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The Toymaker

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The Toymaker

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Prologue

Do you know Frausisstrasse?

You must.

The street named after that fine Duke who, seeing his army beaten before him, rode his great high-stepping white horse down onto the battlefield, and taking off his hat in one majestic sweep, dismounted before the enemy prince, drew his sword as though to surrender it, and drove it instead straight through the man's heart, so the lost battle was won and the city saved.

They named the street after him. You must know it.

But you must have heard of Menschenmacher, or seen a toy that came from his shop.

You have not?

Then I must tell you that they were the most

remarkable toys that any man ever made. He made them, you know. He didn't buy them and sell them on like some cheap shopkeeper. No. He made them. Small moving men and women, and carts and horses, and birds and dogs and cats and fish – all manner of quite astonishing things. They each had their own key – no one Menschenmacher key fitted them all, other than the one that Menschenmacher himself kept on a chain about his waistcoat. No. You had to have the exact key for the exact toy if you were to make it work. And work they did. The keys were remarkable enough in themselves, fine silver and bronze – and small. So small. You had to pinch them tight between your nails to hold them. Each toy had a hidden place for its key. Fit it in and turn and turn, and then stand back and wonder.

For a moment nothing would happen and then – I swear it is true – the eyes in its head would turn and look at you as if to say, *Well, what shall it be today?* Then the toy would move and you would never know what it would do next. It never did the same thing twice. If it was a horse, it might rear up and gallop, and you would have to catch it quickly before it jumped off the tabletop; a woman in her fine court dress might curtsey and dance in slow graceful turns,

or a soldier or guard might lower his pike and stab at your hand if you didn't snatch it away in time. And their eyes *did* move, I tell you. I have tried it. I wound one once – it was not mine but I had the chance – and letting it go, I stood away and watched those small bright eyes turn until they found me, which was unnerving. If I were not as sensible as I am, I might say that they, or something in them, was alive. But of course they were not. They were toys. When their spring had wound down, they would stop quite still and not move again from now until Christmas unless you put the key in again and wound it up.

They were very expensive. All sorts of wealth and nobility bought them. You sometimes saw the grand carriages stop in Frausisstrasse and the coachman descend and open the door. Then down they would step in their rich clothes, and pass through the wooden arch that led to the small dead-end where Menschenmacher had his shop. And then they would come back carrying a small box looped with a red ribbon and you would know what was in it.

Menschenmacher would not let anyone watch him make a toy, though his workbench was there to see if you went into his shop. Each day at four o'clock he would close the shutters and pull down

the blinds, and that is all that the world would see of him until the next morning when he opened them again. There were tools on the bench, a small lathe for cutting the minute cogs and wheels that filled his toys – so minute that above them there was a large glass to magnify the work so that he could see it all. And screwdrivers no bigger than pins and soldering irons no larger than a needle. That is what he used, but you would not see him do it. When the shop was shut – that was when Menschenmacher worked.

People were afraid of him. That's strange, isn't it – to be afraid of a toymaker? But they were. It was that same feeling of fear that steals up on you in the night when you are alone. It doesn't need any words. It was wrapped around Menschenmacher like a cloak, as though when he looked at the people who came into his shop, he already knew just what each one of them feared most in the world. Knew it, and could make it happen if he chose.

No.

They were glad to be out through the door again and into the busy street, the wonderful toy with its red ribboned box in their hand. They would never have gone in had it not been for that.

Now let me tell you something that no one else

knew. That bench by the workshop window – he had it there to catch the daylight – that wasn't his only workbench.

He had another.

If you went into his shop, the counter was to the right, so, the bench to the left by the window, and the small winding stair over in the corner. At the bottom of the stair was a cupboard. Well, I say a cupboard, but it was not much more than a thick green velvet curtain on a pole that he pulled across to cover up the boxes and wrapping and small things that he needed. You could see them because the curtain was always a little bit open.

And that was the trick.

You thought that it was just a curtain and a cupboard because you could see that that was all there was. But it wasn't. When the shutters were closed and the blinds pulled down, Menschenmacher would draw the curtain back, move the empty boxes away and, finding the key, that small key upon his waistcoat that would fit all the toys, slip it into a crack in the wall – no, not a crack, though it might look like one. A lock. He turned the key and pushed, and the wall opened. He always looked to see that there was no one behind him, then he drew the curtain

shut and, going through the wall, closed and locked it.

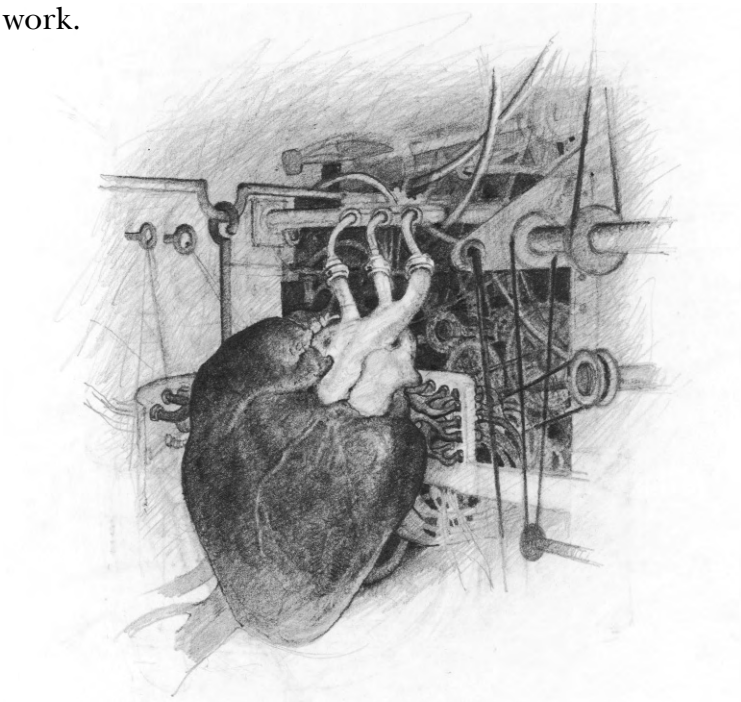
And that is where his other workplace was.

What good is a toy that you wind up? It will wind down and stop. Clever though the toys were that he sold from his shop, they were lumps of metal and clay compared to the things he made down there. What good is a toy that will wind down? What if you could put a heart in one? A real heart. One that beats and beats and doesn't stop. What couldn't you do if you could make a toy like that?

Menschenmacher would sit at his bench and look at his tools with his pale green eyes and think on it.

At first he had no success. He would set small wicker traps in the little dark yard behind the shop. He sprinkled the ground with crumbs and laid the trap above them – a basket propped up with a stick. Then he would watch until a sparrow or a starling came down and, careless of the trap, pecked up the crumbs, and he would pull on a string, the stick would fall, and down the basket would come. He had tiny cages for them – they were no use to him dead. The cages lined the wall of the workshop. The birds sat and looked out into the room. A hundred black beady eyes. And he would work at his bench

until he was ready, with the half-made toy open before him. Then he would take a sparrow from a cage and, with a quick knife, take out its heart, still beating, and try to fit it into the toy, carefully joining the tiny cogs and wheels so that the fluttering heart might make them move. But he could not make it work.



There was something that could not be made to work. The toy would lie there as lifeless as the sparrow, and in a fury he would throw them both

into the fire and watch them burn.

Sometimes, even though he worked so fast, the heart would stop beating before he even placed it in the toy. But at other times it would beat on, just for a moment, and the limbs of the toy would jerk and the eyelids flicker as though about to open, but then the heart would stop and there was no starting it again.

The more he tried, the nearer he came to the answer, until one day he knew what it was. It was the knife. In cutting out the heart of the sparrow he was cutting out its life too. What he needed was a blade so fine, so sharp, so minute, that it could fit between a heart and its life and not sever the two.

That is what he set himself to make, when the town clocks struck four and the shutters were drawn. In the light of the fire and his brightest lamp, all reflected in the hundred black beady eyes of the birds in the cages on the wall, he tried to make a blade so fine that it could not be seen, so hard that a tempered sword would not break it, so sharp that it could fit between a heart and its life and not sever the two.

When he made it, he set it into an ivory handle. It was a blade as cruel as frost, so thin that though you

might see the ivory handle, try as you might you could not see the blade.

Nothing had ever been made before that was as sharp as that.

When Menschenmacher slid the blade into a sparrow's breast, it looked at him with momentarily puzzled eyes. It never knew that its heart had been taken. Menschenmacher set the tiny thing, still beating, into the open toy upon his bench and joined the wheels and cogs, the minute gears and pins. Then he stood back and waited as the heart beat on.

The toy moved its limbs as might a man waking.

And opened its eyes.

PART ONE
The Conjuror's Boy

1
The Man with the White Face

As circuses go, it was not very large. It hardly warranted the name at all. 'Travelling show' was more like it. There were only two carts. The wood of their sides was rotten – no amount of bright paint could hide that – and there were only four horses to pull them both, two to each cart. They were old horses, bone thin. How they managed to pull those heavy carts through the winter mud I don't know, but horses do that. They keep on going while there is breath in their body. They have big hearts, horses. Did you know you can ride a horse to death? You really can. It won't complain. It will keep going and keep going until it drops dead of exhaustion beneath you. Then you have to walk. So if you have any sense, you don't do that. You rest the horse when it needs it, and you have to decide when that is

because the horse can't tell you. It will just carry on and on until it drops dead. Imagine that.

There had once been two more horses than there were now. They would walk behind the second cart on a long rope and be changed over when the others needed a rest. But these were wild times and there were no safe roads. The thick woods hid things – wolves as well as men. It was the wolves that got them. Just before dark they came out of the woods without a sound – silent and hungry and big. They had the two following horses down before anyone could do a thing: the horses were screaming and plunging at their ropes but the wolves just sank their teeth in and wouldn't let go even though the halters were still tied and the cart was dragging the wolves and the kicking horses along the ground. So the circus men cut the ropes and the two carts went on as fast as they could, leaving those two horses to the wolves. There was a small lamp in each cart and by its light the people could just see the fear on each other's faces as the wolves killed the screaming horses, and then everything was quiet except for their own scared breathing and the creaking of the carts as they continued on their way.

The first cart carried everything that was needed:

the food, the faded costumes, the props. With that cart went the owner, Lutsmann, and his painted wife, Anna-Maria. He said that this arrangement allowed him to check that everything was always to hand when it was needed, but everyone knew that it was because Lutsmann thought they would steal things if he put them in the second cart. That's the kind of man he was. He thought that people would steal from him because he never missed a chance to steal from them. He stole from them in the thin food he gave them; he stole from them in the wages he never paid and in the promises he never kept. But they had nowhere else to go. They were people who had once wanted nothing more from life than to juggle and dance, breathe great gouts of fire, turn somersaults and lift enormous weights, but they had never been quite good enough at their art to find a place in a proper show. When they were taken on by Lutsmann, they thought that it was at least something – a start. Only then did they realize that this was all they would ever have, and that all their dreams and their hopes had gone. They had nothing left but Lutsmann's Travelling Circus. It is a terrible thing to have no dreams, no hopes. So, in many ways, as well as owning the carts, Lutsmann

owned them too.

His wife, Anna-Maria, was a vicious woman. She considered herself a great beauty. Maybe she had been once. She painted her face thick with make-up. Rouged her cheeks, blacked her eyelashes, reddened her lips – dark as blood. She carried herself with a haughty highness and had a riding crop with which she laid about her when her temper was raised. Lutsmann called her crooningly 'my dove', 'my apple'. She called him simply 'Lutsmann', and he jumped when she spoke.

But what of the performers? You might expect that if they weren't looked after by Lutsmann, then at least they looked after each other. But you'd be wrong. They were petty and vindictive. Maybe that is really why they found themselves where they were. They were that sort of person: Lutsmann's show was just the lowest sink into which they had all fallen. Perhaps they would have been the same anywhere. Or maybe they could have been better if the world had been better to them. That is a very hard question. It's not one that I know the answer to. There was a strongman, a fire-eater, a tightrope-walker, a juggler and dancer, a lady who could bend her body in quite impossible ways, a conjuror and a boy. And

the boy was the only good thing there, in the back of the cart creaking along the road, while the wolves killed the screaming horses.

Let me tell you about that boy, then you can make up your own mind about him. His name was Mathias.

Lutsmann's Travelling Circus was the only world he could remember. It was not the only one he'd ever known, but it was the only one he could remember. Eleven or twelve years before, there had been another world in which first his mother and then his father had died. And in that world too there had been an uncle – his father's brother – and an aunt – the uncle's wife – who both died as well. And then, though this was a part he'd never really understood, there had been his grandfather. He was the reason why Mathias came to be in the creaking cart. His name was Gustav. He was the conjuror. There is something about him which I'll tell you in a moment. When Mathias was younger, Gustav had kept him close by on a rope tied to his wrist. If he thought that Mathias had been bad, he would hurt him. Sometimes he hurt him very much. But Mathias couldn't run away from him because of the rope. Those days were very confused in Mathias's

mind. He couldn't remember them easily – not that he really wanted to. He had to make do with things as they were, because he had no other choice.

Now, there were two important things that he knew: the first was that Gustav was his grandfather; the second, well, that was something that he almost knew. It was a great secret that Gustav was going to tell him one day. Once, when Gustav had been drunk – often he was very drunk – he had told Mathias that he knew a secret. A secret that would make Gustav rich beyond all dreams. A secret so big that there were men who would kill him rather than have it told. When Gustav was sober again, Mathias asked him what the secret was and Gustav's eyes had narrowed because he knew he'd said too much to the boy. 'You must never tell,' he told Mathias. 'If you are a good boy and do all that I say, one day I will tell you what it is, the secret that only I know.' And he had put his finger to Mathias's lips and then to his own. 'One day, if you are always a good boy.'

The secret was why – and this is the strange thing that I was going to tell you – Gustav had painted his face quite white. He never took the paint off. Ever. What better disguise than a face as white as a corpse? What better place to hide than a travelling circus,

what better companion than his grandson? How could such a person know anything?

When Gustav joined Lutsmann's circus, he had actually been a very good conjuror. If people do not understand how a thing is done, they are prepared to believe that it might, just might, be magic. If I were to open my hand and, where a moment before there had been nothing there was now a bird, you might not understand how I had done it but you would guess that somehow I had put it there. But if I were to ask you to turn *your* hand over, peel back your fingers and in your palm was a bird – now how could that have got there? That is what Gustav could do. That and many more things too. He could make a tight scarf appear around a man's throat if he had called out from the crowd and made him angry. 'Take care,' he would say, 'or next time I will make it a rope.'

It was not magic, but how could it have been done?

He was a finer conjuror than Lutsmann could ever have expected to find, and Lutsmann snapped him up having seen only part of what Gustav could do. He took him, child and all, and no questions were ever asked. But Lutsmann knew a man with a past

when he saw one. What did it matter to him? He had a conjuror and Gustav had somewhere to hide – what more did either want?

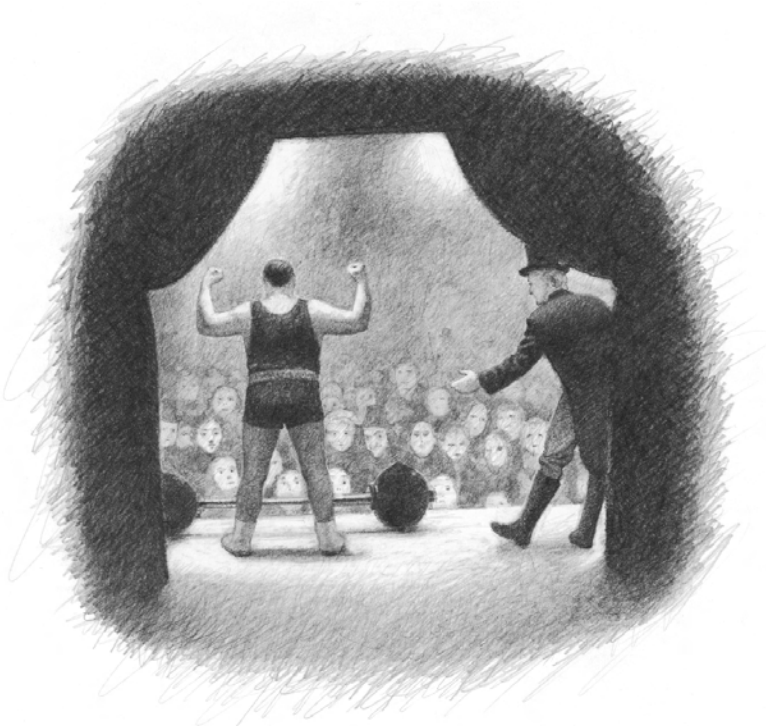
Well, I'll tell you what Lutsmann wanted – what Anna-Maria wanted. They wanted to know what it was that Gustav had to hide. Why else would a man like him have come to them? Why else would he never show his real face?

This was the life that Mathias led in the circus. Preparing the things the performers would need. Helping them dress and undress, and never any thanks given. Estella, the lady contortionist, was the worst. Mathias would avoid her when he could. Sometimes he couldn't. She would call him 'my pretty boy' and put her hand beneath his chin as though to pet him, but instead she would dig her finger hard into the top of his throat so that he hung there upon her nail as if upon a single spike. 'My pretty boy,' she would say, and then her voice was like a cat snagging silk with its claws. He fetched their water, he cleaned and mended, and did all the things that a child shouldn't have to do. But he had no choice. There was no one else to look after him.

When they came to a place that was large enough for a show, Lutsmann would stop the brightly

painted carts. The side of the second cart would be lowered so as to make a stage, and there Lutsmann would stand in his fine clothes, black boots and red coat, shouting until he had a crowd. Beside him stood the man who ate fire. He would thrust a lighted torch into his mouth and blow out a jet of flame that lit a twist of straw Lutsmann held in his hand. He could swallow swords too. He could put five of them down his throat at once, one after the other. While this was happening Gustav would be on the stage too, whirling cards out of his hands in ribbons and drawing them back in, spreading them like fans, making them loop the loop. Estella would fold her body around and sit on her own head, and all the time Lutsmann would be shouting and beating a drum while Anna-Maria went amongst the crowd and sold tickets for the show. For this wasn't the show itself; this was just enough to make people want to come. The real show would only happen when the light faded and the burning torches were lit. Then everything was in shadow, and in the flickering light people didn't see the cheaply painted carts; they saw what they wanted to believe.

In the light of the flaming torches, Lutsmann would introduce each act before it came on. The



strongman would come first. Like most circus shows, not all was what it seemed. While he was showing his muscles to the crowd, it was Mathias's job to crawl into a secret space beneath the cart and, at the right moment, hook to an iron bar beneath the floor the huge weights the strongman was to lift, so that when Lutsmann called the young men up to try their luck, they couldn't move them an inch. He knew when to unhook them too, so that the strongman, face red

with pretended effort, could sail them above his head to the gasps of the crowd.

Then Estella's turn would come. There was nothing fake about her. She would bend and twist her thin body, and the village men would stare at her, wide-eyed and greedy, until their wives made them look away. Then came the fire-eater, the juggler and the tightrope walker, and then, last of all, Gustav. Mathias would watch the faces in the crowd as they stared open-mouthed as Gustav pulled flags from the air and sent glowing balls floating just out of reach over their heads. What Mathias never saw though was how, from behind his white face, Gustav carefully searched the faces in the crowd for one that he knew.

It puzzled Mathias that Gustav never showed the crowd what he could really do. It was much more than they ever saw. Sometimes Gustav could be kind, though it was strange when he was – he would show Mathias a trick to stop his tears. 'Look,' he would say, and then he would do something remarkable – like finding the bird in Mathias's hand, or making cold blue flames burn on the tip of each of his fingers. When he did those tricks, the air would fill with a scent, like honey and resin. It clung to Gustav's

clothes afterwards, but Mathias never knew what it was, and Gustav would never tell him.

And that is how it was.

But then things got worse. Mathias saw that his grandfather was becoming absent-minded. He was vague on the stage. He mistimed his tricks now and then, even dropped things, which was unheard of. At night Gustav would twitch and turn in his bed, and if Mathias got up – there was no toilet in the cart – Gustav would catch hold of him as though he were a thief and stare at him for minutes on end in the darkness, wanting to know, over and over, if the daylight was coming. Sometimes he didn't know who Mathias was or why he was there, and then he got angry, accusing him of trying to steal his secret. For as long as Mathias could remember, Gustav had slept with a pistol beneath his pillow. But one night, when he was raving like that, Gustav put it to the side of Mathias's head and held it there in trembling silence. It was the longest moment Mathias had ever known.

In the morning, when Gustav was himself again and weeping floods of self-pitying tears, Mathias threw the pistol into the long grass and Gustav never noticed it had gone, or if he did, he said nothing.

There was no medicine that made any difference. Gustav tried several – little red bottles that he would tip down his throat in one swallow, or mix in a small tumbler with wine. It got so that he couldn't do his act any more. He started to tremble and his words were hard to understand. He forgot things halfway through, and the crowd would hiss and laugh at him as the tricks dropped from his hands. But for all that had happened, Mathias still felt tears of rage behind his eyes when they laughed at the feeble man with the white face, because when all was said and done, he was his grandfather. But that became the act. Lutsmann saw to it. The others didn't want Gustav any more – he was just an extra mouth to feed – but Lutsmann did. 'I am doing you a favour,' he would say in his fat, greasy voice, putting his arm around Mathias. 'Let the people laugh at him and we will still feed you.' Then he would thumb his large nose. 'Maybe one day you will be able to do something to repay us?'

Mathias knew what that was. Lutsmann wanted to know what Gustav's secret was. Once, Mathias had surprised Anna-Maria going through Gustav's bags. She said she had been tidying up – 'Such a mess.' But she needn't have said anything and Mathias

knew that she had been looking for something, even if she didn't know exactly what it was. They weren't afraid of Gustav now that he was feeble and dribbled and couldn't do the trick of putting a rope around their neck. So Mathias looked after him, and so far as a boy was able he protected him too, because he was his grandfather.

And that is the kind of boy that Mathias was.

Then came the day of the wolves and the horses. The circus travelled on and set up in the next market square. The cart they travelled in was emptied out as usual and the stage set. When it came to Gustav's turn, he stood looking down at the sea of grinning faces, not sure what it was that he was supposed to do next. Mathias looked away as he always did because he knew what was going to happen and he couldn't bear to watch it. But as he turned away, he saw in the crowd a man with a silver-topped cane. It was the cane that he saw first – the top of it caught the light of the flaring torches that lit the stage. It struck Mathias as odd because in the last town there had been a cane like that too; it had gleamed then. And then he looked at the man who held it, and realized that it was the same man as well. And that struck him as odd, because people

wouldn't come to see the same show twice. Certainly not follow it from one town to the next. But there he was, Mathias was sure. He was standing near the back, his eyes intently watching the man on the stage. Then Gustav saw him too. He stopped stock-still, staring at the man with the silver-topped cane. He started to dribble; he looked wildly from side to side as though he were trying to find somewhere to run to, but as he lurched forward his knees caught the side of the cart and he pitched head first over the edge of the stage and onto the hard stone beneath.