

FAMOUS BLIND

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We frequently encounter, in History, persons of great celebrity, or at least of a certain interest, who show how, despite the loss of the most noble of the senses, man is able to overcome this disability and to lead not only a dignified life, but also to achieve such great success as to merit his being honoured by posterity. This, of course, is much easier and more frequent in case of monocular blindness, which we shall discuss in the first place.

PART I

MONOCULAR BLINDNESS

We shall deal only briefly with the frequently encountered lack of binocular vision in strabism, which is seen in between two and three percent of the population (Hugonnier, 1965).

Buffon, the highly skilled naturalist and biologist, was squinting and made reference to strabism in his works. There exist forty-eight portraits of Buffon, and nevertheless his anomaly is perceptible in none of them.

In some famous paintings, however, there is evidence of strabism; thus, for example, in "St. Catherine of Alexandria" by **Raphael**, in which divergent strabism can be observed. In several canvases by **Lesueur**, a "false strabism" may be seen, which is in fact hypertelorism, that is to say, an abnormally long distance between the centres of the two eyes. This was a defect shown by his wife and which he reproduced in some of his paintings, such as "St. Raphael guided by Tobias" (Museum of Grenoble) and "The three Muses" (Clio, Euterpe and Thalia), which is to be seen in the Louvre.

In Old Castilian, those suffering from strabism were called "tuertos" (one-eyed), although, nowadays, only those suffering from complete monocular blindness are called "tuertos".

Art has not disdained, on several occasions, to depict a model with monophthalmia, such as the beautiful portrait of the French School of the XVIIth century, of a one-eyed flautist, which can be seen in the Cabinet Clovet at the Louvre.

The curious sculpture in coco-nut "The one-eyed man" by Dr. **Trias Maxenchs** merits a mention for its interesting and peculiar style.

In general, the one-eyed person conceals his defect with a prosthesis. Sometimes, without concealment, the monophthalmia was betrayed by the presence of a bandage. The numerous one-eyed persons who have distinguished themselves, in sciences as well as in arts, prove that monophthalmia is not a drawback for genius, any more than it is for feminine beauty; a well-known example of this was the Princess of Eboli. **Ana de Mendoza y de la Cerda, Princess of Eboli** (1520 – 1592) was the daughter of **Don Diego Hurtado de Mendoza**, Viceroy of Peru. At the age of twelve years, she was married to **Ruy Gomez de Silva**, Prince of Eboli; her relations with **Antonia Pérez**, favourite of Philip II, are well known to historians, as also is the displeasure of Philip II, which finally led to the arrest and banishment of Pérez.

Other one-eyed women, too, were famous for their beauty, such as the **Countess of Moret**, who bore a son, **Antoine de Bourbon**, to Henri IV.

Hannibal and **Sertorius**, conqueror of Pompey both lost an eye in battle. Pompey became proud of his defect and said that it was his trophy, better than those kept by others in their houses. **Wenceslas III**, King of Bohemia (1289 – 1306), also was one-eyed. He died assassinated at the age of seventeen years, while he was preparing his troops for war against Poland.

Camoëns (*fig. 1*), a great figure in portugese literature, seems to have been born in Lisbon in 1524. At the age of twenty-three years, he had to leave the Court to go to Ceuta, where he served in the garrison. In a fight against the Kabyles, he lost his right eye. Later, he returned to Lisbon, where, because of bloody affrays, he was imprisoned. Thereafter, he embarked for the West

Indies. Nevertheless, the many shipwrecks, love affairs, court cases and imprisonments in his unhappy and intense life did not prevent him from writing the most beautiful poems in the portuguese language. His single eye deprived him, seemingly of the ladies' favours. Nevertheless, **Camoëns** saw, in one of his madrigals the shrine of love in the eyes of his beauties:

*''Eyes which enshrine a thousand flowers
and which regard with so much grace
that it seems that Love
lives here, where you live too''*

At the court of Louis XIV, MMe. **de Beauvais** (1608 – 1675) was famous for her beauty, despite the fact that she was blind in one eye. The **Duchess of Devonshire**, who married Cavendish in 1774, gracefully concealed her blind eye with a lock of her hair. In one of his pictures, **Reynolds** painted her in profile.

Among some outstanding and famous men, too, some were blind in one eye. Mention should be made of the **Count of Neipperg**. He was blind in one eye from the age of nineteen, but became nevertheless the husband of Marie-Louise of Austria. The elegant Spanish Grandes, **Don Cypriano Portocarrero y Palafox, Count of Miranda, de Montijo y de Mora**, wore with arrogance a bandage over his right eye.

Needless to say that, when the loss of an eye was due to a war action, it only enhanced the valour and accentuated the bellicose appearance of the soldier.

Of the warriors of Antiquity, who, in noble combat, lost an eye, we would mention **Philip II**, King of Macedon, father of Alexander the Great, who lost an eye at the siege of Methone. In that town lived Aster of Amphipolis, a renowned archer, who, one day, offered his services to Philip of Macedon, assuring him of being able to shoot down the most rapid bird. Philip replied that he would engage him when he should have declared war on the swallows. At the siege of Methone, resentfully, **Aster** shot an arrow with the inscription ''For Philip's right eye''. And, in effect, it destroyed it. Philip had the arrow shot back, bearing on its return journey another inscription: ''If **Philip** takes the town, **Aster** will be hanged''. Which was done shortly afterwards.

Marshal de Rantzau was wounded sixty times in war. At the siege of Arras (1640), he lost his left leg; he had already lost his right eye at the siege of Dôle (1636). May we give a translation of the inscription on his grave:

*''Of the Rantzau's body but a part lies here,
The rest he left on the fields of War.
His limbs and his fame are dispersed far and wide.
Oft he fell but his glory still triumphed.
With his blood for his victories in full he paid,
But his heart he kept always unscathed''.*

Another, lesser-known soldier, **André de Foix**, Seigneur de Lespavre, lost his left eye in battle against the Spanish. After some time, he lost the other eye, because of sympathetic ophthalmia, a disease found relatively frequently at that time.

Christian IV, King of Denmark (*fig. 2*), lost his right eye in a naval battle against the Swedes. Immediately after having been wounded, he rose, encouraging all to fight, without anyone's being aware, until much later, of the fact that the King had lost an eye. In Rosenborgh Castle, in Copenhagen, is preserved the handkerchief with which he bandaged his wounded eye.

The **Count of Pagan**, master of Vauban, the famous military engineer, lost his left eye and was wounded by a bullet from a musket, during the siege of Montauban, in 1621.

Blas de Lezo (1641 – 1687), officer of the spanish marine (*fig. 3*), lost his left leg in combat. Afterwards, at the battle of Toulon, he lost also an eye, but remained in the Navy. He became famous during the defence of Cartagena de Indias. This city resisted the attack by an english squadron commanded by **Admiral Vernon**, who, prematurely sure of victory, had a medal struck to commemorate his entry in the port. However, he was beaten and had to withdraw.

Gregor Alexandrovich Potemkin (1739 – 1791) was born in a family of the Russian nobility and entered the army when he was still very young. At the age of twenty-three years, **Catherine II** appointed him Gentleman of the Privy-Chamber. Some time later, he lost his eye, but he did not lose the favor of the Sovereign. His influence in russian politics and wars was always decisive. During the second Russo-Turkish war, he was in supreme command of the russian forces and was made a Count by Russia and a Prince of the Empire by the Emperor Joseph II of Austria.

Nelson lost an eye at the siege of Calvi (1795). On the other eye, he wore a monocle, and as may be seen in some of his portraits, he had only one arm. At the battle of Copenhagen, he was lieutenant under Admiral Parker. When this gave the signal to break off the engagement, Nelson continued the battle. When his officers reminded him of the Admiral's order, he placed his monocle on his blind eye and replied: "I am blind in one eye, so I cannot see the signal and I cannot obey it."

We must add to the list of brilliant war heroes, that of other persons who were monophthalmic by accident, because they were conspicuous in various circumstances and gained a remarkable place in History.

Lycurgus, the Greek legislator, was the son of the King of Lacedemon. He was wounded in one eye with a stick by a young man called Alcandro, with whom he had not even a argument. After the incident, he built a temple to

Minerva, but it is not known whether because he was cured or because Alcandro could not damage both his eyes, as it was his intention.

In more modern times, **Nicolas-Jaques Conté** (1755 – 1805) lost his left eye as a consequence of a hydrogen explosion during one of his chemical experiments. He was a military engineer under Napoleon, whom he accompanied on the Egyptian Campaign. In one of his portraits, with the pyramids in the background, he is depicted with the left orbit covered by an ugly bandage.

André Masséna (1756 – 1817), Duke of Rivoli, Prince of Essling, lost an eye in a hunting accident, through a bullet from Napoleon's gun. The emperor made him one of his most outstanding marshals and was always grateful for his respect in not divulging the origin of the projectiles.

Gambetta (*fig. 4*), in childhood, suffered a penetrating injury of the right eye. In 1867, the young lawyer was examined by one of his friends, the famous **Dr. Fieuzal**, who recommended him to the illustrious **de Wecker**. The latter diagnosed buphthalmia and carried out an enucleation under ether anaesthesia. The enucleated globe was found to have an antero-posterior diameter twice that of the normal.

Baron **Alphonse de Rothschild**, in 1893, lost an eye in a hunting accident. He died in 1900 and in his will left the funds for the construction of a large ophthalmological hospital. That was the origin of the Rothschild Institute, in Paris, an excellent centre of treatment and research.

Finally, mention should be made of the famous inventor, **Marconi** (*fig. 5*), who lost his right eye in 1912 as a consequence of a car accident. He continued nevertheless with alacrity his brilliant research work.

There can be not doubt that monocular blindness is a serious handicap, especially from the psychological point of view, but, as it is demonstrated by the examples we have given, it does not prevent a fine and fruitful life.

PART II

BILATERAL BLINDNESS

Bilateral blindness becomes every day less frequent and easier to prevent and to cure. From the prophylactic point of view, we would mention only the efficacy of **Credé's** method, which has practically eliminated ophthalmia in new-born babies, and the judicious and adequate administration of oxygen to premature babies, which mostly prevents retrolental fibroplasia. As a result of the efficacy of therapy, the new treatments for trachoma, syphilis and the like, have reduced enormously the number of blind people.

On the other hand, it is lamentable that, in past times, blinding was imposed by inhuman legislations, as a punishment for certain offences. The germanic peoples applied it for treason and counterfeiting of money. In Spain, the "Fuero Juzgo" applied blinding as a punishment for infanticide and for treason. The "Partidas" (Statute No. 6, Art. 31, Clause 7) abolished that punishment, except for those who proclaimed – with evil intention – that they would like to see the King die, in order that they should not see their wish fulfilled.

Painters have repeatedly taken blindness as a theme, giving their works a realistic and impressive quality, sometimes touched by the gentle and consoling hand of charity. Thus, in ancient iconography, there are many representations of the blind cured by the Saviour. An interesting monograph on that subject has been published by Professor **Jaeger**, of Heidelberg.

Many paintings of more recent times represent thaumaturgical cures. In a painting by **Madrazo**, which is in the Royal Palace in Madrid, we see a group of sick people imploring St. Isabel and in the middle, a beautiful girl with the sick eyes covered by a bandage.

On other occasions, the absence of vision due to retinal and optic nerve diseases, becomes apparent from the attitude which Professor **Marquez** called the "head held high", without photophobia, but with extended hands, as depicted in an expressive work by **C. Collet**.

In many cases, the lack of vision is expressed by the presence of a child-guide by the activity of the blind people, who formerly was often a vendor of novels (**Ribera**, **Bayeu**, etc.).

In earlier times, too, the blind were often compelled to announce their presence by music. Frequently, the blind man held in his hands a guitar or hurdy-gurdy, as in a painting by **La Tour**, in the Nantes Museum, a typical example of pathetic realism in art.

The hurdy-gurdy, or "vielle", which was a string instrument with a wheel and a keyframe, was very popular in the Middle Ages. Its popularity declined under Louis XVI, although it is still a popular musical instrument in some parts of France (**Marvan** and **Berry**). In the Middle Ages, it was also known as the "lyra mendicorum", or "Bayerleyer".

It is an undeniable fact that in the absence of vision, the other senses become more sensitive, which explains the special acuity of hearing and touch. This fact explains the particular competence of the blind in certain professions or occupations (musicians, masseurs, for example).

In a painting by **Lucas Jordan**, we can admire the realism of a blind sculptor. In modern schools for the rehabilitation of the blind, sculpture is not



Legends of the Stamps

Fig. 1: Camoëns (Portugal).

Fig. 2: Christian IV, King of Denmark.

Fig. 3: Blas de Lezo (Spain).

Fig. 4: Gambetta (France).

Fig. 5: Marconi (Italy).

Fig. 6: Tobit by Rembrandt (The Netherlands).

Fig. 7: Homer (Greece).

Fig. 8: Milton, dictating his "Paradise Lost" to his daughter (picture of O.P. Soma at the Museum of Budapest).

Fig. 9: John the Blind (Luxemburg).

forgotten. In one of them (Lighthouse, New York), we have admired some beautiful sculptures made by the blind.

Present-day painting, with expressionistic tendencies, often has been blind for theme. Such is the case, for example for **Pablo Picasso**, who, in 1903 in Barcelona, painted "The old Jew", which is now in the Moscow Museum. In the Art Institute in Chicago, one can see "The old guitarist" and in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, "The blind man's meal", all painted by that great Malagan-Barcelonan artist.

In one of the designs for tapestries which the French State ordered from Sert for the Gobelins factory in Paris, there was "The blind man", which today belongs to the collection of Prof. **A. Puigvert**. Other designs also represent personages and scenes of the picaresque novel. It is not rare to see in these that the child-guide plays silly tricks on the blind person. In **Sert's** drawing of the **Puigvert** collection, the blind man carries a sack over his shoulder; his trousers are torn, perhaps because of earlier falls. Now, the child-guide cruelly prepares another fall, by leading him on to the planks of some scaffolding.

The misery evident in the representations of the blind, such as we see them in the museums, is very far removed from the magnificent human achievements that have been accomplished by many blind who have distinguished themselves in History. Of these, we have chosen only a few who were splendid personages or authentic models for famous painters.

TOBIT

Tobit was often depicted in the paintings of Rembrandt (*fig. 6*). In the Vulgate, the Book of Tobias, together with those of Judith and Esther, follows the historical Books. There is, however, considerable doubt about the text, because the original was lost, as was the Aramaic text used by St. Jerome. The narrative deals very freely with history and geography. Moreover, there can be no doubt that the venerable author did not claim to be writing a book on history, but, even if it was probably based on facts, these only served as a pretext for imparting religious instruction to the readers.

Tobit, the Patriarch, tells us that when he was asleep in a courtyard, having his face uncovered because of the heat, some sparrow droppings fell on to his eyes, and there appeared in them some white spots. "I went to the doctors", he related, "so that they should cure me, but the more remedies they applied, the less I could see, because of the spots. Ultimately, I became completely blind and passed four years without being able to see."

Tobit asked his son Tobias to travel from Niniveh to Media, for which journey the Angel Raphael served him as guide. On his return, Raphael said to Tobias, when they were approaching the father: "I am sure that your father's

eye will open. Anoint his eyes with fish-gall, and the white spots will fall like scales from his eyes. And thus, your father will be able to see again the light.”

Rembrandt and other painters have depicted the healing of Tobit. It is curious to report that gall was indeed used as a remedy for certain forms of ophthalmia.

ARTISTS

Two of the greatest poets were blind: **Homer** and **Milton**. One cannot say, with certainty, that **Homer** never existed. The most recent archeological discoveries and those of comparative literature, the uniformity of style evident in the "Iliad" and in the "Odyssey", lead us today to accept the existence of Homer (*fig. 7*), which was still disputed throughout the last century.

The etymology of the name Homer has been subject to much controversy. Among other arguments, it was stated that it derives from the *o* (personal pronoun), the *me* (negation) and from the active participle of the verb *orao* (to see). With these, is formed the word *omeoron* (he who does not see).

Legend depicts **Homer** as a blind, wandering rhapsodist.

Seven greek cities dispute the honour of his birth in the Xth century B.C. In fact, he seems to be born either in Chios or in Smyrna. From his descriptions, giving details of forms and colours, it may be assumed that **Homer's** blindness was not congenital, but acquired at an advanced age.

John Milton (1608 – 1674) did not write, but dictated his great religious epic poem, "Paradise Lost". He was blind, and the magnificent picture by O.P. Soma (1872 – 1880) shows one of his daughters writing it down. This picture has been reproduced on a stamp issued in Hungary (*fig. 8*). In that painting, which is today in the Fine Arts Museum of Budapest, **Milton** is depicted together with two of his daughters and his third wife. He became blind in 1652. He lost his second wife in 1658, and the poet, now completely blind, began to create "Paradise Lost". Some time later, at the age of fifty-five years, he married Isabel Minshull, a young woman of twenty-five. It is amazing to think how, being blind, he could create his immortal poem, which was not published until 1667.

When the windows of their eyes were shut, like finches blinded by cruel hands, the exquisite spirits of some poets were able to create the most beautiful verse, and often the most beautiful musical creations were written by blind.

Francisco de Salinas was born in 1513 and died at the age of seventy-seven years in Salamanca. At the University of Salamanca, we have visited the hall wherein Salinas taught and have seen the organ touched by his hands. Brother **Luis de Leon**, who taught in an adjoining hall, dedicated the following well-known verses to him:

*"The air becomes calm
and clad in beauty and virgin light,
when you, Salinas, produce extraordinary
music with your wisely directed hand."*

Despite being blind, **Salinas** went to Rome and thereafter to Salamanca, where he occupied the Chair of Music from 1575 until his death. In his *"Marcos de Obregon"*, edited in 1586, **Espine** said: *"I saw in Salamanca the blind Abbé Salinas, the most erudite man in the speculative music of the ancient times"*. He was succeeded in the Chair of Music at Salamanca by **Bernardo Clavijo**, the famous organist to Philip III of Spain.

MONARCHS

That the handicap of blindness is not absolute, is demonstrated by the fact that History tells us of monarchs who were blind and who, despite this, were efficient sovereigns esteemed by their subjects.

John the Blind whose portrait was reproduced on a Luxembourg postage stamp (*fig. 9*), was considered by Perroy as one of "the most chivalrous princes of his time". He was succeeded first by Charles IV, a "businesslike" sovereign, and then by Sigismund, also, like "John the Blind", a brilliant knight. It is interesting to note that before John the Blind, in the XIIth century, there was in Luxembourg another monarch, **Henry II**, who was also surnamed "The Blind". He was the son of Godfrey of Namur and Gumersinda, the daughter of Conrad of Luxembourg.

In modern times, other monarchs, too, have been blind. **Georg V of Hanover** (1851), after having lost accidentally one eye, became blind because of sympathetic ophthalmia, which did not prevent him from reigning. In 1883, **Magnus** considered that about five percent of the cases of blindness were due to sympathetic ophthalmia. Since then, early in the present century, especially at the start of the First World War, some clinicians contested the existence of this terrible disease, "of which everyone talks, but which no-one has seen". Nowadays, with biomicroscopy, sympathetic ophthalmia is easily diagnosed, but it must be recognised that there are many relatively benign forms, and that, in others, the evolution can be warded off by ACTH and other modern therapeutic resources.

Summary

History demonstrates that the loss of the most noble of our senses, be it uni- or bilateral, does not hinder numerous persons from overcoming wonderfully their handicap at the point of being often honoured by the posterity in various fields. An evidence of this fact is the issue in different countries of stamps with their effigy.

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Resumen

La Historia nos demuestra que la pérdida del órgano del más noble de nuestros sentidos, unilateral y especialmente cuando es bilateral no impide en muchos casos, de modo admirable, como muchos personajes han podido superar su desgracia hasta hacer con su obra que la posteridad los honre de diversas formas. Una de ellas es que su imagen sea reproducida en la filatelia de diversos países.

Resumé

L'histoire nous montre que la perte du plus noble de nos sens, qu'elle soit uni- ou bilatérale, n'empêche pas de nombreuses personnes de surmonter admirablement leur handicap au point d'être très souvent honorées par la postérité en des domaines divers. Une preuve de ce fait est l'émission dans différents pays de timbres portant leur effigie.

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