

The Puppeteer

On board the steamship was an oldish man with such a joyous face that unless it was lying he had to be the happiest man on earth. Which he was, he said; I heard it from his own mouth; he was Danish, a fellow-countryman and a travelling theatre director. He had his entire troupe with him, it lay in a large box; he was a puppeteer. His inborn good humour, he said, had been refined by a graduate from a technological college, and the experiment had resulted in his becoming completely happy. I did not immediately understand him, but he then clearly explained his story to me, and here it is.

I was giving a performance in Slagelse, he said, at the stagecoach inn, and had a splendid house and audience, all of them as yet unconfirmed, except for a couple of old ladies. A black-clad person with the appearance of a student then comes in and sits down, and he laughs in all the right places, claps exactly when he should, he was a quite exceptional spectator! I simply had to find out who he was, and I hear that he is a graduate from the technological college, sent out to instruct people in the provinces. My performance was over at eight o'clock, for children have to go to bed early, and one must take into consideration what is convenient for the audience. At nine o'clock the graduate began his lectures and experiments, and now it was my turn to be a spectator. It was a strange experience to see and listen to him. Most of it was above my head and into the clergyman's, as one says, but I could not help thinking: if we human beings are capable of thinking up such things, we must also be able to last longer than we do before we are laid in the ground. What he performed were only small miracles, and yet all of them seemed as easy as falling off a log, perfectly natural. Back in the time of Moses and the prophets such a graduate of technology would have been one of the country's wise men, and in the Middle Ages he would have been burnt at the stake. I didn't sleep all night, and when the following evening I gave another performance and the graduate was there again, I really began to feel in fine fettle. I have heard from an actor that when playing the role of a lover he concentrates on one single person in the audience, he acts for her alone and forgets the others in the theatre; the graduate was my 'her', my sole spectator, the one I performed for. When the performance was over and all the marionettes had taken their curtain calls, I was invited by the graduate to join him for a glass of wine; he spoke about my play and I spoke about his knowledge of science, and I think we took equal pleasure in doing both, though I spoke more than he did, for there was so much in his world that he could not put into words, such as the fact that a piece of iron that falls through a spiral becomes magnetic, yes, what can one call it: the spirit comes upon it, but where does that spirit come from; it is rather like that with the people of this world, I think, the Lord God allows them to tumble through a time spiral, and the spirit comes upon them, and suddenly you have a Napoleon, a Luther, or some similar person. 'The whole world is a series of marvels,' the graduate said, 'but we are so used to them that we think they are everyday occurrences.' And he spoke and he explained, it finally felt as if he was lifting up the lid of my skull, and I honestly admitted that had I not already been an old fellow, I would immediately have started to study at a technological institution and learn how to go over the world with a fine tooth-comb, despite the fact that I was one of the happiest of men. 'One of the happiest!' he said, and it was as if he was savouring the phrase. 'Are you happy?' he

asked; 'yes,' I said, 'I am happy, and am welcome in all the towns I come to with my troupe. There is admittedly one wish that occasionally troubles me like an irksome pixie, that rides me like a nightmarish hag and spoils my good humour, it is this: to be the theatre manager of a live troupe, a troupe of human actors.' 'You would like your marionettes to come alive, you wish for them to become real actors,' he said, 'and for you be the director, and then you think you would be completely happy?' He did not think so, but I did, and we discussed this back and forth, and we did not seem to be making any headway, but we clinked glasses, and the wine was extremely good, but there must have been a magic potion in it, for otherwise the story would just be about how I became drunk. But I did not, I was clear-sighted. It was as if there was sunshine in the room, it shone out of the face of the graduate of technology, and I could not help thinking of the old gods who were eternally young when they frequented this world; and I said this to him, and then he smiled, and I could have sworn that he was a god in disguise or one of the family – which he was – my highest wish was to be fulfilled, the marionettes would come alive and I would be a director of human actors. We drank to it; he packed all my puppets in the wooden box, strapped it on my back, and then let me tumble through a spiral; I can still hear myself tumbling down, I lay on the floor, it is absolutely true, and the entire troupe leapt out of the box, the spirit had come upon them all, all the marionettes had become excellent artists, they said so themselves, and I was their director; everything was ready for the first performance, the whole troupe wanted to speak to me, as did the audience. The female dancer said that if she didn't stand on one leg, the whole house would come down, she was supremely adept at everything and wished to be treated accordingly. The puppet that played the empress also wished to be treated as an empress off stage, for otherwise she got out of practice; the one used to come in with a letter, behaved as if he was just as important as the male lead, for the small actors and the great actors were of equal importance in the artistic whole, he said. And then the hero insisted on his entire role only consisting of exit speeches, for they were followed by applause; the prima donna wanted only to act under red spotlights, for that became her – she did not want any blue lights. It was like having a flurry of flies in a bottle, and I was right inside the bottle, I was their director. It took my breath away, it took my mind away, I was as miserable as a human being can be, I had ended up among a new human race, my only wish was to have them all back in the box again, and that I had never become their director. I told them straight out that all of them were actually nothing but marionettes, and then they killed me. I was lying on my bed in my room, how I got there from being with the graduate he must know, for I don't. The moon was shining down onto the floor, where the puppet box lay overturned with all the puppets strewn about the place, large and small, the whole caboodle; but I was not slow to act, I leapt out of bed, and flung them all back into the box, some of them landing on their head, others on their feet; I slammed the lid shut and sat down on top of the box; it was worth painting, can you picture it, I can. 'Now you're going to stay put,' I said, 'and I will never again wish for you to be flesh and blood!' – I was so light-hearted, I was the happiest person on earth; the graduate of technology had refined me; I sat there in utter bliss and fell asleep on the box, and the next morning – well, it was more around noon, for I slept a remarkably long time that morning – I was still sitting there, happy, for I had learnt that my earlier single wish had been stupid; I asked for the graduate of technology, but he was gone, just like the Greek and Roman gods. And from that time onwards I have been the happiest of men. I am a happy

director, my troupe do not reason, nor does my audience, they enjoy themselves from the bottom of their hearts; I can freely make up my own plays. I take the best bits of all the plays, and nobody gets upset about that. I now put on plays that are now looked down on at the major theatres, but which audiences flocked to and wept at thirty years ago; I now give them to the youngsters and they sit snivelling just like their fathers and mothers used to snivel; I give them 'Johanna von Montfaucon' and 'Dyveke', but in shortened versions, for young ones won't put up with all that long-drawn-out love nonsense, what they want is something unhappy, but quick. I have now criss-crossed the whole of Denmark, I know everyone here and am known by everyone; now I'm off to Sweden, and if I am a great success and earn plenty of money there, I'll be a proper Scandinavian, though not otherwise – I'm telling you this as you are a fellow-countryman.

And I, as a fellow-countryman, naturally pass it on at once, for the sheer pleasure of doing so.