

Creatures That Once Were Men and Other Stories

by

Maxim Gorky

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Introduction

It is certainly a curious fact that so many of the voices of what is called our modern religion have come from countries which are not only simple, but may even be called barbaric. A nation like Norway has a great realistic drama without having ever had either a great classical drama or a great romantic drama. A nation like Russia makes us feel its modern fiction when we have never felt its ancient fiction. It has produced its Gissing without producing its Scott. Everything that is most sad and scientific, everything that is most grim and analytical, everything that can truly be called most modern, everything that can without unreasonableness be called most morbid, comes from these fresh and untried and unexhausted nationalities. Out of these infant peoples come the oldest voices of the earth.

This contradiction, like many other contradictions, is one which ought first of all to be registered as a mere fact; long before we attempt to explain why things contradict themselves, we ought, if we are honest men and good critics, to register the preliminary truth that things do contradict themselves. In this case, as I say, there are many possible and suggestive explanations. It may be, to take an example, that our modern Europe is so exhausted that even the vigorous expression of that exhaustion is difficult for every one except the most robust.

It may be that all the nations are tired; and it may be that only the boldest and breeziest are not too tired to say that they are tired. It may be that a man like Ibsen in Norway or a man like Gorky in Russia are the only people left who have so much faith that they can really believe in scepticism. It may be that they are the only people left who have so much animal spirits that they can really feast high and drink deep at the ancient banquet of pessimism. This is one of the possible hypotheses or explanations in the matter: that all Europe feels these things and that only have strength to believe them also. Many other explanations might, however, also be offered. It might be suggested that half-barbaric countries, like Russia or Norway, which have always lain, to say the least of it, on the extreme edge of the circle of our European civilization, have a certain primal melancholy which belongs to them through all the ages. It is highly probable that this sadness, which to us is modern, is to them eternal. It is highly probable that what we have solemnly and suddenly discovered in scientific text-books and philosophical magazines they absorbed and experienced thousands of years ago, when they offered human sacrifice in black and cruel forests and cried to their gods in the dark. Their agnosticism is perhaps merely paganism; their paganism, as in old times, is merely devil-worship. Certainly, Schopenhauer could hardly have written his hideous essay on women except in a country which had once been full of slavery and the service of fiends. It may be that these moderns are tricking us altogether, and are hiding in their current scientific jargon things that they knew before science or civilization were.

They say that they are determinists; but the truth is, probably, that they are still worshipping the Norns. They say that they describe scenes which are sickening and

dehumanizing in the name of art or in the name of truth; but it may be that they do it in the name of some deity indescribable, whom they propitiated with blood and terror before the beginning of history.

This hypothesis, like the hypothesis mentioned before it, is highly disputable, and is at best a suggestion. But there is one broad truth in the matter which may in any case be considered as established. A country like Russia has far more inherent capacity for producing revolution in revolutionists than any country of the type of England or America. Communities highly civilized and largely urban tend to a thing which is now called evolution, the most cautious and the most conservative of all social influences. The loyal Russian obeys the Czar because he remembers the Czar and the Czar's importance. The disloyal Russian frets against the Czar because he also remembers the Czar, and makes a note of the necessity of knifing him. But the loyal Englishman obeys the upper classes because he has forgotten that they are there. Their operation has become to him like daylight, or gravitation, or any of the forces of nature. And there are no disloyal Englishmen; there are no English revolutionists, because the oligarchic management of England is so complete as to be invisible. The thing which can once get itself forgotten can make itself omnipotent.

Gorky is preeminently Russian, in that he is a revolutionist; not because most Russians are revolutionists (for I imagine that they are not), but because most Russians--indeed, nearly all Russian-- are in that attitude of mind which makes revolution possible, and which makes religion possible, an attitude of primary and dogmatic assertion. To be a revolutionist it is first necessary to be a revelationist. It is necessary to believe in the sufficiency of some theory of the universe or the State. But in countries that have come under the influence of what is called the evolutionary idea, there has been no dramatic righting of wrongs, and (unless the evolutionary idea loses its hold) there never will be. These countries have no revolution, they have to put up with an inferior and largely fictitious thing which they call progress.

The interest of the Gorky tale, like the interest of so many other Russian masterpieces, consists in this sharp contact between a simplicity, which we in the West feel to be very old, and a rebelliousness which we in the West feel to be very new. We cannot in our graduated and polite civilization quite make head or tail of the Russian anarch; we can only feel in a vague way that his tale is the tale of the Missing Link, and that his head is the head of the superman. We hear his lonely cry of anger. But we cannot be quite certain whether his protest is the protest of the first anarchist against government, or whether it is the protest of the last savage against civilization. The cruelty of ages and of political cynicism or necessity has done much to burden the race of which Gorky writes; but time has left them one thing which it has not left to the people in Poplar or West Ham.

It has left them, apparently, the clear and childlike power of seeing the cruelty which encompasses them. Gorky is a tramp, a man of the people, and also a critic, and a bitter one. In the West poor men, when they become articulate in literature, are always sentimentalists and nearly always optimists.

It is no exaggeration to say that these people of whom Gorky writes in such a story as "Creatures that once were Men" are to the Western mind children. They have, indeed, been tortured and broken by experience and sin. But this has only sufficed to make them sad children or naughty children or bewildered children. They have absolutely no trace of that quality upon which secure government rests so largely in Western Europe, the quality of being soothed by long words as if by an incantation. They do not call hunger "economic pressure"; they call it hunger. They do not call rich men "examples of capitalistic concentration," they call them rich men. And this note of plainness and of something nobly prosaic is as characteristic of Gorky, in some ways the most modern, and sophisticated of Russian authors, as it is of Tolstoy or any of the Tolstoyan type of mind. The very title of this story strike the note of this sudden and simple vision. The philanthropist writing long letters to the Daily Telegraph says, of men living in a slum, that "their degeneration is of such a kind as almost to pass the limits of the semblance of humanity," and we read the whole thing with a tepid assent as we should read phrases about the virtues of Queen Victoria or the dignity of the House of Commons.

The Russian novelist, when he describes a doss-house, says, "Creatures that once were Men." And we are arrested, and regard the facts as a kind of terrible fairy tale. This story is a test case of the Russian manner, for it is in itself a study of decay, a study of failure, and a study of old age. And yet the author is forced to write even of staleness freshly; and though he is treating of the world as seen by eyes darkened or blood-shot with evil experience, his own eyes look out upon the scene with a clarity that is almost babyish. Through all runs that curious Russian sense that every man is only a man, which, if the Russians ever are a democracy, will make them the most democratic democracy that the world has ever seen. Take this passage, for instance, from the austere conclusion of "Creatures that once were Men":

Petunikoff smiled the smile of the conqueror and went back into the doss-house, but suddenly he stopped and trembled. At the door facing him stood an old man with a stick in his hand and a large bag on his back, a horrible old man in rags and tatters, which covered his bony figure. He bent under the weight of his burden, and lowered his head on his breast, as if he wished to attack the merchant.

"What are you? Who are you?" shouted Petunikoff.

"A man . . ." he answered, in a hoarse voice. This hoarseness pleased and tranquillized Petunikoff, he even smiled.

"A man! And are there really men like you?" Stepping aside, he let the old man pass. He went, saying slowly:

"Men are of various kinds . . . as God wills . . . There are worse than me . . . still worse. . . Yes. . . ."

Here, in the very act of describing a kind of a fall from humanity, Gorky expresses a sense of the strangeness and essential value of the human being which is far too

commonly absent altogether from such complex civilizations as our own. To no Westerner, I am afraid, would it occur, when asked what he was, to say, "A man." He would be a plasterer who had walked from Reading, or an iron-puddler who had been thrown out of work in Lancashire, or a University man who would be really most grateful for the loan of five shillings, or the son of a lieutenant-general living in Brighton, who would not have made such an application if he had not known that he was talking to another gentleman. With us it is not a question of men being of various kinds; with us the kinds are almost different animals. But in spite of all Gorky's superficial scepticism and brutality, it is to him the fall from humanity, or the apparent fall from humanity, which is not merely great and lamentable, but essential and even mystical. The line between man and the beasts is one of the transcendental essentials of every religion; and it is, like most of the transcendental things of religion, identical with the main sentiments of the man of common sense. We feel this gulf when theologians say that it cannot be crossed. But we feel it quite as much (and that with a primal shudder) when philosophers or fanciful writers suggest that it might be crossed. And if any man wishes to discover whether or no he has really learned to regard the line between man and brute as merely relative and evolutionary, let him say again to himself those frightful words, "Creatures that once were Men."

G. K. CHESTERTON.

Creatures That Once Were Men

PART I

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 willow-- 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 toward 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 toward the sky, and their gilded crosses shine beneath the rays of the sun. During the rainy weather the neighboring 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 rainwater.

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 farther 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 amid its surroundings. The walls bent outward, 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 toward 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 honored 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 court-yard, or else in the eating-house of Egor Yavilovitch, 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 raw-looking face, swollen with drunkenness, and with a dirty yellowish beard.

His eyes were large and gray, 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 brick-made 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 honor, 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 realize that he had spent all his money in drink.

"Your honor, 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 philosophize is always foolish; to philosophize 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 work, and if you think you cannot control yourself, tell the contractor, your employer, to keep your money, or else give it to me. When you get sufficient capital, I will get you a pair of trousers and other things necessary to make you seem a respectable and hard-working man, persecuted by fate. With decent-looking trousers you can go far. Now then, be off!"

Then the client would go to the river to work as a porter, smiling the while over the Captain's long and wise speeches. He did not distinctly understand them, but only saw in front of him two merry eyes, felt their encouraging influence, and knew that in the loquacious Captain he had an arm that would assist him in time of need.

And really it happened very often that, for a month or so, some ticket-of-leave client, under the strict surveillance of the Captain, had the opportunity of raising himself to a condition better than that to which, thanks to the Captain's cooperation, he had fallen.

"Now, then, my friend!" said the Captain, glancing critically at the restored client, "we have a coat and jacket. When I had respectable trousers I lived in town like a respectable man. But when the trousers wore out, I, too, fell off in the opinion of my fellow-men and had to come down here from the town. Men, my fine mannikin, judge everything by the outward appearance, while, owing to their foolishness, the actual reality of things is incomprehensible to them. Make a note of this on your nose, and pay me at least half your debt. Go in peace; seek, and you may find."

"How much do I owe you, Aristid Fomich?" asks the client, in confusion.

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