The Polar Bear

A Portrait

BY

Henrik Pontoppidan

WITS II, Number 12
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HENRIK PONTOPPIDAN

("Isbjørnen," 1st ed. 1887)

TRANSLATED
WITH AN AFTERWORD
BY JAMES MASSENGALE

WITS II, NUMBER 12
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I

Imagine for yourself, dear Reader, a large, flaming red face, with a snow-white, tousled beard hanging down from it; and hiding, here and there in those rough chinhairs, more old remnants of green cabbage slop, breadcrumbs or tan-colored snuff tobacco than one might find completely appetizing. Let us add to this a shiny and knotty skull, wreathed in back by white hair at the nape, with tangled curls down over the coat collar; a pair of small, thick, hairy ears; heavy, cotton-like eyebrows; and a huge, slightly bluish nose between large watery-blue, piercing eyes. Now combine in this face a continual, seemingly unconscious shifting of expression—a smile at some thought, a merry squint of an eye or a sudden, unmotivated raising or lowering of the heavy eyebrows, accompanied by similar movements in the arms and shoulders—and you should be somewhat able to picture for yourself that incarnation of terror within the county of Uggelejre, that object of every parson's horror, of the schoolteachers' indignation and the bishop's despair—the parish minister of Søby and Sorvad: Thorkild Asger Ejnar Frederic Müller.

It should also be pointed out that Pastor Müller was exactly six feet one and a half inches tall, that he had lost a finger on his left hand, and that he presented himself to the world, summer and winter, in the same marvelous costume, consisting of a moth-eaten dogskin cap with a visor, a pair of gray checkered trousers stuck into a pair of massive boots that stank sourly of whale oil, and a short, shiny old hunting jacket, a so-called "rump-cooler," that was buttoned tightly over his huge, giant-like body. Not even on the coldest days of winter could he be induced to make any change in this manner of dressing. When it froze hardest around him, he might tie a blue checkered cotton handkerchief around his neck, but otherwise he just took an extra pinch out of his red bladderskin snuff pouch that he always carried with him; this he called his "hot water bottle."

If it happened at a time like this that he met a cowering farmer on his way who—bundled up in woolen scarves, with nose dripping and eyes running—tried to sneak by him along the opposite edge of the road, he stopped with his most good-humored smile and his hand on his hip, and called out across the way: "Halloo, there!...Be careful, for God's sake, or you'll freeze and stick to your fur coat!"— —and as he went on

his way he let out a thundering laugh that filled the air all around with terror and made the two big scrawny yellow dogs that always followed him leap with their noses in the air and howl wildly in glee.

And the smile stayed there on his face, and his lips moved with their merriest twitches, as he listened to his "favorite music"—the crunching sound of the snow under his boot soles. Even on the last hill above the village he stopped and moved his bearlike arms to be better able to fill his lungs with the ice needles in the air, before creeping in under the roof of his dark parsonage.

Inside there would be no welcome by a proper little pastor's wife, to take his walking stick and his cap, brush the snow dust off his coat and pat his wet cheek with a pleasant smile. Nor would there appear that otherwise indispensable happy little parsonage child jumping out and throwing her arms around his neck, pulling his beard and calling him her "big bad ugly wonderful bruin-daddy." What did appear was only an old red tomcat, down from the attic with a rat in its chops, then quickly darting off into a big empty room by the hall, where a newly slaughtered calf was hanging from the middle of the ceiling with its stomach sliced open, to let it cool down.

If, as one might surmise, Pastor Müller himself was something of an exceptional sight for most people, his residence—"the Lair," as it was referred to by the children of the parish—was no less unusual. One would hardly be able to imagine anything that reminded you less of that sort of cosy, carpeted nook with bookcases and comfortable armchairs, where our pleasant country parsons usually putter around with their pipes and their sermons. Here, even in the Pastor's own livingroom, there was not so much as a rag covering the window. The floor was as black as a newly plowed field, and the simple furnishings—an old wax-cloth sofa, a couple of little tables, an empty bookcase and a dilapidated wooden armchair with leather cushions—were scattered around in the room without the slightest regard for comfort or order. The only stimulating addition was a strange collection of great bearskins, sealskins, walrus tusks, reindeer antlers, and such like, tacked up on one end wall as if in a museum. By way of contrast, over in the corner by the tile stove, there was a singularly unappetizing little table with remains of slop cabbage in an earthen bowl, a hunk of dark bread, a canister with bacon fat or butter and a knife.

The point is that the Pastor of Søby was a recluse, and he lived his life accordingly. Or rather: his home was the whole district. From morning to evening he wandered throughout the woods and the heather-covered hills and the ponds and marshes, with his gun or his heavy oaken

spear—frightening children and travelers with his savage appearance and his spirited laughter.

It is true enough that he had in his employ an old, smudgy woman who was supposed to serve as a kind of housekeeper for him and the others who lived at the parsonage. But from the very first moment, Pastor Müller had declared war without mercy on this person. In his pigheadedness, he would not even allow her to make his supper, let alone come near his livingroom. He could fall into a terrible rage about this little tiptoeing, terrified creature that circumstances compelled him to keep in his house, if on a rare occasion he thought he noticed some trace of her within his private domain.

Now when he—in his most splendid winter mood—stepped into his room, he stopped on the doorsill for a moment out of habit, making sure that everything was in the same place where he had left it. When nothing suspicious could be detected, he took a considerable plug of snuff from the red leather pouch with his frost-stiffened fingers, and then began to make a meal for himself. He put the bowl with its slop cabbage leftovers into the tile oven, laid a couple of pine sticks across the half-burnt embers and rubbed his numb hands together happily when the wood began to catch fire and the first, delicious smell of kale arose from the greasy edge of the bowl.

Suddenly he got an idea. He went over to a cupboard that hung on the opposite corner of the wall, opened it with a cunning smile, and took from its depths a bottle in a paper wrapping, and with convulsive facial contortions, he filled from its contents two tiny colored glasses that were on the dining table between the butter and the hunk of bread. Then he banged on the ceiling with something that looked like a narwhal tusk, which he had hauled out from behind the sofa, and eased himself down into the old easy chair, which creaked under the weight of his mighty limbs.

Upstairs, where Curate Ryegaard had his apartment, the sound was heard of a chair being pushed back. A pair of felt slippers trod across the floor up there—all the way to the opposite end of the house, where they disappeared at the end of a creaking staircase. Several doors were opened and closed across the length of the whole empty house. Finally there was a knock on the Pastor's own door.

Curate Ryegaard was a thirty-year-old theologian, rather plump, with a clean-shaven face that was round and flat, with an oily sheen of fat like that of a dinnerplate that has been licked clean. Wrapped in a gray dressing gown that he was holding together over his stomach in an anxious way, he remained standing in the doorway and looked questioningly over at the armchair through round, thick eyeglasses.

"I had the impression," he finally said with a broad Jutland dialect, as he brought his outspread hand up to his glasses: "I had the impression that the Pastor knocked."

"Right you are—right you are!" the old man jumped up as if from his musings. "It was only...I just wanted to inquire of Your Excellency, if you wouldn't allow yourself to be tempted by a couple of innocent digestive drops? I took the liberty of filling a little glass for you. It occurred to me that if you had had your difficulty again today after eating too many porridge cakes, I'd—"

"You know very well, Mr. Müller," the Curate broke in with an indignation that was only poorly disguised, "you know *very* well that I never take spirits except at mealtimes. It appears to me that this little joke is really a bit old. It would certainly please me if you could find something else with which to entertain yourself."

"Ah, yes—yes of course—naturally," sighed the old man and shook his head as if in shame. "But just the same—how would it be if Your Excellency would deign to step into an unworthy brother's den and impart to him something of your epoch-making dogmatic studies? If my worthy Superior would be kind enough to join me here, I shall have a half barrel of coal and a foot muff be brought in on the spot. Tell me now...pneumatology, wasn't it?...Anthropology, was it something like that?...And then, what was it now—Petrus Lombardus, was it...?"

But the Curate remained in the doorway and looked down at the gray-haired old man with an expression that alternated between pity and embitterment.

"Do you really suppose, Mr. Müller," he finally began, when the Pastor had fallen silent: "do you *really* suppose that it is proper for us to discuss these elevated matters in such a way? I for one am of the opinion that there are people enough who ridicule and sneer at the holiest things, and that we should take great care, on our own part, not to give any occasion for offensive behavior. I cannot allow myself to think that you, Mr. Müller, should find this to be a proper use of your time, when we see everywhere around us such ignorance and spiritual need waiting for our good offices!...In this regard, I must tell you, Pastor, that this very afternoon, during your absence, we received a message from wheelwright Povlsen from Sorvad Overdrev, whose old father—if you remember—is dying. It now appears that he is in a bad way, and is probably lying right now and waiting in distress and pain. The Pastor's carriage—as usual—was found to be unserviceable. But I promised to come as soon as possible. Now in the meantime, a terrible storm has blown in, so the roads are completely impassable. In addition, it appears that you have taken the liberty, Mr. Müller, as to hide away my fur coat.

At least, it has not been possible for me to find it lately. It would indeed be appreciated if you would let me have it back."

"Good God, is the poor man sick—is he sick?" said the Pastor, this time in honest thoughtfulness. But immediately he raised his head and the raffish smile crossed his face again.

"Listen, do you know what, Mr. Bishop?—Can you guess what I thought about today?"

"No, I certainly do not know."

"Now, God knows you ought to get married, Mr. Ryegaard."

"M-m-married?...What do you mean by that?"

"So just look here...I read the other day in the paper about these new patented tile stoves—you know, these transportable ones. Tell me now: wouldn't it be an idea if you got married to one of these? It would be just the thing for you! Think—transportable! It would be easy for you to carry it along under your arm when you went out for a walk, and at night you could have it with you in bed to warm things up...Stoke it up fresh in the morning and the evening, as they say in the advertisements! Well, what do you say? Isn't it a terrific idea?"

"Perhaps *now*, Pastor, you'll give me leave to get back to my studies. I assure you that I would be *extremely* grateful," the curate broke in again, bowed with ironic courtesy, and disappeared from the doorway.

Pastor Müller leaned back in his chair and sent along after the Curate one of those mighty volleys of laughter that made the dust and the moths and the spiderwebs tremble in the dark corners of the room and the rats under the floor tremble and prick up their ears. Up above the ceiling the soft steps of the felt slippers were heard again and the sound of the chair returning to its proper spot. But for a long while the old man sat chuckling, with his legs stretched out and his hands folded over his hopping stomach.

All at once he jumped to his feet. Darkness had already fallen. The glow from the tile oven fell on the two small glasses that still stood untouched on the table. Without hesitation, he took one of them between two giant fingers and drank it down; then he took the other one and sent its contents down the same way.

After that he turned on his heel, grabbed the stick in the corner, the cap from its peg—and was out the door.

There was whirling snow out there, dark as pitch, a storm blowing in from the north. The snow swept across from every side and collected in drifts as tall as a man's height along the fences and in all the hollows. But the Pastor pushed his pikestaff into the ground and leaned into the storm, and his dogs followed along.

Far on the other side of the hills there was a sick old man lying and waiting.

Meanwhile, the dust back home at "the Lair" settled back down through the tranquil air. In the stillness of the evening the rats stuck their pointed noses out of the holes in the corners, dashed across the floor, bit and squeaked and rolled around under the sofa, while the spiders and the moths and mites wandered about silently up in the bearskins and in the old spiderwebs under the smoked-blackened ceiling. And over the fire in the stove the forgotten cabbage stew cooked and snored sorrowfully until there was nothing left of it.

It is about this Pastor, about his life and his peculiar fate that these pages are going to tell.

There existed a couple of generations ago-—and for that reason there could still exist—a royal decree, a ministerial ordinance or something of that sort, according to which impoverished theological students, who signed a contract that after finishing their examinations they were committed to a lengthy and otherwise indefinite period of employ as pastors out in our Greenland provinces, were to obtain a substantial yearly stipend from the government, designed for the continuance of their studies. A most humane ordinance!

In spite of this there were-—even back in those times when there were huge numbers of theologians—not very many who followed this call. And the few who did were by no means always the choicest of students. On the contrary: if the truth must be known, it was usually the case that rather hapless types, those whom life in one way or another had already left in the lurch—sinking wrecks—were the ones who grasped at the Government's bait in their time of need, as if it were their last straw.

The fact of the matter was that that "otherwise indefinite" space of time, to which one was legally bound to commit oneself, generally encompassed virtually the rest of the person's life. Only in the case of a rare exception was there any hope of an earlier pardon.

It should therefore be easy to understand the presentiments with which a young person allowed himself to be mortgaged to this life-long exile: the quiet shudder, when he thought of the day when his ordination letter would come and the ship would sail, and the spires and towers of the city would disappear beneath the waves at that coast that he might never see again—or in the luckiest case, only as an old graybeard with snowblind eyes—after a age-long interment out there in the awful isolation of an eternal desert of ice. Nor should it be so difficult to understand that these "Greenland students"—as the poor wretches were called—

with such dire prospects before them, did not always conduct themselves in an exemplary fashion during the short time they still had to enjoy life. Their unhappy backgrounds, disappointments, hardships and suffering had already contributed to loosen the ground beneath their feet, and the consciousness that they had "sold themselves" soon dealt a death-blow to the last iota of their self-confidence. They would sink quickly into a furtive and misanthropic existence in disreputable back alleys and in the back rooms of basement taverns, where they took part in life's pleasures with a bestial craving, as long as they could...until one night, making it back to their cold attic room and lighting a candle, they would turn pale at the sight of a large blue envelope: the official injunction that it was now time to take their theological examination in order to take the first ship that spring that was on its way to—"the pardoning of sins, the renunciation of the flesh, and the eternal snows," as the place was referred to by these unhappy souls.

And Thorkild Asger Ejnar Frederic Müller, who was one of these students, had not been any different than the rest.

Perhaps there are a few still living who remember from that time a heavily built and slow-witted-looking student, who provoked laughter everywhere he went. The chances are that he would have been best remembered in conjunction with a few lectures in the Theological Auditorium, at which he had found himself a couple of times by mistake, and where his appearance in the doorway had immediately elicited such merriment that he quickly decamped again...Or perhaps even better from one of that bygone era's dirty, dreary student billiard parlors, where he often sat for days on end in the same dark corner with his elbows on his knees and his chin resting on his hands, as if he were asleep inside, while he gazed with a blank expression at his friends around the billiard table and only now and then drew the corners of his mouth up in a sluggish smile, if one of these friends got the idea of pouring a glass of aquavit over his head, or in some other way made him the butt of a joke. Without ever saying a word himself or taking part in the fun, but patiently putting up with being the object of whatever practical joke his comrades devised, he could sit for hours without moving—like a giant changeling, a heavy-set, all-too-good-natured troll, who had long since decided, along with everyone else, that he had been born into the world as an impossible entity.

In point of fact, there had also been unanimous agreement about this matter virtually from the first moment that little Thorkild opened his big, watery blue eyes in his mother's bedroom. Relatives and friends were at pains to declare as loudly as possible that he was, and would always be what they euphemistically referred to as "abnormal." And his

poor, beleaguered mother never lost the opportunity, as he was growing up, to take his large head between her hands and tell him how little hope he should have for this life, how small his expectations ought to be, and how he ought to bear the yoke Our Lord had laid on his shoulders with forbearing and humility.

Thorkild had first seen the light of day in a little provincial town in Jutland, where his father, a schoolteacher, died a short while after the boy's birth and left the mother and child in tight circumstances. With the economic support of several relatives and under their severe supervision, he was sent at the age of ten to the town's Latin School, in fulfillment of a wish that his father had expressed on his deathbed—and which the family survivors thought they had a duty to carry out—that the boy receive preparation for University study.

These were long and anguished years for the hapless child. More than once they were on the verge of giving up the attempt in despair, and when Thorkild finally, at age twenty, made it through his matriculation exam, they immediately had him signed up to be a Greenland pastor. The family relatives convinced the weak and disheartened mother into believing that there was no other way out for the boy.

Thorkild himself offered no resistance. He accepted this decision with the same patience that he had gradually accustomed himself to in dealing with his "fate." When it finally dawned on him what they had done to him—where he had his proscribed place—he followed faithfully along at the heels of the "Greenlanders," both in their visits to the dark alleys and to the back rooms of cellar taverns, and he never even appeared to be completely conscious of what he was doing. Truth to tell, he was neither so dull nor so indifferent as he appeared to others. That immutably calm disposition that he showed in the face of all the humiliations was rather an habitual grimace behind which he had hidden, since his early childhood, his sorrow and shame about being born to be pitiful and useless human being. It was a kind of despairing indifference that in his private moments often came close to thoughts of suicide. More than once it had in fact occurred to him that he might end his miserable life. It was the thought of his mother that had always held him back from taking such a step.

Regarding his outward appearance, it cannot be said that he became more attractive as the years went by, neither in his own eyes nor in those of others. A wild, reddish beard began to stick out of his freckled face, and his limbs grew from plump to ridiculously formless. He was referred to as "the Bear" by his comrades already in those days, and in truth, when he sat in their company, sunken in deep torpor, with his great red paws under his chin and his hairy head nuzzling down to his

chest...one could easily have pictured him then as a huge, tame but untrained bear. Misty dream visions with scattered images from his childhood's great forests and marshes flitted past his half-closed eyes.

Now it happened just at this time that an unusually bitter winter snatched away a couple of the Danish pastors in the northernmost part of Greenland, and when Thorkild one night came back to his empty garret, he therefore saw—long before he had expected it—*his* "blue letter" under the candlestick on the table.

For the first time in his life, he felt his knees buckle beneath him. For three days he sat shut up in his room without seeing anyone. A double-barreled cavalry pistol lay on the table next to his bed.

But during these days of brooding deliberation a brilliant thought welled forth in his brain—a thought of such genius that it surprised him, while at the same time it confounded him that no one else had thought of it long ago. It occurred to him that it was simply impossible for them to make a pastor out of him. During the past five years he had scarcely opened a book, and since that last failed attempt to slip unnoticed into the Theological Auditorium, he had not even had a glimpse of the walls of the University. He was nothing but a *tabula rasa*...And now, he figured, all he had to do was to turn in his examination papers without answering a single question, and attend his oral exam without uttering a single syllable, and it would simply be impossible to assign him a grade—the result would be, at least for the time being, that he would have to be allowed to stay in Denmark.

When the day of the examination came, he carried out his plan for the written part of the test without batting an eye, and a great cheer arose from among the students when they heard the rumors about the Greenlandic bear who had turned in all his exam questions "as blank as ice."

But Thorkild had made his calculations without taking into consideration his actual proprietor—the Government Ministry. An internal query to this office from the Faculty resulted in a response that the Candidate in question *would* pass his examination, and indeed, he would do so in such a timely fashion that he might be delivered, properly ordained, to the Greenland Colonies with the very first ship that sailed...And thus the stage was set for a comedy that for many years would live on in legend in the halls of the Theological Faculty.

Before a fully packed auditorium of young and older theological candidates who had crowded together to witness the spectacle, poor Thorkild was compelled to run the gauntlet between the whole range of theological subjects, of which several were unknown to him even by name. With one hand on each knee, his eyes staring at the floor—laughable even to himself in his black, rented dress suit that was too small for

his arms and legs—he sat immobile on his chair like a deaf mute. The professors were furious. They turned and twisted like snakes, they shook him by his coat collar and yelled in his ear...but not a single syllable fell from his trembling lips.

Finally, in the very last subject, when the chief examiner took him unawares and managed to compel a "Yes" from him, in answer to the question "if more than three hundred years had passed since Luther lived"—eliciting something like a jubilant cheer from the auditorium — the affair came to an end. At least it could be said that he had responded! So with his *vix non contemnendus*, his ordination and the Bishop's most severe admonition that by the exercise of diligence and conscientious behavior he was going to have to repair those miserably neglected matters, he was sent off to the most northerly benefice in the whole world.

Not even his mother got to wish him a last farewell...The ship lay in the harbor ready to sail, and one afternoon at the beginning of April it hoisted anchor.

No one at all had come to see him off—and soon the gloom and the fog hid the coast of his native land from his staring eyes.

II

Where the land rose up and the mountains—naked and black—advanced out into the icy sea, there was an arm of the fjord that curved in between two staggeringly high cliff-bosoms and penetrated deeply into the coastal land. At its mouth it was as wide and spacious as a sound, filled with little snow-covered islands and craggy skerries, over which thousands of snow-white birds circled, filling the air with their sharp cries. Further in, however, the fjord became more and more constricted in its curving bed between high, precipitous, naked mountain walls that lifted themselves to the sky—peak after peak—and disappeared up into the clouds. Then at the very innermost part of the fjord it widened out again, ending almost like a circular lake that covered the bottom of a massive cauldron-shaped cliff formation, where its more gently sloping sides and moss-green or yellowish ravines, covered with crowberry shrubs, mirrored themselves in the calm water.

Once in a while it could happen during the short summer—especially when a storm threatened—that a whaler made its way in here between the high mountains and awakened an echo with its clanking anchor chains and its human voices...or that an ocean whale lost its way in among the skerries and whipped up the water in its anger until, blowing and making a rumpus, it escaped out to sea again. Otherwise the stillness lay deep, slumbering between the peaceful mountains, night and day without a break...Only the midnight sun's buzzing swarms of midges provided a musical accompaniment. They hung out over the gold-tinted water like black, dancing veils, sifting the sun-dust. Now and then there would be a quiet splash out in the deeper water, and a shiny black back would break the surface and then disappear again. Broad, chubby snouts appeared here and there above the water, to take in air, and then submerged noiselessly.

The blueish-gray arctic fox came down the side of the mountain with sleepy steps. It paused on a ledge of the cliffs and showed its red yawn...then shook its fur and continued on...It followed for a while along the shoals, where little multicolored siliceous stones glittered on the bottom of the crystalline water. It snapped lazily at a midge and finally began to use its pointed nose to root around in a heap of old gnawed bones that lay outside the entrance to an abandoned, half-col-

lapsed den made out of peat moss and stones, until it finally disappeared into the den's coolness.

Circling the lake, scattered around under the steep slopes, there lay a whole little colony of these tiny sunken earthen dens—the wretched winter dwellings of the natives—that they had left helter-skelter at the first glimpse of spring and sunlight, in order to find their way to the exuberant reindeer hunt up on the great high plateaus beneath the inland glaciers. There was also a miserable-looking stone chapel here, built up against the cliff wall itself, with a wooden cross above the entrance. And hanging up on a steep mountain slope there was a beamed cabin, painted red, with white window frames, a board roof and a fenced-in yard for the dogs—the parsonage.

Even this building was empty now. The fox, with his fur full of midges, was the only one that prowled around up there in the evenings, to scratch his back on the corner beams.

But when the long winter night drew near and the snow started to quilt the land, life began to awaken in this desolate cliff-cauldron. From the east, tiny fur-clad shapes worked their way down across the mountainsides with dog teams and heavily laden sleds. Some came on skis—dashing down across the steep slopes! At the same time, others came from the west, in through the fjord, in big, yellow leather boats and little kayaks[1]...two, three families together, chattering, bickering, smiling. The women sat at the oarlocks, yellow-brown and black-eyed, some with suckling children on their backs in the amaut.[2] And all the boats were filled with bundles of furs, animal fat, chunks of bloody seal meat, game birds, stinking hides and great distended reindeer stomachs filled with mixtures of flour, hulled grain or peas that had been bartered for at marketplaces farther south.

Each day brought new families to the colony. Around the lake a noisy life was led by the small, fur-clad figures, as if they were still half intoxicated from the summer sun and the wild hunt up close to the highland ice pack. The winter quarters had to be put in order, stones and moss collected, the new hides spread out over the cliffs to be wind-dried. Up in the ravines, in remote places, the winter provisions were placed in stone cairns and carefully covered with hides and snow. And inside the darkness of their igloos[3] the talkative old women waddled around and spread hides out over the stone beds, filled the soapstone lamps with whale oil and hung the big cooking pot up under the low, wet, dripping ceiling.

And all the while, the sun sank deeper and deeper beneath the horizon, and the gloom slid in from the north with heavy, cold snow showers and stinging icy winds.

But even in the month-long winter night, when the land was buried under chest-high snowdrifts and the sea lay packed in ice and dark as far as the eye could see, there was *life* up here under the snow, impoverished though it often was. Here and there a reddish glow from the den's gut pane fell over the white blanket of snow, that usually had sunk a little over such a spot because of the heated room down beneath it. Now and then a bundle of fur came creeping out on all fours from the long, low, stone-paved passage that led from the den out into the free air. And their big, skinny dogs were always rummaging around, howling in the bitter cold nights.

Out in the fjord, hidden in frosty mists, stood seal hunters, frozen stiff as they kept watch near the seals' blow-holes. They stood there immobile for hours, with their harpoons ready in their right hands...carefully lifting one foot now and again, to keep it from freezing fast to the ice. Others made their way out between the skerries with their bows and arrows, and ventured further and further out, as the winter provisions gradually got used up and the freezing weather closed all the waterways.

And even if hunger and need were great during that time, it happened rarely that they died *completely*. When the last piece of frozēn fat was eaten and the soapstone lamp under the ceiling had flickered out for a lack of fuel, they rolled up together in the darkness on the stone beds and lay there silently, waiting patiently for the moment when the snow on the high peaks once again was illuminated by that pale golden shimmer, heralding the return of the sun.

Then they all came creeping out of their huts—big and little fur-bundles alike—and stood upright with tottering knees, and stared with dull eyes up at the unfamiliar light that came and went, as if in sport, on the mountaintops. Old people and those who were so exhausted by hunger that they could hardly stand on their own legs were carried out into the open air, so that they too could get a glimpse of how the gleam day by day crept farther down the sides the the cliff. Finally the first, narrow, red-glowing rim of the sun peered over the blueish mountain range in the south. Great tears of joy ran down their shrunken cheeks. They yelled and clapped their hands, hobbled around on their awkward limbs and threw their arms around each other in their emotion. Mothers held up their children with outstretched arms, and shrieked in wild delight, and the children reached out as well with their small, thin hands toward the great fountain of warmth, and added their voices to the communal cry of hallelujah:

Sekinek! Sekinek![4]

Each day after that the red ball raised itself a bit higher into the blue sky and imbued the land with color and radiance, where the snow

disappeared in frothy cataracts down the sides of the mountains. And when at last it no longer left them, and there was a continuous, long, sun-shimmering day, young, glistening moss and reddish lichen began to spread out from every gully and ravine, thrusting forward and holding fast until it covered all the steep slopes and valleys like a festive, gaudy carpet of flowers. Crowberries sprouted up, whortleberries and thumb-high stunted willows growing the tiniest of leaves...and then at last there came those terrifying, subterranean-sounding thunderings around and about from the coastline—crash after crash—each time an iceberg broke off from the land and plowed its way out over the newly opened sea.

Calm, majestic, these magnificent sailing vessels of the polar sea glided away under the wine-colored sky...like magical castles...like floating palaces of crystal, with peaks and domed towers, sun-red, azure blue or as if dripping blood and gold.

* * *

Something was going on down around the lake. People were running back and forth at the edge of the water. Out of their dens they were hauling tattered hides and fur pelts, together with any sewn stomach guts that they had not consumed during the winter, collecting their hunting tools and packing everything together in their kayak-shaped dogsleds or else in the large, yellow umiaks[5] that were lined up on the beach.

The winter colony was starting to break up. Now, when the sun finally had come, there was no time to lose, to make the ascent to the joyous reindeer hunt on the wide plateau land near the inland ice fields. A few of the winter dens were already empty, their inhabitants already on their way to the mountains. And the ones who were still around were thinking of nothing else than getting ready to follow along as quickly as possible.

Thorkild was sitting up on a bench outside the little beamed cabin, high on the hillside, that served as his parsonage. He sat in his usual, bent-over position with his chin in his hands, watching, with increasing anxiety, the busy preparations for departure down around the lake. He saw how the sleds were being loaded and tied, how the dogs were harnessed, the sick and the weak carried out and made comfortable on top of bundles of hides. For his own part, he was going to spend the summer at a marketplace on the coast some miles to the south, and he was waiting for word at any moment from the crew that was supposed to sail him away.

The whole day long he had sat this way, keeping watch. With his gaze he had followed each family that had finally finished their preparations for departure and, laughing and prattling as they went, had begun their difficult journey over the cliff scree and the steep mossy slopes, until after a span of several hours they had disappeared as tiny, dark dots behind the white mountain ridges. Even after they had disappeared, he had kept on staring in the same direction, as if the mountain itself had opened up in front of his eyes, as if behind the clifftops he could look out over the wide, plentiful high plains...as if he could see the tents that were raised beneath the slopes with their long wooden poles and the beautiful gut leather blanket in front of the entrance, and see the great, reeking whale-oil fire, where the brown women sat around, camping under the open sky; and see the reindeer in flight with its calves; and hear the bark of the dogs, the calling and yells, while the sun sparkled over the soft, glittering moss...

Then it hit him—with a sudden pang of dread—and he lowered his eyes. He pressed his face down into his huge, freckled hands and sat there, plunged in a terrible spiritual battle.

It had been a long, oppressive winter for him—this first one. During the whole period of frost and night he had been sitting inside beneath the drowsy oil lamp in his lonely little beamed room, with his aching head pressed tightly between his hands, reading and reading from "Christianity and Heathendom," "Preach Jesus to Those of Little Faith," "Gilded Treasure Chest," "Current and Serviceable Methodology for Highly Necessary Indoctrination of the Truths of Christian Teaching"—book after book, a whole chestful that the Missionary Society had given him to take along on his trip.

But try as he would to bend his thoughts to his will, it had been impossible to keep them concentrated on his books. At every sound that reached him from the lake, he had raised his bushy head and listened, and before he knew what he was doing, he was lost in puzzlement about what the sound came from. Could it be the kayaks coming home from their hunt? or the flensers on the beach, or maybe it was the young people who were dancing *Pingasut*[6] in the moonlight in front of the dens? If he heard the kayak men's familiar yells, when they came back into the fjord with their catch, it was impossible for him to stay calm. He had to step outside and see what was going on, what they had brought home.

He could find himself standing for hours outside his door, following the wild hunting cries at the seal-slayings out on the ice or at the furious pursuit of a wounded bear...with a feeling of passion like that which had been the cause of such worry to his mother during his early boyhood days, and which had given rise to the abhorrence that was felt by all his relatives. Just a few days ago he had been walking in the morning on a lonely spot down at the edge of the water, lost in his thoughts, when he

suddenly stopped breathless: he spotted a seal that was lying and rocking in the water behind a sun-drenched cake of ice near the coast. Seized by an irresistible urge, he had crept on all fours over behind a large block of stone and had started scraping with the stones lying on the edge of the beach, while at the same time he whistled softly and gently, the way he had seen and heard the natives do. The seal began to listen too, and it looked around, soon plumping itself down into the water. But directly after that it showed its large, round, attentive head at the surface of the water, this time closer in to land. With a pounding heart, Thorkild scraped again with the stones and with his lips made a new series of soft, drawn-out mating calls. The beast stuck its broad, bristled snout in the air, expanded its nostrils and disappeared again. And when it popped up for the third time, this time quite near the land, he crept forward and slung a sharp-edged, fist-sized stone with all his might against its head. The stone hit the animal right in the middle of its forehead. The water around it turned red when it dived under. At the same instant he realized, to his shame, what he had just done. And in despair over himself and his unseemly passions, he trudged back home and buried himself once more in his books.

During this time he had often been forced to think of his grandfather. He had never met this relative, but one of his mother's old servant women had told terrifying stories about him many times when he was a child. Back in those days the impression he had gotten was that his grandfather had been an infamous poacher and had lived more or less like a savage deep in the Rold Forest near Thorkild's home town. He had also later conceived of him as a giant figure with a wild, red beard. The grandfather must have actually caused the family great sorrow: this he deduced, among other things, from the fact that his mother had never once talked about him. Only once had he ever heard her even mention his grandfather's name, in one of her anxious moments, when it slipped out of her mouth that he—Thorkild—resembled him. He could still remember the frightful impression that this had made on him.

He raised his head. He heard the sound of people's voices, down below on the path that led across the mountain slope up toward his cabin; and after a little while two fur-clad figures appeared—a man and a woman—and in these he recognized old Ephraim and his daughter Rebecca, or "the Sun," as she was called because of her gentle look. He also knew that they were coming to say goodbye. He had heard their dogs barking in happy excitement down at the shore.

Ephraim was a small, slightly stooped person with a longish, dark brown face, in which a pair of unusually developed eyebrows and a set of well-preserved teeth were the only things that could be seen to ornament his face. His eyes appeared only as two small, slightly slanted lines high up under his eyebrows, and his nose was so flat and underdeveloped that it had the appearance of a small, incidental fold of skin between his broad, prominent cheekbones.

Once he had been one of the most daring hunters in the colony, and he was still counted as once of its most sober and reliable patriarchs. But these last severe winters, when he at times—like so many others as well—had had to keep himself alive by eating seaweed and old angmaset-heads[7] that he had dug up out of the refuse pits beneath the snow, had taken their toll on him, and he looked weak and worn down. Thorkild asked him to have a seat, and the old man began talking about his preparations for travel and his summer plans. He and his daughter were to join a couple of other families, with whom they shared their winter quarters. As soon as the dogs had been fed, they were going to get going, in order to make it over the first mountain before evening. Thorkild, who still had only a meager understanding of the natives' language, listened somewhat distractedly to the old man, but he kept looking over at the daughter. She had positioned herself over against a large rock at a little distance from them, and from there was sending stolen glances in the direction of this strange, shy, close-mouthed pastor whom nobody could figure out. When their eyes met, they both blushed and looked away. Rebecca was a small, plump girl of eighteen, with a slightly lighter skin color than her father's, and a zestful expression in her small, slanted eyes. She had a dress of red-colored leather that clung to her strong, compact body. Her "top-knot"[8]—her hairdo—of blue-black, wiry hair, was bound up fully six inches high, and was wrapped with a gaudy leather band. On her feet she had a pair of brand new kamiks[9] with white embroidery, and she was clearly making an effort to draw the pastor's attention to them.

Finally Ephraim got to his feet and said goodbye. Thorkild shook both their hands, but in such a hesitant, agitated and distracted way that the father and daughter exchanged astonished glances. And when they had left, he remained standing in his doorway, following them with his eyes, while they went swaying down the path. At a bend in the path, Rebecca turned back to look at him. And after that, every time the path turned, she looked back again, to see if he was still standing there.

Thorkild's heart had started beating hard. The blood rose violently to his head. For a couple of minutes he stood with his hand clenched on the door frame, in a great battle with himself. Then suddenly he took several steps forward, cupped his big hands to his mouth and yelled with a trembling voice:

"Ephraim!...Ephraim!"

Down below on the path, the two small figures turned and looked up.

"Palase!...Oi!"[10] the little man called back.

— —Toward evening, when two of the men who were to bring Thorkild by boat down to the marketplace came for his clothing, they found, to their dismay, that the parsonage was already empty, the door locked and the windows nailed up. The pastor was off to the mountains with Ephraim and his hunting party.

* * *

He was among the first to come back when the snow fell. On his skis he raced down over the mountain's funnel-shaped sides, with his dogs behind him. Anyone who had not seen him since the previous spring would hardly have known him. Not only was his head thrown back, his eyes sparkled with life and his cheeks had color. At the same time, there was also something of the boundlessness of the high plateau in his glance, something of the hunt's resounding "halloo" in the lusty, quick utterances in his sturdy voice.

He had become a new...a reborn person. He himself had noticed how new founts of life had gushed forth inside him, while he knocked about aimlessly—he hardly knew at times where or with whom. Joining up now with one group, now with another, gradually as he learned to know the people and the language, he had flung himself into the salmon fishing along the rivers and into the hunts up under the gleaming highland glaciers. He had even dared to venture up on the ice itself together with Ephraim and his sons, looking for a herd of reindeer whose tracks he had recognized. And as soon as the people had noticed what kind of "blubber" their new pastor was made of, it had not taken long before they regarded him as one of their own. He had slept in their leather tents between women and children, with a bearskin over him and a pile of hides under his head. He had taken his dinner together with them around the great communal pot—reindeer hams, crowberries cooked in grease, eider eggs and above all, the most highly regarded delicacy of the summer: the great, stuffed reindeer stomachs, with their contents of half-digested plant matter and spittle. In return, he had taught them to shoot with an old rifle that he had taken with him from Copenhagen, and with which he had aroused their thunderstruck astonishment. And when the daylight waned and everyone sat camped around the smoking whale-oil fire, he had made his contributions to the entertainment by telling legends and wild tales that he remembered from his boyhood days, and he had gotten them to listen with gaping mouths.

There was no turning back for him now. Now, after having dared to make the break, he shut his eyes, he stopped up his ears for the voice of conscience...and let things drift along.

Even before the winter had iced over the fjord and closed the sound, he had taught himself to steer a kayak and aim a harpoon. He learned to pierce a grouse in flight with an arrow and bring down a running hare at a distance. Out in the skerries, hunting the utok,[11] or in a sled with sixteen baying dogs in a team, the time flew by...for days he went up and down the mountainsides after foxes! Sometimes he had hardly gotten home in the evening and settled down under his hide blanket in bed, when there was a knock on his window.

"What news?"

"Bear in the fjord, pastor!"

"I'll be darned!—A bear!"..the rifle came down off the wall, furs were pulled on, and it was out again into the night.

— —He drifted and drifted.

Of course it could happen from time to time, when the wild coursing of his blood calmed down for a moment, that he seemed to look himself in the face—and lowered his glance. He could almost be afraid of himself then...at the sight of his own hand, when it was still bloody from the last flensing, or for his unkempt beard and the resonance of his deep voice. He saw before him the frightful picture of his grandfather again, and he remembered the silence that surrounded that name, and that terrified glint in his troubled mother's eyes, the one time the name had crossed her lips.

So it was, that one evening he was sitting outside his door, remorseful, with his head between his hands. He had just come home, dead tired, from far out in the outer skerries. The day before, a huge carcass of a great whale that had drifted in had been pulled to shore and then been brought up on land. Every man in the colony had been on their feet for this event, to secure a part of the booty for themselves. Thorkild had participated in the difficult salvage operation with his usual enthusiasm, and had later taken charge, both of the dismembering of the great beast and of its distribution between the participants. Now, after having gone around for more than twenty-four hours between these giant pieces of bloody meat, he could see nothing but red in front of his eyes.

Above his head the deep blue sky arched itself, thickly sprinkled with big golden stars. Out in the east the moon rose slowly over the mountain ridge and spread a strange milk-white glow across the new-fallen snow. Now and then a glimmer of the northern lights could be seen in the sky.

Down around the lake, where the gut-windows above the dens could be seen faintly, like shiny little reddish dots in all the whiteness, the sound of merrymaking and song could be heard, on the occasion of the unexpected riches that the colony had acquired with the fine catch. Busy, dark fur-bundles crept in and out. Even the dogs were playing happily.

All at once Thorkild heard footsteps right beside him.

He looked up. There—in the full moonlight—was Rebecca standing and laughing down at him. She had on a white, quite new anorak,[12] edged at the neck and wrists with black dogskin and decorated with red bands. Along with that she had on richly colored sealskin trousers, embroidered with red up the front side, and red-colored kamiks. A gold-wrought band was twisted around her top-knot.

He looked up at her for a long while, as if he were waking up from a dream. The moon shone in on her white teeth and gave her small eyes a sparkling green luster.

"But...is that you, dear?!"

Of course it was she! She laughed with her dry, creaking laughter and pulled on his beard. Hadn't he even heard her coming?

"But—but my dearest girl!...You look so lovely! You're all decked out!...Come, sit down over here!"

No, no, she could not stay today. She just wanted to say hello and say that father had caught sea-scorpion, so if he was hungry, mother was just now stirring the pot.

"What are you telling me?...You father's caught a sea-scorpion?"

Well, that's what she'd just said. And if he could only get a move on, they were waiting for him. And without listening to the excuses that he was starting to make, she crawled up into his living quarters, extinguished the oil lamp that had been left burning over an open, but dust-covered book; she closed his door and gave him her hand with a smile.

But instead of following along after her, Thorkild dragged her into his arms with a violent ferocity, clasped her to him, bent her head back and pressed one, two, three wild-man's kisses on her mouth.

She was a bit flabbergasted at first by these unexpected, furious caresses; but when she rested there in his arms, she looked up at him with a quiet jubilation in her gaze.

Down in front of Ephraim's den, one could deduce even by the great number of footprints in the snow that there had to be something unusual going on inside. The ice-clad walls of the long, low entry-way had also been polished brightly by all the stiff fur coats that had pressed themselves through it during the day, and when one got to the end of the passage, crawling on all fours, and shoved open the low door, one found

the pinched quarters filled with people—mostly members of the three families that lived inside. Around about the length of the dripping-wet stone walls they lay on benches: men, women and children heaped together—all naked, for the heat and the smoke in there were stifling.

An old, bow-legged, fat and rather bald woman, black with soot and filth, and with a leather rag around her flabby loins, stood over the black pot that hung from the ceiling over the whale-oil fire in the middle of the room. Over in a corner sat a bunch of quiet children, sucking eagerly on big pieces of meat, while the fat dripped down over their fingers.

They had given up waiting for Thorkild. Everyone there had taken a chunk from the pot with their fingers, and sat or lay now and cut it apart with a knife, while the den filled with the noise of all these talkative and smacking mouths and with the thick vapors that rose from the brown, heated bodies that were lit up by the light of the fire.

Finally there was a scraping sound outside, and Thorkild's well-known, resonant "Halloo!" was heard from the entrance, as he crawled through. The door-hatch was shoved back, and he crept into the den amid the merry greetings and welcomings from all the bunks, while Rebecca sneaked in unnoticed behind his back. He slipped off his fur coat and his undershirt, ran his fingers through his hair, which was warm and unkempt, and went right to work on the fish that the old woman with her black fingers pulled up by its tail from the boiling pot.

Over in the darkest corner of the den, Rebecca had already found her seat. She squatted down, half naked, only wrapped in a leather coverlet...but not for a second did she take her flashing, enamored eyes off of Thorkild.

— —

He drifted and drifted.

Finally he didn't even notice it himself. The days passed, and the years went by, and he hardly kept track of them.

One fine day he did get married, though—to Rebecca, of course.

He fully realized that her face might have been better proportioned, her eyes more expressive, her body less squarely built. But he also saw the thankful joy that shone in those eyes, if he just let his hand stroke her cheek, and the faithful spirit with which she waited for him at home in their little room, watching out from the door for his return, when he had been out on his long journeys with the sled and the dogs. And he noticed the childlike sense of security with which she could come and lie close to him under the skin blanket during the dark winter nights, when the snowstorm raged above the house and shook the walls.

He was happy. And Rebecca was happy. And every second summer, out on the reindeer hunt, a tiny, round Greenlander sprang out of her womb.

He had gradually broken off his connections with his native land altogether. It made him smile when he remembered the nervousness and excitement he had felt in the beginning, waiting for the kayak-mail—once a year—to come around the bend in the fjord. Now everything back home seemed foreign to him and a matter of complete indifference. His comrades had forgotten him; his relatives never even asked about him; and finally one year, when he got no letter from his mother, but only a short notice from an attorney about her death, he forgot his old home completely.

But here, up under the frozen pole, he lived a long and joyful life. Among these impoverished, frugal people he learned about a kind of good fortune he had never even dreamed about, back in the days when he had sat with his suicidal thoughts in his garret room in Copenhagen. Here he found, while his hair filled with gray, the home that had been denied him in his childhood, the friends he had always lacked as a boy, and a calling that everyone understood, one for which he was loved. In the end, he became a father for all these children of nature, their common adviser and comforter. And when, during the winter in the little stone church or during the summer out under the open sky, he collected his flocks around him and in his own, outspoken way tried as best he could to lift the veil from the mysteries of life and death, he could make hearts beat faster inside those stiff fur bundles, because he was so full of thanks himself that songs of praise to life and its Lord came all by themselves to his lips.

—Here Thorkild stayed, until he became an old man.

III

So why didn't he stay forever? Why did he finally head back home anyway?—Well, could he even have explained it himself?

One summer out on the reindeer hunt, he suddenly noticed that he had begun to get older. It had been an unusually persistent and severe winter. The snow lay on the cliffs until far into the summer, and the ice still formed a warped jam in the fjord when he broke winter camp with his family and headed for the mountains. He had had his ailing periods, and now, as he felt the summer warmth, he still experienced a shortness of breath that often forced him to stay at home around the tents and putter about with the women and children, while exuberant hunting calls and the shots of the others could be heard from the high plains.

This was not his style. Sometimes he could get a bit testy; and one day, when Rebecca came out of the tent door, she saw him sitting thoughtfully on a rock with his hand under his chin. She approached him silently, and when she carefully laid her hand on his shoulder, it was as if a shiver ran through him, and he looked up with a distant look. And when she asked him why he was sitting there all alone, he got to his feet and made an evasive reply.

This repeated itself several times in the following period, and Rebecca became quite distressed. When he would come back into the tent and see her sorrowful expression, he would pat her gently on the shoulder and smile, but he avoided her questioning eyes.

At last even their friends noticed with sadness that something was wrong with him. They asked if he was sick. He said: Maybe!

But the truth lay deeper. He had begun longing...longing like the enchanted person in the mountain, who has had a dream about the church bells ringing down in his village.

Sometimes when he had sat alone in his thoughts and let his gaze wander over the high, naked mountain peaks where his foot could no longer tread—sometimes, then, a longing awakened in him to rest once more in the shade of his fatherland's great forests, to stretch his legs in a luscious field of clover and hear the rush of the breeze through a billowing field of grain...or to lie motionless up on a green hillock, with his hand under the back of his neck on the sun-warmed earth, and feel the wind stroking his hair, to look out over the marshes with red-legged

storks and brindled cattle, over the thatch-roofed villages and dusty white roads, where knitting women walked with milkpails on their heads and harvesters strode along with their shiny scythes on their shoulders.

And then, when he had happened to think about his mother, his poor, fragile mother—the desire had welled up in him to pay a visit to her grave and plant a flower there as a sign of his filial love, and as a little prayer to ask forgiveness for all the sorrow and worry with which he had filled her frail little heart ever since his birth.

Maybe there would also be an old friend or two still around who might be rather glad to see him again, and he could tell them about all his remarkable adventures up here at the North Pole...Peter Brammer, Christofer Birch, Anton Hansen, whatever their names were! Think how astonished they would be when one fine day he walked in their door and said: Who am I? Don't you remember "the Bear"? Well, here he is!...

During the next winter Rebecca died, and he could no longer fight against his homesickness. At the first summer mail pickup, he wrote home to the Cabinet Minister, and the following year he was standing with the new appointment in his hand. There was a wailing and a sorrow among all the small, slant-eyed fur-bundles in the little colony, when they found out that their old friend and father wanted to leave them, and Thorkild himself regretted what he had done the moment he saw that it had borne fruit. But now it was too late. He made arrangements for his children to stay put temporarily. Not until the following summer, when he had gotten himself settled in his new home, were they to follow him.

— —And that is the way it happened that "the Bear," one day in the late summer, tumbled down like a heaven-sent terror upon the peacefully dozing congregation of Søby and Sorvad.

It is said that the Bishop nearly had one of his apoplectic fits on the day when he saw him striding through his doorway in his greasy pea jacket, with his beard hanging down like icicles over his broad chest. By an unfortunate coincidence, the punctilious little Bishop turned out to be none other than that Christofer Birch, Thorkild Müller's old tavernmate and school chum, the one whose image had most often been called to mind during the last period of his service abroad. So when Thorkild recognized him, he clapped his mighty palms together and let out a roar of happiness: "Well *now* I guess I got my britches full!...Is it really you, you old bum, that they made a bishop?!"

It is not reported what transpired during the rest of this audience, but both the Bishop and Rural Dean soon agreed that Müller was a total disaster. They immediately began to take steps to cover up the unfortunate mistake in one way or another and to get him removed before he could cause some major public scandal.

Meanwhile, the rumor of the newly-arrived "Polar Bear" had spread quickly over the whole district. Around in the various parsonages the story was told how the first time he came striding through the village with his dogskin cap and his great pikestaff he had frightened women and children so much that they fled into their houses, and how an old man had been frightened half out of his wits, because Thorkild suddenly stopped in front of him and had put his heavy hand on his shoulder and said:

"Here you see before you, my pale friend, an old Polar seafarer and bear hunter, who has seen and known things, old man, that neither you nor anybody else here has even dreamed of...So get ahold of yourself! There's nothing to shake in your camiks about. We two are going to get along just fine, I can tell by your honest face!"

Thorkild Müller certainly noticed the terror he caused around him, but in his naïveté he regarded it as an expression of veneration, a natural respect for a man who had lived such a long and strange life so far from his home country. He had forgotten what he had gone through here in his childhood, and after forty years' absence he had become much too used to being praised for his personal gifts to understand now that here at home there was not going to be any admiration or envy of his powerful figure, his fortitude and his splendid beard. Instead of reproaching himself about his "impossible" nature, as he had as a youth, he sauntered around cheerfully and self-confidently, paying visits right away to all the surrounding parsonages in the hope of meeting old comrades. At every secular and religious gathering where there were large numbers of people, he placed himself boldly—perhaps even with a touch of vanity—in the most prominent seats, letting his scholarly failings and his blueish nose be observed with a lack of embarrassment that even got the schoolteachers upset.

Finally there was hardly a day that passed without one rumor or another that caused his brethren of the cloth to blush with shame for the sake of their calling. There was the time he had been invited to a large country wedding as the parish pastor, and for some reason had suddenly rolled up his pants, to show his calf muscles. And after that he had lifted the bride up to the ceiling with one outstretched arm, looking around with a triumphant glance, as if daring the young men to do the same trick. The schoolmaster of the village—a wizened little patriarch—had on this occasion even plucked up his courage and pointed out to him the impropriety of such behavior. But in his heedlessness Thorkild Müller had countered by turning the fellow around in a complete cartwheel, whereupon a large number of small cakes, cigars, sugarcubes, etc., which the schoolmaster had acquired during the course of the evening

and hidden in his voluminous back pockets, spilled out on the floor—at least that time, it all ended with the laughter on the side of the pastor.

His desperate colleagues exchanged letter after letter, trying to agree on a way to deal with him collectively. And when on one occasion at a clerical conference, after the end of the discussion, his fearsome face suddenly appeared at the speaker's podium, and he began to tell about his adventures in Greenland—in such language and such a tone that the chairman quickly had to demand that he step down—the unanimous decision was made to employ serious and powerful measures to put an end to the scandal once and for all.

In the meantime, the unfortunate thing was that Thorkild Müller's parishioners had begun rather to like him. After the first fearful shock had passed, they noticed that within his remarkable hulk and astonishing manner there was a man who understood them, in a way that they were not accustomed to being understood by their pastors—a man who was actually no stranger to the same feelings that stirred within themselves, and a man to whom they could turn with their small problems or their great sorrows, as if he were one of their kind. He could join them in their livingrooms as an equal, he could sit down at their dinnertable and partake of their ordinary meals, have a glass of schnapps with them without embarrassment, and find himself along with a few others in a room without immediately feeling the need to launch into a lecture or a sermon. He refused to fill sick or dying people with biblical passages and bombastic explanations, but sat quietly down on the edge of their beds and spoke plainly and restfully to them; he read a bit out of the New Testament or a couple of psalm verses and then simply tried the best he could to soften their pain and make their spirits light and confident.

"Don't let your spirits down," he would say. "Now, you haven't done anything so very bad, have you? And even if you have, I'm sure you regret it now. Our Lord isn't such an old grump, sitting up there and calculating down to the last decimal point on the ledger. You'll see—he's actually a decent fellow, and he'll make you feel right at home."

Not even Thorkild Müller's bitterest enemies could deny that a certain vitality and animation had actually been infused into Søby Parish's deadened masses, which had previously been utterly notorious among non-tenured pastors on account of their lack of interest in anything that lay beyond their secular interests. These parishioners, who until now had thought that they could ensure their salvation by paying the tithe to their pastor on schedule and by bringing their church-offerings to the three most important church festivals, these same people began coming in ever-growing crowds, streaming into churches that previously had often been closed several Sundays in a row because of poor

attendance. Now when Thorkild Müller climbed into the pulpit with his beard billowing down over his seldom spotless ruff and got going in his own jovial way: "Good morning, my friends! Well, so now we're all here again!...What time has it gotten to? Anybody here have a watch?...Ten-thirty!...Well! All right, the thing was that I was supposed to tell you something today about that time when Jesus came to visit that widow—what was her name, now?—well, what's the difference anyway?...On the other hand, wait a second!—let me check in the Book; it might be fun anyway to know what the lady's name was,"— —then the many well-nourished faces looked wide-awake, ears were pricked up, not a sentence was missed. Sometimes in the course of the discourse he could be so funny that the whole church floor rang with peals of laughter; but at other times, particularly in the long prayers with which his short sermons were often ended, he could be gripped by such emotion that his listeners were moved as well, and handkerchiefs were pulled out and dampened on the men's side of the aisle as much as on the women's.

Gradually people began pouring into his churches even from other parishes, as they began to acquire a taste for this kind of service—and then the bitterness of his colleagues knew no bounds. Even a Grundtvigian pastor from nearby, who had cultivated a jovial image and had initially risen to his defense, began to realize now what a dangerous person he was, and how necessary it was, for the sake of the profession, to have him removed.

It was at this time that the parish was blessed with the addition of that venerable object that bore the name N. P. Ryegaard.

The cause of this blessing was an injunction, worded in the friendliest of terms by the small, diplomatic Bishop, who had his own reasons not to be too heavy-handed against an old comrade who had had occasion to know the ins and outs of his own youthful dissipations. "Due to the unusually large dimensions of the parish, and the Reverend's advanced age"—was the sympathetic wording on paper, while the Bishop in his private musings and with full cognizance of Mr. Ryegaard's particular qualities thought confidently to himself: Fight fire with fire!

Thorkild Müller chewed on the long letter, with all of its careful circumlocutions and obscure formulations, for a good while. For some time now he had already figured out that his dear colleagues' embarrassment over him was not based solely on their deference for his muscular body; and as soon as his understanding had brought him to that point, memories from his youth had quickly opened his eyes to other matters. Now—as he read the Bishop's injunction—he finally understood how things stood.

"Stuff it in liverfat!" he exclaimed with a Greenlandic oath, and banged his fist down on the table. "It's an ambush!"

But when the "ambush" later arrived, and Thorkild saw the pale, bespectacled little individual for the first time, creeping out of his footwarmers and jacket and presenting himself as his curate, his anger was quickly dissipated. This one was worth a good guffaw. That they should sic such a limpwimp of a person on him seemed so completely comical that he had to go out into the village at once and tell his friends about his "formidable" executioner.—

Meanwhile the "ambush" himself, undismayed, fixed up his quarters and started unpacking the wagonload of chests and suitcases that he had brought with him. He hung new flowered curtains on the windows all by himself. He set up his twenty-three well-polished pipes in a double row on the wall and a plastercast of Christ above his desk. In one corner he hid the supply of tobacco that he had brought (two whole casks of a pipe blend and three boxes of the cheapest cigars), and over his bed he tacked up a luminescent cross with a religious inscription. It was with particular pride that he lingered over the arrangement of his "library," which consisted of a collection of old, useless volumes that he had paid for by weight at a second-hand bookseller's, in order to have something to fill his bookcases. When he had carefully arranged them on the shelves so that they were not too close together, they covered almost a whole wall, just as it looked in the Bishop's own study.

Altogether, he lacked nothing to fit out his room: he had a green shade to hang over his study lamp, a bundle of pipe-lighter sticks, a wax taper and a brand new bar of sealing-wax. And he had even managed to bring along a spittoon and a little cloth runner to put under the water jar.

When everything was finally in place, he wrapped his gray dressing gown around himself with a gesture like a bat folding its wings, seated himself on a chair in the middle of the floor, and let his scrutinizing gaze slowly wander around the room with a contented smile that clearly showed that he was nearing the realization of a long-nourished dream, concluding a long and difficult journey, the successful completion of which he had hardly dared to believe possible.

Curate Ryegaard had once borne the modest name Niels Peder Madsen, the son of a well-to-do farmer from the fertile East Jutland district, where the children—as the saying goes—are born with a silver shilling in their hand. At the age of fifteen, he was sent to the city's grammar school, and here he had performed the initial modification of his name by adding the local designation, "Ryegaard." Later he had allowed it to undergo a switching procedure, from "Ryegaard-Madsen"

to "Madsen-Ryegaard," until he had finally gotten rid of the lower-class "Madsen"-part entirely, so that he emerged as a pure "Ryegaard."

A similar transformation occurred simultaneously with his personal appearance. The ruddy-cheeked, squarely built son of peasant stock had gradually become pale and fat. His large, round head had sunken deeper down between his shoulders, and his colorless eyes stared with a nearsighted, ferret-like expression. As he sat there wrapped up in his gray dressing gown with his whitish-blond, rather closely shorn hair, his large, round glasses, his flat nose and totally bloodless skin, he bore a resemblance to a maggot, quite like one of those pale, furtive, worm-like creatures that turn up wherever something begins to rot, and which—when observed through a microscope—seem to stare back with a pair of huge, stupid, voracious, protuberant eyes.—

While nothing had been indicated specifically to Curate Ryegaard by persons higher up in the system, he had had a completely unambivalent and correct conception of what his task in the parish consisted of for the moment, and of what was expected of him. He perceived that an excellent opportunity presented itself here for him to win the favor of his reverend superiors—and, of course, to work for the furtherment of the Church and its reputation as well. In the beginning, he had been clever enough, however, to proceed with the greatest caution in the face of a congregation that had already sunk so far into delusion. He began his mission in the most modest way, introducing himself to the richer parishioners as Pastor Müller's fellow servant and true friend. Only a little later did he try—but always in private conversation and using the most cautious means of expression—to awaken doubt about the Pastor's mental faculties.

"Dear me—our dear Pastor Müller!" he would sigh in a melancholy way, in the broad dialect that had stayed with him as an imperishable memento of his farm heritage. "If only he would allow himself a little rest now and then, to have a little peace! In spite of his many wonderful traits—and nobody values those more than I do—there can hardly be any doubt now that signs of a most distressing weakness of his spiritual faculties is beginning to show itself. Well—everything is in the hands of the Lord! Perhaps it is nothing more than just a temporary lapse!"

But even with all of his crafty peasant tactics, he had gotten nowhere. Not only had all the commotion that Thorkild Müller caused in ever widening circles *not* had any cooling effect on his parishioners, on the contrary—the more opposition and attention he attracted, the more it caused them to support the Pastor with still greater pride. The curate finally became furious. He had thought he could win a quick and

easy victory over this ignorant Greenlander, who—he knew it as a fact!—still could not repeat his three articles of faith without a mistake. But the farmers in the parish had stopped up their ears when he began to parade his university erudition in front of them, and they showed no signs whatsoever of being impressed by his large collection of books. In the end they were close to being infected by Müller's example and began to treat the curate in a condescending way and make him the butt of their jokes. They often referred to him as "Madsen," just to needle him—and on one occasion, in the presence of Pastor Müller, a young man had shouted at him when he entered the room:

"Well if it isn't Mr. Curate Madsen-Ryebread!" This stupid witticism had made everyone laugh, and Pastor Müller had let out a peal of laughter that reverberated against the ceiling, and after that had made it his pleasurable habit to introduce him formally on all occasions in the following manner: "My Reverend Superior—Mr. Bishop Madsen-Ryebread!"

But the hour of vengeance was soon to strike. That dark winter night, when Thorkild Müller—defying snow squalls and storm winds, accompanied only by his dogs—trudged off through the winter wilderness in order to arrive in time to administer the sacrament to a sick old man, he poured the drop into the cup of indignation that made it overflow.

The old man who lay dying that night had lived a life that was far from exemplary. Among other things, he had never set foot in a church, since he—as he put it—"never had the right duds for it." Now he had sent for the Pastor in order to get just a bit of a foretaste of the afterlife he was about to enter into; and Müller seated himself by his bedside and began in his usual way to tell about what he thought he knew about these things, according to the Bible.

When he was through, the man lay there for a moment and pondered. Then he said: "Well but—don't we get grub or liquor up there?"

Müller had to answer in the negative.

"But ain't there no womanfolks or sweethearts, you say?"

No—there wasn't any marrying up there.

"Don't you even get a dang bit of chaw tobacco?"

But when Pastor Müller also had to deny this, the old man turned his head toward the wall, as if to indicate that that was one Heaven he didn't care to have anything to do with.

Müller, who saw his gesture and understood its meaning, suddenly grew thoughtful. After staring for awhile at the floor, he raised his head with a determined expression and said that all that was a bunch of twaddle, what he had told him, because in Heaven everybody got to do

anything they wanted. And to make his idea completely understandable to the old man, he embroidered on this a bit, and told him how folks generally just had to express their wishes up in Heaven in order to have them fulfilled. If he felt any hunger up there, the angels were going to set the table for him right away with the nicest things to eat, and he could just choose what he wanted. If he hankered for a woman, he wouldn't have to suffer in silence about that either—and well, even if he really felt he needed his chewing tobacco, why, the Good Lord himself would happily hand him a plug, because He wouldn't think of saying no to His dear children who had died in the faith in Him as their sweet Father. The Lord just wanted everybody up there to make themselves right at home.

When he had heard this clarification, the man turned back toward Thorkild, satisfied and calm. He folded his wrinkled hands, accepted the sacrament and shortly afterward passed away in the faith of the Lord.

However, when this story became known, a howl of indignation was heard in all the surrounding parsonages and parish clerk's abodes. To characterize Our Lord as a common tavernkeeper and the Home of Souls as a grimy public house—this time he had gone too far! The Rural Dean went straight to his desk and penned a confidential letter to the Bishop detailing what had occurred. He ended with the comment that from now on the only valid conclusion to be drawn—which (it was noted in parentheses) was not an uncommon one either within nor outside the parish—was that Pastor Müller's spiritual faculties not only were attenuated, but that he would have to be said to suffer from an advanced stage of spiritual disorder.

Upon receipt of this epistle, the Bishop banged his knuckles impatiently on the desk and made his long-awaited decision: he announced via the Dean that he was coming to visit the parish himself.

IV

Even before the churchbells started ringing, the little church was completely packed with people. Every inch of space—right up to the two rows of caned chairs and the high-backed wicker chair in the choir that were reserved for the Bishop and his retinue—was occupied by a solemn and formally dressed congregation, who in their apprehension and excitement waited to see what the day would bring. Some sat round-shouldered in embarrassment and stared down at their hands folded in their laps, as if they were quietly searching their consciences, and it was generally noticed that a number of Thorkild Müller's closest friends had not come at all.

This visitation by the Bishop had also been staged by the superior authorities of the Church in a way that clearly was designed to frighten the general population. Curate Ryegaard and the schoolteachers of the parish had been sneaking around with grave and secretive expressions, as if something awful were about to occur. Word went around that not only would there be a thorough investigation of the schools in the parish, the church buildings, the cemetery and every aspect pertaining to church and school activity; the Bishop had, in addition, demanded that the last five classes of the parish confirmation candidates be presented on the church floor, so that he could personally test their knowledge of the catechism.

Now for that matter, Thorkild Müller had not been resting on his laurels either. He understood very well what all these preparations were for, and he had said to his friends: "Well, if they want war, they'll get war!" For some time now, he had had the desire—exasperated by the constant pettiness of his neighboring pastors—to rear up on his back paws, like a real bear will do when the barking dogs are getting too close, inspiring a bit of respect by grabbing one of those mongrels by the ears and roughing it up. On his long, lonely treks through the greening countryside, whose soft, sleepy, mist-veiled nature was like a picture of his own youth's inactive, wasted dream-life, he had still grappled with daring plans to start a general uprising among the people, to break the tyranny of his reverend superiors. At times he could actually snort with fighting spirit. In his imagination, crowds of tiny, ill-tempered clerical types shouted up at him with threatening gestures. And as he saw in his fantasy the whole black-clad, ruff-collared troop assemble themselves,

rank upon rank, with their velvet-stomached Bishops on the flanks, he began to get that same wild glint in his eyes, the same flush on his cheeks as he had had in the old days during the hot chases of the reindeer on the high plains up under the inland glaciers.

The report of the arrival of the Bishop, which was understood—by him as by everyone else—as an omen of his impending defrocking, had removed the last particle of his level-headedness. Without otherwise being particularly clear about his objectives, he now wanted to preach revolution, to plant the banner of revolt in the Danish church community. Or as he said to his friends, with his ringing laughter: "The Holy Reverends are going to get a chance to see what happens when they let a bear into their sheep-pen!"

Quite without noticing the nervousness that the rumor about the arrival of the Bishop had awakened in his previously so confident congregation, he had already met his colleagues' challenge by making a number of personal preparations of long-range significance. Among other things, he had announced at the latest parish meeting that all tithes and offerings, fees, and so on, accruing to his person would in the future no longer be collected. He maintained, namely, that the free usage of the resources of the parsonage constituted plenty of compensation for the work that a pastor did. Furthermore, the continual taxation of the populace at weddings, baptisms and confirmation ceremonies served no purpose but to undermine the relationship between the pastor and his flock.

Unfortunately, it was precisely this unusual generosity that took a fateful turn for him during the skirmishes of those days against Curate Ryegaard's suddenly increasing influence in the congregation. Suspicions regarding Thorkild's mental stability, which that servant of the Lord had previously tried in vain to inveigle into the minds of the populace, finally had their effect. That a pastor refused to accept tithes and offerings—money that he had a lawful right to—that, as any fool could understand, had to be the idea of a madman!

From that day onward, there was a general, careful retreat from Thorkild. And when he noticed that his friends began to desert him, he turned on them with a violence that only made a bad situation worse. At a single stroke, everyone suddenly came to the realization that they had a crazy pastor.

During the last two weeks he had raged around the villages like a wild beast, now with threats, now with persuasion, trying to raise his sunken reputation. But wherever he appeared, he had either found the farm gates locked, or the men had slipped away and hidden themselves in the stables to avoid talking to him, while they let the women entertain him in the front room and wheedle and cajole him until he went away.

At a few places they even panicked and turned the dogs loose on him, when he came up to the door with his pikestaff and his spattered, muddied clothes, his unkempt hair and his beard sticking out at a rakish angle from a face that was pale and distorted by his agitation. When he left, they had carefully polished the door handle with tripoli—after all, the sweat of a crazy man could cause liver disease.

Right up to the preceding evening he had invited his friends to a meeting at the parsonage, but no one had come. And that is why everyone was sitting in church now, waiting with fear and trembling about what the hour would bring. That is why there were all those round-shouldered figures in there, sitting in their pews, staring down at their folded hands in their laps. It was as if these repentant people wanted to free themselves from the slightest connection to the man who was going to be judged today.

The pastors from the district began to arrive. Wearing spotless white ruffs, they took their positions on the two rows of wicker chairs in the chancel, and from this vantage point they cast severe glances out over the lost congregation. Up in the little room behind the altar, Curate Ryegaard walked back and forth with his hands behind his back, talking aloud to himself in his excitement. He positively glowed with triumph and expectation. He saw his future unfold before him in a deep and radiant perspective, leading all the way to the Castle Church in Copenhagen, where he—the country boy, the despised peasant scholar who had been nothing but a laughingstock—would step forward before the altar adorned in bishop's vestments, his chasuble of golden brocade and the cross of the Commander of the Order of the Dannebrog, second grade, on his chest. His heart was full of gratitude, his eyes moist with pious tears.

Outside the churchyard gate, the schoolteachers of the parish stood in their black formal dress with white ties, ready to signal the sexton and to notify the pastors the minute the Deacon's coach—with which the Bishop was to be transported—showed itself over the crest of the hill. The Bishop had announced his arrival to be at precisely ten o'clock, at which time the church service was to begin. Later in the day there would be the school inspection, and after that he would start on his homeward journey, together with the Deacon, before evening.

But there was still no sign of Thorkild Müller.

"That's all we need!" said the withered little school-teacher, the one that Thorkild had turned upside-down at the farmer's wedding, and who since that time had pursued him with teeth-gnashing hate. "Just think, if he makes the Bishop wait! That would be just like him, that—

er—blackguard—to say it straight out. I guess you heard what he planned to serve us at the pastors' dinner today—if the Bishop hadn't refused to have any food served at all. 'Yellow peas and bacon! What did they ever give me??'...Can you imagine such mockery and insubordination?!...That—um—dung peasant!"

His colleague, Fatso Mortensen, grunted in agreement.

"Think of the impertinence!" continued the other with a voice that cracked with bitterness. "Now it's two minutes to ten, and we haven't seen hide nor hair of him! Just wait, Mortensen—he wants to cause a scandal. He won't be satisfied until he's made a rumpus in the church itself. They said he was completely crazy last night at home. The Curate told me he had heard him all night long, rummaging around in the room below. It was awful! You'd better believe, he's got some trick up his sleeve! He'll never stop until— —But, Lord help us! Mortensen...there's the carriage!...Jacob! Ring the bells! Ring—damn it!— —"

The bells began to toll, the little parish clerk rushed into the church, and soon after, all the pastors bustled out, looking confused and bewildered. What was to be done? Pastor Müller wasn't even here yet! It was unbelievable! Somebody had to be sent to get him immediately— —

At that moment the carriage pulled up to the churchyard gate..

The Bishop was a thin little man with a wise, sharply defined profile and elegant manners. He nodded silently around him, a bit coolly, at the assembled pastors, then looked around and said in a surprised voice: "Is Pastor Müller not here?"

Now Curate Ryegaard came creeping forward out of the clump of pastors, his colorless eyes veritably bulging out over his spectacles in his humble zeal to be of service. He reported that Mr. Pastor Müller unfortunately had not as yet made his presence known, but that someone would be sent to fetch him on the spot.

The Bishop looked at him with an icy expression that could not be mistaken for affection.

"I shall not ask you to bother. Pastor Müller knows that the Lord's service is set to begin at ten o'clock. There is still one minute left...Let us go in."

At that moment his glance fell upon the corpulent schoolteacher, Mortensen, who had been parading back and forth at the church door—quite pale and out of breath from the exertion that all the unaccustomed standing about had caused him.

The Bishop, after having eyed him a bit, asked in a sharp voice:

"What is your name?"

Mortensen, in his consternation, got his own name jumbled up in his throat, so the other parish clerk, who was standing beside him in

deep reverence, with his top hat pressed against his stomach, finally thought it best to answer for him. The Bishop turned his piercing eyes quickly to the clerk and said, in a tone that was even less friendly:

"Can't the man be allowed to answer for himself? So what is *your* name?"

"Mikkelsen!"

"Really," said the Bishop with a contemptuous emphasis. Then he disappeared into the church, followed by his white-collared flock.

Mikkelsen and Mortensen looked questioningly at each other and then straight ahead with an astonished expression.

"What did he mean by that?"

"Damned if I know."

"What did he say, actually?"

"What, did he *say* something?"

"Guess not."

"That was *peculiar*."

* * *

There arose among the tightly-packed crowd in the church a mighty stir of emotion, when the little Bishop in his silken vestments, with the Cross of the Commander of the Order of the Dannebrog hanging around his neck, stepped into the chancel and—after throwing a hasty scrutinizing glance out over the congregation—arranged himself in the high-backed cane chair. The pastors seated themselves silently in the wicker chairs behind him, and for a moment it was so quiet in the church that the last reverberations of the bell up in the belfry could be heard.

Then even the bell was silent.

The little schoolteacher stuck his head out of his cubicle and looked questioningly over to Curate Ryegaard. The latter looked over at the Dean, and he in turn looked at the Bishop. The Bishop, however, sat quite impervious, with his hands folded in his silken lap, staring stiffly out into space.

It was not until this moment that the rest of the people in the church realized that Thorkild Müller still had not arrived, and that it was he upon whom everyone was waiting.

There was panic in the air. Could that man really mean to make a fool of the Bishop? That, God knows, would be carrying the joke a bit too far!...Everyone's eyes were turned again to the Bishop. From every corner in the church people stretched their necks and raised themselves up on their toes, trying to get a look at the progressively darker and more inscrutable expression on his thin face.

Finally he stuck his hand into the inside of his vestment, drew forth a golden watch, and made a gesture in the direction of Curate Ryegaard, who stood ready to pounce at the side of the altar. The Curate relayed the gesture to the parish clerk, who then stepped forward and began the service.

They all bowed their heads. The prayer was held, and the psalm was begun. But at each verse the tension increased in the congregation, because Thorkild Müller still did not make his appearance, and the position before the altar was still empty. From down on the church floor people could observe that Curate Ryegaard, via the Dean, carried on negotiations about all this. But the Bishop just shook his head, and the parsons looked at each other with a questioning glance.

When the psalm was finished, they waited a little while longer. The silence was again so profound in the whole church, that when a man in one of the rearmost pews dropped his psalmbook on the floor, a great gasp went through the congregation. Suddenly the Bishop stood up from his chair and went forward to the altar, took his handkerchief out, wiped his mouth, then turned toward the assembly and began the altar service.

But this thrilled the congregation, so that many got tears in their eyes. When his well-modulated, beautiful voice sounded forth over their heads, they were gripped by a special solemnity, a feeling of security and peace that they had not felt for a long time. It was as if sweet angels once again found their home here beneath the echoing vaults, after having been frightened off by Thorkild Müller with his frightful bass voice.

When the altar service was ended, a second psalm was sung. It was a psalm with many long verses, but there was hardly a person in the church who could keep their thoughts on the text any longer. It was whispered that someone had now been sent to get Müller. But the psalm came and went without his appearance.

Suddenly there was a commotion over where the pastors were sitting. The Dean got up and nodded to the parish clerk, who jumped to his feet and darted out. Shortly after that they heard the door being opened up to the pulpit and the steps creak beneath footsteps...Finally!—Now he was there!...

But when, instead of seeing Thorkild Müller's savage head pop up over the pulpit desk, they saw Curate Ryegaard's maggot-pale face, people suspected that something decisive had happened, and a quiet shudder went through the congregation.

It was not until the service was over and the people streamed out of the church that they learned the truth of the matter. "The Polar Bear" had already departed during the night. All he had taken along were his

dogs and his oaken spear. They found his farewell greeting in the words written in chalk on his door:

You have the tyrants that
you deserve.

In Søby and Sorvad Parish nothing has ever been heard of Thorkild Müller from that day onward. All they learned was that he had gone back to Greenland.

He may still be there.

NOTES

1 *KajaK*, "canoe" (Peacock's Dictionary), of the Inuit type, for a single person.

2 "the hood on a woman's *attigêK* [parka]" (Peacock).

3 *iglo* [Rink 1877 spells it *igdlo*, "house"; a winter dwelling of mostly stone and turf or earth [as described by Pontoppidan] (Peacock); the snow house we commonly refer to as "igloo" is glossed by Peacock as *iglovigaK*.

4 "the sun" (Peacock).

5 "*umiaK*, "open skin boat" [Rink 1877]; *umiavik*, "the old Eskimo skin boat" [for larger numbers of people] (Peacock).

6 "a native dance; the word itself means 'three'" (Peacock).

7 "fish heads"; angmagssaK [Rink 1877] is "Capelin," a small fish used for food and as bait. Accdording to Rink 1857, it is found in greatest quantity in southern Greenland, but also makes its way up the western coast as far as Disco Bay. (Not in Peacock.)

8 *kilerteK*, as noted in Fenger 1971, 18 (not in Peacock). Pontoppidan does not use the Inuit word.

9 sealskin top boots, although the word means "shoe" in general. (Not in Peacock.)

10 "Pastor!...Hey!" *Palasé* is the Inuit pronunciation of Dan. "præst" ("Pastor," known since the time of the first Greenland pastor, Hans Egede.)(Not in Peacock.)

11 *ôtoK*, "a basking seal" (Peacock 1974).

12 *annorâK*, "a [native Greenlandic cloak or] dress, clothing" (Peacock).

AFTERWORD

There has been a real need, in our modern Scandinavian literature classes, for an exuberant story with no battle of the sexes, no lengthy accounts of awful diseases, no "depressing realism." *The Polar Bear* was chosen partially as an answer to a common student reaction of the type: "do the Scandinavians *always* get depressed or divorce or commit suicide in their stories?" The answer, as far as this novella goes, is certainly no; but that does not mean that our story is simplistic, or that it lacks depth or "debate." The choice also has the advantage of bringing to students' attention the name of an outstanding but less-known Danish author, Henrik Pontoppidan, who, despite winning a shared Nobel Prize for literature in 1917, has not remained within our American-Scandinavian teaching "canon." He needs to be reinstated, along with a number of other Scandinavian writers of both sexes who have been brushed aside by the great Ibsen/Strindberg steamroller and the restrictive policies of some of the larger publishing houses.

Henrik Pontoppidan (1857–1943) came from a formidable old family of men of the cloth and of letters. Among his prominent ancestors could be named Bishop Erik Pontoppidan the Elder, who published the oldest Danish grammar (1643). Henrik's father, Dines Pontoppidan, was also a Pastor, and Henrik, who was born in Fredericia on the Jutland peninsula, grew up in a pastor's residence in Randers with fifteen brothers and sisters. He followed a normal bourgeois educational course through the completion of Latin School, but had decided by that time to become a civil engineer rather than a pastor, and chose to enroll in the Polytechnical College in Copenhagen. He completed the first part of his exam, but his interest in engineering cooled as well, and by the time he was ready for the final exam in 1879, he had decided to become a writer, and he never finished his engineering degree.

Part of his change of heart may be traced to his desire for adventure. He had applied to the Commission for Geographic and Geological Studies in Greenland for an internship to travel to Julianehaab, Greenland, in 1876. They ultimately picked another candidate, but Pontoppidan had, by that time, enthusiastically devoured the work of the Greenland geographer and anthropologist, Hinrich Rink, in preparation for his possible trip (Ahnlund, 188f.). In his autobiographical book, *Hamskifte* ("The Shape-Changer," 1936), he recalled sitting and poring over his

studies night after night, shocking his landlady when she found him at his desk one morning, still reading (cf. Woel I, 59). Pontoppidan had completely assimilated Rink's rhapsodic but well-researched work by the time he made his decision to write *The Polar Bear*, and it is uncertain that participation in one geological expedition would have made the short novel more effective in terms of its description of the frigid geographical area and its inhabitants. What the story mirrors as well is a sense of the young writer's longing to break with the confining atmosphere of his Lutheran home and to experience a starkly different landscape than the gentle rolling hillsides of Denmark.

The kernel of the tale of the Greenland pastor (although perhaps not its boisterous mood and pointed satire) came from Pontoppidan's father, during what has been described as a rare evening of jocular storytelling in the serious and proper home. Dines Pontoppidan had been visited by an old student comrade who had spent years in Greenland and had strange tales to tell of his time there (Ahnlund, 353). This childhood memory, together with our author's later fame in his own country, has caused several Danish researchers to try to find the "real" person behind the figure of Pastor Thorkild Müller (cf. Ahnlund, 47). It is probably a futile exercise, since the most memorable aspects of the tale certainly emanate from the writer's vivid imagination. Indeed, the "portrait" that Pontoppidan created of the peculiar pastor with his "rump-cooler" and his narwhale tusk has even been chided for its exaggeration of the truth, which some critics have felt undermined the sober intentions expected of authors during that serious and realistically inclined period of Scandinavian literature of the 1880's...which is a bit like saying that the trouble with Mark Twain's *Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* is that it didn't really happen. The truth of Pontoppidan's story actually lies on a different plane than that of biographical exactitude.

From our vantage point at the beginning of the 21st century, 1871 still stands as the inauguration of the great "Scandinavian breakthrough" in Western European literature. The critic Georg Brandes' dictum at that time that for a literature to be alive it must "present problems for debate" exerted a powerful impact on the writing of the already established Ibsen and on the young and fiery Strindberg, as well as on numerous other Scandinavian authors of the time. Henrik Pontoppidan was well aware of the proclamations about the "death" of Romanticism and the necessity for "debate." His upbringing in the Danish Lutheran Church and his subsequent scientific study had also prepared him for a nuanced debating position regarding the conflict between traditional religious views and the new Darwinist theories. But he never became an outspoken follower of Brandes. Pontoppidan did consider literature to have a mission,

as is implied in his later epithet for himself as a "common soldier in the struggle for the liberation of the human spirit," (*Undervejs til mig selv*, "On the Road to Myself,"1943, cf. Skjærbek, 37). But he avoided the trap of creating simplistic or artificial opponents, and he often carved out a controversial position within his stories by testing or having his characters exemplify the "politically incorrect" as well as the "politically correct" point of view.

Pastor Müller is an excellent representative of a "politically incorrect" position in the system, and much of what makes the book so amusing is the hero's initial lack of apparent talent in being an example of anything at all. It is only the absurd bureaucratic need to have a Danish mission in Greenland at any cost—no matter how ridiculous the candidate—that prods him into opposition, and even then, he is anything but an exemplary radical. But life gradually educates us with other means than books (Pontoppidan would seem to remind us), and by the time the "Bear" returns to Denmark, he has acquired a confidence in his "politically incorrect" position that can shake up not only his parishioners, but even the Establishment itself.

At this point in the tale, Pontoppidan serves up a sort of Danish intellectual in-joke that his contemporaries (not least those higher-ups among the clergy of that time) probably found infuriating. The Bishop who must pass judgement upon the recalcitrant pastor bears resemblance to the mid-century Bishop of Copenhagen, H. L. Martensen (Andersen, 48). The battle over the hearts and minds of the pastor's congregation—whether or not to adhere to the Lutheran State Church in all its finery and its corrupt but buttery style, or listen to straight talk from a man who speaks with little authority but with a genuine concern for the individual parishioner and a distaste for the system of tithes or gratuities for churchmen's services—resonates in a most peculiar and humorous way with Søren Kierkegaard's attack on the Lutheran Church. Denmark's greatest philosopher, in the last year of his life (1855), had railed against the same Establishment and the same Bishop Martensen, and for a number of the same reasons.

Another dialectical dimension that Pontoppidan opens up lies in the arena of the "post-colonial." Unlike most other possessions that accrued to the old Danish Monarchy, Greenland was treated both as an exploitable resource (whale oil and skins) and as a rare opportunity for converting illiterate heathens (the Inuit) to Christianity. Starting in the 1720's with the daring but often misguided mission of Hans Egede, the Danish Ministries encouraged (or, as we hear in our story, even forced) a number of clergymen to pit their lives against the snow and freezing temperatures, for the glory of Denmark and Lutheranism. Like a frosty

and boisterous counterpart to Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," our narrator chronicles a fictional journey into the realm of the "Other" and the changes that are wrought there (cf. Said, esp. pp. 22–30, 60–69). By contrast to the development in Conrad's story, Pontoppidan sketches out an "educational" sequence in the production of a revolutionary spirit. His protagonist is "othered" from the moment he is born; but only when grounded in the hard school of Inuit life does he discover who he is—and only when he brings his knowledge of "Otherness" home to Denmark does he learn where and with whom he belongs. Those critics who find the story ultimately "pessimistic" and see Thorkild Müller's life in defeatist terms (so, for example, Ahnlund, 47), have, I think, missed the point. Referring to Thorkild's second voyage to Greenland, our narrator jokes that "He may still be living there." (It has to be a joke, since it refers to the trip of an aged man who, some time in the past, went "home" to Greenland to die.) But in a more abstract sense, the words have could a prophetic ring, as the fictional Pastor's multiracial progeny live on, transforming his message into more modern demands on the Danish Government for local autonomy.

Finally, the dispute between religious faith and religious dogma has its place in the story. It is a comical dispute, but a dispute nonetheless. The story develops into more than that of a hopeless klutz who somehow finds himself in an amusing battle with Church authority. It is within the parameters of the Greenland ice fields and their inhabitants' hunting expeditions that Thorkild Müller unexpectedly finds himself not only a willing participant, but even an effective shepherd for the people he is officially supposed to lead to Christ. At the same time, Pontoppidan makes it clear that the unusual Pastor has a genetic bond to that Viking ancestry for which modern Danes have had both national romantic pride and an uneasy admiration. The oldest kingdom in the world evolved out of great families of pillagers and marauding killers. So is the modern Dane simply a namby-pamby degenerate of the old genetic material? Or does he retain—somewhere beneath that bureaucratic and genteel surface—an inner passion for slaughter and rape? And which alternative is worse? Even the jovial narrator of *The Polar Bear* seems to have difficulty with this particular dispute, and our author, Henrik Pontoppidan himself, seems to take no definitive stand; he just lets his narrator flail with the issue, when the "facts" of the story are to be couched within a moral perspective.

* * *

A NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION:

Translating Pontoppidan into English required a rather liberal addition of punctuation. Some of the more unusual punctuational features in the text, however, belong to Pontoppidan's original text. To emphasize an "oral" narrative style, he frequently uses triple dots ("...") or multiple dashes ("— —") as emphatic pauses. He sometimes even uses the odd combination of a comma *and* triple dots, and I have then taken the liberty to remove the comma. The "pause" symbols, however, especially when found between paragraphs, seem to indicate a larger break in the story itself. A similar break is also indicated by an interposed triple asterisk ("* * *") or—by nothing at all, a bit of empty space between printed lines. I have retained these anomalies. On the other hand, I took the liberty of adjusting the name of Curate Ruggaard, to prepare for a pun that only comes toward the end of the story. For any other oddities in the text, my own failings must bear responsibility. But for help with my early drafts of the story, I am greatly beholden to Faith and Niels Ingwersen, who saved my text from many an additional clumsiness.

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[*Isbjørnen: Et Portræt* was originally published in book form under the designation "Smaa Romaner III" in 1887. When it was republished in 1899 as part of a collection, *Fortællinger I*, it had been reworked, the printer had used a new manuscript (Skjærbek 333), and the designation "Smaa Roman" ("Short Novel") had been dropped. The present translation, from a later printing (1922) of the story, uses this 1899 version of the tale.]

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