

**MARIE GRUBBE, A
LADY OF THE
SEVENTEENTH CENTURY**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649211760

Marie Grubbe, a lady of the seventeenth century by Jens Peter Jacobsen

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
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JENS PETER JACOBSEN

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(96)

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A LADY OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

BY
JENS PETER JACOBSEN

TRANSLATED FROM THE DANISH
BY HANNA ASTRUP LARSEN



NEW YORK
BONI & LIVERIGHT

1918

PT
8140
M213
1918
c.1
ROBA

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First printing April, 1918
Second printing August, 1918



INTRODUCTION

“**L**ANGUAGE is like an instrument that requires to be tuned occasionally. A few times in the course of a century the literary language of a country needs to be tuned afresh; for as no generation can be satisfied to think the thoughts of the preceding one, so no group of men in the world of letters can use the language of the school that went before them.” With these words Georg Brandes begins his discussion¹ of the influence of J. P. Jacobsen. As Brandes himself was the critic who found new paths, Jacobsen was the creative artist who moulded his native language into a medium fit for modern ideas. At the time when Denmark and Norway had come to a parting of ways intellectually, and the great Norwegians were forming their own rugged style, Jacobsen gave the Danes a language suited to their needs, subtle, pliant, and finely modulated. He found new methods of approach to truth and even a new manner of seeing nature and humanity. In an age that had wearied of generalities, he emphasized the unique and the characteristic. To a generation that had ceased to accept anything because it was accepted before, he brought the new power of scientific observation in the domain of the mind and spirit. In order to understand him it is necessary to follow the two currents, the one poetic, the other scientific, that ran through his life.

Jens Peter Jacobsen was born in Jutland, in the little town of Thisted, on April 7, 1847, and was the son of a merchant in moderate circumstances. From his mother he inherited a desire to write poetry, which asserted itself while he was yet a boy. His other chief interest was botany,

¹ *Det moderne Gennembruds Mænd.*

then a new feature of the school curriculum. He had a fervent love of all plant-life and enjoyed keenly the fairy-tales of Hans Christian Andersen, in which flowers are endowed with personality. At twenty, Jacobsen wrote in his diary that he did not know whether to choose science or poetry for his life-work, since he felt equally drawn to both. He added: "If I could bring into the realm of poetry the eternal laws of nature, its glories, its riddles, its miracles, then I feel that my work would be more than ordinary."

He was one of the first in Scandinavia to realize the importance of Darwin, and translated *The Origin of Species* and *The Descent of Man*, besides writing magazine articles elucidating the principles of evolution. Meanwhile he carried on his botanical research faithfully and, in 1872, won a gold medal in the University at Copenhagen for a thesis on the Danish *desmidiaciae*, a microscopic plant growing in the marshes. In the same year, he made his literary debut with a short story, *Mogens*, which compelled attention by the daring originality of its style. From that time on, he seems to have had no doubt that his life-work was literature, though he became primarily a master of prose and not, as he had dreamed in his boyhood, a writer of verse.

In the spring of 1873, he wrote from Copenhagen to Edvard Brandes:¹ "Just think, I get up every morning at eleven and go to the Royal Library, where I read old documents and letters and lies and descriptions of murder, adultery, corn rates, whoremongery, market prices, gardening, the siege of Copenhagen, divorce proceedings, christenings, estate registers, genealogies, and funeral sermons. All this is to become a wonderful novel to be called 'Mistress Marie Grubbe, Interiors from the Seventeenth Century.'

¹ *Breve fra J. P. Jacobsen, Med Forord udgivet af Edvard Brandes.*

You remember, she is the one who is mentioned in Holberg's Epistles and in *The Goose Girl* by Andersen, and who was first married to U. F. Gyldenløve and afterwards to a ferryman."

When the first two chapters were finished, an advance honorarium from his publisher enabled him to follow his longing and make a trip to the south of Europe, but his stay there was cut short by an attack of the insidious lung disease that was, eventually, to end his life. At Florence, he had a hemorrhage and was obliged to return home to Thisted, where the family physician declared his illness to be mortal. He recovered partially and lived to write his great works, but for eleven years his life was a constant struggle with physical disability.

Marie Grubbe cost him nearly four years of labor, during which time he published nothing except a short story, *Et Skud i Taagen* ("A Shot in the Mist"), and a few poems. The first two chapters of his novel appeared under the title *Marie Grubbes Barndom* ("The Childhood of Marie Grubbe"), and were printed in October, 1873, in a monthly magazine, *Det nittende Aarhundrede*, edited by Edvard and Georg Brandes. The completed book was published in December, 1876, and had sufficient popular success to warrant a second edition in February. Conservative critics, however, needed time to adjust themselves to so startling a novelty, and one reviewer drew from Georg Brandes the retort that certain people ought to wear blue goggles when looking at a style so full of color.

Long before he had finished *Marie Grubbe*, Jacobsen felt a new novel taking shape in his mind. It was to be the story of a modern youth and be called *Niels Lyhne*. It was written, bit by bit, in Thisted and abroad, and did not appear until