

30th September 2020

Scissors

**“The door flew open, in he ran,
The great, long, red-legg’d scissor-man.”**

Heinrich Hoffmann, Struwwelpeter, ‘Johnny Head-In Air’

Heinrich Hoffmann was a doctor in Frankfurt in the 19th century, who told funny stories to put his young patients at their ease. Frustrated by the moralistic tone of contemporary children's books, he wrote and illustrated *Struwwelpeter* as a Christmas present for his three-year-old son, and it has delighted *and* terrified generations since. The book is a classic of cautionary tales and gruesome punishment, and an English translation of his rhymes, published in 1848, became an instant success. *Struwwelpeter* has seen a recent resurgence of interest following the successful tours of the musical “Shock-headed Peter”, which graphically illustrates the tales of Conrad Suck-a-Thumb (who has his fingers cut off by the red-legg'd scissor-man), Harriet (who suffers a dreadful fate after playing with matches), and Fidgety Philip (who just won't keep still).

I can't help wondering whether finger-amputation as a cure for thumb-sucking is appropriate ... and what gave red-legg'd scissor-man the right to be judge and jury over Conrad's behaviour anyway? Discuss ...

Scissors can be useful, and scissors can be dangerous. Knife-crime, a current scourge of our inner-cities, was prevalent back in the 1970s when I worked in my first parish. There was clamp-down on the sale of knives. So, some enterprising thugs bought industrial-sized scissors, split them in two, tied one part to a broom handle, and had a dangerous spear-like weapon. Maybe they weren't red-legg'd, but they could have used the sobriquet “scissor-man” easily enough. In the right hands, scissors do good. In the wrong hands, they can be very dangerous indeed.

Might we be the same? We were made to do good, be useful, put our lives to proper purposes. Yet how dangerous we can be in the wrong hands, or under bad influences, or when destruction becomes our focus. “Red-legged” some of us may be. But “scissor-man”? Oh, I do hope not!

A prayer for today

*Lord, you made me to do good; forgive me when I do wrong;
give me guidance to do better; hold me safely in your hands. Amen*

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