BUCHHOLTZ JOHANNES

EGHOLM AND HIS GOD

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Содержание

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I

Sivert stands leaning his elbows on the window ledge, digging all ten fingers into his curly hair, and looking down at the muddy court below.

Not a soul.

He looks at the wet roofs, and the raindrops splashing tiny rings in the water all along the gutter.

Not so much as a sparrow in sight. Only the sullen November drizzle, flung now and then into gusts, and whipping the panes with a lash of rain.

But that is enough for Sivert. He looks out into the grey desolation, highly amused at it all.

Now he purses up his lips and whispers something, raises his eyebrows, mutters something in reply, and giggles.

Let him, for Heaven's sake, as long as he can, thinks his mother.

And Sivert finds it more amusing still. Wonderful, so much there is going on inside him. He shakes his poodle mop of hair, and gives way to a long-drawn, gasping laugh – simply can't help it – leans his forehead against the pane, thrusts both hands suddenly deep into his pockets, and gives a curious wriggle.

"You great big boy, what's the matter now?" says his mother gently.

Sivert turns his head away and answers with an evasive laugh:

"All that rain … it tickles so."

Fru Egholm does not question him again; for a moment she really feels as if the boy were right. And, anyhow, it would be no use asking him. If only he can find his little pleasure in it, so much the better.

And there's no saying how long … Egholm had said it was time the boy found something to do, now he was confirmed. Find him a place at once. And Sivert, poor weakly lad – how would it go with him?

Fru Egholm shakes her head, and sends a loving glance at the boy, who is plainly busy in his mind with something new and splendid.

Then suddenly his face changes, as if at the touch of death itself. His eyes grow dull, his jaw drops; the childish features with their prematurely aged look are furrowed with dread as he stares down at something below.

"Is it Father?" she whispers breathlessly. "Back already?"

She lays down her sewing and hurries to the window; mother and son stand watching with frightened eyes each movement of the figure below.

Egholm walks up from the gate, lithe and erect, just as in the old days when he came home from the office. But at every step his knees give under him, he stumbles, and his wet cloak hangs uncomfortably about him. At last he comes to a standstill, heedless of the fact that his broad boots are deep in a puddle of water.

Once he looks up, and Sivert and his mother hold their breath. But the flower-pots in the window hide them. His head droops forward, he stands there still. A little after, they see him trudging along close to the wall, past his own door.

The watchers stand on tiptoe, pressing their temples against the cold glass, straining to see what next.

Egholm stops at the Eriksens' gate, glances round, and kneels.

Kneels down full in the mire, while the gale flings the cape of his ulster over his head. Now he snatches off his hat and crushes it in his fingers; his bald head looks queerly oblong, like a pumpkin, seen from above.

"He's praying!"

And the two at the window shudder, as if they were witnessing some dreadful deed.

"Where am I to hide?" blubbers Sivert.

The mother pulls herself together – she must find strength for two.

"You need not hide to-day. Take your little saw and be doing some work. You'll see, it will be all right to-day."

"But suppose he counts the money?"

"Oh, heaven…!"

"Hadn't we better tell him at once? Shout out and tell him as soon as he comes in, and say Hedvig took it?"

"No, no."

"Or go and kill ourselves?"

"No, no. Sit still, Sivert dear, and don't say a word. Maybe God will help us. We might put something over the bowl … no. Better leave it as it is."

Heavy steps on the stairs outside. Egholm walks in, strong and erect again now.

He hangs up his wet things, and fumbles with a pair of sodden cuffs.

"Didn't get a place, I suppose?" asks his wife, looking up from the machine. Sivert sits obediently at a little table at the farther end of the room.

"Is it likely?" Egholm's face is that of one suffering intensely. And he speaks in an injured tone.

"I only thought… You're home earlier than usual."

No answer. Egholm walks over to the window and stares into the greyness without, his long, thin fingers pulling now and again at his dark beard.

Lost in thought…

His wife does not venture to disturb him, though he is shutting out the fading light. She keeps the machine audibly in motion, making pretence of work.

A long, long time he stands there. Sivert has been sawing away conscientiously all the time, but at last he can bear it no longer, and utters a loud sigh. Fru Egholm reaches stealthily for the matches, and lights the lamp. Her fingers tremble as she lifts the glass.

Egholm turns at the sound. And now he is no longer Egholm the upright, nor Egholm the abject; *Egholm the Great* he is now. His eyes glow like windows in a burning house; he stands there filling the room with Egholm; Egholm the invincible. The mother cowers behind her sewing-machine; and her seam runs somewhat awry.

What terrible thing can he be thinking of now? The "Sect," as usual? – Heaven have mercy on them, now that Egholm has joined the Brotherhood.

Surely something terrible must happen soon; he has rarely been as bad as this before.

He moves, and his wife looks up with a start. But now he has changed again, to something less terrible now – not quite so deadly terrible as before.

He is far away in his dreamings now, without a thought for his earthbound fellow-creatures.

He stands in his favourite attitude, with one hand on his hip, as if posing to a sculptor. A fine figure of a man. His watch-chain hangs in a golden arc from one waistcoat pocket to the other. Only one who knew of the fact would ever notice that one of the oval links is missing, and a piece of string tied in its place.

After a little he begins walking up and down, stopping now and again at the window, with a gesture of the hand, as if addressing an assembly without.

Then suddenly he swings round, facing his wife, and utters these words:

"Now I know what it means. At last!"

Fru Egholm checks the wheel of her machine, and looks up at him with leaden-grey, shadow-fringed eyes. But he says no more, and she sets the machine whirring once more.

Peace for a little while longer, at any rate, she thinks to herself.

Sivert looks up stealthily every time his father turns his back; the boy is flushed with repressed excitement, the tip of his tongue keeps creeping out.

"Mark you," says Egholm after a long pause, "I'm wiser perhaps – a good deal wiser – than you take me for."

He throws out his chest with conscious dignity, lifting his head, and placing one hand on his hip as before.

Oh, so he's still thinking of that quarrel of theirs this morning. Well, well, of course it would be something to do with the Brotherhood some way or other.

"You said I was wasting my time."

"I didn't say that."

"You said I was throwing money out of the window."

Fru Egholm shifts in her seat, pulling nervously at her work. She would like to mitigate the sharpness of her words, and yet, if possible, stand by what she had said.

Sivert wakes to the fact that he is dribbling down over his hand, and sniffs up hastily.

"Didn't you say it was throwing money out of the window?"

"I said, it was hard taking money where there was none."

"You said it was throwing money away. But do you know what I'm doing with that money all the time? I'm putting it in the bank."

"In the bank?.."

"In the *Bank of Heaven*– where the interest is a thousand – nay, tens of thousands – per cent.! If it wasn't for that, I'd never have thought of joining the Brotherhood at all."

"But – I can't help it, but I don't believe in him, that Evangelist man. Young Karlsen, I mean."

Egholm breathed sharply, and quickened his steps. The answer did not please him.

"You talk about young Karlsen: I am talking of Holy Writ."

"But it was Karlsen that…"

"Yes, and I shall thank him for it till my dying day. He it was that opened my eyes, and showed me I was living the life of one accursed; pointed out the goal I can reach – cannot fail to reach – if only I will pay my tithe. Do you know what it says in Malachi? Shall I give you the words of Malachi the Prophet?"

"Ye – es … if you please," answers his wife confusedly.

"Yes … if you please," echoes Sivert in precisely the same tone. He has a painful habit of taking up his mother's words when anything excites him.

But Egholm had no time now to punish the interruption; he stood forth and spoke, with threatening sternness:

"'*Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.*'

"'*Ye are cursed with a curse…*'

"Cursed!" Egholm struck the table with his fist in condemnation. "Do you hear? They are accursed who would rob the Lord —*in tithes and offerings!*"

"It's solemn hard words," said the mother, with a sigh.

"No harder than it should be. Just and right!"

"I was only thinking – the New Testament – perhaps there might be something there to make it easier."

"Make it easier! God's Law to be made easier! Are you utterly lost in sin, woman? Or do you think I would tamper with the Holy Scriptures? Read for yourself – there!"

He snatched the old Bible from its shelf and flung it down on the sewing-machine. Fru Egholm looked at the thick, heavy tome with something like fear in her eyes.

"I only meant … if it was really God's will that we should starve to find that money for Karlsen."

"Starve – and what's a trifle of starvation when the reward's so much the greater? What does it say there, only a little farther on: '*Prove me now herewith, saith the Lord of Hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it*'?

"Isn't that a glorious promise? Perhaps the finest in the whole Bible. Are you so destitute of imagination that you cannot see the Lord opening the windows of heaven, and the money pouring out like a waterfall, like a rainbow, over us poor worms that have not room enough to receive it?"

"Money? – but it doesn't say anything about money."

"Yes, it does – if you read it aright. It's there all right, only" – Egholm drew his lips back a little, baring his teeth – "only, of course, it needs a little sense in one's head to read the Bible, just as any other book. It wasn't all quite easy to me at first, but now I understand it to the full. There's not a shadow of doubt, but the Bible means *ready money*. What else could it be? The blessing of the Lord, you say. Well, there's more than one of the Brethren in the congregation thinks the same – and that's what makes them slow in paying up *their* tithes and offerings. They think the blessing is just something supernatural; an inner feeling of content – fools' nonsense! Do you suppose I could be content, with duns and creditors tearing at me like dogs about a carcase? No; ready money, that's what it means. Money we give, and money shall be given unto us in return; we shall receive our own with usury, as it is written."

"Do you really mean…"

Egholm grasped eagerly at the hint of admission that he fancied lay behind her doubt. He strode to the chest of drawers, and, picking up the crystal bowl, held it out towards the light as if raising it in salutation. The tithe-money showed like some dark wine at the bottom.

"I swear unto you," he said, with great solemnity, "it is even so."

Fru Egholm meets his burning glance, and is confused.

"It would be a grand thing, sure enough, if we could come by a little money." And she sighs.

"But it's not a little," says Egholm. The impression he has made on her is reacting now with added force upon himself. "Not altogether little; no. I can feel it; there is a change about to come. And a change, with me, must be a change for the better. It means I am to be exalted. 'Friend, come up higher!'"

Again he strides up and down, seeking an outlet for his emotion. He sets down the bowl, and picks up the Bible instead, presses the book to his breast, and slaps its wooden cover, shaking out a puff of worm-eaten dust.

"Beautiful book," he says tenderly – "beautiful old book. By thee I live, and am one with thee!" And, turning to his wife, he goes on: "After all, it's simple enough. If I do my duty by God, He's got to do His by me, and I'd like to see how He can get out of it."

There was a rattle of the door below. Fru Egholm listened … yes, it was Hedvig, coming back from her work. There – wiping her boots on Eriksens' mat, the very thing she'd been strictly forbidden. And dashing upstairs three steps at a time and whistling like a boy. No mistaking Hedvig.

Fru Egholm signed covertly to Sivert to go out in the kitchen. She could give the children their food there, without being noticed. What you don't hear you don't fear, as the saying goes. And that was true of Egholm; it always irritated him when Sivert made a noise over his food. Poor child – a good thing he'd the heart to eat and enjoy it.

Hedvig came tumbling in, with a clatter of wooden shoes.

"Puh, what a mess! I'm drenched to the skin. Look!" She ducked forward, sending a stream of water from the brim of her hat. Her hair, in two heavy yellow plaits, slipped round on either side, the ends touching the floor; then with a toss of her head she threw it back, and stood there laughing, in the full glare of the lamp.

Glittering white teeth and golden eyelashes. The freckles round her nose gave a touch of boyishness to her face.

"My dear child, what can we give you to put on?"

"Oh, I'll find some dry stockings – there's a pair of mine in the settee."

"Sivert borrowed those, dear, last Sunday, you know. But you can ask him – he's outside in the kitchen."

Egholm, too, must have his meal. He had a ravenous appetite. The pile of bread and dripping vanished from his plate as a cloud passes from the face of the moon. Possibly because he was reading, as he ate, of the land of Canaan, a land flowing with milk and honey.

The rain spattered unceasingly against the panes.

"What are you hanging about here for?" asked Hedvig. Sivert was standing huddled up by the sink.

"He'll find out in a minute," whispered the boy. "He's waving his arms and legs about, and talking all about money."

"Puh – let him. We must eat, so there's an end of it. He'll have forgotten by to-morrow how much there was."

"But he'll count it to-night. He's going to the meeting."

"To-night – h'm. That's a nasty one," said Hedvig thoughtfully.

Sivert showed a strange reluctance to hand over the stockings.

"They've been confirmed," he explained. "I wore them last Sunday. You can't have them back now after they've been to my confirmation. It's a great honour."

"You take them off, and that sharp! You can see mine are wet through."

"Mine are … they're wet, too."

"Wet, too? Why, what have you been doing?"

"I – I couldn't help it," snivelled Sivert shamefacedly. "It came of itself, when Father took the bowl…"

Hedvig drew away from him, turning up her nose in disgust.

"Ugh! You baby!"

"Mother! Is she to call me a baby now I'm grown up and confirmed?"

"Hold your noise, out there!" cried his father. "Run down to Eriksens' and ask the time."

Sivert hurried away, and brought back word: half-past seven.

"I must be off," said Egholm, with an air of importance.

Mother and children looked with a shiver of dread towards the cut-glass bowl. But Egholm was quietly putting on his still dripping coat, looking at himself in the glass, as he always did. It was a game of blind man's buff, where all save the blind man know how near the culprit stands.

"Leave out the key, Anna, if I'm not…"

"Oh, I'll be waiting up all right."

"Well, if you like." Egholm moved to the door; he grasped the handle. A flicker of hope went through them; he had forgotten his tithe and offering. To-morrow it wouldn't matter so much…

But Egholm stood there still, pulling at his beard, straining himself to think…

"Ah – I mustn't forget the chiefest of all."

In the midst of a ghastly silence he took the bowl from its place, shook out the little heap of coppers, and with a satisfied air stacked them up in orderly piles, ready to count. He counted all through, counted over again, and moved the piles in different order, pulled at his beard, and glowered. The mother kept her eyes fixed on her work, but the children were staring, staring at their father's hands.

"How much was it he lent us on the clock last time? Three *kroner*, surely?"

"Yes; I think it was three," said Fru Egholm, trying her hardest to speak naturally.

"What do you mean? – 'you *think* it was!'" Her husband rose to his feet with a threatening mien.

"Yes, yes, I remember now. It *was* three *kroner*."

"And did you put the thirty-*øre* tithe in the bowl, as I ordered?"

Fru Egholm felt instinctively that it would be best to insist that the money had been put in the bowl. But another and stronger instinct led her at this most unfortunate moment to hold forth in protest against the giving of tithes at all, and more especially tithe of moneys received on pawned effects. And very soon she had floundered into a slough of argument that led no way at all.

Egholm strode fuming up and down the room.

"You didn't put it in at all."

"I did. To the last *øre*."

Now this was perfectly true. The money *had* been put in…

"Then you must have stolen it again after."

"God wouldn't have it, I know. It's blood money."

"Wouldn't He? He shall – I'll see that He does! You've stolen money from the Lord! What have you done with it?"

"What do you think we should do with it?"

"Who's been out buying things?" he thundered, turning to the children.

"It wasn't me – not quite," said Sivert, with one thumb deep in his mouth.

"That means it was you, you little whelp. What did you buy with the money?"

"I didn't buy two eggs." Sivert was steadfastly pleading not guilty.

Egholm called to mind that he had had an egg with his dinner. The depth of villainy was clear and plain.

Fru Egholm could hold out no longer. "I – I thought you needed something strengthening, Egholm; you've been looking so poorly. And I took out the thirty *øre* again and bought two eggs. One you had, and one I gave the children. They need it, too, poor dears."

Egholm felt his brain seething; he gripped his head with both hands, as if fearing it might burst. Every nerve seemed to shudder as at the touch of glowing iron.

"*Ye are cursed with a curse*," he said in a hollow voice.

"Egholm, do be calm…" But his wife's well-meaning effort only made him the more furious. He picked up his stick and struck the table with a crash.

"You should be struck down and smitten to earth – you have brought a curse upon my house!"

"Egholm, do be careful. It's not for my own sake I say it, but remember the state I'm in…"

"What have I to do with the state you're in?" he thundered inconsequently, but laid down his stick. "Out with the money this minute! Do you hear? The money, the money you took!"

"But you know yourself we used all we had for the rent, or I wouldn't have touched the other. I can't dig up money out of the ground."

"Then give me the silver spoon."

This was a little child's spoon, worn thin, and bearing the date of Fru Egholm's christening.

"Take it, then," she said, weeping.

The children had been looking on with frightened eyes. Sivert, in his confusion, now began sawing again.

"What – you dare – at such a time! Stop that at once!" cried his father. And by way of securing immediate obedience, he twined his fingers in the boy's hair and dragged him backwards out of his chair, till his wooden shoes rattled against the flap of the table.

Fru Egholm sprang towards them; the linen she was at work on tore with a scream.

"For Heaven's sake!" she cried desperately, picking up the boy in her arms.

"Give me the spoon and let's have no more nonsense," said Egholm, and strode out. The three stood listening, as to the echoes of retreating thunder. First the slam of the door below, then the heavier clang of the gate across the yard.

"O – oh!" said Hedvig, "he ought to be *thrashed*!" And she drew a deep breath, as of cleaner air.

“Don’t speak like that, child. After all, he’s your father.”

II

Egholm descended the stairs, each step carrying him so much farther down from the heights of his rage. By the time he had crossed the stone paving, and let the street door clang behind him, he was as gentle as any hermit of the dale.

A gust of wind sent him staggering over to the outflow of a gutter pipe, which greeted him with an icy shower; he took it as one might take the jest of a friend. What matter, either, that the same wind thrust a chilly feeler in under his collar, right down to the armhole, or slapped him flat-handed on the mouth and left him breathless? He was not moved to anger when the streams and puddles he was wading through followed the law of nature and filled his leaky boots within to the level of the waters without. Meekly he pressed his hat more firmly down, bowed his head submissively, and walked in all humility close to the house walls, lest he should hinder the wind in its task.

The tumult within him had subsided, leaving no more than the ordinary eagerness of a man in a hurry – a man intent on getting to a meeting in good time.

Street after street, with the same wet breath in his face. He crossed over Vestergade, where the shop windows flared in a row on either side, and a carriage on its way to the theatre nearly knocked him down. Then he burrowed once more into the side streets, emerging at last, by way of a narrow passage, into a yard, where lights were burning in the windows of a stable – a stable converted, being now the hall and meeting-place of the Brethren of St. John.

The unlighted entry gave out a thick smell of mildew and plaster. Egholm felt a childish nervousness as he realised that the meeting had already begun. He smoothed his wreath of hair, and wiped the water from his face with his cape; then, fumbling for the handle of the door, he walked in.

The hall was half-full of people; young Karlsen was standing on the stage, delivering a sort of homily. This was young Karlsen's usual opening, designed to pass the time until old Karlsen could get away from the shop. Everybody knew it, and all bore it patiently, excepting young Karlsen himself, who longed most earnestly for the hour of his deliverance.

At the sound of the door, he stooped and bent forward, trying to see beneath the lamps and make out who had come in. But he made no pause in his sermon; only, his delivery became somewhat strained and disconnected.

When the bald top of Egholm's head caught the light, however, he drew back with a jerk of disappointment, yawned, thrust his hands resignedly into his pockets, and went on:

"Consequently, my dear friends, as I have said – "

Egholm stepped softly to a rickety seat, and sheltered himself behind Fru Laursen's ample figure.

The hall was not large, but all were heartily welcome there. On Saturdays and Sundays its rotten floor-boards shook beneath the feet of factory girls, with high wooden heels, and lads from the slaughterhouse, with neckties slipping up at the back. Both parties sweated profusely as they danced, and mine host from the dramshop across the courtyard sat on an upturned box next the door uncorking bottled beer.

On Wednesdays, from six to eight, a drill sergeant fumed over a class of unpromising pupils from the Peasant Welfare Schools, who walked, and on the toes rose, and from the hips bent, as they were told, yet never managing to attain that explosive *élan* which alone maketh the heart of a drill sergeant to rejoice.

When the Brethren of St. John arrived at eight, the air would be foggy with chalk precipitated in the sweat of peasant brows; it might even happen that the "last four" were still gaspingly at work dragging the vaulting-horse back into place.

For three hours, no more, the congregation of Brethren held the hall in peace; a few minutes past eleven, and figures uncouthly garbed thrust pale but insistent faces in at the door. These were

the Histrionics – the Amateur Dramatic Society of the Trade and Commercial Assistants' Union, who with true business talent had chosen Wednesday for their rehearsals, in order to enjoy the warmth provided beforehand by the Brethren. They were not interested in other of the Brethren's manifestations. Any extension of the service or proceedings beyond time limit would be greeted with whistlings, cat-calls, and slamming of doors – while nothing could exceed the eager politeness with which the waiting Histrionics made way for the Brethren as they left.

The hall was further used as an auction room. Egholm was often present on such occasions; he had an inclination towards the feverish excitement of the hammer.

Karlsen was still on his feet.

Egholm let his glance wander absently from the ropes and trapeze to the ragged fringe of the stage curtain, that waved in the draught like the fin of a fish.

He was not an attentive listener; he freely admitted that, when he came to the meetings, it was not so much to hear the edifying speeches of the "Evangelist," as because the door to the treasury of the Lord was here to be found. And the depth of faith in his heart – that was the key… With a sudden impulse, he felt in his pocket for the tithe-money. Yes, thank Heaven, it was there.

Karlsen was taking an unpardonable time about it this evening. There was an ever-recurring phrase he used: "*Dear friends.*" He used it like the knots in the climbing-rope that hung from the ceiling, as something to rest on by the way. And there was often quite an appreciable pause before he could spit on his hands and go on. It was plain to see that his speech would never carry him beyond the roof, but, for all that, his face, bluely unshaven, and furrowed with intercrossing wrinkles, showed a degree of cunning as if he were solving a difficult problem, or recounting the details of a complicated business manœuvre.

Egholm knew that Karlsen had been a travelling pedlar selling woollen goods from his pack along the roads, before he turned Evangelist. And in some ways, the tricks of his old trade clung to him yet. He would hand out eternal truths as if it were a pair of flannel unmentionables – pure wool, unshrinkable, everlasting wear…

Having nothing now with which to occupy his hands, the Evangelist thrust them in his pockets and gesticulated with them under cover there. Now he would clench his fist, till the pocket bulged as if with a heavy revolver; now he would draw out his breeches sideways like a concertina. And in the pauses he could be seen to scratch himself assiduously, first with one hand, then with the other.

At last – at last he came to an end, and led the singing from a little thin book.

The congregation livened up a little, with a clearing of throats and shifting in seats. Half-way through the hymn, the door was heard. The Evangelist ducked down again to look, and when suddenly he pulled his hands out of his pockets, all knew who it was that had arrived.

Old Karlsen, the Evangelist's father, was the eldest of the flock, and holder of its highest dignity – that of Angel.

Also, apart from his connection with the Brethren, proprietor of a very paying little ironmongery business.

Slowly he strode through the hall; the singing faces turned towards him as he came. His black clothes gave him an air of distinction; his silvery hair and prophet's beard were outward and visible signs of holiness. It would be hard to imagine a figure more suited in its dignity to the weighty name of Angel.

The only access to the stage was by way of three beer cases set stairwise to its edge. But under the footsteps of the prophet they were transformed to golden steps of a ladder leading heavenward.

Young Karlsen murmured a few words, glanced at his watch, and disappeared like one cast forth as unworthy. And old Karlsen prayed with his earnest, almost tearful voice for the welfare of the congregation.

Egholm was thrilled. This – this was surely communion with the Lord.

The eyes of the prophet shone in the glare from the footlights – or perhaps it was rather that he saw God, as it had been promised to the pure in heart.

There came a sound of weeping from behind; Egholm turned to see. It was Lystrup, the cobbler. His flat, brown fingers clutched and curled convulsively, and his bony head, with the queer feathery hair, rocked to and fro, as he wept and moaned, without covering his face.

The cobbler's emotion spread to those around. Within a second it had reached the hindmost bench, where the old women from the almshouses sat. There was a flutter of movement among the shawls, accompanied by a low wailing. Egholm noticed with some surprise that deaf old Maren was weeping with the best. Evidently, the influence of Angel Karlsen could manifest itself in other ways than that of common speech.

Egholm was greatly moved; he withdrew his gaze, and looked down at the floor as if in search of something fixed and immovable. But Fru Laursen's back began to work, and soon her bulky frame was slopping incontinently about in front of him. Egholm felt an ache within him, something comparable to hunger; he raised his eyes and seemed to see, through tears, great folded angel-wings behind Karlsen's back. This was too much; Egholm surrendered himself utterly, and wept. And his weeping was louder and more passionate than the weeping of those about him; some there were who ceased at the sound, and watched him.

Young Karlsen had planted himself against the wall by the end of Egholm's bench, and was enjoying the effect. The wrinkles in the young apostle's face were ceaselessly at play, forming new and intricate labyrinths without end. As soon as the Angel had finished his prayer, young Karlsen slipped in close to Egholm and sat down beside him.

"Straight to the heart," he said admiringly. "That's the sort of goods, what? It fetches them."

Egholm dried his eyes bashfully.

"That's the way to drive a lot like this. But" – a sudden gleam of contempt shone in his blue-and-watery sheep's eyes – "it's about the only thing he can do. Angel, indeed! Once he's got you here, he's good for something, I'll allow. But who is it fills the hall? – eh, young man? Who is it gets them here to start with? Jutland and the half of Fyn, that's my district. I'm an Evangelist – a fisher of men. And I've my little gift of tongues as well – and need it, or the fishes wouldn't bite as they do.

"Hear my little speech this evening? Not much in it to speak of. But then I'd finished really, by the time you came. But I've got another on hand that'll do the trick. The Word, what?"

"Yes," sighed Egholm accommodatingly.

"Well, you know yourself," said the Evangelist, with a little laugh, "for you were simply done for when I began. You can't deny it!"

"God's own words – " began Egholm.

"Of course, my dear good man, of course. But who picked them out? God's words, you say, but there's any amount of words; no end of words. The thing is to pick out the right ones – just as you'd pick out the right sort of bait for the right sort of fish. God's words – huh! The Bible's like a pack of cards; doesn't mean anything till it's been dealt round."

Egholm spoke up at this. "I wouldn't like, myself," he said, "to compare the Bible to a pack of cards. But – as far as I know – I'd say there's no card to beat the ace of clubs."

The Evangelist laughed heartily. "If spades are trumps, a bit of a smudgy black knave's enough to do for your ace of clubs. There's one coming along this evening – I've been working on her for over two years now, and all she cared for was the fear of Hell. You've got to deal with them according to their lights, and there's a power of difference sometimes. Now, you, for instance – you were easy enough. Windows of heaven opening, that was your line. Ho, I remember! Well, well, it's all the same, as long as…"

Karlsen broke off in distraction every time the door opened.

"As long as the Lord gets your souls. And Father, he'll see to that."

Egholm began to feel uncomfortable.

The congregation had broken up into groups, centring more particularly about the neighbourhood of the Angel. Johannes, the postman, glared furiously, with distended greenish eyes, at Fru Laursen wading like a cow among the reeds.

"If I can keep behind her," thought Egholm to himself as he rose, "I might get through. Just to thank him…"

"Thought it was her," whispered Karlsen in his ear.

"Eh?"

With a look of unspeakable cunning, Karlsen brought his face closer, blinked his eyes, and whispered again:

"A goldfish! And, on my word, the best we've had up to now. The one I told you about before."

Egholm forgot all else. "A lady, you mean? Who? Coming to-night?"

"A lady, yes," said Karlsen, almost stifling with pride. "A real lady, and no fudge." He made a gesture that might have been mere helplessness. "But whether she'll come or not, well, time will show."

A little after, he lapsed into his natural dialect, and said frankly:

"I'm simply bursting to see if she'll come."

"But who is it?" asked Egholm impatiently.

"Her name – is – Fru Westergaard!"

"What? You don't mean – the Distillery?"

"Hundred thousand," said Karlsen, patting an imaginary pocket-book. "Widow of the late Distiller Westergaard, yes!" Then suddenly he broke into his platform tone, an imitation of Angel Karlsen's tear-stifled voice.

"Fru Westergaard's soul was hungered and athirst after Zion. And for two years past I've cried aloud to her in the wilderness, making ready the way before her – the way to the blessed Brotherhood of St. John. And now, at last, my words have brought forth fruit in her heart. Yes, and *I've been to the villa!*"

He grasped Egholm's hand and pressed it in a long, firm grip – a way they had among the Brethren.

Again the door opened, but it was only Meilby, the photographer. The Evangelist turned up his nose in scorn, and looked another way.

Meilby was another uncommon figure in his way. Here, among a congregation of contritely stooping sinners, he walked as stiffly upright as a well-drilled recruit. Even his eyes had nothing of that humility which might be expected in the house of the Lord, but looked about him sharply, as if in challenge, though ordinarily they were mildly blue as a boy's. What did he want here, night after night? Was he drawn by some higher power, and yet sought, like Saulus, to kick against the pricks? Maybe. Egholm looked after him with a shake of the head, as he tramped through the hall, shut his cigar-case with a click, and seated himself irreverently on the vaulting-horse.

Egholm often walked home with Meilby after the meetings, but it was he who did the talking, Meilby's contributions rarely amounting to more than a fretful "Heh," "Haw," or "Ho" – a kind of barking, incomprehensible to ordinary mortals.

"D'you know Meilby at all?" asked Egholm.

Karlsen twirled one finger circlewise in front of his forehead, but he had not time to explain himself further; just at that moment Fru Westergaard arrived.

She stopped just inside the door, and turned her wet veil up over her eiderdown toque – a tall, thin woman, with the angular movements of an old maid, and clothes that looked as if she slept in them.

"Naughty, naughty dog! Outside, Mirre, Mirre, do you hear!"

She faced round, and waved her dripping umbrella at an eager poodle with its tongue hanging out.

"Here she is!" cried young Karlsen. And at once the room was so still that the scraping of the dog could be heard against the flooring. All mouths stood open, as if in one long indrawn breath of astonishment.

Still scolding under her breath, she walked with some embarrassment a few steps forward. Young Karlsen thrust Egholm aside, and hurried to meet her with a bow.

"Dog's all right," he said, with reassuring ease of manner. "Don't bother about him. Late? Not a bit of it; we've hardly begun. Just sitting talking, heart to heart, you understand. Come along in, both of you. Know me, doggy, don't you, eh?"

He bent down and ruffled the dog's ears.

"He – he must have slipped out and followed me. I'd no idea…"

Young Karlsen's eyeballs rolled about, to see what impression the lady made upon the congregation. And he was not disappointed. If St. John the Apostle, the traditional founder of the sect, had appeared in their midst, it could hardly have created a greater sensation.

Egholm had himself been something of a thunderbolt – an ex-official of the railway service suddenly appearing in this assembly of hunchbacked tailors and lame shoemakers, relics from the almshouses, and all that was worn out and faded – always excepting, of course, the prosperous ironmonger at their head. But Fru Westergaard was as an earthquake that sent them flat on their faces at once. Not a child in the town but knew her and her villa and her dog, that took its meals with her at table.

Johannes, the postman, stood leaning against the wall, helpless, as if in terror.

Madam[1] Kvist, her eyes starting out behind her glasses, asked aloud, in unaffected wonder:

"Why – what in the name of mercy will she be wanting here?"

And Madam Strand, the dustman's wife, a little black figure of a woman, was curtseying and mumbling continually: "Such an honour, did you ever, such an honour…"

Most of those present inwardly endorsed the sentiment.

Egholm drew himself up and sought to catch Fru Westergaard's eye. He did not manage it, but let off his bow all the same. Only the incorrigible photographer sat swinging his legs on the vaulting-horse, with an expression of cold disapproval on his face.

Angel Karlsen stood by the three steps, ready, like another St. Peter, to receive the approaching soul. He took both the lady's hands and pressed them warmly.

"There's rejoicing here on earth and in the mansions of the Lord," he said, with emotion, "at the coming of this our new disciple." When he spoke, his great white beard went up and down, as if emphasising his words.

"And now the usual word of thanksgiving. Sit down here in front, *Frue*."

The new disciple was still talking nervously about the dog – it was leaving footmarks all over the place, but then, you know, in such weather… She had galoshes for it, really, only to-night…

She moved to sit down, but the others rose hurriedly as she did so, and the bench rocked.

No, no, she couldn't sit there – no, not there; she couldn't. No…

Fru Westergaard allowed herself the luxury of some eccentricities. She had remained unmarried until her six-and-fortieth year.

Egholm had been prepared for the trouble about the seat. Sprightly as a youth, he dashed out of the hall and across the courtyard to the taproom in front.

"A chair; lend me a chair, will you? Fru Westergaard's there."

"Fru Westergaard!"

"Fru Westergaard!"

He came back, breathless, with an American rocking-chair, which he proffered humbly.

[1] "Madam," the title used for elderly – strictly speaking, married – women of the working class, as distinct from "Fru" (Mrs.), which is – or was – reserved for ladies of higher social standing.

The congregation had meanwhile arranged itself in a phalanx formation like wild geese on the wing. In the forefront of all sat the new disciple in her restless chair. On the next bench were Evangelist Karlsen and Egholm alone, and behind them again came the rest of the dearly beloved, in order of precedence according to dignity or ambition.

The entire flock seemed shaping its course towards the sun, in the person of Angel Karlsen, who was up on the platform praying and preaching, tearful and affecting as ever.

"*As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after Thee, O God.*

"*My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God; when shall I come and appear before God?*"

He wrung his hands in a great agony, and hid his face.

"*My tears have been my meat day and night…*"

Egholm was touched. He, too, knew what it was to weep for meat.

Karlsen the Elder closed with the Lord's Prayer; and another hymn was sung.

"Now, it's me again," whispered the young Evangelist. "You see me let her have it this time."

His speech seemed actually to have gained force and balance; there was an evident purpose in it. The opening was weak, perhaps, for here he still clung to his "Dear friends" from force of habit, though every word was addressed to Fru Westergaard only.

"And now, in conclusion, I thank you, my dear friends, for coming here among us the first time. I hope, dear friends, it may not be the last. In the midst of all your wealth and luxury and manifold delights out at the villa, you have yet felt the lack of a word – the word of the Spirit. Yes, dear friends, it is even so. You go to church and you go back home again, and your need is not fulfilled.

"But then one day there comes to your door – out at the villa – a poor Evangelist, an unlearned man. And lo – a strange thing, dear friends —*he* has the word – the word of the Spirit!"

Having thus laid down a flattering position for himself, young Karlsen went on to praise his new convert as one docile and of a good heart. She had come this evening of all evenings – a first Wednesday – on purpose that she might pay her tithe. No, there was no drawing back. And in truth it would be a fool's game to try it on. The Lord, He could see straight through a drawer in a table or the cover of a bank-book, never fear of that. And what was His, that He was going to have. Yes, that was His way. And woe unto him that falleth into the hands of the living God!

Far down by the door, old Karlsen was modestly seated on the extreme end of a bench. In his lap was a japanned tin box. There was a slight rattle during the next hymn, as he took out his keys and opened the casket.

The bench was so placed that the disciples could only pass by in single file. The old women from the almshouses, who had been sitting farthest back, were now the first to pass. As a matter of fact, they were exempt from the tithe contribution, having no income beyond their food and lodging. But most of them, nevertheless, managed to deposit a copper two or five *øre* piece with the Angel as they went out, though he never so much as looked up.

Why should he look? The money was not for himself, but for God. He was only sitting there holding the black tin box.

There was a clicking of purse-clips, and a soft ring of coin. Lystrup, the cobbler, dropped his money, and crawled miserably over the floor beneath the benches, looking for that which was lost.

Those who had paid stopped behind to see the others share their fate.

Fru Westergaard, Egholm, and the Evangelist came down together.

"But – but how do you manage when it doesn't work out exactly?" said the lady, nervously trying to do sums in her head.

"It always works out exactly," said Karlsen, with superior calm.

"As long as it's *kroner*, of course, I understand. But when it's *kroner and øre*?"

She gave it up as hopeless, and drew out a crumpled book from the little bag she carried.

"Here you are; you can see. I get my money from the bank, you know; it's in a book like this."

Egholm craned up on tiptoe. The Evangelist wormed up closer, his face a curious mingling of venom and sweetness; even old Karlsen thrust the box under his arm and rose to his feet.

"My spectacles!" And he slapped his pockets so that the money rattled in the box.

Two hundred and sixty-six *kroner* thirty *øre*.

That was the figure that showed again and again down the page in the cross-shaded columns, with Fru Westergaard's signature after. There was a murmur from the waiting crowd.

"How much was it?"

"Eh, to think now! And every month!"

"Over two hundred and fifty, that is," explained Lystrup, the cobbler.

"That will be twenty-six *kroner* sixty-three to us," said the Evangelist, as if it were the merest trifle.

"Not sixty-three *øre*? – that can't be," said the disciple energetically, looking round for support.

Egholm could not meet her eyes; it pained him that Karlsen was so evidently right.

"But I only get thirty *øre*, and you say I'm to pay out sixty-three! No, thank you, that's trying it on, I know."

"It's the law – it's the law." Old Karlsen drummed on his box.

"Oh, I won't put up with it!" Fru Westergaard's grey cheeks flushed with a red spot.

"Not an *øre* less."

Young Karlsen stood planted in the opening between the bench and the wall. He wore high boots, with his trousers thrust into them, and stood with his feet a little apart. There was something ominous written, as it were, between the lines in his face. His shoulders were slightly raised – a very respectable pair of shoulders had young Karlsen.

Fru Westergaard tucked away her book again with trembling hands.

"Perhaps you'll let me pass?"

"It's twenty-six sixty-three, all the same," said the Evangelist, without moving an inch.

"I won't give more than twenty-six thirty!" She stamped her foot. Mirre growled softly, and sniffed round and round Karlsen's legs.

"Twenty-six sixty-three."

"Sh!" old Karlsen intervened. "We'll take what *Fruen* thinks is right. The Lord is long-suffering… Lauritz, you can be putting out the corner lights."

Thus did the Angel, by his wisdom and gentleness, save one soul for the congregation of the Brethren.

Fru Westergaard had, it appeared, the money in a separate compartment of her bag, all ready counted out. Handing them to Angel Karlsen, she said:

"And you're quite sure there's no Hell, really?"

"No Hell…"

Young Karlsen was standing on a bench, puffing at one of the lights. He turned warningly towards his father.

"No," he cried. "That's right. No Hell. You know, we talked it over…"

Angel Karlsen bowed his head in silence, but Fru Westergaard stared wildly before her.

"Hell, hell fire, all yellow flames…"

Egholm could contain himself no longer. He would show the lady and the rest of them how a true disciple settled up his accounts with God. With a smile and a gesture as if he had been casting a rose into his mistress' lap, he flung his paper bag of money into the Angel's casket. The bag burst with the shock, and the coins came twirling out; the old man had to use both hands to guard them, and could hardly close the box.

"Wait, there's more yet!" cried Egholm, and his voice broke. He held the silver spoon aloft in two fingers, then pressed it in through the crack at the lid of the box.

But the box was full to repletion, and the bowl of the spoon would not go in.

Egholm felt there had never been so magnificent an offering.

Yet another of the Brethren passed by that strait place – Meilby, the photographer. Not one single copper *øre* did he put in, but Angel Karlsen only turned his eyes meekly to the other side.

III

February had set in. Fru Egholm's seventh was making ever stronger demands on her heart's blood. While she toiled at her work, the young citizen to come was pleased to kick about occasionally, or turn over on the other side, making her faint and dizzy. But, recovering, she would smile, and whisper softly: "There there, now, bide your time, little man." She had her own convictions that it was to be a boy.

Egholm stood in front of the mirror, smoothing his wreath of hair. His pupil was due for the English lesson.

"The Pupil" was a subject of considerable importance in the house, especially to Egholm's own mind. It was no other than Meilby, the sharp-tongued photographer, who had started taking lessons in the previous November. After many mysterious hints, and exacting a promise of silence, he had confided to Egholm that he was going to America in a few months' time. Egholm had grabbed at him avidly and without ceremony, as a chance of work. Regarded as a pupil, he was by no means promising. He had but the faintest conception of any difference between parts of speech such as substantives and adjectives, and whenever his mentor touched on genitives and possessives, he would glance absently towards the door. Furthermore, he never paid any fees, which was a subject of constant tribulation between Anna and her husband.

"But it's a good thing to have a little outstanding. Like capital in the bank, against a rainy day."

Anna made no answer to this. It seemed to her mind that the days were rainy enough to call for all the capital by any means available.

Egholm sniffed vigorously, and postponed the matter further. But now it was February, and he must raise the question somehow. He smoothed his hair with extra attention, to make the most of his dignity when the pupil arrived. Unfortunately, he could hardly point to the goods delivered and demand payment in cash – the goods were so little in evidence.

It passed off better than he had expected. Meilby said "Good evening" in English when he arrived, and laughed a little nervously, as if dismayed at his own courage. Egholm snatched at the opening, and came to the point at once:

"That's right, that's right – you're getting on. Getting on, yes. But don't you think, now, you might let me have a little on account?"

Meilby laughed no more. Money – it was always such a nuisance about money. There didn't seem to be any money these days. Money was a thing extinct, he said.

"On earth, yes," Egholm admitted.

But no need to bother about that. It would be all right. Only wait to the end of the month, and then it would be decided. "Whether I'm to go or not," said Meilby.

Of course, he didn't want to go. Much rather stay where he was. But, of course, he would go all the same. What else could he do? And if he went, why, then, of course, Egholm would get his money. That was how it stood. How else could it be?

Egholm was very far from understanding, but he gave it up. Opening the book, he got to work at the lesson, but with less careful attention, perhaps, than usual. And after a little he broke in, cutting short his pupil in the middle of a sentence:

"But about the money – how will you get the money if you do go?"

"Why, then, of course, I shall sell all my apparatus."

So that was it. Egholm still seemed troubled in his mind. He knew the collection of things that formed Meilby's stock-in-trade. There was one item in particular – that devilish camera of his. It was quite a small one, but with a breadth of focus that could almost look round a corner. Fancy having that for his own! There would be an end of poverty then!

The windows of heaven should be opened, and the flood pour in – oh, in no time. He knew it, he felt sure of it. But the belly was not to be put off, not for so much as a day. And his hands were impatient too; there was a nervous thrill at the roots of the nails, or a deadly chill in the fingers from sheer inactivity. Every morning he raced about after the situations vacant in the papers, but always in vain. With Meilby's apparatus, he could make money – ay, though his studio had no roof but the February sky.

He grew quite genial towards his pupil, and praised him more than was properly his due. When they had finished with their brainwork for the evening, he said anxiously:

"But, promise me you don't go selling them without letting me know."

Meilby would bear it in mind.

"Yes, but suppose you forgot?"

"Why, we'll be none the less friends for that," said Meilby, with an amiable smile.

"You'll get nothing out of him, you see," said Anna when he had gone. "It'll be just the same with him as with young Karlsen, when he came to learn English, too. Huh! It was you that learned something that time, if you ask me."

"He's an artful one," said Egholm, with a laugh. "He tricked the doctor when he went to be examined. But, after all – what's a trifle like that when a man stands firm on the rock of truth?"

"Do you think Meilby does? You think it's for any good he's going running off to America like that?"

Egholm, law-abiding man, paled at the thought, but said, with an attempt at liveliness:

"I'll get him to stay, then."

"But he won't pay you at all unless he goes."

That, again, was true – painfully true. No … anyhow, Egholm would have nothing to do with any doubtful affairs. Not for any price. Better let Meilby go his own gait as soon as he pleased.

But even as he formed the thought, he seemed to feel the milled edges of the screws that set the camera between his fingers, and with a sigh he breathed the resolution from him once more.

One morning, a few days later, Egholm came back from his usual round.

"No luck, I suppose?"

"No, no, no," he snarled, flinging off his hat. Then he took down the Bible.

What could have happened to make his hands shake like that?

A few minutes later came the explanation.

"I went after a job – Hansen and Tvede, it was – as errand boy. Told them they could have me a full day's work just for my food. But they laughed at me. Oh, and there was a beast of a fellow in riding-boots – the manager, perhaps. You should have seen his face."

"Perhaps he meant it wasn't the sort of thing they could offer you. Something better," hinted Fru Egholm.

He made no answer, but strove to calm his indignation by strenuous attention to the Bible. If that didn't help him, why, then… But he was nearly through with it now – it was the Epistle to the Hebrews.

The letters danced and crept like ants before his eyes.

"*And verily they that are of the sons of Levi, who receive the office of the priesthood, have a commandment to take tithes of the people according to the law, that is, of their brethren…*"

"Ha ha! Riding-boots and all! No, 'twasn't that he meant, giving me something better. The beast! I shan't forget him!"

"*For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law…*"

"'I see from the paper you're wanting an errand boy' – that's what I said to him. And asked if I would do. And I crushed my hat in my hands and stood up. Then, of course, what he ought to have said was, 'What, *you* looking for a place as errand boy? No, no. Couldn't think of it. I'll take you on in the office, as a clerk. You shall be cashier. I've taken a fancy to you, the way you stand there

modestly as could be.' But he didn't say that, not a word of it. Good Lord, no! The worst of it was, he saw through me. *He winked at me!*"

"*For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof.*

"*For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.*"

Egholm sighed, and passed his hand over his face. Alas, he noted to his shame how his thoughts had strayed from the Bible's lofty theme.

What could it be for a commandment, that was disannulled for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof, he wondered. H'm, it would say farther on, no doubt. And he read on, but it did not appear to say. Then he went back and began again, reading slowly, in a whisper, the same verses over again. And of a sudden, his heart contracted violently, forcing a spout of blood to his temples. What – what was this? Was it *the tithe* that was abolished?

He read it through again and again.

"Anna" – he dared not trust his own senses now – "Anna, come here and look at this. Quick – read from there to there." He stood as if about to strike; there were red spots on his pale face. Anna trembled with fear, and fell to reading about Melchisedec, the Levites, and the rest, without understanding a word of it all.

"Well, why don't you speak, woman?" broke in Egholm, when she had been reading a few seconds. "Are you asleep? – or, perhaps it doesn't interest you? Eh? Now, then, what is it you're reading? – what do you make of it? Eh?"

"Yes, yes, I see," stammered Fru Egholm, her eyes flitting to another part altogether in her confusion – "something about the Tabernacle…"

"Is the tithe abolished? – that's what I want to know," said Egholm insistently. "Does it say there, or does it not, that the tithe is weak and unprofitable?"

"Why, yes – but that's what I've always said," answered she, with marvellous presence of mind. "Was it only that you wanted me to see?"

Egholm looked her up and down contemptuously.

A moment later he was tearing down the street with the big family Bible all uncovered under one arm.

Oh, but this was the most wonderful day of his life! The Bible itself had revealed its darkest secrets to him —*to him alone*. What would they say, all those whose minds were yet in darkness? what would old Angel Karlsen say? what would young Evangelist Karlsen look like with his wrinkled face – when they heard that the Community of the Brethren of St. John was built on sand – nay, upon a swamp, into the bottomless depth of which their money sank never to be seen again? *He, Egholm, was a new Luther*, wielding the Bible as a mighty club against heresy and false doctrine. They would have to make him Angel, ay, Archangel, after this. In every land where the Brethren of St. John were known, his name would be named with honour. He would write a new Book of Laws for the Brotherhood, and it should be translated into seven tongues. Into seven tongues! Almost like a new Bible.

Karlsen's shop was at a corner of the market square. It was a very old house, with a steep red roof. At the bottom two small windows had been let in to make it look like a shop, and through them one could discern, in spite of a thick layer of cobwebs and dust, the rows of shelves with yellow jars in all sizes. The modest store was suited to the taste of the peasant customers. They could stand for ages pondering over the choice of a shovel or rake, and weighing it in the hand. Karlsen was understood to be a wealthy man.

Egholm inquired of a chilblainy youth if he could speak with Angel Karlsen.

H'm. He didn't know. Would go in and ask.

"Say it's something of importance," said Egholm.

As the door in the corner was opened, Egholm heard a sound of voices in dispute from the office beyond. Two voices – and he could not recognise either. Or was it – yes, surely that was old Karlsen's, after all? Egholm listened in wonder, as one might listen to a familiar air played out of time or at a different pace.

"Call me a scoundrel if you like," shouted the one, a nasal trumpeting voice with a twang of city jargon – "call me a thief, a convict, or anything you damn well please, but I won't be called a fool!"

"But the contract, the contract, the contract!" screamed out the angelic voice of Karlsen the Elder.

No, the young man was sorry, Hr. Karlsen could not possibly see him just now. He was engaged with one of the travellers.

"Well, I must see him, anyhow," said Egholm more soberly.

They were at it again inside, and his knock was unheeded. Then suddenly the whole seemed to collapse in a cascade of laughter.

He knocked again, and walked in. There was old Karlsen, his face unevenly flushed, with a fat cigar sticking out of his beard, and before him a bright-eyed, elegantly dressed commercial traveller, who slapped the Angel's outstretched hand repeatedly, both men laughing at the top of their voices.

"Beg pardon, Hr. Karlsen – er – would you kindly read this?.." Where was it now? Egholm began helplessly turning the pages of his Bible.

"Hullo, here's somebody wants to save our souls, by the look of it," said the elegant one, with a tentative laugh.

"Didn't my young man out there tell you I was engaged?" said old Karlsen angrily, turning aside.

"But it's a discovery I've made – it's of the utmost importance. A wonderful find – here in the Holy Scripture itself. Read it, here – it's only a few lines. I can hardly believe my own senses. Read it – there!"

"But, my dear friend," said the Angel, "you can see for yourself I'm engaged. We're in the middle of important business."

"Let me read just three words to you."

"No, no, no, I won't have it, I say."

Egholm stood with hectic cheeks; his former respect for the Angel still checked any actual outburst of fury, but from the look of him, it was doubtful what might happen next.

"This is not the proper place to discuss the word of God, nor the proper time, nor the mood for it, either. Come round again this evening, my dear Egholm. At eight, say, and then we can talk over whatever it is that's troubling you."

The commercial plucked him by the sleeve. "I thought you were coming round to the hotel —*Postgaarden*, you said."

"Er – well, we might say *to-morrow* evening at eight," corrected the Angel. "Yes, come round to-morrow, Egholm; that will do."

Egholm drew himself up and shot sparks, but said nothing. He shut up the clasp of his Bible with a snap.

"Have a cigar, won't you?" said the Angel, offering the box.

"No, thank you."

"Yes, yes, do. They're none so bad – what, Hr. Nathan?"

Hr. Nathan uttered a curious sound – an articulate shudder, as it were – and looked quizzically at the box.

"I don't smoke."

"Well, then, a glass of port?"

"I've other things to think about than drinking wine. The fate of the Brotherhood lies in my hand. In *my* hand. I'm going round to the Deacon now."

“No, really? He he! Are you really? Well, well,” said Karlsen, with that strangely jovial angel voice of his, that Egholm knew so well, and yet found strange…

IV

But Egholm was so shaken by his interview with the Angel that he did not go round to the Deacon after all. The Deacon was a pottery worker, living at a village just outside the town.

He went back home to look again and make sure it was right. He clutched the Bible tightly under his arm as he walked, as if in dread lest the all-important text might drop out.

Yes, there it was. He read through the passage again in wonder, and fell to musing anew.

That same evening Evangelist Karlsen came round.

Egholm shook his head nervously.

"It's no good, Karlsen. No. I'm not going to give in."

Young Karlsen stood staring open mouthed.

"No. I've settled up with myself once and for all. I won't give in. I know well enough what you've come for."

"But, my dear friends, what on earth are you talking about? Anything wrong?"

"Karlsen, you know as well as I do it's your father sent you round," said Egholm almost pleadingly.

"I swear I know nothing of the sort. I've only just got back this evening. From Veile. Know Justesen, the horsedealer, there? Been seeing him. And then on the way – I've been dragging my bag along, and it's heavy. I thought I'd just look in for a breather."

"Let Sivert carry it for you," said Fru Egholm.

"No, thanks, it's all right outside on the stairs. I never like to leave it very long."

Egholm put his hand to his eyes; the cracked and furrowed countenance of the Evangelist always distracted his attention. Then he began telling of his discovery – first, in mysterious roundabout hints, then suddenly breaking out into fiery declamation, with the open book before him, and his finger-nail underlining the words.

Karlsen was thunderstruck. And he thought *he* knew his Bible… Never in his life had he come across that place. He stamped about the room, spitting into all four corners.

Egholm went further; he drew up an outline of the new laws, the entire reorganisation…

"It'll be a hard struggle for me, I know. But I'll…"

"Oh, we'll manage it all right," said Karlsen cheerfully.

"Eh? D'you mean to say … you're on my side?"

"Oh, I'm on the side of the Bible, of course."

And there was Egholm with the enemy's leading general won over, without a blow!

"It's the only thing to do, anyway," explained Karlsen, "as things are now. There's been some talk about you having my place when I moved up. But I don't know what they'll say to that now…"

"Me! Evangelist!" Egholm turned stiff all over.

"Yes," said Karlsen quietly.

"I've never heard a word about it before."

"Well, the Elders have gathered together… But it was to be a surprise, you understand?"

"Yes, yes," murmured Egholm faintly. Again it overwhelmed him for the moment, but he recovered himself, and said, with a laugh:

"Who knows, they might make me Angel now."

"Almost sure to, I should say," opined the dark Evangelist.

Egholm felt calm and strong now, no longer dizzy as he had been during the morning. And Karlsen was really a jolly sort, after all. Here he was, actually gloating over the face his respected father, the Angel, would set up when the bombshell burst.

The upshot of it was that they worked out a plan together.

Egholm was to prepare a grand speech for the meeting next Wednesday. Karlsen knew – now he came to think of it – quite a lot of first-rate texts that could be used, in support of the new discovery.

"But don't you think" – Egholm lowered his voice confidentially – "wouldn't it be better if I went round to the Brethren, and just let them know how it stands?"

Karlsen pondered.

"H'm. I should say, the best way's to take the whole congregation by surprise, all at once. Better effect, you know, when you can stand there and throw out a hand and there it is! And you've quite a decent platform manner, to my mind."

"Yes," agreed Egholm, beaming.

"Anyhow, I'll trot round and tackle a few of the thickest heads myself. I've a certain amount of influence, you know, and authority, and all that. I know how to manage them."

"Why, then, it's as good as done!" Egholm's voice was almost a song.

"Easy as winking," said Karlsen confidently.

"You don't know how glad I am you came over to the right side at once."

"Oh, never mind about that. You can always do me a little service some time in return."

They stayed up till nearly midnight. Egholm strode up and down, filling the room with words. Possibly he was already rehearsing for the coming Wednesday. Karlsen smoked, and drank many cups of black coffee. The children hung over the table, limp and heavy with drowsiness, casting greedy glances at the settee. Their mother tore at her sewing more violently than usual, and sighed aloud.

At last Karlsen took his leave. Egholm could not bear to break off even then, but went out with him. He waved his arms in the air, and tripped about, now and then actually circling round his companion as they walked.

Did he think, now, the Bible Society would care to have a dissertation on the two conflicting points? There ought, at any rate, to be some kind of indication, an asterisk, say, in the first place, to save others from confusion.

Karlsen thought they very likely would.

The street lamps glowed red in the fog. A policeman appeared at a corner, waved to them cheerfully, and said sympathetically: "Get along home; that's the best place for you."

"Thinks we're drunk," said Egholm, and stopped for breath. "But – we've been talking, and never thought … your bag. We've forgotten all about it."

"Bag? Oh yes… No; that's all right. I spotted the old man's cart just outside the station, and sent it home by that."

"Good! Then that's all right." Egholm's thoughts were at once occupied with something else. His brain was fluttering with innumerable winged thoughts.

"Well, better say good-night."

"Good-night, Karlsen. And thanks, thanks. You shall be Angel, if I can put in a word."

Egholm looked round, confused. Where had they got to now? These big houses … it wasn't the way…

"I'll see you right home," he offered.

"Well – er – I'm not exactly going home just yet," said the Evangelist, with some embarrassment. "Just a hand at cards with a few friends, that's all." He sighed guiltily. "But if I do win a *kroner*, say, it means ten *øre* to the Brethren… Oh, I forgot, that's all over now, of course."

"But – d'you mean to say there's anybody up at this time of night?" asked Egholm in astonishment.

"Only a couple of friends – Brethren in the Lord."

"But where?"

"In the red room at the Hotel *Postgaarden*," said Karlsen innocently.

V

Going round to the meeting on the following Wednesday, Egholm was surprised to find the hall already full, though it was not yet eight o'clock. He was also surprised, and agreeably so, to perceive that his entry created some stir. Evidently, Karlsen had let fall a word of what was to happen. Unless, indeed, it were the Lord Himself that had given hint of it to each individually. Anyhow, it was just as well to have plenty of witnesses in a case like this.

But where – where were the Elders of the flock?

Egholm sat down at the back of the hall, by the stove; it was a pious impulse that had come to him, having in mind the promise that whoso humbleth himself shall be exalted. And it was a good idea in other ways, he thought. The little group of paupers would form an excellent background.

"Angel Karlsen – hasn't he come yet?" he whispered to a shawl-wrapped crone at his side.

The woman looked round, showing a face weather-worn and overgrown like a relic of the past. A single tooth showed like a stone wedge in her half-open mouth. She made no answer.

Egholm repeated his question, with no more result than before. Oh, but, of course, it was Deaf Maren. He had forgotten for the moment. But how ugly she looked to-night – and what a malicious glance she gave him. And the others, too, all with the same forbidding look – why couldn't they answer? It was plain to see they had heard his question, and that they knew enough to tell him if they would. But every one of them turned away, or looked down at the floor – until at last Madam Strand, the gipsy woman, who was sitting on a bench at the extreme left, crept up to him with a submissive curtsey.

"They're in there – all of them," she said, with a shake of her thin grey locks. "All the God-fearing lot – the Angel, and the Prophet from Copenhagen – bless 'em – and the Deacon and young Karlsen. Talking and talking and making their plans. Such a fuss they're making to-night – enough to make a body quake all over."

She passed her wrinkled skinny hand over his wrist as she spoke.

Egholm felt his heart beat faster. He glanced over towards the door Madam Strand had indicated; it led to a little anteroom that was used, among other things, as a dressing-room for the gymnasium class. He fancied he could hear voices. A moment ago he had felt something like pity for all these people, whose conviction he would now be called upon to shatter and replace by another. But already he found himself in need of courage, seeking comfort from the fact that, after all, the weapon was in his hand. What did it matter if there were many who came up against him? And young Karlsen, no doubt, would help to bear the brunt of it.

This last was merely a sort of aside to himself. But Egholm felt his doubts of the Evangelist's honesty suddenly grown stronger than ever.

Those artful round eyes of his – and the queer look in them when he had said good-night that evening outside Hotel *Postgaarden*. What could one expect from a man who went off to play cards at twelve o'clock at night at hotels? And what sort of companions could he find for the same? "Brethren in the Lord," indeed! It was an expensive place, too, that one could hardly expect the poorer Brethren to frequent. Wait a bit, though: *Postgaarden* … wasn't it there the commercial traveller man was going to meet old Karlsen that same evening?.. To sum up, then, nothing more nor less than a neat piece of spying, and carrying the whole tale to his father immediately after! After which, of course, he had simply been sent round to all these simple souls, to set their minds against him, Egholm…

It would be a hard fight now.

Fru Westergaard and Mirre, the dog, passed by. Egholm rose and bowed, but received only a half-glance in return. Fru Westergaard made her way through to her privileged chair, and sat down carefully, arranging her skirts about the dog's head.

Her arrival was like that of the bride at a wedding, the signal for proceedings to begin. At the same moment, the door of the little room opened, and a little troop of men – looking, to tell the truth, more like mutes at a funeral than anything to do with weddings – marched in close order up on to the stage. At their head the Angel, wrapped in his beard, which seemed alive with electric tension. After him marched the Prophet from Copenhagen – a quondam priest by the name of Finck – together with the Deacon, Potter Kaasmose, whose long hair was plastered down and cut as if to the rim of one of his own pots. Of the remaining five, Egholm knew only two – Dideriksen, the Apostle, and Karlsen, the Evangelist. Dideriksen was a very pious man, as was apparent, for instance, in his habit of constantly stroking downwards over his face. Karlsen had put on a glaring red tie, which gave him a martial touch. He looked as if he were gloating over some great disaster. The stairs had been widened with a further consignment of beer boxes, so that the procession could mount the platform in something like order.

A breathless silence reigned among the congregation when Angel Karlsen began to pray, while the remaining Elders seated themselves in a half-circle. The Copenhagen Prophet, evidently on easy and familiar terms with platforms, thrust his coat-tails carelessly aside, polished his gold pince-nez with a handkerchief of brilliant whiteness, and did other things hitherto unknown in those surroundings. Young Karlsen, for instance – not to speak of Potter Kaasmose – would have been utterly unable to imitate the elegant movement with which he flung one leg over the other, after first pulling up the legs of his trousers. He had chosen his seat on the extreme right, like the first violin in an orchestra. His interesting appearance could hardly fail to draw off some attention from the prayer, but was no doubt edifying in itself.

"Amen," said Angel Karlsen.

"And having now concluded this prayer which Thou Thyself hast taught us, we further pray that this our ancient congregation, founded by St. John the Apostle, and lasting even unto this day in despite of the deluge of sin and the drought of indifference, may likewise henceforward so prevail against the ravages of the wolf that steals abroad by night, that neither sheep nor lamb may fall a prey.

"All ye who were present here last evening know what I mean. But for those others who do not, I will briefly set forth the matter which has called us Elders to gather in conclave here to-night."

Egholm sat gasping as if half stunned. "Present here *last evening*!.." Then they had called a meeting, without his knowledge – a meeting where they had betrayed him and his great cause, and sowed the seed of hatred against him in all the hearts of those who had no judgment of their own. In the midst of his anger, indignation, and fear, Egholm yet tried to frame a prayer for strength and courage. But he could do no more than mumble helplessly: "I'm in the right, you know I am. Lord God, you know I'm in the right."

Meanwhile, old Karlsen was reciting a pretty parable about the wolf that took upon itself sheep's clothing, that it might deceive the unwary – ay, even the shepherd himself, that he might open the door of the fold and let that monster enter in, with kindly words: "Enter, poor strayed sheep, and be refreshed with the grass of this pleasant fold." But then one day the shepherd looked into the eyes of that wolf in sheep's clothing, and lo! they were eyes of fire. And another day he looked at its teeth, and lo! they were the teeth of a wolf. But the monster believed itself still safe and unsuspected – even until to-night. "And so it comes here amongst us at this moment, and says to the sheep: 'Follow me. I know a place where the grass is richer and more pleasant; make haste and leave that evil shepherd, who shears you of your fleece. I will lead you; I will be your shepherd!'"

When the Angel had finished, Egholm rose, pale and ill at ease, and begged leave to speak. But his seat was so far back, and his voice so weak, that those on the platform might be excused for overlooking him. All heard, however, when young Karlsen called out the number of a hymn, and though Egholm repeated his request in a slightly louder voice, the congregation began singing:

"'Up, ye Christians, up and doing,

Warriors of the Lord, to arms!
Lo, the foeman's host pursuing,
All the power of war's alarms.
Draw and smite
For the right,
Hell is arming 'gainst the Light.

Follow in your leader's train,
Trusting in his strength to win,
Satan hopes the day to gain,
Up, and smite the host of sin!
Here at hand
Still doth stand
One who can all powers command!'"

Egholm had lost patience. As the hymn concluded, he sprang up and roared across the hall:

"Look here, do you mean to say *I'm* Satan?"

There was a stir as all in the hall turned round. Fru Westergaard's chair rocked suddenly, and a bench crashed down, but after that followed a moment of icy silence, cleft immediately by Karlsen's angel trumpet:

"Guilty conscience, Egholm?"

A new silence, Egholm stammering and gurgling, but finding no appropriate answer. Then the Evangelist let loose a shower of insulting laughter. Strangely enough, this had the effect of bringing Egholm to his senses.

"I was the first to ask; it's your place to answer. D'you mean to say I'm Satan?"

And before any of the Elders on the platform could pull themselves sufficiently together, he went on:

"Do you know this book here? It's an old one, and the title-page is missing. You think, perhaps, it's St. Cyprian, but I can tell you, it's the Holy Scripture. Yes, that's what it is. And what I have to say to you now is just the words of the Scriptures, and no more. Holy Scripture, pure and undefiled. I'll read it out, and you can judge for yourselves. I tell you, you haven't got a shepherd at all; you've a *butcher*!"

At the first exchange of words, the congregation had been confused and uneasy, quivering this way and that like a magnetic needle exposed to intermittent current. Now, Egholm had, it is true, most of them facing his way, but many looked up to the Elders, and especially to the Angel, partly to see the effect of Egholm's words, and partly to gain some hint as to which way their own feeling should tend. The congregation was thus divided, but Egholm wanted it united. Accordingly, he left his place between Deaf Maren and the stove, and advanced by jerks, still speaking, up towards his foes.

Yes, he knew it was a serious thing to call Angel Karlsen – Egholm shook a little at the venerable words – a butcher. But it was plain to him now, after what had passed, that Angel Karlsen was not acting in good faith as regards the point in dispute: whether tithe should be paid, or if tithe had been abolished by God's own word, and was consequently foolish – nay, wicked. But if the Angel knew God's will, and did not act upon it, and open the eyes of the Brotherhood to the same, then no words could be too strong.

Egholm spoke for twenty minutes. He had got right to the front, and stepped up on to the first of the beer boxes, making, as it were, an act drop of his body in front of those on the platform. The audience could only see their shadows, and hear a slight sound when the Copenhagen Prophet cleared his throat. Once young Karlsen tried his devilish laugh, but was sternly suppressed by his venerable

sire. There was no real disturbance of any sort; the congregation made but one listening, eager face. The Elders were exorcised already. Victory – victory!

But at the very moment when the thought first thrilled him, Egholm's eloquence suddenly ran dry. With a spasm of dread he realised that he could say no more. The source within him, that he had imagined endless, had ceased. He had not firmness enough to begin again, and the texts and parables he had chosen for his purpose had been rehearsed so often in his mind for the occasion that he could not now remember what he had actually said and what he could still use.

The emptiness that followed was almost physically oppressive – Egholm gasped once or twice as if the very air about him were gone. Then came the voice of the Angel, calm and firm:

"Have you any more to say?"

"No," said Egholm, paling as he spoke. "I hope now you have understood."

And with that he stepped down from his elevation, sighed, wiped his forehead nervously, and leaned up against the wall at the side.

Old Karlsen delivered a prayer longer and more powerful than ever before. It gathered like a cloud above the congregation, gradually obscuring all that Egholm had said. Not until he noticed that the cloud had condensed here and there to a mild rain of tears did the Angel pass over imperceptibly to mention of Egholm's onslaught.

"And now, now – well, you have heard the leader of your flock, the shepherd and Angel of the Brotherhood, referred to as a butcher. Here, in our own house, and out of the mouth of one whom we regarded as a brother. Why do I not lift up my hand against him, and drive him forth, even as the Master drove out those from the Temple who defiled its holy places? No! For it is written: *Blessed are the meek*."

The Angel's prayer had opened the hearts of the flock. Thereupon Finck the Prophet stepped forward. He wore a reddish-brown beard, his eyebrows were bushy, and his eyes glittered behind his glasses. It seemed as if he had hitherto affected lordly indifference, but was now so moved that he could no longer control his emotion, and his anger burst forth in a torrent.

"In days gone by," he began, "when I realised that the Established Church of Denmark was being suffered to drift like a ship without a compass, I declined to stay on board. And before leaving, I warned my fellow-travellers, and the captain and the mate. I told them in plain, bold words that they were drifting towards shipwreck. Many believed that my words were over-bold. A conflict raged about my name, as some of you may perhaps remember. But, now, we have heard a man whose words were not bold, but only brutal and coarse – a man who, I think I am qualified to say, lacks the very rudiments of ability to understand what he reads. This ignoramus takes upon himself to pick out a verse here and a verse there, and then adds them together in a fashion of his own. We may compare him with the man who read one day in his Bible: 'Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him' – and the next: 'Go thou and do likewise.'…"

The sum and essence of Finck's oration was that the rendering of tithe was a jewel of price reserved for the Brotherhood of St. John apart from all others. To cast away that jewel now would be sheer madness.

Egholm stood quivering with impatience to answer. His mind was clear now as to what he should say. And as soon as Finck had ended, he sprang forward.

"It seems to me that Hr. Finck, the Prophet, in spite of all his claims to learning, and his libellous attack…"

"Silence, man!" roared Finck, his voice echoing roundly from the walls. "We will hear no more. You have said your last word here. Go!"

"My turn now," said young Karlsen, with a swaggering fling of his shoulders.

But the venerable Angel could not find it in his heart to deny Egholm a last word. He found it preferable to let him wreak his own destruction. And with his keen perception of the feeling among the congregation, he was confident that this would be the result.

"Beloved Brethren," he said, "there is but a quarter of an hour left us – one poor quarter of an hour. I had endeavoured to secure the hall for another hour, but other and more worldly matters intervened. I think, then, we should let Egholm say what his conscience permits him, and then conclude with the old hymn: 'All is in the Father's hand.'"

"I should just like to ask Prophet Finck," said Egholm furiously, "how *he* would interpret and explain…"

"What's that?" said Finck loftily.

"The leading point, the essence of the whole thing, namely, the text found by me in the Epistle to the Hebrews – you have not said a word about that, really. I am firmly convinced that I am right, but, all the same, I should like to hear how you propose to explain away…"

"Write it down," broke in Finck sharply.

Egholm obeyed involuntarily. He found a stump of lead pencil in his waistcoat pocket, and began scrawling on the faded paper at the back of his Bible. He was a facile writer ordinarily, but in his present state of emotion he could hardly frame his question. Two or three times he struck out what he had written and began again. Suddenly he heard young Karlsen clearing his throat, and then:

"Now, then, we'd better…"

"No, no!" cried Egholm.

"Throw that man out," commanded Finck.

"You cowards, you're afraid to let me speak!"

"Oh, go and heave him out, Johannes," called young Karlsen, leaning over the footlights.

But Johannes, the postman, was paralysed already by the unwonted tumult, and did not move. There were others in the hall, however, who seemed eager enough to respond to the invitation, seeing that Karlsen himself was to be responsible.

"You miserable traitor," hissed Egholm, "give me back my tithes, give me my money, and I'll go. But not before. Give me my four hundred *kroner*."

"Turn him out, the wretch!"

"'All is in the Father's hand,
All things answer His command…'"

The Angel made a brave attempt to start the hymn, but the congregation appeared more interested in the conflict, and no one followed his lead.

"My money – give me my money, you thieves!"

"Pot calling the kettle black!" cried the Evangelist, with a sneer.

"Liar, slanderer, scoundrel!" roared Egholm, seeing in this last remark a reference to the manner of his dismissal from the railway service. And, beside himself with fury, he raised the heavy Bible to throw at Karlsen, when a diversion took place which drew off his attention and that of the audience.

A confused but violent noise came from the back of the hall, and then repeated shouts that rose above the din.

"You lanky black beast! You filthy devil! What about the seventh commandment? Yes; it's you I mean, you filthy, incontinent swine! You evangelical hypocrite! What about Metha, eh? She's lying there at home now and asking for you – for you!"

The words were plain and to the point; everyone in the hall stared in amazement at the backsliding photographer, who was standing on a bench and waving clenched fists in the air. It was evident that he had been drinking.

Then they turned to look at young Karlsen. His face was drawn awry.

Egholm was so moved at this unexpected reinforcement that the tears flowed down his cheeks. He found voice again and took up the cry.

"They're a lot of criminals, all of them. Setting themselves up against God's laws that I've discovered. I'll have you up, that I will. Give me my money, my money!"

Young Karlsen lost his self-control. He sprang in long leaps down through the hall, and flung himself upon Egholm, thrusting his head forward like a bull about to charge.

"You shut yo' jaw!" he cried, lapsing into his country dialect.

"Lauritz, be careful!" cried the Angel warningly. But it was too late. Finck came up to take part, and Egholm was borne towards the door, still shouting, and hanging on with arms and legs to the benches as he passed.

A little party of Brethren carried Meilby in similar fashion to the door. Serve him right, the sneak, always behindhand with his tithes…

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.