

The King, Who Wanted to Be an Actor

A fairy tale in the spirit of H.C. Andersen by Henrik Frederiksen, ©ElephantTribe.org

Far, far away, in a land where the swallows fly when we have winter, there once lived a king. He had everything a human heart could desire: His castle was built of the whitest marble, his gardens were filled with fountains and rare roses, and when he rode through the streets, the people bowed in the dust. But the king was terribly bored.

"Being a king is the most boring chore in the world," he sighed as he sat on his throne. "One just has to sit up straight, nod to old ministers, and listen to lamentations. No, I wish I were an actor! Imagine living a thousand lives! To feel the blood rush like a brave hero, to suffer like a poor shepherd boy, and to love so deeply that the audience weeps. That is true life!"

And since he was king and could do as he pleased, he immediately commanded that a magnificent theater be built in the middle of the castle. It was made of red velvet and heavy silk, and the stage was illuminated by a thousand wax candles.

Now the king acted in plays every single evening. He put on silk capes, let himself be painted with white powder, and drew on black eyebrows so that he looked quite fierce and terrible.

When he played tragic roles and threw his arms out, the ladies-in-waiting swooned, exactly as they had been ordered to do. And the ministers clapped so hard that their white leather gloves split, for one must, of course, clap for the king, even when he forgets his lines.

But inside the little dressing room behind the stage lay his real royal crown on a cushion of red plush. Beside it lay a theatrical crown of cardboard and gold paper. "I am much lighter than you," rattled the cardboard crown proudly,

"and I get to join in on all the fun. No one looks at you anymore."

The royal crown of the reddest gold did not answer a word, for pure gold has its own silent weight, and it knew that its time would surely come.

One evening, there was the harshest winter outside. The snow lashed against the castle windows, and the wind howled in the chimneys like a pack of hungry wolves. Inside the theater, it was cozy and warm.

The king stood on the stage, practicing for the greatest role of his life. He was playing a desperate man who had lost everything, and he wrung his hands and wept artificial tears.

Suddenly, he heard a small sound from the dark rows of seats. It was not the Lord Chamberlain clearing his throat. It was a small, fragile child. A poor girl in far too thin rags, who had crept in through an unlocked door to find

shelter from the snowstorm. She sat and looked at the king with large, serious eyes.

"Why are you crying?" asked the little girl.

The king stepped forward to the edge of the stage, quite proud to have moved his audience. "I am playing an unhappy man, little friend. I am suffering hardship and have neither food nor warmth."

The girl looked at his gold-trimmed cape and the thousand burning wax candles.

"Are you just playing?" she asked quietly. "Out in the city, the storm is real. My mother is ill, bread is too expensive, and the cold bites at our fingers. Why do you pretend to freeze in here, when you could warm those who are freezing out there?"

Those words struck the king right in the heart. It was not a line of dialogue from any play he knew, but it tightened his throat as no drama ever had. He looked at his hands,

which were full of theatrical makeup. He looked at the child's cheeks, which were blue from the cold, and at her tears, which were very, very real.

Without saying a word, the king stepped down from the stage. He took off his heavy silk cape and wrapped it gently around the shivering little shoulders. Then he went into the dressing room. He looked at the theatrical crown of paper and pushed it aside. With both hands, he lifted the real royal crown and placed it on his head. It pressed down a little, for responsibility does, but for the first time, he felt that it sat exactly where it should.

That evening, the great gates of the castle were thrown open. The theater's thousand wax candles were carried out into the courtyard, where the king's men lit mighty bonfires. Bread and meat were brought from the castle's cellars, and the king himself stood in the snow, with the crown on his head, making sure that every poor soul received food and warmth.

When night turned to morning, and the storm died down, the king was more tired than he had ever been, but his heart was light and warm.

The theater inside the castle was later turned into a hospital for the city's poor, and the cardboard crown went into the stove, where it gave a little hiss and burned up. The king never played comedy on the boards again, for he had finally learned that the hardest and most beautiful role in the whole world is to be a real human being.