

2 The Stranger

by Walter Macken

I Michael John's shop was the only one in the village, but in it you could find everything you would ever want to buy. Strangers rarely found their way into it, for the village was in the middle of the mountains with a long and very bad road leading into it from the main road. Everyone in it was quite happy, and they did not care if they never saw a stranger. So Michael John was a little surprised one fine spring morning, looking out of his small window, to see a stranger coming over the hill and walking down the road.

He was a tall man dressed in a dark suit. The boots he was wearing and his trousers were covered with dust. He has come far, Michael John thought, and he has walked all the way. His shoulders were very broad, and he had very long arms hanging straight down. They were almost below his knees. His head was bare and his short hair was very grey and there was a sort of yellow look about his face. He paused in the middle of the road. There were only four houses to be seen. The other few were hidden behind the hills. He saw the faded tobacco sign outside Michael John's and headed that way. Michael John pulled away from the window.

The shop was part of his house, just a small counter to one side of the room. The big open fire was blazing, because even though it was a spring day there was snow on the top of the hills and you would get very cold if you were not working.

The man appeared in the door.

"Morning," said Michael John.

The man came in. He had a big face, with big muscles on the jaws and a strong nose. Calm brown eyes without any expression in them. Michael John liked the man from the look of him. That was the way he was. He would like you or he would not. If he liked you and you turned out bad he would always find

stranger fremmed
rarely sjældent
suit sæt tøj
boot støvle
cover dække
dust støv
faded falmet
sign (her:) skilt
head (vb) sætte kursen,
gå
pull trække (sig)
counter disk
blaze burn
jaw kæbe
calm rolig
turn out vise sig at være



excuses for you. If he did not like you and you turned out to be a saint he would not trust you anyhow.

"It's a nice day," said the man. His voice seemed to be rusty.

"It is, thank God," said Michael John.

"I'd like to buy a loaf of bread and a little cheese and a bottle of stout."

"It's a pleasure," said Michael John, reaching for them.

"Would it offend you if I ate them here?" the man asked.

"It would not," said Michael John. He liked the man's good manners.

He watched the man eating. He ate slowly and carefully. He chewed every bit of the bread and cheese slowly and washed it down his throat with the stout. He took a purse out of his pocket, found a few coins and paid, and Michael John thought he was old-fashioned. Very few men carried the little leather purses nowadays. He was not as young as he had looked

ex'cuse *undskyldning*

saint *helgen*

anyhow *alligevel*

rusty *rusten*

stout *mørkt øl, porter*

pleasure *glæde, fornøjelse*

offend *forværme*

manners *opførsel; good*

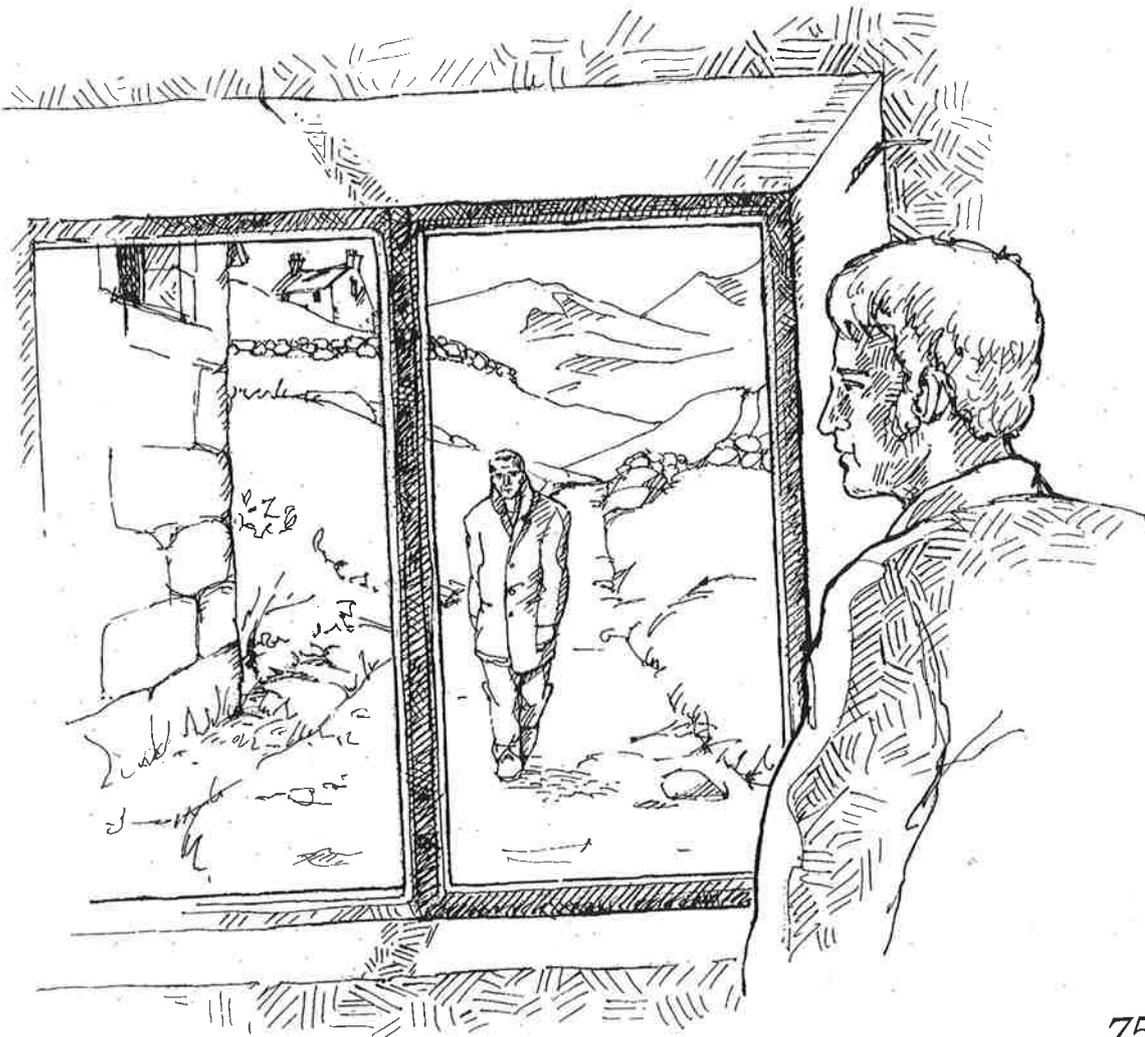
manners *høflighed*

chew *tygge*

wash *skylle*

purse *pung*

coin *mønt*



walking to the house. Michael John thought he must be more than fifty. But he was strong and healthy. Muscles were bulging under his coat sleeves. Michael John wondered about him.

He took out tobacco and filled a pipe and lit it. Then he looked at Michael John.

"This is a nice spot," he said. "Is it lonely?"

"I don't know," said Michael John. "We like it. Is it lonely? I don't know. We haven't time to be lonely."

"I don't mean that way," said the man. "I mean do many strangers find their way into it?"

"We're rarely troubled," said Michael John.

"When I came in by the fork on the hills," said the man, "I saw a green space up in the middle of the heather. There is a house there too with a lock on the door. Looking like a small hill farm that had been deserted."

"That's right," said Michael John.

"Does it belong to somebody?"

"It belongs to me," said Michael John. "I was born in that house. My grandfather died in it. We couldn't make him move down here."

The man paused. His big hands rubbed against each other.

"Would you let me live there?" he asked. Direct.

Michael John was a bit uncertain.

"It's not in good shape," he said. "The roof is bad. It must be leaking inside. It wants an awful lot done to it."

"I'll do it," said the man. "I'll do all that wants to be done to it, and I'll clear the fields of the weeds. I'll make it very nice for you and I'll pay you within my means."

"It's a long way from company," said Michael John. "In the bad winters there's no way out of it. A person would be snowed up like the sheep."

"I'd like it that way," said the man.

"Where are you from?" Michael John asked.

"I'd rather not tell you that," the man said earnestly. "I'd just like to fix that little house if you'll let me live there on my own. If you think I'm honest, oblige me, and if you don't think so just let it lie."

Michael John thought. He looked into the brown eyes that were calmly fixed on his own. Michael John had a big, cheerful face that was very readable. The man knew he had succeeded when he saw its expression.

"All right," said Michael John.

The man sighed. Michael John was surprised. A terrible lot depended on that, he thought.

bulge svulme

sleeve ærme

trouble genere

fork 'hvor vejen deler sig'

heather lyng

rub gnide

shape (her:) stand

leak lække, være utæt

wants ... done trænger

til, at der bliver gjort ...

clear rense, rydde

weeds ukrudt

wi'thin my means så

godt jeg kan; efter evne

company selskab; 'andre

folk'

earnestly alvorligt

ob'lige me do as I ask

you

cheerful happy

readable easy to read

suc'ceed have heldet med

sig, få sin vilje

sigh sukke

de'pend on afhænge af



"My name is Paul," said the man.

"Shake on it, then, Paul," said Michael John, holding out his hand.

Paul seemed to hesitate, and then put out his hand. It was as hard as rock, Michael John felt.

"You do it up, and when you have it fixed we can talk about a payment from then," said Michael John. "Up to that it will be like you are working for me."

The man's eyes showed his thanks. For one of the few times in his life Michael John was embarrassed. That look should only be in the eyes of a sick dog, he thought.

If the people wanted something to talk about they had it now. They wanted to know everything. Michael John, knowing very little more than themselves, had to pretend to be very mysterious. That went well. Just a friend of mine, said Michael John, from the other side of the country. Bad health. Building himself up.

1. Describe the village. Why was it rarely visited by strangers?
2. Describe Michael John's shop.
3. What do you specially notice about the stranger's looks?
4. Why do you think Michael John liked him?
5. What did the man buy?
6. What were Michael John's feelings about the village?
7. What was it the stranger would like to do?
8. Why did Michael John hesitate?
9. Why did he agree?
10. What was Paul's reaction?
11. What did Michael John tell the villagers about Paul? Why?

Polite requests (:anmodninger) and answers

Please ...

I'd like to ...

Would you please give me ...?

Could I trouble you about ...?

Would it offend (:fornærme) you if ...?

Would you let me ...?

Could you perhaps/possibly ...?

It's a pleasure ...

I'm pleased to ...

I'm happy to ...

You are welcome to ...

hesitate *tøve*

do up *fix, repair*

em'barrassed *forlegen*

build oneself up *komme*

til kræfter



II

Three months later you would not have known the small place on the side of the hill. The house had changed from sad and grey to yellow and white. The fields were cleared with neat stone walls all around them. It was like a miracle. But nobody could get close to the man. He would answer your greeting and talk about the weather and drink a bottle with you in Michael John's in the calm of the evening. But that was all. He had lost his yellow look. He was brown and strong and one of the hardest-working men they had ever met. And one of the happiest. The villagers became fond of him, and proud of his place, and Michael John had a way of looking at him, as if he had got him from Santa Claus for Christmas.

The inside of his house was nice. The furniture he made himself was good and solid. The children liked him. They seemed to understand his silence. With a knife he could make the funniest figures that you ever saw out of bits of branches and roots. There was not a kid in the place that did not have one of them. In the beginning the parents often questioned the children about him. But before long they gave up asking and just accepted him.

But then, the following spring, the car made its way into the mountains.

The road was bad even for bicycles, and the car had terrible trouble with it, bumping along and swaying. It was not the only car that had come in here. Lorries had come before and often brought supplies in to Michael John. But lorry drivers are very careless people who will drive a lorry in and out of hell as long as they do not own it themselves.

Paul was working at the road he was making into the place. It was a hard job, but now the worst was over and it was a pleasant sight to see it running up the hillside. He saw the car making its way and he leaned on the spade to watch it come. If he had seen it coming a year ago it might have given him uneasiness, but he was a different man now.

The man driving the car was small and fat. He wore glasses and his face was a round blob that was decorated with a small nose and a small mouth and small eyes. He travelled for people. He sold all sorts of things for them. He was very successful because he often did what he was doing now, following the bad side roads that other men would have thought too much trouble.

As the bumping car came closer Paul pretended to be working

neat *pæn*
greeting *hilsen*
root *rod*
sway *svaje, hælde*
sup'plies *varer,*
forsyninger
careless *uforsigtig,*
ligeglad
un'easiness *utilpashed,*
uro
blob *klat*
work away *be busy*
working





away. But he could not help looking back now and again over his shoulder. The car stopped below him. The window rolled down. He heard the small high voice calling him. He turned and went down to stand beside the car. He could feel the heat from it. Then he saw the face of the little man and his life was destroyed. The man tried to hide the recognition in his face, but it was too late. Paul had seen it. Bitterness filled him, and black despair. His hands gripped the spade, hard. Seeing this, the man was suddenly frightened. Then Paul turned away and went slowly up the hill. The little fat fellow called after him, "Hi, mister, is this the way in to Michael John's?"

The man did not turn back to answer him. He kept walking up the hill.

not help *ikke lade være*
recog'nition *genkendelse*
de'spair *fortvivlelse*



1. "Nobody could get close to the man." What does this sentence mean here?
2. What were Paul's feelings about "the place"?
3. What were Michael John's feelings about Paul?
4. Why had Paul started making a road up to the house?
5. What is the first impression (indtryk) you get of the man in the car?

III

The salesman started his car again and went on.

He smiled broadly. Who would ever believe this? He heard himself telling the story in every cheap hotel in the country. Did these people in here know? They would not. But wait till they heard. He went down into the valley at full speed. He did not notice the river, the glittering sea far away, the sun shining brightly on the cottages. He saw nothing because he was really only a blind little man who thought about nothing except commission and dirty stories.

Michael John was in the shop, and two more of the men.

He did not even try to sell anything. He started straight off.

"Hey! How are you, men? I met a fellow up on the side of the hill. Do you know who he was?"

"That's Paul," said Michael John.

"Paul, is that what he calls himself?" said the little fat fellow.

"No, my friend, that's James Brian who killed his wife twenty years ago, down in the town. Came home drunk and didn't know his own strength. Listen, man. Listen now to the best part of it. Do you know who was foreman of the jury that convicted him? Me! Imagine that! Did you ever hear the like of that?"

"Listen," said Michael John tensely. "Did you talk to him?"

"Oh no," said the little fellow. "Not me. Should I talk to a murderer? He took one look at me and then he went up the hill as if the devil was after him."

Michael John left the shop at a run. He was cursing. He was not good at running any more. He was slow in the legs and heavy around the middle but he ran. Up the road and around the hill, holding his hand at his chest to keep his heart from bursting.

And he was too late. That was what he had been afraid of.

He stood there and called to the small figure down in the valley.

salesman *repræsentrant*
 glittering *shining*
 com'mission *'procenter',*
fortjeneste
 dirty *sjofel*
 straight off *at once*
 jury *nævninge*
 con'vict *dømme*
 i'magine *tænk jer*
 the like of that *noget*
lignende
 curse *bande*





The small figure of the big man running and jumping down. He was wearing the suit that he came with and nothing at all in his hands or in his pockets or on his back. He was going out the very same way he came in. Michael John stood there and called: "Paul! Paul!" He called and the hills carried his call away and over the man and sent it back to him. He saw the man stand as if he had been hit with a bullet, wait a moment and then run on. Michael John shouted "Paul!" once more, but it was no use, and he knew it. Tears of anger and sadness came into his eyes, and he had to bend in two, coughing from the running. Then he turned and walked back to the group at the door of the shop. Michael John stopped in front of the little fat one and looked at him with red-rimmed eyes.

"Get out of here, you little bastard," he said, "and if you put a foot in this place again I'll shoot you."

"Now look here," said the little fellow, in the tone he used to sell people things they did not want.

"Get out of here," Michael John roared at him, grabbing his

bullet (*gevær*) kugle

cough *hoste*

red-rimmed *rødrandede*



shoulder and pushing him towards his car. "Get out of here before I cripple you."

"But –" said the fellow, and then after a look at Michael John's face he jumped into the car and shot away. Michael John bent and took up a stone from the road and flung it at the car. It made a mark in the black paint.

He walked into the shop and went over towards the fire. Then he sat down on a chair and lowered his face into his hands.

1. Why did the salesman get frightened?
2. Why is he called "blind"?
3. "... didn't know his own strength."
Try to imagine what may have happened.
4. Why did Paul leave?
5. Why did he not take anything with him?
6. What would you have done in his situation?

cripple slå til krøbling
fling/flung/flung kaste,
kyle
lower sænke, bøje