

TOWERS
A PRAGUE CHRISTMAS STORY
By Olga Folda Stepanek

He was one of those crippled men with lights in his eyes. Jan used to think it was all the reflection of the tinsel and the silver and gold papers that sparkled under the candlelight in the evenings. That was the crippled man's business during the Christmas season—to sit outside on the big Karlovo Namesti, behind a wooden booth, and to hope that people would stop and look at his bright array of Christmas fancies. And then, of course, he hoped that they would buy. He didn't see how they could help it. What they could get for a crown was almost amazing.

It was cold those nights too. Frosty air makes the eyes of people shine. Jan thought perhaps it was that too, together with the silver and gold tinsel, that made his eyes so starry. But now he knows that he was wrong. He knows because he saw him in his own small room, where neither the sun nor the moon looked in and where sad shadows lurked and drowned everything they touched. Everything except Trupik's eyes. The shadows never touched them.

Karlovo Namesti is an imposing square in Prague, that medieval city of Central Europe. The gray old university buildings and clock tower at one end of the square, streets radiating from that, the little park in the center, never drab, not even in the winter, because people lingered there and left footprints in the interweaving paths that formed outlets and inlets to the square. And there were the trees - a weeping willow and a great tall oak that clung fiercely to its rattling brown leaves even when the snow nestled in its branches.

And on the walks that bordered the outside of this Karlovo Namest rows and rows of gaudy Christmas booths were set up for the children of Prague. Lights incomparably lovely because they were colored, toys trembling on the ends of silver ropes, jingling in the winter wind, great slabs of Turkish taffy shining like marble rocks, ginger-bread hearts adorned with red and white frosting! And the men who lived behind these booths, frost bitten but happy looking to these little boys who lingered about—all kindness they were, it seemed. Or the old women whose heads were wrapped up in colored kerchiefs so that their noses and chins looked like little red apples!

Among these fairy gods and goddesses (for that was what they were at Christmas time to all the little ones) was Trupik. His chair faced the cobbled street that rolled away under him. But it faced more than that. Looking up through the icy branches that mapped inky designs on the sky, he could see towers—tall ones that stood nearer, then smaller thin ones, and threads of them that were sometimes hidden by the mists. Towers were beautiful Trupik thought, because they were always looking up—up—so high that sometimes his very heart almost lifted out of him. And when that feeling came to him he knew that he was in love with the world. And so, you see, he needed towers. There are times when a cripple forgets loveliness.

Jan was always strolling around the tinsel booth, and though he was ten years old he seemed to possess nothing that felt in the least like a crown piece. It was true, something kept jingling in his pocket but it had a cold sound, not like money. Trupik thought that he should like to surprise him and throw him one of his stars, the gold one, with the dazzling carnelian frill. The child had been so faithful. Everyday for one week he had walked past with his hands in his pockets, looking as if life were a business to be deliberated about. Now, glancing casually at the whole array of resplendent booths he wound his way through the excited mobs of people; but curiously enough, when he approached Trupik he slackened his pace and almost stopped. Though his eyes roved to and from the case his mind seemed to be on some far distant idea. Just

now Trupik thought he must be oblivious to the whole world of swirling individuals.

Something spun through the air and landed at *Jan's* feet. It was a gold star with a carnelian colored frill. In a flash the boy stood before Trupik.

"Mister—see what the wind did. But it's not dirty."

His cheeks were quite the color of the frill itself. Holding the star by the slender edge of one of its points he stretched out his arm. But Trupik smiled.

"Keep it."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I haven't three crowns yet."

But even as he spoke a slight note of expectation was perceptible in his voice.

"But I'm giving it to you."

Jan was silent. He slipped his free hand slowly into his pocket. Then he looked at Trupik—not at his face, but at his legs, twisted, helpless as the branch that was dangling in the wind above his head. What small boys think is a secret. They never tell. And sometimes no-one ever guesses. Both the man and the boy were silent for a long moment. Many people must have passed in that interval but no-one interrupted. Some can understand a reverie even on the cobbled street of an old square.

Suddenly Jan bent his knee and swayed toward Trupik.

"Mister—if you could, and nobody wants it—may be tomorrow."

"Take it now."

Jan shook his head gravely as he dropped the star on the counter.

"Tomorrow I'll have three crowns."

He shook his pockets and again Trupik heard the pleasant jingle of something in them.

"This is only nails," said Jan. Baring his head in the steely wind he stepped back. "Good bye." And in an instant he was lost in the swarm of people across the street.

Trupik put the star into his pocket. Just then it seemed to him that the towers lifted themselves to the sky and touched something of the blue that hung above them.

Every day Trupik paid five crowns to the coal man for wheeling his chair from his shack to Karlovo Namest. It is not easy to be an independent cripple. Trupik used to wish that his arms might be gone instead of his legs. It would be so good to walk, to feel the firmness of a street under his feet, or to crunch the snow under his boots with a vital force that only men with legs can experience. But as he grew older a philosophy that had somehow connected itself with the towers about him grew into his heart. His soul moved upward and legs did not matter. Every day he saw people on the street, strong and healthy bodied; but sometimes their eyes told him that their souls were grovelling on the ground. And he felt sorry. They walked with their heads bent, forgetting that the city swarmed with towers. Even if they picked out one it might help. Yes, Trupik felt sure that souls should be like towers - growing upward.

Three days before Christmas the city was heavy with shadows. Everyone said that a new snow fall was on its way. Everywhere it was dark. Distant buildings were not visible; the towers were gone. Trupik sat in his chair and his heart was heavy. Even his tinsel ropes and his purple toys looked dull. He knew why his heart was clouded: the coal man was going away tomorrow. He would be gone for five days. And Christmas was coming in three. Trupik was disappointed, not only because his Christmas would be lonelier but because there would be no-one to wheel him outside. The women would not offer. They had too many things to do. Or perhaps they were ashamed. People stared at them so. Five days to spend alone in a barren cold room whose

windows opened out to a grey wall without a spire. That was hard. If he had only sold more toys he might pay someone else to wheel him out. But people seemed to be through with their Christmas shopping. Trees were already decorated with sparkling stars and tinsel ropes at this very moment and laid away in closets until Christmas.

Trupik was looking out over the dark sweep of the city when Jan came up. He had not forgotten about Jan; and yet, he was surprised. He knew why he had come. In Jan's blue hand were squeezed three silver crowns.

"I have come for my star."

Trupik drew it from his pocket and his eyes were kind in the dusk.

"Was it hard?"

"No, I hauled a big tree for a lady and she gave me four crowns and a branch."

Trupik was wrapping the star in a piece of newspaper. It was frail and one must be careful. Jan did not risk putting it into his pockets. They were too small and they might have holes in them. Holding it gently in his cold mittenless hands he looked up at Trupik.

"How long do you stay tonight, Mister? All the booths are gone."

"I know it; but I have to wait for the coal man to wheel me home. He'll come soon."

"Let me!"

Trupik bethought himself of his empty pockets. In his hand he still held the money Jan had just given him. The boy's eyes were eager and the man felt a wave of warmth sweep through him.

"If you really want to. I don't live far."

Jan pushed the chair through the black streets with vigor. It rumbled over the cobblestones; it seemed to be saying: "Christmas is coming—coming—Christmas is coming—" Trupik talked over his shoulder to the boy. There was a sense of companionship between them. When they reached the poor barren corner where Trupik lived *Jan's* shoulders expanded. He was somewhat proud of himself. You see, he was still a very small boy. Trupik's eyes were shining too. He put out his hand to the boy who grasped it in a most manly fashion. But in the palm of his hand he felt the pressure of the three crown pieces. His smile drooped.

"No—no—" he said.

Trupik saw that Jan meant it; he had such an earnest look. The child was right—it was more friendly this way. So he put the money back into his pocket and Jan spoke again:

"Can I get you on Sunday?"

Sunday was Christmas. What a child! What a man-child! Trupik's face was full of light.

"Yes!" he replied fervently. "I thought I'd be alone. And now—I won't."

They both laughed.

"My mother said: 'Bring him along—it's Christmas!'"

The man heard the door close gently when Jan disappeared. It was like a story. Trupik clasped his hands together and leaned back. His eyes closed. But he was seeing things. He was seeing little boys like Jan fluttering by on the streets, winding their way between tall buildings and snow-encrusted spires!

The snow was falling thickly on Christmas day. It had started before Christmas eve was over and by morning everything was covered with soft cloaks of white. Even the glaze of the frozen river had changed to a snowy ribbon. And people rushed along the streets like black and white snow balls. There was something about life that day that everyone remembered.

Trupik ate his Christmas dinner alone. The landlady brought it up to him at twelve o'clock; and she built a fire in his stove. After four, when the day began to grow dark, Trupik

wondered about Jan. And yet, he felt sure of him. He felt sure of the look in his face. Never had he seen anything like it in a small boy's face before. And while he was remembering it and the kindness of this child he heard a rap on the door. Jan stood there like a soldier. On his head he wore a bright red cap—apparently so new that the Christmas flakes were the first to have touched it.

"I had to work till now. But I hurried."

They both were excited when they blew out the lamp and closed the door behind them. Out into the great white world now! Out to see the snow peaked spires! They talked jovially as they pushed their way along. Everyone must be jovial on Christmas.

With the help of his old crutch Trupik was able to creep up the two flights of cold stone steps. Jan placed his shoulder under Trupik's.

"Lean on me. I'm safer than the banister anyway."

At the top of the steps Jan's mother was waiting, wearing quite the same look that Jan had. She flung open the door and Trupik felt a flow of warmth greet him. They had fixed up a broken old arm chair and had covered a box for a foot stool. Trupik sank into the chair gladly. The stove was red with heat and cast a firelight glow upon the dingy walls. The room was small and almost bare. But it looked like a fairy tale to Trupik. For tonight was Christmas. They talked about their riches.

"Today I found this cap in my stocking." Jan pulled it from his head and blew the snow away. "From my mother." He looked at her again.

"And I", she said proudly, "I found this on my floor today."

Trupik looked down at the rug. It was green. The worn out spots only helped the shades to mellow, one into the other.

"Tell him how you got it for me, Jan."

"At the auction with the money I earned. It used to be in a rich house, in the room where the little children played. And I got it cheap. See—it's almost new. And now we have a rug."

Jan stooped to the floor and felt once more of its rough greenness. He was greatly satisfied with its beauty.

"What makes it nicer," said the mother to Trupik, "is that little children played on it."

"Yes—" Trupik had clasped his hands together. "Little children always make things nicer."

"And now," Jan jumped to his feet, "now comes your surprise. Turn the lamp as low as you can, mother!"

She turned it down so that the flame flickered and cast only a dim glow about the room. Jan disappeared and Trupik sank more deeply into his chair. His mind seemed pleasantly confused. But into his happy heart there crept a tinge of sadness that he could not explain. Laughter sometimes came with tears for him. Too much joy hurts. There was a poignancy about life. Jan's mother sat close to him and was silent. She was one of those understanding women. There was not a sound in the room, not even a clock to break the stillness. Only the crusts of ice on the window pane outside cracked, almost like burning pine. And then the door opened.

"Close your eyes!"

Trupik's had been closed but no-one had noticed. "Now open!"

He lifted his head. Jan stood in the center of the room with the Christmas spirit in his arms. A tiny fir tree seemed to have burst into the room. On its green branches swayed three wax candles which were burning brightly. And on the top rocked the gold star with the carnelian colored frill. That was all—just the candles and the star. But oh! What brilliance - what poetry!

Trupik thought that he had never seen a lovelier tree. And even through tears it seemed to take on the magnificent light of sun and moon and stars!

"What is it, Jan, that makes things so beautiful!"

That evening Trupik told them of his towers, how they pointed upward and were the highest things on earth. It was the way souls should be, and hearts.

And Trupik knew that Jan had understood...