

THE KING'S NEW ACTOR (Vol 1)

A novel about H.C. Andersen (1816–1827)

ACT I: Odense – Goodbye to the Washerwoman (1816)

- **Theme:** Escape

Chapter 1: The Coffin

The smell of death in the small half-timbered house on Munkemøllestræde strangely did not smell of decay, but of wood shavings and cold vinegar.

The marble slab on the small table in the corner was covered with his father's shoemaking tools. Lasts, knives, waxed thread, and the heavy iron shoe-form that his father, Hans Andersen, had hammered away at all those years while his lungs slowly withered inside his meager ribs. Now the iron shoe-form stood silently behind, while his father lay on his bed under a white sheet that his

mother, Anne Marie, had desperately smoothed out again and again until it was entirely without wrinkles.

Hans Christian stood by the door. He was eleven years old, but his bony knees already poked out of his worn trousers, and his arms were so long they seemed attached to his body by mistake. His eyes, small and dark beneath his heavy brow, never left the corpse.

“Touch his foot, Hans Christian,” his mother whispered. Resting on the edge of the bed, she smelled of soapy water and old sweat. Her hands were red and swollen from the Odense River, where she washed clothes for the town's better citizens until her knuckles bled. “Touch him, so you don't dream about him at night.”

Hans Christian took a step forward, but his legs felt like dry branches about to snap.

“He isn't reading anymore,” the boy said. His voice was strangely high—a piercing, clear pitch that struck the low beams in the ceiling. “He isn't reading Holberg.”

"No, he is with God," sobbed Anne Marie, wiping her nose on her apron. "And God has no use for plays."

His father had been a peculiar man. A shoemaker who dreamed of attending Latin school, but instead had to sew shoes for the peasants. When he wasn't working, he built a small puppet theater for Hans Christian. He carved the figures out of wood, glued silk and paper onto them, and read Holberg's comedies aloud in a voice that made the tiny room expand until Odense's muddy streets vanished and only the theater remained.

And now he lay there.

Two days later, the carpenter arrived with the coffin. It was a tin-lined wooden box that the school administration or the poor relief board had scrimped together for, but it was too short. When they had to lay Hans Andersen inside, they had to force his long, stiff body into place.

That was the sound Hans Christian never forgot: the wood creaking, and the hollow, dry rumble as the lid was nailed shut with heavy iron nails. *Thump. Thump. Thump.*

It sounded like a theater sign being nailed up. A curtain falling on the only man in Odense who had understood him.

The weeks after the funeral were dark and heavy, like the wet clothes Anne Marie dragged home from the river. The living room swarmed with strangers. An aunt, neighbors, the master tailor from over the street who smelled of cheap brandy and damp wool. They spoke over Hans Christian's head as if he were a piece of furniture standing in the way.

"The boy needs an apprenticeship," the master tailor said, pointing at Hans Christian with a thick finger wearing a gold ring. "He's too long to sit at a shoemaker's bench, but he can learn to sew. The tailoring trade can always use a spindly lad who can reach the top shelves and be kept to task."

"Yes," said Anne Marie, nodding eagerly. "He must earn his own bread. He can't go around here writing poems and playing with his dolls anymore. He is eleven years old. He needs to be useful."

Hans Christian shrank all the way into the corner by the iron stove. His heart pounded right up in his throat like a trapped bird. Tailor? Sitting bent over gray cloth from morning till night in a dark workshop while the needle pricked and pricked? He looked at his own long, awkward fingers. They were created to guide puppets across a stage, to mix colors, to write words—not to baste trouser legs for the merchants of Odense.

"I don't want to," he whispered.

"What are you saying, boy?" snorted his mother.

"I don't want to be a tailor!" he shouted, and his high voice cracked into a squeak that made the master tailor chuckle with laughter.

"He's got his father's notions," the tailor said, shaking his head. "It will end badly."

Salvation came not from God, but from a traveling theater company from Copenhagen that set up their tent on the market square at Sortebrødre Torv late that summer.

Hans Christian didn't have a penny, but he slithered through the crowd like an eel. He crawled under the heavy, foul-smelling canvas at the back of the tent while the guard looked the other way. The mud splatters on his wooden clogs were gone; the smell of poverty was gone. Inside the tent was the scent of burned whale oil from the lamps, of powder, makeup, and old velvet.

The stage was merely a few assembled planks, but to Hans Christian, it was the gate to heaven.

The actors stepped forward. They wore costumes of shining silk and gold braid—real gold, he thought, even if

it was just dried brass. They didn't speak like the people in Odense. Their words were rounded, floating, and proud. When the actor in the red cape shouted his curses out over the hall, Hans Christian felt as though a bolt of lightning stroked through his very bones.

They were not bound to the earth. They were not tailors or washerwomen. They were kings, heroes, ghosts. They were everything one was not allowed to be on Munkemøllestræde.

When the performance ended and the audience applauded, Hans Christian stood stock-still in the shadows behind the stage curtain. He watched the actors remove their wigs. He saw their sweaty, painted faces in the lamplight. They laughed, they drank from wooden mugs, they were gods who had just descended to earth.

One of them—a tall man with dark eyebrows—spotted the long, thin boy standing and staring open-mouthed.

"What do you want, lad?" the actor shouted, laughing.

"Looking for your mother?"

Hans Christian felt the warmth rise in his cheeks, but he didn't flee. He straightened his long back, lifted his chin just as he had seen the actor do two minutes earlier, and said in his high, peculiar voice:

"I want to be like you."

The actor laughed out loud and tossed his scarf over his shoulder. "Like me? A vagabond? Go on home to your mother, boy. The theater is for those who can afford to starve with style."

But the words did not hit Hans Christian as a rejection. They hit him like a baptism.

He walked home through the dark streets of Odense that evening without feeling the rain that had begun to fall. He looked at his own legs casting long, deformed shadows against the curved house facades in the glow of the

lanterns. His shadow looked enormous. Bigger than the houses. Bigger than Odense.

His father's coffin was closed, but for Hans Christian, the theater curtain had just risen. He wasn't going to be a tailor. He was going to be something the world had never seen before.

Chapter 2: The Voice

When Hans Christian sang, he forgot about his legs.

He forgot that his trouser legs stopped five inches too short above his ankles, and that his jacket pinched across his sharp shoulder blades. His voice didn't belong to the Funen babble or the mud of Munkemøllestræde. It was transparent, piercingly pure, and so high that people in Odense stopped in the street and looked around for a nightingale before spotting the gigantic, swaying boy in the courtyard.

"The Nightingale from Odense," the cheerful printer Iversen called him.

Colonel Høegh-Guldberg, the town's learned and fine gentleman, had opened his door to him. In the elegant parlor, where the linen tablecloths were starched and the walls covered in French wallpaper with hunting scenes, Hans Christian stood in the middle of the floor letting the trills roll. He sang ballads, he sang hymns, and he recited scenes from Holberg's *The Fidget*, flailing his arms and twisting his face into tragic theatrical masks.

"Look at him," whispered a fine lady with lace around her neck, lifting her lorgnette. "Is it a girl or a boy? The voice is like an angel's, but the limbs... Good heavens, he looks like a stork that has sprained its wing."

The company laughed softly behind their fans. Hans Christian heard it clearly, but he took it for adoration. He bowed deeply—so deeply that his long nose nearly touched the carpet—and felt the intoxication rise to his head. They were looking at him. They were listening to

him. In this moment, he was not the washerwoman's son; he was a miracle.

Something tightened around his throat, however. The shirt his mother had remade from his father's old church coat chafed against his collarbone. The sleeves were too short, and the fabric smelled faintly of old tobacco and mothballs. He was dressed as a grown man, but sang like an infant.

When he left the fine house with a piece of pastry wrapped in paper—a reward from the gentry—the sun shone over the street grime. But happiness was short-lived.

At the corner of Pogestræde, they stood waiting. Three boys from the cloth factory. Their faces were greasy with wool grease, and their hands black with soot and machine oil. They worked ten hours a day at the heavy looms while Hans Christian walked around writing poetry. They had seen him enter the colonel's house.

"Look, here comes the comedian!" shouted the largest of them, Jens, spitting a brown jet of tobacco juice onto the stones. "Sing for us, nightingale! Sing a little ballad for the workers!"

Hans Christian tried to slip past, but they stepped in his way. His heart began its familiar, frantic gallop in his chest.

"Let me pass," he said, trying to make his voice dark and authoritative, but it cracked into a squeak. "I'm going home to my mother."

"Listen to him! Is he a girl?" Jens grabbed the collar of his father's old coat. The thread in the shoulder seam burst with a dry rip. "Let's see if he's even a boy at all! He sings like a hag!"

"No! Don't!" screamed Hans Christian.

They shoved him behind the tanner's fence, down into the stinking trash of skin scrapings and rotten fat. Hans

Christian thrashed desperately. His long legs kicked in the air like an upturned crab. Jens grabbed his trousers to pull them down while the others laughed hoarsely. Humiliation burned behind his eyes like liquid lead.

In his desperate terror, he did the only thing he could: he opened his mouth and emitted his highest, most piercing tone.

It was not a song. It was the shriek of terror from a monster, a soprano volley so sharp and unnatural that the tanner's dog on the other side of the fence began to howl at the sky.

The shout was so wild that the boys let go of him for a second in sheer astonishment.

Hans Christian seized the moment. He scrambled up from the mud, stretched out his long legs, and ran. He ran as if death itself were after him, through the streets, while his torn coat fluttered around him like the wings of a shot bird. He heard their laughter ringing behind him,

but he didn't stop until he hit the church wall at Saint Canute's Church.

There he collapsed onto his knees in the grass, out of breath, stained with mud, with tears streaming down his dirty cheeks.

He touched his throat. His voice was still there. It trembled, but it was there. It was his only weapon, his only ticket away from the factory whistle and the wash tub.

When I get to Copenhagen, he whispered to the cold church stones as he wiped his nose on his torn sleeve, they won't laugh. There, the King himself will listen to me. There, my voice will make me a prince.

Chapter 3: The 13 Rigsdaler

The coarse wool of the lining chafed against his breastbone, but beneath it lay the treasure.

Thirteen rigsdaler. Thirteen heavy, cold silver coins that Anne Marie, with trembling, red-scalded fingers and a silent, desperate strength, had sewn into the lining of his confirmation coat. Every stitch of the needle had been like a farewell song. His mother had wept when she handed him the bulging lumps in the fabric; she had begged a wise woman in Nørregade to read his fortune in cards and coffee grounds, and the woman had raised her wrinkled face to the sky and proclaimed: "He will become a great man! Odense will one day be illuminated in his honor!"

Those were the words Hans Christian clung to as he stepped into the dark room on Munkemøllestræde for the last time.

"You're going to starve to death in the big city, Hans Christian," sobbed his mother as she packed his few belongings into a small canvas bag. Her eyes were bloodshot from brandy and tears. "Copenhagen is for the rich. What is a poor, helpless boy without a trade going to do over there?"

"I am going to become famous, Mother," he said, straightening his back so his coat sleeves pulled all the way up to his forearms. His Funen dialect was thick with conviction. "First you go through a terrible amount of suffering, and then you become famous! It says so in all the books."

In his inner pocket lay his secret weapon: a letter of recommendation from printer Iversen to the celebrated solo dancer at the Royal Theatre, Madame Schall. Hans Christian had begged and pleaded on his knees until the old printer gave in to the 14-year-old boy's frantic eyes and wrote a few lines. The boy didn't know that Iversen didn't know the dancer at all. To Hans Christian, the paper was a golden passport straight behind the curtain.

On September 4, 1819, the mail coach stood ready at the gate. The horses' breath rose like white clouds of steam in the cool early morning air, and the smell of wet leather, manure, and old straw lay heavy over the square.

Anne Marie clung to his slender shoulders. She smelled strongly of brandy and damp clothes.

“Do you promise to write, Hans Christian? Do you promise to look after your money? And if it doesn't work out... then come home. The tailor will still take you.”

“I will only return as a great man, Mother,” he answered. His voice trembled, but his eyes burned. He kissed her wet cheek and broke free.

The driver's whip cracked in the air. The wagon wheels clattered against Odense's uneven cobblestones, and the heavy coach slowly set in motion. Hans Christian leaned out of the window. He watched his mother grow smaller and smaller—a tiny, dark figure in a worn shawl, waving an apron in the middle of the mud, until the bend by Saint Canute's Church swallowed her up.

He pulled his head back inside and settled onto the hard wooden seat. The other passengers—a portly merchant and a silent clergyman—looked at the long, impossibly

thin lad with the oversized feet and worn cap. Hans Christian paid them no mind.

He pressed his hand flat against his chest. Beneath the fabric, he felt the hard contours of the coins.

Thirteen rigsdaler. It was his destiny, his future, his freedom.

As the carriage rolled out of town and onto the open highway toward Nyborg, the sun slowly set over the Funen hills. Ahead lay the Great Belt, and beyond the sea lay Copenhagen with its towers, its palaces, and above all: the grand, gilded theater at Kongens Nytorv.

Hans Christian closed his eyes and softly hummed a note from an opera he had never heard. The play had begun.

ACT II: Copenhagen – The King's New Clothes (1819–1822)

- **Theme:** Humiliation

Chapter 4: The Arrival

The 6th of September 1819 tasted of coal smoke, horse manure, and salt water.

When the ship across the Belt finally docked and the wagon bumped through Vesterport, the rain soaked through Hans Christian's thin cap. Copenhagen was not gilded. The city was a noisy, overcrowded maw of dark half-timbered houses, where gutters overflowed with cabbage leaves and rotting offal, and where carriages with iron-rimmed wheels clattered against the stones with a din that made his ears ring.

He was fourteen years old. His legs were stiff from the journey, and the confirmation coat where the coins lay

hidden in the lining had been stained with soot from the ship's chimney.

But when he stepped onto Kongens Nytorv, he stopped breathing.

There it stood. The Royal Theatre.

The building towered against the gray September sky like a Greek temple in the middle of the mud. To Hans Christian, it was not bricks and plaster; it was Solomon's temple, it was the navel of the world, it was the place where he was to be reborn. He walked all the way around the massive building, running his long, dirty finger over the cold granite foundation and gazing up at the tall windows. He imagined how the lights burned inside, and how the applause rolled like thunder over the pit.

Something pulled at his stomach—a mixture of wild, manic hunger and paralyzing dread.

He found a miserable, crumbling room in Gardergade with a widow who looked at his tall, faltering frame with deep suspicion, but accepted his pennies. That same evening, he ran back to the theater.

He snuck around to the stage door in Tordenskjoldsgade. Every time an actor stepped out in a fine cloak, Hans Christian shuddered with awe. He took off his cap and bowed so deeply to every single one of them that people thought he was insane. An older gentleman in a walking coat looked irritably at the awkward lad standing in the rain, swaying like a reed in a storm.

The next morning, there was no time to lose. Destiny called.

Hans Christian brushed his coat with his hands, smoothed his matted hair, and walked straight up to the heavy oak door of the theater. He grabbed the heavy brass knocker and knocked. Hard.

The door opened a crack, revealing a burly man with a gray beard, a red face, and a dark blue uniform with brass buttons. It was the doorkeeper, Siboni. He smelled strongly of pipe tobacco and sour beer.

“What do you want, boy?” the man snorted, inspecting Hans Christian’s too-short sleeves, his muddy shoes, and his wild, feverish eyes. “Looking for errand work? We have no use for vagrants.”

“I must speak with the directors,” Hans Christian said. His Funen dialect hit the doorkeeper like a bucket of cold water. “I have come from Odense to be admitted to the theater. I have a letter! And I can sing, and I can recite Holberg!”

Siboni looked at him with an expression that shifted from astonishment to pure contempt. He had seen many strange creatures lingering around the theater gates, but this gigantic, scarecrow-like boy with the piercing girl’s voice surpassed them all.

"Admitted?" Siboni chuckled mockingly and took a step forward, forcing Hans Christian to take a step back on the stairs. "Look at yourself, boy. You look like a tramp who stole his confirmation suit. The theater isn't for country bumpkins from Funen."

"But you don't understand!" shouted Hans Christian, grabbing desperately at the doorframe. In sheer panic, he began flailing his arms to recite a verse from *The Happy Shipwreck*, while his high soprano shrieked up toward the theater staircase: "O Destiny! Thou who canst guide—"

"Shut your mouth, boy!" roared Siboni.

The man grabbed the front of Hans Christian's coat—right where the thirteen rigsdaler were sewn inside—and gave him a powerful shove backward.

Hans Christian lost his balance. His long legs tangled together, and he tumbled backward down the stone steps. His knees smashed against the cold granite, and his jacket buttons scraped against the stones. The door

slammed shut with a heavy, thundering crash that echoed down the empty street.

Thud.

The wood was thick. Closed. Locked.

Hans Christian remained sitting on the cold, wet stones. The rain began to pour down over Kongens Nytorv once more. He looked at his hands, scraped and filthy from the street grime. His fine letter of recommendation to Madame Schall lay crumpled in his pocket.

He was in Copenhagen. He was at the theater. And the door had been locked in his face.

Chapter 5: The Benefactors

Hans Christian was a ghost that refused to be banished.

When the theater's gates were locked, the city's parlors had to be conquered. Clutching the crumpled letter of

recommendation in his damp hand, he sought out the celebrated solo dancer Madame Schall. When the maid opened the door to the elegant home, the 14-year-old boy pushed undaunted into the parlor, threw off his hat and shoes, and in pure, desperate enthusiasm began to dance in his stocking feet upon the parquet floor. He used his hatbox as a tambourine and sang his own improvised lyrics. The dancer stared dumfounded at the gigantic, bony creature flopping around her polished floor like a wounded crane, before having him shown to the door with a few mild but firm words suggesting he would do better to seek an honest trade.

But Hans Christian did not let a refusal defeat him; a no was merely a pause in the overture.

His salvation became the composer C.E.F. Weyse. One evening, as Hans Christian ran weeping and exhausted through the streets, he ended up at the home of one of the theater's leading figures. By pure stroke of luck, Weyse was sitting there—Weyse, with his warm gaze and an appreciation for the peculiar—listening to the boy's

story. Weyse did not see a vagrant; he saw an unspoiled Funen curiosity. A natural marvel from the depths. He immediately collected a small sum among the city's musical elite and secured singing lessons for the unlikely lad with the Italian Giuseppe Siboni himself—the choir master who shared a name with the brutal doorkeeper, but possessed a somewhat softer heart.

In the months that followed, Hans Christian lived in a state of pure bliss.

Every morning he stood in Siboni's heated salons, where the smell of Italian olive oil, theater powder, and expensive perfumes lay thick in the air. Siboni struck heavy chords on the grand piano, and Hans Christian sang.

His voice was a wonder. It soared higher and higher, rising above the tall windows toward the rooftops of Copenhagen, clear as crystal and light as an angel's. When he sang his arias, he forgot the torn seams in his coat and the cold glances from the street urchins. Weyse nodded

approvingly in the corner, and the powerful director of the Royal Theatre, Conference Councillor Jonas Collin—a stern, dark-clad man with spectacles and an inscrutable face—came to listen to this strange phenomenon from Odense.

“A natural singer,” Collin muttered, making a small note in his pocketbook. “But he lacks cultivation. He can barely write his own name without errors.”

“Cultivation can wait!” exclaimed Siboni in his broken Danish. “Listen to that soprano! He shall sing in the chapel. He shall be our new star!”

Hans Christian was floating. The world was bending to his will.

It happened on a raw Tuesday in November during a rehearsal in Siboni’s large practice hall.

The room was filled with fine guests. Ladies in silk dresses and gentlemen with gold chains across their waistcoats

had come to hear the Funen wonder-boy. Hans Christian stood in the center of the rug. He wore a newly acquired, second-hand jacket that Weyse had procured for him—it was handsome, though the sleeves still ended two inches too short over his long, white wrists.

Siboni struck the opening chord. A proud, soaring melody from one of the great Italian operas of the day.

Hans Christian took a deep breath. He felt the music fill his slender chest, raised his chin, closed his eyes, and let his voice rise toward the ceiling's gilded plaster rosettes.

The note hit a pure, high C. It hung in the air, piercing and clear.

And then—in the middle of the most soaring trill—disaster struck.

It felt like a needle prick in his throat, as if an invisible thread had snapped deep within his larynx. The pure angel note broke in mid-air, transforming into a hoarse,

harsh croak—a sound like a goose being stepped on the tail.

Crack.

Hans Christian stopped abruptly. His eyes widened in terror.

Siboni's hands froze over the keys. The chord died out in a discord.

"Keep singing, boy," Siboni said sternly, striking the note again. "What are you hesitating for? Again, from *A tempo*."

Hans Christian tried. He forced air up from his lungs, he opened his mouth, but no nightingale came out. Only a dark, gravelly, and uncertain rattle. His voice refused to go up. It sank, it stumbled, it cracked again—plunging into a dark, shapeless depth, as though a stranger had suddenly lodged himself in his throat.

Some of the ladies in the gathering stifled a giggle behind their fans.

“Good heavens,” a gentleman whispered. “The boy’s voice is breaking.”

The words struck Hans Christian like the lash of a whip.
Voice breaking.

He looked desperately at Siboni. The choir master slowly closed the piano’s wooden lid with a small, dry click. His face was suddenly devoid of enthusiasm.

“It is over,” Siboni said softly, shaking his head. “The voice is gone. It may never return—and if it does, it will be dark and useless for a soprano. The lessons are finished, my young man.”

The room began to spin around Hans Christian. The light from the crystal chandelier stung his eyes. He looked at Weyse, but the composer was staring down at the floor.

He looked at Conference Councillor Collin, who simply closed his notebook and slipped it into his pocket.

His voice—the only thing he owned, his golden key, his salvation from the darkness in Odense—had broken.

Without a word, without a bow, Hans Christian turned and bolted from the salon, down the stairs, and out into Copenhagen's ice-cold, rain-drenched November darkness.

He ran down to the canal by Holmen's Church, where the black, muddy water lapped against the stone embankment. There he collapsed in the rain, grabbed his throat with both hands, and tried to scream. But the only sound that issued from his mouth was a hoarse, broken squeak.

The nightingale was dead. And he was still just an overgrown, poor boy in a jacket that was far too small.

Chapter 6: The Ballet Boy

If the voice had broken, the body had to step in its place.

A man without a voice could still move, and on the stage, movement was a language without cracked pitches. Through one last, feeble plea to the theater management, Hans Christian managed to secure an act of mercy: he was admitted as a student to the Royal Theatre's ballet school under the strict French ballet master, Antoine Bournonville.

It was his last chance to belong behind the curtain.

The practice room under the theater roof smelled of resin, old sweat, and starched costumes. Every morning, a line of slender, lithe twelve-year-old boys lined up at the barre. They looked like tiny, graceful porcelain figurines in their tight-fitting tights and soft leather shoes.

And in the middle of them stood Hans Christian.

He was fourteen and a half years old, but towered two heads above the rest. His legs were so long and bony they looked like two dry hazel sticks thrust into a pair of far too tight ballet slippers. When he tried to execute a *plié*, his knees creaked loudly enough to be heard all the way in the back row.

"*Non, non, non!*" Bournonville shouted, tapping his wooden cane hard against the polished floorboards.

"Monsieur Andersen! What are you doing? You are not bending your knees, you are snapping like a dry twig! Pull in your stomach! Shoulders down!"

The other boys snickered in the corner.

"Look at the stork from Funen," whispered Anton, a nimble little boy with slicked-back hair and perfect posture. "He's trying to fly, but his wings are too long for the room."

When the students had to perform *pirouettes*, Hans Christian transformed into a hazardous windmill. His

arms flailed in the air, and instead of spinning elegantly on his axis, he swung his heavy feet out so uncertainly that the other boys had to jump aside to avoid being tripped.

“He talks like a bumpkin and dances like a threshing machine,” they laughed behind Bournonville’s back while changing in the dressing room. They pointed at Hans Christian’s long, pale body, at his worn undergarments marked by repair stitches from Munkemøllestræde. They mocked his Funen accent when he tried desperately to explain himself: *“But I’m doing what the master says!”*

The humiliation gnawed at him like a rusty knife, but Hans Christian refused to give up. Every evening when the training room was locked, he snuck down to the courtyard of his miserable lodgings. In the moonlight, standing on the greasy cobblestones, he leaned against a water pump and practiced his *battements* until his thigh muscles trembled with exhaustion and his feet bled through the thin leather shoes.

*I will show them, he whispered to the cold, clear night sky.
I am not a stork. I am a swan.*

His big opportunity came with the staging of the ballets *Armida* and *Paul and Virginie*. The theater needed extras—silent figures to fill out the background of the stage.

Hans Christian was assigned his first role: he was to play a troll in one of the forest scenes.

When he pulled the troll costume over his head in the dressing room, the fabric was too short across his back. It strained over his protruding shoulders, and the mask pressed tightly against his long nose. But when he stepped onto the stage beneath the lit lamps, he forgot the costume's flaws.

There it was. The smell of burned oil, makeup, and dust. The sound of the orchestra tuning their instruments down in the pit.

He was merely supposed to stand in the background behind an artificial tree and make threatening gestures while the lead dancers performed their *pas de deux*. But Hans Christian could not settle for being background. He was an artist.

As the music swelled, he began flexing his muscles, contorting his face behind the mask, and curling his long fingers in such wild, tragic gestures that the audience in the pit began shifting their gaze away from the solo dancers to look at the enormous, awkward troll fighting his own private passion play beside the papier-mâché tree.

In the wings stood Bournonville, gripping his wooden cane until his knuckles turned white.

"What is that idiot doing?" the ballet master whispered furiously. "He's ruining the entire picture!"

When the curtain fell and the applause rolled in, Hans Christian rushed forward toward the curtain call,

believing the clapping was meant for him. But before he reached the front, a strong hand grabbed the collar of his troll costume and shook him brutally.

“That was your last appearance on my stage, Monsieur Andersen,” Bournonville snorted, shoving him against the wing wall. “You are too tall, you are too clumsy, and you have no feel for the ensemble. You cannot be part of a picture, because you fill the whole thing with your own foolishness!”

Hans Christian was left standing in the dim backstage area while the other students walked past smiling, clapping each other on the shoulders.

He was fifteen years old. He could no longer sing, and now he had been thrown out of the ballet. He removed his troll mask. The mirror on the wall in the dressing room showed a tall, strange boy with wet eyes and a costume that had split down the back.

Chapter 7: Extra and Prompt

When you can neither sing nor dance, you must learn to hide in the walls.

For Hans Christian, the theater's back door remained the only portal to existence. He was fifteen years old, without steady employment, and earned his living running small errands for the actors and begging the ticket collectors to let him slip inside. Eventually, he was tolerated as a harmless ghost in the hallways—a lanky, invisible shadow always ready to hold a cloak, fetch a cup of coffee, or step in when a scene required an extra silent face.

He became a supernumerary.

His debut as a real actor in a speaking role occurred in the tragedy *Makaroff*. He was to play one of the knight's attendants. His costume consisted of armor made of gold paper and a velvet beret that sank all the way down over his ears, because his head was too slender for the

theater's adult props. His entire line consisted of four words:

"The letter has arrived, my lord!"

For weeks, Hans Christian had practiced those four words in his dark room in Gardergade. He had spoken to them with tragic weight, with whispering terror, with royal pride. He had straightened his back before his small, cracked mirror and watched an actor by the grace of God emerge.

But when he stepped onto the stage under the burning lamps, when the orchestra fell silent, and the great actor Frydendahl turned to him with a commanding look, Hans Christian's throat constricted.

The thousand eyes of the audience shone up at him from the darkness of the pit. He felt his knees tremble beneath the gold paper.

"The letter..." he whispered. His voice broke into the dark, cracked register that his voice change had left him with.

"The letter... is... my lord!"

The word *arrived* vanished entirely in his throat. He delivered the piece of paper so awkwardly that he tripped over his own long cloak and nearly fell over the footlights. From down in the pit came a muffled chuckle of laughter. Frydendahl snatched the letter with an annoyed snort and turned his back on him.

Hans Christian was never given a speaking role again.

His next refuge was the prompt box.

It was a small, semicircular hole right at the front center of the stage floor, covered by a dark wooden hood facing the audience. There, down in the wood-lined depth, sat the prompter with the scripts open before him, whispering the lines up to the actors who forgot their texts.

Hans Christian was allowed to sit beside him during rehearsals. It was like sitting in the very belly of the theater.

Through the crack in the wooden hood, he saw the actors' layers of powder, their beads of sweat, their fake tears, and their fixed gazes. He heard the words before they were shouted out over the hall. And as he sat there in the dark, surrounded by the scent of dust and burned oil, a new, mad thought struck his feverish mind:

If I am not allowed to speak the words on stage... then I must write them.

He borrowed a stack of paper, dipped his pen in ink, and set to work. He barely knew the rules of grammar. His Funen dialect and lack of formal schooling made his spelling a grotesque landscape of errors, but his imagination knew no bounds. He wrote a tragedy in five acts, inspired by Shakespeare and Schiller. It was called *The Robbers in Wisbaden*.

It was a wild drama of murder, blood, knightly honor, and tragic love. Whenever he lacked a grand word, he looked up a German-Danish dictionary and pasted the most florid terms right into the middle of his clumsy sentences.

When the work was finished, recopied in his awkward, large handwriting, he wrapped it in a silk ribbon and delivered it with trembling hands to the theater management. He was seventeen years old. He secretly believed that the play would be accepted immediately, that the curtain would rise, and that the King himself would call him onto the stage to receive the public's acclaim.

The answer came on a gray afternoon in May.

Hans Christian stood waiting on the theater's broad granite steps facing Kongens Nytorv. The theater guard stepped out and handed him back his manuscript. The silk ribbon had been untied, and attached to the margin of the cover was an official letter from the board, signed by the theater's censors.

Hans Christian grabbed the paper. His heart pounded right up in his temples as his eyes flew across the rigid, black letters.

He read aloud to himself. His voice cracked faintly on the cold stone steps while the rain began to lash against his face:

“The Board cannot accept the submitted play. It reveals such a lack of the most elementary school knowledge and truly contains no sense...”

No sense.

The words stood there. Clear, irrevocable.

Hans Christian sank onto the bottom step. His long legs stretched out across the mud-splattered stones. He clutched the thick manuscript against his chest while his tears mixed with the rainwater on his cheeks.

He was not an actor. He was not a dancer. He was not a singer. And now the gods of the theater had established that he did not even think like a sensible human being.

People walked past him in the street with raised umbrellas, without deigning to give the curled-up boy a glance. Hans Christian sat on the steps of the temple that had rejected him in every form, while the ink on his first tragedy slowly ran out into the rain.

Chapter 8: The Patron

The rain over Kongens Nytorv had stopped, but the cold sat deep in Hans Christian's bones.

The rejection of his tragedy lay in his pocket like a dead weight. *"Contains no sense."* The words gnawed at his thoughts as he wore out his worn shoes against the cobblestones. His last pennies were gone. The widow in Gardergade threatened to throw him out onto the street, and his stomach screamed with hunger.

When all was lost, there was only one door left to knock on: the door to the men of power, the men of the state, to Conference Councillor Jonas Collin.

Jonas Collin was the director of the theater and the most powerful man in the Financial Deputation. He was not a man of grand emotions or florid gestures; he was a man of numbers, order, and civic duty. In his office on Stormgade, he sat behind a heavy mahogany desk, surrounded by meticulously sorted stacks of paper, while the candlelight reflected in his round, shiny spectacles.

Hans Christian was shown in by a servant. He looked like a vision from a ghost story: pale, impossibly tall, with crooked shoulders, worn-out shoes, and a look so wild and desperate that Collin slowly laid down his quill.

"Andersen," Collin said in his dry, calm voice. "You write strange letters to me. You ask for money, you ask for roles, you ask for miracles. And now you have submitted a play that, according to the board, lacks the most fundamental concepts of Danish spelling."

Hans Christian collapsed onto his knees in the middle of the fine carpet. He clasped his long, bony hands and burst into an unintelligible stream of weeping and Funen pleas.

"O, Excellency! Mr. Conference Councillor! Spare me!" he cried, while tears rolled down his pointed nose. "The theater is my only world! If you drive me away, I have nothing left but the grave or the wash tub in Odense! Just let me raise the curtain, let me sweep the stage, just let me be allowed to be there!"

Collin looked at the boy. Many would have laughed or thrown the theatrical lad out. But Collin looked beyond the grotesque behavior. Behind the exaggerated gestures and the terrible spelling, the experienced official saw something else: an undaunted, almost terrifying vitality. A fire burning so fiercely that it would either consume the boy or make him into something extraordinary.

“Stand up, Andersen,” Collin said quietly, but firmly. He took off his spectacles and wiped them with his handkerchief. “You are not going to sweep the stage. And you are not going to act in plays. You are seventeen years old, and you are completely uneducated. If you are ever to become anything—regardless of what that might be—you must learn to think and write like a cultivated human being.”

Hans Christian wiped his nose on his sleeve and looked up hopefully. “Will you let me perform tragedy, Mr. Conference Councillor?”

Collin shook his head. “No. I have arranged with His Majesty the King for you to receive a small annual grant from the Fund for Public Utility. But the money is given on one condition.”

Collin leaned forward over the desk and looked him squarely in the eye.

“You must go to Latin school. In Slagelse.”

The words struck Hans Christian like a paralyzing blow to the face.

Slagelse? Latin school?

For a seventeen-year-old boy who already considered himself a misunderstood artist, being placed on a school bench among twelve-year-old boys was the ultimate humiliation. To him, Latin school was not salvation; it was a place of exile. It meant being torn away from the enchanted world of the theater, away from the streets of Copenhagen, away from the dream.

"But... the theater?" he stammered, his voice on the verge of cracking again. "Am I not to be at the theater?"

"The theater does not want an unlearned boy, Andersen," Collin said coldly, though not without a certain paternal gentleness. "You leave tomorrow. Headmaster Meisling in Slagelse is expecting you. He will teach you Latin, Greek,

and geography. And above all: he will teach you discipline.”

When Hans Christian stepped out of the house on Stormgade shortly after, he felt more shattered than when the doorkeeper Siboni had thrown him down the steps.

Conference Councillor Collin had become his patron, his saving angel—but the angel had just locked him in a prison.

The next morning, he stood once more by the mail coach. This time he was not traveling toward fame in Copenhagen, but away from it. As the carriage rolled out through Vesterport, leaving the theater’s towers behind in the pale morning mist, Hans Christian leaned his head against the cold windowpane.

He was no longer the King’s New Actor. He was merely a poor, overgrown schoolboy being sent into exile to learn his times tables.

ACT III: The Transformation (1822–1827)

- **Theme:** Finding One's Own Stage

Chapter 9: Slagelse and Headmaster Meisling

Copenhagen's theater lights were extinguished, replaced by the gray, endless expanse of mud in Slagelse.

To Hans Christian, the West Zealand provincial town felt like a graveyard for living dreams. The town's houses were low, the streets smelled of manure and sour cabbage, and the only sound in the twilight was the monotonous tolling of the church bell. But nothing in Slagelse was as terrifying as the Latin school and its ruler: Headmaster Simon Meisling.

Headmaster Meisling was a short, corpulent man with greasy hair, spectacle marks across his broad nose, and a suit perpetually stained with snuff and meat sauce. He was a learned man, but his pedagogy was pure brutality.

He hated poetry, he hated daydreaming, and above all, he hated the tall, awkward seventeen-year-old boy whom Conference Councillor Collin had placed in his lowest class.

"Look at our new 'poet'!" Meisling shouted on the first morning, pointing his sharp wooden pointer at Hans Christian, who sat squeezed into a far too small school desk beside twelve-year-old boys. The class burst into crude laughter. "He towers like a spire, but his head is filled with hay and theater filth! Come up to the chalkboard, Andersen!"

Hans Christian rose slowly. His long legs bumped against the edge of the desk, causing the inkwell to tilt. Every day at the cathedral school was a new execution.

While the other students quickly recited their Latin conjugations, Hans Christian's thoughts always went their own way. When he looked out of the barred window, he didn't see grammar; he saw stage sets. In his mind, he

relived the evening as a troll at the Royal Theatre, the sound of the orchestra, the smell of makeup and lamp oil.

"You're dreaming again, Shakespeare!" roared Meisling, slamming his wooden ruler onto the podium with a crash that sent dust swirling up. "You can't even conjugate *amare*, and you imagine you're a genius! You are a dunce, Andersen! An idiot who will never amount to anything! Your poems belong in the gutter!"

Meisling's words were not merely insults; they were a systematic attempt to break the boy's soul.

In the evenings, Hans Christian boarded with the headmaster himself. In the dark, damp house, it smelled of Meisling's cheap pipe tobacco and the rotting stench from the bleaching pond in the backyard. The headmaster pursued him right into his room. When Hans Christian tried to write in his diary by the dim glow of a tall candle, Meisling would enter without knocking, snatch the papers from his hands, and read his spelling errors aloud in a lethal, mocking voice.

“‘Heart’ spelled with a ‘g’?” chuckled the headmaster, tossing the paper into the stove. “You can’t even write your own mother tongue, and you want to write tragedies? You are a disgrace to your benefactors in Copenhagen!”

Through the long, cold winter nights, Hans Christian lay awake in his narrow bed. He wept until his pillowcase was soaked. He felt a terrible, creeping realization gnaw its way into his thoughts.

Meisling was right about one thing.

Hans Christian looked at his long, rough hands in the moonlight. He remembered the audience’s laughter at the theater when he tripped over his cloak. He remembered the cracked note at Siboni’s. He remembered the rejection on the steps: “*Contains no sense.*”

He would never become an actor. He couldn't fit into the costumes. He couldn't force his body to be graceful, and he couldn't hide his Funen accent behind a fine mask. He was too tall, too strange, too much himself to ever be someone else on a stage.

The door to acting had not just been locked; it had been shattered.

One night, he stood at the window looking out over Slagelse's dark rooftops. In his chest, he felt an emptiness so deep he thought he would die from it. The theater had been his religion, his only salvation from the mud of Odense. If he was not an actor... what was he?

Chapter 10: The Voice Returns

In the spring of 1826, Headmaster Meisling moved to the Latin School in Elsinore, and he took his most impossible student with him.

Elsinore was different from Slagelse. The town opened toward the shimmering darkness of the Sound, where mighty sailing ships glided past beneath Kronborg's heavy, green copper towers. But inside the classroom, the darkness was the same. Meisling's mockery had only grown sharper with the years.

"You are a zero, Andersen!" the headmaster shouted one morning, spraying saliva onto the podium. "An inflated bumpkin who will never wear a student's cap! Your soul is rotter-food!"

But something inside Hans Christian had stopped bleeding. The humiliation had turned into a thick layer of oak bark over his mind.

In the afternoons, when the schoolbooks were closed, he sought refuge down by the shore. He sat on the granite blocks where the waves crashed over the seaweed, looking across toward the Swedish coast. He still wore the stained, too-short school coat, but in his pockets he hid small, folded slips of paper.

Since he could no longer perform on a stage, the words had begun to force their way out in secret.

It started as a survival mechanism in the dark. In the dormitory at night, when the younger boys lay trembling in fear of Meisling's cane or longing for their mothers, Hans Christian began to whisper.

He didn't tell them about Holberg's classical characters, nor did he recite Latin vocabulary. He invented his own worlds.

He told them about the little match girl in the snow, about the princess who slept on a pea, about trolls living in hollow trees, and about a steadfast tin soldier standing on one leg. His voice—the dark, somewhat raspy voice that had come after his voice broke—settled into the darkness. It didn't tremble anymore. It had become deep, warm, and strangely comforting.

In the dormitory, total silence fell. Boys who during the day had laughed at his long nose and his awkward gait now lay with eyes wide open, holding their breath so as not to miss a single word.

“Tell us more, Andersen,” whispered a ten-year-old boy from the corner bed. “Tell us about the mountain that opened up.”

Through the darkness, Hans Christian felt a surge of something completely new pass through his body.

It was not the intoxication he had felt when standing on an elegant doorstep in Odense, crooning soprano arias for fine ladies. It was something deeper. It was not a desire to be seen—it was a power to create.

He needed no costumes of faded silk or gilded theater frames. He needed no revolving stage or chapel orchestra.

His voice had returned. Not as the light angel-tone Siboni had wept over losing, but as an instrument for stories. When he spoke, he built his own sets inside the listener's head. He was no longer a clumsy actor tripping over his own cloak on stage—he was the theater director, its playwright, and its gods all at once.

In secret, he wrote down a poem on a tattered piece of paper. It was called *The Dying Child*.

It was about a little child watching angels sing while its mother wept by the bed. It was simple, it was imperfect, and it was steeped in the stark, painful longing he himself had carried since his father's coffin was nailed shut with heavy iron nails in Odense.

He didn't read it to Meisling. He didn't submit it to the theater's censors.

He sent it in a letter to a friend in Copenhagen. And when it shortly after appeared in print in one of the capital's finest journals, people read it in the cafes and parlors.

Some wept. No one asked if the author could dance ballet, or if his trousers were too short.

On the beach at Kronborg, Hans Christian stood in the wind, unfolding the paper before him. He looked out over the open sea as seagulls shrieked through the air above his head.

"They would not let me act in plays," he whispered to the sea wind, and for the first time, there was no squeak in his voice. *"So I must write my own."*

Chapter 11: The Farewell

A cool evening wind from the Sound swept over Kongens Nytorv in the autumn of 1827.

Hans Christian stood before the Royal Theatre. He was twenty-two years old and wore the black, peaked student cap tilted on his head. The examination was passed—not thanks to Headmaster Meisling's tyranny, but in spite of it, and with Jonas Collin's stoic support behind him. He

was no longer the fourteen-year-old country bumpkin from Funen with thirteen rigsdaler sewn into his coat sleeve and mud on his clogs.

Yet the building pulled at him like a powerful magnet.

He didn't go around to the stage door in Tordenskjoldsgade. He didn't stand on the steps to beg the doorkeeper for a glimpse into the machinery. Instead, he bought a ticket for the pit at the main entrance—with his own, honestly earned pennies—and entered through the public doors as a free man.

Inside the hall, the crystal chandeliers burned like distant stars above the gilded boxes. The scent of powder, burned oil, and starched velvet was the same, but tonight it did not pierce his chest with dread.

Hans Christian found his seat on the plush chair in the dark.

The curtain rose. The stage depicted a dense, romantic forest with painted papier-mâché trees and flickering side lights. Out from the wings stepped the actors in their brilliant costumes. They delivered their lines with grand, rehearsed gestures, and the ballet ensemble moved in straight, symmetrical rows across the stage floor.

Hans Christian looked at the lead dancer—a young man with slick hair and perfect legs who moved as effortlessly as Anton had at the ballet school.

Seven years ago, Hans Christian would have sold his soul to stand in that man's shoes. He would have wept with envy over the costume's gilded buttons and the audience clapping in rhythm from the boxes.

Now he saw something else.

He saw the wooden frames behind the wings supporting the papier-mâché trees. He saw the greasy layers of makeup under the actor's eyes and the beads of sweat threatening to dissolve the powder on the young dancer's

forehead. He saw the theater's illusions—beautiful, but narrow, bounded by the fixed dimensions of the stage and the dark hole of the prompt box.

Something loosened deep within him. An old, painful knot that had been stuck in his throat since the day Siboni's oak door slammed in his face.

The theater didn't want me, he thought, leaning back into the plush seat as a small, invisible smile spread across his lips. *Because I was too big for their stage.*

They had wanted to squeeze him into tight costumes, force his long, awkward limbs to follow Bournonville's tempo, and demand that he speak other people's words with a voice that was not his own. But an actor was merely a shadow of another man's thought. An actor was a bird in a gilded cage, singing only the songs the score allowed.

He was not meant to be on the stage. He was not meant to squeeze his long legs behind a painted tree as a silent troll.

He was meant to create the stage.

His theater needed no walls. His sets could be an entire world—a cold snowscape in Lapland, an imperial garden in China, or the bottom of the ocean where a little mermaid longed for the surface. His characters needed neither makeup nor ballet slippers; they needed only his words to come alive.

When the performance ended and applause roared through the grand hall, Hans Christian did not stand up to adore the actors.

He straightened his long back, adjusted his student cap, and walked calmly out into the cool Copenhagen night. He looked up at the dark sky, where stars shone brightly above the theater's copper roof.

The play was over. The poet's life had begun.

Epilogue: The Shadow

Many years had passed. Kongens Nytorv had changed, but the theater still stood there, dark and towering against a late November sky.

An elderly gentleman walked slowly down Tordenskjoldsgade. He wore a long, dark coat of the finest cut, and on his chest he wore the Knight's Cross. His face was lined with wrinkles, and his hair had turned gray, but his long, bony frame and striking profile were unmistakable.

It was Councillor of State and Titular Professor Hans Christian Andersen. The fairytale writer whose books were read in every corner of the world, and whose name was known from Copenhagen to London.

At the theater's side door, he paused.

A dense fog drifted in from the sea, laying like a cold blanket over the cobblestones. Out from the stage door stepped the theater's doorkeeper, shoving a young boy out onto the street.

The boy was perhaps fourteen years old. His legs were far too long for his worn trousers, his jacket sleeves ended halfway down his forearms, and in his damp, trembling hand he clutched a crumpled stack of papers.

"Get lost, boy!" roared the doorkeeper, slamming the heavy oak door shut with a crash that echoed down the empty street. "The theater has no use for vagrants!"

The boy remained standing on the cold stones. He collapsed onto the bottom step, hid his face in his long, dirty hands, and broke into silent, frantic weeping. The rain began to fall, lashing against his sharp shoulders.

Hans Christian stood completely still in the fog. Muffled by the rain, he looked at the curled-up figure.

It was like looking at his own shadow.

A shadow that had remained hanging here on the steps for decades while he himself had walked on out into the world. He remembered the pain in his own fourteen-year-old chest—the paralyzing dread of having to return to the mud of Munkemøllestræde, the hunger, the humiliation, and the desperate, burning dream of becoming someone.

He took a step forward to offer the boy a coin or speak a comforting word. But he stopped mid-motion.

He knew that comfort was useless. If someone back then had told the young Hans Christian that he would never become an actor, the boy's heart would have broken. He had to go through the trial by fire. He had to lose his dream to find his calling. The humiliation was not a curse; it was the harsh lye that washed his true voice clean.

The boy rose slowly, wiped his nose on the sleeve of his too-short coat, and began faltering down the dark street.

His long, deformed shadow stretched across the cobblestones under the glow of the lanterns—enormous, strange, and bigger than the city itself.

Hans Christian watched him until the fog swallowed the young figure.

When he arrived home at his warm, book-lined study in Nyhavn, he sat down at his mahogany desk. He lit a candle, dipped his quill in black ink, and closed his eyes for a moment.

He thought of the boy at the theater door. He thought of how a person can separate from their own past, as if losing one's own shadow—and how the shadow sometimes wants to be the real man, while the man merely becomes a spectator.

He set the pen to the white paper and wrote the title of his new fairytale:

The Shadow

"In the hot countries, the sun really burns! People turn dark brown; but in the very hottest countries they are burned into Negroes. It was to the hot countries that a learned man had come from the cold ones... But his shadow wanted to be its own master, it wanted to be a real human being..."

The pen moved across the paper with a dry, crackling sound. The curtain had risen for the last time, and this time, the stage was his own.