

# The Neighbouring Families

You might well think that something was going on down at the village pond, but there wasn't anything going on! The ducks, just when they felt most comfortable out on the water – some were standing on their heads because they were able to – all suddenly made for the bank; in the wet clay you could see the imprint of their webbed feet, and from quite far away one could hear them squalling away. The water began to stir quite a lot, only recently it had been as smooth as a mirror, one could see every tree, every bush close by in it, and the old farmhouse with the holes in its gable and the swallow's nest, but especially the rose bush full of flowers that hung out from the wall practically over the water, where everything stood as in a painting, but upside-down; and when the water became agitated, everything merged into everything else, the whole picture was gone. Two duck feathers that had fallen from the ducks in their flight bobbed vigorously up and down, suddenly they moved faster, as if caught by a gust of wind, but there wasn't any wind, and then they lay still, and the water was as smooth as a mirror once more, one could clearly see the gable with the swallow's nest, and one could see the rosebush; every rose was reflected; they were so lovely, but were unaware of this themselves, for nobody had told them so. The sun shone down between the fine petals that were so full of fragrance; and every rose felt as we do when we are blissfully lost in thought. 'How delightful it is to be alive!' each rose said, 'the only thing I could wish for is to be able to kiss the sun, because it is so warm and bright. –Oh yes, and the roses down there in the water I would also like to kiss! they look exactly like us; I would kiss the sweet young birds down there in the nest; oh yes, and there are some above us too! they are sticking out their heads and starting to cheep; they have no feathers whatsoever, as their father and mother have. It's nice neighbours we have, both those up above and those down below. Oh, how delightful it is to be alive!'

The small nestlings up there and down there – yes, those down there were only an apparition in the water – were common sparrows, father and mother were common sparrows; they had taken the empty swallow nest from the previous year, there they lay and were at home.

'Is that duck children swimming there?' the young swallows asked when they saw duck feathers floating on the water.

'Make sensible questions before asking,' their mother said. 'Can't you see that it's feathers, living dress material that I have and you will get, but ours is finer! Though I wish we had them up here in the nest, for they warm well. I wonder what it was that frightened the ducks! there must have been something in the water, for it certainly wasn't me! although I admittedly did say a rather loud 'pip' to you! The thick-headed roses ought to know, but they know absolutely nothing, they simply look at themselves and give off scent. I really am sick and tired of those neighbours!' –

'Listen to the sweet little birds up there!' the roses said, 'they're starting to want to sing now!' – They couldn't before, but it'll soon come!' – What a great pleasure it must be! It's so diverting to have such cheerful neighbours!' –

Just then two horses arrived at a gallop, they were to be watered; a farmer's boy sat on one of them, and he had taken off all his clothes except for his black hat; it was so broad-rimmed and big. The boy whistled as if he was a little bird, and then rode out into the deepest

part of the village pond; and when he came over to the rose bush, he broke off one of the roses and put it in his hat, then he felt he was really smartly dressed, and off he rode with it. The other roses gazed after their sister and asked each other: 'where did she go off to!' but nobody knew.

*'I wouldn't mind getting out into the world,' one of them said to another, 'but it's also very nice out here in our own green little spot! in the daytime the sun is so warm and at night the sky shines even more beautifully! we can see that through the many small holes in it!'*

It was the stars they thought were holes, each and every one, for the roses didn't know any better.

'We live up around the house,' the sparrow mother said, 'and swallow's nests bring good fortune,' people say, 'so they are glad to have us! but those neighbours there, a whole rose bush right up against the wall like that, makes it damp; I think it will probably be taken away so that at least a grain of corn can grow there. Roses are only for looking at and for smelling, or at most for sticking in your hat. Every year, I know this from *my* mother, they fall off, the farmer's wife conserves them with salt, they are given a French name, one that I can't pronounce and don't care for either; and then they are put on the fire when a nice smell is wanted. See, that is the whole course of their lives! they only exist for eyes and noses. So now you know!'

When evening came and the mosquitoes danced in the warm air, when the clouds were so red, the nightingale came and sang for the roses: that the Beautiful was like sunshine in this world; and that the Beautiful lived for ever. But the roses thought that the nightingale was singing about itself, and one could also think so. It didn't occur to them that they were the ones that were to have the song, but they were glad to hear it and wondered if all the small sparrow nestlings could also become nightingales.

'I understood very well what that bird sang!' the young sparrows said, 'there was only one word I didn't understand: What is the Beautiful?'

'It's nothing!' the sparrow mother said, 'it's just the way things can look. Up at the manor house, where the pigeons have their own house and have peas and corn strewn about the courtyard every day – I have eaten with them and you will get to as well! tell me who you keep company with and I will tell you who you are! – up there at the manor house they have two birds with green breasts and a crest on their heads; the tail can fan out as if it was a large wheel, and it has so many colours that it hurts your eyes; they are called peacocks, and they are the Beautiful! If their feathers were plucked a bit, they would not look any different than the rest of us. I would have pecked them if they hadn't been so big!'

'I'll peck them!' the smallest nestling said, and he didn't have any feathers at all yet.

Inside the farmhouse two young people lived; they were so very fond of each other, they were so diligent and industrious, everything was so nice and orderly in their home. On Sunday morning the young wife went out, took a whole handful of the loveliest roses, put them in a glass of water and placed it on the chest of drawers, right in the middle.

'Now I can see that it's Sunday!' the man said, kissed his sweet little wife, and they sat down, read a hymn, held each other's hands, and the sun shone in through the windows onto the fresh roses and the young couple.

'I'm tired of seeing that!' the sparrow-mother said, looking into the room from her nest; and then she flew off.

She did the same thing the following Sunday, for every Sunday fresh roses were put in the glass and the rose bush went on blooming just as beautifully; the young sparrows, who had now got feathers, wanted to fly with her, but their mother said: 'You stay put!' and so they stayed put. – She flew off, but fly or not, suddenly she was caught in a horse-hair bird snare that some boys had fixed to a branch. The horse hairs fastened round her leg, they grew oh so tight that it felt as if her leg would be cut off; the pain, the fear were terrible; the boys were there in a flash and grabbed the bird, and they seized her so brutally hard. 'It's nothing more than a sparrow!' they said, but even so they didn't let it fly off again, they went home with it, and each time it cried out, they hit in on the beak.

Inside the farmhouse, an old fellow stood who knew how to make shaving soap and hand soap, soap in balls and soap in bars. He was an itinerant, cheerful old chap, and when he saw the sparrow the boys came with which they said they weren't at all interested in, he said: 'shall we make it *beautiful*?' and a shudder passed through the sparrow-mother when he said that. And out of his box, in which there lay the loveliest colours, he took a lot of gleaming gold leaf, and the boys were told to run and fetch an egg, and he took the egg-white and smeared it all over the bird, then daubed the gold leaf on, and then the sparrow-mother was a gilt bird; but she didn't think anything of all this finery, her whole body simply shook. And the soap-man took a red patch of cloth, he tore it out of the lining of his old jacket, cut it into the shape of a serrated cockscomb and pasted it onto the bird's head.

'Now watch the gold bird fly!' he said and let go of the sparrow, who in a state of utter terror flew off into the bright sunshine. Oh, how it gleamed! all the sparrows, and even a large crow who was no youngster himself, were quite frightened by the sight, but they flew after it even so, for they wanted to find out what sort of a strange bird it was.

'From where! from where!' the crow croaked.

'Wait a bit! wait a bit' the sparrows tweeted. But she refused to wait a bit; out of fear and fright she made for home; she almost sank to the ground and all the time more birds congregated, large and small; some flew right up close so as to peck away at her. 'What a fre-eak! what a fre-eak!' they all cried out.

'What a fre-eak! what a fre-eak!' her nestlings cried out when she approached the nest. 'It must definitely be a young peacock, there are all those colours that hurt the eyes, just like mother said: cheep! that is the Beautiful!' And so they pecked away with their small beaks and made it impossible for her to enter, and she was so frightened she could no more say cheep than say: I am your mother. The other birds now joined in the pecking, so that all her feathers fell off, and bloodied and torn the sparrow-mother sank down into the rose bush.

'The poor creature!' the roses said. 'Come, let's hide you! Lean your little head up against us!' The sparrow mother spread its wings out one final time, then held them tightly at her sides and died there among the neighbouring family, the beautiful fresh roses.

'Cheep!' the small sparrows in the nest said. 'I simply can't understand where mother's got to! It could possibly be a trick of hers to force us to take care of ourselves. She's let us keep the house as our inheritance! but which of us is to have sole right to it when we have families.'

'Yes, I can't have all you lot here when I expand and have a wife and children!' the smallest of them said.

'I'll probably have more wives and children than you!' the second one said.

'But I'm the eldest!' said a third. They all ended up squabbling, they beat their wings, pecked with their beaks, and thud, one after the other was pushed out of the nest. There they lay, extremely angry; they cocked their heads right over to one side and blinked with the eye pointing upwards – that was their way of looking sulky.

They could fly a little, and then they practised some more, and they finally agreed, so as to be able to recognise each other were they to meet out in the wide world, that they would say 'cheep!' and scratch three times with their left leg.

The young sparrow that was left up in the nest spread itself out as much as it could, for now it was a house-owner, but this didn't last for long. – That night, red fire gleamed through the windows, the flames shot out under the roof, the dry straw blazed up, the whole house caught fire, along with the young sparrow, although the young couple fortunately managed to escape.

When the sun had risen the following morning and everything seemed so refreshed as after a peaceful night's sleep, there was nothing left of the farmhouse except a few black, charred beams that leant up against the chimney, which was its own master; there was much smoke still coming from the plot of land, but in front of it, fresh and blooming, the entire rose bush stood unharmed, mirroring its every branch and flower in the still water.

'Oh, how lovely the roses are in front of the burnt-out house!' a passing man called out. 'What a charming little picture! I simply must capture it!' and the man took a small book with white pages out of his pocket, and he took his pencil, for he was a painter, and then drew the smoking gravel, the charred beams up against the leaning chimney, for it was beginning to lean more and more, but right at the front stood the large, blooming rose bush, it really was lovely, and was also the reason for the whole scene being drawn.

Later that day two of the sparrows who had been born here passed by. 'Where's the house?' they said, 'where's the nest? – Cheep, everything's gone up in flames, along with our strong brother! that was what he got for keeping the nest. – The roses have escaped unhurt! they're still standing there with rosy cheeks. They're not grieving at the misfortune of their neighbour. Well, I won't speak to them, and it's ugly here, that's my opinion!' So they flew off.

That autumn there was a lovely sunny day, one could almost believe it was the middle of summer. It was so dry and tidy in the yard in front of the large staircase of the manor house, and pigeons went back and forth, black, white and violet – they glistened in the sunshine and the old pigeon-mothers ruffled their feathers and said to their young, 'group yourselves! group yourselves!' – for that showed them up to greater advantage.

'What's that stray grey running around among us?' an old pigeon asked that had red and green between its eyes. 'Stray grey! stray grey!' she said.

'They're sparrows! honest creatures! We've always had the reputation of being dutiful, so we let them pick things up! – They don't join in the conversation and scratch so prettily with their leg!'

Yes indeed, they scratched, three times they scratched with their left leg, but they also said cheep and so they recognised each other, they were the three sparrows from the burnt-out house. –

'Extremely good place to eat, this!' the sparrows said.

And the pigeons went around together, ruffled their feathers and had their own opinions about things.

‘Do you see that ruffling pigeon?’ one of them said about another, ‘and do you see her, how she’s swallowing peas? she’s getting too many! she’s getting the best ones! coo coo! can you see how her comb’s thinning out! can you see that, dearest, that ill-humoured creature! shoo, shoo!’ and the eyes of all them gleamed red with ill-humour. ‘Group yourselves, group yourselves! Stray grey! stray grey! Shoo, shoo coo!’ they went on incessantly – and still will a thousand years from now.

The sparrows fed well, and heard well, they even formed a group, but it didn’t suit them; they had eaten their fill; so they left the pigeons and expressed their opinion about them amongst themselves, then they hopped in under the garden palings, and as the door of the garden room was open, one of them hopped up onto the doorstep, he was more than replete and therefore bold: ‘cheep!’ he said, ‘I dare all right!’ – ‘cheep!’ the second one said, ‘I dare too and a bit more!’ and he then hopped right into the room. There was nobody in there, the third saw that, so he flew even further up into the room and said: ‘all the way in or nothing at all! that’s a ridiculous-looking human nest! and how things have been arranged here! Now, what on earth is this!’

Right in front of the sparrows roses were blooming, they were reflected in the water, and the charred beams lay up against the dilapidated chimney! – Now, what on earth is this! how did it get inside the manor house?’

And all three sparrows wanted to fly over the roses and chimney, but it was a flat wall they flew into; all of it was a painting, a large, magnificent work that the painter had done from the small drawing he had made.

‘Cheep!’ the sparrows said, it’s nothing! It just looks like it! Cheep! it’s the Beautiful! Can you make head or tail of it, for I can’t!’ and then they flew off, for people were entering the room. Days and years now passed, the pigeons had cooed many times, not to mention shooed, the petulant creatures! The sparrows had frozen during the winter and lived the life during the summer; all of them were betrothed or married – or whatever one should call it. They all had young ones and each felt that theirs, of course, was the loveliest and cleverest; one flew here and one flew there, and if they met, they recognised each other by ‘cheep’ and three scratchings with their left leg. The oldest of them, such an ancient bird she was, had no nest and no young ones; she wanted just once to see a big city and so she flew to *Copenhagen*. – There lay a large house with many colours there; it lay very close to the palace and the canal, where there were ships carry apples and pots. The windows were broader at the bottom than at the top, and when the sparrows peeped in, it seemed to them as if they were looking down into a tulip, all sorts of colours and convolutions, and in the middle of the tulip stood white human figures; they were of marble, some were also of plaster, but that makes no difference to sparrow eyes. On top of the house there was a metal carriage with metal horses hitched to it, and the goddess of victory, she too of metal, drove it. It was the Thorvaldsen Museum. ‘How it gleams! how it gleams!’ the sparrow maid said, ‘it must surely be the Beautiful! cheep! but here it is larger than a peacock!’ she could still recall ever since her young days what the largest Beauty was that her mother knew. And she flew straight down into the courtyard; there everything was splendid too, palms and branches had been painted up the walls, and in the middle of the courtyard stood a large, blooming rose bush; it inclined its fresh branches with the many roses over a grave; and she flew across to it, for there several sparrows could be seen, ‘cheep!’ and three scratchings with her left leg; that greeting she had given many

a time for days and years, and no one had understood it, for those who are parted do not meet every day; that greeting had become a habit, but today there were two old sparrows and a young one who said 'cheep!' and scratched with their left leg.

'Well, just look, good day, good day!' it was three old ones from the sparrow nest and a young one of the same sparrow family. 'Just think that we should meet here!' they said. 'It's a very fine place, but there's not much to eat. It's the Beautiful! cheep!'

And many people came from the side-rooms, where the splendid marble statues stood, and went over to the grave which housed the great master who had carved the marble statues, and all those who came stood with radiant faces around Thorvaldsen's grave, and a few gathered the fallen rose petals as keepsakes. There were people from far and wide; some came from Great Britain, from Germany and France; the loveliest lady took one of the roses and placed in at her breast. Then the sparrows believed that the roses ruled here, and that the whole house had been built for their sake, and this did seem to be a bit much, but since the humans all made such a fuss of the roses, they did not want to do less. 'Cheep!' they said, swept the floor with their tails, and looked with one eye at the roses; they did not have to look long before they were certain that they were their former neighbours; and that was also the case. The painter who had drawn the rose bush by the burnt-out house had later that year been granted permission to dig it up, and had then given it to the master builder, for no roses could rival them; and he had placed the bush on Thorvaldsen's grave where, as an emblem of the Beautiful, the roses still bloomed and gave their red, fragrant petals to be carried as keepsakes to distant countries.

'Have you been given a permanent position here in the city?' the sparrows asked. And the roses nodded; they recognised their grey neighbours and were so glad to see them again.

'How marvellous it is to live and bloom, to see old friends and kind faces every day! Here it is as if every day was a holiday!'

'Cheep!' the sparrows said, 'yes, it's our old neighbours! We remember their origins from the village pond! cheep! how you have come up in the world! Some also manage this without any exertion whatsoever. And what's so nice about such a red splodge, I don't know! – And there's a withered leaf, / can see it!'

And so they nibbled at it till it fell off, and the bush stood even fresher and greener, and the roses smelt so sweet in the sunshine on Thorvaldsen's grave, to whose immortal name they added their beauty.