

VLADIMIR KOROLENKO

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Korolenko, Vladimir Galaktionovich (1853-1921) was a noted Russian short-story writer and publicist. When he was arrested in 1879 for alleged populist activities and exiled to Siberia, he used the time to write many lyrical tales, exceptional for their descriptions of human sadness and desolate nature. His existential sufferings in Yakutsk, during which he often contemplated suicide, express themselves in his writings. "My little hut was like a lost island in a boundless ocean," he wrote in his diary. "Not a sound about me....The minutes, the hours passed, and insensibly the fatal moment approached when the 'cursed land' pierced me with the hostility of its freezing cold and its terrible shadows, when the high mountains covered with black forests rose menacingly before me, the endless steppes, all lying between me and my country and all that was dear to me...Then came the terrible sadness, which in the depths of your heart, suddenly lifts up its sinister head." One of Korolenko's famous short stories, Makar's Dream (1885) is set in Siberia. Makar, a poor little peasant, who has become half-savage by his association with the Yakutsk people, dreams of a better future. Normally he has no time for dreaming; his days are consumed by hard physical labor—chopping, ploughing, sowing, and grinding. He only dreams when he is drunk. One Christmas Eve, Makar drifts off in a drunken sleep and dreams that the god of the woods,

Tayon, has judged him harshly for his former deeds and has decided to transform him into a post-horse. Makar ends up convincing Tayon of his innate goodness. In another famous story, The Blind Musician (*Slepoi Muzykant*) (1886), a blind youth overcomes his painful self-pity to become a sensitive violinist whose music takes on universal resonance. As his uncle watches the captivated audience, he thinks about his nephew. "He understands suffering. He has had his share, and that is why he can change it into music for this happy audience." Korolenko's talent thus lies in his expressions of the emotional and sentimental dimensions of life, his compassion for the downtrodden, as well as his masterful depictions of nature much like Turgenev's. Like many Russian writers, however, he felt that that literature should play a leading role in advancing human progress; a writer should not stand idly by in the face of injustice. Korolenko sought to create works that would unite realism and romanticism. In one historical story about the revolt of the Jews against the Romans ("A Tale about Florus, Agrippa, and Menachem, the Son of Jehudah"), Korolenko rebuts Tolstoy's doctrine of non-violent resistance to evil. In works such as "The Day of Atonement" ("Sudny Den," first entitled "Iom-Kipur," 1890) and later in "House Number 13," Korolenko also took issue with anti-Semitism. Korolenko's later condemnation of the Bolshevik regime and the Red Terror he witnessed is revealed by his indignant letters to Anatoly Lunacharsky, the People's Commissar for Education.

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