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Opening extract from

Puppet Master

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Beneath the Golden Clock

Standing alone on Prague's Old Town Square, a small dark-haired girl with eyes like emeralds and five freckles sprinkled on her nose dances from one foot to the other to keep warm. There's a frozen drinking fountain to her left, an overturned cart to her right and a jumble of buildings all around her. Beneath her feet the icy cobblestones shine and overhead the sky gleams black and silver like coal.

On the eastern edge of the Square the Church of Our Lady Before Tyn dwarfs the buildings around it and is capped by two spires which point to the heavens like a pair of gigantic witches' hats. On the western side stands the white Church of St. Nicholas.

The girl pushes her hands deep into the pockets of her red coat and looks up at the city's famed Astronomical Clock, hoping her friend will arrive before it strikes five. The clock's façade is a series of

black and gold rings which show the days and the months, the rising and setting of the sun, and the waxing and waning, equinoxes and phases of the moon. It shows the course of the planets, the signs of the zodiac as well as the hours, minutes and seconds that mark the passing of each day. Carved animals and plants adorn the edges.

It is almost five o'clock.

Dong

A door bursts open at the top right hand side of the clock. The girl gasps.

Dong

Dong

A wooden statuette of Christ bolts out of the door. She clenches her cold fingers.

Dong

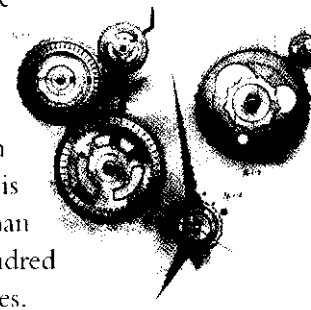
Twelve more figures representing the Apostles emerge in quick succession from the same door. A cockerel leaps from a window at the top of the clock. It crows.

Death emerges from a doorway in the bottom half of the clock, silver bell in one hand, sand-glass in the other. The girl shrinks back, terrified by the sight of Death jerking across the clock face, skeletal jaws agape. He is followed closely by The Turk shaking his head to show he is not yet ready to depart this world. And then comes The Miser clinking a money-bag and The Profligate, gazing into a mirror.

Dong

On the final stroke the figures move back inside the clock.

Milena shivered as a wind from the east whipped around the corner of the Old Town Hall. It felt as if the cold was cutting into her bones. She turned up her collar, eyes still fixed on the clock face. No matter how many times she saw this display, her terror never lessened. Every time Death emerged – shaking his bell, baring his teeth – the story of the master craftsman who had built the clock some four hundred years earlier replayed itself before her eyes.



The tale of how he had been blinded by the city authorities was one of Prague's best-loved and most gruesome legends, and regularly clawed its way into Milena's dreams. As she gazed up at the clock, she could see intruders breaking into his chamber. She saw him being grabbed from behind, being stabbed in both eyes with a hot poker. She heard his flesh fizz, watched him stumble then fall, howling in agony. She felt his heart tumble as he realised he would neither see, nor build another clock.

Milena blew on her fingers and looked across the Square. "Where are you, Lukas?" she said out loud. "Come *on*!" She'd been waiting over twenty minutes for him to arrive.

"And where are you, Maminka?" she whispered. "Are you alone on your birthday? When are you coming home?" No answer came, and no one who knew the Prochazka family believed Milena's mother would ever come home. She'd disappeared three years before, soon after Milena's father, Petr, had died in an accident.

Milena yawned, rubbed her eyes. She'd slept badly, disturbed by another dream of her mother's homecoming. Long before sunrise, she was awake and had run outside, expecting to see her. "One day," she thought, "you *will* come."

Milena spoke to her mother every morning, last thing at night, and very often throughout the day, certain she could hear her, certain that one day she would walk through the door and everything would be as if she had never left. Her father's death had been easier to accept in a way. She had seen his coffin lowered into the ground. She had heard the thud of earth shovelled onto the wood. She knew her father was never going to come back, but she refused to believe she would never see her mother again, and she refused to be called an orphan.

"Where *is* he?" Milena glanced at the clock again. It was twenty minutes past five. She left the Square and went down Zelezna Street, towards the building that used to house her father's marionette theatre. She missed coming here after school. It had been like a second home.

Milena loved everything about the theatre. The thrill

of waiting in the wings before the curtains swished open, the smell of greasepaint in the dressing room, the feel of the plush velvet chairs in the auditorium, the satisfaction she felt as the stories unfolded. And she especially loved marionettes. Watching a puppeteer animate a character with a careful flick of the wrist and a tug on the strings was like witnessing magic. Milena loved the wobbling and nodding of their heads, the satisfying clop of their wooden feet on the stage. And she loved to hear her grandmother's stories about Petr's passion for puppetry. Even before he was able to tie his shoelaces, Baba had told her, he had learned to carve and construct simple marionettes. By the time he was nineteen he had saved enough money to buy this building in Stare Mesto, Prague's Old Town. He transformed it into a theatre named the House of Dream Delights.

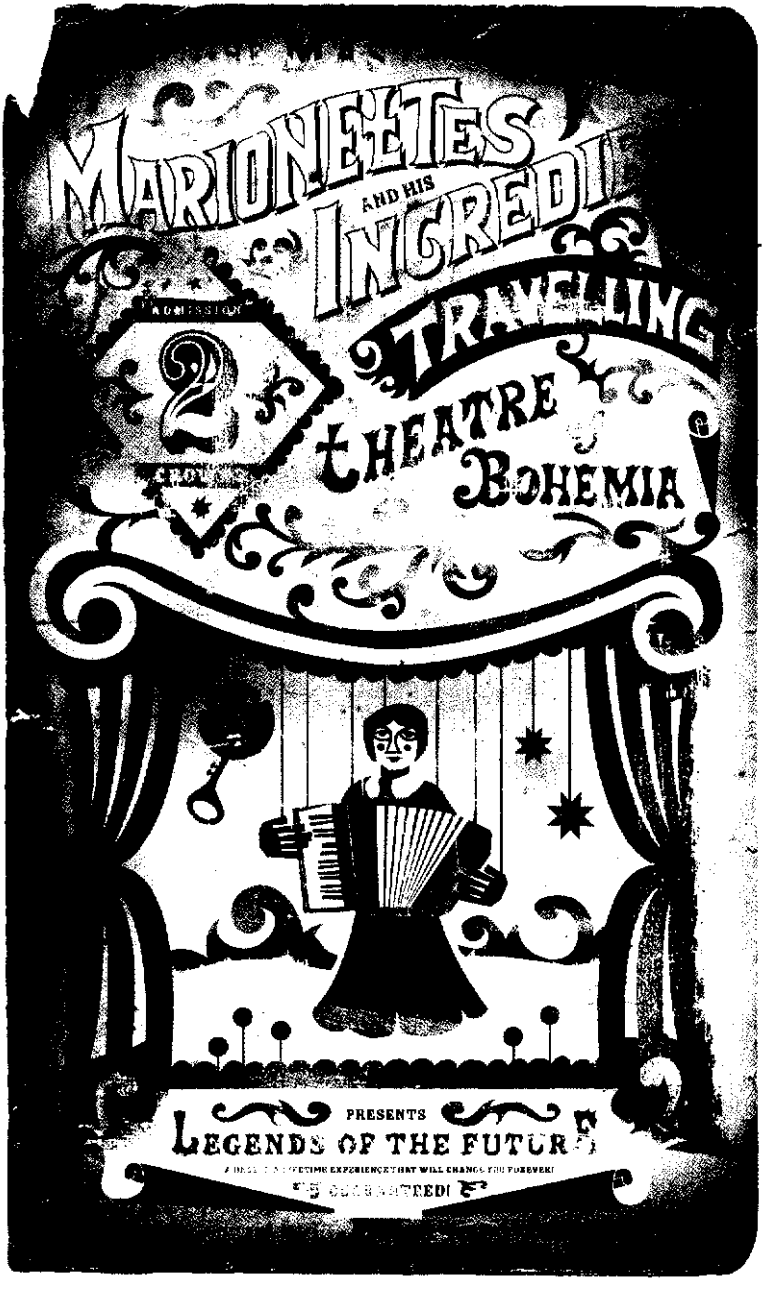
Today the windows were boarded up. The once immaculately painted green façade was beginning to crumble. Gone were the bright window boxes of hyacinths and chrysanthemums. Gone was the box office decked out like a stick of striped candy. Milena looked up at the silver sign hanging over the entrance. It was so entangled in twists of ivy she could barely read her father's name.

This was where Milena had taken her first steps and fallen in love with marionettes. And this was where her father had plunged to his death. He'd been positioning a marionette on a platform high above the stage when it had collapsed, sending him headlong onto the boards. As Milena sat on the stone doorstep, clutching her knees to her chest, a lump rose in her throat. It broke her heart to see the theatre like this.

"I'll reopen your House of Dream Delights," she promised. "I'll work and I'll work until I have enough money. That's all that matters. Maminka will come home, and we'll give your theatre new life." She turned to touch the door. A poster had been nailed there. Its edges had been torn by the wind but the message seemed to leap from the cream paper. She wanted to tear it to pieces.

How dare anyone do this to Father's theatre? He was the only real Puppet Master.

But, as she thought of the respect her father had always shown fellow puppeteers, Milena decided he probably wouldn't mind the poster being there.


MARIONETTES
AND HIS
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The show did look intriguing. She traced a finger around the swirling letters.

The sound of footsteps approaching disturbed her thoughts. "Lukas?" She whirled around. There was no one there. The street was strangely empty.

It came again. The sharp click, click of new boots on stone.

She glanced to the left. Then to the right. Still nothing.

The sound came closer. Milena knew it couldn't be Lukas; his boots were worn thin. Should she slip into the shadows until they had passed? Crouch in the doorway and make herself as small as possible?

As it turned out, there was no time for either.

Stare of the Stranger

The footsteps clicked closer and closer.

And then they stopped.

"Will you," boomed a voice, "be attending my most marvellous show?"

Milena turned to face the voice and gasped. Shining through the darkness was a pair of glistening yellow eyes. Their calm reptilian blinking horrified her but she found she couldn't look away. The pupils widened, leaving only a dash of colour, like tiny specks of amber in onyx.

Momentarily, the eyes blinked shut, and only then did Milena notice the person they belonged to. An imposing giant whose scarred hands were adorned with gold rings, each so thick they forced his fingers apart. He wore black trousers with gold and red braiding, a black waistcoat, also trimmed with red and gold, and an overcoat with a fox fur collar. Milena was certain; this

was the Master of Marionettes.

"I . . . I don't think so. I'd like to but we don't have the money."

"No money! No money! One of the poor folk, are you?" he snarled. "But," he continued, looking Milena up and down, "if your general deportment and physique – the arch of your brow, the length of your neck – is anything to go by, I believe that at some point, perhaps many moons ago, but certainly at some point, your family may have had some importance . . . But I digress . . . " He lowered his head, locked his eyes on Milena's.

"In my experience, and my experience is considerable – it is as vast as the heavens, as deep as the oceans, as rich as all Bohemia – in my experience, poor folk are little more than animals and, try as they might, there is no way they could fully appreciate the subtle nuances of my show."

Milena restrained herself from wiping the Master's spit from her face. She fidgeted, pulled her coat tight and tried to look away. But again, she couldn't. His eyes held her still. Her head rolled back, her arms dropped to her sides. She no longer felt the cold and she was no longer aware of where she was.

"So, you've nothing to say?" scoffed the Master, pacing around Milena like a fox circling a chicken pen. "Where's your gumption? Your mettle? Your pluck, your sense of pride? Your family must be ashamed to have brought such a meek and miserable creature into this world. Am I right, hmm? Am I not right?" he demanded.

"But you can't hear a word I'm saying, can you?"

"You're wrong," replied Milena. She *could* hear him. She had managed to hurl herself back into the real world. She was aware of the wind and the frost and the grizzly bear of a man standing over her.

"You're wrong," she repeated, staring into his eyes, as resolutely as his had invaded hers. "You know nothing about me, nothing at all, so keep your thoughts to yourself!" She lowered her gaze. "If you don't mind," she added quietly.

The Puppet Master's face turned beetroot red; his chest expanded, the veins on his forehead bulged. His whole body trembled. Just as it looked as if he might explode with rage, he let out an almighty roar of laughter. Milena thought the whole city would feel its reverberations, from the top of the castle high on the hill, to the muddy depths of the river bed. The laugh went on and on. Eventually it subsided and he began to speak.

"Remarkable," he laughed. "All my life I have played with people the way a cat might tease a mouse. I circle them, psychologically speaking, sometimes physically, you understand, creating dread, observing their terror grow and grow until it takes over their being from the inside out. I watch the colour drain from their cheeks, and then I turn with a swish of my coat and leave them, with uncertainty and fear burning right into their very core. I control them. What else would a Puppet Master do, but pull people's strings? But you, you answered

back. I applaud you."

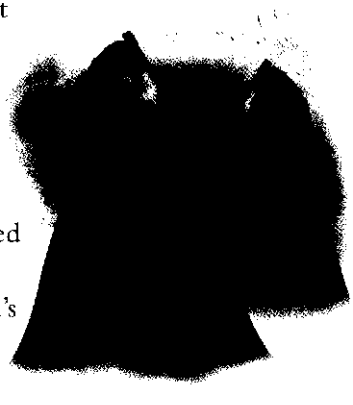
"Mi-lena!" Lukas' voice rang out. "Mi-lena, where are you?"

"I am certain we shall meet again. Very soon, in fact." The Master glanced over his shoulder. "Zdenko, Zdenka, to my carriage!"

Two short figures swathed in hooded cloaks emerged from the shadows and stood either side of him. Shiny round-toed shoes jutted out beneath the billowing black cloth.

The Master departed with a swoosh of his coat. The hooded figures followed, so close it looked as if he had extra limbs.

"I guessed you'd be here, but who were ***they***?" called Lukas, hurrying towards Milena. "Are you all right?" he asked, laying a hand on her shoulder.



He and Milena had been best friends for longer than Lukas could remember. No-one understood him like she did. They couldn't have been closer. "I'm really sorry I'm late."

"Where were you? I got bored waiting on the Square.

Lukas dismissed Milena's crossness with a wave of his arm. "I'm here now, and just in time by the look of things. What did they want?"

"I'm really not sure ***what*** they wanted," Milena

frowned. "The man is the Puppet Master in charge of this show. He appeared from nowhere, and I suddenly began to feel very odd, as if I was in a dream. But look, it says it's a 'once in a lifetime experience'. It opens on Friday. I'd love to see it."

Lukas read the poster. "So would I, but it's too expensive. Anyway, let's go. I didn't like the look of him. He's made you as jumpy as a jack-in-the-box. Look at you, you're shaking. You know my mother would have had a fit if she'd seen him. She's always been terrified of puppets, ever since she was little. 'Dancing corpses', that's what she calls them."

"She shouldn't be afraid of them, they're not exactly dead. It's more as though they're always between life and death, waiting to become whatever the puppeteer needs them to be. That's what Father used to say."

"I don't think that would make her feel any better," Lukas laughed. "Here, take my gloves before your fingers turn to icicles."

Nestled deep in the valley formed by seven hills, the city was draped in the darkness of a winter evening as Milena and Lukas set off, chatting about what they'd done during the day. Almost every street corner they passed was occupied by a chestnut roaster or pretzel-seller calling to customers. The aroma of chestnuts blistering on hot coals filled their noses. All across the city squares emptied as market stalls were cleared of goods and

packed away for the night. Rattling trams filled with bleary eyed office clerks who had put their papers to one side, and with factory machinists who had shut down their clanking machines. Inside, wives and mothers put pots on to boil, stoked fires and called their children off the streets and out of parks.

As they stepped in front of him, a toymaker took a wooden bird from a cloth laid at his feet. He wound it and placed it on his grubby hand.

"Good evening!" he called, nodding to Milena and Lukas in turn. "Can you spare a moment to view my wares? Observe how he flaps his wings and pecks my palm! Sir, I think your friend would love to take this fine fellow home with her. I have plenty more, look! Every colour, every size, every type of bird you could wish for."

The toymaker lunged towards the ground with the unpredictability of a madman. His eyes darted from one to the next as he wound up all the birds and set them hopping and pecking and whirring across the cloth.

"Look at them go! Cheep, cheep little birds! Would you like me to name one after you? What are you called?"

"Milena Prochazkova," Milena answered politely.

"How about this one, Milena? I'll give you a good price. Or how about this furry fellow?" He pulled a clockwork mouse from his pocket, turned the key on its back, set it scuttling about the ground. "I only need a coin or two to buy a sausage for my supper."

"They're all very nice, but I'm afraid we can't afford one," said Milena.

The toymaker kicked out at the birds. "They're all very nice, but I'm afraid we can't afford one," he mocked in a squeaky voice. "Don't lie to me. You can't be short of a crown or two."

"I'm not lying," Milena insisted. "We really can't."

"Think you're better than me, do you?" he hissed, tossing the jittering toys into a sack. "Think you're too good for my birds? You'll be sorry when my birds have gone."

Milena pulled a coin from her pocket. "Take this," she offered. "It's not enough for a bird, but it's all I have."

"Really?" asked the toymaker. "That's really all you have?"

Milena nodded.

"Thank you for your kindness." He took the coin, threw the bundle of birds over his back and disappeared down a side street.

"I hope he'll be all right," said Milena as he vanished from view.

"Don't worry about him. You tried to help. Come on, Baba will be wondering where you are."

But Milena was worried about the toymaker. She suspected the birds were his only companions. She wished she'd had enough to buy one. Baba had taught her to be generous, and she'd never forgotten her tale of the Conceited Tradeswoman. She could hear it now, as clearly as if Baba were whispering in her ear.

The Tale of the Conceited Tradeswoman

The Conceited Tradeswoman was a shrewd creature who made a living buying poultry from country people and selling them in Prague for great profit. One day a farmer came from Jilove and sold her a dozen chickens for a very good price. She felt like having chicken for her dinner so she cut one open and, to her delight, discovered several grains of gold in its stomach. Greedy as she was, the tradeswoman cut open the rest of the chickens and there, inside each of the plump creatures was grain after grain after grain of glittering gold. She couldn't believe her good fortune.

When the farmer returned a week later he agreed to sell her more of his hens if she promised never to sell them on to anyone else. She agreed and soon became one of the richest people in Prague, but she never shared her wealth with anyone.

A few weeks later the Tradeswoman was on her way to collect rent from one of her tenants when an elderly beggar stopped her as she crossed Karluv Bridge.

"Good lady, could you spare me a crown?" the old woman called. "My husband is dead, my children have left me, I'm all alone in this cruel world. Please lady, I haven't eaten for days."

The Tradeswoman tossed her hair and looked away in disgust.