

# The Little Town

By J. D. Beresford

## I

“It is quite a small place.”

That was all the information I could obtain. I had been referred to the omniscient Joe Shepperton and this was all he could tell me. “St. Erth,” he had said. “In Cornwall?” And when I had explained that this was another St. Erth, he had said, “Oh! quite a small place.” Probably he had never before heard of it. . . .

As I looked out into the darkness and tried to dodge the reflection of my own face in the window, it seemed that we were passing through country of a kind which was quite unfamiliar to me. I had a vision of mountains and the broad roll of great forests; an effect that may have been produced by clouds. The yellow-lighted reflection of the now familiar interior jutted out before me, its floor diaphanous and traversed by two streaks of shining metal. And my own white face peered in at me with strained, searching eyes, frowning at me when our glances met, trying to peer past me into the light and warmth of the railway carriage.

Once we crossed an interminable bridge that roared a sonorous resentment against our passage. I could not explain that bridge. We were not near the sea and no English river could surely have been so wide. Yet the bridge was not a viaduct, for I caught the gleam of water below, some reflection of paler shadows from the lift of the sky.

This adventure into unknown country was immensely exciting. It was discovery. I gave up my strained inquiry into the world beyond, and let my imagination wander out into mystery. I was in the midst of high romance when the magnificent energy of our triumphant speed was checked by the sickening grind of the brake. . . .

The little station was a terminus; one forsaken, gloomy platform that stretched a grey finger into the night out of which we had come. I tried to see what was on the further side, across the metals, but beyond was a black void. I received the impression that I was on an immense height, that the dimly seen low stone wall was the parapet of some awful abyss.

I could form no idea of the town during my minute’s walk from the station to the rooms I had engaged. The whole place seemed to be very ill-lighted. All I could see was that it hung on the side of a hill.

I went out when I had had something to eat. It was only a few minutes past eight, and I was eager for adventure. I told my landlady that I was going down into the town to explore.

“It’s very dark,” she said, with a note of warning in her voice.

The street in which I was staying dipped gently towards the town; but as I went on, the dip became more pronounced. I congratulated myself on the fact that there would be no difficulty in finding my way back. The lie of the land would direct me, I had merely to ascend again.

My street was longer than I had expected. At first there were houses on one side only, but further down the roadway narrowed and there were houses on each side. I classified my lodgings as being in a sort of suburb grown up round the railway station which was detached for obvious reasons—no railway but a funicular could have been carried down that hill.

I came to the bottom of the street at last and found another narrow street running across right and left. Opposite to me an alley continued the descent in nearly a straight line. Far below a dim lamp was burning. I decided to keep straight on and plunged down the alley.

It was interminably long. At the lamp it twisted suddenly but still descended the hill.

“The place is bigger than I thought,” was my reflection. I saw, however, that as the road continually fell before me, I must be keeping a right line.

The town was not deserted. There were movements and the sound of voices all about me; figures loomed up out of the darkness to meet me and clattered past over the rough cobbles. I heard laughter, too, and whisperings in the dim black recesses of courts and doorways, and once or twice I caught the tinkle of some thin high music far away in the distance.

Everywhere I was conscious of the stir and struggle of life, of unseen creatures as careless of my presence as I of theirs.

And still I had not come as yet to the town itself. I had pictured to myself some wider streets, or open market, a place of lighted shops and visible life. I began to wonder if I had not passed by this imagined centre. I became a trifle impatient. I hurried on; down, always down, through the wriggling maze of tiny narrow alleys and passage-ways, lighted only by an occasional flickering lamp, bracketed out from some corner house.

“A small place, indeed,” I said to myself. “It is an enormous place.” I received the impression that I might walk on for ever through that tedious ravel of streets. Yet I knew that I could not be walking in a circle, for I was always descending.

I gave no thought now to the long toil of my return up the mountain—already I thought of it as a mountain—I felt that I must and would reach the bottom.

It was not what I had expected to find, yet the reality, when I came upon it, was so inevitable that I believed it to be the thing I had always anticipated. I turned at last out of a passage so narrow that my body brushed the wall on either side, into a small square of low houses and the floor of the square was flat. On all sides it was entered by passages such as that from which I had just emerged, and all of them led upwards. About and above me I could vaguely distinguish an infinite slope of houses, ranging up tier above tier, lost at last in the black immensity. I appeared to be at the bottom of some Titanic basin among the mountains; at the centre of some inconceivably vast collection of mean houses that swarmed over the whole face of visible earth.

“There is surely no other place like it in the world,” I said to myself in wonder.

## II

There was light in the square; two lamps that flanked an open door. Above the door was a faded sign. I guessed the place to be a hail of entertainment, probably a “picture palace.”

I walked over to it and read the sign; it bore the one word “Kosmos.”

“Some charlatan,” I decided.

No one was taking money at the door, and after a moment’s hesitation I went in.

It was a queer little hall. The bareness of the walls was partly hidden by pathetic attempts at decoration; some red material was rudely draped over the raw brickwork; and a few unframed, dingy canvases—the subjects indistinguishable—were hung on this background.

At the end was a rough proscenium opening, and behind it a stage that appeared to me quite brilliantly lighted, after my long sojourn in the darkness.

In the body of the hall some twenty persons were seated on rough benches staring at the still unoccupied stage.

I found a seat near the door and waited. It came to me that the stage was disproportionately large for the size of the hall.

And then out of the wings came wobbling a tiny figure, and I realised that this great stage was set for a puppet-show. The whole thing was so impossibly grotesque, that I nearly laughed aloud. . . .

Presently I turned my attention for a moment to the vague forms sitting round me, some of them silhouetted against the light of the stage. But none of them returned my stare. "Rustics!" I thought, with a touch of contempt. "Men and women of such small intelligence and narrow experience that even such an amateur show as this amuses them."

I turned back to the performance, though the foolishness of the dolls' actions was beneath criticism.

Nevertheless, after a time, a certain fascinated interest began to grow upon me, and I watched the performance, chafing at its slowness—with increasing attention. I tried to disentangle some meaning, some story, some purpose from the apparently aimless movements of these tiny dolls staggering about their gigantic setting. Every now and again I thought that I understood, that there was an indication of some sequence of action, some development of a theme. But always the leading figures wavered or fell at the actual moment, and chaos followed; a hopeless, maddening jumble.

One piece of management, however, deserved and received my approbation. I had never in any marionette show I have ever witnessed, seen the suspending wires so cleverly concealed. Stare and criticise as I would I could see no sign of any mechanism whereby the dolls were supported and animated. This did, indeed, give me a curious sense of reality, it made me feel that these poor ridiculous little figures had a sentient life of their own. Then some senseless action or helpless collapse reminded me of the invisible wires, and my pity for the feeble dolls was turned to contempt for the ineptitude of the operator.

Dwelling on that ineptitude, I began to lose my temper and I became conscious that other members of the audience were being similarly affected. I heard impatient sighs and half-suppressed groans of despair when some doll attempted to strut across the stage and collapsed half-way.

I looked round me again and saw that men were twitching their arms, hands and fingers; leaning this way and that as if to influence the movement of the dolls—just as a man will strain and grimace in order to influence the run of a ball over which he has no sort of control.

I discovered that I had been unconsciously making the same foolish movements, and, also, that our attempted directions were not concerted. There was no unison, no characteristic sway in this direction or that. It was plain that we wished to influence the dolls in contradictory ways.

But one feeling, I am convinced, animated us all; we were unanimously and angrily critical of the unseen operator; we were all convinced that we could work the unseen wires far more efficiently than that bungling performer. Indeed, the fact, so far as I was concerned, seemed clearly demonstrable. The actions of the dolls were so infantile, so contemptibly purposeless.

That obsession grew upon me. The mismanagement of the whole stupid affair began to appear of quite transcendent importance.

I could not watch without striving to help, and I was forced to watch.

### III

The performance closed abruptly.

The curtain descended without notice, apparently in the middle of the play, unheralded by any grouping or arrangement which might suggest a finale.

The audience, almost in darkness, were left to stumble out as best they could.

I could not find the exit and when I did find a door it was not the right one. It opened on to a flight of steep narrow stairs.

It occurred to me that this must be the way up into the flies, to the place in which the operator sat and controlled his dolls. In a sudden mood of determination I decided to seek him out—I would give him some primitive instruction. He must be some ignorant countryman. I would give him a few useful hints in the conduct of his business; suggest a story for his dolls to act, some sequent, purposeful story moving towards a climax. . . .

I stumbled upwards in the dark, one hand on the cold rough wall, the other stretched out before me to guard against any obstacle which might be in my path. It was a very long staircase, for the proscenium opening was a high one. When I was nearly at the top, the stairway twisted unexpectedly, and I found myself looking down on the still brilliantly lighted stage.

Before me in a great chair that was almost a throne, an old man sat gazing tenderly down upon the stage below him. There was a calm gentle wisdom upon his face and he moved his hands slowly this way and that.

I looked down and saw that although the curtain had fallen and the hall was empty, the performance was still going on in the same, aimless, inexplicable manner.

Perhaps the old man was practising his art, or perhaps he did not know that the curtain had fallen and the audience gone away—in any case he sat there with a sweet intent smile, passing his outspread hands slowly to and fro over the heads of those foolish, inept figures beneath.

And even then I could see no wires, no connection between those mesmeric hands and the tottering figures.

A strange diffidence had come over me. From where I stood it appeared an immensely difficult task to control and guide the movements of those below.

My anxiety to instruct died out of me. I began to marvel at the dexterity with which the old man would sometimes raise a falling doll by the lift of his little finger. And from my new point of view I thought I could at last discern some purpose in the play. . . .

For a time I stood motionless, watching, and then I looked again at the operator seated in his great chair. He was quite unconscious of my presence. He wore always the same serene, gentle smile. He was in no way perturbed when his dolls stumbled and fell. He sat serene, intent; and his hand moved ceaselessly to and fro over the great stage.

I crept away softly and found my way out.

When I reached the square again the moon had risen.

I looked up and saw the little railway station a few hundred yards away.

It was a stiff climb, but I reached home in ten minutes.

The town was, after all, quite a small place. . . .

In the morning I wondered whether the old man still sat in the same place manipulating his dolls.

I wondered whether he was a charlatan or only very old, and very, very foolish.