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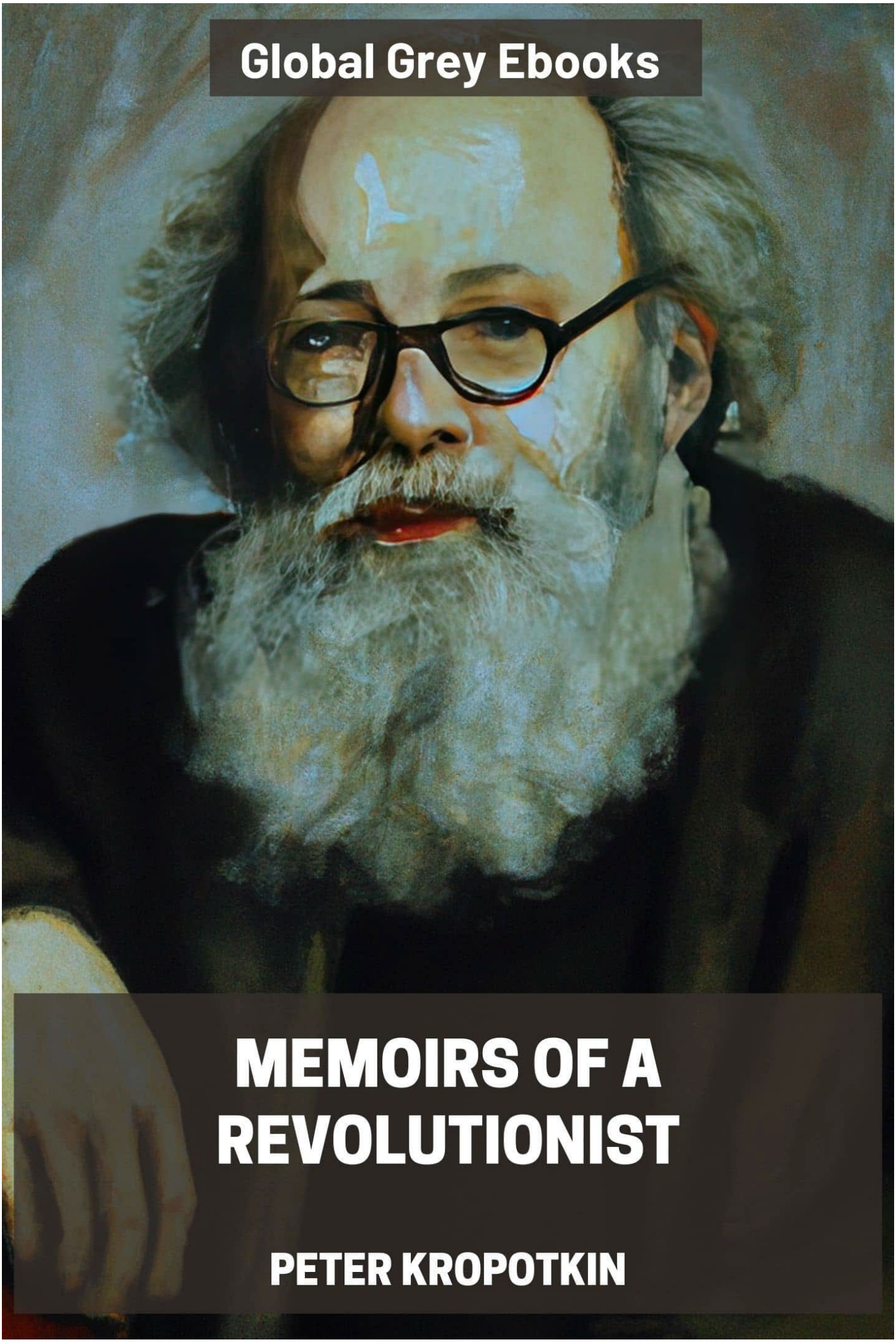

MEMOIRS OF A REVOLUTIONIST

PETER KROPOTKIN

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Author’s Note

This book would not probably have been written for some time to come, but for the kind invitation and the most friendly encouragement of the editor and the publishers of “The Atlantic Monthly” to write it for serial publication in their magazine. I feel it a most pleasant duty to express here my very best thanks for the hospitality that was offered to me, and for the friendly pressure that was exercised to induce me to undertake this work. It was published in “The Atlantic Monthly” (September, 1898, to September, 1899), under the title, “The Autobiography of a Revolutionist.” Preparing it now for publication in book form, I have added considerably to the original text in the parts dealing with my youth and my stay in Siberia, and especially in the Sixth Part, in which I have told the story of my life in Western Europe.

P. Kropótkin

Bromley, Kent, October, 1899

Introduction by Georg Brandes

The autobiographies which we owe to great minds have in former times generally been of one of three types: ‘So far I went astray, thus I found the true Path’ (St Augustine); or, ‘So bad was I, but who dares to consider himself better!” (Rousseau); or, ‘This is the way a genius has slowly been evolved from within and by favourable surroundings’(Goethe). In these forms of self-representation the author is thus mainly preoccupied with himself.

In the nineteenth century the a autobiographies of men of mark are more often shaped on lines such as these: ‘So full of talent and attractive was I; such appreciation and admiration I won!’ (Johanne Louise Heiberg, ‘A Life lived once more in Reminiscence’); or, ‘I was full of talent and worthy of being loved, but yet I was unappreciated, and these were the hard struggles I went through before I won the crown of fame’ (Hans Christian Andersen, ‘The Tale of a Life’). The main Preoccupation of the writer, in these two classes of life-records, is consequently with what his fellow-men have thought of him and said about him.

The author of the autobiography before us is not preoccupied with his own capacities, and consequently describes no struggle to gain recognition. Still less does he care for the opinions of his fellow-men about himself; what others have thought of him, he dismisses with a single word.

There is in this work no gazing upon one’s own image. The author is not one of those who willingly speak of themselves; when he does so, it is reluctantly and with a certain shyness. There is here no confession that divulges the inner self, no sentimentality, and no cynicism. The author speaks neither of his sins nor of his virtues; he enters into no vulgar intimacy with his reader. He does not say when he fell in love, and he touches so little upon his relations with the other sex, that he even omits to mention his marriage, and it is only incidentally we learn that he is married at all. That he is a father, and a very loving one, he finds time to mention just once in the rapid review of the last sixteen years of his life.

He is more anxious to give the psychology of his contemporaries than of himself; and one finds in his book the psychology of Russia: the official Russia and the masses underneath—Russia struggling forward and Russia stagnant. He strives to tell the story of his contemporaries rather than his own; and consequently, the record of his life contains the history of Russia during his lifetime, as well as that of the labour movement in Europe during the last half-century. When he plunges into his own inner world, we see the outer world reflected in it.

There is, nevertheless, in this book an effect such as Goethe aimed at in ‘Dichtung und Wahrheit,’ the representation of how a remarkable mind has been shaped; and in analogy with the ‘Confessions’ of St. Augustine, we have the story of an inner crisis which corresponds with what in olden times was called ‘conversion.’ In fact, this inner crisis is the turning point and the core of the book.

There are at this moment only two great Russians who think for the Russian people, and whose thoughts belong to mankind, Leo Tolstoy and Peter Kropotkin. Tolstoy has often told us, in poetical shape, parts of his life. Kropotkin gives us here, for the first time, without any poetical recasting, a rapid survey of his whole career.

However radically different these two men are, there is one parallel which can be drawn between the lives and the views on life of both. Tolstoy is an artist, Kropotkin is a man of science; but there came a period in the career of each of them, when neither could find peace

in continuing the work to which he had brought great inborn capacities. Religious considerations led Tolstoy, social considerations led Kropotkin, to abandon the paths they had first taken.

Both are filled with love for mankind; and they are at one in the severe condemnation of the indifference, the thoughtlessness, the crudeness and brutality of the upper classes, as well as in the attraction they both feel towards the life of the downtrodden and ill-used man of the people. Both see more cowardice than stupidity in the world. Both are idealists and both have the reformer's temperament. Both are peace-loving natures, and Kropotkin is the more peaceful of the two—although Tolstoy always preaches peace and condemns those who take right into their own hands and resort to force, while Kropotkin justifies such action, and was on friendly terms with the Terrorists. The point upon which they differ most is in attitudes towards the intelligent educated man and towards science altogether; Tolstoy, in his religious passion, disdains and disparages the man equally with the thing, while Kropotkin holds both in high esteem, although at the same time he condemns men of science for forgetting the people and the misery of the masses.

Many a man and many a woman have accomplished a great life-work without having led a great life. Many people are interesting, although their lives may have been quite insignificant and commonplace. Kropotkin's life is both great and interesting.

In this volume will be found a combination of all the elements out of which an intensely eventful life is composed—idyll and tragedy, drama and romance.

The childhood in Moscow and in the country, the portraits of his mother, sister, and teachers, of the old and trusty servants, together with the many pictures of patriarchal life, are done in such a masterly way that every heart will be touched by them. The landscapes, the story of the unusually intense love between the two brothers—all this is pure idyll.

Side by side there is, unhappily, plenty of sorrow and suffering: the harshness in the family life, the cruel treatment of the serfs, and the narrow-mindedness and heartlessness which are the ruling stars of men's destinies.

There is variety and there are dramatic catastrophes: life at Court and life in prison; life in the highest Russian society, by the side of emperors and grand dukes, and life in poverty, with the working proletariat, in London and in Switzerland. There are changes of costume as in a drama; the chief actor having to appear during the day in fine dress in the Winter Palace, and in the evening in peasant's clothes in the suburbs, as a preacher of revolution. And there is, too, the sensational element that belongs to the novel. Although nobody could be simpler in tone and style than Kropotkin, nevertheless parts of his narrative, from the very nature of the events he has to tell, are more intensely exciting than anything in those novels which aim only at being sensational. One reads with breathless interest the preparations for the escape from the hospital of the fortress of St. Paul and St. Peter, and the bold execution of the plan.

Few men have moved, as Kropotkin did, in all layers of society; few know all these layers as he does. What a picture! Kropotkin as a little boy with curled hair, in a fancy-dress costume, standing by the Emperor Nicholas, or running after the Emperor Alexander as his page, with the idea of protecting him. And then again—Kropotkin in a terrible prison, sending away the Grand Duke Nicholas, or listening to the growing insanity of a peasant who is confined in a cell under his very feet.

He has lived the life of the aristocrat and of the worker; he has been one of the Emperor's pages and a poverty-stricken writer; he has lived the life of the student, the officer, the man of science, the explorer of unknown lands, the administrator, and the hunted revolutionist. In