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The Toymaker

written by

Jeremy De Quidt

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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.

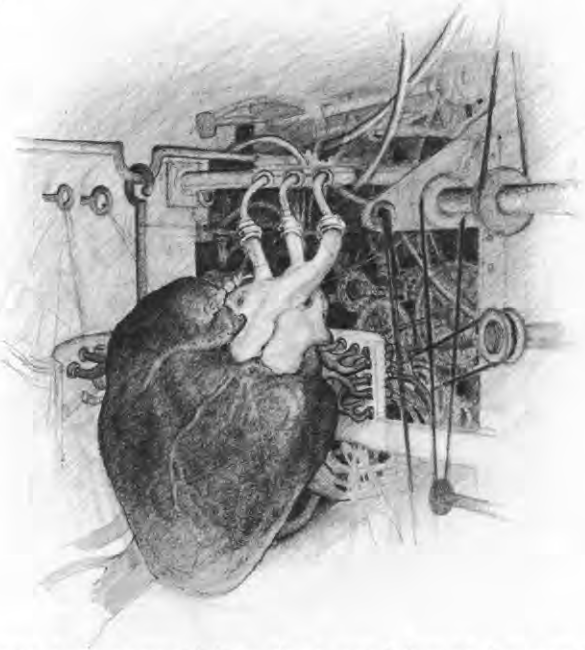
And that is where his other workplace was.

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.