

The Country of the Blind H G Wells

Retold in simplified English

There is an old legend in South America of a valley high in the mountains where all the people are blind. The story goes that long ago the people could see, but then a disease came to the valley and they all became blind. The disability was passed to the next generation and their children were born blind too.

Shortly after this there was a terrible earthquake and the mountain roads leading to the valley were blocked by huge rocks. No one could go in or come out and the people in the valley were cut off from the rest of the world for ever and forgotten except in the old legend.

One day, many years later, a man called Nunez, a mountaineer, was climbing in the mountains with an expedition when he slipped and fell over the edge of a steep precipice. The others saw him disappear into a valley far below and everyone thought he was dead.

But Nunez was lucky and even though he dropped hundreds of metres, his fall was broken by soft snow and trees. Cut and bruised, but not seriously injured, he found himself in a steep-sided valley. It was very beautiful with plants and trees, flowers and insects.

He set off to explore and after a while he saw a village in the distance. As he came up to the village he noticed something strange about the houses. They had no windows and their walls were painted in a strange way with many different colours, none of them matching. He also noticed that all the roads leading to the houses had little walls running alongside.

He looked closely at one of the houses and said to himself, 'Whoever painted this house must have been as blind as a bat.' It was then that he suddenly recalled the old legend about the lost valley where the people were blind. At the same time, he remembered an old saying: 'In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king,' and an idea came to him. He repeated the words to himself again and again. 'In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.'

Just then he saw two men coming out of a house. They came up and immediately Nunez could see that they were blind. They put their hands out to touch him and asked him who he was and where he had come from. They spoke a strange, old-fashioned Spanish but Nunez could just about understand. He said he'd come over the mountains from the city by the sea. He told them it was a large, modern city with thousands of people and that all them could see, like him.

Instead of being impressed, the men shook their heads. 'Nonsense,' they said. 'What are these words you are saying "city", "mountains", "sea"? This is crazy talk. There are no such things. You came out of the rocks.'

Nunez tried to argue with them but they wouldn't listen.

'He's a very simple person,' they said. 'He doesn't understand anything.' They told Nunez to follow them to the elders of the village, and took him into one of the houses. It was so dark inside the house that Nunez could hardly see. The elders, strange old creatures with tiny closed eyes, questioned him and again he told them he had come from the city over the mountains. 'You must understand,' he

said, 'I can see!' But none of them would listen. 'You're mad,' they said. 'What are you talking about? There's no such word as "see"'.

Then they examined him with their hands, which they ran all over his body, feeling every inch of him. When they touched his eyes, Nunez said, 'Careful, those are my eyes.'

'There's something wrong with his face,' they said. For their own eyes were quite different: small, closed and shrunken. Large, open, moving eyes were something entirely new to them.

Nunez began to grow impatient. Remember, he said to himself, 'In the country of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.'

He decided to prove to them that he had the power of sight and of the advantages that this had. But this was more difficult than he had imagined. Over the centuries the blind people of the valley had adapted themselves and their surroundings to blindness. They had made everything so that it worked perfectly for blind people. The paths with the little walls running alongside had been specially built so they couldn't get lost. They didn't have words for day and night, but they were aware that there were periods of warm and cold, so they slept during the warm periods – the day, and worked during the cold – the night.

Their other senses, meanwhile, had become amazingly acute. Their hearing and sense of smell were both extremely strong. They didn't need sight in their world.

As much as he tried, Nunez was unable to show his superiority. As they only came out at night, and of course, they had no lights or

windows in their houses, he was at a great disadvantage. He had to learn to do things their way or risk falling over or bumping into things. They thought him clumsy and stupid and they refused to listen to his stories of the world outside. The more he talked, the more they said he was crazy. If he tried to run away, they could hear exactly where he went. One day he got so angry he picked up a spade to hit one of them, but their sharp ears immediately heard his movement.

‘Put that spade down,’ they said.

Somehow, angry as he was, Nunez could not hit a blind man. He gave up. He needed food and drink so he had to accept that as long as he stayed in their world, he would have to obey them. Rather than see him as a king, they saw him as a fool. Still, they were kind enough once he had submitted to their ways, and he was allowed to stay in the village and work as a servant for a man called Yacob. Nunez’s long stay in the Country of the Blind had begun.

Yacob had a daughter called Medina, who Nunez thought was beautiful. Even though she was blind, her eyes didn’t seem to be quite as closed and shrunken as those of the others. He began to talk to her and found that she was friendly and seemed to like him. Every time he saw her, he spoke to her and soon they were having long chats and walks together. At first he didn’t talk about his eyes but as they grew closer, he told her that he could see. To his joy, she listened. Of all the people in the valley, Medina was the only one who would listen to him. She thought his stories about sight were beautiful.

Yacob, however, was not happy about their friendship. He didn't want his daughter to marry a fool like Nunez who talked nonsense and was only fit to be a servant. On the other hand, he was very fond of his daughter Medina and it was clear that she was in love with Nunez. He didn't want to make her unhappy so he went to the village elders to ask for their advice. After a while they came up with a solution. The problem with Nunez, they said, was his strange moving eyes. This was what made him different and what seemed to be the cause of all his crazy talk. They called Nunez to the house of the village elders.

'You wish to marry Medina,' they said.

'I do,' said Nunez.

'Then you'll have to agree to one condition and then we'll allow the marriage to go ahead.'

'What's that?' asked Nunez.

'It's very simple,' they said. 'It's these "eyes" that make you behave like a crazy person. If you want to be one of us, you'll have to agree to have them removed. We'll do an operation to remove your eyes, and then you'll be a happy, normal person like the rest of us.'

Nunez didn't know what to say or what to do, but they were impatient, and he loved Medina so much that at last, after much agonizing, he agreed to have his eyes removed the following week.

On the evening before he was due to have the operation, he went to see Medina. They went for a walk and he looked at the setting sun and said, 'Tomorrow I shall see no more.'

‘I know, dear’ she said. ‘But don’t worry, they won’t hurt you.’

He held her in his arms and kissed her and then she turned and went home to bed. As she went, he looked after her and, full of pity, whispered, ‘Goodbye.’

Then he turned and began to walk. He walked straight out of the village towards the mountains, and when he reached the first hills he began to climb, straight up and up towards the last light of the sun. It was difficult and he cut his arms and legs on the sharp rocks as he pulled himself further and further up and away from the valley.

When the sun finally set he was no longer climbing, but he was far and high. His clothes were torn, his arms and legs were blood-stained and he was bruised in many places, but he lay quietly, and there was a smile on his face.

From where he rested the valley seemed to be in a deep, dark hole nearly a mile below. Already it was dim with haze and shadow, although the mountain peaks around him were things of light and fire. There were deep, mysterious shadows in the valley, blue turning to purple, and purple to darkness, and overhead the infinite vastness of the sky. But he paid no attention as he lay, still and smiling, as if he were happy merely to have escaped from the Valley of the Blind, in which he had wanted to be King. Finally the glow of the sunset passed, the night came, and still he lay there, under the cold, clear stars.

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