

The Puppet-show Man

Hans Christian Andersen

On board the steamer was an elderly man with such a joyful face that if it didn't belie him he must have been the happiest person on earth. In fact, he said he was the happiest; I heard it from his own mouth. He was a Dane, a countryman of mine, and a traveling theatrical producer. His whole company was with him and lay in a large box, for he was the proprietor of a puppet show. He said that his natural cheerfulness had been enlightened by a Polytechnic student, and the experiment had left him completely happy. At first I didn't understand what he meant, but later he explained the whole thing to me, and here is the story.

"In the town of Slagelse," he said, "I gave a performance in the post-office courtyard before a brilliant audience, all juvenile except for two old matrons. Suddenly a person in black, looking like a student, entered the hall and sat down; he laughed at the right places and applauded appropriately. He was an unusual spectator. I was anxious to know who he was, and I learned that he was a student from the Polytechnic Institute of Copenhagen who had been sent out to teach the people in the provinces. My performance ended promptly at eight o'clock, for children must go to bed early, and a manager must consider the convenience of his public. At nine o'clock the student began his lecture and experiments, and now I was one of his spectators. It was all extraordinary to hear and see. Most of it went over my head and into the parson's, as one says, but it made me think that if we mortals can learn so much we must surely be intended to last longer than the little span we're here on earth. What he performed were miracles, and though only small ones, everything was done as easily as a foot fits into a stocking, as naturally as nature functions. In the days of Moses and the prophets such a man would have been counted among the wise men of the land; in the Middle Ages he would have been burned at the stake. I didn't sleep that whole night. And the next evening, when I gave another performance, and the student was again present, I was in an exuberantly good humor. I once heard from an actor that when he played the part of a lover he always thought of one particular lady in the audience; he played only to her and forgot the rest of the house. Now the Polytechnic student was my 'she,' my only spectator, for whom alone I performed.

"After the performance, when the puppets had taken their curtain calls, the Polytechnic student invited me into his room to have a glass of wine; he spoke of my plays, and I spoke of his science, and I think we were equally pleased. But I had the better of it, for there was much of what he did that he couldn't explain to me. For instance, a piece of iron that falls through a spiral becomes magnetic. Now why does that happen? The spirit enters it, but where does it come from? It is just as it is with the humans in our world, I think; our Lord lets them fall through the spiral line of time; the spirit enters them, and there then stands a Napoleon, a Luther, or some such person. 'The whole world is a series of miracles,' said the student, 'but we're so used to them that we call them everyday things.' And he continued talking and explaining until finally my skull seemed lifted from my brain, and I honestly confessed that if I weren't already an old fellow I would at once attend the Polytechnic Institute and learn to examine the world more closely, even though I was one of the happiest of men.

"'One of the happiest!' said the student, and seemed to be quite thoughtful about it. 'Are you really happy?' he asked me.

"'Yes,' I said, 'I am happy. All the towns welcome me whenever I come with my company. But I do, to be sure, have *one* wish, which sometimes haunts me like a goblin-a nightmare that rides on my good nature. I should like to be a real theatrical manager, director of a troupe of real men and women!'

" 'You wish your puppets would come to life; you wish they would become real actors,' he said, 'and you would be their director; and then would you be completely happy, you think?' He didn't believe it, but I believed it, and we talked back and forth about it, without coming any nearer a solution; still we clinked glasses together, and the wine was excellent. There must have been some magic in it, for otherwise the story would have been that I got drunk. That didn't happen, though; I kept my clear viewpoint. Somehow there was sunlight in the room, and it shone from the face of the Polytechnic student. It made me think of the old tales of the gods in their eternal youth, when they wandered on earth. I told him that, and he smiled. I could have sworn that he was one of the old gods in disguise, or at least that he belonged to their family! And he certainly must have been something of that sort, for my greatest wish was to be fulfilled; the puppets would come to life, and I would be the director of real people. We drank to that.

"He packed all my puppets into a wooden box, strapped it on my back, and then let me fall through a spiral. I can still hear how I tumbled; and then I was lying on the floor-this is positively true-and the whole company sprang from the box! The spirit had come upon all of them; all the puppets had become great artists-at least, so they said-and I was their director. Everything was ready for the first performance. But the whole company wanted to speak to me, and the public, too.

"The prima ballerina said that the 'house' was going to 'fall' if she didn't stand on one leg in the show; she was mistress of the whole company, and insisted on being treated as such. The lady who played the empress wanted to be treated as an empress off stage, or else she would get out of practice. The man who had only to deliver a letter made himself as important as the leading man, for the little parts were just as important as the big ones, and all were of equal consequence in making up an artistic whole, he said. The hero would play only parts composed of nothing but exit lines, because those brought him the applause. The prima donna would only play act in a red light, for that suited her best; she refused to appear in a blue one. They were like a troupe of flies in a bottle, and I was in the middle of the bottle with them, for I was the director. My breath stopped, and my head was dizzy; I was as miserable as a man can be. It was quite a new kind of people among whom I found myself now. I only wished I had them all back in their box and that I had never been a director at all. I told them straight out that they were all nothing but puppets-and so they killed me!

"I found myself lying on my bed in my room; how I got there, or how I got away from the Polytechnic student, he may know-I don't. The moon shone in on the floor where the box lay overturned, and all the dolls, great and small, were scattered about in confusion; but I wasn't idle. I jumped out of bed and popped them all back into the box, some on their heads and some on their feet; then I slammed down the lid, and seated myself on the box. It was a picture worth painting! Can't you just see it? I can! 'Now you'll just have to stay in there,' I said. 'And I'll never again wish that you have flesh and blood!' I was in such a relieved frame of mind, I was the happiest of men. The Polytechnic student had entirely purified me. I sat there in a state of utter contentment and fell asleep on the box.

"The next morning-it was really noon, for I slept wonderfully late that day-I was still sitting there, lighthearted, and conscious that my one former wish had been foolish. I asked for the Polytechnic student, but he was gone, like the gods of Greece and Rome; and since that time I have been the happiest of men. I am a happy director; my company never grumbles, or my public either-they're amused to their hearts' content. I can put my plays together just as I like, taking out of other plays anything that pleases me, and no one is annoyed at it. Plays that nowadays are disdained in the big theaters, but that the public ran to see, and wept over, thirty years ago-those plays I now put on. I perform them for the little ones, and the little ones weep just as Papa and Mamma did. I give them *Johanne Montsaucon* and *Dyveke*, but in abbreviated versions, for the youngsters don't want long-winded love stories; what they want is something sad but short.

"I have traveled through Denmark from one end to the other; I know everyone there, and everyone knows me. Now I'm on my way to Sweden, and if I'm successful there and make good money, I'll be a man of Scandinavia; otherwise I won't. I tell you this because you are my countryman."

And I, as his countryman, in turn naturally tell it - just for the sake of telling it.