

Twenty-six Men and a Girl by Maxim Gorky

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There were twenty-six of us — twenty-six living machines, locked up in a damp cellar, where we patted dough from morning till night, making biscuits and cakes. The windows of our cellar looked out into a ditch, which was covered with bricks grown green from dampness, the window frames were obstructed from the outside by a dense iron netting, and the light of the sun could not peep in through the panes, which were covered with flour-dust. Our proprietor stopped up our windows with iron that we might not give his bread to the poor or to those of our companions who, being out of work, were starving; our proprietor called us cheats and gave us for our dinner tainted garbage instead of meat.

It was stifling and narrow in our box of stone under the low, heavy ceiling, covered with smoke-black and spider-webs. It was close and disgusting within the thick walls, which were spattered with stains of mud and mustiness. . . . We rose at five o'clock in the morning, without having had enough sleep, and, dull and indifferent, we seated ourselves by the table at six to make biscuits out of the dough, which had been prepared for us by our companions while we were asleep. And all day long, from morning till ten o'clock at night, some of us sat by the table rolling out the elastic dough with our hands, and shaking ourselves that we might not grow stiff, while the others kneaded the dough with water. And the boiling water in the kettle, where the cracknels were being boiled, was purring sadly and thoughtfully all day long; the baker's shovel was scraping quickly and angrily against the oven, throwing off on the hot bricks the slippery pieces of dough. On one side of the oven, wood was burning from morning till night, and the red reflection of the flame was trembling on the wall of the workshop as though it were silently mocking us. The huge oven looked like the deformed head of a fairy-tale monster. It looked as though it thrust itself out from underneath the floor, opened its wide mouth full of fire, and breathed on us with heat and stared at our endless work through the two black air-holes above the forehead. These two cavities were like eyes — pitiless and impassible eyes of a monster: they stared at us with the same dark gaze, as though they had grown tired of looking at slaves, and expecting nothing human from them, despised them with the cold contempt of wisdom. Day in and day out, amid flour-dust and mud and thick, bad-odored suffocating heat, we rolled out the dough and made biscuits, wetting them with our sweat, and we hated our work with keen hatred; we never ate the biscuit that came out of our hands, preferring black bread to the cracknels. Sitting by a long table, one opposite the other — nine opposite nine — we mechanically moved our hands, and fingers during the long hours, and became so accustomed to our work that we no longer ever followed the motions of our hands. And we had grown so tired of looking at one another that each of us knew all the wrinkles on the faces of the others. We had nothing to talk about, we were used to this and were silent all the time, unless abusing one another — for there is always something for

which to abuse a man, especially a companion. But we even abused one another very seldom. Of what can a man be guilty when he is half dead, when he is like a statue, when all his feelings are crushed under the weight of toil? But silence is terrible and painful only to those who have said all and have nothing more to speak of; but to those who never had anything to say — to them silence is simple and easy. . . . Sometimes we sang, and our song began thus: During work some one would suddenly heave a sigh, like that of a tired horse, and would softly start one of those drawling songs, whose touchingly caressing tune always gives ease to the troubled soul of the singer. One of us sang, and at first we listened in silence to his lonely song, which was drowned and deafened underneath the heavy ceiling of the cellar, like the small fire of a wood-pile in the steppe on a damp autumn night, when the gray sky is hanging over the earth like a leaden roof. Then another joined the singer, and now, two voices soar softly and mournfully over the suffocating heat of our narrow ditch. And suddenly a few more voices take up the song — and the song bubbles up like a wave, growing stronger, louder, as though moving asunder the damp, heavy walls of our stony prison.

All the twenty-six sing; loud voices, singing in unison, fill the workshop; the song has no room there; it strikes against the stones of the walls, it moans and weeps and reanimates the heart by a soft tickling pain, irritating old wounds and rousing sorrow.

The singers breathe deeply and heavily; some one unexpectedly leaves off his song and listens for a long time to the singing of his companions, and again his voice joins the general wave. Another mournfully exclaims, Eh! sings, his eyes closed, and it may be that the wide, heavy wave of sound appears to him like a road leading somewhere far away, like a wide road, lighted by the brilliant sun, and he sees himself walking there. . . .

The flame is constantly trembling in the oven, the baker's shovel is scraping against the brick, the water in the kettle is purring, and the reflection of the fire is trembling on the wall, laughing in silence. . . . And we sing away, with some one else's words, our dull sorrow, the heavy grief of living men, robbed of sunshine, the grief of slaves. Thus we lived, twenty-six of us, in the cellar of a big stony house, and it was hard for us to live as though all the three stories of the house had been built upon our shoulders.

But besides the songs, we had one other good thing, something we all loved and which, perhaps, came to us instead of the sun. The second story of our house was occupied by an embroidery shop, and there, among many girl workers, lived the sixteen year old chambermaid, Tanya. Every morning her little, pink face, with blue, cheerful eyes, leaned against the pane of the little window in our hallway door, and her ringing, kind voice cried to us: "Little prisoners! Give me biscuits!"

We all turned around at this familiar, clear sound and joyously, kind-heartedly looked at the pure maiden face as it smiled to us delightfully. We were accustomed and pleased to see her nose flattened against the window-pane, and the small, white teeth that flashed

from under her pink lips, which were open with a smile. We rush to open the door for her, pushing one another; she enters, cheerful and amiable, and holding out her apron. She stands before us, leaning her head somewhat on one side and smiles all the time. A thick, long braid of chestnut hair, falling across her shoulder, lies on her breast. We, dirty, dark, deformed men, look up at her from below — the threshold was four steps higher than the floor — we look at her, lifting our heads upwards, we wish her a good morning. We say to her some particular words, words we use for her alone. Speaking to her our voices are somehow softer, and our jokes lighter. Everything is different for her. The baker takes out a shovelful of the brownest and reddest biscuits and throws them cleverly into Tanya's apron.

"Look out that the boss doesn't see you!" we always warn her. She laughs roguishly and cries to us cheerfully:

"Good-by, little prisoners!" and she disappears quickly, like a little mouse. That's all. But long after her departure we speak pleasantly of her to one another. We say the very same thing we said yesterday and before, because she, as well as we and everything around us, is also the same as yesterday and before. It is very hard and painful for one to live, when nothing changes around him, and if it does not kill his soul for good, the immobility of the surroundings becomes all the more painful the longer he lives. We always spoke of women in such a manner that at times we were disgusted at our own rude and shameless words, and this is quite clear, for the women we had known, perhaps, never deserved any better words. But of Tanya we never spoke ill. Not only did none of us ever dare to touch her with his hand, she never even heard a free jest from us. It may be that this was because she never stayed long with us; she flashed before our eyes like a star coming from the sky and then disappeared, or, perhaps, because she was small and very beautiful, and all that is beautiful commands the respect even of rude people. And then, though our hard labor had turned us into dull oxen, we nevertheless remained human beings, and like all human beings, we could not live without worshipping something. We had nobody better than she, and none, except her, paid any attention to us, the dwellers of the cellar; no one, though tens of people lived in the house. And finally — this is probably the main reason — we all considered her as something of our own, as something that existed only because of our biscuits. We considered it our duty to give her hot biscuits and this became our daily offering to the idol, it became almost a sacred custom which bound us to her the more every day. Aside from the biscuits, we gave Tanya many advices — to dress more warmly, not to run fast on the staircase, nor to carry heavy loads of wood. She listened to our advice with a smile, replied to us with laughter and never obeyed us, but we did not feel offended at this. All we needed was to show that we cared for her. She often turned to us with various requests. She asked us, for instance, to open the heavy cellar door, to chop some wood. We did whatever she wanted us to do with joy, and even with some kind of pride.

But when one of us asked her to mend his only shirt, she declined, with a contemptuous sneer.

We laughed heartily at the queer fellow, and never again asked her for anything. We loved her; all is said in this. A human being always wants to bestow his love upon some one, although he may sometime choke or slander him; he may poison the life of his neighbor with his love, because, loving, he does not respect the beloved. We had to love Tanya, for there was no one else we could love.

At times some one of us would suddenly begin to reason thus:

"And why do we make so much of the girl? What's in her? Eh? We have too much to do with her." We quickly and rudely checked the man who dared to say such words. We had to love something. We found it out and loved it, and the something which the twenty-six of us loved had to be inaccessible to each of us as our sanctity, and any one coming out against us in this matter was our enemy. We loved, perhaps, not what was really good, but then we were twenty-six, and therefore we always wanted the thing dear to us to be sacred in the eyes of others. Our love is not less painful than hatred. And perhaps this is why some haughty people claim that our hatred is more flattering than our love. But why, then, don't they run from us, if that is true?

Aside from the biscuit department our proprietor had also a shop for white bread; it was in the same house, separated from our ditch by a wall; the bulochniks (white-bread bakers), there were four of them, kept aloof, considering their work cleaner than ours, and therefore considering themselves better than we were; they never came to our shop, laughed at us whenever they met us in the yard; nor did we go to them. The proprietor had forbidden this for fear lest we might steal loaves of white bread. We did not like the bulochniks, because we envied them. Their work was easier than ours, they were better paid, they were given better meals, theirs was a spacious, light workshop, and they were all so clean and healthy — repulsive to us; while we were all yellow, and gray, and sickly. During holidays and whenever they were free from work they put on nice coats and creaking boots; two of them had harmonicas, and they all went to the city park; while we had on dirty rags and burst shoes, and the city police did not admit us into the park — could we love the bulochniks?

One day we learned that one of their bakers had taken to drink, that the proprietor had discharged him and hired another one in his place, and that the other one was a soldier, wearing a satin vest and a gold chain to his watch. We were curious to see such a dandy, and in the hope of seeing him we, now and again, one by one, began to run out into the yard.

But he came himself to our workshop. Kicking the door open with his foot, and leaving it open, he stood on the threshold, and smiling, said to us:

"God help you! Hello, fellows!" The cold air, forcing itself in at the door in a thick, smoky cloud, was whirling around his feet; he stood on the threshold, looking down on us from above, and from under his fair, curled moustache, big, yellow teeth were flashing. His waistcoat was blue, embroidered with flowers; it was beaming, and the buttons were of some red stones. And there was a chain too. He was handsome, this soldier, tall, strong, with red cheeks, and his big, light eyes looked good — kind and clear. On his head was a white, stiffly-starched cap, and from under his clean apron peeped out sharp toes of stylish, brightly shining boots.

Our baker respectfully requested him to close the door; he did it without haste, and began to question us about the proprietor. Vieing with one another, we told him that our "boss" was a rogue, a rascal, a villain, a tyrant, everything that could and ought to be said of our proprietor, but which cannot be repeated here. The soldier listened, stirred his moustache and examined us with a soft, light look.

"And are there many girls here?" he asked, suddenly.

Some of us began to laugh respectfully, others made soft grimaces; some one explained to the soldier that there were nine girls.

"Do you take advantage?" . . . asked the soldier, winking his eye.

Again we burst out laughing, not very loud, and with a confused laughter. Many of us wished to appear before the soldier just as clever as he was, but not one was able to do it. Some one confessed, saying in a low voice:

"It is not for us." . . .

"Yes, it is hard for you!" said the soldier with confidence, examining us fixedly. "You haven't the bearing for it . . . the figure — you haven't the appearance, I mean! And a woman likes a good appearance in a man. To her it must be perfect, everything perfect! And then she respects strength. . . . A hand should be like this!" The soldier pulled his right hand out of his pocket. The shirt sleeve was rolled up to his elbow. He showed his hand to us. . . . It was white, strong, covered with glossy, golden hair.

"A leg, a chest, in everything there must be firmness. And then, again, the man must be dressed according to style. . . . As the beauty of things requires it. I, for instance, I am loved by women. I don't call them, I don't lure them, they come to me of themselves." He seated himself on a bag of flour and told us how the women loved him and how he handled them boldly. Then he went away, and when the door closed behind him with a creak, we were silent for a long time, thinking of him and of his stories. And then suddenly we all began to speak, and it became clear at once that he pleased every one of us. Such a kind and plain fellow. He came, sat awhile and talked. Nobody came to us before, nobody ever spoke to us like this; so friendly. . . . And we all spoke of him and of his future successes with the

embroidery girls, who either passed us by, closing their lips insultingly, when they met us in the yard, or went straight on as if we had not been in their way at all. And we always admired them, meeting them in the yard, or when they went past our windows — in winter dressed in some particular hats and in fur coats, in summer in hats with flowers, with colored parasols in their hands. But thereafter among ourselves, we spoke of these girls so that had they heard it, they would have gone mad for shame and insult.

"However, see that he doesn't spoil Tanushka, too!" said the baker, suddenly, with anxiety.

We all became silent, dumb-founded by these words. We had somehow forgotten Tanya; it looked as though the soldier's massive, handsome figure prevented us from seeing her. Then began a noisy dispute. Some said that Tanya would not submit herself to this, others argued that she would not hold out against the soldier; still others said that they would break the soldier's bones in case he should annoy Tanya, and finally all decided to look after the soldier and Tanya, and to warn the girl to be on guard against him. . . . This put an end to the dispute.

About a month went by. The soldier baked white bread, walked around with the embroidery girls, came quite often to our workshop, but never told us of his success with the girls; he only twisted his moustache and licked his lips with relish.

Tanya came every morning for the biscuits and, as always, was cheerful, amiable, kind to us. We attempted to start a conversation with her about the soldier, but she called him a "goggle-eyed calf," and other funny names, and this calmed us. We were proud of our little girl, seeing that the embroidery girls were making love to the soldier. Tanya's relation toward him somehow uplifted all of us, and we, as if guided by her relation, began to regard the soldier with contempt. And we began to love Tanya still more, and, meet her in the morning more cheerfully and kind-heartedly.

But one day the soldier came to us a little intoxicated, seated himself and began to laugh, and when we asked him what he was laughing at he explained: "Two had a fight on account of me. . . . Lidka and Grushka. . . . How they disfigured each other! Ha, ha! One grabbed the other by the hair, and knocked her to the ground in the hallway, and sat on her. . . . Ha, ha, ha! They scratched each other's faces. . . . It is laughable! And why cannot women fight honestly? Why do they scratch? Eh?"

He sat on the bench, strong and clean and jovial; talking and laughing all the time. We were silent. Somehow or other he seemed repulsive to us this time.

"How lucky I am with women, Eh? It is very funny! Just a wink and I have them!"

His white hands, covered with glossy hair, were lifted and thrown back to his knees with a loud noise. And he stared at us with such a pleasantly surprised look, as though he really

could not understand why he was so lucky in his affairs with women. His stout, red face was radiant with happiness and self-satisfaction, and he kept on licking his lips with relish.

Our baker scraped the shovel firmly and angrily against the hearth of the oven and suddenly said, sarcastically:

"You need no great strength to fell little fir-trees, but try to throw down a pine." . . .

"That is, do you refer to me?" asked the soldier.

"To you. . . ."

"What is it?"

"Nothing. . . . Too late!"

"No, wait! What's the matter? Which pine?"

Our baker did not reply, quickly working with his shovel at the oven. He would throw into the oven the biscuits from the boiling kettle, would take out the ready ones and throw them noisily to the floor, to the boys who put them on bast strings. It looked as though he had forgotten all about the soldier and his conversation with him. But suddenly the soldier became very restless. He rose to his feet and walking up to the oven, risked striking his chest against the handle of the shovel, which was convulsively trembling in the air.

"No, you tell me — who is she? You have insulted me. . . . I? . . . Not a single one can wrench herself from me, never! And you say to me such offensive words." . . . And, indeed, he looked really offended. Evidently there was nothing for which he might respect himself, except for his ability to lead women astray; it may be that aside from this ability there was no life in him, and only this ability permitted him to feel himself a living man.

There are people to whom the best and dearest thing in life is some kind of a disease of either the body or the soul. They make much of it during all their lives and live by it only; suffering from it, they are nourished by it, they always complain of it to others and thus attract the attention of their neighbors. By this they gain people's compassion for themselves, and aside from this they have nothing. Take away this disease from them, cure them, and they are rendered most unfortunate, because they thus lose their sole means of living, they then become empty. Sometimes a man's life is so poor that he is involuntarily compelled to prize his defect and live by it. It may frankly be said that people are often deprived out of mere weariness. The soldier felt insulted, and besetting our baker, roared:

"Tell me — who is it?"

"Shall I tell you?" the baker suddenly turned to him.

"Well?"

"Do you know Tanya?"

"Well?"

"Well, try." . . .

"I?"

"You!"

"Her? That's easy enough!"

"We'll see!"

"You'll see! Ha, ha!"

"She'll. . . ."

"A month's time!"

"What a boaster you are, soldier!"

"Two weeks! I'll show you! Who is it? Tanya! Tfoo!" . . .

"Get away, I say."

"Get away, . . . you're bragging!"

"Two weeks, that's all!"

Suddenly our baker became enraged, and he raised the shovel against the soldier. The soldier stepped back, surprised, kept silent for awhile, and, saying ominously, in a low voice: "Very well, then!" he left us.

During the dispute we were all silent, interested in the result. But when the soldier went out, a loud, animated talk and noise was started among us.

Some one cried to the baker:

"You contrived a bad thing, Pavel!"

"Work!" replied the baker, enraged.

We felt that the soldier was touched to the quick and that a danger was threatening Tanya. We felt this, and at the same time we were seized with a burning, pleasant curiosity — what will happen? Will she resist the soldier? And almost all of us cried out with confidence:

"Tanya? She will resist! You cannot take her with bare hands!"

We were very desirous of testing the strength of our godling; we persistently proved to one another that our godling was a strong godling, and that Tanya would come out the victor in this combat. Then, finally, it appeared to us that we did not provoke the soldier enough, that he might forget about the dispute, and that we ought to irritate his self-love the more. Since that day we began to live a particular, intensely nervous life — a life we had never lived before. We argued with one another all day long, as if we had grown wiser. We spoke more and better. It seemed to us that we were playing a game with the devil, with Tanya as the stake on our side. And when we had learned from the bulochniks that the soldier began to court "our Tanya," we felt so dreadfully good and were so absorbed in our curiosity that we did not even notice that the proprietor, availing himself of our excitement, added to our work fourteen poods (a pood is a weight of forty Russian pounds) of dough a day. We did not even get tired of working. Tanya's name did not leave our lips all day long. And each morning we expected her with especial impatience. Sometimes we imagined that she might come to us — and that she would be no longer the same Tanya, but another one.

However, we told her nothing about the dispute. We asked her no questions and treated her as kindly as before. But something new and foreign to our former feelings for Tanya crept in stealthily into our relation toward her, and this new something was keen curiosity, sharp and cold like a steel knife.

"Fellows! Time is up to-day!" said the baker one morning, commencing to work.

We knew this well without his calling our attention to it, but we gave a start, nevertheless.

"Watch her! . . . She'll come soon!" suggested the baker. Some one exclaimed regretfully: "What can we see?"

And again a lively, noisy dispute ensued. To-day we were to learn at last how far pure and inaccessible to filth was the urn wherein we had placed all that was best in us. This morning we felt for the first time that we were really playing a big game, that this test of our godling's purity might destroy our idol. We had been told all these days that the soldier was following Tanya obstinately, but for some reason or other none of us asked how she treated him. And she kept on coming to us regularly every morning for biscuits and was the same as before. This day, too, we soon heard her voice:

"Little prisoners! I've come. . . ."

We hastened to let her in, and when she entered we met her, against our habit, in silence. Staring at her fixedly, we did not know what to say to her, what to ask her; and as we stood before her we formed a dark, silent crowd. She was evidently surprised at our unusual reception, and suddenly we noticed that she turned pale, became restless, began to bustle about and asked in a choking voice:

"Why are you . . . such?"

"And you?" asked the baker sternly, without taking his eyes off the girl.

"What's the matter with me?"

"Nothing. . . ."

"Well, quicker, give me biscuits. . . ."

She had never before hurried us on. . . .

"There's plenty of time!" said the baker, his eyes fixed, on her face.

Then she suddenly turned around and disappeared behind the door.

The baker took up his shovel and said calmly, turning towards the oven:

"It is done, it seems! . . . The soldier! . . . Rascal! . . . Scoundrel!" . . . Like a herd of sheep, pushing one another, we walked back to the table, seated ourselves in silence and began to work slowly. Soon some one said:

"And perhaps not yet." . . .

"Go on! Talk about it!" cried the baker.

We all knew that he was a clever man, cleverer than any of us, and we understood by his words that he was firmly convinced of the soldier's victory. . . . We were sad and uneasy. At twelve o'clock, during the dinner hour, the soldier came. He was, as usual, clean and smart, and, as usual, looked straight into our eyes. We felt awkward to look at him.

"Well, honorable gentlemen, if you wish, I can show you a soldier's boldness," . . . said he, smiling proudly. "You go out into the hallway and look through the clefts. . . . Understand?"

We went out and, falling on one another, we stuck to the cleft, in the wooden walls of the hallway, leading to the yard. We did not have to wait long. Soon Tanya passed with a quick pace, skipping over the plashes of melted snow and mud. Her face looked troubled. She disappeared behind the cellar door. Then the soldier went there slowly and whistling. His hands were thrust into his pockets, and his moustache was stirring.

A rain was falling, and we saw the drops fall into splashes, and the splashes were wrinkling under their blows. It was a damp, gray day — a very dreary day. The snow still lay on the roofs, while on the ground, here and there, were dark spots of mud. And the snow on the roofs, too, was covered with a brownish, muddy coating. The rain trickled slowly, producing a mournful sound. We felt cold and disagreeable.

The soldier came first out of the cellar; he crossed the yard slowly, stirring his moustache, his hands in his pockets — the same as always. Then Tanya came out. Her eyes . . . her eyes were radiant with joy and happiness, and her lips were smiling. And she walked as though in sleep, staggering, with uncertain steps. We could not stand this calmly. We all rushed toward the door, jumped out into the yard, and began to hiss and bawl at her angrily and wildly. On noticing us she trembled and stopped short as if petrified in the mud under her feet. We surrounded her and malignantly abused her in the most obscene language. We told her shameless things.

We did this not loud but slowly, seeing that she could not get away, that she was surrounded by us and we could mock her as much as we pleased. I don't know why, but we did not beat her. She stood among us, turning her head one way and another, listening to our abuses. And we kept on throwing at her more of the mire and poison of our words.

The color left her face. Her blue eyes, so happy a moment ago, opened wide, her breast breathed heavily and her lips were trembling.

And we, surrounding her, avenged ourselves upon her, for she had robbed us. She had belonged to us, we had spent on her all that was best in us, though that best was the crusts of beggars, but we were twenty-six, while she was one, and therefore there was no suffering painful enough to punish her for her crime! How we abused her! She was silent, looked at us wild-eyed, and trembling in every limb. We were laughing, roaring, growling. Some more people ran up to us. Some one of us pulled Tanya by the sleeve of her waist. . . .

Suddenly her eyes began to flash; slowly she lifted her hands to her head, and, adjusting her hair, said loudly, but calmly, looking straight into our eyes:

"Miserable prisoners!"

And she came directly toward us, she walked, too, as though we were not in front of her, as though we were not in her way. Therefore none of us were in her way, and coming out of our circle, without turning to us, she said aloud, and with indescribable contempt:

"Rascals! . . . Rabble!" . . .

Then she went away.

We remained standing in the centre of the yard, in the mud, under the rain and the gray, sunless sky. . . .

Then we all went back silently to our damp, stony ditch. As before, the sun never peeped in through our windows, and Tanya never came there again!