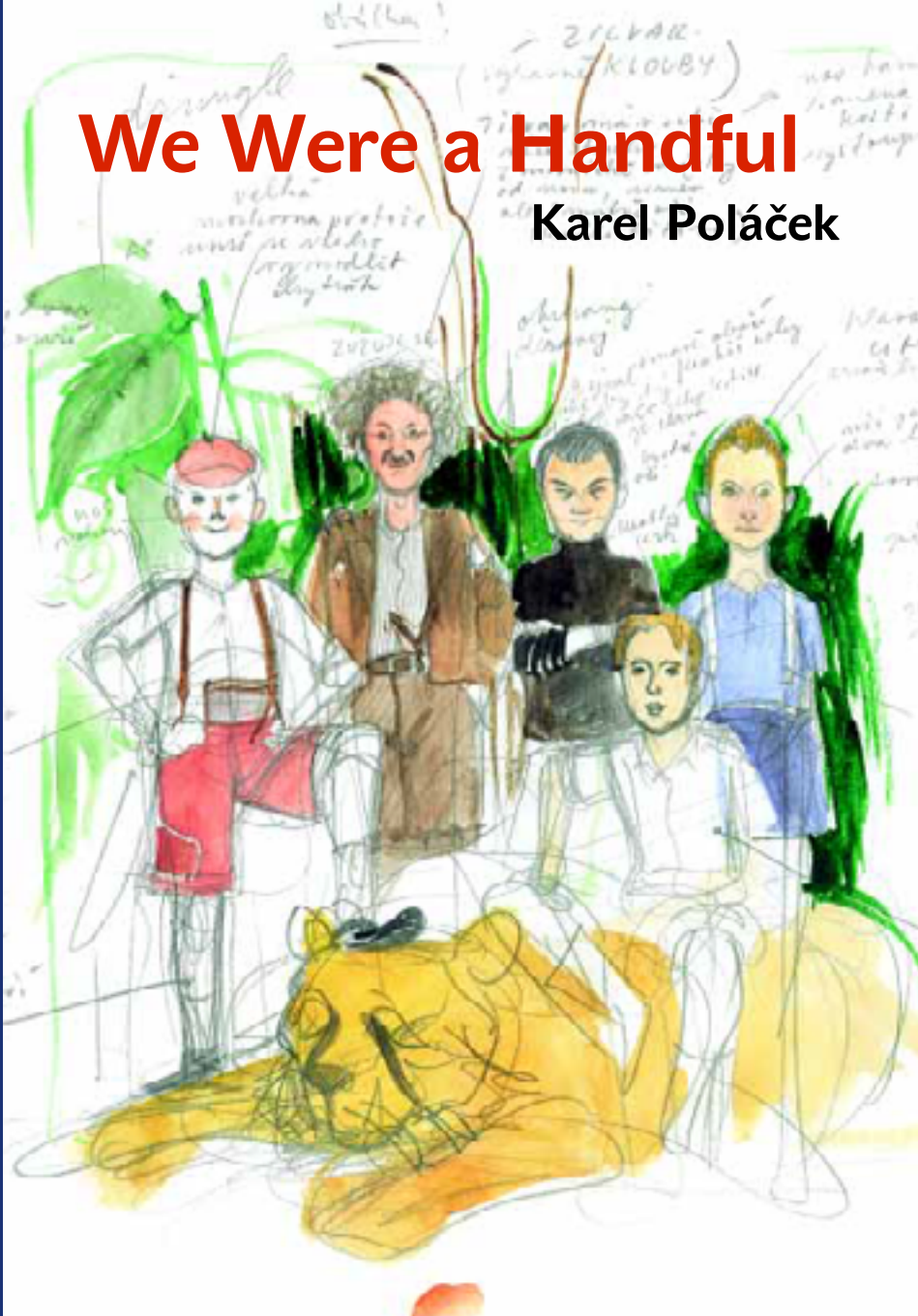


We Were a Handful

Karel Poláček



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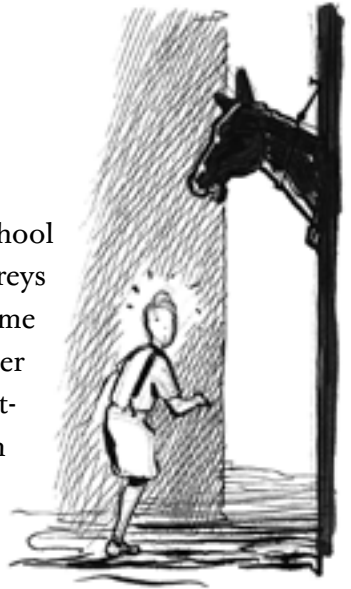






Every day I head for school past a house with two storeys and a shop sign with the name Martin Bejval on it. 'Haulier and Dealer in Coal' is written underneath the name in hand printed letters. The sign is painted blue and red with a pair of crossed hammers on either side,

which is something I really like. But what I like even more is the horse's head fixed between two windows on the first floor. When I was small I didn't like the head, not at all, because I was scared of it. Its mouth is always open and its teeth are bared. It grins at me as if it had something on me and was jeering: "Hold your horses, impish boy, I'm going to tell on you". I reported the fact that the head kept making faces at me and that I'd done nothing to deserve this. It started picking on me whenever I went by and it should have left me alone. Ma had to calm me down and explained that





the head couldn't do anything to me since it was made of wood.

But she could say that to me over and over again and I still didn't want to believe her, because my own head was terribly empty. And whenever I went past Bejval's place I just ran like the clappers. I got the idea that the horse's head was telling people all sorts of tittle-tattle about me in a whisper. Sometimes I heard it whispering: "Why didn't you have the soup today, it was such good soup?" "I know how you tormented Honza your ginger tomcat when you tied nutshells to his paws. What a clatter he made scurrying round the house. It greatly upset him. What made you do that? Don't you realise that he feels pain just as you do? Stop making his life a misery." "And who was it that scooped the raisins out of the maid Christina's Christmas cake, eh?"

I told the head that this wasn't true and to leave it out and that sneaks ended up in hell where devils would prod them with pitchforks to stop them telling tales. But the head went on pulling faces and whispering something in a low voice. So I decided to get hold of a long stick and sock it one in order to stop it grinning at me like that.

Now, on the other hand, I've grown up and therefore I've become clever and I know that the horse's head isn't jeering at me, it's just the way it is and I've made friends with it. When I go to school I say "Hello" to the head and it says "Hello" back. In the Spring it asks me whether I'll be playing marbles today or tipcat. Or perhaps I'll be running around playing football in the playground and so it reminds me not to forget that the ball needs more





air. I reply to this: “Ta for that, I shan’t forget!” In the summertime it will want to know what’s going to happen about swimming. Is it a day for swimming at the Trousers or a day for swimming at the Hat? In the autumn it will want to go kite flying with me or to make camp fires, and in winter to make a snowman or go tobogganing or visit the skating rink. I can see that it would like to join me, but what lad would want to go places with a wooden horse’s head? Let it stay put.

We have a nice new school and a teacher called Mr. Veselík, who wears gold-rimmed specs and eats a bread roll during the break with his head in a book. When he sees a boy doing something wrong he dishes out punishment and doesn’t care a hoot. During the break we go into the courtyard and several boys make an awful racket and I’m one of them. Once Mr. Potůček took a photo of us in this courtyard and they made sure that the serious swats were the ones sitting in the front. Mr. Veselík sat in the middle and country bumpkins from over

the fields were standing there watching the whole scene. I have the photo in a frame, it's hanging above the settee, where no one is allowed to sit except for Aunt Angela. We will inherit from her and she's well aware of that so she's always in a terrible temper with us. That's why she always sits there and stares and looks ever so strict. Eddie Kemlink sits next to me, I'm a friend of his, and Charlie Páta sits on the left. I don't ever want to be friends with him. He's a sneak, he tells tales, but it never does him any good. He never shares anything with anyone either, he's so penny pinching, though he knows how to wheedle things out of others. But just let him try that with me!

How Ma laughed when she saw the picture! There was I with the top of my head looking like a parrot's crest. She said that it would be something



nice for me to look back on one day. Pa grumbled that I wasted money on trifles and he wasn't going to put up with it. "I slave away from dawn to dusk and you throw away money to have your picture taken," he said. The teachers, he explained, all took him for a millionaire, but they did all right, they were well looked after, whereas people never paid him what they owed. "Stop complaining," said Ma, "you old grouse. Stop spoiling the child's happiness." "We'll see how he will pay me back in due course," said Pa, and went to lie down. He always sleeps after lunch and covers his face with Affairs of the Nation in order to keep the flies off.

The teacher praises me for my good behaviour and for being clever, so I carry the exercise books for him after school. I have the best handwriting in the whole class, my written work always looks very neat. I write even more nicely than Francis Kolořenč, who is top of the class but often misses school because of scrofula and mumps and suchlike. I myself came home from school with lice, my head was full of them. No one had as many as I did, not even Zilvar, who lives in the poorhouse. Ma said

she despaired of me and went on combing my hair. My family say that I must go on with my studies in order to become a gentleman so that I won't end up packing boxes like Pa. Our Lawrence, he's the eldest, he was supposed to carry on with his studies too, but geometry never suited him and he smoked cigs. So they brought a student to the house to go over the subject with him, but Larry still couldn't make any sense of it. He stole sweets from our store and dished them out to girls so they'd go on dates with him. So the family hauled him out of school and put him in a grocer's in the town of Most, so that he could learn the German language. He took against that from the beginning and wrote asking them to take him home again, saying that he'd behave himself and asking them to send him his textbooks so that he



could prepare on his own for the senior class. Pa wrote back saying: “Dear Lawrence, A fine thing that would be, I know you well enough, I wasn’t born yesterday. We’ve had enough of your studying and if I hear any complaints about you I’ll fetch my cane. When you’ve served your apprenticeship, God willing, you’ll take over the business from me.” I took the letter to the post office where the clerk stamped it with a thumping sound that I liked. So our Larry settled down, he sent his washing home with a letter attached saying he was happy with his situation after all, likewise his boss was happy with him. “Please send me, my dear relatives,” he went on, “a little something to tide me over from time to time. I like you ever so much and little Mirabelle too. Talking of the tot, does she know how to walk yet?” I read this letter out to our tomcat. “What do you say to that, Honza? Are you happy with your situation too?” But the tom didn’t say a thing, he just made a face, licked his belly and then jumped out of the window and set out on one of his jaunts.

The family thinks that when I’m grown up I’ll sit in some warm office and people will come and doff



their caps to me while I go on licking government stamps. And come lunchtime I'll be sending someone to fetch me a hot dog. This is not really what I'd like at all. I'd rather be working at Bejval's place with the horses, because I'd wear a leather apron and I'd wear a brass earring to ward off the evil eye, which is what Jacob does, he's the groom there. Then I'd walk beside the furniture van, a handsome fellow with a swagger in his step, and I'd whistle to myself as I gave a wave with my whip. I've tried to walk like Jacob the groom a few times and now I know how to do it. I've taught myself to whistle too, horses like that, but you must always sound a sad note. Then they turn their heads towards the coachman and they look at him with their lovely dark eyes. Sometimes Jacob tucks the handle of his whip into his high boots and stops off at Friedmann's for a tipple. First he examines the glass against the light, then he drinks the contents, shakes his head and makes a "Brr" sound. The other day Ma was surprised at the way I drank the coffee she made me. I examined the mug against the light, then I drank and then I went "Brr" and made a gesture as if I had

a moustache to wipe. Ma asked: "What mischief is this, you rascally little rascal, how would you like me to tan your hide with the soup stirrer?" I assured her that I wouldn't like it.

Jacob is not a talker, he's a man of few words with people, the words being "Hm", "Yeah", "So", "No", "OK" and things like that. On the other hand he understands what horses say, and horses have to watch out that they don't let slip any secrets in front of him. I've seen how they whisper to each other when they're standing in front of Friedmann's and I can guess what they're saying. That Jacob is giving himself up to the bottle, which harms your health and leads to trouble. I'd also like to understand horse talk and I asked Jacob to teach me it, saying that I'd give him my collection of minerals in return. Jacob laughed and said "Some chance!" Then I said to him: "I don't care if you don't. It's all the same to me, because I already know horsetalk anyway. A moment ago I heard White Spot say to Dappled Dawn, 'Look who's coming! It's Sir Plastered.'" Jacob laughed some more and said "Sure thing!"



The name of my best friend is Anthony Bejval. Tony and I are thick as thieves. We lend each other books. He's got a suitcase full to bursting with westerns such as 'Morning Brings Plague to Prague', 'The Mercenaries from Passau Hit Town' and 'The White Lady of Rosenberg'. There's a picture on one with a caption saying: "The Prince faces a twenty-pointer'. A huge stag has its antlers at the ready to run the prince through. At that moment his trusty huntsman shoots it dead, and



because of this he gains the undying gratitude of the prince. Tony's got penny dreadfuls and thrillers galore. He's got the lot, because Mr. Bejval says that he cares about learning and doesn't count the coppers.

Tony will have to take over from his father as a carter, and has promised me that he'll then take me on in the removal business. That would be great. The only problem is that Tony himself doesn't want to stay at home but plans to set off for greener pastures, because he's an inventor. He's invented glass that burns. When the sun's out he says: "Give me your hand, I'm going to show you something but you're not allowed to watch,

because you'd give away the secret of my invention." So you hold out your hand and for a while nothing happens, but after another while you give a yelp from the pain and there's a red mark on your hand. Tony says that when he's grown up he'll get oodles of cash for this invention and buy himself a motorbike.

His father, Mr. Martin Bejval, is the strongest of them all. He's not afraid to stand up to anyone, he'll take on all comers. To me he's like Samson, Bone-crusher and Battering Ram all in one. It's just like I read in one of the books which our teacher lent us from the school library. The books have to be returned in good condition, otherwise the families or those who stand in for them have to pay up. Once Mr. Bejval started wrestling with Mr. Plachetka for fun. Mr. Plachetka is a brewer and also incredibly strong. He fought in the war and got the better of all his enemies. The two of them fought till they were red in the face and breathing heavily. Then Mr. Bejval hurled Mr. Plachetka to the ground. He fell with a thud. Mr. Bejval knows all the right holds. Everyone laughed and Mr. Plachetka said:

“Phew! You’re a crafty devil,” and he had to buy everybody a beer. In the Physical Education Association Mr. Plachetka lifts hundred-kilo weights, no one but him can manage it. So I’d like to be a delivery man in order to build up my muscles. All my worst enemies will then run for their lives from me. I’ll be scared of no one, even someone armed to the teeth like Horia, the Highwayman who used to go around with Gloska.

So I’m glad to be a boy, because only a man knows how to bring his enemies down so that they’re begging for mercy and promising that they’ll never do anything wrong again. Girls fight too, but it doesn’t mean anything, all they do is giggle and cry. They don’t know how to play, their games are so stupid and they want to get married. But no one will have them because it’s no fun with them. When they play at weddings, a girl has to be the bridegroom because no boy will do it, so she does a wiggle and twists her mouth and that’s how we’re supposed to tell she’s the groom.

You ought to know that I was once in great danger of staying a girl, because every boy when