**The Magic Puppet Theatre**

Once upon a time in the furthest flung part of a magical island there was a small town and at the heart of the small town close by the side of its church was a long hall painted in the brightest reds and greens and yellows. Now for most of the year the hall stood empty but at Christmastime the shutters that covered the windows would be opened and light would chase out the darkness within the hall and as one all the men and women of the town would brave the beasts and the spirits that dwelt within the forest that grew just beyond the town gates and gather between them wood, ivy, mistletoe and holly. The ivy, mistletoe and holly was used to decorate the hall so that it was, for a short time, at least as beautiful on the inside as it was on its brightly painted outside. The wood that the villagers collected was given to the local carpenter who would take each piece, gently touch it with his strong craftsman’s hands, feel its weight and hold it up close to his eye and then, depending on how it felt, or its shape or how heavy or light it was, he would begin to fashion the most extraordinary puppets from it. Twisted stumps he would turn into the ugliest of misshapen dwarfs and the branches of slender, saplings would become in his hands graceful dryads. Finally, when all the decorations were finished and the puppets were all made then the Mayor of the village would light a roaring fire within the entrance to the hall from all the wood that had been left behind by the carpenter and this fire would not be allowed to die down until the shutters were closed in the New Year and it was the darkness’s time to stealthily return and rule within the hall once more.

Now, Christmastime was a special season to the villagers and every year they would put on seven shows for all of their children using the puppets that the carpenter had made and the children would look forward to them from the first primroses of Spring through to the long night of Winter. For, although it was only the children’s parents who pulled the strings of the puppets and the same who sung the songs and not always too tunefully it must be said, the children loved it more than if it had been performed by the most highly favoured actors and actresses in all the land because after all it was their stories that were told to them by those that were most precious to them. But sometimes and most magically of all it seemed that in certain songs and in certain dances the puppets for a brief moment would become alive and their eyes would no longer be of glass and their limbs would no longer be of wood but instead they would move and sing of their own free will and their voices and their steps were things of real beauty and the children would whisper to each other and say that the spirits of the forest had left their dark wooded home and slipped inside the sculpted bodies of the puppets and that thought made each one of them shiver with both fear and excitement.

Years past, as they must, and the children in turn grew older and had children of their own and they in turn would take their turn in making the puppets dance and sing. But one day a new Mayor was elected by the townsfolk and he did not like the Christmastime puppet show at all. He did not like the way that the puppets were used to sometimes mock the important people of the town and he did not like the songs that were bawdy because they made the children laugh too much. He did not like that sometimes the singers were a little out of tune and he did not like the stories that were told because they did not always make sense. But most of all he did not like those moments when the puppets seemed to come alive because that had always frightened him as a child. And so, he decided to write a new show for the theatre, a show that would not be about silly songs and childish laughter but one which would be improving and from which the children could learn how to become the right kind of grown up. Now in his heart the mayor believed that there was only one right way to be a grown up and that as he was a very rich and powerful man it was to be like him. When the townsfolk heard this they grumbled at first, particularly when they learned that the mayor had bought some new puppets from a toy shop in the big city and also had hired puppeteers to pull the puppet’s strings but he reassured them by telling them that there would still be a place in his show for a six of the carpenters’ puppets and those parent’s that were most deserving of trust would be allowed to play their part in controlling them.

And so, after much rehearsing the Christmas Puppet Show was ready to be performed and the children were shown to their seats and hushed. Now truth be told every song was sung in tune, not a worthy line of the play was forgotten and in every dance each step was in time, but the children, perhaps a little ungratefully, began to become bored and fidget. Then, as if by magic, the mermaid that had been carved by the carpenter from a particularly springy piece of willow gave a fishy wriggle and then with a wink began to sing a bawdy song about the mayor. The children hooted with laughter and clapped though the mayor looked at the mermaid’s puppeteer with a face that would sour milk and the poor puppeteer could only stare open mouthed at his unruly and seemingly uncontrollable charge. The play finished and the children clapped politely as good children must but as soon as they got outside of the theatre they began to talk about what the mermaid did and I am afraid to say that the following morning her song was on every child’s lips in the town.

Now the following night when the children gathered at the theatre they noticed that the fire in the entrance was burning far hotter than the previous nights but before they could see that the source of that extra flame was born from the wood of the bawdy mermaid they were ushered into their seats. Again, at first, everything went to plan and there were no surprises until half way through the evening when during a natural pause in the Mayor’s favourite song “Work can set you Free!” a bass voice from the back of the stage began to sing an entirely different song. Then, to the front of the stage strode one of the ugliest dwarf puppets that the carpenter had ever carved and he pulled along his hapless puppeteer by the strings that were there to bind and control him! The dwarf sang to the children about both the joy and sadness of love and the melody was so exquisite that many of the children wept even though they did not know why the music touched them so. Again, the following day all the children could talk about was the dwarf and they were saddened in the following day’s performance to see that neither he nor the mermaid were no longer there though they all noticed that the fire within the entrance burned brighter still.

And so, every evening one of the carpenter’s puppets would for just a short time spring to life and each night would be that particular puppets last performance until the very last night when the only puppets left were those that had been bought from the toy shop in the city and the fire within the entrance was an inferno. This night, the mayor thought, was perfection as everything went just like clockwork and there were no unplanned interruptions by the puppets and at the end of the show he ran to the stage and clapped and clapped and he was overjoyed to hear the children clapping in unison behind him. He turned to them with something approaching love in his heart and then stopped. The children’s clapping continued, rhythmic and staccato not a beat missed all perfectly in time but each of their eyes now no longer glittered with life but instead simply reflected the lights of the stage as if they were made of glass. He touched one of the children’s arms but it was not warm flesh that he felt but something cool and textured like wood. The children continued to clap and the mayor looked from the children to the puppets and from the puppets to the children but it was impossible to say now which was which.