

Confronting Life

Maxim Gorky

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CONFRONTING Life, two people stood both discontent. And to the question, "What do you expect of me?" one made answer with weary voice: "I am distracted by the cruelty of thy contradictions. Feebly my reason strives to understand the meaning of existence, and with perplexing gloom my heart is filled before thee. My consciousness doth tell me man is the highest of creations."

"What wouldst thou have of me?" fearless, questioned Life.

"Happiness! For my happiness it is necessary that thou shouldst reconcile two endless chains of contradictions in my breast, brought about by my 'I will' and thy 'Thou must.'"

"Will that which for me thou must," Life sternly said.

"I do not wish to be thy victim!" the man exclaimed. "I wish to be the sovereign of life, and am compelled to bend the neck beneath her yoke of laws wherefore?"

"Speak plainer," put in the other fellow, standing nearer Life; but, heedless of his companion's words, the first went on:

"I wish for freedom to live in harmony with my desires, and do not want to be unto my neighbor, from sense of duty, either a brother or a servant. I would be that which I should freely choose a slave or brother. I do not wish that in society I shall constitute a black, of which society may dispose at will. I am a man, the mind, the spirit of life; I must be free!"

"One moment," interrupted Life, smiling sternly. "Thou didst speak at length, and all that thou wouldst further say is known to me. Thou wouldst be free? Well be so! Wrestle, subdue me and become my master; then will I be thy slave. Thou knowest I am not partial and ever yielded readily to conquerors. But thou must conquer. Art thou prepared to battle with me for thy freedom's sake? Yes? Art strong enough for victory, and in thy strength hast confidence?"

And the man said, mournfully: "Thou hast set me at war with mine own self; thou hast made keen my reason like a blade deep, deep it plunged into my heart and crushed it."

"Be more severe with the tyrant; stop complaining," again put in the other man.

But the first continued: "I want a respite from thy oppression. Give me a taste of happiness!"

Life smiled again, a smile like gleaming ice:

"Tell me, when thus thou speakest, dost thou demand or beg?"

"I beg," came like an echo from the man.

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"You beg, like a habitual mendicant. But I must tell thee, poor unfortunate, Life bestows no alms. And do you know? the free ask not, they take my gifts themselves. Why, thou, thou art but the slave of thy desires, no more. Free is he who hath the power to withdraw himself from all desires and throw his total strength into but one. Didst understand? Away!"

He understood, and, crouching dog-like at Life's indifferent feet, made ready to pick up submissively the stray crumbs that fell from off her table, her leavings.

Then did the lack-luster eyes of stern Life glance at the other man his was a rough but kindly face:

"What do you ask?"

"I ask not, I demand."

"What?"

"Justice! Come, give her up. All else I will take later; meantime I do insist on naught but justice. I waited long; patiently I waited; my days were spent in labor, sans rest, sans light! I waited But enough! I seek for justice!"

And unto him Life calmly answered: "Take."