

The Bishop of Børglum and his Men

Hans Christian Andersen

We are up in Jutland, near the wild marsh. We can hear the North Sea, hear it tossing about, for it is quite close by. Before us there rises a great sand dune; we have been looking at it for a long while, and we've been, and still are, driving toward it, very slowly, through the deep sand. On the top of this sand dune is an old, rambling building, the Børglum Monastery, the largest wing of which is the church. We arrive there in the late evening, but the air is clear and the night is bright, so we can enjoy an expansive view over meadow and moor as far as the Aalborg Fiord, over field and heath, out over the dark-blue sea.

Now that we are up there, we drive on through barn and shed, then turn through the gates and on into the old castle court, where the linden trees stand in a row along the walls; sheltered from wind and weather, they thrive here, and their leafy branches almost hide the windows.

We climb up the winding stone staircase; we then walk through the long corridors, beneath raftered ceilings. The wind whistles so strangely here, whether outside or inside; one doesn't quite know where the sounds come from. And then one tells stories. Yes, a person tells and sees so many things when he is frightened or wants to frighten others. The old dead monks, one says, glide silently past us and into the church, where the wind rushes through and seems to us to be singing Mass for their souls; this brings strange thoughts to one, thoughts that carry us back into the olden times.

There is a stranded ship on the coast, and the Bishop's men are active there on the beach. While the ocean has spared some of the voyagers, these men spare none; the water will wash away all trace of crimson blood that has flowed from broken skulls. The stranded goods - and there are many - all belong to the Bishop. The waves have washed up the anchor and barrels filled with fine wines for the cellar of the monks, where there is already a full supply of ale and mead; there is also a plenitude of poultry, sausages, and ham in their kitchen, and in the ponds outside are fat bass and delicious carp. The Bishop of Børglum is a man of power; he owns much land and yet he wants to acquire more; all must bow before him, Oluf Glob. A wealthy kinsman of his, at Thy, has just died; the widow will find Oluf Glob neither kin nor kind to her. Her late husband ruled the whole district, with the exception of the church properties; her son is in a foreign land, having been sent away, at his own wish, when no more than a boy, to learn foreign customs. For years no word has come from him; he may be in his grave and may never return home to take over the rule that now his mother must assume.

"What! Shall a woman rule?" says the Bishop. He summons her into the courts, but for what gain? She has broken no law; right and justice are on her side.

Bishop Oluf of Børglum, what are you pondering over? What are you writing on that white parchment? What is it that you now conceal under band and seal and then give to a knight and his servant, who ride off with it, out of the country, far away to the city of the Pope?

The time of the falling leaves, the season of storms and wrecks, is past, and now icy winter comes. Twice it has come with no tidings from abroad, but now finally with its return the knight and his servant ride back from Rome, bearing a papal ban against the widow who dared oppose the pious Bishop.

"A curse upon her and all that is hers! Cast out is she from church and congregation. None shall dare lend her a helping hand; friends and kinfolk alike must shun her as a plague and pestilence! What will not bend must break," said the Bishop.

The people all forsake her; yet she is steadfast in her trust in God, who alone will be her strength and bulwark. Only one servant, an elderly maid, remains faithful to her; together

they guide the plow over fields where the corn flourishes, though the land has been cursed.

"You child of hell, I shall yet carry out my purpose!" says the Bishop of Børglum. "Now I summon you before the tribunal that will condemn you!"

Then the widow harnesses her last two oxen to her carriage, and she and her faithful servant drive away across the heath, out of the land of Denmark. Now she is a stranger among strangers, where a strange tongue is spoken, and where foreign customs prevail, far away, where the green hills rise into mountains, and where the vineyards grow. Traveling peddlers pass her, carefully guarding their loaded wagons, in deadly fear of attack from robber barons. But the two poor women, in their humble cart drawn by the black oxen, may pass in safety along the dangerous roads and through the dense forests. Now they are in France, and they meet a gallant knight followed by twelve men-at-arms. The knight pauses and looks at the strange wagon and then asks the younger of the women what country they have come from and what their journey's destination is. She explains that they are from Thy, in Denmark, tells of her cares and misery, but these all seem to come to an end; our Lord has guided them together - the stranger knight is her son! He holds out his arms and embraces her, and the poor mother weeps, which she has not been able to do for many years, but rather has bitten her lips until blood has come forth.

It is the time of the falling leaves, the season of wrecks. The ocean washes ashore filled wine casks for the Bishop's cellars; in his kitchen the wild venison is roasting; it is pleasant and warm within doors, though winter freezes without. But news is brought; Jens Glob has returned to Thy with his mother. Jens Glob summons the Bishop into court, to demand their lands and rights.

"Much good that will do him!" said the Bishop. "Spare your efforts, Sir Jens!"

Another year passes; again the time of the falling leaves returns, the season of wrecks; icy winter follows, and the white bees swarm about and sting one's face until they melt. It is sharp weather today, say people who have ventured out into it. Jens Glob stands close to his fire, lost in thought; he sings his mantle, burns a hole in it unawares. "I will master you yet, Bishop of Børglum! You are safe from the law, sheltered by the mantle of the Pope, but not safe from Jens Glob!" He writes to his brother-in-law, Sir Oluf Hase of Salling, bidding him meet him Christmas Eve at Mass in Hvidberg Church; the Bishop must leave Børglum and come to Thyland, to read the Mass there; this Jens Glob knows.

Meadow and moorland are buried beneath ice and snow, and across them speeds a cavalcade of horse and riders - the Bishop, his clerks, his squires. They take the short cut among the waving reeds, where the wind sings its melancholy song. Blow your brazen trumpet, you trumpeter dressed in foxskin! It sounds sharply in the clear air! They ride on over heath and moorland, where in the warm summertime Fata Morgana decks her magic bowers; on they ride, to the south, toward Hvidberg Church.

The wind blows *his* trumpet, too, blows it louder and louder, creating a storm, a terrible storm, that continues to grow in force. On, on through the storm, toward the church, they ride. The house of God stands firm, but the storm drives on over field and moorland, over fiord and ocean. The Bishop reaches the church. But Sir Oluf Hase can scarcely do so, however hard he rides. He reaches the opposite side of the fiord with his men, whom Jens Glob has summoned to aid him in calling the Bishop to account. The church is the courthouse; the altar is the counsel table. The candles in the heavy brass candlesticks are all burning. Outside the storm screams out the accusation and the sentence. The wind rushes through the air, over moorland and heath, over the rolling billows; no ferryboat can cross the fiord in such weather.

Oluf Hase is held at Ottesund; he dismisses his men, bids them keep his horse and armor

and take his farewell to his wife, for alone will he risk his life in the roaring waters. They will be his witnesses that it is not his fault if Jens Glob stands alone in Hvidberg Church. But his faithful warriors will not leave him; they will follow him even into the raging waters. Ten of them are swept away by the torrent; Oluf Hase and the two youngest reach the opposite shore in safety and have still four miles to ride.

It is past midnight, Christmas Eve. The wind has died down; the church is lighted up, the light shining from the windows over meadow and heath. The service is ended, and the house of God is so still that the wax can be heard dripping from the candles to the stone floor. Now at last Oluf Hase arrives.

Jens Glob meets him in the forecourt, saying, "God day. The Bishop and I are reconciled now!"

"Are you, indeed!" says Oluf. "Then neither you nor the Bishop shall leave this church alive!" His sword flashes from its scabbard and splits in two the wooden door of the church, which Jens has closed between them. "Hold back, dear brother-in-law! First see what sort of reconciliation this is! I have slain the Bishop and all his men! Not one of them will do evil again, and we need say nothing more of the wrongs done my mother!"

The altar lights burn red, but redder is the stain that shines from the church door; there, lying in blood, is the Bishop, with a cloven skull, and lying dead around him are his men. It is quiet and calm on the holy eve of Christmas.

The third evening after Christmas, funeral bells in Börglum Convent. The murdered Bishop and his slain men lie in state beneath a black canopy, lighted by candelabras swathed in crape. The once mighty lord is a corpse, robed in a silver-bordered mantle, with the crosier in his powerless hand. Incense fills the air as the monks chant a funeral dirge; it sounds like a sentence of wrath and condemnation, and may be heard over the whole countryside as it is carried along and wailed by the wind. Sometimes the accusing voice sinks to rest for a while, but it never dies out completely; it always rises again, carrying its dismal strains late into our own century, singing of the cruel Bishop of Börglum and his wicked men. On many a dark night the terrified peasant, driving along the heavy sandy road past Börglum Convent, hears it; and the sleepless listener within Börglum's thick walls hears it, too. The church entrance has long been walled up, but superstitious eyes still see the door there, opening before them; the candles in the church brass crowns shine, and the church is revealed in its former splendor, rich with the smoke of incense, while the monks still sing the funeral Mass for the murdered Bishop. He lies there in his silver-bordered robe, the crosier in his powerless hand, the bloody wound shining as red as fire from his pale, proud forehead. There are the worldly mind and evil passions that burned.

Sink into the grave, into the night of oblivion, you dismal memories of the olden days!

Listen to the voice of the wind, sweeping over the rolling sea! Out there a storm is raging and will take many lives, for the sea has not changed its nature because the times have changed. Tonight it is all mouths to devour; tomorrow perhaps it will be as clear as a mirror, just as it was in the olden times we have now buried. Sleep calmly if you can!

Now it is morning; the new day brings sunshine into the room. But the wind still blows, and there is news of a wreck, as in the olden times. Last night, down by Lökken, the little red-roofed fishing village visible from our windows, a ship was wrecked. But by the use of a rocket apparatus a line was cast ashore and a bridge made between the wreck and the mainland; all on board were saved and brought to land, and beds were found for them. Today they are going to Börglum Convent. There they will find warm hospitality, be sheltered in comfortable rooms, see friendly eyes, and hear kindly voices speaking their own language. The piano will sound for them with melodies of their native land, and before these have died away, a chord of another sort will be struck; soundless and yet full of sound and certainty, the telegraph wire will reach the homes of the shipwrecked in a

foreign land and tell of their safety. Then with their minds at ease, they will join in the dancing at the feast given in the hall at Börglum. Waltzes and folk dances will be danced, and songs will be sung about Denmark and her valiant soldier in our time.

Blessed be you, our new age! Let a fresh and pure summer breeze sweep through the towns! Send your sunrays into our hearts and minds! Let them erase the dark traditions of the cruel days of old!