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Chicken Greta's Family

by

Hans Christian Andersen

(from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories* [1930]), translated by M. R. James)

Chicken Greta was the only person who lived in the handsome new house that had been built for the chickens and ducks at the Manor. It stood where the old mansion of the feudal days had stood, with its tower, its crowstepped gables, its moat and drawbridge. Close by it was a wilderness of trees and bushes. The garden had been there, and had extended down to a large lake which now was but a swamp. Rooks, crows, and jackdaws flew screaming and cawing over the old trees, a swarming multitude of birds. They didn't get any fewer if a shot was fired among them, they only flew the faster. You could hear them even in the hen-house where Chicken Greta sat and the ducklings ran about over her wooden shoes. She knew every hen and duck from the moment it crept out of the egg, and was proud of her hens and ducks, proud too of the handsome house that had been built for them. Clean and neat was her little room: the lady of the house (to whom the hen-house belonged) insisted on that. She often came there with smart genteel visitors, and showed off what she called the Hens' and Ducks' Barracks.

There was a wardrobe and an arm-chair there, and there was a chest of drawers on which stood a brightly polished plate of copper: and on it was engraved the word "Grubbe"; which was no other than the name of the ancient and noble family that had lived here at the Manor house. This copper plate had been found in digging there, and the Parish Clerk had said that it was of no value except as a monument of old times. The Parish Clerk knew a great deal about the place and about old times; he was book-learned, and a great deal of writing was laid up in his table drawer. He had to be sure a deal of information about the old days, and yet the eldest of the crows perhaps knew more, and screamed about it in his own language--however, that was crow-talk, and the Parish Clerk didn't understand that, clever as he might be.

After a hot summer day the marsh would steam with vapour, so that it spread like a great lake out beyond the old trees where the rooks and crows and jackdaws flew about. It had looked like that in the days when Squire Grubbe lived there, and the old Manor with its thick red walls was still standing. The watchdog's chain used to reach right across the gateway. Through the tower you entered the stone-paved passage to the rooms. The windows were narrow and the window-panes small, even in the great hall where the dancing went on. But in the last Grubbe's days there had been no dancing within living memory. All the same, an old kettle-drum still lay there, which had served for the band. Here too stood a richly carved cupboard in which rare bulbs were kept, for Lady Grubbe was fond of gardening and used to nurse trees and plants. Her husband liked better to ride out and shoot wolves and wild boars, and his little daughter Marie always accompanied him. When she was but five years old she sat her horse proudly and stared boldly about her with her great black eyes. She enjoyed slashing at the hounds with her whip; her father would sooner she had slashed at the peasant boys who came to look at the gentry.

The peasant in the mud hut close by the Manor had a son, Sören, of the same age as her little ladyship. He was a good climber, and always had to go up and take birds' nests for her. The birds screamed as loud as they could scream, and one of the biggest gave him a peck just over his eye, so that the blood flowed, and it was thought the eye was gone; but there was no harm done.

Marie Grubbe called him her Sören. This was a great favour, and turned out very lucky for his father, poor John. John once committed some offence and was to be punished; he was to ride the wooden horse. It stood in the court, with four stakes for legs and a single narrow plank for a back; on this John was to ride astride and have some heavy bricks tied to his legs so as not to sit too light. His face was ghastly to see, and Sören cried and implored little Marie; and she gave orders at once that Sören's father was to be taken down: and when they paid no attention to her, she stamped on the pavement and pulled at her father's coat sleeve till it tore. She would have her way, and she got it, and Sören's father was let down.

Lady Grubbe, who was by, stroked her little daughter's hair and looked kindly on her, Marie couldn't think why. She was going to the kennels and not with her mother, who walked over to the garden and down to the lake where water-lilies and water-daisies were in flower, and bulrushes and scented rushes swayed to and fro among the reeds. She gazed at all the

luxuriance and freshness of it. "How pleasant it is!" said she. In the garden there stood a tree, rare in those days, which she had planted herself; a copper beech it was called--a kind of blackamoor among the other trees, so dark brown were its leaves. It needed strong sunlight, otherwise its leaves, if it stood always in shadow, would become green like the rest, and it would lose its characteristic. In the tall chestnut trees were numbers of birds' nests, and more in the bushes and the green sward. It seemed as if the birds knew they were in sanctuary, for no one could go popping their guns off here.

Little Marie came that way with Sören. He could climb, as we know, and many an egg and callow young one was brought down. The birds flew about in anxiety and fright; big and little, they all flew. The plover out on the open field, the rooks, the crows, and the jackdaws in the tall trees screamed and screamed again; just such a screaming there was as the tribe keeps up still in these days.

"Why, what are you doing, children?" cried the gentle lady. "That is the devil's work."

Sören stood abashed, and her little ladyship too looked somewhat askance, but then she said--shortly and sulkily: "Father lets me do it."

"Get away, get away!" screamed the big black birds, and off they flew, but they came back next day, for they were at home there.

The quiet gentle lady, however, did not stay at home there long. God called her to Himself; and indeed she was more at home with Him than there at the Manor, and the bells tolled solemnly when her body was taken to the church, and the poor mens' eyes were full of tears, for she had been kind to them.

When she was gone nobody took care of her plants, and the garden fell into neglect.

Herr Grubbe was a hard man, people said, but his daughter, young as she was, could stand up to him. He had to laugh it off, and she got her way. She was twelve years old by this time, and strong-built and well grown. She looked through and through people with her black eyes; she rode her horse like a man and fired off her gun like a practised sportsman.

Great visitors came to these parts, visitors of the highest degree, the young King and his half-brother and companion, Herr Ulrik Frederick Gyldenlöve. They came to shoot wild boars and spend a day at Herr Grubbe's Manor.

Gyldenlöve sat next to Marie Grubbe at table: he seized her by the neck and gave her a kiss, as if he were one of the family, but she gave him a slap in the mouth and said she couldn't abide him, and there was great laughter at this as if it had been the best of jokes. Perhaps, indeed, it was; for five years later, when Marie was full seventeen years old, there came a messenger with a letter. Herr Gyldenlöve asked for the noble maiden's hand. That was something.

"He's the noblest and gallantest lord in the realm," said Herr Grubbe. "He's not one to be turned off."

"I don't care much about him," said Marie Grubbe: all the same, she did not turn away the noblest in the land, who sat next to the King. Silver plate, woollen and linen stuffs were shipped over to Copenhagen. She made the journey by land and took ten days. The trousseau had the wind against it, or else no wind at all, for months passed before it arrived, and by the time it did Lady Gyldenlöve was gone.

"I'd sooner lie on sacking than in his silken bed," said she. "I'd rather trudge barefoot than drive in a coach with him."

Late one evening in November two women came riding into Aarhus town--Gyldenlöve's wife, Marie Grubbe, and her maid. They came from Veile and thither they had come by ship from Copenhagen. They rode up to Herr Grubbe's stone-walled Manor. He was by no means pleased with the visit. She got hard words, but a room to lie in, and her breakfast next day, but no breakfast talk. Her father's wicked temper showed itself in a way she was not wont to hear. She was of no gentle nature, and as one is called, so one answers. She had her answers ready, and spoke with malice and hate of her lawful husband; with him she would not live, she was too decent and honourable for that.

Thus a year went by, and not pleasantly. Ill words were bandied between father and daughter, such as should not be. Ill words bear ill fruit. What would be the end of it?

"We two can't live under one roof," said her father one day. "Move out of here to our old house: but bite your tongue off sooner than let lies get abroad."

So they parted! She and her maid went off to the old house where she had been born and bred, where the quiet godly

lady, her mother, lay in the vault at the church. An old cowman lived at the Manor, and that was the whole population of it. Cobwebs hung in the rooms, black and heavy with dust; the garden grew as it lived; hop-vines and bryony wove nets over trees and bushes, hemlock and nettles grew rank and large. The copper beech was overgrown and hidden in shade, and its leaves were as green as those of the other common trees; its beauty was past and gone. Rooks, crows and jackdaws flew in swarming multitudes over the tall chestnut trees; there was a squalling and screaming as if they had important news to tell each other. "Here she was again, the little girl that had had their eggs and young ones stolen." The actual thief who had taken them was climbing a tree without any leaves; he was sitting on a tall mast and getting his fair share of the rope's end when he didn't behave himself.

All this story the Parish Clerk told in our own days; he had gathered it and put it together from books and notes, and along with much else it lay written and kept safe in his table drawer.

"Up and down goes the world," said he, "it's a strange thing to hear tell of." And we will hear tell how it went with Marie Grubbe; but for all that we won't forget Chicken Greta sitting in her smart hen-house in our time. Marie Grubbe sat too in her time, but her temper was not like Chicken Greta's.

Winter went by, spring and summer went by, and the windy autumn came again with its wet cold sea fogs. It was a lonely life and a wearisome life there at the Manor.

Well, Marie Grubbe took her fowling-piece and went out on the heath and shot hares and foxes, and what birds she could hit. Out there she met, more than once, the noble lord, Palle Dyre of Norrebaek. He was out too with his gun and his dogs. He was big and strong, and bragged of it when they talked together. He might have measured his strength with the late Herr Brockenhaus of Egeskov in Funen, of whom men still talked as a strong man. In imitation of him Palle Dyre had hung up at his own gate an iron chain with a hunting horn, and when he came riding home he would grasp the chain and lift himself and his horse from the ground and blow the horn.

"Come and see it for yourself, Lady Marie," said he. "There's a fine fresh air at Norrebaek."

When she came to his home is not recorded; but on the chandeliers of Norrebaek church you may read that they were given by Palle Dyre and Marie Grubbe of Norrebaek Manor.

Body and strength had Palle Dyre. He drank like a sponge, he was like a barrel that could never be filled, he snored like a whole sty of pigs; he was red and bloated in the face.

"He's sly and he's a bully," said Lady Palle Dyre, Grubbe's daughter. She quickly tired of living with him, but it grew no better as it went on.

One day the table was spread, and the dinner grew cold. Palle Dyre was out fox-hunting, and his lady was not to be found. Palle Dyre came home towards midnight, Lady Dyre neither at midnight nor at dawn; she had turned her back on Norrebaek and had gone off without a word of farewell.

The weather was grey and damp, and the wind blew cold, and a flock of black screaming birds flew over her; they were not so homeless as she.

First she turned southward, far on the way towards Germany. Solid gold rings set with precious stones she pledged for money, and then she went eastward, and then again turned westward. She had no goal before her, and she was angry with everyone, even with God, so miserable was she in mind; and soon her body too shared her misery, and she could hardly drag one foot after the other.

A plover flew up from its grass-tuft when she stumbled over it, and cried, as they always do: "Stop, thief! Stop, thief!" Never had she stolen her neighbours' goods, but birds' eggs and young birds she had as a little girl had brought to her from tuft and tree, and that came to her mind now.

From where she lay she could see the sandhills by the shore. Fishermen lived there, but she could not get so far, she was too ill. The great white seagulls came flying over her and screaming, as the rooks and crows and jackdaws screamed at her home in the Manor garden. The birds flew quite close to her, and at last she thought they had turned coal black; and then everything was dark before her eyes. When she opened them again she was being lifted and carried; a big tall fellow had picked her up in his arms. She looked straight into his bearded face. He had a scar above his eye, cutting the eyebrow clean into two halves. He carried her, weak as she was, to his ship, where he got harsh words from the skipper

for his good deed.

Next day the ship sailed. Marie Grubbe was no longer ashore, she went with it. But she came back? Yes, but when and where?

This too the Parish Clerk was able to tell, and it wasn't a tale he had made up himself. He had the whole extraordinary course of it from a trustworthy old book, a book which we can take down and read for ourselves. Ludwig Holberg, the Danish historian, who wrote so many books worth reading, and also those amusing comedies, from which we learn to know his age and the people who lived in it--he tells in his letters of Marie Grubbe and where and how he met with her. It is worth hearing, but for all that we won't forget Chicken Greta, sitting cheerful and happy in her smart hen-house.

The ship set sail with Marie Grubbe aboard; that was where we left off.

A year went by, and yet more years.

The plague was raging in Copenhagen; it was the year 1711. The Queen of Denmark moved to her German home, the King left his capital, everybody who was able hurried away. The students, even those who were lodged and boarded free, went out of the town. One of them, the last who had stayed at what was called Borch's Collegium, near the Regent's palace, was now setting off. It was two o'clock in the morning; he started with his knapsack, which was fuller of books and manuscript than merely clothes. A wet cold mist hung low over the town; not a soul was to be seen in all the street he was passing through. About him on doors and gateways crosses were drawn; either the sickness was there or the people had died. No more life was to be seen in the broader, winding Fleshmonger street, as that one was called which leads from the Round Tower down to the King's palace. Just then a great ammunition cart came rumbling by. The driver was plying his whip, and the horses were at a gallop. The wagon was full of corpses. The young student held his hand to his face and inhaled a strong spirit which he carried in a sponge in a copper vinaigrette. From a pot-house in one of the alleys came the sound of the shrieked-out song and dismal laughter of people who were drinking out the night and trying to forget that the pestilence was waiting at the door and meant to have them into the wagon with the rest of the dead. The student made for the palace bridge, where a few small craft lay. One was weighing anchor to get away from the beleaguered town.

"If God spares us, and we get a wind, we're bound for Grönsund on Falster," said the skipper; and asked the student who wanted to come with him, what his name was.

"Ludwig Holberg," said the student. The name sounded just like any other, but now we hear in it one of the proudest names of Denmark; at that time he was only a young and unknown student. The ship glided on past the palace. It was not yet full day when she got into open water. Then came a light breeze, the sail filled, and the young student lay down with his face towards the fresh wind and fell asleep; not exactly the wisest thing he could have done.

By the dawn of the third day the ship lay off Falster.

"Do you know anyone here with whom I could lodge cheaply?" Holberg asked the Captain.

"I think you'd do well to go to the ferry-woman at the Borrehus," said he. "If you want to be very polite, her name's Mother Sören Sörensen Möller, but it may very well be she'll turn nasty if you're too finicky with her. Her husband's doing time for a crime and she works the ferry-boat herself; she's got a fist of her own."

The student took his knapsack and went to the ferry-house. The door was not locked, the latch lifted, and he entered into a room with a tiled floor, where the most important piece of furniture was a bedstead with a large leather coverlet. A white hen, with a brood of chickens, was tethered to the bedstead, and had upset the water-bowl so that the water was running over the floor. There was nobody either there or in the next room, only a cradle with a child in it, whether man or woman it wasn't easy to say. The personage had a big overcoat on and a fur cap and a hood on the head. The boat came ashore.

It was a woman who came walking into the room. She looked quite imposing when she stood up straight. Two proud eyes looked out from under black eyebrows. This was Mother Sören, the ferry-woman. The rooks and crows and jackdaws would scream out a different name, one which we know better.

She had a sullen look, and did not care to talk much, but thus much was said and settled, that the student struck a bargain for his keep for an uncertain time, as long as things were so bad at Copenhagen.

Often there came to the ferry-house, from the market town hard by, one or more worthy citizens. Frands, the Cutler, and Siverts, the Searcher, would come and drink a jug of ale in the ferry-house and have a discussion with the student. He was an able young fellow, who knew his *Practica*, as it was called, well, could read Greek and Latin, and knew about learned matters.

"Well, the less you know, the less it worries you," Mother Sören would say.

"You're hard worked," said Holberg one day when she was bucking the linen in the sharp lye, and then had to chop up wood herself for fuel.

"Let me get through it," she answered.

"Have you always had to drudge and work since you were a child?"

"You can read that for yourself in my fists," said she, and showed him her two hands--small, to be sure, but hard and strong, with the nails bitten close. "You're scholar enough to read."

Towards Christmas the big snowfalls began. The cold got a grip and the wind blew keen as if it had vitriol in it to wash people's faces with. Mother Sören wasn't daunted, she wrapped her great coat about her and pulled the hood down on her head. It got dark in the house early in the afternoon. She piled wood and peat on the fireplace, sat herself down and new-footed her stockings, there was nobody else to do it. Towards evening she talked to the student, more than she usually did; she spoke of her husband.

"He happened to kill a skipper from Dragör by accident, and for that he's got to work in irons on the Holm for three years. He's only a common sailor, so the law must take its course."

"The law's the same for the upper classes too," said Holberg. "Think so?" said Mother Sören, gazing into the fire. Then she began to speak again. "Did you ever hear of Kai Lykke, who had one of his churches pulled down, and when Parson Mads thundered at him from the pulpit he had Herr Mads laid in bolts and irons and brought an action and condemned him to lose his head himself; and it was cut off too. That wasn't an accident, yet Kai Lykke got off scot-free that time."

"Well, he was within his rights according to those days," said Holberg. "We've got past that now."

"You can tell that to the idiots," said Mother Sören, and got up and went into the room where "baby", the little child, lay. She tended it and put it to bed, and then tidied the student's bed. He had the leather coverlet, he felt the cold more than she, and yet he was born in Norway.

New Year's morning was a real bright sunny day. There had been a frost, and there was one still, so strong that the drifted snow lay frozen hard enough to be walked on. The bells in the town were ringing for church, and student Holberg wrapped his woollen cloak about him and set off to the town.

High over the Borrehus flew the rooks, the crows and the jackdaws with scream and squall; you could hardly hear the church bells for them. Mother Sören was out of doors filling a copper kettle with snow to set on the fire and get drinking water; she looked up at the swarm of birds and had thoughts of her own about it.

Student Holberg went to church. Both going and coming he passed Sivert the Searcher's house door. He was asked in to take a cup of hot beer with syrup and ginger. The talk turned on Mother Sören, but the Searcher didn't know much about her; indeed, few did. "She didn't come from Falster," he said. "At one time she must have had some little means; her husband was a common sailor, a hot-tempered man; he had killed a skipper from Dragör. The fellow beats her, but yet she takes his part."

"I wouldn't stand such usage," said the Searcher's wife. "Besides, I come of a better stock; my father was stocking-weaver to the King.

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"And for that reason you have a royal official for a husband," said Holberg, making his bow to her and the Searcher.

It was Twelfth Night. Mother Sören lighted a Three-King's candle for Holberg--that is to say, three tallow dips she had made herself. "A light for each man," said Holberg.

"Each man?" said the woman, looking sharply at him.

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

"Oh, you mean it that way," said she, and was silent for a long time. But on that Twelfth Night he got to know more than he had known before.

"You're fond of the man you're married to," said Holberg, "but people say that he keeps on ill treating you."

"That don't concern anybody but me," she answered. "The beatings would have done me good when I was young. I suppose I get them now for the wrong I've done. How good he has been to me, I know." And she stood up. "When I was lying ill on the open heath and nobody cared to touch me, except maybe rooks and crows to peck me, he carried me in his arms and got hard words for the game he brought to the ship. I wasn't the kind to lie ill, so I got better. Everyone has his own ways, and Sören has his, but one mustn't judge the horse by the bridle. On the whole, I've lived more happily with him than with the one they called the gallantest and noblest of all the King's subjects. I was married once to Governor Gyldenlöve, the King's half-brother. Then I took Palle Dyre. Six of one and half a dozen of the other. Every man to his taste and I to mine. It's a long story--but now you know all about it." And she left the room.

It was Marie Grubbe! So strange had been the ups and downs of her fortune. She didn't live out many more Twelfth Nights. Holberg has recorded that she died in June, 1716, but he has not recorded, for he did not know it, that when Mother Sören, as she was called, lay dead in the house, a swarm of great black birds flew over the place. They made no sound, they seemed to know that there must be quietness about a burial. As soon as she was laid in the grave the birds were seen no more. But the same evening there was seen in Jutland--near the old Manor house--an immense flock of rooks, crows and jackdaws, shrieking into each other's beaks, as if they had some news to tell; perhaps of the man who when he was little had taken their eggs and their callow young; the peasant's son who was wearing iron garters on the King's Holm, and of the noble maiden, who ended her life as ferry-woman at Grönsund. "Bra, Bra!" they screamed, and the whole tribe of them screamed "Bra, Bra!" when the old Manor house was pulled down. "They scream it out still, now there's nothing to scream about," said the Parish Clerk when he told the story. "The family's died out, the Manor house is pulled down, and, where it used to stand, the smart hen-house stands now with its gilded vanes and old Chicken Greta in it. She's very happy in her pretty dwelling-place; if she hadn't had that, she'd have been in the poor-house."

The pigeons cooed above her, the turkeys gobbled and the ducks quacked all round her.

"Nobody knew her," they said. "Family she has none. It's an act of charity that she's here. She's got no drake-father or hen-mother, and no young ones."

Family she had, for all that. She didn't know it, nor did the Parish Clerk, however much he had got recorded in his table drawer, but one of the old crows knew about it, and told about it. She had heard tell from her mother and her grandmother about Chicken Greta's mother and her grandmother, whom we too know about, from the days when as a child she rode over the drawbridge looking proudly about her, as if the whole world and all the birds' nests in it were hers. We saw her lying on the heath by the sandhills, and last we saw her at the Borrehus. Her grandchild, the last of all the race, was come home again to where the old Manor house had stood, where the wild black birds screamed--only she sat among the tame birds, known of them and knowing them all. Chicken Greta had nothing more to wish for. She was glad to die, and old enough to die.

"A grave, a grave!" shrieked the crows.

Chicken Greta was laid in a good grave; nobody knows it but the old crow--if she isn't dead too.

So now we know the story of the old Manor house, and the old time, and all Chicken Greta's family.

[End of *Chicken Greta's Family* by Hans Christian Andersen, from *Hans Andersen Forty-Two Stories*, translated by M. R. James]