

Great-grandfather

Great-grandfather was such a kind, wise, and good man; we all loved and respected him so much. At first, for as long as I could remember, he was called Grandfather, but then my elder brother Frederick had a little son, and Grandfather was promoted to Great-grandfather. Higher than this title he could not rise in life. He loved us all very much, but he did not particularly care for our times.

"In the good old days things were different!" he would say. "Those times were solid and dignified! But now everyone rushes headlong, everything is turned upside down! The young people make speeches, talking about kings as if they were their equals! Any gentleman from the street can dip his rag into a dirty puddle and wring it out over the head of a respectable person!"

And saying this, Great-grandfather would turn quite red, but then he would calm down again, smile his usual gentle smile, and say:

"Well! Perhaps I am not entirely right! But I am a man of the old times and cannot keep step with the new! Let us leave it to God to lead His way!"

Listening to Great-grandfather's tales about the olden days, I felt as though I were living through them myself: I traveled mentally in a golden carriage with haiduks, saw ceremonies of moving guild signs accompanied by music and banners, participated in amusing Christmas entertainments and games. True, even in those times there was much that was bad and terrible: wheels, racks, bloodshed, but even these horrors held something enticing. I also learned much that was good from Great-grandfather's stories: for example, about the Danish nobles who liberated the peasants, about the Danish crown prince who ended the slave trade.

Yes, it was wonderful to listen to Great-grandfather's tales about the days of his youth, yet the time preceding even that was still better—so strong, so mighty!

"Cruel, barbaric!" replied my brother Frederick. "Thank God it has passed!"

He stated this directly to Great-grandfather! This was not quite proper on his part, yet I still respected Frederick very much. He was my elder brother, "he might even have been my father," as he himself used to say; such an odd fellow! He brilliantly passed his university examinations, and worked so diligently in Father's office that he was soon admitted to participate in the firm's affairs. He was

Great-grandfather's favorite, yet they were forever arguing with each other.

"These two will never understand each other, never agree," the whole family would

say about them, and small as I was, I nevertheless noticed that these two could not do without each other!

When Frederick spoke or read aloud in Great-grandfather's presence about new scientific discoveries and inventions marking our age, the old man's eyes would light up.

"People are becoming smarter, but not kinder!" he would say nonetheless immediately afterward. "They invent the most terrible instruments of destruction for mutual ruin."

"All the sooner will war come to an end!" Frederick would retort. "Now one need not wait seven years for peace! Society suffers from plethora, and from time to time it is necessary to let its blood!"

Once Frederick told Great-grandfather about an incident that had truly occurred in a certain town. The burgomaster's clock, the large clock on the town hall tower, set the time for the entire city. The clock did not keep quite accurate time, yet the whole city regulated itself by it. But then a railway was built; it was connected with the railway networks of other countries, and now it became necessary to calculate time precisely, otherwise the trains might easily collide! At the station, their own sundials were installed; they indicated the time accurately—unlike the burgomaster's—and so all the inhabitants of the town began checking their watches by the railway time. I laughed—the story seemed amusing to me.

But Great-grandfather had no thought of laughing; on the contrary, he became even more serious.

"There is something in your story!" he began, turning to Frederick. "And I understand why you told it to me. Your clocks are very instructive. They bring to my mind other clocks, old, simple Bornholm clocks with heavy lead weights, which belonged to my parents. By these clocks my parents lived, and I lived by them when I was a child. Perhaps they did not keep entirely accurate time, yet they went, and we looked at the hand and trusted it, without worrying about the wheels inside. That is how matters stood then with the mechanism of the state: people quietly believed what the hands showed. Now, however, the mechanism of the state has become a clock made of glass: its entire construction is visible; you see how the wheels spin and buzz, you fear for every cog, for every little wheel, you doubt whether the clock strikes correctly, and so the former childish trust is gone! Here lies the weakness of our time!"

And Great-grandfather would end by becoming agitated. He and Frederick could never agree, yet it was difficult to separate them, just as it is difficult to separate

the past from the present. Both of them realized this, and so did the whole family, when Frederick had to depart on the firm's business on a long journey, to America. It was hard for Great-grandfather to endure such a separation: Frederick was going far away, across the sea, to another part of the world!

"Every two weeks you will receive a letter from me!" said Frederick. "And faster than any letter, news from me will fly to you along the telegraph wire. Instead of days, hours will be needed; instead of hours, minutes!"

The first greeting came from Frederick in England; he sent it while boarding the ship sailing to America. And then, faster than any letter—even if the rushing clouds themselves had undertaken to deliver it—a greeting arrived from America, where Frederick had disembarked only a few hours before!

"Our age has been illuminated by a truly divine thought!" said Great-grandfather then. "The telegraph is a blessing for mankind!"

"And Frederick told me that the first discovery of these forces was made in our homeland!" I said.

"Yes!" answered Great-grandfather and kissed me. "Yes, and I myself looked into those gentle eyes which first penetrated the secrets of this new force of nature! In them shone a childlike soul, just as in yours! It was granted me also to shake his hand!"

Then Great-grandfather kissed me again.

More than a month passed, and then we received a letter from Frederick announcing his engagement to a young, lovely girl whom, of course, the whole family would love. Enclosed in the letter was her photographic portrait, and we examined it in every way—with the naked eye and through a magnifying glass. Indeed, this is precisely what is good about these photographic prints: they can be viewed through the strongest magnifying glasses, and the resemblance emerges even more strongly! This the portrait painters, even the greatest among the old masters, could not achieve!

"Had the olden times possessed this invention, we could now see face to face all the great men and benefactors of humanity!" said Great-grandfather. "How kind and good this little girl looks, however!" And again he fixed his eyes upon the card lying under the magnifying glass. "Now I shall recognize her the moment she steps across the threshold!"

But this might never have happened! It very nearly did not happen! Fortunately, we learned of the danger only after it had already passed.

The young newlyweds happily and cheerfully reached England, and from there set sail by steamship to Copenhagen. They had already sighted the Danish shore and the white sand dunes of western Jutland, when suddenly a storm arose, the steamship struck a reef and ran aground. The waves rose like mountains and threatened to break it apart; it was impossible even to lower the lifeboats. Night fell, but then the nocturnal darkness was pierced by a bright rocket fired from the shore toward the perishing steamship. The rocket carried a rope aboard the vessel, and communication was established between the ship and the land. Soon a rescue basket with a beautiful young woman slid along the rope above the dark, turbulent waves. She was landed on solid ground, saved! And how happy she was when her young husband appeared beside her! All the passengers and crew of the steamship were saved by the same method before dawn.

Meanwhile, we were sleeping sweetly here in Copenhagen, thinking of no danger, and only when we were all sitting at morning coffee did news reach us, received in the city by telegraph, about the wreck of an English ship off the western coast. Our hearts sank. But at that very moment a telegram also arrived from our dear young ones: they were saved and would soon be with us!

Everyone wept; I wept, and Great-grandfather wept too. Then he devoutly folded his hands and—I

I am sure—he blessed the new era.

On that same day, he donated two hundred rixdollars toward a monument to Hans Christian Ørsted.

When Frederik returned with his young wife and heard about this, he said:

"Now that's the spirit, great-grandfather! Now I shall read to you what Ørsted himself wrote many years ago about the old times and the new!"

"Surely he shared your opinion?" asked the great-grandfather.

"Of course he did!" replied Frederik. "And you hold the same view now; otherwise, you wouldn't have contributed your share toward his monument!"