

THE EGYPTIAN FIRE-EATER

RUDOLPH BAUMBACH

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Next Easter he must go to N to school. Fact. It is high time; he is eleven years old, and here he is running wild with the street-boys. That's what I say.

He, that is, I, hung my head, and I felt more like crying than laughing. I had passed eleven sunny boyhood years in the little country town, I stood in high esteem among my playmates, and would rather be the first in the ranks of my birthplace than second in the metropolis.

Through the gray mist, which surrounded my near future like a thick fog, gleamed only one light, but a bright, attractive light; that was the theatre, the splendor of which I had already learned to know. The white priests in the *Magic Flute*, Sarastro's lions, the fire-spitting serpents, and the gay, merry Papageno, such things could not be seen at home; and when my parents promised me occasional visits to the theatre, as a reward for diligence in study and exemplary conduct, I left the Eden of my childhood, half consoled.

Young trees, transplanted at the proper time, soon take root. After a tearful farewell to my friends and a slight attack of home-sickness, I was quite content. I was received into the second class at the gymnasium, and drank eagerly of the fountain of knowledge; a certain Frau Eberlein, with whom I found board and lodging, cared for my bodily welfare.

She was a widow, and kept a little store, in which, with the assistance of a shop-girl, she served customers, who called from morning to night. She dealt principally in groceries and vegetables, but besides these, every conceivable thing was found piled up in her shop: knitting-yarn, sheets of pictures, slate-pencils, cheese, pen-knives, balls of twine, herring, soap, buttons, writing-paper, glue, hairpins, cigar-holders, oranges, fly-poison, brushes, varnish, gingerbread, tin soldiers, corks, tallow candles, tobacco-pouches, thimbles, gum-balls, and torpedoes. Besides, she prepared, by means of essences, peach brandy, maraschino, ros solis, and other liqueurs, as well as an excellent ink, in the manufacture of which I used to help her. She rejoiced in considerable prosperity, lived well, and did not let me want for anything.

My passion for the theatre was a source of great anxiety to good Frau Eberlein. She did not have a very good opinion of the art in general, but the comedy she despised from the bottom of her heart. Therefore she made my visiting the theatre as difficult as possible, and it was only after long discussions, and after the shop-girl had added her voice, that she would hand over the necessary amount for purchasing a ticket. The shop-girl was an oldish person, as thin as a giraffe which had fasted for a long time, and was very well read. She subscribed regularly to a popular periodical with the motto, *Culture is freedom*, and Frau Eberlein was influenced somewhat by her judgment. This kind-hearted woman was friendly towards me, and as often as her employer asked, *Is the play a proper one for young people?* she would answer, *Yes*, and Frau Eberlein would have to let me go.

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Those were glorious evenings. Long before it was time for the play to begin, I was in my seat in the gallery, looking down from my dizzy height, into the house, still unlighted. Now a servant comes and lights the lamps in the orchestra. The parquet and the upper seats fill, but the reserved seats and the boxes are still empty. Now it suddenly grows light; the chandelier comes down from an opening in the ceiling. The musicians appear and tune their instruments. It makes a horrible discord, but still it is beautiful. The doors slam; handsomely dressed ladies, in white cloaks, gay officers, and civilians in stiff black and white evening dress take their seats in the boxes. The conductor mounts his elevated seat and now it begins. The overture is terribly long, but it comes to an end. Ting-aling-aling, the curtain rises. Ah!

I soon decided in my own mind that it should be my destiny, some time, to delight the audience from the stage, but I was still undecided whether I would devote myself to the drama or the opera, for it seemed to me an equally desirable lot to shoot charmed bullets in *Der Freischutz*, or, hidden behind elderberry bushes, to shoot at tyrannical Geslers in *William Tell*. In the meantime I learned Tell's monologue, *Along this narrow path the man must come, by heart, and practised the aria, Through the forest, through the meadows.*

Providence seemed to favor my plan, for it led me into an acquaintance with a certain Lipp, who, on account of his connections, was in a position to pave my way to the stage.

Lipp was a tall, slender youth, about sixteen years old, with terribly large feet and hands. He usually wore a very faded, light-blue coat, the sleeves of which hardly came below his elbows, and a red vest. He had a rather stooping gait, and a beaming smile continually played about his mouth. Besides, the poor fellow was always hungry, and it was this peculiarity which brought about our acquaintance.

On afternoons when there was no school, and I went out on the green to play ball with my companions or fly my kite, Frau Eberlein used to put something to eat in my pocket. Lipp soon spied it out, and he knew how to get a part, or even the whole of my luncheon for himself. He would pick up a pebble off the ground, slip it from one hand to the other several times, then place one fist above the other, saying:

This hand, or that?
Burned is the tail of the cat.
Which do you choose?
Upper or under will lose!

If I said upper, the stone was always in the lower hand, and vice versa. And Lipp would take my apple from me with a smile, and devour it as if he were half-famished.

Why did I allow it? In the first place because Lipp was beyond me in years and in strength, and in the second place, because he was the son of a very important personage. His father was nothing less than the doorkeeper of the theatre; a splendid man with a shining red nose and coal-black beard reaching to his waist. The wise reader now knows how young Lipp came by a light-blue coat and red vest.

My new friend from his earliest years had been constantly on the stage. He played the gamin in folk-scenes and the monster in burlesques. Besides, he was an adept at thunder and lightning; by means of cracking a whip and the close imitation of the neighing of horses, he announced the approaching stage-coach; he lighted the moon in *Der Freischutz*; and with a kettle and pair of tongs gave forewarning of the witches' hour. When I opened my heart to Lipp and confided to him that I wanted to go on the stage, he reached out his broad hand to me with emotion and said, *And so do I. Hereupon we swore eternal friendship, and Lipp promised as soon as possible to procure me an opportunity for putting my dramatic qualifications to the test. From that hour his manner changed towards me. Before, he had treated me with some condescension, but now his behavior towards me was more like that of a colleague. Moreover, the game of chance for my lunch came to an end, for from that time forth I shared it with him like a brother.*

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The fine fellow kept his promise to make a way for me to go on the stage. A few evenings later (*Der Freischutz* was being played), I stood with a beating heart behind the scenes, and friend Lipp stood by my side. In my hand I held a string, with which I set the wings of the owl in the wolf's glen in rhythmic motion. My companion performed the wild chase. By turns he whistled through his fingers, cracked a whip, and imitated the yelping of the hounds. It was awfully fine.

You did your part splendidly, said Lipp to me at the end of the scene; next time you must go out on the stage.

I swam in a sea of delight. A short time after, *Preciosa* was given, and Lipp told me that I could play the gypsy boy. They put a white frock on me and wound red bands crosswise about my legs. Then a chorister took me by the hand and led me up and down the back of the stage two or three times. That was my first appearance.

It was also my last. The affair became known. In school I received a severe reprimand, and in addition, as a consequence of the airy gypsy costume, a cold with a cough, which kept me in bed for a day or two.

It serves you right, said Frau Eberlein. He who will not hear must feel. This comes from playing in the theatre. If your blessed grandmother knew that you had been with play-actors she would turn in her grave.

Crushed and humiliated, I swallowed the various teas which my nurse steeped for me one after another. But with each cup I had to listen to an instructive story about the depravity of actors. In order to lead me back from the way of the transgressors to the path of virtue, Frau Eberlein painted with glowing colors; one story in particular, in which occurred three bottles of punch-essence never paid for, made a deep impression on me. But Frau Eberlein's anecdotes failed to make me change my resolves.

Soon after, something very serious happened. Lipp's father, the doorkeeper of the theatre, after drinking heavily, fell down lifeless by the card-table in the *White Horse*; and my friend, in consequence of this misfortune, came under the control of a cold-hearted guardian, who had as little comprehension of the dramatic art as Frau Eberlein. Lipp was given over to a house-painter, who, invested with extended authority, took the unfortunate fellow as an apprentice.

Lipp was inconsolable at the change in his lot. The smile disappeared from his face, and I too felt melancholy when I saw him going along the street in his paint-bespattered clothes, the picture of despair.

One day I met the poor fellow outside the city gate, where the last houses stand, painting a garden fence with an arsenic-green color. My good friend, he said, with a melancholy smile, I cannot give you my hand, for there is paint on it; but we are just the same as ever. Then he spoke of his disappointed hopes. But, he continued, because they are deferred, they are not put off for ever, and these clouds (by this he referred to his present apprenticeship as painter) will pass away. The time will come I say no more about it; but the time will come. Here Lipp stopped speaking and dipped his brush in the paint-pot, for his master was coming around the corner of the house.

One day Lipp disappeared. The authorities did everything in their power to find him, but in vain; and since, at that time, the river, on which the city stood, had overflowed its banks, it was decided that Lipp had perished. The only person who did not share in this opinion was myself. I had a firm conviction that he had gone out into the wide world to seek his fortune, and that some day he would turn up again as a celebrated artist and a successful man. But year after year passed by and nothing was heard of Lipp.

I had entered upon my fifteenth year, was reading *Virgil* and *Xenophon*, and could enumerate the causes which brought the Roman empire to ruin. But in the midst of my classical studies I did not lose sight of the real aim of my life, the dramatic art; and as the stage had been closed to me since my first appearance, I studied in my own

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room the roles in which I hoped to shine later. Then I had already tried my skill as a dramatic author, and in my writing-desk lay concealed a finished tragedy. It was entitled Pharaoh. In it occurred the seven plagues of Egypt and the miracles of Moses; but Pharaoh's destruction in the Red Sea formed the finale from which I promised myself the most brilliant success.

Therefore I went about dressed as a regular artist. My schoolmates imitated the University students, wore gay-colored caps, dark golden-red bands, and carried canes adorned with tassels; but I wore over my wild hair a pointed Calabrian hat, around my neck a loose silk handkerchief fastened together in an artistic knot, and in unpleasant weather a cloak, the red-lined corner of which I threw picturesquely over my left shoulder.

In this attire I went about in my native town, where I was accustomed to spend my summer vacations. The boys on the street made sport of me by their words and actions, but I thought, What does the moon care when the dog bays at her! and holding my head high, I walked past the scoffers.

Every year, in the month of August, a fair was held in the little town. On the common, tents and arbors were put up, where beer and sausages were furnished. Further entertainment was provided in the way of rope-dancers, jugglers, a Punch-and-Judy show, fortune-tellers, monstrosities, wax figures, and tragedies.

As a spoiled city youth, I considered it decidedly beneath my dignity to take part in the people's merry-making; but I couldn't get out of it, and so I went with my parents and brothers and sisters to the opening of the festival out in the park, and walked more proudly than ever under my Calabrian hat.

The sights were inspected one after another, and in the evening we all sat together in the front row of a booth, the proprietor of which promised to exhibit the most extraordinary thing that had ever been seen. The spectacle was divided into three parts. In the first a little horse with a large head was brought out, which answered any questions asked him by nodding, shaking, and beating his hoofs. In the second part two trained hares performed their tricks. With their forelegs they beat the drum, fired off pistols, and in the "Battle with the Hounds" they put to flight a whining terrier.

The proprietor had kept the best of all that is, the Egyptian fire-eater, called Phosphorus for the last part. The curtain went up for the third time, and on the stage, in fantastic scarlet dress, with a burning torch in his left hand, there stood a tall ah! a form only too well known to me. It was Lipp, who had been looked upon as dead.

I saw how the unfortunate fellow with a smile put a lump of burning pitch in his mouth, and then everything began to swim around me. I pulled my hat down over my eyes, made my way through the crowd howling their applause, and staggered home exhausted.

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During the rest of the festival I kept myself in strict seclusion. I announced that I was not well, and this was really no untruth, for I was very miserable. "That is because he is growing," said my anxious mother; and I assented, and swallowed submissively the family remedies which she brought to me.

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At last the fair was over, and the Egyptian fire-eater had left the town. But the poor fellow did not go far. In the city where he exhibited his skill he was recognized and arrested, because he had avoided service in the army. To be sure, he was set free again after a few weeks as unqualified; but in the meantime his employer with the performing hares had gone nobody knew where, and Lipp was left solely dependent on his art, which he practised for some time in the neighboring towns and villages.

The end of his artistic career is sad and melancholy. He fell a victim to his calling. As an ambitious man he enlarged his artistic capabilities; he ate not only pitch but also pieces of broken glass, and an indigestible lamp-chimney was the cause of his destruction.

When I returned to the city I burned my tragedy of "Pharaoh," and sold my cloak and Calabrian hat to an old-clothes dealer. I was thoroughly disgusted with the career of an artist, and whenever afterwards I was inclined to relapse, Frau Eberlein would call out to me, "Do you, too, want to die from a lamp-chimney?" Then I would bend my head and bury my nose in my Greek grammar.