PRINCE KROPOTKIN.
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PRINCE KROPOTKIN.

His Informing But Prejudiced Book on Russian Literature.*

RINCE PETER ALEXEIvitch Kropotkin is one of the greatest living Russian geographers. Few people, however, consider that fact in perusing his works on Socialistic subjects. To the world at large his notoriety is due to the fact that he is a theoretical Anarchist, feared by the Russian oligarchy and at times incomprehensible to even intelligent foreigners. His genuine fame is thus lessened and marred either through ignorance of his actual knowledge and ability or of prejudice against the cause he advocates. To say that he thoroughly knows the literature of his country is a simple truth. But naturally, what he thinks and writes of that literature is colored in accordance with his attitude toward society. It could not be otherwise. In the quietude of his Bromley cottage in Kent he has recently thrown into coherent form a number of essays and lectures on Russian writers, past and present, intermingled with biographical notes and observations concerning others of less importance.

Both Kropotkin's material and his point of view are particularly significant at this time, for it may be that the next historian of Russian literature will find another temper with which to deal. It is just possible that Kropotkin has the last word to say of that literature that has been born in repression and suppression, nurtured by persecution, and whose rhetorical tropes are fashioned rather to deceive the censor than to add literary ornaments. Kropotkin, therefore, writes of a literature that has had seed, and has grown up and blossomed, or was cut down under the shadow of calamity. Even with full appreciation of the author's political bias the facts are too eloquent for deception. We know that such and such authors were deprived of their civic rights; that others were imprisoned; that others were sent into that Eastern land across the Urals, there to suffer a living death in the Siberian mines. Such have been the formative influences and the inspirations of Russian literature—elements which the whole world hopes will pass away with the overthrow of the oligarchy or with a loosening of its reins on individual liberty.

The Pathological Phase of Muscovite Belles-Lettres.

Although Wallszensky's book on Russian literature contains much important information, one had to turn to the works of Melchior de Vogüé and Ossip-Lourié to appreciate the true pathological phase of Muscovite belles-lettres. It may be said with no spirit of exaggeration that Prince Kropotkin's volume, expanded, as it is, from published essays, and particularly from his course of lectures delivered at Lowell Institute, Boston, four years ago, presents this phase in a manner which is to be found in no other work printed in the English language. Even more may be said: Kropotkin being himself a revolutionist, it is most natural that he should emphasize that aspect of Russian literature beyond the point reached by the French critics. The spirit that only occasionally inspires them he evokes on every page. The natural accusation that Kropotkin is not sufficiently detached to make a reliable critic is rendered unimportant through the fact that his very prejudices give force to fundamental truths. An authoritative historian and critic of the literature of Russia cannot detach himself from the political aspect of the country. It may be parenthetically remarked, however, that certain Russian writers who have so detached themselves receive slight attention from Kropotkin; very probably they possess a certain amount of literary value. By the same token, certain characters in Russian novels, notably the "Anna Kareinna" of Tolstoy, are not analyzed in accordance with the principles of the foreigner—whether literary or moral. Anna's fate, for example, is not regarded as the inevitable consequence of transgressing the moral law, but as a result of the opinion of hypercritical, narrow-minded females.

But neither the moral nor the literary attitude of foreigners is likely to receive a shock from Kropotkin's eloquent and striking pictures of such dominant literary personalities as Pomyalovsky, Ryeshetnikov, Levitor, Gorky, and their fellows who have written and still write under the shadow of that calamity which is about to be dispersed. Indeed, in the cases of Gorky, of whose struggle we already know something, and of Ryeshetnikov, with whose personality and labors and inspiration we are—most of us—in ignorance, Kropotkin writes with almost painful and insistent realism, as though these men were characters in their own novels, and not authors.

The Hooligan of the Steppes.

Ryeshetnikov, the son of a poor church usher in the Urals; Ryeshetnikov, the dismal, sorry, and unhappy "Hooligan" of the steppes; Ryeshetnikov, the poor Government clerk; Ryeshetnikov, the jester of jovial monks, and Ryeshetnikov, the founder of the ultra-realistic school of Russian folk-novelists, is a personality of great and enduring and human attributes in the hands of his biographer, and what Kropotkin, as a critic, says of his characters is no less striking. "For Ryeshetnikov's heroes, who live all their lives without being sure of bread for the morrow, death is not a catastrophe; it simply means less and less force to get one's food, less and less energy to chew one's dry piece of bread, less and less bread, less oil in the lamp—and the lamp is blown out."

Or, take the case of Levitor, "that sweet, pure flower of the steppes." What was the nature of the spiritual blight he received amid the intellectual proletariat in the great, cold, and stupendous, yet hidden egotism of the capital on the Neva?

Whenever he stayed at St. Petersburg or at Moscow he always lived in the poorest quarters, somewhere on the outskirts of the town; they reminded him of his native village. And when he thus settled among the lowest strata of the population he did so, as he wrote himself, "to run away from the moral contradictions, the artificiality of life, the would-be humanitarianism, and the cut-and-dried imaginary superiority of the educated classes." He could not live, even for a couple of months in Summer, in relative well-being; he began to feel the gnawings of conscience, and it ended in his leaving behind his extremely poor belongings and going somewhere—anywhere—where he could be poorer still.

Many of the authors in this book are merely names to the foreigner, some of them not even that; but all have their tragic fate very often summed up in a few lines—the brilliant student of some university, a youthful poem in which were mere allusions to the evils of autocracy, and then—Siberia and a life of dark, glacial advance upon the powers of intellectual and spiritual night.

The student of the drama may find nothing new in the origin of the Russian stage as described by Kropotkin. In Russia, as elsewhere, the drama developed, on one hand, out of the religious mysteries, and on the other out of popular comedy, until university students gave it Graeco-Latin form and character. Pathologically, its evolution is similar to that of the Russian novel. Russian tragedy and comedy is a sealed book for most of us, but it will amply repay examination and exploitation.

Finally, Prince Kropotkin is to be congratulated on the fine command that he has obtained over the intricacies of his adopted tongue. But his English, in its short, feverish sentences or in its similitudes strong with the figure of suspense, reveals Slavonic thought as the dominant and inspiring note.

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