

GORKY MAKSIM

CREATURES
THAT ONCE
WERE MEN

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Creatures That Once Were Men

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Maksim Gorky

Creatures That Once Were Men

INTRODUCTORY

By G. K. CHESTERTON

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 they 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 civilisation, 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 devilworship. 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 civilisation 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 dehumanising 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 civilised

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 pre-eminently 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 Russians – 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 civilisation quite make head or tail of the Russian anarchy; 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 civilisation. 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 this of "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, the most recent and 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 strikes 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 dosshouse, 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 odd 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 tranquillised 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 civilisations as our own. To no Western, 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 theologies 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 learnt 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.

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 willows – 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 towards 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 towards the sky, and their gilded crosses shine beneath the rays of the sun. During the rainy weather the neighbouring 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 rain-water. 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 further 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 amidst its surroundings. The walls bent outwards 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 towards 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 honoured 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 courtyard, or else in the eating house of Egor Vavilovitch, which was opposite the house, where he took all his meals and where he also drank vodka.

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 grey, 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 brickmade 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 honour, 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 doss-house, and on the following morning they would again begin treating each other till the Captain's companion would wake up to realise that he had spent all his money in drink.

"Your honour, 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 philosophise is always foolish; to philosophise with a drunken headache, ineffably so. Drunken headaches require vodka 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 vodka 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 co-operation, 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.

"One rouble and 70 kopecks... Now, give me only one rouble, or, if you like, 70 kopecks, and as for the rest, I shall wait until you have earned more than you have now by stealing or by hard work, it does not matter to me."

"I thank you humbly for your kindness!" says the client, touched to the heart. "Truly you are a kind man...; Life has persecuted you in vain... What an eagle you would have been in your own place!"

The Captain could not live without eloquent speeches.

"What does 'in my own place' mean? No one really knows his own place in life, and every one of us crawls into his harness. The place of the merchant Judas Petunikoff ought to be in penal servitude, but he still walks through the streets in daylight, and even intends to build a factory. The place of our teacher ought to be beside a wife and half-a-dozen children, but he is loitering in the public-house of Vaviloff. And then, there is yourself. You are going to seek a situation as a hall porter or waiter, but I can see that you ought to be a soldier in the army, because you are no fool, are patient and understand discipline. Life shuffles us like cards, you see, and it is only accidentally, and only for a time, that we fall into our own places!"

Such farewell speeches often served as a preface to the continuation of their acquaintance, which again began with drinking and went so far that the client would spend his last farthing. Then the Captain would stand him treat, and they would drink all they had.

A repetition of similar doings did not affect in the least the good relations of the parties.

The teacher mentioned by the Captain was another of those customers who were thus reformed only in order that they should sin again. Thanks to his intellect, he was the nearest in rank to the Captain, and this was probably the cause of his falling so low as doss-house life, and of his inability to rise again. It was only with him that Aristid Kuvalda could philosophise with the certainty of being understood. He valued this, and when the reformed teacher prepared to leave the doss-house in order to get a corner in town for himself, then Aristid Kuvalda accompanied him so sorrowfully and sadly that it ended, as a rule, in their both getting drunk and spending all their money. Probably Kuvalda arranged the matter intentionally so that the teacher could not leave the doss-house, though he desired to do so with all his heart. Was it possible for Aristid Kuvalda, a nobleman (as was evident from his speeches), one who was accustomed to think, though the turn of fate may have changed his position, was it possible for him not to desire to have close to him a man like himself? We can pity our own faults in others.

This teacher had once taught at an institution in one of the towns on the Volga, but in consequence of some story was dismissed. After this he was a clerk in a tannery, but again had to leave. Then he became a librarian in some private library, subsequently following other professions. Finally, after passing examinations in law he became a lawyer, but drink reduced him to the Captain's doss-house. He was tall, round-shouldered, with a long sharp nose and bald head. In his bony and yellow face, on which grew a wedge-shaped beard, shone large, restless eyes, deeply sunk in their sockets, and the corners of his mouth drooped sadly down. He earned his bread, or rather his drink, by reporting for the local papers. He sometimes earned as much as fifteen roubles. These he gave to the Captain and said:

"It is enough. I am going back into the bosom of culture. Another week's hard work and I shall dress respectably, and then Addio, mio caro!"

"Very exemplary! As I heartily sympathise with your decision, Philip, I shall not give you another glass all this week," the Captain warned him sternly.

"I shall be thankful! ... You will not give me one drop?"

The Captain heard in his voice a beseeching note to which he turned a deaf ear.

"Even though you roar, I shall not give it you!"

"As you like, then," sighed the teacher, and went away to continue his reporting. But after a day or two he would return tired and thirsty, and would look at the Captain with a beseeching glance out of the corners of his eyes, hoping that his friend's heart would soften.

The Captain in such cases put on a serious face and began speaking with killing irony on the theme of weakness of character, of the animal delight of intoxication, and on such subjects as suited the occasion. One must do him justice: he was captivated by his role of mentor and moralist, but the lodgers dogged him, and, listening sceptically to his exhortations to repentance, would whisper aside to each other:

"Cunning, skilful, shifty rogue! I told you so, but you would not listen. It's your own fault!"

"His honour is really a good soldier. He goes first and examines the road behind him!"

The teacher then hunted here and there till he found his friend again in some corner, and grasping his dirty coat, trembling and licking his dry lips, looked into his face with a deep, tragic glance, without articulate words.

"Can't you?" asked the Captain sullenly.

The teacher answered by bowing his head and letting it fall on his breast, his tall, thin body trembling the while.

"Wait another day ... perhaps you will be all right then," proposed Kuvalda. The teacher sighed, and shook his head hopelessly.

The Captain saw that his friend's thin body trembled with the thirst for the poison, and took some money from his pocket.

"In the majority of cases it is impossible to fight against fate," said he, as if trying to justify himself before someone. But if the teacher controlled himself for a whole week then there was a touching farewell scene between the two friends, which ended as a rule in the eating-house of Vaviloff. The teacher did not spend all his money, but spent at least half on the children of the main street. The poor are always rich in children, and in the dirt and ditches of this street there were groups of them from morning to night, hungry, naked and dirty. Children are the living flowers of the earth, but these had the appearance of flowers that have faded prematurely, because they grew in ground where there was no healthy nourishment. Often the teacher would gather them round him, would buy them bread, eggs, apples and nuts, and take them into the fields by the river side. There they would sit and greedily eat everything he offered them, after which they would begin to play, filling the fields for a mile around with careless noise and laughter. The tall, thin figure of the drunkard towered above these small people, who treated him familiarly, as if he were one of their own age. They called him "Philip," and did not trouble to prefix "Uncle" to his name. Playing around him, like little wild animals, they pushed him, jumped upon his back, beat him upon his bald head, and caught hold of his nose. All this must have pleased him, as he did not protest against such liberties. He spoke very little to them, and when he did so he did it cautiously as if afraid that his words would hurt or contaminate them. He passed many hours thus as their companion and plaything, watching their lively faces with his gloomy eyes. Then he would thoughtfully and slowly direct his steps to the eatinghouse of Vaviloff, where he would drink silently and quickly till all his senses left him.

Almost every day after his reporting he would bring a newspaper, and then gather round him all these creatures that once were men.

On seeing him, they would come forward from all corners of the court-yard, drunk, or suffering from drunken headache, dishevelled, tattered, miserable, and pitiable. Then would come the barrel-like, stout Aleksei Maksimovitch Simtsoff, formerly Inspector of Woods and Forests, under the Department of Appendages, but now trading in matches, ink, blacking, and lemons. He was an old man of sixty, in a canvas overcoat and a wide-brimmed hat, the greasy borders of which hid his stout fat red face. He had a thick white beard, out of which a small red nose turned gaily heavenwards. He had thick, crimson lips and watery, cynical eyes. They called him "Kubar," a name which well described his round figure and buzzing speech. After him, Kanets appeared from some corner – a dark, sad-looking, silent drunkard: then the former governor of the prison, Luka Antonovitch Martyanoff, a man who existed on "remeshok," "trilistika," and "bankovka,"¹ and many such cunning games, not much appreciated by the police. He would throw his hard and oft-scourged body on the grass beside the teacher, and, turning his eyes round and scratching his head, would ask in a hoarse, bass voice, "May I?"

Then appeared Pavel Solntseff, a man of thirty years of age, suffering from consumption. The ribs of his left side had been broken in a quarrel, and the sharp, yellow face, like that of a fox, always wore a malicious smile. The thin lips, when opened, exposed two rows of decayed black teeth, and the rags on his shoulders swayed backwards and forwards as if they were hung on a clothes pole. They called him "Abyedok." He hawked brushes and bath brooms of his own manufacture, good strong brushes made from a peculiar kind of grass.

Then followed a lean and bony man of whom no one knew anything, with a frightened expression in his eyes, the left one of which had a squint. He was silent and timid, and had been

¹ Note by translator. – Well-known games of chance, played by the lower classes. The police specially endeavour to stop them, but unsuccessfully.

imprisoned three times for theft by the High Court of Justice and the Magisterial Courts. His family name was Kiselnikoff, but they called him Paltara Taras, because he was a head and shoulders taller than his friend, Deacon Taras, who had been degraded from his office for drunkenness and immorality. The Deacon was a short, thick-set person, with the chest of an athlete and a round, strong head. He danced skilfully, and was still more skilful at swearing. He and Paltara Taras worked in the wood on the banks of the river, and in free hours he told his friend or any one who would listen, "Tales of my own composition," as he used to say. On hearing these stories, the heroes of which always seemed to be saints, kings, priests, or generals, even the inmates of the dosshouse spat and rubbed their eyes in astonishment at the imagination of the Deacon, who told them shameless tales of lewd, fantastic adventures, with blinking eyes and a passionless expression of countenance. The imagination of this man was powerful and inexhaustible; he could go on relating and composing all day, from morning to night, without once repeating what he had said before. In his expression you sometimes saw the poet gone astray, sometimes the romancer, and he always succeeded in making his tales realistic by the effective and powerful words in which he told them.

There was also a foolish young man called Kuvalda Meteor. One night he came to sleep in the dosshouse and had remained ever since among these men, much to their astonishment. At first they did not take much notice of him. In the daytime, like all the others, he went away to find something to eat, but at nights he always loitered around this friendly company till at last the Captain took notice of him.

"Boy! What business have you here on this earth?"

The boy answered boldly and stoutly:

"I am a barefooted tramp ..."

The Captain looked critically at him. This youngster had long hair and a weak face, with prominent cheek-bones and a turned-up nose. He was dressed in a blue blouse without a waistband, and on his head he wore the remains of a straw hat, while his feet were bare.

"You are a fool!" decided Aristid Kuvalda. "What are you knocking about here for? You are of absolutely no use to us ... Do you drink vodki? ... No? ... Well, then, can you steal?" Again, "No." "Go away, learn, and come back again when you know something, and are a man ..."

The youngster smiled.

"No. I shall live with you."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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