

## **Three Plays without Words**

No.2: "The Mazurka"

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**No 2: "The Mazurka"**

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*The play is set in various locations and the text refers to them as if the action was actually taking place there. This is basically for the guidance of the performer. There is only one actor and no props or sets. Music is essential to this play, preferably played live.*

**Dramatis Personnae**

A young man of around 27 years or so

**Scene:** *Early Morning*

A man walks on to the stage. He is young, well-groomed and modestly dressed. He appears to be at peace with the world. All seems to be going well with him. He limbers up and sits down before an imaginary piano. He smiles as he picks up a book of musical compositions and begins to search for the one he plans to practice. He finds it, places it on the stand and swiftly moves his fingers across the piano keys, sort of warming up before he actually begins to play. He has a confident, almost beatific expression on his face for he is in his element and all is right with the world.

The first bars he plays don't sound right (***Music: Chopin - Mazurka No 32 in C sharp minor, Op 50, No 3***). Something is missing. He acknowledges this lapse with a tolerant smile, shakes his head a

trifle ruefully and tries again. Still not good enough. What could the matter be? He stares at the sheet of music before him, composes himself and tries to play it even more carefully this time. But once again, he is disappointed. He is beginning to get irritated and also a bit flustered. What should he do? He is reading the notes correctly but the music just refuses to play.

While he is pondering over his next move, the doorbell rings. He walks over to the door, opens it and jumps back in alarm. The caller appears to have intimidated him.

"What do you want?" he gestures defensively.

The visitor replies aggressively. The man shrugs and turns out his pockets as if to prove that he has no money. An argument ensues and ends with the man hanging his head in shame as he closes the door and returns to his piano. He has been grossly insulted, which results in feelings of inadequacy that force him to sink deeper and deeper into depression. For a while, he remains lost in his dismal thoughts. His gaze wanders here and there until it falls on the sheet of music before him and his face momentarily lights up. He will give it another try. With an optimistic smile on his lips, he attempts to play the score yet again. The music, however, is still lacklustre. Things just don't seem to be working out. He sits down, dejected and exasperated. But then, as if out of nowhere, a determined look appears on his face. He has had an idea, an awakening of sorts, almost an epiphany: he will go out into the wide world to earn money by the sweat of this brow. By God, so he

will! That will show them. Yes, sir, it most certainly will! If others can do it, so can he. He quickly slips on his shoes, picks up an umbrella and walks out into the street.

**(Music: Tchaikovsky - Piano Concerto No. 1 in B flat minor, 1st movement)** The man moves with a determined expression on his face and a jaunty spring in his stride. He is going to take the bull by its horns. No one fools around with him. No, sir! He will jolly well show them. Yes sir, he most certainly will. He looks around as if searching for something. Ah! There it is -- an employment exchange! Maybe, they will have something for him. He walks in and introduces himself at the registration desk. The clerk doesn't seem very impressed by the man's qualifications, so he embellishes them as best he can. The clerk, however, is still not impressed. The man tries another approach. He puffs out his chest and flexes his muscles as if to indicate that he is absolutely fit and not in the least averse to hard work. This, too, doesn't go down very well with the clerk. The man begins to argue, gradually breaking down to a pleading whine. Surely, there must be something a person like him could do? The clerk relents and hands the man a large attaché case. The man opens it to find it packed with books. He has been offered the job of an encyclopaedia salesman! He is gratified for now he is gainfully employed. The attaché case is heavy and he staggers out into the street, stooped over to one side by its sheer weight.

The man looks around for someone he can sell his wares to. He tries to catch the attention of people passing by but they ignore him. He then pauses to survey his surroundings and decides to change his strategy. He walks up to a nearby building and rings the doorbell of the first apartment he comes to. No answer. He tries again and this time the door is opened in a fairly violent manner, causing him to jump back in alarm. But before he can even open his mouth, the door is slammed shut, right in his face. He is hurt by this discourteous behaviour but soon recovers his composure and moves on to the next apartment. Not to be out done, he wedges his foot firmly in the door as soon as it is opened. This aggressive sales tactic allows him to give vent to his entire sales pitch. He extols the wide-ranging scope of his encyclopaedias and how lucky his customer is to have such a fabulous bargain at such a phenomenally low, almost throw-away price; that this is merely a one-time introductory offer and so on and so forth. After he finishes, he pauses for breath, expecting the customer to place an immediate order. Instead, the latter declares that he is not interested in buying encyclopaedias or any other books, for that matter. The protagonist is absolutely flabbergasted. He continues to receive this kind of an indifferent response wherever he goes, till he is so dispirited that he throws down his entire load of books and walks away, his head downcast. To hell with everything! his stride seems to proclaim. But he has bills to pay and creditors to contend with, so he needs to find some kind of employment and

the sooner the better. He shivers involuntarily as he remembers the hard, uncompromising look on the face of the bill collector who had only so recently called on him.

The man walks on in the heat of the blazing sun, constantly wiping the sweat from his brows as he searches for something to do. Tired and thirsty, he tries to dodge a passing taxi; but it comes right up to him and stops with a nerve-shattering screeching of brakes. The man jumps aside in alarm and glares at driver as he steps out of the taxi. Much to his surprise, the driver approaches him and offers him a job, provided he has a valid driver's licence. The man eagerly replies in the affirmative and promptly extracts his licence from his wallet for the driver to see. The latter appears to be satisfied and hands over the car keys to the man. This is going to be fun! thinks the man. It's only for a short while, till the driver has a bite to eat. But what the hell, something is better than nothing.

The man shakes hands with the cabdriver and climbs into the car with alacrity. He starts the car and satisfied with the hum of the engine, he sets out in search of his first fare. (**Music: Haydn - Trumpet Concerto in E flat, 3rd movement**). He is cruising around when someone calls out to him. He stops and then heads eagerly towards his first customer. The man listens to his passenger's instructions, sets his meter and moves off in the direction indicated. He drives very carefully but the traffic is unruly and he has a number of close shaves. A traffic policeman stops him and

asks him to pull over. The man does so and protests that he hasn't done anything wrong and is absolutely innocent. The officer, however, remains unmoved and fines him. A sly, cunning smile appears on the face of the protagonist as he tries to slip the policeman a bribe. He is severely rebuffed for his efforts and fined even more heavily. As the officer walks away after suitably reprimanding him, the man makes a cheeky obscene remark, casting aspersions on the officer's parentage. This further enrages the policeman, who turns around and bears down on the man, with a distinctly menacing look on his face. Absolutely aghast, the man decides that discretion is the better part of valour and apologises profusely. The policeman is somewhat placated and departs, after once again admonishing him. The chastised man shakes his fist in impotent rage at the back of the retreating policeman. There is, however, really nothing he can do, so he gets back into his car and drives away.

It is the peak hour for traffic and so the man has to use all his skills, swerving from side to side and braking ever so often, to avoid other vehicles. All of a sudden, he turns into a side lane, where he is forced to come to an abrupt halt. He is now stuck in a traffic jam! Dammit! He inches forward, bumper to bumper. Meanwhile, his passenger has begun to lose patience and protests. The man turns around to pacify him and narrowly misses hitting the car ahead. He sticks his head through the window in order to apologise to the other driver, only to narrowly miss another



vehicle. The passenger is alarmed and expresses a desire to disembark from the taxi. The man tries to calm him down but the passenger refuses to listen. He needs to get off! he insists petulantly. The man points out that the passenger is still far from his destination but the latter is adamant. At last, the man shrugs and moves over to the side of the road, where he brings the car to a halt. As he watches the passenger alight from the cab, the man remembers that he has not received his fare. Hey! What about the fare? The passenger apologises and immediately pays up. The man graciously accepts the apology along with the money proffered and hands back the change. The passenger refuses to take it and asks him to consider it a tip. The man is grateful and happily pockets the money. Not bad. Something lost, something gained. He then drives away in search of another fare.

Someone waves out to him and he pulls over, giving a flamboyant twist to the steering wheel. Another fare? Great! But who is this? Oh No! It's the cabdriver who had employed him. The cabdriver says he has finished with his lunch and is ready to have his taxi back. Just as the man was beginning to enjoy himself! Heaving a deep sigh, the man hands over the car keys along with the money he has earned. The cabdriver in turn pays him what he is due. Hey! This is great! It has been a while since he has earned any money and so he is justifiably proud of himself. He counts the crisp notes of currency with a flourish and places them in his wallet. Things

seem to be looking up but he is still short of the amount required to pay his debts.

Never mind, it's only midday. Something or the other is bound to come up. Besides, it's time for lunch. He looks around and spots a sandwich vendor, from whom he buys a nice, large, toasted sandwich and sits down on the kerb to eat it. He watches the traffic pass by as he munches away happily. The sandwich soon disappears and the man slowly gets up. Lost in his thoughts, he absent-mindedly tosses the sandwich wrapper on to the pavement. A policeman sees him and pulls him up for littering. The man, a guilty look on his face, pleads with the policeman. He hadn't done it on purpose. It happened inadvertently. Of course, he will pick it up. He retrieves the wrapper and throws it into a large bin, a few steps away from him. As he does this, he notices a poster on wall. What's this? He reads it carefully as he thoughtfully strokes his chin. This is certainly not what he is looking for. He ponders over its contents for a moment and then marches off to apply for the post. He is hired on the spot and is handed a broom. Soon the man is out in the street, sweeping with commendable vigour ***(Music: Franz Schubert - Piano Sonata in E major D157- Andante)***.

The man sweeps all the rubbish he can find into a neat pile and then stands back, arms akimbo, to survey his work. Just then, there is a sudden gust of wind and the debris is scattered all over the place. The man rushes around in a frenzy, trying to retrieve it. As the wind dies down, the man returns to his task of sweeping the

street. This time he cleans up and quickly dumps the rubbish into a large bin. Soon the street is spotlessly clean. Now that's what one calls a job well done!

While he is busy sprucing himself up, a passing vehicle splashes him with mud. He shouts out angrily and shakes his fist in the direction of the speeding car. Uncouth imbeciles! The nerve of some people! They buy enormous cars that resemble monster trucks and then strut around as if they were relatives of the lamentably late and un-mourned Frankenstein! He tries to brush the mud off his clothes but it only makes matters worse. He brightens up, however, when he sees his employer coming up to pay him. The man bashfully accepts the money proffered. Nice going! he congratulates himself. He is pleased but he still needs more money to pay back what he owes.

Once again, he sets out in quest of a fresh opening. He wanders around until he comes to a graveyard. Perhaps, he can find some work here? He is hesitant but beggars can't be choosers. So after steeling himself for the ordeal, he enters the cemetery. He is promptly hired by the undertaker, who hands him a large shovel. With a deep sigh, he begins to dig. The ground is very hard and the wind seems to have picked up, causing him to shiver. At last, he is done and he leans on his shovel as he stares at the open grave before him. He steps aside as he sees the coffin being brought out and stands by solemnly as the burial ceremony takes place. **(Music: Vivaldi - Concerto No 4 in F Minor, RV 297 'Winter')** He is so moved

by the proceedings that tears roll down his cheeks. He wipes them away with the back of his hand. All kinds of memories have surfaced. He remembers his parents, grandparents, relatives and all the friends he had known. As the service draws to an end, the man tries to pull himself together. After wiping away his tears, he collects his pay from the undertaker and walks away from the cemetery with a weary stride.

As he strolls down the road, a cool, fresh, reviving breeze blows on his face and he begins to look on the brighter side. Things aren't really all that bad. He has managed to earn quite a bit of money. How much? Let's see now. He counts his money carefully. Not bad. Not bad, at all. Not only can he pay off his debts but he will have a bit left over. His mood begins to lift as he realises that he has achieved something, after all. He begins to walk with a spring to his stride (***Music: Chopin - Galop Marquis in A flat major***), The man is so engrossed in his reverie that he loses his way and ends up in a lonely spot. He has taken a wrong turn somewhere for there seems to be no one in sight. He surveys the area around him and spots a stranger in the distance. He walks up to him and asks for directions. Instead of answering him, the stranger pulls out a knife and asks him to hand over all his money (*The music stops*) The man protests but the thug responds by viciously slashing him across the face and then beats him up mercilessly. The man writhes in pain on the ground. After a while, he manages to raise himself from his prone position. He picks up

his purse, which he finds lying close by, opens it and finds it empty. He has lost all his earnings. Nothing remains.

The man begins his slow walk home, literally dragging himself across the road. At last, he arrives at his apartment, bruised and battered, opens it and stumbles in. He immediately slumps down into a chair and wearily places his head in his hands. For a while, he is despondent, till his eye falls on his piano. He sits down to play and gives the keys a tentative touch. He picks up his book of compositions, selects one, places it on the music stand before him and settles down to play. The results are most gratifying. Not bad, if he says so himself. He continues to better his rendition until what he is playing sounds right. **(Music: Mozart - Rondo Alla Turca, from Piano Sonata in A)**. The pianist is soon lost in the nuances of the composition. He is so euphoric now that his face glows with confidence as he moves from bar to bar, fingering the melody on the magical black and ivory keys. We leave him happily engrossed in the music, oblivious to the fact that the bill collector and his thugs will arrive in the morning to square their debts with him. For the moment, his entire attention is on the notes inscribed on the sheet of music before him. That, for him, is all that matters.

**NOTE: A pianist struggles with a musical composition till he is utterly frustrated. For some reason, he is unable to focus on his art. Although he is perceptive enough to realise he is missing out on the spirit of the work, he is unable to do anything about it. He**

is faced with the eternal enigma of the artist: on the one hand, he wishes to perfect his craft; on the other, he has to earn a living. What should he do? Who will pay his bills? On the spur of the moment, he decides to step out into the great wide world.

He spends the day doing nothing really special; but something in him changes. He is not the same person he was a short while ago. On reaching home, he selects a different composition and plays it perfectly. Does he find Mozart easier to play than Chopin, or is there more to it? Maybe he will try Chopin's *mazurka* tomorrow or the day after and maybe he won't. Would a different kind of person, one less sensitive, have reacted otherwise? It is really difficult to say for a work of art, such as the one the protagonist attempts to interpret, has a life of its own, independent of all factors extraneous to its existence. But then, for that matter, so does the pianist.