

## Back home at The Forecastle (*Skansen*)

By Signe Gometz (1957)



*Skansen, or Lagaholmsgården.*

### Going home

A horse-drawn carriage is rolling along a highway in northwestern Skåne. It is the year 1896. It is early morning and the day is damp and chilly. The driver is a man in his thirties, rather thin, and his hard face wears a dogged expression. By his side an eight-year-old lass. She is small and sits quietly and hunched-up, while the carriage covers mile after mile. At the back of the carriage large wooden cases are piled up high, and to avoid any accidents, carefully tied with ropes. To him that is driving, the cases represent a great value. They are the fruit of six months hard work. The cases are filled with fine wooden clogs, about to be sold at the Laholm market the following day. That is where we are going. Because the eight-year-old is me. And how I found myself in such strange circumstances may need an explanation. At my house, we were slightly "overpopulated", while the rest of the family was mostly childless. So it happened now and then that a child was on loan to relatives. And I had now been on loan to an aunt and uncle in Skåne for four years. There had probably been an exchange of letters between my uncle's and my home, and one day I was told I was going home by riding with the clogmaker. And so here I was, sitting beside August Knutsson, not a complete stranger, since he was the father of my favourite playfellow.

It was to be a long, uneventful day. Maybe I slept a little now and then, since we had been on the road since early morning. I do recall two events from the trip, though. First that we visited a place that I found both ugly and

boring, and not at all as welcoming to strangers as my aunt's home. I was told that this was The Margretetorp Inn. We had coffee there, served only with rusks and no biscuits. Then the journey was continued uphill, and we had to walk a lot to lighten the load for the horse. When at last we sat up on the carriage again and the surroundings felt really desolate, the man beside me suddenly said: "Over there is the place of The Old Man (Gubbakarlen)". He pointed with his whip towards a small cottage not far from the road. Despite my warm coat I shivered. I wished the horse would run faster and take us away from this dangerous neighbourhood. In spite of my young age I had heard that Gubbakarlen was a dangerous robber who would ambush travellers and plunder them. And he would hide stolen goods.

But there was no need for any additional pastime. I had so many serious and exciting things to ponder. My father had written that my family had moved from Ysby to Laholm, where they had found a place called The Forecastle (Skansen). It was really an island completely surrounded by the river Lagan. This sounded very precarious. Everything today had been all joyful, but this worried me: to live on an island. With water all around. How would one get there? In a rowing boat? Then I would never get home, but be left on the river bank. I was afraid of water, especially rushing water. (I actually believe that being afraid was my main quality.) The little brook that murmured merrily through my uncle's garden had always appeared hostile to me. Over the brook there was a narrow foot-bridge that I had to use when being sent on an errand to our neighbour, or on my way to my little playmate. The murmur and the narrowness of the bridge used to make me dizzy. And it felt even worse when the grown-ups made jokes about my fears. And now - a great big river all around my home. How would I ever get home?

Our journey eventually came to an end. The clogmaker parked his cases and his horse, and with my little bundle in his hand he told me that we were going home. I heard the sound of rushing water as soon as we left the town. And soon we were right there in front of that fearful river. There was a bridge, certainly. It looked like an ordinary highway, I thought. But it was still horrible. The rushing and roaring and sputtering on both sides of the bridge. I walked as close to the man as I dared. Oh if only he had held my hand! Louder even than the rushing rapids I could hear my own heart beat, and it seemed to me that the bridge was quite endless. But as soon as we had crossed it everything changed. The horror lay behind me. Now I was almost home.

### **At home**

That turned out to be quite a drawn-out prologue. But now let us take our time. You have to take your leave of the hurry and hustle of today, if you shall be allowed to come along. Because now you are at The Forecastle. Not the Forecastle you may come panting to and drive straight over with your

car. Alas no, this is the old, the real Forecastle, sleeping its Sleeping Beauty sleep of several hundred years and disclosing its secrets only to quiet people, and to children, even the timid ones.

You see, here it starts. With a small stone cottage right where a narrow road turns left down to "the real" Forecastle. In that cottage lived bookbinder Stadling with his young wife. Well, we thought mainly of mr Stadling as the manager of the nursery, where the older brothers worked in the summer and managed to earn some money. The road is straight for a while. Then it turns rather oddly down a slope. From that point we could always make out when there were visitors arriving. On the right there was water. That was the Forecastle pond. And then the road curved upwards to the homestead - home.

I can never recall the season when I arrived at The Forecastle for the first time, and everyone who might have told me are dead now. But it must have been in the summertime..

The yard was rectangular, to the west and north bound by house rows, the western one being the dwelling-house. By the eastern border of the yard was quite a big stone fence. Inside the fence lay our garden plot with a couple of fruit trees, lilac bushes and down by the pond a row of tall alder trees. But I might remember the cardinal points wrong. To the east it was all open land. Yes, there were fields and meadows, but they are not important. You could see far beyond them to the millfall, whose organ music accompanied the view. And there was the mill, where father worked from early morning until very late in the evening.

The brothers - there were five of them - had totally occupied the island when I made my entrance. I caused some disturbance in the nesting-box. *What* was one supposed to do with a *girl* in the flock? She could neither be a Red Indian nor a warrior. Both most important occupations. Because both the Indian novels and **The Barber surgeon's Stories** were to be *played*. We were happily unaware of the fact that this is called to dramatize. Ah, blessed magazines! They were good for cockades and plumes and badges of rank and feathered headdresses for the Indians. And the saw-horse became a fine Indian tent, when covered in green turpentine-smelling plants from the pond. And the girl came to use. In wartime she would be Lotta Swärd () and when the Red Indians made the neighbourhood unsafe she would have to stay inside the chief's wigwam. The canteen served carrots and sugar peas from the garden-plot, sometimes with a slice of mother's good homemade coarse-grained bread.

And there was bathing, of course. Not down at the Cape, though. That was the dangerous bathing-place of the towns-people. We found that living, laughing people went there and came back dead, drowned, followed by silent, serious men. No, that place was not for us. But when mother had

finished her chores, our little group of minors was allowed to go down to the west side of the island. For hours mother would sit on a stone or in the green grass knitting, while we bathed or just splashed around or examined the secrets of the depths, the uncountable fish-spawn, whereof the water abounded.

How slowly Lagan ran and how black and mysterious it was! Sometime our romping died down as if on command. Silently, almost solemnly, fishermen came gliding downstream in their flat-bottomed punts. We knew them all. There was Lars Öman, the tallest of them all, with his dented hat and many a kind word in store for the li'l uns. That was how I imagined the appearance of the old vikings. And there was Sövda-Nils, who lived up at the Northern star, where heaven touched the earth. And then there was Trygger's Pelle, badly harelipped and with great speech difficulties. We were all prepared to be quiet when we saw two fishermen come gliding so silently, on their knees in their punts, because we did not want our noise to scare the salmon. Sometimes it happened - suddenly some movement in the punts because a salmon was caught in a net. Then there was excitement and drama for a few minutes. Something glittered for a moment by the side of the boat when the net was hauled in. My brothers ready on the shore, because now the quickest one was to run off on light feet to get to the liquor store in town and buy the litre that was to be used for celebration. And - this was actually the main thing - to become the happy owner of the 5 öre coin that was to be the change for the enclosed single crown coin. Mother, who had been a teetotaller since early age, was not all that pleased with the procedure. It was to be accepted only because the fishermen were all our friends. And now, half a century later, I may testify that mother despite the procedure described above had five teetotal sons and two ditto daughters.

To wake up on a summer morning at the Forecastle! Somebody has opened up the doors. The sunshine and lovely scents of summer come rushing in accompanied by the sound of the rapids. Outside our windows a large flowerbed dug by the older boys. All summer long it is filled with flowers like marigolds, mignonettes, flax, poppies, "the flowers of innocence", California poppies and runner beans. Close by stands the beebench with its many beehives covered in straw. And the sun shines all day long and the bees buzz and the flowers spread their fragrances. Now and then white clouds build fairytale castles in the sky. While your eyes are following them, you cannot help but letting your thoughts touch the Eternal one, our God, never far from our notions and our conversations. And the stream surges and sings. Mother used to say, that she became sleepless in the dry periods or when the rapids froze during hard winters.

Winter at the Forecastle! And Christmas! But before that so many other things. The bees had been swarming during the warm summer days and the beehives had grown. Not everyone could hibernate, thus there was a bee slaughter. It was a bit gruesome, we thought. But it was followed by a

honeycake, tasting of all the loveliness of a summer at the Forecastle. For where was there ever such an abundance of wild flowers? And we had picked all of them into bouquets. Only one particular flower was taboo, like the Tree of Knowledge. It was the henbane over where the ruin descended so abruptly down towards the river. (Who has this flower in their herbarium? I have looked for it in my adult years, but it was gone by then.) And the rain had arrived and the water risen and closed in on our domains, and on the riverbed my brothers had built a water mill, with a real turbine, which powered several small wheels. And the wooden boats with their white sails had been put in the river, and us li'l uns had stood there looking at them with regret, wondering if they would really sail all the way to Åmot and out into the great ocean. Before winter all the potatoes in our garden plot opposite the old castle ruin would also be dug up. The lizards, shimmering of gold and green and all the colours of the rainbow, came scampering to see, who was disturbing their peace. Such beautiful lizards I have never seen again, and they made themselves at home everywhere. Mother thought it was a bit much when they entered our house, and she would rather send us children to dig up the potatoes, thus not having to touch their ice cold skin herself. Our potato patch yielded more. We found old arrow-heads, one or two cannonballs, a very small silver clasp, all of which father and my older brothers took care of. It was quite common that, with a spade, a pitchfork or a pickaxe, we unearthed bone fragments. I do not know from where we got the idea, but we used to tell each other that those were surely human bones.

Among my brothers there was one, a small one, who knew "everything", at least if it was written in books. He was twelve years old when we moved to the Forecastle, but he had told us in no uncertain words, that there had been battles fought here long ago, the battles of the Forecastle. Because of this we often spoke of the dead we thought were to be found in the earth around the Forecastle. In a place close to our house there was a deep hole that had been dug and left open. We were often standing leaning over it, and then someone always said: "There is surely a dead person lying down there." Thoughts of death and the dead often occupied our minds. I have been told this much later. At the time we did not speak of it that often. But when, after a long sundrenched summer's day of playing and frolicking, we sat together on the stone fence, and the stillness of the summer evening began to fall, someone might say: "Let's go inside". No one ever stayed behind then. Because suddenly we all got that slightly shuddering feeling, that you may get visiting a churchyard in the evening. You want to join the living again. Since my eighth year I have felt it, and much, much later I have had proof that the rest of us felt the same. It was not like being scared of the darkness. It was completely different: the presence of something that did not quite belong to our every-day-world.

There were more people living at the Forecastle homestead. But the children of those families were much younger and I am afraid we very much

acted as the master race towards them.

I shall not be describing the autumn, because I cannot remember one single autumn day at the Forecastle. We would no longer have been the master race and the rulers of the island then. We would have been sitting as more or less attentive pupils at the Ahla school or with Beijer in Laholm. We probably belonged to Ahla, but since I was small in size and a girl as well, I was allowed to attend school in town, since that was much closer to my home.

Where does winter arrive as promptly as it did at the Forecastle? One day it was already there, with the wind coming from the north. And the pond, filled to the brim by autumn rain, which I cannot remember, but which must have fallen nevertheless, lay smooth as a mirror after the first frosty night. My older brothers watched out for that mirror. No stone was to be thrown. And father's firm decree was: "Never try the ice until there have been three days of frost." It seems there were always three days of frost at the Forecastle, because one day you could see your brothers skating the smooth surface with long strides. Then life at the Forecastle changed into something quite different. The ice skaters came along. On Sundays almost the whole town came. My big brother had bought a pair of skates with his own money. The next brother had then inherited his old ones. But that was it. The rest of us had to keep warm by going sliding. Wooden clogs slid excellently. But they did not fare very well, nor did father's purse. And sometimes you still almost froze to the ground, because there was so much to look at with all those strangers that you wanted to know who they were. Foremost of all was candidate Öman, the indisputable king of the skating arena, when clad in his blue student's winter cap he drew patterns on the smooth surface of the ice. Then one day notice was given that the junior college boys had also arrived. They were remarkable and enviable people, who were able to go away to a nice school, where they became "men of learning". Of course there were also ladies and girls, but they were so refined and remarkable that I never got to know anything about them. For I was always surrounded by boys and boy's talk, and this actually made me more interested in the subjects coveted by boys. Sitting here tonight I can see all those people swarming merrily before me. When the falling darkness drove all the strangers home, we used to stay on in the moon- or starlight. We would stand still and listen to the sounds in the ice-crust when it got colder. And then it happened again! "Let's go inside". As if on command the flock gathered together and we all went inside. We suddenly felt as if another world had taken over.

While living in the summer, the autumn and the winter, we kept on talking about Christmas. The Christmases I had spent in Skåne had not been much different from any ordinary Sunday. Because of this I listened with rising astonishment to all this talk of Christmas. At last Christmas-time arrived, and the Christmas holidays allowed us to spend whole days at home. The boys filled our house with "Christmas letters". They were bought at

Bookseller Rådberg's and cost 5 öre apiece. How we cut and glued! Soon warriors from regiments all over the world started appearing in our house. There were Turks and Zuaves and the riflemen of Jämtland and cuirassiers, and the emperor Menelik and his Ethiopian warriors adorned in lions' manes were there as well. Me, I bought something more girlish about bearkillers and the like.

Every day was such a joy! What did it matter that you had to help with brushing the iron ovens glassy like mirrors or carry firewood and peat? Christmas was coming, soon. One day you were supplied with 15 öre and allowed to accompany your youngest brother - since the money was his - to see the Christmas exhibition at Rådberg's. We got a whole elephant for our money, and it was even equipped with wheels.

At last the newly starched curtains were in place, the white bed-curtains were hung, a white cloth covered the table, and the Christmas tree with its strong fragrance was carried into our house and covered in decorations by my second eldest brother. My heart expanded with joyous expectation. When in the evening our lamp had been lit, mother opened a drawer where the *Christmas magazines* had been locked up. "Father Christmas", "The Christmas Gift" and "Tom Thumb" appeared. We felt so solemn and tried to outdo each other in courteousness. No one wanted to be the first but instead we all wanted to allow the others to be first to open and enjoy this wonderful entertainment. Imagine holding a brand new *Christmas magazine* in your hands! And to let yourself become engrossed in "The Boy Who Could Not Lie", "The Angel on the Roof" or "The Story of the Haycocks". At nightfall light snowflakes had started falling and when the door was opened it all shimmered like fine, white gauze. We were just waiting for father to arrive. And then his quick steps could be heard, and for the rest of our lives we would be able to hear his joyful cry: "Christmas is here", as well as his jocular wake up call every Christmas morning: "Hurry up, children. It is Christmas Eve." Through the years, this has always been the greeting with which we have saluted each other on Christmas Eve. - Our table was laid with coffee and pastry, and we just had to take our seats as soon as father had arrived in his best clothes. It astonished me that we all had to put on our very best clothes, even though we stayed at home. For there were three kinds of clothes, and the kind in the middle was used for Sundays-at-home. Another remarkable thing was, that we were allowed to take one of each of all the different kinds of cookies...

We lit the Christmas-tree candles. Oh, the Christmas-tree at the Forecastle! It had the real glass ornament balls and the real tinsel garlands and the real Christmas candles: red, blue, yellow, green, white. I have seen Christmas trees, radiant with magnificence and splendour, white candles in abundance. They were beautiful. But the real Christmas candles were the ones in the Christmas tree of my childhood at the Forecastle. No other tree has smelt like that tree did. It filled our house with its fragrance. And imagine to at

last be able to fall asleep enveloped in that fragrance.

Suddenly there was a slight noise. Somebody touched the door handle and the door opened. But no one entered. Instead a parcel rolled along the floor. Everyone was dead silent. My siblings had told me so much about Santa Claus who used to come visiting. He was an unknown celebrity to me. And here he was. He existed. What did it matter, that I could not see him. He did not want to be seen by humans, my brothers had told me, since he was not a person like us. But mother would put some porridge out in the barn for him. That was how he wanted it. He came along quietly and cautiously time after time. One person after another got their parcel, until everyone had received a gift. Everybody but one - me. But that was not such a mystery. I did not quite belong here, since I had made my home in Skåne for so long. But I wanted so much to belong here instead and be like all the rest. To my despair I felt tears running down my face. For I really did not think it appropriate to cry for something I had not received. I must have sobbed aloud, because suddenly I was the centre of everyone's attention. One of my brothers hurried out into the kitchen to see mother. "Mother, Signe is crying". And mother came right out to see, what was going on. Then it all became too much, and I was quite overcome by crying. Mother began to realize the situation. "Where is your Christmas present?" she asked. The answer must have felt like a real blow to my mother. "I have not received any present". Mother turned quite reproving, telling me that of course I had received a present. No, for once my brothers stood up like my protectors and explained that there had been no present for me. Then something strange happened. As soon as mother had returned to her chores in the kitchen, the door opened and a parcel, the largest parcel, rolled in. It had my name on it. Beneath all the wrapping there was a round box containing - a muff. It was almost a luxury and my parents had had to dig deep into their purses to give me this joy, maybe with the thought that the muff would be compensation for all the Christmases when I had been away from home. Now Christmas was here again in all its glory, and the joy it brought was whole and unbroken.

I have tried to describe Christmas at the Forecastle. But I do not believe, that I have succeeded. Yet it will live in my heart forever. Many different Christmases have I celebrated since then, and in many different places. And every time the same thing happens: in the middle of the festivities I walk alone back to the Forecastle to sit for a while in our real Christmas. Best is if one of my siblings is there. Then we shall be there, even if we do not utter a word.

"You green islands, the home of my heart down here..."

### **Meeting the dead**

Many years have past. My memories of the Forecastle and our childhood

town Laholm are hidden deep down in my heart. Everything has moved so far away. Only sometimes during my Christmas- and summer holidays am I able to have a quick look at my old home, while my train runs past it.

One day there is suddenly a short news-item in a paper. It says, that there are to be excavations made at the Forecastle. Alas, can this be true? And - I might ask - is this *possible*, since all of us are not there? I think I have to try to get there some day. But time passes and further information about the excavations is sparse. Nevertheless they have found the mortal remains of a person there, a warrior. Not in the deep hole from our childhood, but east of the main road in an area we were forbidden to enter.

Then Ascension Day arrives with a clear sky, light, fast-moving skies and a fresh, cool breeze. One of my colleagues comes along and says that he is driving to Halmstad with his fiancé, and that there is room for me in the car as well. I thank him, and ask if he might give me five minutes at the Laholm churchyard, and five more between the bridges at the Forecastle. He agrees, and off we go. Over the northwestern plains of Skåne, across the ridge and away towards dear old Laholm. Here lies the churchyard where father was put to his final rest, when the century was quite new.

We drive on. We pass the first bridge and I can get out. My travel companions stay put in the car, and I am grateful to be able to go exploring on my own. I turn into the old road and stop for a moment where the road bends sharply downhill. What is happening down in our old garden? There are tools and baskets down there, and they have put up some kind of fence. I quicken my steps. And then I am there - - -. How can I describe the sight that met my eyes! In one part of the area the earth has been shuffled aside. How carefully they had proceeded! And how carefully they had handled everything! I stood there thinking that they seemed to have moved the earth using a teaspoon. And the findings were put in baskets. And there, open to the clear, glaring spring light and to the wind, graves side by side - each containing a skeleton - our "dead". - They were the silent companions of our childhood hunches. Here the secret of the Forecastle was revealed.

*One morning they would all be lying in a row  
mouldering in the gravel of the grave,  
the simple man of heather and shore meadows  
as well as the fine gentleman.*

“Elfkarlen” (The Nix, the title of a poem)

Yes, here they lay, the tall, strong men. Long ago in another time and far away on a strange shore, someone had been waiting and expecting them to return home: parents, siblings, sweetheart. My heart slowly filled with something like gratitude for not disturbing the joys of our childhood. Also, I wanted to beg their pardon for all our merry noise by their resting place. But most of all I wanted to give a prayer for eternal peace and calm rest and at

last a blessed resurrection for all "our dead". When I turned around to leave I realized that my face was covered in tears.

The brother I was on my way to see, was told this story about an hour later. "But we always knew", he commented. "You remember the evenings, when we always hurried inside all at the same time." When we moved out of the Forecastle, this brother was eight years old. We had never before spoken of the subject. A long letter was written and sent to another brother, living in the U.S.A. "Aha, so *that* was the hidden secret of our childhood Jerusalem", he wrote back. Yes, and how strange it was that one of us children came back at the very moment when it was possible to greet the dead.

Translated into English by Eva Gometz 2008