

# Henhouse Grethe's Family

*Henhouse Grethe* was the sole human resident of the fine new house that had been built for hens and ducks at the manor house; it stood where the old baronial castle had once stood, complete with tower, crenelated gable, moat and drawbridge. Close by was a wilderness of trees and bushes; here the garden had been that stretched down to a large lake which had now become marshland. Rooks, crows and jackdaws flew shrieking and screeching over the old trees, a motley mass of birds; shooting at them did not lessen their number, it rather served to increase it. They could be heard clearly inside the house where *Henhouse Grethe* sat and the ducklings tumbled over her clogs. She knew every hen, every duck from the moment it crawled out of the egg, she was proud of her hens and her ducks, proud of the fine house that had been built for them. Her living room was kept neat and tidy, that was something the mistress of the henhouse insisted on; she often came here with her fine, distinguished guests and showed them 'The Barracks of the Hens and Ducks', as she used to call it.

There was both a wardrobe and an easy chair, yes, there was even a chest of drawers, and on it stood a highly polished brass plate engraved with the word '*Grubbe*', which was precisely the name of the old aristocratic family that had once lived here at the baronial castle. The brass plate had been found when digging was done here, and the *parish clerk* said it had no other worth than that of an old keepsake. The *clerk* knew a lot about the place and the old times, he was quite a scholar and much lay written down in his desk drawer. He had considerable knowledge of former times; although the oldest crow possibly knew more and screeched about it in its own tongue, but that was crow language, and in spite of his knowledge, the *clerk* could not understand that.

At the end of a hot summer's day the marsh could sometimes steam, and the haze made it look like a large lake beyond the old trees where the rooks, crows and jackdaws used to fly; this was how it had looked when Sir *Grubbe* the knight lived here and the old castle stood with its thick brick walls. The dog-chain reached right down past the gateway; via the tower one entered the flagstoned passage to the rooms; the windows were narrow and the panes small, even in the great hall, where dances were held, but by the time of the last *Grubbe* there had been no dancing there for ages, although an old kettledrum still lay there that had been used for the music. Here too there stood a beautifully carved cupboard in which rare flower bulbs were kept, for Lady *Grubbe* was fond of gardening and cultivated trees and plants; her husband preferred to ride out and shoot wolves and wild boars, and his young daughter *Marie* always used to accompany him. By the age of five she sat proudly on her horse and looked spiritedly around her with her large black eyes. She loved to crack her whip among the hounds; her father would have preferred her to do so among the peasant boys who came to gawp at their betters. –

The farmer in the peat house close to the castle had a son, *Søren*, the same age as the noble young maiden, he was good at climbing trees and was always bringing down bird's nests for her; the birds screamed at the top of their voices, and one of the largest ones pecked him just above the eye, so that the blood streamed down his face, people thought his eye had been pecked out, but it had not been injured at all. *Marie Grubbe* used to call him *her Søren*,

that was a great favour, and that stood his father, poor *Jøn*, in good stead one day when he had done something wrong and was to 'ride the wooden horse'. This instrument of torture stood in the courtyard with four posts as legs and only a narrow board as its back; *Jøn* had to sit astride it, his legs weighted down with heavy bricks so as not to sit too lightly; he grimaced horribly, *Søren* wept and begged little *Marie*, who immediately ordered *Søren's* father to be taken down, and when she was not obeyed, she stamped her foot on the cobblestones and tugged her father's sleeve so hard that it tore. She was quite adamant and got her way, *Søren's* father was released. –

Lady *Grubbe*, who arrived on the scene, stroked her daughter's hair and looked at her with mild eyes, *Marie* didn't understand why.

She wanted to go in to the hounds and not accompany her mother, who crossed the garden and went down to the lake, where the white and yellow water lilies were in bloom; reedmace and flowering rush swayed among the reeds; she gazed at all this profusion and freshness. 'How delightful!' she said. In the garden there stood a tree, rare at that time, which she herself had planted, it was called a '*copper beech*', a kind of blackmoor among the other trees, so blackish-brown were its leaves; it had to have strong sunlight, for if it was in constant shadow the foliage would turn green just like that of the other trees and lose its distinctive character. There were many bird's nests in the tall chestnut trees, also in the bushes and even the lawn. It was as if the birds knew that they were safe here, that no one would blaze away at them with a shotgun. –

Little *Marie* came with *Søren*, he was good at climbing, as we already know, and both eggs and downy young were fetched. The birds flew up in fear and dread, both large and small! The lapwing out from the field, rooks, crows and jackdaws from the tall trees screeched and screeched, the kind of screeching that they continue to do even nowadays.

'What on earth are you up to, children!' the gentle lady called out, 'what an ungodly thing to do!'

*Søren* stood there shamefaced, even the young aristocratic young girl looked a little to one side, but afterwards she said curtly and sullenly: 'Father says I may!'

'Away! away!' the large black bird screeched and flew off, but they came back the following day, for this was their home. –

The quiet, gentle lady, however, did not have this as her home for long, the Good Lord called her to him, and it was more of a home to her there than here at the castle; and the chapel bells tolled solemnly when her body was driven to the chapel, many a poor man's eye was moist, for she had been good to them. –

When she was no longer there, no one tended all she had planted, and the garden grew wild. –

Sir *Grubbe* was a hard man, people said, but his daughter, despite her young age, had the measure of him; he had to laugh, and she got her way. She was now twelve years old and strong-limbed; her black eyes had a piercing gaze, she rode her horse like a young man and shot like an experienced hunter.

A most important visitor came to the area, the finest possible, the young king and his half-brother and friend Sir *Ulrik Frederik Gyldenløve*; they wanted to hunt wild boar there and stay for a day and a night at Sir *Grubbe's* baronial castle. –

*Gyldenløve* sat next to *Marie Grubbe* at table, held her head and gave her a kiss, as if they were members of the same family, but she slapped him in the face and said that she couldn't stand him, and this gave rise to much laughter, as if it was something extremely amusing.

Perhaps it was, for five years later, *Marie* was now seventeen, a messenger arrived with a letter; Sir *Gyldenløve* requested the high-born maiden's hand in marriage; now that was something!

'He is the most distinguished and gallant gentleman in the entire kingdom!' Sir *Grubbe* said. 'He's not to be rejected.'

'I'm not particularly keen on him!' *Marie Grubbe* said, but she didn't reject the most distinguished man in the land, one who sat at the king's side. –

Silverware, woollens and linen were sent by sea to Copenhagen; she made the journey by land in the course of ten days. Her trousseau either had adverse winds or no wind at all; it took four months for it to arrive, and when it did, Lady *Gyldenløve* was gone. –

'I'd rather lie on tow yarn than his silken sheets!' she said. 'I'd rather walk barefoot than ride with him in a coach!' –

One late evening in November two women arrived in *Aarhus* on horseback: it was *Gyldenløve's* wife, *Marie Grubbe*, and her maid; they came from *Vejle*; they had arrived there from *Copenhagen* by boat. They rode up to Sir *Grubbe's* red-brick residence. He was not at all pleased to see them. *She* was given hard words, but a room to sleep in even so; was given soothing ryebread porridge for breakfast, but no soothing words, for her father's ill-naturedness was let loose on her, which was something she wasn't used to; and she was not gentle-minded either, she gave him tit for tat, answered him back and spoke with bitterness and hatred of her wedded husband, she refused to live with him, she was too modest and decent to do that. –

A year passed, and it was not a pleasant one. Harsh words were spoken between father and daughter, which should never happen. Harsh words bear bitter fruit. How would it all end?

'The two of us can't live under the same roof!' her father said one day. 'Move out to our former place, but bite your tongue off rather than start telling a pack of lies!'

So the two of them parted; she moved into the old castle with her maid, the house where she had been born and bred, where the quiet devout lady, her mother, lay in the chapel vault; an old herdsman lived there, he was the sole resident. Cobwebs hung in the rooms, black and heavy with dust, the garden grew as it pleased; the hopbines and bindweed formed a tangled mesh between trees and bushes; cow parsley and nettles grew in profusion and strength. The copper beech was overgrown and stood in shadow, its leaves were now green like those of the other, common trees, its glory was over. Rooks, crows and jackdaws flew, a motley mass of birds, over the tall chestnut trees, there was a shrieking and a screeching, as if they had important news to tell each other: Now she was here once again, the young one who had allowed their eggs and young to be stolen; the thief himself who fetched them, now climbed up the branches of leafless trees, sat high up in the tall mast and was lashed if he misbehaved. –

All of this was related by the present-day *parish clerk*, he had collected and compiled it out of books and records; it lay along with much more besides written and kept in the desk drawer. 'Up and down, that's the way of the world!' he said, 'it's an odd tale!' – And we want to hear how things went for *Marie Grubbe*, but we won't forget *Henhouse Grethe* either, she sits in

her fine henhouse in our age, *Marie Grubbe* sat in her age, but not in the same state of mind as old *Henhouse Grethe*.

The winter passed, the spring and summer passed, and then autumn came with its gales and clammy, cold sea mists. It was a lonely life, a dreary life there at the castle.

Then *Marie Grubbe* took hold of her shotgun and went out onto the heather-clad heath, shot hare and fox, shot whatever birds came within range. Out on the heath she met the nobleman *Palle Dyre* from *Nørrebæk* on more than one occasion, he was also out with his shotgun and his hounds. He was big and strong, and boasted of the fact when they talked to each other. He could bear comparison with the late Sir *Brockenhuus* from *Egeskov Castle on Funen*, whose strength was still renowned abroad. – *Palle Dyre*, following his example, had hung an iron chain with a hunting horn up at his gateway, and when he rode back home, he would seize the chain, lift himself with his horse clean off the ground and sound the horn. –

'Come and see for yourself, Lady *Marie!*' he said. 'There's plenty of fresh air at *Nørrebæk!*' It has not been recorded when she came to his manor, but on the candlesticks in *Nørrebæk* chapel it states that they have been donated by *Palle Dyre* and *Marie Grubbe* from *Nørrebæk* manor. –

*Palle Dyre* was a strong, strapping man; he drank like a fish, he was like a barrel that couldn't be filled; he snored like an entire pigsty – his face was bloodshot and bloated.

'He's a rogue and a teaser!' said Lady *Palle Dyre*, *Grubbe's* daughter. She soon tired of such a life, but that didn't improve things.

One day the table had laid and the food had grown cold: *Palle Dyre* was out hunting foxes and his wife couldn't be found anywhere. – *Palle Dyre* came home around midnight, his wife came neither at midnight nor the next morning, she had turned her back on *Nørrebæk*, had ridden off without so much as a greeting or farewell.

The weather was grey and wet; a cold wind was blowing, a flock of black, screeching birds flew over her, they were not as homeless as she was.

First she journeyed southwards, all the way down to Germany, a couple of gold rings with precious stones were exchanged for money, then she travelled eastwards, and then turned back westwards once again, she had no particular aim and was angry with everyone, even the Good Lord, so wretched was her state of mind; her body was soon likewise, she could hardly move a foot. The lapwing flew up from its tuft of grass when she tripped over it; the bird screeched, as it always screeches: 'You thief! you thief!'. She had never stolen from her fellow humans, but bird's eggs and bird's young she had allowed to be fetched from both tussock and tree, she now recalled.

From where she lay she could see the dunes, down by the shore fishermen lived, but she could not manage to reach the shore, she was that ill. The large white gulls flew over her and screeched like rooks, crows and jackdaws used to screech over the manor garden back home. They flew quite close to her, finally it seemed to her that they turned jet-black, and then everything went black.

When she opened her eyes once more, she was being lifted and carried – a big, strapping young man had picked her up in his arms, she looked straight into his bearded face, he had a scar above one eye, which made his eyebrow look as if it was divided into two; he carried her, in her pitiful state, to his boat, where the skipper rewarded him with harsh words for his kindly act.

The following day the boat set sail. *Marie Grubbe* did not come ashore, she was still on board. But did she ever get back? Yes, when and where?

The *parish clerk* could also relate this, and it was not just a story he had compiled, he had the whole remarkable course of events from a trustworthy old book we ourselves can take out and read. The Danish historian *Ludvig Holberg*, who has written a great many books well worth reading alongside his comedies, which gave us insight into his age and those living at the time, mentions in his letters a certain *Marie Grubbe*, where and how in the world he happened to meet her; it is well worth hearing, though we will in no wise forget *Henhouse Grethe*, she is happily ensconced in her fine henhouse.

The boat sailed off with *Marie Grubbe*, that was how far we had got. –

Years passed and more years passed. –

The plague was ravaging *Copenhagen*, it was in the year 1711. The Danish queen left for her native Germany, the king left the capital, everyone who was able to hurried away; the students, even if they had free board and lodging, tried to escape. One of these, the last one to remain at the so-called '*Borchs Collegium*' close to the free student lodgings, also left. It was two o'clock in the morning; he came with his knapsack that was more stuffed with books and written articles than any articles of clothing. A dank, clammy mist hung over the city; there was not a soul to be seen in the whole street he was walking along; doors and gate posts had been marked with crosses, the plague was inside, or everyone had died. Nor was there anyone to be seen in the broader, winding '*Butcher's Street*', which runs from the Round Tower down towards the king's palace. Now a large hearse rumbled past; the coachman cracked his whip, the horses galloped past, the hearse was full of corpses. The young student held his hand in front of his face and inhaled strong spirits he had on a sponge kept in a brass chalk-holder. From a tavern in a nearby alleyway there came squalling singing and grisly laughter from people drinking the night away so as to forget that the plague was on their doorstep, eager to have them on board the hearse along with the rest of the corpses. The student made for *Slotsbroen* jetty where a couple of small vessels lay, one was weighing anchor so as to leave the plague-ridden city. –

'If God allows us to live and we have favourable wind, we are heading for *Grønsund* on *Falster*!' the skipper said and asked the student who wanted to come on board what his name was.

'*Ludvig Holberg*,' the student replied, and that name sounded like any other, now it is one of Denmark's most glorious names; back then, he was nothing but a young, unknown student. The boat glided past the palace. It was still not yet dawn when they reached open water. A light breeze sprang up, the sail billowed, the young student sat with his face towards the fresh wind and fell asleep, which was not exactly the most advisable thing to do.

By the third morning the boat was already moored off *Falster*. 'Do you know anyone here where I can find accommodation for a small sum of money?' *Holberg* asked the captain.

'I think you should go down to the ferrywoman from the inn in *Borrehuset*!' he said. 'If you wish to be very polite, her full name is Mother *Søren Sørensen Møller*! Though she can fly off the handle if you get too high-faluting with her! Her husband has been arrested for some misdeed, she's the ferryman herself now, she has a good pair of hands, that woman!'

The student picked up his knapsack and went to the ferry house. The living room door wasn't locked, the latch went up and he entered a paved room where the most prominent object

was a wooden bed-settee with a large fur skin on it. A white hen with chickens was tethered to the bed-settee and it had upset the water dish, so that water ran out over the floor. There was no one here or in the small room next to it, only a cradle with a baby in it. The ferry returned, there was only one person in it, it was hard to tell if it was a man or a woman. The person was clad in a large greatcoat, and was wearing a fur cap like a bonnet. The boat was now moored. –

It was a woman that entered the room. She looked quite impressive when she straightened her back: two proud eyes gazed out from under black eyebrows. It was Mother *Søren*, the ferryman's wife – ravens, crows and jackdaws would screech a different name, one we know better.

She looked dour, not especially fond of talking, but even so enough was said and decided for the student and her to agree on board and lodging for an unspecified time, as long as things were so bad in *Copenhagen*.

The occasional couple of honest citizens would drop in at the ferry house from the nearby market town. Among them were *Frans the cutler* and *Sivert the customs officer*; they drank a tankard of beer in the ferry house and discussed things with the student; he was a competent young man who knew his 'Practicalities' as they called it – he could read Greek and Latin and knew about learned subjects. –

'The less one knows, the less it burdens one!' Mother *Søren* said.

'You have a hard time of it!' *Holberg* said, one day when she was busy washing clothes in strong lye and had to go out and chop logs up into firewood.

'That's my problem!' she replied.

'Have you always had to toil and slave away since you were young?'

'You can read that from my fists!' she said, and showed him a pair of admittedly small but hard, strong hands with bitten nails. 'You've got learning, you read them.'

Around Christmas heavy snowstorms started; the cold held everything in an icy grip, the wind blew piercingly as if it had nitric acid to fling into people's faces. Mother *Søren* remained undaunted, threw on her greatcoat and pulled her fur cap down over her ears. It was dark inside the house by early afternoon; she placed firewood and sods of peat in the fireplace; then sat down and darned her stockings, there was no one else to do it. Towards evening she spoke more words to the student than she otherwise used to do; she spoke to him about her husband.

'He accidentally killed a *Dragør* skipper and so he's serving three years of hard labour in *Holmen* prison. He is only a common sailor, so the law must take its course.'

'The law also applies to the higher ranks of society!' *Holberg* said. –

'You think so!' Mother *Søren* said and gazed into the fire, but then spoke some more. 'Have you heard of *Kai Lykke*, who had one of his churches pulled down, and when the vicar, *Mads*, thundered about it from the pulpit, he had Rev. *Mads* chained and fettered, set up a court and personally sentenced his neck to be forfeit, it was also chopped through; that was no accidental act, and yet *Kai Lykke* was completely acquitted!' –

'He was within his rights at the time!' *Holberg* said, 'such times are now in the past!'

'Maybe you can convince fools of that!' Mother *Søren* said, got up and went into the small room where 'the little lass', the infant lay, she comforted it and put it to bed, then she got

the student's bed-settee ready; he had the fur-skin bedspread, he was more sensitive to the cold than she was, despite the fact he had been born in *Norway*.

On New Year's Day it was bright and sunny, the frost had been and still was so severe than the drifting snow had frozen solid, so that one could walk on it. The bells in the town called people to church; Student *Holberg* pulled his woollen coat around him and wanted to be off to the town.

Over *Borrehuset* flew, screeching and shrieking, rooks, crows and jackdaws, one couldn't hear the church bells for their racket. Mother *Søren* stood outside filling a brass kettle with snow, to put it over the fire and make drinking water, she looked up at the seething mass of birds and thought her own thoughts.

Student *Holberg* went to church; on his way there and way home he passed the door of *Sivert the customs officer's* house, there he was invited in for a bowl of warm beer with syrup and ginger; the conversation turned towards Mother *Søren*, but *Sivert* knew little about her, like many other people: she was not from *Falster*, he said, she had once had private means, her husband was a common sailor, hot-tempered, he had killed a *Dragør* skipper, 'he beats his wife, but she always comes to his defence.' –

'I wouldn't put up with such treatment!' the customs officer's wife said. 'But then I come from a better class of people! my father was a royal hosier!'

'That must be why you have also married a royal official,' *Holberg* said, bowing to her and the customs officer. –

It was Twelfth Night. Mother *Søren* lit a Twelfth Night for *Holberg* – a three-pronged tallow candle she had made herself.

'One candle for each man!' *Holberg* said.

'Each man?' the woman said and stared at him.

'Each of the Wise Men from the East!' *Holberg* said.

'Oh, that!' she said and was silent for a long while. But on that Twelfth Night he got to know more than he had done before.

'You are kindly disposed to the man you are married to,' *Holberg* said; 'although people say that he treats you badly.'

'That's nobody's business but mine!' she answered. 'Those blows would have done me good as a young child; now I probably get them for my sins! I know perfectly well what good he has done me,' and she stood upright. 'When I lay ill on the open heath and no one thought of approaching, except perhaps the rooks and crows to take a peck at me, he bore me in his arms, and was given harsh words for the catch he brought back to the boat. I don't have a sickly constitution, so I recovered. Everyone has their own way of doing things, *Søren* his, don't judge a hack by its halter! I have lived more pleasurably with him, all told, than with the one they called the most gallant and distinguished of all the king's subjects. I have been married to vice-regent *Gyldenløve*, the king's half-brother; later on I took *Palle Dyre*! It's all much of a muchness, everybody does things in his or her own way, I in mine. That was a long speech, but now you know!' And she left the room.

It was *Marie Grubbe*! so strange the vicissitudes of her fortune had been. She did not live to see many more Twelfth Nights; *Holberg* has noted that she died in June 1716, but he did not write, for he didn't know this, that when Mother *Søren*, as she was called, lay on her bier in *Borrehuset*, a whole host of black, black birds flew over the spot, they did not screech,

as if they knew that silence is appropriate for a funeral. As soon as she lay in the earth, the birds were no more to be seen, but that same evening in *Jutland*, over at the old manor, a vast host of rooks, crows and jackdaws were seen screeching away at each other, as if they had something to announce, perhaps about the man who, as a young boy, had taken their eggs and their downy young, the farmer's son who lay in leg-irons in the prison on Kongens Holm, and the nobly born maiden who ended up as the ferrywoman at *Grønsund*. 'Haw! haw!' they screeched.

And the family screeched 'haw! haw!' when the old manor was pulled down. 'They're still screeching and now there's nothing more to screech about!' the *parish clerk* said when he told the story: 'The family line is no more, the manor demolished, and where it once stood there is now the fine henhouse main building with gilt wings and with old *Henhouse Grethe*. She is so happy with her attractive residence, 'if she hadn't come here, she would have ended up in the poorhouse.'

The pigeons cooed above her, the turkeys gobble-gobbled around her and the ducks quacked.

'Nobody knew her!' they said, 'she has no family. It is an act of mercy that she is here. She has neither a duck-father nor a hen-mother, no offspring!'

But she did have kith and kin; she was unaware of this, as was the *parish clerk*, no matter how much he had written down in his desk drawer, but one of the old crows knew about it and told the story. From his mother and grandmother he had heard about *Henhouse-Grethe's* mother and her grandmother, who we also know, from the time she rode as a child over the drawbridge and looked boldly around her, as if the whole world and all its bird's nests belonged to her, we saw her on the heath by the dunes and last of all at 'Borrehuset'. The grandchild, the last of the family line, had returned home to where the old manor had once stood, where the wild black birds screeched, but she sat among the tame birds, knew each one and was known by each. *Henhouse-Grethe* did not wish for anything more, she was happy to die, and old enough to die.

'Graw! graw!' the crows screeched.

And *Henhouse-Grethe* was given a fine grave that no one knew about, except the old crow, unless it's dead too.

And now we know the story of the old manor, the ancient family and all of *Henhouse-Grethe's* kith and kin. –