



# *The Puppet Showman*

Hans Christian Andersen  
DanishNordicScandinavian

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On board the steamer was an elderly man with such a merry face that, if it did not belie him, he must have been the happiest fellow in creation. And, indeed, he declared he was the happiest man; I heard it out of his own mouth. He was a Dane, a travelling theatre director. He had all his company with him in a large box, for he was proprietor of a puppet-show. His inborn cheerfulness, he said, had been purified by a Polytechnic candidate, and the experiment had made him completely happy. I did not at first understand all this, but afterwards he explained the whole story to me, and here it is. He told me:

“It was in the little town of Slagelse I gave a representation in the hall of the posting-house, and had a brilliant audience, entirely a juvenile one, with the exception of two respectable matrons. All at once a person in black, of student-like appearance, came into the room and sat down; he laughed aloud at the telling parts, and applauded quite appropriately.

That was quite an unusual spectator for me! I felt anxious to know who he was, and I heard he was a candidate from the Polytechnic Institution in Copenhagen, who had been sent out to instruct the folks in the provinces. Punctually at eight o'clock my performance closed; for children must go early to bed, and a manager must consult the convenience of his public. At nine o'clock the candidate commenced his lecture, with experiments, and now I formed part of his audience. It was wonderful to hear and to see. The greater part of it was beyond my scope; but still it made me think that if we men can find out so much, we must be surely intended to last longer than the little span until we are hidden away in the earth. They were quite miracles in a small way that

he showed, and yet everything flowed as naturally as water! At the time of Moses and the prophets such a man would have been received among the sages of the land; in the middle ages they would have burned him at a stake. All night long I could not go to sleep. And the next evening, when I gave another performance, and the candidate was again present, I felt fairly overflowing with humour.

I once heard from a player that when he acted a lover he always thought of one particular lady among the audience; he only played for her, and forgot all the rest of the house; and now the Polytechnic candidate was my 'she,' my only auditor, for whom alone I played. And when the performance was over, all the puppets were called before the curtain, and the Polytechnic candidate invited me into his room to take a glass of wine; and he spoke of my comedies, and I of his science; and I believe we were both equally pleased. But I had the best of it, for there was much in what he did of which he could not always give me an explanation. For instance, that a piece of iron that falls through a spiral should become magnetic. Now, how does that happen? The spirit comes upon it; but whence does it come? It is as with people in this world; they are made to tumble through the spiral of this world, and the spirit comes upon them, and there stands a Napoleon, or a Luther, or a person of that kind. 'The whole world is a series of miracles,' said the candidate; 'but we are so accustomed to them that we call them every-day matters.'

And he went on explaining things to me until my skull seemed lifted up over my brain, and I declared that if I were not an old fellow I would at once visit the Polytechnic Institution, that I might learn to look at the sunny side of the world, though I am one of the happiest of men.

'One of the happiest!' said the candidate, and he seemed to take real pleasure in it. 'Are you happy?'

'Yes,' I replied, 'and they welcome me in all the towns where I come with my company; but I certainly have one wish, which sometimes lies like lead, like an Alp, upon my good humour: I should like to become a real theatrical manager, the director of a real troupe of men and women!'

'I see,' he said, 'you would like to have life breathed into your puppets, so that they might be real actors, and you their director; and would you then be quite happy?'

He did not believe it; but I believed it, and we talked it over all manner of ways without coming any nearer to an agreement; but we clanked our glasses together, and the wine was excellent. There was some magic in it, or I should certainly have become tipsy. But that did not happen; I retained my clear view of things, and somehow there was sunshine in the room, and sunshine beamed out of the eyes of the Polytechnic candidate.

It made me think of the old stories of the gods, in their eternal youth, when they still wandered upon earth and paid visits to the mortals; and I said so to him, and he smiled, and I could have sworn he was one of the ancient gods in disguise, or that, at any rate, he belonged to the family! and certainly he must have been something of the kind, for my highest wish was to have been fulfilled, the puppets were to be gifted with life, and I was to be director of a real company.

We drank to my success and clinked our glasses. He packed all my dolls into a box, bound the box on my back, and then let me fall through a spiral. I heard myself tumbling, and then I was lying on the floor—I know that quite well—and the whole company sprang out of the box. The spirit had come upon all of us: all the puppets had become distinguished artists, so they said themselves, and I was the director.

All was ready for the first representation; the whole company wanted to speak to me, and the public also. The dancing lady said the house would fall down if she did not keep it up by standing on one leg; for she was the great genius, and begged to be treated as such. The lady who acted the queen wished to be treated off the stage as a queen, or else she should get out of practice. The man who was only employed to deliver a letter gave himself just as many airs as the first lover, for he declared the little ones were just as important as the great ones, and that all were of equal consequence, considered as an artistic whole.

The hero would only play parts composed of nothing but points; for those brought him down the applause. The prima donna would only play in a red light; for she declared that a blue one did not suit her complexion. It was like a company of flies in a bottle; and I was in the bottle with them, for I was the director. My breath stopped and my head whirled round; I was as miserable as a man can be. It was quite a novel kind of men among whom I now found myself. I only wished I had them all in the box again, and that I had never been a director at all; so I told them roundly that after all they were nothing but puppets; and then they killed me. I found myself lying on my bed in my room; and how I got there, and how I got away at all from the Polytechnic candidate, he may perhaps know, for I don't. The moon shone upon the floor where the box lay open, and the dolls all in a confusion together—great and small all scattered about; but I was not idle.

Out of bed I jumped, and into the box they had all to go, some on their heads, some on their feet, and I shut down the lid and seated myself upon the box. 'Now you'll just have to stay there,' said I, 'and I shall beware how I wish you flesh and blood again.' I felt quite light, my good humour had come back, and I was the happiest of mortals. The Polytechnic student had fully purified me. I sat as happy as a king, and went to sleep on the box. The next morning—strictly speaking it was noon, for I slept wonderfully late that day—I was still sitting there, happy and conscious that my former wish had been a foolish one.

I inquired for the Polytechnic candidate, but he was gone, like the Greek and Roman gods; and from that time I've been the happiest of men. I am a happy director: none of my company ever grumble, nor my public either, for they are always merry. I can put my pieces together just as I please. I take out of every comedy what pleases me best, and no one is angry at it. Pieces that are neglected now-a-days by the great public, but which it used to run after thirty years ago, and at which it used to cry till the tears ran down its cheeks, these pieces I now take up; I put them before the little ones, and the little ones cry just as papa and mamma used to cry thirty years ago; but I shorten them, for the youngsters don't like a long palaver; what they want is something mournful, but quick."

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