

Aunty

Hans Christian Andersen

You ought to have known Aunty; she was so lovely. And yet, to be more specific, she wasn't lovely in the usual sense of the word, but she was sweet and charming and funny in her own way - just the type to gossip about when one is in the mood to gossip and be facetious over someone. She should have been put in a play, just because she herself simply lived for the theater and everything that goes on in it. She was so very respectable, even if Agent Nob, whom Aunty called Snob, said she was stage-struck.

"The theater is my schoolroom," she said, "my fountain of knowledge. There I have brushed up on my old Biblical history. Take *Moses*, for instance, or *Joseph and His Brethren* - they're operas now. It is from the theater that I've gained my knowledge of world history, geography, and human nature. I've learned about Parisian life from French farces - it's naughty, but very interesting. How I have cried over *The Riquebourg Family* - to think that the husband had to drink himself to death just so his wife could get her young sweetheart! Ah, yes, many's the tear I've shed in the fifty years I've been going to the theater!"

Aunty knew every play, every piece of scenery, every actor who came on or ever had come on. She really only lived during the nine months of the theatrical season. A summer without a summer stock company was enough to age her, while an evening at the theater that lasted till past midnight prolonged her life. She didn't say, as people did, "Now we will have spring; the stork has come!" or, "There's an item in the paper about the early strawberries!" Instead, she announced the coming of autumn, "Have you seen that the box office is open? They'll begin the performances soon!"

She reckoned the value of a house and its location by its distance from the theater. She was heartbroken to have to leave the narrow alley behind the theater and move to a wide street a little farther away, and live in a house where there were no neighbors opposite her.

"At home my window must be my box at the theater. You can't sit by yourself without ever seeing people. But where I live now, it seems as if I've moved way out into the country. If I want to see people, I have to go into the kitchen and climb up onto the sink. That's the only way I can see my neighbors. Now, in that old alley of mine I could look right into the linen dealer's, and then I was only three steps from the theater; now I am three thousand steps away - a guardsman's steps, at that!"

Aunty might sometimes be ill, but however badly she happened to feel, she never missed the theater. One evening her doctor ordered her to put her feet in sour-dough poultices; she did as he told her, but rode off to the theater and sat there with her feet in sour dough. If she had died there it would have pleased her. Thorvaldsen died in the theater; and she called that "a blessed death."

She could not imagine heaven if there were no theater there; indeed, it was never promised to us, but it surely was conceivable that the many great actors and actresses who had gone on before would want to continue their work.

Aunty had her own private wire from the theater to her room; and the "telegram" came every Sunday for coffee. Her private wire was Mr. Sivertsen, of the stage-setting department. It was he who gave the signal for the raising and lowering of the curtain, the setting or striking of the scenery.

From him she received a brief, expressive report of each of the plays. Shakespeare's *Tempest* he called "detestable stuff - there's so much to set up! Why, it begins with water down to the first side drop!" That is to say, the rolling billows extended far forward on the stage. On the other hand, if a play could go through five acts in one and the same set, he

said it was sensible and well written; it was a play of rest that could play itself, without all that setting up to do.

In the earlier days, Aunty recalled, meaning some thirty-odd years back, when she and Mr. Sivertsen were indeed much younger, he was then already in the mechanical department, and, as she called him, her "benefactor." At that time it was customary at the town's big and only theater to admit spectators into the cockloft; every stage carpenter had one or two places to dispose of. It was often filled to capacity, and with a very select company; it was said the wives of generals and councilmen had been there, because it was so interesting to look down behind the scenes and see how the performers stood and moved when the curtain was down.

Aunty had been there several times, to tragedies and ballets, for the productions requiring the largest casts were the most interesting to watch from the loft. You sat up there in almost complete darkness, and most people brought their suppers with them. But once three apples and a package of sandwiches filled with sausage fell straight down into the prison where Ugolino was about to die of hunger! The sausage produced a tremendous effect. The audience laughed and cheered, and the sausage was one of the main reasons why the management decided to forbid admission to the cockloft.

"But still I've been there thirty-seven times," said Aunty. "And for that I shall always be grateful to Mr. Sivertsen."

On the last evening that the cockloft was open to the public, they were giving *The Judgment of Solomon*. Aunty could remember it so well, for from her benefactor, Mr. Sivertsen, she had obtained a ticket for Agent Nob. Not that he deserved it, for he always made fun of the theater and teased her about it, but still she had got him a seat in the cockloft. He wanted to look at the goings-on in the theater upside down. "Those were his very words, and just like him," said Aunty.

And so he saw *The Judgment of Solomon* from above, and fell asleep. One would surely have thought that he had come from a big dinner and had drunk many toasts. He slept until after the theater was locked up and had to spend the whole dark night up in the loft. He had a story to tell of his waking up, but Aunty didn't believe a word of it. *The Judgment of Solomon* was played out, the lights were out, and all the people were out, above and below; but then began the epilogue, the real comedy, the best thing of all, according to the agent. Then life came into the properties, and it wasn't *The Judgment of Solomon* that was given now; no, it was *Judgment Day at the Theater*. All this Agent Nob impudently tried to cram into Aunty; that was her thanks for getting him into the cockloft.

The story the agent told was amusing enough to hear, but there were mockery and spite behind it.

"It was very dark up there," said the agent, "but then the witchery began, the great spectacle, *Judgment Day at the Theater*. Ticket takers were at the doors, and every spectator had to show his spiritual testimonial, to decide whether he could enter free or handcuffed, and with or without a muzzle. Fine society people, who came too late, after the performance had begun, and young fellows who wasted their time were hitched outside. There they were muzzled, and had felt soles put under their shoes, to walk in on in time for the beginning of the next scene. And then they began *Judgment Day at the Theater*.

"Purely wickedness," said Aunty, "which our Lord knows nothing about!"

Had the scene painter wanted to get into heaven he would have had to climb up some stairs he had painted himself but which were too steep for anybody to use. That, of course, was because of his sin against perspective. The stage carpenter who had placed the plants and buildings in lands where they didn't belong had to move them into their proper places before cockcrowing time, if he expected to go to heaven. Mr. Nob would

have to watch his own chances of getting there! And to hear what he said about the actors, both in comedy and tragedy, or in song and dance - why, it was shameful of Mr. Nob! Mr. Nob! He never deserved his place in the cockloft! Aunty didn't believe a word of what he said. He had written it all out, he said - the snob! - and would have it printed, but not until he was dead and buried, since he had no wish to be skinned alive.

Only once had Aunty known terror and anguish in her own temple of happiness, the theater. It was one of those gray winter days when we have only two hours of foggy daylight; it was cold and snowing, but Aunty was bound for the theater. They were giving *Hermann von Unna*, besides a little opera and a grand ballet, with prologue and epilogue - it would last well into the night. Aunty had to be there; her lodger had lent her a pair of sleigh boots, shaggy both outside and inside, that reached all the way up her legs.

Aunty arrived at the theater and was seated in a box; the boots felt warm, so she kept them on. Suddenly there arose the cry of "Fire!" as smoke rolled from one of the wings and down from the cockloft! There was a fearful panic, and people stormed out. Aunty was sitting farthest from the door - "second tier, left - hand side; from there the decorations look best," she said. "They always arrange them so they will look the prettiest from the King's side of the house." Now she wanted to get out of there, but the excited people in front of her thoughtlessly slammed and jammed the door shut. There was Aunty, with no way out and no way in, for the partitions between the boxes were too high. She called for help, but nobody heard her. When she looked over at the tier beneath, she saw it was empty; the balustrade was low; and the drop wasn't very far. Her fright made her feel young and active, so she prepared to jump. She got one foot on the seat and the other over the railing; there she sat astride, well draped in her flowered skirt, with one long leg dangling below, a leg in a huge sleigh boot. That was a sight to see! And it was seen, when finally her cries were heard; and then she was easily rescued, for the fire didn't amount to much.

That was the most memorable evening of her life, she said, and she was glad she hadn't seen herself, for she would have died of shame!

Her benefactor in the mechanical department, Mr. Sivertsen, came to see her regularly every Sunday. But it was a long time between Sundays. So in later years, in the middle of the week, a small child would come to her for the "leavings"; that is, to get her supper from the remains of Aunty's dinner.

This little child was a member of the ballet who really needed the food. She played the roles of a page or a fairy, but her hardest part was the hind legs of the lion in Mozart's *Magic Flute*. She eventually grew up to become the front legs, but for this she was paid only three marks, while as the hind legs she had received one rix-dollar. She had had to creep about as the hind legs, stooping, panting for fresh air. This was very interesting to know, thought Aunty.

Aunty deserved to have lived as long as the theater itself, but she couldn't hold out that long; nor did she die in the theater, but quietly and decently in her own bed. Her dying words were full of significance; she asked, "What are they playing tomorrow?"

She must have left about five hundred rix-dollars; we came to that conclusion from the yearly rental, which amounted to twenty rix-dollars. The money was left by Aunty as a legacy for some deserving old spinster who had no family. It was to be used for a seat in the second tier, left side, every Saturday, for that was when they gave the best plays. There was only one condition imposed on the legatee. As she sat in the theater every Saturday, she was to think of Aunty lying in her grave.

This was Aunty's religion.