

Chicken Grethe's Family

Hans Christian Andersen

Chicken Grethe was the only human tenant of the fine new house that was built for the hens and ducks on the estate. It was built where the old baronial castle had stood with its tower, crow's-perch gable, moat, and drawbridge. Close by was a complete wilderness of trees and bushes. This had been the garden, running down to a big lake which was now a marsh. Rooks, crows, and jackdaws - a whole horde of screeching, cawing birds, hovered over the trees. The flock did not seem to diminish but rather to increase when one fired among them. They could be heard even inside the poultry house where Chicken Grethe sat with the ducklings waddling about her wooden shoes. She knew each chicken and every duck from the moment it hatched. She took pride in her chickens and her ducks, and in the fine house that had been built for them.

Her little room was clean and tidy. Her mistress, who owned the chicken house, insisted upon neatness, for she frequently brought distinguished visitors to see "the barracks of her hens and ducks," as she called the place.

She had a rocking chair, and a wardrobe, and even a chest of drawers, on which stood a highly polished brass plate with the name "Grubbe" engraved on it. This was the name of the old noble family that had lived there in the days when the castle was standing. The brass plate had been found while they were digging the ground and the parish clerk said that it had no value except as a relic. The clerk knew all about the place and the old days, for he was a scholar and his table drawer was filled with manuscripts. He knew much about the old days, but perhaps the oldest crow knew more and jabbered it out in his own language, but that was crow-talk, which the clerk did not understand, learned though he was.

Toward the end of hot summer day, the mist would rise over the marsh until it looked as if there were a lake beyond the old trees where the rooks, crows, and jackdaws lived. This was how it had looked when old Sir Grubbe had lived there, and the castle with its massive red walls was still standing. In those days the dog's chain used to reach clear across the gateway. By way of the tower one came to the stone-flagged passage that led to the living quarters. The windows were narrow and the panes quite small, even in the great hall where they used to dance. But, in the days of the last Grubbes, there had been no dancing for as far back as a man could remember, though an old kettledrum that had been used in the orchestra still remained in the hall. And there was also a curiously carved cupboard in which the rare flower bulbs were stored, for Lady Grubbe took pleasure in planting and in cultivating flowers and trees. Her husband preferred to hunt wild boars and wolves, and his little daughter, Marie, always rode with him. When she was no more than five years old, she sat proudly on horseback and gazed fearlessly about with her great dark eyes. She delighted in cracking her whip among the hounds, though her father would rather have seen her lash out among the peasant boys who came to stare at the gentry.

The peasant who lived in a clay hut near the castle had a son named Sören, who was of the same age as the well-born little lady. He knew how to climb trees, and he had to bring bird nests down to her. The birds screamed as loud as they could scream, and one of the largest of them struck him so hard right above his eye that blood ran down, and they thought at first that he had lost an eye, but it had not been injured. Marie Grubbe called him "her Sören," a sign of high favor which once served to protect even his father, poor Jon. When he had done something wrong one day, Jon was condemned to ride the wooden horse. This contrivance stood in the yard, with four poles for legs, and for its back a single small rail which Jon had to straddle. Lest he ride it too comfortably, heavy bricks were tied to his feet. He made such agonized faces that little Sören wept and went down

on his knees to beg. Marie to have his father released. She instantly commanded that his father should be taken down. When she was not obeyed, Marie stamped her small feet on the flagstones and tugged at her father's coat sleeve until she tore it. She would have her way, and she got it. Sören's father was released.

Lady Grubbe came to her, stroked her hair, and looked at her daughter with mild, approving eyes. But Marie did not understand why. She would go with the hounds, not with her mother, who went down through the garden to the lake, where the water lilies bloomed, and where the bulrushes swayed among the reeds. "How charming," Lady Grubbe would say, as she admired this fresh, abundant growth. A then very rare tree, which she herself had planted, grew in her garden. A blood beech it was called, a sort of dark Moor among the other trees, so dark brown were its leaves. It needed plenty of sunlight, for in constant shade its leaves would turn green like those of other trees, and thus lose their distinction. In her tall chestnut trees, in the shrubbery, and even the grass were many bird nests. The birds seemed to understand that they were safe here, where no one dared fire a gun.

But little Marie came here with Sören who, as we know, could climb, and she sent him to bring her down both the eggs and the downy little birds. The parent birds fluttered about in terror and anguish. Large and small - lapwings from the lawns, rooks, crows, and jackdaws, from the tall trees - they screamed and shrieked just as their progeny shriek today.

"Children, what are you doing?" the gentlewoman cried. "What a wicked thing to do."

Sören looked ashamed and even the high-born young girl looked a little embarrassed, but then she said in an abrupt and sulky way: "My father lets me do this."

"Away, away!" the black birds shrieked, and away they flew, but they came back the next day because they lived there.

But the quiet gentlewoman did not live there much longer. The Lord called her away, and with Him she was more at home than ever she was in this house. The church bells solemnly tolled as her body was carried to the church, and poor men's eyes grew dim, for she had shown them kindness. And now that she was gone no one looked after her plants, so the garden went to rack and ruin.

"Sir Grubbe is a hard man," people would say, "but young as she is his daughter can handle him." He would laugh and let her have her will. She was twelve years old now, tall and well built. She looked right through people with her great dark eyes, rode her horse like a man, and shot her gun like an experienced hunter.

It came to pass that great men visited that district. They were as great as great can be - the young King with his half-brother and crony, Lord Ulrick Frederick Gyldenlöve. They came to hunt wild boar, and they planned to stay overnight at Sir Grubbe's castle.

At the table, when Gyldenlöve sat beside Marie, he took her about the neck and gave her a kiss, just as if they had been related. But she gave him a slap in the face, and told him she could not stand him. This caused great laughter, as if it were a most pleasing sight.

And maybe it was, because five years later, when Marie was seventeen, Gyldenlöve sent a messenger with a letter asking for her hand in marriage. That was something!

"He is the highest and most gallant lord in the land," said Sir Grubbe. "You cannot refuse him."

"I don't like him much," Marie Grubbe said, but she did not turn down the highest lord in the land, who sat next to the King.

Her silver, woolens, and linens were sent by ship to Copenhagen. Marie made the trip overland in ten days, but the ship with the dowry met with contrary winds, or no wind at all.

It took four months to reach Copenhagen, and when it did get there Lady Gyldenlöve had gone.

"I'd sooner lie on sacks than in his silken bed," she said. "I'd sooner walk barefoot than ride in a carriage with him."

Late on an evening in November, two women came riding into the town of Aarhus. They were Lady Gyldenlöve and her maid. They came from Veile, where they had arrived by ship from Copenhagen. They rode up to Sir Grubbe's town house. He was not at all pleased to see Marie. He gave her harsh words, but he did give her a bedroom. She got her beer broth for breakfast, but no good words to go with it. Her father's bad temper had turned against her, and she was not used to it. Her own temper was by no means mild. As one is spoken to, so one answers, and answer she did. Of her husband she spoke with bitterness and hatred. She declared that she could not live with him; she was too honorable and virtuous for that.

In this fashion a year went by, most unpleasantly. Bitter words passed between father and daughter. That should not be. Bitter words bear bitter fruit. What would be the outcome?

One day her father said, "We cannot live under the same roof. You must move to our old castle. I would rather you bit off your tongue than spoke lies."

So they parted. With her maid, she went to the old estate where she was born and bred, and where her mother, that pious gentlewoman, lay in the churchyard vault.

An old cowherd lived in the castle, and that was all. Cobwebs, heavy and black with dirt, draped every room. The garden was not taken care of. Wild hops and other climbing vines wove a tangled web between trees and shrubbery. Hemlock and nettles grew tall and rank. The blood beech had been outgrown, and in the deep shade its leaves had turned as green as those of ordinary trees. Its glory was gone.

Rooks, crows, and jackdaws flew in enormous flocks above the tall chestnuts. They shrieked and cawed as if they had great news to tell each other. Here she was again, the girl who ordered their eggs and babies to be stolen from their nests. The real thief, the one who had actually stolen them, was now climbing a leafless tree. He clung to the tall ship's mast, and got his share of lashes with a rope's end if he didn't behave himself.

All this was told in our own time by the parish clerk. He had pieced it together from books and letters, and it lay with many another manuscript hidden away in his table drawer. "Up and down is the way the world goes," said he. "It's a curious story to hear." We want to hear how it went with Marie Grubbe, but we shall not lose track of Chicken Grethe who sat there in her fine hen house, in our own day. Marie Grubbe sat in this place in her day, but not so contentedly as old Chicken Grethe.

Winter went by. Spring and summer passed, and again came the stormy autumn with its cold and wet fog. It was a dull and dreary life there on the old estate. Marie Grubbe would snatch up her gun and go out on the heath to shoot hares or foxes, and whatever birds she could find. More than once on these excursions she encountered a nobleman, Sir Palle Dyre from Nørrebaek with his gun and his dogs. He was a big man, who enjoyed boasting of his strength when he talked with her. He might have been a match for the departed Mr. Brockenhus of Egeskov, at Fyen, whom people still remember as a man of might. Like him, Palle Dyre had fastened a hunting horn to an iron chain over his gateway. When he came home he would catch hold of the chain, lift himself and his horse clear off the ground, and sound the horn.

"You must come to my castle and see that, Lady Marie," he said, "for we have fine fresh air at Nørrebaek." We have no record of when she went to Nørrebaek, but on the candlesticks at Nørrebaek church it is inscribed that they were given by Palle Dyre and Marie Grubbe of Nørrebaek Castle. Body and strength had Palle Dyre. He could drink like

a sponge. He was like a cask that could never be filled. He snored enough for a whole pig pen, and he looked red and bloated.

"A cunning swine and a nagging fool he is," said Lady Palle Dyre, the daughter of Grubbe. She soon grew weary of the life there, which did not improve matters. At dinner time one day, the food got cold on the table. Palle Dyre was off fox-hunting, and Lady Dyre could not be found. Palle Dyre came home at midnight. Lady Dyre came home neither by midnight nor by morning. She turned her back upon Nørrebaek, and rode away without a word of farewell. The weather was cloudy and wet. The wind was sharp, and the flock of black birds that croaked over her head were not as homeless as she.

First she rode south, almost to Germany. She turned a couple of gold rings with precious stones into ready money. She went east and she went west, with no fixed goal. She was angry with everybody and even with the good Lord himself, so sick was her mind. And soon her body was sick too. She could scarcely drag her feet along. The lapwing flew up from its tuft of grass when she stumbled upon it and fell. The bird screamed, as it always does, "You thief, you thief!" Yet she had never stolen her neighbors' goods, except for the birds' eggs and nestlings taken from the clumps of grass and the tall trees when she was a little girl. She thought of that now.

From where she lay, she could see the sand dunes along the beach. Fishermen lived there, but she was too ill to crawl so far. The great white sea gulls came screaming over her as the rooks, crows, and jackdaws screamed above the trees at home. The birds flew nearer and nearer, until at last she thought they were black birds. But then everything went black before her eyes.

When she opened her eyes again she was being carried in the arms of a tall, strapping fellow. She looked straight into his bearded face, and saw that he had a scar over one eye that appeared to divide the eyebrow in two. Sick as she was, he carried her to his ship, where he was abused by the shipmaster for bringing such a burden.

The ship set sail next day. Marie Grubbe sailed with it - she was not put ashore. Didn't she ever come back? Yes, but when and how?

The parish clerk could tell about this too. It was not a tale which he had pieced together. He had the whole strange story from a reliable book which we can get and read for ourselves.

The Danish author, Ludvig Holberg, who has written so many books worth reading and so many gay comedies by which we get to know his time and its people, mentions Marie Grubbe in his letters, which tell how and in what part of the world he found her. This is well worth hearing, but we shall not lose track of Chicken Grethe, who sits so happy and comfortable in her imposing chicken house.

The ship sailed off with Marie Grubbe. That was where we left off. Year upon year went by.

The plague was raging in Copenhagen. That was in the year of 1711. The Queen of Denmark went to her German home. The King left his capital, and every one who could made haste to leave. The students, even those who had free board and lodging, scurried out of the city. One of them, the last student left at what they called Borch's College, near the students' headquarters, made ready to go. At two o'clock in the morning he started out, with his knapsack stuffed with more books and manuscripts than clothes. A raw, dank mist hung over the city. Not a soul was to be seen in the street through which he passed. All around him the gates and doors were marked with the crosses which showed that there people lay ill or had died of the plague. Even in broad and winding Meatmonger's street - as the street leading from the round tower to the King's palace was called then - there was not a man to be seen. Suddenly a large hearse came rumbling by. The driver cracked his whip to urge his horses into a gallop, for the wagon was crammed with to urge

his horses into a gallop, for the wagon was crammed with corpses. The young student covered his face with his hands, and breathed the fumes of strong spirits which he carried in a brass-boxed sponge.

From a grog shop in one of the streets came the sound of songs and forced laughter. Men were drinking the night away in an effort to forget that Death stood at their door, beckoning to them to come with him and join the other dead men in the hearse. The student hurried on to Castle Bridge, where two small boats were moored. One of them was just about to cast off and quit the plague-ridden city.

"If the Lord spares our lives and the wind serves us, we shall sail to Grönsund, on Falster," the captain said, and he asked the name of this student who wanted to go with them.

"Ludvig Holberg," the student said, and at that time it sounded like any other name. Now it resounds as one of Denmark's proudest names, but he was then only a young student, and unknown.

The boat slipped past the castle, and before daybreak they came to the open sea. A light breeze sprang up and the sails filled. The student sat down with the wind in his face, and fell asleep. And that wasn't exactly an advisable thing to do! On the third morning the boat was already at Falster.

"Do you know of anyone in this place with whom I can live cheaply?" Holberg asked the captain.

"I believe you had best go to the ferry man's wife at Borrehouse," he said. "If you want to be polite, call her Mother Sören Sörensen Möller, but she may turn angry if you show her too much politeness. Her husband is under arrest for some crime or other, and she runs the ferry herself. What fists she has!"

The student shouldered his knapsack and went to the ferry house. The door was not locked, so he lifted the latch and entered a brick-floored room in which a large folding bed with a big furred cover was the most noticeable piece of furniture. A white hen, with her chickens around her, was tied to the bedstead. She had upset her drinking dish, and water ran across the floor. No one was there or in the next room, except a little child who lay in a cradle.

The ferry boat came back with only one person on board - whether man or woman was hard to say. This person was wrapped in a great cloak, with a hood that covered the head.

When the boat was docked, it was a woman who entered the room. She had an impressive air as she straightened up and looked at him. Two proud eyes were set under her dark brows. It was Mother Sören, the ferry man's wife, though rooks, crows, and jackdaws could scream out another name by which we would know her better.

Glum she looked, and little enough she cared for talk, but it was settled that the student would stay and board with her for an undetermined time, until things went well again in Copenhagen.

Now and then some honest fellows from the neighboring town dropped in at the ferry house. Among them were Frank, the cutler, and Sivert, the customs collector, who came to drink a mug of ale and to chat with the student. He was a thoughtful young man who knew what's what, as they said. He read Latin and Greek, and was well posted in many fields of knowledge.

"The less one knows, the lighter his burden," said Mother Sören.

One day when Holberg watched her wash clothes in strong lye, and chop up knotty stumps for firewood, he told her:

"You work too hard."

"That's my business," she said.

"Have you had to toil and slave this way ever since you were a child?"

"Read the answer in my hands," she said, and showed him her two hands, small but strong and hard, with broken nails. "You know how to read. Read them."

At Christmas time there was a heavy snowfall. The cold made itself at home, and the winds blew as bitterly as if they were dashing acid in people's faces. Mother Sören didn't care. She flung on her cloak, drew up the hood, and went about her business. When the house grew dark early in the afternoon, she would throw pine knots on the fire and sit by it to darn her stockings, for she had no one to do it for her. As evening came on she talked with the student more than she usually did. she spoke of her husband:

"By accident he killed a captain from Dragor, and for this they put him in chains and sentenced him to three years of hard labor on the King's Island. He is only an ordinary sailor, so the law must take its course, you know."

"The law applies to the upper classes too," Holberg said.

"Do you believe that?" Mother Sören stared into the fire, and then went on. "Do you know the story of Kay Lykke, who ordered one of his churches torn down? When Mads, the pastor, thundered from the pulpit against this, he had Mads clapped in irons and thrown in prison. Then he appointed himself Judge, found Mads guilty, condemned him, and had his head struck off. That was no accident, yet Kay Lykke was never punished."

"He was within his right, according to the custom of his time," Holberg said. "We have come a long way since then."

"Try to make fools believe you." Mother Sören got up and went into the next room where Toesen, her little child, lay in the cradle. When she had tidied and aired the cradle, she made the student's bed. He had the big furred cover, for though he was born in Norway he felt the cold more than she did.

New Year's Day dawned clear and sunny. It was so cold that the snowdrifts were hard enough for one to walk across them. The bells in the village were ringing for church, as student Holberg wrapped himself in his heavy cloak to set off for town. Rooks flew screeching over Börrehouse, and so did the crows and jackdaws. They made such a racket that you could scarcely hear the bells. Mother Sören stood outside, filling a brass kettle with snow, to melt over the fire for drinking water. She gazed up at the dark swarm of birds and thought her own thoughts.

Student Holberg went to church and on his way back he passed the house of Sivert, the customs collector. Sivert invited him in to warm himself from a bowl of mulled ale, sweetened with syrup and ginger. They started to talk about Mother Sören, but the customs collector knew little about her. Indeed, there were few who did. "She is not a native of Falster," he said, "and she has probably seen better days. Her husband is a common sailor, with a violent temper. He killed a captain on Dragör, and, though he used to beat his wife, she always sticks up for him."

"I would never stand for that," said the customs collector's wife. "I too come of better stock. My father wove stockings for the King."

"So naturally you married one of the King's officers," Holberg said, with a bow to her husband.

Twelfth Night came, and Mother Sören lighted for Holberg a candle of the Three Kings - that is, three small tallow candles - which she herself had prepared.

"A candle for each man!" said Holberg.

"Each man?" she exclaimed, and looked at him hard.

"Each of the wise men from the east," Holberg said.

"Oh, that's how you meant it," she said, and sat in silence for a while. But on that evening of the Three Kings, he learned a great deal about her that he had not known.

"You are fond of the man you are wedded to," Holberg said, "yet people tell me he daily mistreated you."

"That concerns no one but me," Mother Sören declared. "The blows would have done me good had they fallen when I was a child. Now they probably fall for my sins. I only know the good he has done me." She stood up straight. "When I lay ill and weak among the sand dunes, and no one would come near me except perhaps the rooks, the crows, and the jackdaws, who came to pick at me, he carried me in his arms, and got hard words for bringing such a find on board his ship. I do not come of sickly stock, so I recovered. All of us have our faults, and Sören has his. One must not judge the horse by his halter. With him I have led a more pleasant life than I did with him whom they called the highest and most gallant one of all the King's men. I have been married to Governor Gyldenlöve, half-brother to the King. Afterward I took Palle Dyre. Good or bad, each has his own way, and I have mine. That was a long story, and now you know it."

Mother Sören went out of the room.

So this was Marie Grubbe, so strangely does the ball of fortune turn. She did not live to see many more feasts of the Three Kings. Holberg wrote that she died in June, 1716, but he did not write, for he did not know, that when Mother Sören, as they called her, lay dead in Borrehouse, a flock of large black birds flew over the roof in silence. They did not scream, and it was as if they knew that at funerals one must be quiet. As soon as she was in her grave, the birds departed, but on that same evening the birds were seen in enormous numbers over her old estate in Jutland. Rooks, crows, and jackdaws, screamed to each other as if they had much to tell. Perhaps they croaked of him who robbed them of their eggs and young ones when he was a boy - the peasant boy who received an iron garter on the King's Island - and also of the high-born young lady who died a ferry woman at Grönsund.

"Bra! Bra!" they croaked. And "Bra, Bra!" the whole tribe croaked when the old castle was torn down. "And this they cry still, though there is nothing left to croak about," said the parish clerk, when he told the story. "The family died out, the castle was torn down, and where it stood the new hen house now stands, with its gilded weathercock on the roof, and Chicken Grethe inside. There she sits, well satisfied with her cosy residence, for if she had not come here she would have gone to the workhouse!" - The pigeons cooed above her, the turkeys clucked, and the ducks quacked around her. "No one knew her," they said. "She had no relatives. By an act of charity she came here, and children she had none!"

Nevertheless, she had ancestors, though she did not know of them, nor did the parish clerk, for all the manuscripts he had in his table drawer. But one of the old crows knew, and he told about it. From its mother and its grandmother, it had heard tell of Chicken Grethe's mother and grandmother, whom we know too. We know how, as a child, she rode over the drawbridge and looked about proudly, as if the whole world and all the bird nests in it belonged to her. We also saw her on the sand dunes, and last at the ferry house. Her granddaughter, last of her line, had come home again where the old castle had stood, and where the wild birds croaked. But she sat among her tame fowls, known by them and on friendly terms with them.

Chicken Grethe had nothing more to wish for. She was happy to die and old enough to die.

"Grave, grave!" the crows croaked.

And Chicken Grethe was buried in a good grave. No one knows where it lies except the old crow, if he isn't dead too.

Now we know the story of the old castle, and of all Chicken Grethe's family.