

THE YOUNG MAN AND THE DIRTY LITTLE TOWN

A Fairy Tale based on some true Events

Once upon a time, there lived a young man who was born into a family which had achieved great affluence in a short time through its business activities. But the young man did not want to become a businessman or an entrepreneur. He was more interested in politics and the finer things of life. So he traveled around, studied various subjects in big cities, became involved in several political associations and indulged in expressing radical thoughts. However, his family did not agree with this lifestyle and his father in particular was very concerned about what would become of his son.

Then something unexpected happened. The young man's grandparents died suddenly, one shortly after the other and, to the surprise and annoyance of the whole family, left him the lion's share of their enormous fortune. But the grandparents had known exactly what they were doing. For when the young man claimed his inheritance, he declared that he did not intend to keep most of this unearned income but to use it for the benefit of the community at large.

The young man lived in a town which had been particularly ravaged by industrialization and had become very ugly and dirty as a result. The town was also reputed to have no tradition or culture and its inhabitants to be interested only in survival. And that was true. For the town was relatively young and inhabited almost exclusively by workers and factory owners, that is to say people who for one reason or another had neither the money nor the time to spend reflecting on their lives.

The young man was very conscious of this and it hurt him. For he loved his home town and he reacted to prejudice against it as if the criticism were aimed at him personally. So to the astonishment of his friends and family, he decided to stay in this little, dirty and cultureless town despite his great wealth, which would have allowed him a comfortable life anywhere in the world, and to do

everything in his power, as he put it himself, "to interest our art-forsaken industrial region in modern art".

However, he had only a vague notion of how to go about this. On the advice of some friends, he decided first to establish a museum in his town following the example of aristocratic traditions. But he was not sure what kind of museum he ought to found either, so he began to collect all sorts of different items: natural history and ethnography, arts and crafts and fine art. He hoped that the museum building, which he commissioned from the architect who had built his father's villa and which was to be located in a prominent position in the town, would unite the collections.

When the shell of the museum building was completed two years later, the young man realized that this project was not much different to what he had been trying to change. Disappointed and perplexed, he discontinued the construction work and sought new inspiration.

Then came another unexpected event in the young man's life. He discovered a report in an art magazine about an unusual foreign artist and architect whose work he greatly liked. As he himself later wrote, he recognized "at a glance that this was the path for the future, the path which led to beauty via reason". That very same day, he sent a telegram announcing his intention to visit the artist.

The young man and the much older artist immediately hit it off and agreed on a mutually beneficial form of collaboration. For the commission to develop the museum gave the artist the long-awaited opportunity to implement his ideas on a grand scale - accepting the fact that this was to take place only in a dirty little town. The young man, on the other hand, saw the artist's involvement as the opportunity finally to achieve his desire to overcome the ugliness of everyday life and make people happy.

For the interior of the museum, the artist developed a new design concept which was regarded as truly revolutionary by his contemporaries. However, the museum gained importance not only because of its unusual interior design but also because the young

man, under the influence of the experienced artist, altered the thematic concept of his museum, turned his attention to contemporary art and rapidly built up a collection which contained important works by artists who later became world-renowned.

The dirty little town thus received the world's first museum for contemporary art. It was a splendid museum which became famous within just a few years and a place of pilgrimage for artists and art enthusiasts. But the townspeople understood none of this. They saw it as an intrusion and reacted increasingly aggressively to what they regarded as impertinent behavior. For the young man, soon realizing that he could not achieve his objective with the museum alone, had not restricted himself to the museum but begun to involve himself in all kinds of campaigns in the town's daily life.

What he called his "art mission" was now aimed at making "beauty once again the dominating power in life". In short, the reorganization of social life through art. So the young man did everything he could to attract excellent artists to the town, to obtain commissions for them, to establish an artists' colony, workshops and a teaching institute. And people came from far and wide to see what had suddenly become of the dirty little town. And they praised and supported the young man. And he became famous and had a lot of friends.

However, the people who came to see what the young man had done or organized also saw that the town had remained small, dirty and cultureless; that the young man - despite all his good deeds - was not accepted by the inhabitants of the town but was regarded as a crackpot and good-for-nothing and was even scorned.

But the young man did not give up. Instead he tried now to change the town itself. He bought an entire hill on the edge of the town and invited the most celebrated architects of his days to build a garden city, an artists' colony and a large school devoted to the integration of all arts. For he was now convinced that he would only be able to realize his utopia, his *Gesamtkunstwerk Gesellschaft*, if the living conditions of the people were improved.

Yet the young man made only slow progress with this project since he needed the approval of the people from the town to achieve it. And virtually all of them were mistrustful and did not want to follow the young man. Consequently, only a small part of what was planned was actually built. And other broad initiatives which the young man had launched increasingly did not make as much progress as he had hoped.

And yet another unexpected event happened. A major war broke out. Nobody was interested in art and the aesthetic improvement of life any longer. But the young man, who was now no longer quite so young, lost a large part of his possessions due to the war, had to economize and even sell some of the items from his Museum to which he had become very attached. Finally, his wife - tired of his exclusive interest in art - left him and ran off with another young man to seek the simple country life.

Then the young man fell ill and died. After the young man's death, a dispute flared up about what was to do with his estate. The young man had decreed that the Museum should be handed over to the town. But the town was neither willing to pay the purchase price demanded by the heirs nor to guarantee that the Museum would be preserved in the same status it was received. The town felt that it was automatically entitled to the Museum and everything its "son" had created.

But at a big city people had recognized the importance of the Museum and were prepared to fulfill all the conditions. Thus the administrator of the estate, who took the young man's wishes seriously and believed in his ideas, sold the entire museum to the big city. And as a result the dirty little town was once again just a dirty little town. And from now on, it also had the reputation of being a town where the people understood nothing about culture and were too stupid to give such an important matter the treatment it deserved.

Most people in the dirty little town did not really care about the whole business. Some were angry about the sale of the Museum

since they believed that they had been cheated out of what was rightfully theirs and theirs alone. But others were sad about the loss and regarded the whole affair as an additional blemish on the town. And many of them abandoned all hope of the town ever becoming more beautiful and more interesting and left as soon as they could.

But because the town was still young and not very much had happened there yet, the story of the young man's failure became the town's main talking point. People discovered that in other cases too the town had not been able to preserve valuable things and so the case of the young man became symbolic of the fact that nobody could achieve anything in this town. All those who wanted to achieve something, especially the young people, constantly had the example of the young man before their eyes and so they left as soon as they could. Others who came to the town only stayed for a short time. When they heard the story of the young man, which was repeatedly recounted by those who wanted to make something of their lives, they realized that it would be difficult for them to achieve anything in this town and preferred to try elsewhere. But those who did not manage to leave the town in time were regarded as losers. So the little, dirty and cultureless town not only remained a dirty little cultureless town, it also gained the reputation of being a losers' town. And anyone who came from this town or lived there was treated with malicious condescension by people living in other places. Those who had remained in the town reacted defiantly and defended their home town against outsiders or people who wanted to change things. They insisted on being right and only accepted people into their community who agreed with them or fawned on them. As a result, many people came to the town who had failed elsewhere and thus added to its reputation of being a town of losers.

But even those who had stayed in the town eventually had to admit that the young man had been very important for the town and that it had been a mistake to reject all his ideas and not to keep his Museum. For this Museum was now making the big city which had bought it world famous, whereas people just made fun of the dirty little town. And the young man was now more and more frequently referred to as the town's first son.

And because the pressure grew, it was decided many years later to start again from scratch and to found a municipal art museum. It was dedicated primarily to a painter who had originally been brought to the town by the young man himself and who had stayed there. But a short time later, others came who did not agree with this painter's work and plundered the Museum. But at the same time, they renamed it after the young man. So he finally got his Museum in the dirty little town, although his name was misused for something he had not intended.

Then came a second war. And almost everything which had remained was burned and lost forever. After the second war, the Museum was re-established in the young man's name. Now people tried to reconstruct the old collection. But this was virtually impossible since the old collection had been sold and comparable works of art had meanwhile become so expensive that the little town could not pay the prices. Nevertheless, the Museum did gain a certain reputation. But the more people attempted to cover up what had happened, the more insistent became the questions about its history. Everything which happened in the Museum was measured against what had once been and the more time elapsed, the more dazzling the lost history appeared and the less possible it became to meet the resulting expectations.

So the young man, the town's first son, unintentionally and surreptitiously became the town's enemy. And sooner or later, this contradiction defeated everyone who worked at the Museum.

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