from one of my poor books!”

If the workers are so poor, it may well be wondered how they can afford to buy so many books, for Gorky insisted that the vast majority often are bought by the educated proletariat. He explained that when a notable book on economics or sociology appears, word is circulated among the workers, and it is the custom for several workers in a shop or factory to join in its co-operative purchase. A book like the one of Kautsky’s referred to, two volumes, costing about five dollars, is purchased jointly by eight or ten workers. The Russian workers seem to possess the instinct of co-operation to a remarkable degree, a fact of vast significance in connection with the great struggle they are waging.

As we talked on, heedless of the time, darkness covered the hills, and I awoke to the necessity of returning to Summer Brook. A
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Fierce storm arising, however, it was decided that I must stay at Arisponelet, in one of the dormitories of the Communal “dovecote.” A large wooden structure without windows, partitioned off into small cell-like rooms, open to the air on the sides for a space of about two feet below the roof, with mattress placed upon the wooden floor, so that one may be in bed and be fanned by the pine-scented breezes—such is the “dovecote,” the admirably healthy, but simple and primitive sleeping-place.

For some hours before retiring, however, we talked of Russia—Madame and Gorky telling me of their hopes and fears. Much of that conversation I can not repeat either now or at any other time. It is possible only to lift a corner of the veil which must forever shroud that communication. Tolstoy, Gorky declared, is without influence in Russia to-day, contrary to a widely prevailing notion in this country. Of the older writer’s consummate literary art, the younger man spoke with reverential admiration, while condemning his views as reactionary. But the Count’s teaching has no real influence in Russia to-day, either for good or ill, Gorky says. There was a period, in the seventies, when Peter Lavroff’s works dominated the thought of Russia; in the eighties it was Tolstoy; in the nineties Tolstoy’s influence waned and there was a blank. Now younger writers with new ideas provide the real intellectual motive force of Russia.

Madame spoke of the ill-fated Father Gapon, about whose end there has been some uncertainty. That he was put to death, most likely by the man who had been his nearest friend, is, said Madame, quite certain. He was a weak, vain man; earnest at first, probably the adulation of the people turned his head.

Next morning, instead of loafing, as he had intended, Gorky rose with an overwhelming desire to work. After the simple breakfast, which Madame prepared, he apologized for the change in his plans, saying, “Russia calls—I must work.” With affectionate words of cheer and wishes that we might meet again in Europe, whither he will probably have sailed before this paper appears, he turned to his work. With a few words of farewell to Madame, whose kindness I shall forever cherish among the sweetest memories of my life, I turned away with a choking sensation in my throat, my hand bleeding where Gorky’s splendid, hearty handclasp had forced my ring into the flesh.