

# The Storm shifts the Signboards

In the old days, when *Grandpa* was a very young boy and wore red trousers, a red jacket, a sash round his waist and a feather in his cap – for that was how small boys dressed in his childhood when they wore their very best clothes – a great many things were quite different from nowadays; there were often festive processions in the street, processions that we never see since all this has been done away with, become so old-fashioned; but it is entertaining to hear *Grandpa* talk about them.

It must certainly have been quite some spectacle when the shoemakers shifted their signboard when changing guild halls. Their silken banner waved; on it a large boot had been painted along with an eagle with two heads; the youngest journeymen carried *the welcome cup* and *the guild chest*, and had red and white ribbons fluttering from their shirt-sleeves; the older ones carried drawn rapiers with a lemon impaled on their tip. There was a complete band, and the finest of the instruments was '*The Bird*', as *Grandpa* called the long pole with a crescent moon on it and all sorts of noisy baubles – proper Turkish music. It was raised and swung, it jingled and jangled, and it really hurt one's eyes when the sun shone on all that gold, silver or brass.

Ahead of the procession ran Harlequin, in clothes made of all sorts of coloured patches, his face black and with bells on his head, like a sleigh horse; and he struck people with his wand, which made a loud noise without hurting at all, and people shoved each other to move backwards and to move forwards; small boys and girls fell over their own legs straight into the gutter; old women jostled with their shoulders, looking surly and scolding away. Some laughed, others chattered; there were people on stairs and in windows, even right up on the roof. The sun shone; some rain fell too from time to time, but that was good for the farmers, and if they got completely soaked, that was a real blessing for the land.

Oh, what a storyteller *Grandpa* was! As a small boy he had seen such a procession in all its glory and splendour. The oldest guild journeyman gave a speech from the scaffolding where the signboard was hung out, and the speech was in verse, as if specially composed, which it was – three of them had been working on it and had first drunk a whole bowl of punch, to make sure it turned out really fine. And people shouted hurrah for the speech, but they shouted even more hurrah for Harlequin, when he came out on the scaffolding, pulled faces and mocked the speaker. The jester made excellent jest and drank mead out of snaps glasses that he then hurled into the crowd of people, who caught them in the air. *Grandpa* had one of them, which the plasterer had caught and given to him. It was most amusing. And the signboard, decked with flowers and greenery, hung on the new guild hall.

One never forgets such a spectacle no matter how old one gets, *Grandpa* said, and he didn't either, although he saw many other splendid goings-on and talked about them, but most entertaining even so was to hear him tell the story of the shifting of the signboards in the great city too.

As a young boy, *Grandpa* travelled there with his parents; back then he had never seen the largest city in the country before. There were so many people in the streets that he thought the signboards were going to be shifted, and there were plenty of signboards to shift; one could fill up hundreds of living rooms with pictures if they were hung up indoors instead of outside.

There were all kinds of garments depicted on signboards at the tailor's, he could transform people from uncouth to genteel; there were tobacconist's signs, with the handsomest young lads who smoked cigars as in real life; there were signboards with butter and salted herrings, clergymen's ruffs and coffins, and in addition there were inscriptions and posters; one could easily spend a whole day walking up and down the streets getting one's fill of all the pictures, and then one immediately knew what sort of people lived inside, they had hung out their own signboards, and it's such a good thing, *Grandpa* said, and so instructive to know who lives where in such a large city.

But then something was about to happen to the signboards just when *Grandpa* arrived in the city; he has told the story himself, and he wasn't tongue in cheek, as mother said he was whenever he wanted to get me to believe something; he looked completely trustworthy.

The first night he was in the big city there was the most frightful storm one has ever read about in the papers: there had not been such a storm in living memory. The air was completely full of roof tiles; old fences were blown over; yes, there was even a wheelbarrow that rolled up the street on its own just to save itself. There was howling in the air, there was whining and wailing, there was a terrible gale. The water in the canals came right up over the quays, it didn't know where it belonged. The storm raked the city and took the chimneys with it; more than one proud old church spire got bent and hasn't managed to straighten up since.

A sentry box stood outside the house of the old, good-natured chief fire officer, whose engine was always the last at a fire; the storm refused to let him have the little sentry box, it was wrenched from its moorings and trundled off down the street; and, strangely enough, it raised itself and remained upright outside the house where the poor journeyman carpenter lived who had saved three people's lives during the last fire; but the sentry box didn't give that a thought.

The barber's signboard, the large brass dish, was ripped off and ended up precisely in the window recess of the counsellor, and that was almost spiteful, the entire neighbourhood said, for it, and all her most intimate female friends, called the mistress of the house *The Razor*. She was so sharp, she knew more about people than they knew about themselves.

A signboard with a side of split cod drawn on it flew over to the door of a man who wrote a newspaper. That was a rather weak joke on the part of the storm, who probably didn't recall that a newspaper writer is absolutely not someone to be poked fun at – he is king of his own newspaper and his own opinion.

The weathercock flew over onto the roof of the neighbour opposite and stood there, the epitome of malevolence the neighbours said.

The cooper's barrel got hung up under 'Ladies' Finery'.

The menu of the restaurant, which hung by the door in its heavy frame, the storm placed right over the entrance to the theatre where nobody ever came; it was a very odd programme: 'Horseradish Soup and Stuffed Cabbage' – but then people started coming!

The furrier's fox skin, depicted on his respectable signboard, became the bellpull at the house of the young man who always went to matins, looked like a folded umbrella, searched for the truth and was a 'True Example', his aunt said.

The inscription '*Institute of Higher Education*' was shifted to the billiards club, and the institution itself got the signboard 'Here Children are Bottle-Fed'; that wasn't funny at all, merely naughty, but the storm had made it happen, and it can't be controlled.

It was a frightful night; and by morning, just think, practically all the signboards in the city had been shifted; and sometimes with such malice that *Grandpa* wouldn't talk about it, though he was laughing inwardly, I could see that, and it's just possible he was tongue in cheek.

The poor people in the big city, especially strangers, mistook people all the time, and they couldn't help that, for they went by the signboards. Some wanted to go to a very serious meeting of city elders who were to discuss extremely weighty matters, and they ended up in a rowdy boys' school where they were about to leap up onto their desks.

There were people who mixed up the church and theatre – and that's really quite terrible!

Such a storm has never raged in our time, it is only *Grandpa* who has experienced such a one, and that was when he was quite young; such a storm will perhaps not come in our time either, but in that of our grandchildren; and if so, we must certainly hope and pray that they stay inside while the storm shifts the signboards.