"COMRADE!"—A TALE: BY MAXIM GORKY

In the town everything was strange and incomprehensible. Many churches lifted up their tall spires in brilliant array, but the walls and the chimneys of the factories towered still higher, and the cathedrals were lost amidst the magnificence of the merchant houses, lost in the silent labyrinth of the stone walls like adventurous flowers in the dust and decay of old ruins. And when the church bells rang out for prayer their metallic voices reverberated across the iron roofs and lost themselves mutely in the silent nooks and crannies of the houses below.

The houses were gigantic and sometimes beautiful. The people were ugly and always looked poverty-stricken. From morning until evening, like gray mice they hurried to and fro along the narrow crooked streets of the town, looking with hungry, eager eyes for bread and for pleasure; while others, again, with hostile, suspicious looks, watched that the weak subjected themselves to the strong without protest. For to them the strong meant the rich. And they all believed that money alone gave men power and freedom. All struggled for power and might, for all were slaves. The luxury of the rich inflamed the envy and hatred of the poor. No one knew a finer music than the sound of clinking gold. Every one was the enemy of his neighbor—and the ruler of all was Cruelty.

Sometimes the sun shone over the town, but the light in the streets was always gray, and the people resembled shadows. At night, there appeared many brilliant lights, and then hungry-looking women glided along the streets and sold their love for money. The odor of rich and savory foods filled the air, while out of the silent darkness of the night the mad eyes of the starving glittered eagerly, and above the noises of the town could be heard the low groaning of the unfortunate.

All the people lived unhappily and restlessly, all were at enmity with one another, and all had guilty consciences. There were a few who believed that they were righteous, but these were cruel as wild beasts and were the most malicious of all.

All wanted to live but none knew—none could understand how to follow the straight path of their wishes and desires. Every step into the future forced them involuntarily to turn back to the present, while the present held the people with the relentless grip of an insatiate monster whose embrace is death.
A TALE BY MAXIM GORKY

Doubtful and intimidated, Man stood before this distorted picture of life which seemed to look into his heart with a thousand helpless and mournful eyes, as though pleading for something, and all the fair dreams of the future died within his soul. And the groans of his own helplessness were lost in the discordant cries of suffering and complaints from those who had been crushed by life.

Always sad and restless, sometimes even terrible, like a prison shutting out the rays of the sun, stood that dark, melancholy town, in the midst of whose repulsively regular masses of stone the church spires were lost.

And the music of life was the suppressed shrieks of pain and fury, the low whispers of concealed hatred, the threatening cries of cruelty, and the wailing of the oppressed.

In the midst of this somber restlessness, of misfortune and pain, the terrible struggle between need and avarice, and the depths of miserable egotism, there walked unnoticed through underground passages in which poverty dwelt—that poverty which the riches of the town had created—a few lonely dreamers who believed in mankind, dreamers whose attitude was strange and distant to all, preachers of revolt, rebellious sparks from the distant fire of Truth. Secretly they carried into these underground passages fruit-bearing little seeds of a simple and great teaching. And sometimes with love, they sowed unnoticed the seeds of the clear burning Truth into the dark hearts of these human slaves, who, through the power of the avaricious and the will of the oppressors, had become blind and dumb instruments of good and gain.

And these unenlightened, worn-out slaves listened doubtfully to the music of these new words, a music which their sick hearts had unconsciously long hoped for. Slowly they lifted up their heads and tore asunder the net of falsehoods with which they had been ensnared by their all-powerful and insatiable masters.

Into their lives which were full of dull and suppressed hatred; into their hearts which were poisoned by many bitter insults; into their consciences which had been deadened by the many lies of their oppressors, and into their whole sad and dark existences, saturated with the bitterness of humiliations, one simple word shone out clearly:

Comrade!
A TALE BY MAXIM GORKY

The word was not new to them; they had heard it and had used it themselves; until then, it had sounded as empty and meaningless as many other well-known useless words which one can forget without losing anything. Now it had quite a different sound. It rang out clear and strong; it was hard and brilliant, and finely polished like a diamond. They clung to it and made use of it cautiously and with care, nursing the sound in their souls tenderly as a mother nurses her new born babe.

And the deeper that this word entered into their souls, the more full of light and meaning did it seem to them.

"Comrade," they said.

And they felt that this word had come to unite mankind and to raise it to the heights of freedom, making the whole world kin by new bonds, the strong bonds of reciprocated respect, the respect for the freedom of man, for the sake of freedom.

When the true meaning of this word entered into the souls of the slaves and the oppressed they ceased to be slaves and oppressed, and one day they announced to all the town and to all the men in power the great human cry:

"I will not!"

Then life stood still, for they themselves were the moving power of life and no one else. Water ceased to flow; the light was extinguished; the town was hidden in darkness, and the strong became weak as children. Terror possessed the souls of the oppressors, and suffocating in the stench of their baseness they hid their anger against the revolters out of dread and fear of their strength.

The phantom of hunger stood before them, and their children cried sadly in the darkness.

The houses and churches, shrouded in blackness, resembled a chaotic mass of stone and iron. A threatening silence settled down on the streets. All life died out because the creative strength of the men slaves had awakened to consciousness, because it had found the unconquerable magic word of its will and had thrown off the yoke.

THESE days were days of fear for the strong—those who had till now considered themselves the masters of life—and each night was like a thousand nights, so dense and impenetrable was the darkness, so poor and so dimly did the lights of the dead town
shine. And this monster, sprung up in the course of centuries, and
nourished by the blood of the people, now seemed to them in all its
repulsive ugly worthlessness, a miserable heap of stone, wood and iron.
The closed windows of the houses looked coldly and gloomily into the
streets. And there the real masters of life walked joyously. True,
they were hungry—hungrier than the others, but hunger was not
strange to them. Physical suffering was not so painful to them as the
present suffering of the former masters of life. And it did not extin-
guish the fire in their souls. The consciousness of strength burned
within them, and the presentiment of victory shone in their eyes.

They went through the streets of the town, their dark and narrow
prison where they had been treated with contempt, and where their
souls had been bruised with bitter insults, and they saw the great sig-
nificance of their work. And this realization led them to the conscious-
ness of their sacred right—the right to be the masters, the lawgivers
and the creators of life. Again the uniting word came to them with
new power, with greater brilliancy, that life-giving word:

Comrade!

In the midst of the false and misleading words of the present it
seemed like a happy message for the future, like the tale of a new life
which is for all alike, both far and near. They felt that it was within
the power of their will to get nearer to freedom and that that ap-
proach could only be hindered through their own fault.

The prostitute who, like a half-starved, intimidated animal, had
the evening before waited on the street for some one to come and buy
her reluctant embraces for a few coins—she, too, heard the word. At
first she smiled; she was bewildered, and she did not dare to repeat it.
Then a man approached her in a manner to which she had hitherto
been unaccustomed. He laid his hand on her shoulder and spoke with
a voice of a fellow being:

Comrade!

And she laughed softly, and was embarrassed that she might not
cry for joy. Moved by tenderness for the first time, this crushed
heart was touched. Her eyes, which only yesterday had expressed
impudent desire and had looked upon the world with a dull, brutish
stare, were now filled with the tears of her first pure happiness.

The happy feeling of kinship of the disinherited, and that they
were a part of the large family of workers of the earth, shone in all
the streets of the town. And the closed windows of the houses stared colder and more threateningly.

The beggar, to whom a penny was thrown yesterday in order to get rid of him—a penny, that tribute of sympathy of the satisfied—he, too, heard the word, and it was the first alms which awoke a feeling of gratitude in his poverty-stricken heart.

A cab-driver, a good-natured fellow who had often received blows in order that he might strike the hungry tired horses in return—this man, who had become dull and stupid from the rattling of the wheels on the pavements, looked at a passerby and asked, with a broad grin:

"Will you have a ride—Comrade?"

He said it, and then seemed frightened. He gathered up his reins to drive away, looking at the other unable to conceal the smile which lighted up his broad red face.

The passerby returned his friendly look, and answered, nodding to him:

"Thank you, Comrade, I haven't far to go."

"Oh, mother dear!" the cabman sang out happily, and jumping on his box, in a twinkling of an eye he drove away, merrily cracking his whip.

The people gathered in close groups in the streets and like sparks from fire the word flies from one to the other—the word which was destined to unite the whole world.

Comrades!

A very important and serious looking policeman, with a large moustache, came up to one of the crowds which had assembled at a street corner around an old man who was speaking. He listened, and said, considerately:

"You are not allowed to assemble in the street, please disperse, gentlemen. . . . " He was silent for a moment, lowered his eyes to the ground, and added softly:

Comrades!

The faces of those who carried the word in their hearts, who were ready to sacrifice themselves, and to whom the word meant unity, bore the proud consciousness of the strength of youthful creators, and it was clear that the power which they had put into this living word was irresistible, irrevocable and imperishable.
A TALE BY MAXIM GORKY

But already a gray, blind mass of armed people were gathering to form silently into rank and file. These were the preparations of the oppressors to resist the mighty wave of justice which threatened to roll over them.

But in the small narrow streets of the gigantic town, in the midst of the silent gloomy walls which had been erected by unknown hands, there grew and ripened the belief of man in the brotherhood of all.

Comrade!

Sometimes here, sometimes there, a spark shot up, destined to grow to a great fire which will spread all over the earth a consciousness of the brotherhood of man. The whole earth will reach out for this fire, and in its flame all wickedness and hatred and all the cruelty which disfigures our life will burn to ashes. Our hearts will be touched by this fire and will melt together into a huge heart of the world—one heart. The hearts of all the sincere and noble minded will be bound together by truly indissoluble bonds of friendship to the great family of the free workers.

In the streets of the dead city which had been built by slaves, in the streets of the city where cruelty had reigned, there grew and prospered the belief in mankind, the belief in its final victory over itself, and the victory over everything that is bad in the world.

In this chaos of a restless, joyless existence there shone one bright light, a beacon fire of the future, that plain simple word as deep as a soul:

Comrade!