A MENDICANT OF SORROW

THE STORY OF A NOVEL and Other Stories. *By Maxim Gorky. Translated by Marie Zakrevsky. 12mo. 273 pages. Lincoln MacVeagh: The Dial Press. $2.50.*

LIKE an inspired vagrant journeying through the country-side peering with sad, quick, understanding eyes into the secrets of each new soul he encounters, Maxim Gorki translates for us in tough and luminous prose the story of his wayfaring. When one recalls the oppression and poverty of his early years, his recurring ill health, the endless quarrels which eddied about his exposed nerves like blustering gales about a house with shattered casements, one marvels that so sensitive and desperate a nature should ever have survived at all; and still more how it came to develop a style as potent and punctual as a midday sun recumbent on a field of ripe wheat, and at the same time as haunting as the notes of an old song drifting back to us from some fishing boat on the stream of the Volga. Maxim Gorki is surely an example, if there ever was one, of the fact that writers are born and not made. His similes fall as swiftly and lightly, as naturally indeed, from his pen as rain drops shaken from the wet leaves of an ailanthus tree, rain drops which wash away the dust and stains on the city pavements leaving the granite surface firm and immaculate.

Less subtly cerebral, perhaps, than Chekhov, less massive than Tolstoy, less morbidly probing in his inquests of the soul than Dostoevsky, he yet, like these three great masters of a common heritage, is able to portray tenderness without sentimentality, bitterness without cynicism, and simplicity which is as complicated, as unfathomable, as the alchemy from which springs the first April flower.

The Story of a Novel is a collection of five short stories; and if there are not among these narratives any which seem to the present reviewer to reach quite the height of rounded perfection of one or two of his earlier tales, notably Twenty-six of Us and One Other, still every page demonstrates the fact that they are written by a man of letters whose power in his fifty-sixth year is quite as

vigorous as it ever was, and whose sophistication has ripened with time. We are reminded in his tale, An Incident, of The Death of Ivan Ilyitch, for both stories depict the encroachment of mortality upon victims sensible of their fate, and the bitter revolt which this enemy arouses in the souls of the sufferers. But of the two treatments Tolstoy's is the more powerful, for he does not permit himself to be turned aside from his major theme into those metaphysical and sociological speculations so beloved by Russians. One follows step by step with fascinated dismay and overwhelming belief the futile resistance of Ivan Ilyitch, up to the very last inflexible word on the page, while An Incident lacks focus and control, and when it comes off, as it does, with a sudden snap in the end, it leaves one still uncertain and unconvinced. Yet within its small compass this story contains all that is most characteristic of Russian writing: intellectual fervour, the hesitant advance and retreat of the soul in fright, brooding suspicion, passionate interest in ideas, frustration, and vibrating through all, the sense of an inevitable and tragic doom.

Perhaps none of these short stories can be classified with either of the two great opposing schools of short story writing of which de Maupassant and Chekhov are the masters. They seem rather to fall between these two patterns, for they are often dramatic as de Maupassant is dramatic, yet they lack the lucid control of the Frenchman, nor are they limited as his sometimes are by an artfully contracted simplicity. On the other hand, although they are sometimes episodic and infused with a kind of mental radiance, they have not the fastidious symmetry of his compatriot. They do not give one, as do certain of Chekhov's, the sense of a moment arrested in flux and for ever crystallized into a gem that may be turned at every angle toward the light without detriment to any of its edges.

But truly these comparisons are irrelevant, and odious when no word written by Maxim Gorki could ever be either dull, unimpassioned, or lacking in poetry. And so if there yet remains any one of literary pretensions who is not acquainted with the work of this proud and winnowed mendicant of deepest sorrow, whose welcome to our singular shores once caused so much merriment to our European neighbours, we advise him to read immediately this last example of his mature years.

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