

CLASSICS TO GO
A BOOK OF
MARIONETTES



HELEN HAIMAN JOSEPH

A Book of Marionettes

Helen Haiman Joseph



DRYAD AND TWO FAUNS

[Puppets of Mr. William Simmonds, London]

Note

THE story of the marionette is endless, in fact it has neither beginning nor end. The marionette has been everywhere and is everywhere. One cannot write of the puppets without saying more than one had intended and less than one desired: there is such a piquant insistency in them. The purpose of this book is altogether modest, but the length of it has grown to be presumptuous. As to its merit, that must be found in the subject matter and in the sources from which the material was gathered. If this volume is but a sign-post pointing the way to better historians and friends of the puppets and through them on to more puppet play it will have proven merit enough.

The bibliography appended is a far from complete list of puppet literature. It includes, however, the most important works of modern times upon marionettes and much comment, besides, that is casual or curious or close at hand.

The author is under obligation to those friendly individuals who generously gave of their time and interest and whose suggestions, explanations and kind assistance have made possible this publication. There are many who have been gracious and helpful, among them particularly Mrs. Maurice Browne, Mr. Michael Carmichael Carr, Professor A. K. Coomaraswamy, Mr. Stewart Culin, Dr. Jesse Walter Fewkes, Mr. Henry Festing Jones, Dr. Berthold Laufer, Mr. Richard Laukhuff, Mr. J. Arthur MacLean, Professor Brander Matthews, Dr. Ida Trent O'Neil, Mr. Raymond O'Neil, Mr. Alfred Powell, Dr. R. Meyer Riefstahl, Mr. Tony Sarg, and Mr. G. Bernard Shaw.

Above all, however, acknowledgment is due to the steady encouragement and interested criticism of Ernest Joseph. Although he did not live to see the finished volume,

his stimulating buoyancy and excellent judgment constantly inspired the composition of this simple account of puppets.

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How I Came to Write a Book on Puppets

WE were rehearsing laboriously. Some of our marionettes were finished; the rest we borrowed from the cast of *Tintagiles*. The effect was curious with Belangere and Ygraine acting as sentinels in their blue and green gowns.

The play we were rehearsing was eventually given up. For various reasons the little puppets about to be presented to you never displayed themselves before the public. Undeniable facts, but for my story quite irrelevant and inconsequential.

It was late and everyone else in the house had retired. I sat up all alone, diligently sewing. Alone? Grouped around me in various stages of completion sat the miniature members of the cast. I worked quietly, much absorbed. Off in the corner there was a clock, ticking.

The Chief Prophet of the Stars lay in my hands, impressive by virtue of his flowing white beard, even without the high purple hat. I rested a moment, straightening a weary back. One long white arm of his was pointing at me. He said: "Do not pity yourself. Despite your backache you are having a lovely time." I am sure he said this. I did not answer. How could I? It was true. Near by was the black-robed Priest with the auburn beard. "Even so," he agreed, "her fingers are happy: her tongue may not complain!"

"It is an honor to be permitted to dress us," pompously proclaimed the Chamberlain. He was perched upon the mantel. His queer, stiff beard having been but recently shellacked was now in the process of drying. He was a balloon shaped, striking fellow arrayed in orange.

“She must finish my high hat to-night,” said the Chief Prophet of the Stars, “and see that my whiskers are decently trimmed. Then she may retire.”

“No,” whimpered one of the spotty Spies from the floor, “she promised to brighten my spots for tomorrow.” Then, in a loud aside, “She will probably get my strings twisted while painting the spots. Serve her right. She was too impatient to show me off yesterday. One should finish the *spots first*, say I.” Ungrateful wretch, to be grumbling! But he crawled and crept along the stage so wonderfully I hadn’t the heart to chide him.

I sat the Chief Prophet upon my knee, crossly. His long arm protested stiffly. I pulled the high hat down over his ominous brows. “It isn’t right,” he said. It wasn’t. I took it off. How trying it must be for him to have so clumsy a handmaiden. “Don’t pin it!” he commanded. “Rip it and sew it neatly.” I picked up the scissors and ripped. Then I sewed on in silence.

The marionettes, however, had many things to say.

“She is not as thorough as might be desired,” stated the Chamberlain. “Indeed, I fear that in the manipulating also she is only an amateur with no profound knowledge of the craft. Here am I, still dissatisfied with the bow I make to His Majesty. I know just how I should bow. Who would question my knowledge of etiquette? I shall not be content with anything but *the correct* bow, dignified and, in its way, imposing as the nod of a King. It must be just so and not otherwise but *how will she do it?* She has tried front strings and back strings and innumerable petty expedients. She calls herself a puppeteer: let her devise a way and that shortly! I scorn to display vexation but it perturbs me not a little as the moment approaches for me to bow and the bow, ahem ... refuses to function fittingly.”

“Try on the hat and do not be diverted by such details!” commands the Chief Prophet. I sit him up seriously. “It will do,” he states; “trim my whiskers.” I trim them, oh, very carefully. They hang augustly down over his black stole. I gaze at him, entranced, and at his portrait painted by a young artist. “I think you have caught the spirit of the ideal,” he admitted. “Put me on the mantel.” I obey him.¹

Next I take up the Spy. He writhes in my hand. I ply the paint brush, more yellow paint on the yellow spots. True to prediction, his strings become entangled. “I told you so,” hissed the green and yellow Spy. “My spots will dry over night. You must arrange my strings tomorrow.” I set him beside the Chief Prophet where he slinks down and subsides. “Hee, hee, hee,” snickers the other Spy who has cerise spots of silk on lavender. He is crouched on the floor in a heap. I raise him and place him beside his fellow. He reaches out a long brown arm and pokes him slyly.

I collect the other dolls. Very crude little rag affairs they seem in their unfinished condition. The naked, white body of the King I lay beside that of the Sentinel. One could scarcely tell them apart except that the feet of the King are already encased in little scarlet boots which are long and pointed and curled at the tips. The King is a stiff, unbending person. But the other is a well built fellow fashioned with exceeding care to stand and walk and sit superbly in a few clothes holding a long red spear and a shield. Into the box I lay them, white bodies, blank faces, limber arms and legs. “I shall have to shop again for the King’s purple robe. What a bore!” I think, as I dump disjointed priests, children and servants, all on top of His Majesty, and close the cover of the tin box.

“You are insolent,” said the Chief Prophet of the Stars. “Well, yes, perhaps, oh mighty marionette,” I admit, “but I am sleepy. Goodnight.”

“Fatigue is human,” remarked the black-robed Priest. “We marionettes transcend such frailty.”

“We are immortal!!!” boomed forth the Chief Prophet. “So saith Anatole France, also Charles Magnin, also others.”

“Hist,” whispered one of the Spies, “it is written in *The Mask...*” And, as I moved quietly about in the adjoining room I heard them discussing many matters, concerning themselves, of course. There was talk of the ancient Indian Ramajana, of the Joruri plays of Japan, of bleeding Saints and nodding Madonnas in Mediaeval churches. The conversation veered to Pulcinella, his kinship with Kasper and Karagheuz and with Punch across the channel. There were murmurings of the names of Goethe, Voltaire, even Shakespeare to say nothing of Bernard Shaw, Maeterlinck, Hoffmansthal, Schnitzler, all from the dolls on the mantel and much, much more besides. Some things I overheard distinctly before I fell asleep: some I may have dreamed. All that I could recall I have put into a little book.

Puppets of Antiquity

“I wish to discant on the marionette.

One needs a keen taste for it and also a little
veneration.

The marionette is august; it issues from a
sanctuary....”

ANATOLE FRANCE

PERHAPS the most impressive approach to the marionettes is through the trodden avenue of history. If we travel from distant antiquity where the first articulated idols were manipulated by ingenious, hidden devices in the vast temples of India and Egypt, if we follow the footprints of the puppets through classic centuries of Greece and Rome and trace them even in the dark ages of early Christianity whence they emerged to wander all over mediaeval Europe, in the cathedrals, along the highways, in the market places and at the courts of kings, we may have more understanding and respect for the quaint little creatures we find exhibited crudely in the old, popular manner on the street corner or presented, consciously naïve and precious, upon the art stage of an enthusiastic younger generation. For the marionette has a history. No human race can boast a longer or more varied, replete with such high dignities and shocking indignities, romantic adventure and humble routine, triumphs, decadences, revivals. No human race has explored so many curious corners of the earth, adapted itself to the characteristic tastes of such diverse peoples and, nevertheless, retained its essential, individual traits through ages of changing environment and ideals.

The origin of the puppet is still somewhat of a mystery, dating back, as it undoubtedly does, to the earliest stages of

the very oldest civilizations. Scholars differ as to the birthplace and ancestry. Professor Richard Pischel, who has made an exhaustive study of this phase of the subject, believes that the puppet came into being along with fairy tales on the banks of the Ganges, "in the old wonderland of India." The antiquity of the Indian marionette, indeed, is attested by the very legends of the national deities. It was the god Siva who fell in love with the beautiful puppet of his wife Parvati. The most ancient marionettes were made of wool, wood, buffalo horn and ivory; they seem to have been popular with adults as well as with children. In an old, old collection of Indian tales, there is an account of a basketful of marvellous wooden dolls presented by the daughter of a celebrated mechanic to a princess. One of these could be made to fly through the air by pressing a wooden peg, another to dance, another to talk! Large talking puppets were even introduced upon the stage with living actors. An old Sanskrit drama has been found in which they took part. But in India real puppet shows, themselves, seem to have antedated the regular drama, or so we may infer from the names given to the director of the actors, which is *Sutradhara* (Holder of the Strings) and to the stage manager, who is called *Sthapaka* (Setter up). The implication naturally is that these two important functionaries of the oldest Indian drama took their titles from the even more ancient and previously established puppet plays.

There are authorities, however, who consider Egypt the original birthplace of the marionette, among these *Yorick* (P. Ferrigni), whose vivid history of puppets is accessible in various issues of *The Mask*. Yorick claims that the marionette originated somehow with the aborigines of the Nile and that before the days of Manete who founded Memphis, before the Pharaohs, great idols moved their hands and opened their mouths, inspiring worshipful terror

in the hearts of the beholders. Dr. Berthold Laufer corroborates this opinion. He maintains that marionettes first appeared in Egypt and Greece, and spread from there to all countries of Asia. The tombs of ancient Thebes and Memphis have yielded up many small painted puppets of ivory and wood, whose limbs can be moved by pulling a string. These are figures of beasts as well as of men and they may have been toys. Indeed, it is often claimed that puppets are descended, not from images of the gods, but from "the first doll that was ever put into the hands of a child."

The *Boston Transcript*, in 1904, published a report of an article by A. Gayet in *La Revue* which gives a minute description of a marionette theatre excavated at Antinoë. There, in the tomb of Khelmis, singer of Osiris, archaeologists have unearthed a little Nile galley or barge of wood with a cabin in the centre and two ivory doors that open to reveal a stage. A rod across the front of this stage is supported by two uprights and from this rod light wires were found still hanging. Other indications leave little doubt that this miniature theatre was used in a religious rite, possibly on the anniversary of the death of the god Osiris, whose father was Ra, the sun, as a sort of passion play performed by puppets before an audience of the initiated. Mortuary paintings show us the ritual and tell us the story. As everything excavated at this site is reported to be of the Roman or Coptic period this is probably the oldest marionette theatre ever discovered!

The Chinese puppets and still older *shadows* of the land as well as of other Oriental countries are all of considerable antiquity. In truth, it matters little whence came the first of the puppets, from India, Egypt or from China, nor how descended, from the idols of priests or the playthings of children. It is enough to know of their indisputably ancient lineage and the honorable position granted them in the

legends of gods and heroes. Whatever remains uncertain or fantastic in the theories of their origin can only add to the aura of romance surrounding this imperishable race of fragile beings.

In the mythology of the Greeks one may find mention of the august ancestors of the marionettes. Passages in the Iliad describe the marvellous golden tripods fashioned by Vulcan which moved of themselves. A host of great articulated idols were to be found in the temples all over Greece. These were moved, Charles Magnin avers, by various devices such as quicksilver, leadstone, springs, etc. There was Jupiter Ammon, borne upon the shoulders of the priests, who indicated with his head the direction he wished to travel. There were the Apollo of Heliopolis, the Theban Venus, the statues created by Daedalus and many others, all manipulated by priests from within the hollow bodies.



JOINTED DOLLS OR PUPPETS
Terra-cotta, probably Attic

[Courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston]

But aside from these inspiring deities, in fact right along with them, Greek puppetry grew up and flourished. Yorick writes, "Greece from remotest times of which any accounts have come down to us had marionette theatres in the public places of all the most populated cities. She had famous showmen whose names, recorded on the pages of the most illustrious writers, have triumphed over death and oblivion. She had her 'balletti' and pantomimes exclusively conceived and preordained for the play of 'pupazzi,' etc." Eminent mathematicians interested themselves in perfecting the mechanism of the dolls until, as Apuleius wrote, "Those who direct the movement of the little wooden figures have nothing else to do but to pull the string of the member they wish to set in motion and immediately the head bends, the eyes turn, the hands lend themselves to any action and the elegant little person moves and acts as though it were alive." A pleasant hyperbole of Apuleius perhaps, but some of us credulously prefer to have faith in it.

In the writings of the celebrated Heron of Alexandria, living two centuries before Christ, one can find a very minute description of a puppet show for which he planned the ingenious mechanism. He explains that there were two kinds of automata, first those acting on a movable stage which itself advanced and retreated at the end of the acts and second, those performing on a stationary stage divided into acts by a change of scene. The *Apotheosis of Bacchus* was of the first type, the action presented within a miniature temple wherein stood the statue of the god with dancing bacchantes circling around, fountains jetting forth milk, garlands of flowers, sounding cymbals, all accomplished by a mechanism of weights and cords. It was an extremely

elaborate affair. Of the second type of puppet show Heron cites as example *The Tragedy of Nauplius*, the mechanism for which was invented by a contemporary engineer, Philo of Byzantium. There were five scenes disclosed, one after the other, by doors which opened and closed: first, the seashore, with workmen constructing the ships, hammering, sawing, etc.; second, the coast with the Greeks dragging their ships to the water; third, sky and sea, with the ships sailing over the waters which begin to grow rough and stormy; fourth, the coast of Euboë, Nauplius brandishing a torch on the rocks and shoals whither the Greek vessels steer and are shattered (Athene stands behind Nauplius, who is the instrument of her vengeance); fifth, the wreck of the ships, Ajax struggling and drowning in the waves, Athene appearing in a thunder clap! This play was probably taken from episodes of the Homeric legend and, although Heron does not so state, the action of the puppets was most likely accompanied by a recital of the poem upon which the drama was founded.

Xenophon describes still another type of show, a banquet at which the host brought in a Syracusan juggler to amuse the guests with his dancing marionettes. The best showmen in Greece seem to have been Sicilians. These peripatetic showmen went from town to town with their figures in a box. The plays they presented were generally keen, strong satires on the foibles of human nature, the vices of the times, the prominent or pompous persons of the day, parodies on popular dramas or schools of philosophy. They were a favorite diversion of the masses and of cultured people as well. Even Socrates is reported to have bandied words with a Sicilian showman, asking him how he made a living in his profession. To which the showman made reply: "The folly of men is an inexhaustible fund of riches and I am always sure of filling my purse by moving a few pieces of wood." Eventually the puppets usurped a place upon the

classic stage itself, and it is reported that a puppet player, Potheinus, had a small stage specially erected for his marionettes on the thymele of the great theatre of Dionysius at Athens where Euripedes' plays had been presented.

The Romans borrowed marionette traditions from the Greeks as they did many other art forms. There were large articulated statues of the gods and emperors in Rome. At Praeneste the celebrated group of the infants of Jupiter and Juno seated upon the knees of Fortune appears to have been of this sort; the nurse seems to have been movable. Livy describes a banquet celebration and the terror of the people and of the Senate upon hearing that the gods averted their heads from the dishes presented them. Ovid, also, gives an account of the startling effect produced upon the beholders when the statue of Servus Tullius moved. As in Greece, there were special puppet performances given in private homes as well as the wandering shows along the highways. The latter were popular with common people, with poets, philosophers and emperors. Marcus Aurelius wrote about them, Horace and Persius mentioned them.

The personages of the Roman puppet stage generally represented obvious and amusing types of humanity; their repertoire consisted chiefly of bold satire and parodies on popular dramas. The conventionalized characters of Roman marionette theatres were not at all dissimilar from the later heroes of the Italian *fantoccini*. A bronze portrait of Maccus, the Roman buffoon, which was unearthed in 1727, might serve almost as a statue of Pulcinella, hooked nose, nut-cracker chin, hunchback and all. In fact it is thought that these Roman mimes or *sanni* have lived on in the Italian *burattini*, and in the characters of the Commedia dell' Arte. This theory has been criticized by some who feel that the *personaggi* such as Arlecchino and Pulcinella grew out of the mannerisms and characteristics of the Italians, just as the

puppet buffoons of Rome were true offspring of the Roman people, and that any resemblances between them may be laid at the door of common frailties existing in humanity of all ages and ever fit subject for the satirical play of puppets. Nevertheless it is not impossible to believe that through the curiously confused period in Italy when Pagan culture was giving way to Christianity, when heathen ideals were half perishing, half persisting, something of the old was embodied in, assimilated with the new. And so it may have happened with the marionettes, Maccus emerging with much of Pulcinella, Citeria appearing as Columbine. We have Pappus Bruccus and Casnar, the parasite, the glutton, the fool, passed on somehow.



SIAMESE SHADOWS

Belonging to the collection in the Smithsonian Institution, U. S. National Museum. This collection was presented by the King of Siam in 1876

But not alone this. Excavators in the Catacombs have discovered small jointed puppets of ivory or wood in many tombs. They look like dolls, but they may have been religious images used by the earliest Christians. The Iconoclasts in their zeal annihilated everything that had the appearance of an idol, and many a puppet perished along with the images of the gods, Maccus as well as Apollo! But soon the Church saw the wisdom of using concrete, vivid representation instead of mere abstract symbolism scarcely comprehensible to the simple minded. "Into the churches crept figures, Jesus' body on the Cross instead of the Lamb. To the Apollo of Heliopolis succeeded the crucifix of Nicodemus, to the Theban Venus the Madonna of Orihuela." (P. Ferrigni.) Occasionally these figures were made to move a head or to gesticulate. And here we find the earliest beginnings of the mysteries which were later to come out from the churches and monasteries as precursors not only of our puppet shows but of practically all our drama.

Oriental Puppets

THERE are few of us who at times have not unleashed our imaginations, flung away the reins and bidden our thoughts roam freely beyond the vision of our straining eyes. Who has not pondered whimsically what sort of crooked creatures may be shambling over the craters and crevices of the moon? Similarly the unfamiliar Eastern lands afford adventure for our Western fancies. How alluring the imaginary sights and sounds fantastically flavored; glimmer of spangles, daggers, veils and turbans, camels and busy bazaars and mosques white in the sun, strumming of curious instruments, gurgle, clatter and patter, enigmatical whisperings and silences of unknown import. But of all things so strange what could be fashioned stranger than the puppets of Eastern peoples? As the dreams and philosophies of the Orient seem farther away from us than its most distant cities, so these small symbols of unfamiliar creeds and cultures for us are most amazing. What skill and artistry is displayed in the creation of them, what capricious imagery in their conception! Let us consider them.



JAVANESE WAYANG FIGURES

[American Museum of Natural History, New York]

Probably the Javanese *shadows* present the most weirdly fascinating spectacle to our unaccustomed eyes. What singular creatures are here? Bizarre beyond all description, grotesque forms with long, lean beckoning arms and incredible profiles, adorned with curious, elaborate ornamentation. They are made of buffalo skin, carefully selected, ingeniously treated, intricately cut and chiseled, richly gilded and cunningly colored, and they are supported and manipulated by fragile and graceful rods of horn or bamboo. Such are the colorful and inscrutable little figures of gods and heroes in the *Wayang Purwa*, ancient and celebrated drama of Java, popular now as in the days of Java's independence.