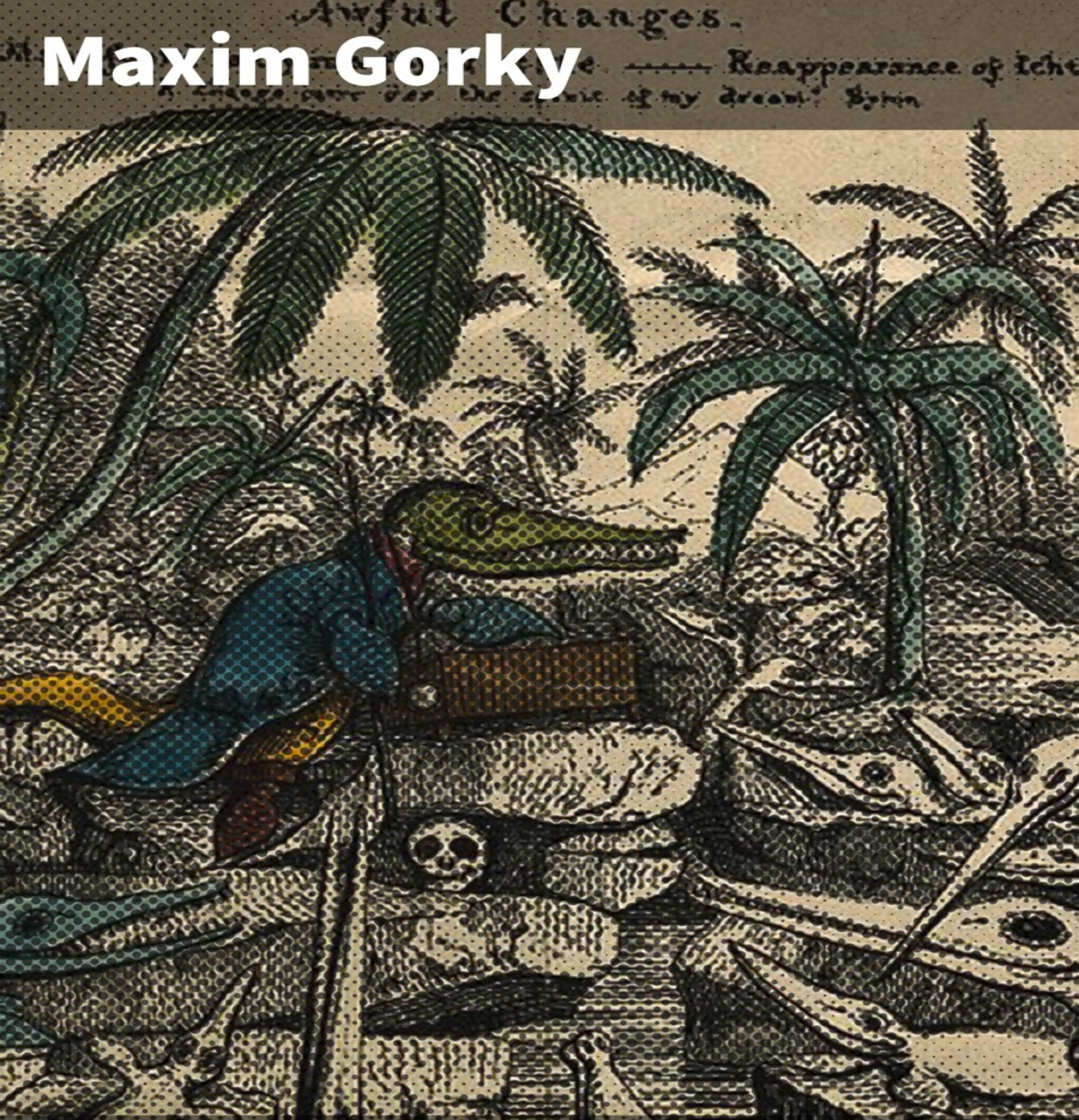
Maxim Gorky



Creatures That Once Were Men

Maxim Gorky

Creatures That Once Were Men

Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066316730

Table of Contents

PART I

Table of Contents

In front of you is the main street, with two rows of miserable looking huts with shuttered windows and old walls pressing on each other and leaning forward. The roofs of these time-worn habitations are full of holes, and have been patched here and there with laths; from underneath them project mildewed beams, which are shaded by the dusty-leaved elder-trees and crooked white willows--pitiable flora of those suburbs inhabited by the poor.

The dull green time-stained panes of the windows look upon each other with the cowardly glances of cheats. Through the street and towards the adjacent mountain, runs the sinuous path, winding through the deep ditches filled with rain-water. Here and there are piled heaps of dust and other rubbish--either refuse or else put there purposely to keep the rain-water from flooding the houses. On the top of the mountain, among green gardens with dense foliage, beautiful stone houses lie hidden; the belfries of the churches rise proudly towards the sky, and their gilded crosses shine beneath the rays of the sun. During the rainy weather the neighbouring town pours its water into this main road, which, at other times, is full of its dust, and all these miserable houses seem, as it were, thrown by some powerful hand into that heap of dust, rubbish, and rain-water. They cling to the ground beneath the high mountain, exposed to the sun, surrounded by decaying refuse, and their sodden appearance impresses one with the same feeling as would the half-rotten trunk of an old tree.

At the end of the main street, as if thrown out of the town, stood a two-storied house, which had been rented from Petunikoff, a merchant and resident of the town. It was in comparatively good order, being further from the mountain, while near it were the open fields, and about half-a-mile away the river ran its winding course.

This large old house had the most dismal aspect amidst its surroundings. The walls bent outwards and there was hardly a pane of glass in any of the windows, except some of the fragments which looked like the water of the marshes--dull green. The spaces of wall between the windows were covered with spots, as if time were trying to write there in hieroglyphics the history of the old house, and the tottering roof added still more to its pitiable condition. It seemed as if the whole building bent towards the ground, to await the last stroke of that fate which should transform it into a chaos of rotting remains, and finally into dust.

The gates were open, one half of them displaced and lying on the ground at the entrance, while between its bars had grown the grass, which also covered the large and empty court-yard. In the depths of this yard stood a low, iron-roofed, smoke-begrimed building. The house itself was of course unoccupied, but this shed, formerly a blacksmith's forge, was now turned into a "dosshouse," kept by a retired Captain named Aristid Fomich Kuvalda.

In the interior of the dosshouse was a long, wide and grimy board, measuring some 28 by 70 feet. The room was lighted on one side by four small square windows, and on the other by a wide door. The unpainted brick walls were black with smoke, and the ceiling, which was built of timber,

was almost black. In the middle stood a large stove, the furnace of which served as its foundation, and around this stove and along the walls were also long, wide boards, which served as beds for the lodgers. The walls smelt of smoke, the earthen floor of dampness, and the long wide board of rotting rags.

The place of the proprietor was on the top of the stove, while the boards surrounding it were intended for those who were on good terms with the owner and who were honoured by his friendship. During the day the captain passed most of his time sitting on a kind of bench, made by himself by placing bricks against the wall of the courtyard, or else in the eating house of Egor Vavilovitch, which was opposite the house, where he took all his meals and where he also drank vodki.

Before renting this house, Aristid Kuvalda had kept a registry office for servants in the town. If we look further back into his former life, we shall find that he once owned printing works, and previous to this, in his own words, he "just lived! And lived well too, Devil take it, and like one who knew how!"

He was a tall, broad-shouldered man of fifty, with a rawlooking face, swollen with drunkenness, and with a dirty yellowish beard. His eyes were large and grey, with an insolent expression of happiness. He spoke in a bass voice and with a sort of grumbling sound in his throat, and he almost always held between his teeth a German china pipe with a long bowl. When he was angry the nostrils of his big crooked red nose swelled, and his lips trembled, exposing to view two rows of large and wolf-like yellow teeth. He had

long arms, was lame, and always dressed in an old officer's uniform, with a dirty, greasy cap with a red band, a hat without a brim, and ragged felt boots which reached almost to his knees. In the morning, as a rule, he had a heavy drunken headache, and in the evening he caroused. However much he drank, he was never drunk, and so was always merry.

In the evenings he received lodgers, sitting on his brickmade bench with his pipe in his mouth.

"Whom have we here?" he would ask the ragged and tattered object approaching him, who had probably been chucked out of the town for drunkenness, or perhaps for some other reason not quite so simple. And after the man had answered him, he would say, "Let me see legal papers in confirmation of your lies." And if there were such papers they were shown. The Captain would then put them in his bosom, seldom taking any interest in them, and would say:

"Everything is in order. Two kopecks for the night, ten kopecks for the week, and thirty kopecks for the month. Go and get a place for yourself, and see that it is not other people's, or else they will blow you up. The people that live here are particular."

"Don't you sell tea, bread, or anything to eat?"

"I trade only in walls and roofs, for which I pay to the swindling proprietor of this hole--Judas Petunikoff, merchant of the second guild--five roubles a month," explained Kuvalda in a business-like tone. "Only those come to me who are not accustomed to comfort and luxuries . . . . but if you are accustomed to eat every day, then there is the eating-house opposite. But it would be better for you if you

left off that habit. You see you are not a gentleman. What do you eat? You eat yourself!"

For such speeches, delivered in a strictly business-like manner, and always with smiling eyes, and also for the attention he paid to his lodgers the Captain was very popular among the poor of the town. It very often happened that a former client of his would appear, not in rags, but in something more respectable and with a slightly happier face.

"Good-day, your honour, and how do you do?"

"Alive, in good health! Go on."

"Don't you know me?"

"I did not know you."

"Do you remember that I lived with you last winter for nearly a month . . . . when the fight with the police took place, and three were taken away?"

"My brother, that is so. The police do come even under my hospitable roof!"

"My God! You gave a piece of your mind to the police inspector of this district!"

"Wouldn't you accept some small hospitality from me? When I lived with you, you were . . ."

"Gratitude must be encouraged because it is seldom met with. You seem to be a good man, and, though I don't remember you, still I will go with you into the public-house and drink to your success and future prospects with the greatest pleasure."

"You seem always the same...Are you always joking?"

"What else can one do, living among you unfortunate men?"

They went. Sometimes the Captain's former customer, uplifted and unsettled by the entertainment, returned to the dosshouse, and on the following morning they would again begin treating each other till the Captain's companion would wake up to realise that he had spent all his money in drink.

"Your honour, do you see that I have again fallen into your hands? What shall we do now?"

"The position, no doubt, is not a very good one, but still you need not trouble about it," reasoned the Captain. "You must, my friend, treat everything indifferently, without spoiling yourself by philosophy, and without asking yourself any question. To philosophise is always foolish; to philosophise with a drunken headache, ineffably so. Drunken headaches require vodki and not the remorse of conscience or gnashing of teeth . . . save your teeth, or else you will not be able to protect yourself. Here are twenty kopecks. Go and buy a bottle of vodki for five kopecks, hot tripe or lungs, one pound of bread and two cucumbers. When we have lived off our drunken headache we will think of the condition of affairs . . ."

As a rule the consideration of the "condition of affairs" lasted some two or three days, and only when the Captain had not a farthing left of the three roubles or five roubles given him by his grateful customer did he say:

"You came! Do you see? Now that we have drunk everything with you, you fool, try again to regain the path of virtue and soberness. It has been truly said that if you do not sin, you will not repent, and, if you do not repent, you shall not be saved. We have done the first, and to repent is useless. Let us make direct for salvation. Go to the river and