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The Yellow Envelope

by J. Christian Bay
With two original drawings by Christian Petersen

Translation and introduction by James D. Iversen

INTRODUCTION - This short story is an example of a collaboration of two outstandingly productive Danish Americans, one in literature, the other in the world of art. The names of J. Christian Bay (1871-1962) and Christian Petersen (1885-1961) have appeared before in The Bridge. Two translations of Bay's work have been published; the first was in an article about an account of a fictional visit to Chicago by Hans Christian Andersen.² The second was a translation of his article about the plant scientist Niels Ebbesen Hansen.³ Two reviews of books about Christian Petersen have appeared in The Bridge.⁴

J. Christian Bay was born in Rudkøbing on the island of Langeland in Denmark on the 12th of October, 1871. After receiving a degree in Botany from the University of Copenhagen in 1892, he left to find his fortune in the United States that same year. He started working at the Missouri Botanical Garden in St. Louis, Missouri, but in 1894, he moved to Des Moines, Iowa, where he worked as a bacteriologist for the Iowa State Board of Health. He became well acquainted with other prominent Danish Americans while he was in Des Moines and participated in the dedication ceremonies at Grand View College in 1896. He taught at the Ashland Danish Folk School in Michigan for a couple of years before starting work at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. in 1900, where he was involved in helping to develop the Library of Congress book classification system. In 1905 he was invited to become a "Classifier" in the John Crerar Library of Science at the University of Chicago. He was named Librarian (i.e., Director) of the Library in 1928 and continued in that position until he became Librarian Emeritus in 1946.⁵

Bay was a prolific writer in both the Danish and English languages. Much of his writing in the English language was in the area of his research and bibliographic interests, but he also did many translations and other writings about Danes and Danish Americans, in both Danish and English.
Examples of these include writings about Danish immigrants such as Max Henius and Frederik Lange Grundtvig. The work about Max Henius was published in 1959, when Bay was 88 years of age. In the preface to his book of short stories Frisk Luft, Bay counted himself among six Danish American authors who attempted to interpret "life on the prairie" for those Danes who had immigrated to the Midwest. He felt that one of the goals of these six authors' writing was to help the people who remained in Denmark gain empathy and understanding for the immigrants who had left their homeland. He proclaimed Anton Kvist the master of the six. Kvist had earlier written a poem in honor of J. Christian Bay in 1930, but it wasn't published in this country until 1955. A short story by Bay follows Kvist's poem in the same issue of Dansk Nytaar. J. Christian Bay wrote a large number of short stories. In that same 1955 issue of Dansk Nytaar, Editor Paul C. Nyholm indicates that Bay, by that date, had written more than 60 short stories, published in various places.

A primary reason for the translation and republication of "The Yellow Envelope" in The Bridge in the year 2007 is that the Christian Petersen Art Museum has opened this year in the restored Morrill Hall (built 1890) on the Iowa State University campus in Ames, Iowa. The new museum houses more than 700 pieces of Petersen's sculpture and drawings. There are now four books which have been published regarding the art of Christian Petersen, and the first two of these, as stated above, have been reviewed in The Bridge.

Christian Petersen was born on a farm just outside of Dybbøl, in Southern Jutland, on 25 February, 1885, and immigrated with the rest of the family to the United States in 1894. He and his family eventually settled on the East Coast, and that is where he received his training and his early reputation as an engraver and sculptor, but he moved to the Midwest in the late 1920s and lived in the Chicago area from 1928 to 1934. We know that while in Chicago, he became well acquainted with Royal Danish Consul General Reimund Baumann, and also with the renowned landscape architect Jens Jensen. Thus, it is likely that he also became an acquaintance of Librarian J. Christian Bay during those 6 years in Chicago.

In 1935, Christian Petersen became the nation's first "artist-in-residence" at Iowa State College (the name later changed to Iowa State University) and remained in that position as well as a member of the teaching faculty until he retired in 1959. Although Petersen was
apparently not as well-known to the professional Danish American community as J. Christian Bay, he was quite proud of his Danish roots and completed a number of works pertaining to Danes and Danish Americans. After his move to Iowa, he became a good friend of August Bang of Cedar Falls, Iowa, who was the editor of the Danish language weekly Dannevirke as well as the annual Christmas publication Julegranen. A comprehensive illustrated article about Christian Petersen and his art was written by Bang and published in Julegranen in the 1943 issue, and shorter presentations were published in later issues.

In the following short story by J. Christian Bay, the author emphasizes, with eloquent poignancy, the sacrifices made by these "pioneers of the prairie" during World War II. Christian Petersen's illustrations measure up to Bay's literary standard.

Rasmus Lind drove straight home from the post office. It was a letter from their son, from Peter, who had gone to fight over in Africa or some other place. That much they had learned. A little doodling on some letters of the alphabet here and there; when they put those letters together, there stood "MOROCCO". That was, however, three months ago, so there could have been much that happened since then. Rasmus did not open the letter in the post office. Mr. and Mrs. always stood outside, but it was Hanne, who opened the letters from their tall, handsome boy, who had been taken from her -- and, of course, also from Rasmus, of course. But Mother is always Mother for a boy.

The old Ford sighed and groaned on the road out of Nyborg. Rasmus' only thought was to get home with the letter. "The Lord be praised" it wasn't a telegram. Yes, that did happen, that people received yellow paper in their boxes. The color showed the kind of message, so the colors all faded and all hope turned gray, and fathers and mothers sat silent and serious and surprised about that all these strong men who were pictured in the papers, could sit there and look happy.

Søren drove in through the gate and stopped in front of his farmstead. A good little farm. Everything in order--so it was. It had been difficult to get everything taken care of after the oldest boy had
been taken. The three daughters were very capable, for that Hanne had the honor, but there were no menfolk to find for help.

It was getting dark. Rasmus drove his car into the garage and waved to Hanne, who had opened the kitchen door.

"There's a letter!" shouted Rasmus.

Mille, the oldest of the girls, came running out of the barn. "There's a letter, Father, great." She snatched the letter, which Father had held out, and flew over the yard to her mother. Rasmus calmly collected the sacks together, which he had bought in Nyborg, and walked after her.

Hanne, Mille and the two younger girls, sat in the living room with the precious letter. Rasmus stumbled into the rocking chair and said nothing.

"Hang up your jacket, Father", said Hanne.

From the front porch he had asked "Where is the letter from?"

Hanne had already opened it. "No place," she said: "There are only some stamps. Well, it doesn't make any difference, where he is living. Please, in God's name, read it, Mille". She handed Mille the letter and folded her hands in a devotional attitude.

Mille read slowly and with fascination. The letter was in English. The Nebraska Twenty-Second had finally come out of (blacked out) --- "That would be Africa." surmised Mille --"-- and was stationed in (blacked out) and it was a very nice place with palm trees and mountains. They got wine to drink because the water was so bad. And Peter had been promoted to corporal."

Rasmus slowly rocked back and forth in his chair. "Hey," he said, "My father was also a corporal, but he made fun of that, when he talked about it. He had been stationed in Horsens.

"My mother's brother was stationed in Aarhus," remarked Hanne. 'You are in error, Father. Your father and my uncle were soldiers together. They both came from the Aarslev area. I am certain they were stationed in Aarhus."

"No, it was Horsens," Rasmus declared. "For I was just a little fellow, once we were driving to Horsens, and they showed me the prison. That was a good place to stay away from, they said, and I have never ever been there since, ha."
Hanne shook her head, but composed herself. "Read on, my girl", she said. Mille read on.

One of Peter's comrades had been a newspaper boy in Brooklyn. His name was Joe. He had no parents. Mille looked up from the letter. "Yeah, that's what it says all right, he has no parents and no brothers or sisters.

"His parents are probably deceased, my girl", Hanne said carefully.

But Joe was a good pal. They shared everything with each other. Cigarettes and sweaters and socks and chocolates and gum. Joe was a Catholic and very interested in the many churches and pictures of the saints there in (blackened out). Their group had made slow progress forward. The country's people were friendly, but afraid, and many of them were in dire need. Peter and Joe and all the others worried about all the small children.

"He has to be in Italy", said Rasmus. "The big boys couldn't let us know whether our children are at the North Pole or in Australia. We could just as well tell the Germans something about it anyway."

"What are you talking about?" shouted Hanne. "If we knew everything, we could easily write it to the Germans, and so they could sneak up on our people, and ---"

Rasmus Lind stood up and lit the lamp. "That is a sure way, Mother," he said, "we write every other day to Hitler, ha". Hanne opened her mouth to answer, but was interrupted.

"Listen!" Mille interrupted. "There is more. If I should be excused altogether from coming back, and if Joe should be on hand, remember we are pals." "She repeated those words slowly and with a trembling voice, put her hand on her forehead, and fought back the tears. It was very quiet in the living room. Finally, Rasmus Lind rose from his chair, found his pipe and tobacco and stood thoughtfully. "Nothing can take him from us, Mother," he said; "he belongs to you and me."

"Belongs?" blurted Hanne. "He belongs to the whole world. Can you get that in your head, Rasmus? Peter and Mille and Karen and Marie, they belong to all others, and all others belong to others - now. Now! Rasmus. It was different, when we lived here nearly alone and hardly had any neighbors. We brought up our children,
that was not more than our duty. Our horses and cattle and our dog and our cat, yes, they belong to us, but the children -- no, now the world is quite different, that can we perceive.

"Yeah" said Rasmus gently. "But the responsibility, Mother, that we still have."

The twelve-year-old Marie crawled up and had set herself on his knee. "I am your girl, Father." He stroked his hand softly over the blond braids. "That you are, Marie."

"The duty," Marie proclaimed, "You well mean the responsibilities, yes, those we have, and those we also must continue with."

Rasmus stood up and laid his pipe aside. "I have to go out and do the chores," he said; "That is my duty."

"No," Hanne replied. "That is your responsibility."

"Hm. Ha." Rasmus stood in the kitchen door and set his cap on his bald head. "I don't really understand that, Hanne."

"Yes," answered Hanne with a little smile. "The children, they are our responsibility, as long as we have them. Now it is my duty to put food on the table, and it is your duty to do the chores. But you have no responsibility if the buckwheat freezes in the night or ---"

Rasmus closed the door. Hanne was smart enough, ha.

"----- or just as when Peter is away from us over there in the war," Hanne ended her sentence half to herself. "Come, girls, and let us get the food on the table."

II

After the fighting in Africa, the Twenty-Second Nebraska regiment was blended in with many other units when the army was transferred to Italy. The landing was difficult, and the opposition had been bitter. But a significant force had finally been assembled on the plain near Capua, and, supported by energetic air strikes, the troops had advanced forward to San Germano, where the enemy had organized a stiff opposition and among other places were occupying the ancient Cloister Monte Cassino. They were fortunate enough to occupy Caserto with its old Neapolitan Royal Castle, but from San Germano the way was strongly blocked. In addition they had reached a mountainous area. It appeared that the Cloister had been hastily occupied and fortified and that the Pope had sought to
get the armies to leave it alone. Much earlier, however, many of its rich artifacts had been taken away and hidden in holes and in rocky areas. But before many days had passed the crimson-colored mountain anemones were speckled with crimson of another kind than the blossoms up along the steep mountain roads. It could now be seen, that all of the noble cloistered brethren had fled in great terror, and soon the bombs smashed the beautiful halls with their fine lumachello marble walls, while the infantry laboriously crawled on hands and knees up along the steep cliffs under the waving Pistacios and Euphorbia. Nothing could be more meaningless than to destroy this honorable place, where the church's arched, beautifully decorated ceilings, Solimeno's altar paintings, and the old hand-carved pews collectively constituted a national treasure; twelve hundred years this place had stood under many other wars, while Father Benedict's grave itself under the altar was visited by all the world's travelers and pilgrims.

Among the thousands of soldiers, who obeyed orders and crept up the mountain, dangerously adorned with cliffs and ravines, there were two, who breathlessly and nearly frantically under the call of duty and a more intangible sense of responsibility followed a courageous young lieutenant. It would be a splendid achievement to surround and expel the hated enemy in the Cloister on the mountain top. And it worked. Finally one fortunate and victorious crowd of young men swung over the wall, which surrounded the Cloister's outer yard, and one of them shouted: "Boys, that's the way my old grandpa climbed Lookout Mountain in the Civil War," -- then a salvo crashed down over them from the half-destroyed tower.

"Peter!"
"Yes, Joe."
"Hit?"
"I -- can't move, Joe."

Some of the comrades gathered around. Neither of them could get up: Joe tore off his shirt and wrapped it around his knee. A young officer came quickly. Peter coughed up a bloody froth, his pal tried to set his little water cup to his mouth. The officer thought that the fight was about over and help was on the way to the wounded, the dead, the dying.

75
"Joe."

"Yes, Peter, old boy."

"We got there, Joe," -- he closed his eyes. "You -- you take my --- my place. I can't -- can't see you, Joe. --- Mother --- tell them all cheerio. --- take my place. At home, Joe."

"You bet,' said Joe. Blood flowed in a stream from his badly injured leg, and Joe, the paperboy from Brooklyn, fainted beside his pal, whose last breath he mercifully was spared from hearing.

III

Rasmus Lind stood clothed ready for travel.

"You should come along into town, Mother. It will cheer you up. There are signs of Christmas all over, and it would be good for you to see other people. The girls can take care of everything until we get back home."

"Oh, Rasmus, I have seen other people every day, Stine & Niels Olsen and Ane & Marie Løvbjerg. Somebody comes every other hour and asks for news. You know, Rasmus, the only news that is in our minds -- and now it has been four months since we have had a letter."

"Perhaps it will come today, Mother."

"Yes, perhaps," sighed Hanne. "But you have to remember everything on this list, you mustn't forget anything of what I have written down for Christmas."
"If there should be a letter, I will come home immediately at high speed, whether I have bought anything or not. Are any of the girls coming with me?"

"That would have to be Marie, because I need Karen and Mille." Marie had heard the discussion and quickly changed her clothes.

The old Ford sighed and groaned, which on this gray December day aimed toward Nyborg, and the child talked nearly incessantly to her Father, whose thoughts were just as far away as Hanne's.

"Do you have any money?" finally he spoke.

"Yes, I have a little, if there is anything I see that I want to buy," answered Marie.

Rasmus smiled in his beard. She is just like Hanne, he thought.

"But maybe I can get some from you, Father!"

"Hm, ha," said Rasmus and thought, well, that for once, was not quite like Hanne.

It started to snow, before they reached Nyborg and stopped by the station. Marie headed toward the row of stores. The Christmas decorations had long since conquered the windows, and the people met and greeted one another, talked a little bit and then hurried further. There were yet fourteen days until Christmas, but out in the country people shopped carefully, so there was no crowding either outside or in.

Marie wished to go into Hansen & Robertson. The father walked past all the stores and into the post office, where women and young people pushed forward with packages -- most with long addresses to foreign lands. Rasmus and Hanne had sent theirs much earlier. Rasmus greeted Peter Mogensen. "-- Good Day, we're getting a little snow, but of course, it is the season."

On the bench by the window sat two hardheaded figures in overalls and heavy boots, sucking on their pipes, and Rasmus captured a fragment of their conversation -- "four attractive Galloways. Niels Jensen, and I have held them in the entire Fall, until they calved, but they had trouble, and there was nothing to do but feed the creatures with mash, so I got a grinder and gave them the mash, but then they had some trouble with digesting the grain; so I also gave them some milk, and so I will ------"
Rasmus Lind turned the key in his post office box. There were a couple of newspapers and some catalogs and letters to Hanne and the girls and some calendars. While he collected all of them together, in from the office someone stuck a couple of postcards in the box and also a letter in a yellow envelope.

A letter - no, a telegram.

A telegram.

In from the office the postmaster's daughter nodded and smiled through the square tube of the box: "Hello, Mr. Lind. Good news, I hope!"

Rasmus grabbed the little yellow letter and it felt like a heavy weight in his hand. There stood Western Union Telegraph Co. in the one corner. Hm. It was addressed to himself. He started to shudder a little, then felt a handslap on his shoulder and heard a cheerful voice: "Yes, Rasmus, I assume everything is going well at home! You are always ready ahead of time. But the buckwheat harvest was very skimpy this year. No one got anything."

He answered with some appropriate words, while the yellow letter slid down in the deep side pocket on his overcoat. Hm. What now?

Yes, now it was necessary to straighten his back and not display his feelings. Mechanically, he followed the stream of people back out on the street. People greeted him, and he nodded. Just let on as if nothing had happened. He found his way in to Hansen & Robertson and found Marie. She had bought some things and was out of money. He thought about Hanne and found the shopping list in his pocket. While Robertson laid the wares on the counter, Marie aimed toward a case where there were displayed some embroidered belts.

"Father," she said, "I would like to get something like these for Mille and Karen for Christmas."

"Do that, my girl. And pick one out for me - one that you would like." With the good Mrs. Robertson's help there were three sparkling belts selected, and Marie was delighted.

Outside the evening train had stopped and the passengers and goods tumbled out at the station. Then the train started slowly again and steamed out on its way to Central City.
Robertson had assembled all the goods on the list, and while his colleague Hansen tallied the costs, he delivered to his partner one of his many stories. That became almost a complete novel. ""But so,' I said, 'I was konked on the head', and so I said 'You take this word back, Kresten, otherwise I will -----'"

The telephone rang. Hansen took off the receiver, listened and turned.

"There is a man over at the station, who is asking about you, Rasmus Lind. The agent said it is a soldier."

"Peter!" shouted Marie, "Peter coming home!"

All the conversation in the store suddenly stopped. Rasmus Lind looked around at the customers and shoved his trembling hand in his pocket. "I come," he said, grabbing his daughter's hand and walked slowly out of the door and over the street.

It was, sure enough, a soldier. He was sitting in the waiting room and got up when Rasmus and Marie came in. His uniform was new, and across his breast ran a series of stripes and medals. He supported himself with a cane. Oh, Lord God, thought Rasmus, he is so young!

"This is Mr. Lind?"

But Rasmus was unable to answer. He nodded.

The young man walked closer. Oh, Lord God, thought Rasmus, his legs are badly injured.

"Are you my brother Peter's pal?" sounded Marie's clear child's voice in the half-darkened waiting room. "Are you Joe from Brooklyn?"

"Yes -- I am --- I was your brother's pal. Are you his sister Mary?"

Then Rasmus found his voice.

"Welcome home, Joe," he said and shook the young man's hand. It was all he was able to say.

"Peter told me to come. I suppose that I belong nowhere else."

Rasmus pulled the yellow envelope out of his pocket, squeezed it again in his hand, and thought: So we never need to open it, never! He left to get the creaky old Ford. Joe had quite a bit of luggage, which was put in the trunk, and then they went over to get their packages at the store.
"Was it your Peter?" Robertson asked, when Rasmus came in. The ears perked up from all sides.

Rasmus Lind turned a little towards the door with eyes glistening and arms full of packages. "Ye--ah", he said. "We have our son again. Now we are driving him home to his mother."

**IV**

All the lights were on, when they drove into the farmyard. Not many words had been exchanged on the trip home. Marie sat with Joe's hand in hers. The car stopped, and now Rasmus felt it was time to pull himself together. He asked the two younger ones to stay in the car and then he walked resolutely into the house with his heart in his throat. Mille and Karen hugged him. Mille told him, that the telegraph man had called and wanted to speak to Rasmus, but would not say more. Then Hanne knew what it was. She sat in the bedroom and waited for him. Rasmus knew what it was. She sat in the bedroom and waited for him. Rasmus walked in to see her.

"Yes, Mother, so now we know --"

Hanne stood up. "I have suspected the whole time," she said softly. "God be praised, anyway, Father!" In an instant she clung to him.

"But hear once, Mother -- out in the car sits Joe, who Peter wrote about. He came on the train just a little bit ago. He walks with a cane, so they have sent him home. But otherwise he is well and has his strength. It was him who our Peter wrote to us about---"

"Where is he?" quickly asked Hanne.

"Out in the Ford with Marie."

Hanne ran out, opened the gate and called:

"Joe --- Joe."

"Right here. Coming!"

Hanne ran down the steps. A single snowflake fell from the light prairie sky -- Winterdew. Like one of the old time courageous prairie women she hurried forward until she stood in front of the young man, who supported himself with his cane, and had gotten out of the car to greet her. And she wrapped her arms around this young person, who she had just seen for the first time. "Velkommen hjem," she said.
"I understand that, all right," said Joe and bent over the slender older woman. "Thank you --- Mother!"

So then the prairie home closed itself around them all.


9 Christian Petersen papers. Special Collections, Iowa State University Library, Ames, Iowa.
Petersen's Danish-oriented works include portrait sculptures of Consul General Reimund Baumann (72), Explorer Vitus Bering (88), Peter Christian Lutkin (Dean of Music at Northwestern University, 91), Landscape Architect Jens Jensen (95), Danish gymnastics leader Niels Bukh (168), Iowa State College dairy scientist Martin Mortensen (173), and Mt. Rushmore sculptor Gutzon Borglum (275). The numbers in parentheses refer to the Catalogue Raisonné in DeLong's book Christian Petersen, Sculptor. We do not know of any work he might have done of J. Christian Bay, although a portrait sculpture of Bay stands in Rudkøbing, the city of Bay's birth, created by Danish American artist Christian Warthoe of Chicago in 1955.