



KOENKO *The* **BLIND MUSICIAN**

В. Г. КОРОЛЕНКО
СЛЕПОЙ МУЗЫКАНТ

На английском языке

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Этюд

ИЗДАТЕЛЬСТВО ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ НА ИНОСТРАННЫХ ЯЗЫКАХ

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VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

THE BLIND MUSICIAN

An Etude

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AUTHOR'S NOTE TO THE SIXTH EDITION*

The present revision and enlargement of a story which has already appeared in several editions is rather a departure from the usual, I realize; and a brief explanation must be offered. My *étude* centres, as its basic psychological motif, around man's instinctive, organic craving for light. From this craving arises the spiritual crisis in the hero's development, and its eventual resolution. In criticism of the story, both printed and oral, I have repeatedly encountered an objection which at first glance may seem very well founded. The craving for light, my critics feel, cannot be predicated of the born blind; for they have never seen light, know nothing of it, and cannot, therefore, feel the lack of it. This consideration does not seem to me convincing. None of us have ever flown like birds; yet we all know how long the sensation of flight persists in dreams—all through childhood and youth. Still, I must admit

* In which considerable changes and additions have been made.

that my adoption of this motif was purely *a priori*, based on imagination rather than on concrete knowledge. It was not until several years after the first editions of the story had come out that I chanced, in the course of one of my excursions, upon an opportunity for direct observation. The two bell-ringers (one born blind, the other blind from childhood) whom the reader will find in Chapter VI; the contrast in their moods; their attitude towards the children; Yegor's talk of dreams—all this was noted in my memorandum book as I actually observed it in the belfry of the Sarova monastery, Tambov eparchy, where, perhaps, the two blind bellmen are showing visitors up the winding stairs to this very day. From the hour when I observed it, that scene in the belfry—conclusive, to my mind, in the question under debate—lay more heavily on my conscience with each new edition of the story; and it was only the difficulty of return to a once finished work that prevented me from introducing it. Of the changes finally made in the present edition, the most important is the addition of this scene. As to the rest—once I had made the return, and my mind had fallen again into its former train of thought, there could be no question, of course, of a mere mechanical insertion of the one new bit. Other changes, throughout the story, were inevitable.

February 25, 1898



CHAPTER ONE

I

A child was born, in the dead of night, to a wealthy family in the South-West Territory. The young mother lay sunk in heavy languor; but when the infant's first cry sounded, low and plaintive, she began to toss feverishly on her bed. Her eyes were shut, but her lips moved, whispering, and her pale face, still soft of outline almost as a child's, twisted as though in suffering and impatient protest—the expression a much-petted child might wear on its first contact with sorrow.

The midwife bent close over the whispering lips.

"Why? Why does he..." the mother asked, almost inaudibly.

The midwife did not understand. Again the child's cry sounded. An expression of bitter suffering passed over the mother's face, and a heavy tear welled from her eyes.

"Why? Why?" she whispered, faintly as before.

This time the midwife understood her question, and answered tranquilly:

"Why the child cries? It's always so. Don't you worry yourself about it."

But the mother was not to be soothed. She started at each new cry, demanding over and over again, with wrathful impatience:

"Why so... so dreadful?"

The midwife heard nothing out of the ordinary in the child's cries; and the mother, she could see, was hardly conscious—did not, perhaps, even know what she was saying. Turning away from the bed, she busied herself with the infant.

The mother fell silent. Only, now and again, some grievous suffering, finding no outlet in words or movement, pressed great tears from her shut eyes. Through the heavy lashes they seeped, and rolled softly down the marble pallor of her cheeks.

Can the mother's heart have sensed the grim, the unalleviable tragedy that had come into the world with the new-born life—that hung over the infant's

cradle, to follow him through all his life, to the very grave?

Or was it, perhaps, no more than delirium? Be that as it may, the child was born blind.

II

No one noticed it, at first. The baby boy turned on the world the same dull, vague look as, to a certain age, all new-born infants do. Day passed after day, until the new life began to be reckoned in weeks. The child's eyes cleared. The dullness lifted, and the pupils seemed to focus. But he did not turn his head to follow the bright beam of light that came into the room in company with the cheery twitter of the birds in the luxuriant country garden, with the murmur of the green beeches swaying close by the open windows. The mother, now herself again, was the first to look, in new alarm, into the baby face—the first to notice its strange expression, its unchildlike gravity, immobility.

"Why does he stare like that? Tell me—oh, tell me why," she kept asking—seeking comfort, like a frightened dove, in the faces around her.

"What do you mean?" people would answer, unresponsive to her anxiety. "The child is like any child of the same age."

"But see how strangely his hands seem to grope."

"The child is too young to co-ordinate movements with visual impressions," the doctor explained.

"But why do his eyes look always straight ahead? Why does he never turn them? Is he—is he blind?"

And, once the fearful guess had burst from the mother's lips, no words could be found to console her.

The doctor lifted the child, turned it quickly to the light, and looked into its eyes. He seemed a little disturbed, and hurried away with no more than a few non-committal words and the promise to look in again in a day or two.

The mother trembled like a wounded bird. Sobbing, she pressed the child to her breast. But the child's eyes looked out as before, grave and unmoving.

In a day or two, as he had promised, the doctor came again—provided, this time, with an ophthalmoscope. He lit a candle and brought it up to the child's eyes; moved it away, and brought it close again. Many times over, he repeated his tests, his eyes fixed steadily on the child's pupils. And finally, deeply disturbed, he said:

"You were not mistaken, madam, to my great regret. The boy is blind. And beyond all hope of cure."

The mother received his verdict with quiet melancholy.

"I know," she answered softly.

III

The family to which the blind child had been born was not a large one. There were the mother and father; and there was "Uncle Maxim," as he was called by everyone in the house and many outside it. The father was a country landowner, very much like a thousand other country landowners in the South-West Territory. He was good-natured—one might call him even kind; treated his labourers well; and was tremendously fond of mills, one or another of which he was perpetually constructing or reconstructing. This occupation took up so much of his time that his voice was seldom heard in the house except at those hours of the day that were set aside for breakfast, dinner, and the like domestic occasions. Coming in, he would invariably ask, "And how are you today, my love?"—after which he would sit down to his meal and hardly speak till it was over, except, perhaps, now and again, for some announcement concerning the virtues of oak shafts and cog-wheels. A simple, peaceful existence, and not one, of course, to influence to any great degree the formation of his son's character and mentality. But Uncle Maxim—that was a different matter. ~~Ten years or so~~ before the events just described, ~~Uncle Maxim had~~ been known as the most dangerous wrangler not only in the vicinity of his own estate, ~~but~~ even at the Kiev "Con-

tracts.”* It had puzzled everyone to understand how *pani* Popelskaya, née Yatsenko—such a respectable family, in every way—could have come by so dreadful a brother. One had never known what tone to take with him, or how to please him. To the gentry’s civilities, he had returned disdainful insolence; yet from peasants he had endured rudeness and liberties that would have provoked the mildest of the gentry to use his fists. Finally, however, to the infinite relief of all sober-minded folk, he had got terribly angry with the Austrians over something or other, and left for Italy; and there he had joined up with just such another brawler and heretic as himself—one Garibaldi, who, as the gentry whispered in pious horror, had sworn brotherhood with the devil, and cared not a snap for the very Pope. Of course, Maxim had doomed that wayward, schismatic soul of his for all eternity—but, on the other hand, the “Contracts” had become appreciably more peaceful, and many ladies round about had been relieved, at last, of the constant fear for their sons’ safety.

The Austrians, evidently, had got angry with Uncle Maxim, too. The battle accounts in the *Courier*, traditional newspaper of the Polish landowners in these parts, had mentioned him now and again as one of the most reckless of Garibaldi’s

* “Contracts”—the local term for the once wide-famed Kiev Fair.

followers; and one day this same *Courier* had informed its readers that Maxim had gone down, with his horse, in the field of battle—whereupon the infuriated Austrians, long eager for a chance at this pestiferous Volhynian (in his fellow-Volhynians' imaginations, more or less the only prop that kept Garibaldi from collapse), had slashed him into mincemeat.

"A bad end, Maxim's," the gentlefolk had thought to themselves, ascribing his fall to St. Peter's special intercession in behalf of his successor—Christ's vicar on earth. Maxim had been considered dead.

As it turned out, however, the Austrian sabres had failed to drive Maxim's indomitable soul from his body, badly though they had marred his limbs. Garibaldi's fire-eaters had borne their worthy comrade out of the fray and put him into hospital; and, some years later, he had suddenly arrived at his sister's home and there settled down for good.

Duels, now, were not for him. His right leg was gone, so that he could not walk without a crutch; and his left arm was too maimed to do anything more than manage a stick. He was graver, too, and quieter—only, at times, his sharp tongue would lash out, unerring as once his sword had been. He no longer visited the "Contracts," and rarely appeared in society. The greater part of his time was spent in his library, in the reading of books that no one had ever heard of or knew anything about, except

for a general suspicion that they must be altogether godless. He did some writing, too; but as nothing from his pen ever appeared in the *Courier*, people attributed no great importance to his literary activities.

At the time when the new young life came into being in the little country home, the silver was beginning to show on Uncle Maxim's close-cropped head, and his shoulders had hunched up with the constant pressure of the crutches until his body seemed almost square. People who did not know him well were often afraid of him—awed by his queer figure and gloomy frown, by the loud tapping of his crutches, and the dense clouds of tobacco-smoke that issued from the pipe he never tired of smoking. And only his closest friends knew the kindly warmth of the heart that beat in the invalid's mutilated body; only they guessed at the tireless mental labour that went on in the big, square-hewn head, under the thick bristle of close-cropped hair.

But not even his closest friends could know what problem it was that occupied his mind at this period in his life. They knew only that Uncle Maxim would often sit for hours on end, enveloped in a blue haze of smoke, his eyes clouded and his shaggy eyebrows glumly drawn. What the crippled fighter was thinking was that life is struggle, with no room for invalids. He was out of the ranks for good—a

burden for the baggage train, and nothing more. He was a knight whom life had struck from the saddle and thrown to earth. Was it not a cowardly thing to lie there, grovelling in the dust, like a trampled worm? Was it not cowardly to clutch at the victor's stirrup, begging to be left the miserable scraps of existence still remaining?

But while Uncle Maxim considered this searing thought, weighing and balancing the arguments *for* and *against* with cold, steady courage, a new being appeared in the household—an invalid from its very coming into the world. At first he hardly noticed the blind child. But it was not long before he began to ponder, with philosophic interest, over the strange resemblance between the child's fate and his own.

"Yes," he said thoughtfully, one day, with a side-wise glance at the infant, "there's another invalid—this youngster. If you could put the two of us together, you'd get one proper man out of us, maybe."

And from that time on his eyes turned to the child more and more often.

IV

The boy had been born blind. Who was to blame for his misfortune? No one. Not only had there been no shade of "evil intent" on anybody's part, but the very cause of the misfortune lay concealed somewhere deep down in life's mysterious intricacies.