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To the Reader. – Everything related in this book rests upon the hundred and six source histories gathered at aalholmslot.dk: the dates, the names, the sums of money, the sealed letters and the legends. The men and women who pass through these pages lived, and most of their deeds are attested. But archives preserve neither the tone of a voice, nor the colour of the sky, nor what is said once the door is shut. Those things belong to the novelist, and he has taken them only where history falls silent. At the end of the volume a key to the sources shows in which chapter each of the histories has found its place.

PROLOGUE

The Eels

Before there were kings upon the island, there were eels.

They came in autumn, when the nights lengthened over the Baltic and the water of the lagoon took on the colour of lead. Through the narrow channel at Nysted they entered in multitudes, gleaming, obstinate, driven by a law older than any treaty, and made their way to the freshwater lake that slept behind the islet. The fishermen had always known their paths. They set their traps where salt met sweet, and they called the place by the only name that suited it: Ålholmen, the islet of eels.

One day, in the last decades of the thirteenth century, a man stood upon that islet and paid no heed whatever to the eels.

He was looking at the water. He saw that the land was as flat as an oaken table, that no boat could pass the channel without being seen, that no horseman could ride down the northern road without being counted. He saw water on every side, mud, reeds; and to the south a thin line of horizon behind which the Counts of Holstein sat in their castles reckoning what the kingdom of

Denmark might be worth.

The man was the King. Which king? The sources hesitate; they say 1256, they say the old fortress at Refshale had fallen and another was needed. But what he thought that day we know better than if he had dictated it to his chancellor, for he wrote it in stone. He thought: *here*.

So they built, in red monastery brick upon a bed of boulders; they laid out a rectangle seventy-four paces by thirty, raised towers at the corners, and gave the walls such thickness that a man might lie full length across an embrasure. They built for years, and when they had done, the kingdom possessed to the south a door that could be shut.

It was not beauty the King had sought. He had seen neither the sun going down over the lagoon, nor the herons motionless in the shallows, nor the evening light that turns the reeds to copper. He had seen fields of fire.

Beauty would come later. It would come with queens, with gardening counts, with the bears of a somewhat mad philologist and the motor-cars of a baron who loved engines more than land. But for seven centuries, whoever wanted anything of Lolland had to reckon with that flat islet.

Some came with an army. Others in a wedding gown. Others again with irons upon their ankles.

And every autumn, whoever was master of the fortress, the eels came back.

PART ONE: THE KING IN THE CELLAR

1. 1329 – A Kingdom Under the Hammer

There are kings who lose their crowns at a single stroke, upon a field of battle. Christopher II lost his as a man loses a fortune: by small debts.

He had come to the throne in 1320 after swearing to a charter the great lords had wrung from him, so narrow that it would have made a rebel of a saint. Christopher was no saint. He broke it article by article, and every breach he paid for in land. Eight years later there was little land left. There were the islands.

One sees him at Ringsted, on the day of the settlement by which Aalholm first enters the written record: a thick-set man with a heavy face, surrounded by Holstein lords who spoke Danish with the accent of beyond the Eider and counted faster than he could think. Opposite him sat his half-brother, John of Plön, whom men called John the Mild, either in irony or for want of any point of comparison.

“Lolland and Falster,” said the Count. “With their castles. With Aalholm.”

“In pledge, my lord brother. Until the sum is repaid.”

“That goes without saying,” replied John the Mild, smiling.

And everyone at the table knew that the sum would never be repaid; for Christopher had never repaid anyone anything, and a kingdom that no longer belongs to itself cannot buy back what it has sold.

The deed was sealed. Aalholm changed masters without a single sword leaving its scabbard. The King went home with enough to pay for a war he had already lost, and Count John sent his men to the flat islet in the lagoon.

Monarchs who pledge their kingdoms always believe they are yielding only the use of them. History shows them, almost without exception, that they have yielded the soul.

2. 1330 – The Count’s Letter

The oldest letter we have from Aalholm is a letter of largesse.

Count John, installed in the fortress, wrote to the priests of Lolland. He gave them something – lands, franchises, it matters little – and set the comital seal at the foot of the deed. It is an amiable letter, almost caressing; the letter of a foreigner who knows he is not loved, and who begins by winning over those who speak to God, since he cannot win over those who plough.

John was no fool. He had the walls raised, towers added,

Holstein sergeants posted on the curtain and Holstein clerks in the chancery. He left the fishermen their eel-traps, for a prudent man does not quarrel with those who feed him.

But there was a thorn in his foot, and its name was Christopher.

The fallen King was still alive. He wandered the realm that had been his, a crowned beggar, trailing behind him a muffled unrest: peasants who would not pay taxes to a Holsteiner, knights who had miscalculated and now regretted it. A weak king is still a king; and a weak king who lives is more troublesome than a strong king who is dead.

In 1331 Christopher tried his fortune one last time. He lost it. After which there remained only one place where he could be put out of everyone's reach, and where no one would forget who held the key.

He was taken to Aalholm.

3. 1332 – The Cellar

The King of Denmark was lodging with a gentleman, Peder Hvitfeldt, in a stone house thatched with reeds at Sakskøbing. It was all that was left to him in the year 1332: a bed under another man's roof, in the very country he had pledged three years before.

Two men of the lesser nobility, Henneke Breide and Johan Ellemose, made a simple and infamous calculation. A king, however fallen, must surely be worth a ransom. They set fire to

the house.

Christopher flung himself out of the window, into the smoke. They were waiting below.

They took him to Aalholm, through the gate of the fortress he himself had strengthened and which his half-brother now held. The chroniclers would have it that Count John was there that day. Picture the scene: in the courtyard, face to face, two sons of the same mother, Agnes of Brandenburg; one blackened with soot, his wrists bound; the other master of all the east of the kingdom.

“Well, brother,” John may have said, “you are better lodged here than with Hvitfeldt.”

We do not know. But we know that he did nothing for him.

The dungeon beneath the north-west tower is there still. One goes down by narrow steps; the daylight turns grey, then dies, and a cold takes hold of you that no season can explain. The walls are ten feet thick. The lagoon is mute there. No one knows in which chamber the King was shut, nor for how long. Straw, a plank bed, a bucket, a thread of light: it was no torture-chamber, but a storeroom where one keeps merchandise until the buyer comes.

The buyer never came.

That is the cruellest stroke of the whole story: the kidnappers had meant to sell a king, and discovered that nobody wanted one. Count John, says a popular book of 1869, “set no store by his half-brother and let him go at once”. It was not mercy. It was contempt. Christopher was sent off to Nykøbing, free, which was worse than fetters, for freedom gave him back nothing.

He died there on 2 August 1332, of grief, say the chronicles, which are fond of such deaths. He was buried at Sorø. By then the whole of Denmark was in pawn – Jutland and Funen to Count Gerhard, Zealand, Scania and the islands to Count John – and the realm remained eight years without a king, like a house whose very locks have been sold.

Those who go down into the cellar today remark a singular silence. Some attribute it to the stones. Others say nothing and come up again quickly.

4. 1342–1360 – Atterdag

He was the younger son, brought up outside the realm at the Emperor's court; and at imperial courts one learns the most useful of royal virtues, which is patience.

Valdemar came back to Denmark in 1340 with his father's name for all his baggage. The kingdom was pledged; the Holsteiners still held Aalholm. But Valdemar did not resemble Christopher. He knew how to count, he knew how to wait, and he knew that a kingdom is not bought back in one piece, but castle by castle.

As early as 1342 the Count's man at Aalholm was writing to Holstein to complain of "the King's gross presumption". The phrase is delicious. It tells us that this young man, who as yet had neither treasury nor army, was already behaving in Lolland as though it were his own.

By 1346 it was. No battle, no feat of arms: money, pressure and patience, until Holstein let go. Valdemar rode into Aalholm, the first Danish king to pass its gate in eighteen years. He looked up at the towers, had them strengthened, and did a thing no king before him had done and none would do again: he made his own son, Christopher, Duke of Lolland.

The boy bore the name of the grandfather who had rotted in the cellar. Now he held his court above it. In 1360 he granted privileges to Nysted “at our castle of Ålholm”, and one hears in those three words a restrained exultation. *Our castle*. No longer the Count’s. No longer the lender’s.

They called Valdemar *Atterdag*, “Day Again”. The young Duke died in 1363 of a wound taken before Helsingborg; the King lost his only son, and it is hard to say which cost him more. But Aalholm was Danish, and so it remained.

5. 1359 – The Prohibition of Aalholm

In the spring of the year 1359 the kingdom was at war with itself.

To gather up the fragments of his inheritance, Valdemar confiscated, taxed, and took back from the great lords the Crown lands they had seized in the kingless years. Jutland was in revolt, there was fighting for castles in Funen, and between the armies there struggled along churches and convents with no defence but their prayers.

The evil bore an innocent name: *gæsteri*, the right of lodging.

Kings and bishops might have themselves housed with their retinues so many days a year; but in time of war, when armed bands roamed the land, hospitality looked very like plunder. The bishops wrote to the King: monks and nuns, lacking the barest necessities, were leaving their houses to beg their bread among laymen; parish priests would soon be driven from their altars; and all by the doing of what the letter calls, with holy wrath, *impious and vagabond men*.

On Monday 29 April 1359, Valdemar Atterdag, sitting at Aalholm, made answer.

He forbade, on pain of losing his favour, that any of his bailiffs, or their officers, or anyone of whatever estate, should henceforth burden priests and convents with forced lodging and unlawful levies. Whoever transgressed would know the King's vengeance.

There was a subtlety in this prohibition that is not at first remarked. The first named among the possible culprits were the King's own bailiffs; and it was those same bailiffs who, with the bishops, were to punish the transgressors. Valdemar made his own agents at once the disease and the cure. Such is the way of princes who know how to govern: they mistrust their servants first.

The letter closes in Latin: *Datum Aleholm nostro sub sigillo et in presencia nostra*. It went out in at least two copies. One reached rebellious Jutland; the other the diocese of Odense, and its trail leads straight back to Lolland, for in 1589 the clergy of the island produced it in defence of their rights, and in 1626 the

original still lay in the church at Stokkemärke. The priests of Lolland kept the King's letter for two hundred and fifty years, as one keeps a weapon one hopes never to use.

At the following Whitsun, at Kalundborg, the prohibition became the law of the land: whoever forced himself upon another without the host's goodwill was to be judged a robber. To gather a kingdom together is not only to retake castles. It is also to set bounds to those who hold the sword. That day, one such bound was set from a flat island in the lagoon of Nysted.

6. 1362–1366 – The Table Where the North Was Carved

In those years Aalholm was less a fortress than a negotiating table; and in that century negotiating tables saw more destinies decided than battlefields.

In 1362 Valdemar received there Albert of Mecklenburg, a German duke whose ambition was as luxuriant as his beard, and the two princes divided the North between them as one carves a pie: to whom this province of Sweden, where the border should run, who should marry whom. The great hall of Aalholm heard more high policy in those years than any other chamber in the kingdom.

In July 1366 Valdemar returned, and with the same Albert concluded a secret alliance – directed against his own son-in-law,

Håkon of Norway. They called it the Treaty of Ålholm. There are few Danish fortresses that have lent their name to great affairs of state; fewer still that have lent it to an agreement whose terms the King's own daughter was presumably not meant to know.

Family dinners, in the fourteenth century, were not for tender souls.

But the wheel turns for everyone. In 1368 the Hanseatic towns, Holstein, Sweden and Mecklenburg rose together against Valdemar, and the King was obliged to leave his realm. He left his castles to their captains and his soul to God.

At Aalholm the commander was a knight named Kersten Kule.

7. 1366 – The Prisoners, the Princess and the Four Scribes

On 28 July 1366, things other than kingdoms were written of at Aalholm.

Between the great clauses that historians remember slipped small questions that no one thinks to tell: who would come out of prison? which old debts would be wiped away? and what would become of the promises made to the King's daughter?

One letter concerned men without names. King Albert of Sweden and the Dukes of Mecklenburg declared they had agreed with Valdemar to release the prisoners of both parties taken since the last Whitsun; and ransoms agreed in the same period

were to lapse. That was the clause that mattered. A liberty that must be bought is only a debt that has changed its shape. Somewhere around the Baltic a score of Swedes and Danes lay in tower chambers; one July day, before they knew it, a piece of parchment sealed on Lolland struck off both their irons and their debt.

Another letter settled an old account: ten thousand marks of fine silver. Wismar and Rostock had joined in the siege of Helsingborg while there was peace with Mecklenburg; Count Adolf of Holstein had arbitrated, the Duke had made amends, and Valdemar swore that neither he nor his successors would ever speak of it again. Do not picture chests of silver passing the gate; picture a seal upon a renunciation. The most costly quarrels are not those one pays for, but those one reopens.

Yet not everything was forgiven. In a third letter Valdemar remitted to the King of Sweden and the Dukes their past defaults – save one, expressly excepted: the dower of his daughter Ingeborg, wife of Duke Henry of Mecklenburg. The father granted a delay until Martinmas 1368; he yielded nothing. Whether Ingeborg was present we do not know. We know that on that day, among kings embracing one another, a father defended his daughter.

And all these nuances had to outlive those who had willed them. Release and ransom, remission and exception, debt extinguished and new term: four men answered for it. The editors of the *Diplomatarium Danicum* have distinguished in

the nine Aalholm treaties four scribal hands, and drafts survive, scratched out and begun again. One sees them, in a room of the north wing, the lagoon's light upon the vellum, inkhorn in hand, watching lest a comma set one prisoner too many free or swallow up a princess's dower.

The kings decided. The scribes made it last.

8. 1368 – The Man Who Talked

In September 1368 Count Henry of Holstein landed upon Lolland with an army the ships of the Hansa had carried over. They called him Iron Henry, and he had not come to converse. The King's castles were falling like ninepins. He presented himself before Aalholm.

Within the fortress, Sir Kersten Kule, knight, held it in pledge. He was no thunderbolt of war, and he knew the exact state of his granaries: too few men, too little corn, no king to whom a courier might be sent. He knew too the state of his adversary: an army that could not spend the winter in the mud before a water-castle.

So Kule talked.

"My lord," he must have said to the Count, "why fret beneath our walls as the season turns? Grant me until the first day of May. On that day we shall decide the fate of the castles."

On 8 September 1368 he concluded a truce for the whole island; three days later the captain of Ravensborg followed his example. Each would keep his goods until 1 May 1369; the

army might withdraw; no one would go hungry. Iron Henry agreed. It was, after all, a surrender on credit.

The first of May came, and went. Aalholm was not handed over. There proved to be obscurities in the agreement, letters to be collated, talks to be resumed. In November Valdemar made peace with the Hansa. As late as September 1370 Kersten Kule, seated at Bardewick with the Duke of Brunswick-Lüneburg, was assuring everyone with the utmost gravity that the castles would be handed over as soon as the parties were “fully agreed upon all negotiations and all letters”.

They were never fully agreed.

When the King came home, Aalholm stood intact, and Kule upon the curtain. The popular book of 1869 notes soberly that the two captains “had manifestly acted with great wisdom”. He had not loosed a single arrow. He had written letters, asked for delays, and let the calendar do his fighting for him.

It is the finest exploit that can be credited to a servant of the State; it is also the rarest, for no one sings of it.

9. 1376 – Two Kings for One Crown

Valdemar Atterdag died on 24 October 1375, leaving a kingdom without a son, which is for a kingdom the worst of maladies.

There remained the grandsons. Ingeborg, the elder daughter, had given Duke Henry of Mecklenburg a boy named Albert. Margaret, the younger, had given King Håkon of Norway a

child of five named Oluf. Denmark was an elective kingdom; the Mecklenburgers did not wait for the election. A few months after the funeral, young Albert was already styling himself in his charters *King Albert of Denmark* – an immense title for a boy who did not own an inch of the country.

On 21 January 1376, at Grevesmühlen, the family and its allies assembled to buy the help that would turn the title into a crown. The price was Aalholm.

The parchment sleeps at Schwerin, weighted with twenty-seven seals of wax. In it the “King of Denmark”, aged fifteen, and the Dukes acknowledge a debt to the Counts of Holstein of thirty thousand marks of silver, and pledge as security Ålholm, Ravensborg and the whole land of Lolland, with Kolding, Ribe and Sejerø thrown in. Albert was pawning a castle he had never seen, disposing on paper of a kingdom still to be conquered; it is the nature of pretenders to spend in advance the inheritance they will never have.

At Aalholm, however, the captain was Henning Schacht, and he was of the other party. Six weeks after Grevesmühlen, on 4 March, Duke Bogislaw VI of Pomerania stood in the castle courtyard beside the lagoon and swore to uphold Oluf, Håkon and Queen Margaret “with all his might”. While the fortress was being sold in Germany, the opposing alliance was being sealed within its walls.

On that same day, at Roskilde, the Archbishop of Lund and the great lords declared for Oluf; and at Eger, hundreds of leagues

away, the Emperor Charles IV promised the Mecklenburgers his help in conquering Denmark. Thus on 4 March 1376 two camps on either side of the Baltic were labouring for two different kings, and Aalholm lay precisely between them, like the gold piece on the gamblers' table.

Margaret won the first hand with the weapon she wielded better than anyone: the men of the kingdom. On 3 May the assembly at Slagelse elected little Oluf. A Mecklenburg fleet appeared in the Sound in September; war hung in the air; but on 21 September, at Copenhagen, terms were agreed, and Mecklenburg acknowledged the child.

One would think the matter closed. Matters of that kind are never closed.

10. 1377 – The Emperor Issues a Summons

On 12 September 1377, at Tangermünde on the Elbe, the Emperor Charles IV had three letters written.

The old Duke Albert had complained once more: the kingdom belonged by right to his grandson, and Danish captains were occupying the Crown's castles *contra deum et iusticiam*, against God and justice. The Emperor named the fortresses one by one, and the man who held each. Hagenskov. Nyborg. Fåborg. Kærstrup. Tranekær. Ravnsborg. And then:

Tu Nicolae Thome castrum Alholm. Thou, Niels Thomsen, who holdest the castle of Ålholm.

Niels Thomsen was a squire who, ten weeks before, had sworn at Nyborg, with King Oluf, Queen Margaret and forty-four knights, to keep the kingdom whole. He was commanded to appear within eighteen weeks before the Emperor or his court judge; and lest he plead fear of the road, he was granted safe-conduct there and back. It was chancery routine; and the very routine showed how the Emperor saw the affair: an ordinary lawsuit, with the captains of Denmark in the dock.

One pictures the squire receiving the parchment from a herald's hands, the imperial seal dangling at the end of its cords, and the injunction to go and answer in enemy country, before the most powerful man in Christendom, for the crime of keeping a Danish castle for the Danish king.

He did not go.

On 27 January 1378, shortly after the term expired, he appeared before the court of Lolland and had a manor at Hessel conveyed to him, with lands in the parish of Radsted. The deed calls him "captain of Aalholm and judge of the land of Lolland". The Emperor had summoned him to Germany; he was buying property on Lolland. A summons can hardly be answered more eloquently.

In October 1382 he was still in command at Aalholm. The Emperor had died at Prague in November 1378, the old Duke in February 1379, and the affair had sunk into the sand. The three imperial letters lie to this day at Schwerin, in the plaintiff's own archives, untouched. A summons had to be served by the party

who obtained it; that they never left the ducal chest says enough about how far the case went.

The great ones of this world hurl their thunderbolts more often than they strike; and the small men who know it sleep soundly.

11. 1394 – The Most Powerful Woman in the North

She had been married at ten, crowned Queen of Norway at seventeen. At thirty-seven she governed three kingdoms in all but name, and no man in the North dared contradict her to her face.

Margaret, daughter of Valdemar.

In 1394 she established herself at Aalholm – not to rest, for rest was unknown to her, but to treat with the envoys of the Hansa, those rich German towns that had humiliated her father. She received them in the fortress where her grandfather had rotted in a cellar; and one likes to think she remembered it.

One sees her in the great hall, all in black, for she wore mourning for years, her face inscrutable and her eye missing nothing. The Hanseatics came with demands; she listened. They came with threats; she listened. They came with offers; then she spoke, and when she had done they had given up more than they had come to take.

It was during her stay that the castle received its finished medieval form; the south wing was completed under her eyes, and the wing that still bears her name, the Margaret Wing, keeps

the memory of those months when the Queen sat at the window over the lagoon dictating letters for Stockholm, for Oslo and for Rome. In those days Aalholm was the capital of the North.

One of the envoys is said to have remarked, on leaving, that it was easier to treat with three kings than with a single Margaret. The saying may be apocryphal. It deserves not to be.

She died in 1412 aboard a ship in the fjord of Flensburg. Aalholm passed to the kings she had made.

12. 1394 – The Peacemakers Who Were Put in Irons

In the autumn of that same year Aalholm very nearly became the place where one of the great quarrels of the North would end. It did not; and the reason is so singular that it deserves a chapter.

Five years earlier, on 24 February 1389, Margaret's army had beaten King Albert of Mecklenburg at Åsle near Falköping, and since then he and his son had been prisoners at Lindholm Castle in Scania. Stockholm still held out; Rostock and Wismar fitted out fleets to revictual the city, and from those fleets were born the Victual Brothers, privateers soon turned pirates, who plundered everything that floated. For the Hansa and for the Teutonic Order the captivity of a king was no affair of crowns. It was an affair of ships, cargoes and lost profits; and merchants, who do not make war, are often the first to want peace.

At Helsingborg, in the summer of 1394, an ingenious solution was found: Margaret would release the King and his son on the surety of eight Hanseatic towns; failing an agreement within a fixed term, Albert would pay sixty thousand marks, surrender Stockholm, or return to prison, alive or dead. But first the peace must be concluded and sworn. For this was appointed *a friendly day at Älholm, at the coming All Saints*, with safe-conduct four weeks before and four after. The Mecklenburgers offered as surety the King himself, his son, Duke John, a hundred of their best knights and all their towns; and, if need be, Stockholm.

Bishop Tord of Strängnäs wrote as much to the city's defenders: at All Saints the Duke, the lords of Prussia and the towns would meet the Queen at Älholm. Margaret herself was to be there.

In October the council notary of Rostock, Konrad Römer, rode all the way to Prussia to hasten the Order's people. Others excused themselves: the town of Kampen sent word that it would send no one, the season being *so wintry and the place so far*. The roads, it is true, were not safe; the burgomaster of Stralsund had been slain by a Dane on the way to Helsingborg.

The Teutonic Order dispatched towards Lolland the Commander of Schwetz, its Grand Procurator and certain burghers. They never arrived.

It is the Grand Master himself who tells us their fate, in a letter written at Montau on Martinmas to Duke Wartislaw the Younger of Stolp in Pomerania. He had sent his people to the day at

Ålholm at the request of both parties, for the peace of the seas and the good of the merchant. “And these our messengers,” he added, “you have taken prisoner.” The Duke had a quite different quarrel with the Order and had seized in passing the makers of a peace that was no concern of his.

Now this Wartislaw of Stolp was the father of young Eric of Pomerania, whom Margaret had only just chosen as her heir. It was the father of her own future successor who stopped upon the road the very men she was awaiting. The gods of history sometimes have a grating sense of humour.

All Saints came and went. One imagines the Queen in the new wing, the safe-conducts ready, the Mecklenburgers at sea, and not a Prussian on the horizon. In February 1395 Lübeck wrote to the towns of Prussia: “You know that nothing came of the day that was to be held at Ålholm.” It was put off until St George’s Day, at Falsterbo. Peace was made elsewhere, at Lindholm, where the captive King was at last released; Stockholm went to the Hanseatics in pledge for a ransom that was never paid, and in 1398 Margaret had the city.

Ålholm did not have its day. But for one autumn it was the place where the whole Baltic had an appointment; and one saw what it costs, in this world, merely to reach the table.

13. 1409–1471 – The Procession of Kings

After Margaret they came one after another, as though Aalholm were a posting-house on the high road to power.

Eric of Pomerania, her adopted son, enfranchised Nysted in 1409. The little town had lived beneath the castle like a servant under her masters' eye; it received a charter and the right to trade on its own account, and never forgot it. In 1438, leaving his kingdom for the career of pirate he was to pursue on Gotland, Eric gave Aalholm to Duke Barnim of Pomerania: the parting gift of a king who had nothing left to give.

Then came Christopher of Bavaria, and he came with a bride.

Her name was Dorothea of Brandenburg, and she was fifteen when in 1445 she met her king at Aalholm. She came from the south with her coffers of trousseau and ladies-in-waiting who had taught her what was expected of a queen. She saw the castle rise from the water, red and massive; she saw the man who was to be hers. Three years later he was dead, and she was a widow at eighteen.

She married the next king, Christian I, who reigned from Aalholm in 1454 and could keep his finances in no better order than his predecessors. In 1471 Dorothea lent him money and took Aalholm in pledge. The bride of fifteen had become the King's banker, and the owner of the castle where she had once trembled.

So began a long age: Aalholm, the island of queens.

14. 1423 – The Governor and the Everlasting Alliance

He had fought against the King of Denmark. We find him among the men upon whom the King founded his policy. Conversions of that kind astonished nobody in the fifteenth century; they astonish few people today.

Erik Krummedige was a Holstein gentleman with lands in Schleswig. In 1411 he had taken Flensburg for the Dukes by a night assault; in 1413 he was still counted among the King's enemies. Then he changed banners, went over to Eric of Pomerania, and his rise was swift: councillor of the realm by 1417, governor of Aalholm by 1419, master of the court in 1424. The former adversary now held a royal fortress on Lolland, and he knew better than anyone what quarrels between the King, Holstein and the Hansa cost: he had staked his land and his head on them.

In 1423 it seemed that a lasting settlement was possible. The King reigned over three crowns, but three crowns did not free him from the merchants of the Baltic. A letter from Lübeck in January lists their grievances with a grocer's precision: restore peaceful trade, free the towns' prisoners, return seized ships and goods, and even settle the question of copper pennies. Behind the grand words of diplomacy there was always a merchant anxious to know whether he would see his cargo again.

On 15 June 1423, at Copenhagen, King Eric and Lübeck, Rostock, Stralsund, Wismar, Lüneburg, Greifswald and Anklam concluded a great treaty: a thousand men-at-arms of mutual help within three months, rules for their keep, protection for people and goods, annual meetings; even the dower of Queen Philippa, should she survive the King. And among the councillors who set their counsel and their seal to it, one reads: *Erik Krummedige of Ålholm*.

The alliance was to last for ever.

Three years later, on 27 September 1426, the Dukes of Schleswig leagued themselves with Lübeck, Stralsund, Hamburg, Rostock, Wismar and Lüneburg – against King Eric. The towns that had promised the King a thousand men turned the same arms against him. In 1431, after the fall of Flensburg, Krummedige's enemies burned his manor of Rundtoft. The great policy he had served came back to knock at his own door.

Everlasting treaties seldom outlast the interest of those who sign them. This one lasted three years. The name of Aalholm has stayed in the parchment.

15. 1460 – The Dower

The word is old and heavy: *livgeding*, the dower. It was the pension of widowed queens – lands, fiefs and castles assigned to their keep until their death. Lolland-Falster suited the purpose admirably: rich soil, a compact royal domain, Copenhagen at a

convenient distance. The islands became the province of queens, and Aalholm went with them.

A curious consequence followed: for long periods the governor of the castle was appointed not by the King but by a dowager queen sitting at Nykøbing. Aalholm had a woman for its overlord.

The line opens with Dorothea, who kept a pledge on the island's royal domains until her death in 1495. Queen Christine, wife of King Hans, passed some time there. Elisabeth, wife of Christian II, was the first to be promised Lolland as her dower – a promise history reduced to nothing, for the royal couple fell, fled, and Elisabeth died in exile without ever having seen her lands.

Sophie of Pomerania, wife of Frederick I, was promised at her coronation in 1525 Nykøbing, Aalholm and Ravnsborg. Two councillors who had sealed the promise to Elisabeth refused to go back on their word; then came the Count's Feud, and Aalholm was "for a time like a ball between the powers", redeemed, surprised, enfeoffed, retaken, before the dowager queen at last enjoyed it. From one of her under-bailiffs, Erik Rosenkrantz, there survives a letter of 1551 complaining that no brick-clay could be found on the estate's lands to repair the castle. Nine years later they were preparing the kiln. The Aalholm of the queens was also the Aalholm of repairs put off until tomorrow.

After the great Sophie, of whom we shall speak, came decline.

Nykøbing became the seat of the dower; Aalholm was no more than a governor's residence. An inspection of 1642 found in the King's chamber only two four-poster beds and "some scarcely usable boards and benches" behind a hanging that was old, threadbare and worm-eaten.

The last queens were distant proprietors: Sophie Amalie, Charlotte Amalie. On the latter's death in 1714, Aalholm reverted to the Crown for the last time. For more than two and a half centuries it had more often been commanded by a woman than by a man; and when the hour came to sell it, it was a woman again who bought it.

16. 1503 – King Hans

The proof lies in three Latin words, but it is of sterling quality. On 4 October 1503 King Hans ended a letter to Archbishop Birger Gunnensen of Lund with this formula: *Ex castro nostro Aleholm*. From our castle of Aalholm.

The letter still exists, on paper, with the remnants of the seal, in the National Archives of Sweden. It is not a tradition; it is a deed. And the King was not on a visit: he was governing. He deferred an affair of lands "until God wills that we may speak together", and from Aalholm he lifted the ban he had laid on the export from the realm of "corn and victuals". The corn policy of Denmark was decided that day on the shore of Nysted lagoon.

The King did not travel alone. With him went courtiers,

servants, guards, horses and the chancery. Power in 1503 was itinerant; when the King moved, the government moved with him, and for a few days the islet became the administrative heart of a kingdom.

But 1503 was no ordinary year. Six years before, Hans had been crowned King of Sweden and the Union of Kalmar united under one sceptre. Then had come defeat in Dithmarschen, the Swedish rising, and Sten Sture as regent. Hans, gone to fetch reinforcements, had left Queen Christine to defend Stockholm Castle; besieged, starved, decimated, she had been forced to surrender in May 1502, a few days before the relieving fleet appeared. She had remained a prisoner of the Swedes.

She was released only in the autumn of 1503, at about the time her husband, at Aalholm, was sealing his letters.

And yet he opens his with his full style: *Johannes, by the grace of God King of Denmark, Sweden and Norway*. Kings never renounce a title; they lose the kingdoms and keep the words.

His father Christian I had stayed here in 1454; his son Christian II would stay here in 1516 and 1519, shortly before becoming King of Sweden in his turn, for a few months, until the Stockholm Bloodbath. Three generations of Oldenburgs made the flat islet a royal residence. When Hans wrote “our castle”, he was not speaking in metaphors.

PART TWO: THE ISLAND OF QUEENS

17. 1516–1526 – The Widows’ Portion

In 1525 the law laid it down: the queens of Denmark should have for their dower Aalholm, Ravnsborg and Nykøbing.

It was an honour, to be sure; it was above all a business. The royal domains of Lolland and Falster were among the richest lands in the kingdom, flat, fat, frostless in winter, with woods for firing and shores for fishing. A queen who received the use of them received not a pension but an enterprise.

Frederick I reigned from the castle in 1526; Christian II had done so in 1516, before losing his kingdom and ending as a captive at Sønderborg – yet another king who learned that a Danish fortress serves two purposes. But it was the women who settled at Aalholm and who stayed.

None took the matter more seriously than Sophie. But before we watch her count her oxen, we must speak of another woman, who was never a queen, and whose death shook a throne.

18. 1517 – The Governor and the Death of Dyveke

Her name was Dyveke, “little dove”, and she had come as a child from the Low Countries to Bergen with her mother, Sigbrit, who kept a trade in the town. There Christian saw her, then viceroy of Norway for his father. When he became king, mother and daughter followed him to Copenhagen, and Dyveke became the sovereign’s acknowledged mistress, lodged first at Hvidøre, then, in 1516, in a fine house on the Amagertorv.

In 1514 the King married Elisabeth of Habsburg, granddaughter of the Emperor; he did not give up Dyveke for that. The Emperor Maximilian sent an embassy to demand that the favourite be sent away. Christian refused. The loves of a northern king had become an affair of Europe.

In 1517 Dyveke fell ill and died. Of what? No one knows. But at once was born one of the most stubborn legends in Danish history: that Torben Oxe, governor of Copenhagen Castle, had sent her poisoned cherries. The council of the realm acquitted him. The King, mad with grief or rage, had him tried by twelve peasants, who condemned him; and on 29 November 1517 Torben Oxe’s head fell. The affair no longer concerned a dead girl; it asked how far a king might go against a nobleman his peers had absolved. The answer would one day cost Christian his crown.

It is here that Aalholm enters the tragedy.

That same year Knud Pedersen Gyldenstjerne had received the

castle in fief. He was no stranger: as a page he had followed the young Christian against Elfsborg in 1502. He kept Aalholm only a few months. He lost it within the year and was thrown into prison – *apparently*, says the Danish Biographical Dictionary, because he was accused of having poisoned Dyveke. He came out alive, which was not granted to everyone that year.

The novelist would like to accuse him; the historian holds him back. We do not know precisely what he was suspected of. But there is, in the list of governors of the castle on the lagoon, a name that leads straight to the heart of the favourite's drama.

His successor was Otte Krumpen, one of the King's faithful: he had carried the crown at the coronation of 1514 and commanded one of the ships that brought the young Queen home. In 1520 he led the Danish army into Sweden, conquered at Bogesund and Uppsala, and was dubbed knight after the coronation at Stockholm, a few days before the Bloodbath. In a few months Aalholm had passed from a man who was falling to a man who was rising.

Then the wheel turned, as it always turns.

Christian fled in 1523; Knud regained favour under Frederick I. And in 1532, when the fallen King, lured north by false promises, was taken prisoner, it was Knud Pedersen Gyldenstjerne and Otte Krumpen who were charged with conveying him to Sønderborg. Two former governors of Aalholm riding side by side, the captive King between them. It was, they say, a bitter reunion: Knud tore from Christian's neck the collar of the Golden Fleece and pulled

his beard. Men do not forgive the prisons into which they have been put, least of all when they may have deserved them.

The Count's Feud tossed them both about. Knud surrendered Nykøbing to Count Christopher's men and knew the gaols of Copenhagen, Malmö and Mecklenburg until 1536. Otte Krumpen received Aalholm once more, this time for the Count, was carried off during a ride outside the walls, dragged to Nykøbing, to Lübeck, to Mecklenburg, stripped, and then forgotten until 1542.

And here is the last turn of the dance. In 1549 it was Knud Pedersen Gyldenstjerne who was given the keeping of Christian II, prisoner at Kalundborg Castle. Both men were nearing seventy. The old soldier had grown devout, composed psalms, and showed his captive as much gentleness as his orders allowed. The man who had lost Aalholm and his liberty in the shadow of Dyveke's death watched over the old age of the King who had had him imprisoned. He died at Kalundborg in 1552.

19. 1533–1534 – The Year the Peasants Came

Not all Aalholm's visitors had been invited.

In 1533 Frederick I died, and Denmark found itself without a king. The council hesitated between Duke Christian, a Lutheran, and a Catholic candidate; while the lords disputed in Copenhagen, the countryside growled. The peasants had had enough of taxes, of bailiffs, of masters who always took and

never gave back.

On Lolland the growling was louder than anywhere.

The bailiff of Aalholm – the King’s man, the receiver, he who held the keys and the ledgers – rode out one day and did not return. The peasants had killed him. Where, how, and who struck first, we do not know. We know only that he lay in the clay of Lolland and that no one at the castle dared go and fetch him.

The following year it was the town itself. The civil war was called the Count’s Feud because Count Christopher of Oldenburg had hired himself out to restore the imprisoned Christian II, and burghers and peasants followed him. In 1534 Nysted rose. The town Eric of Pomerania had enfranchised marched against the castle that had dominated it for three centuries.

A summer morning, mist on the lagoon, and on the causeway the sound of many feet. Burghers with axes, peasants with pitchforks, fishermen with boathooks, boys with stones. It was not an army; it was a town. On the curtain the guards saw them coming and understood that they had neither men enough, nor bolts enough, nor time enough.

Aalholm fell. The fortress built so that no one could get in was taken by its neighbours.

20. 1538–1551 – The King Who Won It Back

It did not last; victories of that sort seldom do.

Christian III, the Lutheran duke, won the war, took

Copenhagen in 1536 and imposed the Reformation. The Franciscans of Nysted, the last Grey Friars in the kingdom, those who had held out longest against the new faith, passed through their gate for the last time in 1538. Nysted was Protestant, like the King.

In 1551 Christian III was at Aalholm, and he had come to hunt.

Oblivion works fast. Fifteen years after the town had stormed the castle, the King was coursing stags in Roden forest as though nothing had happened. The peasants were back on their farms, the burghers at their stalls; a new bailiff never mentioned his predecessor. Yet it took two centuries, they say, before the castle forgot what could be heard rising from the town when the wind blew from that quarter.

21. 1556 – The King's Letter

On 18 August 1556 a clerk entered in the chancery register a very short letter, and noted in the margin the place: Aalholm.

The matter was minute. Two pieces of church land at Vester Ulslev, and a man named Hans Hofmand who wished to remain upon them. The King granted that he might keep them for his lifetime against a single rent, on condition of obeying the governor of Aalholm.

Of Hans Hofmand we know nothing else: not his face, nor the size of his fields, nor whether he came himself, cap in hand. But let us not despise what he obtained. Tenure for life was no right

in 1556; the law did not establish it until 1683. A royal letter that left you on your land until death was, for a peasant, what an earldom was for a gentleman.

And the date tells something more: that on that day Christian III and his chancery were at Aalholm. Twenty years after the Reformation the King was still riding about his realm; perhaps he had come back for the hunting. Between two affairs of state he took the time to seal the fate of one man and two fields.

Kings leave to history their wars and their treaties. Their registers leave something humbler and truer.

22. 1559 – The Peasants and the Fallen King's Letter

The year 1559 began with a death. Christian III died on New Year's Day, and his son Frederick II ascended the throne. A few weeks later, at Kalundborg, died Christian II, a captive for thirty-six years, in the keeping of that same Knud Pedersen Gyldenstjerne who had lost Aalholm in 1517.

A year of three kings. And at Aalholm, at the bottom of a chest, a letter in the dead King's name.

The Crown was demanding tax from the castle's *weekday men*, the peasants who lived close by and owed it a weekly labour. They refused. To prove their exemption, their spokesmen produced a letter of Christian II releasing them from the royal

tax; and they added that in any case they were too poor to pay.

Let us pause at that picture. Peasants of Lolland, in the summer of 1559, brandishing a paper signed by a king whose laws the nobility had burned at Viborg, whose partisans had lost a civil war, and who had just died in prison. They had kept it a whole generation. They knew what it was worth, and what it might cost to show it.

On 18 July, from Copenhagen, Frederick II wrote to Mogens Erichsen at Aalholm to make inquiry. And his answer is a small masterpiece of royal prudence. He did not say whether the letter of a fallen king had force. He asked neither its text nor its date. He asked only whether the peasants had been excused the last taxes in his father's time; in which case they would be excused still.

The young King went round the ghost by consulting his father in its place. There are sovereigns who know from their first weeks that one governs better by custom than by principle.

Here the register falls silent. We do not know the outcome; we do not even know Christian II's letter, which exists only in this mention. But the scene is enough: beneath the walls of Aalholm an old parchment, kept by poor men, obliged a new king to take a side.

23. 1581–1585 – The Wall

But before she was a widow, Sophie came as a queen, and she came to a castle made young again.

In the 1580s Aalholm had been brought up to date. Behind the eastern wall a true wing had been raised; the two northern towers had been heightened in cross bond, the new manner of the age. Frederick II wished to see the work; he came in 1585 with Queen Sophie and the whole council of the realm.

It was a feast. Fires in the courtyard, roasts on the spit, beer in casks, the councillors' ladies in silk and fur, the King's huntsmen hardly able to hold back their eager hounds. Frederick loved to drink, to eat and to hunt; he was in his element.

And one evening, when the wine had loosened tongues, the King wished the visit to be remembered. A painter was sent for. On the wall of the eastern hall in the north wing every name should be inscribed.

At the top, the King, with his motto. Then the Queen. Then, one after another, with their shields and their mottoes, the councillors of the realm, the mightiest men in Denmark.

And at the very bottom, beneath the fine names and the Latin maxims on honour and fidelity, *Christoffer Koryot*, with a belled cap and a tankard.

The King's fool.

"And I, Sire?" he must have cried from the back of the hall, in a voice in which the beer had too much say. "Am I not on it?"

The councillors looked at the King. Frederick, who laughed easily, laughed.

“Put him on,” he said. “Put him at the bottom. And give him a tankard.”

It is perhaps the most Danish of all wall-paintings: power, honour, the orders of knighthood, and beneath them all a man whose trade was to make the mighty laugh, and whom no one afterwards dared to paint out.

The wall was whitewashed over the centuries. It was found again in 1889. Koryot had waited three hundred years to have the last word.

24. 1588–1611 – The Queen of Oxen

Frederick died in 1588. Sophie was thirty-one, with seven children and a kingdom she had no right to govern.

So she governed Lolland.

From Nykøbing she made Aalholm the centre of an agricultural empire without equal in the kingdom. She kept her own accounts; her letter-books, in which every order was copied, show her knowing exactly how many cows stood in each byre, what a barrel of rye fetched at Lübeck, and which steward was robbing her.

She was, said her contemporaries, *the greatest breeder of oxen in the land*: bullocks fattened in the meadows of Lolland and driven in immense herds to the fairs of Holstein and Holland. It

was the black gold of her century, and the dowager queen owned the wells.

In 1611 she had a new byre built at Aalholm, thirty-two bays long, and justified the expense in words one would gladly carve above a door: her cattle “have by God’s blessing multiplied from year to year, for which the Almighty shall rightly have praise and thanks”.

A queen giving thanks to God for her cows: nothing could be more Lollandish.

She grew so rich that she lent money to her own son, Christian IV, who built palaces and waged wars with his mother’s ox-money. She died in 1631, one of the richest women in Europe. She had in the lagoon an island of her own, where she would go and sit away from stewards and sons. It is still called the Dowager Queen’s Island.

25. 1628–1634 – The Governor Who Said No

In 1628 there were prisoners at Aalholm, and they were not Danes.

Christian IV had flung himself into the Thirty Years’ War, that great slaughter of faith and ambition, and he had lost. But he had taken captives, and captives must be lodged where one can. The Emperor’s soldiers, German mercenaries, papist officers gazed from their towers over a lagoon that meant nothing to them, while the King haggled over their ransoms.

Six years later another matter came to the governor's table.

A woman of the fief had been condemned as a witch. The sentence: the stake. There was nothing extraordinary in that; all over Europe in those years the flames were rising, and Denmark was no better than the rest. There were witnesses, confessions extracted as confessions were extracted, and a judgment.

The governor refused to light the fire.

We do not know his name with certainty, nor what his refusal cost him. Was he an enlightened mind who did not believe in witches? A Christian who did not believe in the stake? Or simply a man who knew the woman and knew she was as much a witch as he was the Pope? He read the sentence, looked at the condemned woman, and decided that he would not do it.

History remembers the captains who burn towns. It readily forgets those who, one day, refused to burn a woman. Aalholm remembers.

26. 1658 – Across the Ice

In the winter of 1658 the Baltic froze. No one had foreseen it, save perhaps God, who never gives warning.

Charles X Gustav of Sweden was one of those kings who do not wait for spring. He held Jutland, and between him and Copenhagen lay the Little Belt, Funen, the Great Belt and Zealand: water, more water, always water. Denmark had always slept soundly behind her straits.

Then came the great frost. Day after day, week after week, the ice thickened until it would bear a horseman, then a cannon, then an army. On 30 January the Swedes crossed to Funen. On 5 February they took the southern way, from Langeland to Lolland, over the ice, by night, the horses in long files and the guns on sledges. The ice groaned beneath them; a whole squadron went through and was swallowed. The rest got across.

At Aalholm the governor heard the news. The Swedes were on the island. No army, no fleet, a castle that had not been a fortress for a hundred years, and four old cannon mentioned in an inventory of 1642.

He leapt into the saddle and galloped for Nakskov to raise the alarm.

One sees him under the snow, his beard rimed with frost, his cloak cracking in the wind, riding west to gather whatever could be gathered. It was his duty. It was also the only thing he could do.

Meanwhile the Swedes were arriving at Aalholm.

27. 1658–1725 – The Reckoning

They took whatever could be taken.

The lead from the tower roofs, which they melted into bullets. The slates, because they could. Thousands of tiles. They broke every pane of glass, one by one, not from necessity but from that evil joy which victors know in the house of the vanquished. They

carried off the furniture, the grain, the horses from the stable. Then they crossed to Zealand, and on 26 February, at Roskilde, Denmark signed a peace that cost her a third of her kingdom.

One woman at the castle refused to be cowed.

The castle clerk, Iver Nielsen, “passed for a rich man”. A band of Swedes broke in to make him disgorge. His wife, Johanne Lerche, a pastor’s daughter from Nysted, seized a poker red from the fire and defended her husband with such fury that the enemy turned tail. Someone had run to the town; at the gate the Swedes found burghers in arms, and two of them stayed on the cobbles. So Aalholm’s Swedish war had its heroine, and she fought with a kitchen implement. Her portrait may still be seen in the church at Nysted, with her husband and their eight children.

When the Swedes had gone, a clerk went round the castle and counted. His report is dry, and its dryness chills: for a repair “barely passable” there were needed fifteen thousand tiles, thirty thousand bricks, four thousand floor-tiles. Not a window whole. The towers open to the sky.

It was the end of Aalholm the fortress. Not that the walls had fallen; they stood still, a yard thick. But the age of castles was over; kingdoms were now defended with fleets, earthen ramparts and cannon that fired from one shore of a strait to the other. Aalholm was no more than an office with holes in its roof.

In 1660 Frederick III established absolute monarchy; fiefs became counties, governors became prefects. And the castle that had seen kings in chains and queens at the treaty-table stood

there and rotted. The registers have a word for those years: *Brøstfældigheden*, the Decrepitude. The inspection of 1671 notes cracked walls, rotten beams, roofs that let the rain through; and, curiously, a fifth tower that no drawing shows, a riddle archaeologists still debate.

Charlotte Amalie, the last dowager queen, died in 1714. Frederick IV thought of making Aalholm a cavalry district, then thought better of it. In 1725 he put the castle up for sale.

28. 1662 – The County That Outlived Its Castle

About 1790 a clerk of the Exchequer in Copenhagen was entering death-duties under a heading he had not invented: *Revenue District of Aalholm*. The castle that gave the district its name had by then been in private hands for more than seventy years.

When the King sold Aalholm, he did not sell its name.

In 1662 the old fief of the castle had become the county of Aalholm: the hundreds of Fuglse and Musse, Nysted, Maribo, Sakskøbing. With the county came a prefect, who represented the King, and a receiver, who levied the taxes. Now a county is not an estate. The estate was the King's property: castle, home farm, tenancies, forests. The county was his jurisdiction: everyone living within its bounds, including the lords' peasants, the burghers of Nysted, the parsons and the parish clerks, answered to the prefect and paid the receiver.

In 1725 the King sold the estate and kept the county. Aalholm's peasants had a new lord for their labour and their rent; but their taxes still went to the receiver of Aalholm, and their lawsuits to the prefect of Aalholm. When the great agrarian reforms came in the 1770s, it was still under the name of Aalholm that the villages were re-parcelled.

Not until 1803 were Aalholm, Halsted and Nykøbing merged into a single county of Maribo. The county of Aalholm had lived a hundred and forty-one years, seventy-eight of them framing another man's property.

After that only one thing remained that was called Aalholm: the castle. One would have said the name had proved more solid than the stone.

29. 1717 – Powder for the Periwigs

His name was Povl Boldich, ferryman and clerk of the court at Nysted; two titles that do not smell of industry. On 8 February 1717, however, he obtained the royal privilege to sell starch and powder in the islands of Lolland, Falster and Møn. In practice, a monopoly.

He built his manufactory between the town and the castle.

Let no one smile. In the eighteenth century no man of any consequence went out in his own hair. Every morning, in every house that respected itself, wigs and coiffures were powdered with fine wheaten starch, sometimes scented, sometimes tinted.

Mountains of it were consumed; England in 1795 put a tax on hair-powder, so much wheat did it devour. And starch stiffened the bands, the ruffles, the collars besides.

Lolland overflowed with wheat; Nysted had a harbour; the privilege guaranteed the sales. It was the very enterprise of which mercantilist policy dreamed. In 1735 the town bailiff of Nysted reported a starch and powder manufactory in good working order, situated outside the town's jurisdiction – outside the guilds, outside the borough court, between town and estate. It was among the very few manufactories of the province. Industry had come to Lolland before it came almost anywhere outside the capital.

The manufactory passed from hand to hand with its privilege: to Councillor Hofmann in 1729, to his nephew Dresler in 1734, who in 1752 obtained that the monopoly should henceforth follow the works through every sale. In 1765 it was described as the most perfect in the kingdom, able to grind fifteen hundred barrels of wheat a year.

Here there is a small injustice to set right. Several learned works attribute the foundation to Count Otto Ludvig Raben. But the works were turning in 1717, the Rabens did not buy Aalholm until 1725, and Otto Ludvig did not become count until 1750. The books have given the count what belonged to the ferryman, and repeated it in good faith for a century and a half. The great have that privilege too: one readily lends them the ideas of the small.

The fashion for powder died about 1800, when the Revolution made it unseemly to put bread upon one's head. What became of the manufactory, no one knows.

30. 1719 – Four Troopers in the Gaol

In 1719 there was a gallows at Nysted. And at Aalholm, four soldiers who might have need of it.

We know it from a single sentence, which the historian Karl Rasmussen gathered up in 1917: four troopers were held at Aalholm “who can hardly escape being condemned to the gallows”. Nothing more. Not their names, nor their crime, nor the sentence. The novelist burns to lead them to the scaffold; honesty forbids him.

But their world we know. Frederick IV wanted the royal domains of Lolland and Falster to feed his cavalry; in 1717 three farms of the county were assigned to the dragoons, the barns for quarters, the fields for fodder. Galleries were built in the churches for the soldiers; a pillory was raised on Falster and a gallows at Nysted. And in the castle where Christopher II had been flung, where Christian IV's captives had languished, four men of the King's own army waited to be judged.

Six years later a widow would cross the causeway with her gold, and no one would speak of them again.

PART THREE: THE WIDOW WHO BOUGHT A CASTLE

31. 1725–1734 – Emerentia

In 1725 a woman came to Lolland, and she brought money with her.

Emerentia von Levetzau was the widow of Johan Otto Raben, and she belonged to that species of widow with whom the men of the eighteenth century knew not what to do. She had no intention of retiring to a dower-house to embroider. She intended to buy.

The King was selling Aalholm and Bremersvold. She offered ninety-four thousand nine hundred and twenty-nine rigsdaler – a sum that must be pronounced slowly – and carried the day. After four or five centuries of Crown, of kings and queens, of dungeons and treaties, the southern door of Denmark became private property; and the proprietor was a woman.

One imagines her on the first day, tall, dressed in black, with

a face that had seen more than it allowed to appear, crossing the halls of the Decrepitude. The rain ran through the roof of the great hall; the windows were stopped with boards; the rats held the cellar. The steward followed her, apologising. She did not listen to him. She did not see what was; she saw what would be.

She bought land. Bremersvold, Bramsløkke, farm after farm, parish after parish, until in 1734 she held twelve hundred and twenty-one barrels of hartkorn: enough for a barony, barely half what the law required for a county.

So she asked for a county.

It was impudent. It was Emerentia. She wrote to the King that she wished to erect a county for her eight-year-old grandson, Christian Raben, and that it should be called Christiansholm, after the child. The law said no. The King said yes. There were not many people in Denmark prepared to say no to Emerentia von Levetzau.

32. 1746 – The Chapel

She set the castle on its feet again: new roofs, new windows, carpenters and masons from all over the island for years together. Aalholm came out of its decrepitude, no longer a fortress but a lordly house.

And she thought of death, as wise people do while they are still alive. Her will endowed the schools of Bremersvold and Kærstrup and the poor of Aalholm's parishes. The county was to

pass undivided from generation to generation, in principle until the end of time.

She died in 1746. Christian, at twenty, became first Count of Christiansholm; four years later he was dead, childless, having left his mark on nothing. The county passed to his younger brother, Otto Ludvig.

Emerentia was laid in a sarcophagus of black marble, then in a chapel her grandson built against the church at Nysted, north of the tower. She is there still, and Christian beside her.

But she did not stay lying down.

Legend has it that Emerentia von Levetzau is the *White Lady* of Aalholm. People see her, they say, in the long corridors, at the window that looks on the lagoon, on the stairs of the north wing: a tall woman in white who looks at no one, and who is gone when one seeks her with one's eyes.

She appears, they say, only when the master of the house has no child.

Here is a ghost with a sense of purpose. The woman who had bought a castle and created a county so that it might pass on for ever still watches over the succession. When the heir is wanting, she walks. When he is there, she rests.

She was to have a great deal of walking to do.

33. 1749–1783 – The Count’s Journal

Otto Ludvig Raben was twenty-one when his elder brother’s death made him Count of Christiansholm. Count in name only: his father, Christian Frederik, kept his hand on the estate, and the young man was sent to see the world.

He saw Paris. He lived there nearly four years with his sister and her husband, the envoy Ditlev Reventlow; he frequented the salons and hunted the stag with Louis XV. On his return he was made chamberlain in 1755, married in 1757 Anna Catharina Henningia von Buchwald, and became in 1763, through his kinship with the all-powerful Moltke, the King’s master of ceremonies. Summer on Lolland, winter in Copenhagen.

He kept a journal. Forty-two years, in French, day after day: whom one had seen, when one was at court, at which table he had dined, what carriage each person kept, the hunts, the peasant weddings, the weather, the music. Seldom a feeling, never an omission. It is not the journal of a soul; it is the ledger of a life.

Music was his passion. He played the transverse flute like a virtuoso and amassed scores in numbers no Danish gentleman approached: sonatas, cantatas, symphonies, which were to sleep two centuries in a tower room.

The castle meanwhile was uninhabitable. His elder brother had lived at the home farm, “the castle being uninhabitable by reason of its decrepitude”; the farm burned on 1 July 1750, and the sick young Count had to take refuge in Nysted, where he died.

The medieval fortress stood empty and crumbling in the middle of the Age of Enlightenment.

After the change of reign in 1767 the Moltke party lost favour, and the family settled more firmly on Lolland. In 1773 the father died; Otto Ludvig, count for twenty-three years, could at last command. For ten years the family scarcely left the island.

Then he built. He had already enlarged the county by the village of Stubberup; in 1786 he would add the churches of Kettinge and Bregninge. He wrote for his son a treatise on the art of being a good man when one is born a count. And in 1779 the east wing rose, in the dawning Louis Seize taste: two storeys, long rows of regular windows, light where the castle had never known it. On the gable, iron anchors bearing his cipher and his wife's. Along the causeway, an avenue of clipped limes.

He had the family painted posing before the new Aalholm. Eight children, two sons and six daughters. All appear satisfied.

In 1783 he had a closed family pew built in the church at Nysted, high in the gallery, with its own door pierced through the wall, from which the comital family followed the service above the congregation – and let itself be looked at. Otto Ludvig was not modest. He was patient.

He died in 1791 and lies in the chapel he had built in 1782, in a sarcophagus of pale grey Norwegian marble. But his journal holds something other than visits and showers of rain. We are coming to it.

34. 1765 – The Count's Seals

One August day in 1765 Count Otto Ludvig rode alone to Tågense, south-east of Nysted, stepped into a boat, and went out to shoot seals. He wrote it down himself.

No retinue, no ceremony, no courtiers. A man, a boat, and the shallow, glassy water south of Lolland, where the seals lay on the stones and sandbanks and raised their heads at the sound of the oars. For the King's master of ceremonies, laced all his life in etiquette, there was there no doubt a liberty he found nowhere else.

Three years later, in July 1768, he went again, early in the morning, with his brothers and the officers of the estate: a little expedition, part hunt and part pleasure-party, such as the country-house life of the age loved.

But the most curious thing is older. As early as 1737 his mother was complaining that people from Nysted were shooting seals off the coast. The complaint has only one meaning: the seal-hunt belonged to the lords of Aalholm. Hunting was no common right but a privilege attached to the land; and at Aalholm the privilege reached out into the sea. The seals on the banks were the county's seals.

The burghers shot them nonetheless, for the skin, for the oil, and because the fishermen hated a beast that tore their nets. The centuries that followed paid bounties to whoever killed them, and they were very nearly exterminated.

Today the banks of Rødsand, within sight of those same shores, are one of Denmark's great seal refuges. The harbour seal pups there; the grey seal has come back. They lie out there as they did in August 1765. No one goes after them with a gun. And we know of the Count's outings only because a meticulous man noted everything, and his papers slept two hundred years untouched.

35. 1770 – The Count's Secret Cipher

From 1770, between the dinners, the hunts and the visits, a small sign appears in Otto Ludvig's journal: *IFT*.

It recurs for twenty years. Most often alone; sometimes followed by a woman's Christian name; occasionally half spelled out – "iftu", "j'ay f...". Almost always when the Count was at Aalholm.

The journal waited in the castle archives until the musicologist Jens Henrik Koudal plunged into it in the 1990s. It was he who noticed the sign and broke the cipher: *IFT* stands for *j'ai foutu*, from the verb which in the French of the eighteenth century meant what it means. The Count recorded his embraces as he recorded his walks. The historian Nina Koefoed counted them: ninety-seven, most in the 1770s, the last in 1790.

It was not his marriage-bed he was keeping account of. The Countess had borne him eight children between 1759 and 1774; then the births cease, and the sign begins. The women named

are not the Countess. The two who can be identified were a maidservant and the wife of a tenant farmer.

The county had some two hundred tenants in sixteen villages, without counting cottagers and servants. It is among them one must look. Ninety-seven entries do not make ninety-seven women; they come in runs, as if the Count kept, for periods, a sustained liaison. Consented to, paid for, endured? The sources are silent. But the balance of power is not silent: the Count was for these women master of the house, owner of the land, and judge.

And it is there that the anecdote ceases to be piquant.

In the eighteenth century love outside marriage was an offence. Unwed mothers and their accomplices had to pay fines, and it fell to the lord to bring the case and collect the money. In 1773, taking over the estate, Otto Ludvig cancelled at a stroke all the fines left unpaid in his father's time. Thereafter, every year, he had the offenders carefully recorded – and their fines remitted with the same regularity. The men got off by contributing to the child's keep; the women raised it.

One may see clemency in that. Nina Koefoed sees something else too: a lord who himself broke the laws of morals on his own lands did not punish in others what he did himself; and each pardon left between his people and himself a debt of gratitude that was never settled.

She went through the registers of the eight parishes. The Count appears nowhere as a father; it was not a thing that could

be written. But there are coincidences. On 30 March 1771, at Herritslev, Anne Rasmusdatter had a natural daughter baptised; the parson noted the midwife and all the godparents, and not a word of the father. The Count had written IFT six times in May, June and July of the previous year. At Toreby in 1775 a woman named “a stranger called Lars”. At Herritslev in 1776 another spoke of “an unknown man who came to her in the wood”. And when Ellen Jacobsdatter in 1781 named Rasmus Suhr, that same Rasmus Suhr had become, between conception and christening, tenant of a good farm in another parish of the estate.

None of this proves anything. But the three old ways of hiding a lord’s paternity – the father omitted, the passing stranger, the husband bought with a farm – are all there in the registers of Aalholm, at dates that agree.

Why 1770? Because in Copenhagen the Count was only a subordinate in his brothers-in-law’s network; at Aalholm he was master. There the flesh became a part of his authority.

Otto Ludvig Raben was a man of the Enlightenment. He played the flute, married off his peasants, built chapels and wrote treatises on education. He was also an absolute lord, lawgiver, judge and master of the women he called IFT. Historians have always suspected that lords abused their maidservants; they have almost never been able to prove it, for such things are not written down. Otto Ludvig wrote it all down. In cipher.

Let us think of the women behind the number. Their names are on no wall.

36. 1791–1838 – The Count Who Measured the Stars

Frederik Christian Raben wanted the whole world in his study; and it was no figure of speech.

He travelled for years, from Greenland to Brazil, and came home each time with cases full of the world: dried plants, stuffed birds, fossils, minerals, antiquities. His herbarium came to number twenty thousand plants. His grandfather had collected medals, his father scores; he collected nature itself.

In 1796 he began to plant. The soil of Aalholm lent itself to it: mild winters by the fjord, shelter from the woods to the west, rich clay on a bed of chalk. He drew a landscape park that never ceased to grow; a garden he named *the System*, where rare species stood in rows like the cards of a living catalogue; and in the Horse Paddock fifteen hundred exotic trees, American oaks and pines, planes, fringed oaks, such as no one on Lolland had ever seen. In 1862 a connoisseur called it “the most beautiful and interesting on the European mainland”.

Then he built an observatory. Upon the north-east tower, the old tower with its yard-thick walls, he raised two square storeys – “hideous”, an author would grumble. There he measured the weather, day after day, and there he watched the stars. Imagine him up there on a clear January night, muffled to the ears, bent over his telescope while Lolland slept below: the tower that had

watched for Holsteiners and Swedes now watched for ignorance.

His study overflowed with books, birds, skulls and crystals. There was a great auk from Iceland too, a large black-and-white bird that could not fly, acquired in 1821. The Count did not know he was collecting a doomed species; the last great auk died in 1844. Aalholm's outlived its master by a century and ended under the hammer at Sotheby's, one of the last of its race.

Frederik Christian died at Rio de Janeiro in 1838, in the middle of a journey, far from his tower. But his plane tree is still in the park, a hundred feet high, and the doctor of Nysted, Emil Aarestrup, one of Denmark's finest poets, wrote a poem to it. A tree and a poem: one could ask for no better tomb.

37. 1830 – The Antiquaries Arrive

Johan Gottfried Burman Becker was an apothecary by trade and an antiquary at heart. Romanticism had made the Middle Ages fashionable; he undertook to describe every old castle in the kingdom.

In 1830 his *Notices of the Old Castles of Denmark and the Duchies* appeared. Aalholm figured there under its name of the day, Christiansholm, in four close pages of Gothic type: the castle's first biography.

It is also a witness. Burman Becker saw Aalholm sixty years before the transformations at the end of the century: a four-winged court that "had formerly towers at all four corners,

of which two remain”, one over a hundred feet high and crowned by the observatory; moats on three sides; walls nearly ten feet thick at ground level; above, “a quantity of small windows that have no doubt served as loopholes”. Every detail can be verified today in the soil and in the masonry.

He knew a great deal. The letter of 1330, Christopher’s captivity, the siege of 1346, the treaty of 1366, the summons of 1377; he alone reports that the burghers of Nysted took the castle during the Count’s Feud and that the Swedes ill-used the clerk Iver Nielsen in 1658. He even knew that the county had first been called *Christiansborg*.

He knew too much as well. A child of his century, he placed “at this castle” the partition of the kingdom in 1157 and gave Lolland “with Aalholm” to the Wendish prince Pribislav in 1164. The island’s princes must have had a seat; this was the only one known. The castle was born, the excavations have shown, about 1256. But the error made its way and grew with the decades: in 1869 a popular book made Aalholm the stronghold of the “sea-kings” of the ninth century. The antiquaries had guessed what the laboratories prove today – that there had been something before; they had merely mistaken the century.

The diligence of one man in 1830 has become the foundation on which two hundred years of research have built, corrected and, often, confirmed.

38. 1838 – The Mad Count

Then came Gregers.

Gregers Christian Raben, the eldest son, did not resemble his father. Frederik Christian had measured the world; Gregers read it. A doctor of classical philology, he spoke Latin as others speak to their dogs, and found more truth in Horace than in any sermon.

He was, notes the great manor-house book of 1938 drily, “something of an original, given to the strangest whims, and commonly called *the mad count*”. It is a title not bestowed on just anyone.

He strewed his father’s botanical park with summer-houses in every style, as one sets out pieces upon a chessboard. He raised columns and stelae inscribed with Greek and Latin quotations, so that a walk in the garden became an examination in philology.

He went bear-hunting in Norway. Weigh the sentence: a count of Lolland, doctor of ancient letters, gun on shoulder in the Norwegian forests. And he killed some. He brought home several stuffed bears and exhibited them in a house in the park “with other curiosities”. What curiosities, no one knows. One sees the beasts reared upon their hind legs in the half-dark, and the peasants of Stubberup coming to stare at them of a Sunday, open-mouthed.

It was Aalholm’s first public exhibition. A century before the motor-cars, a mad count was showing his bears to the people.

39. 1843 – The King and Queen at Nysted

In the summer of 1843 a rumour ran through Lolland-Falster: the King was coming. Not upon a coin, but in his own august person, with horses, carriages and sixty persons in his train. Rødby had seen no king, said the gazettes, since Christian IV.

The journey was first of all a journey for his health. Christian VIII, ailing, was to take the sea-bathing at Föhr. But the road from Sorgenfri to Föhr could be laid as one pleased, and it was laid through the southern islands. The King would show himself, inspect; and, though it was written nowhere, he would feel the pulse of a country where absolutism was beginning to creak. At his very accession a peasants' address from western Lolland had dared to ask for a constitution. Christian VIII did not forget that kind of thing.

He was not a king for parades. He travelled with a notebook, went through registers, tried the fire-engines, visited the prisons and wrote everything down at night.

Governor von Jessen walked a tightrope. It was murmured that the King would come escorted by twenty dragoons, as on Møn, where offence had been taken; von Jessen swore upon his oath that Their Majesties would be received with the most sincere devotion, and begged that no troops be sent. The dragoons were sent back.

On 22 July it was Nysted's turn. Town hall whitewashed, arches of greenery, flags. And the programme had been divided:

while the King made his entry, the Queen, as von Jessen had arranged in June, “would proceed directly from Nykøbing to Aalholm, there to join His Majesty”.

Caroline Amalie, unwell for much of the journey, thus escaped the speeches and crossed the causeway to the castle on the lagoon. There she waited for her husband. The new master of the house was Gregers, the philologist, made Master of the Hunt that same year. One pictures him leading the Queen beneath his father’s planes, among the summer-houses and the Latin stelae. What was said within those walls no one wrote down; the court’s boxes and the censored gazettes are mute. What is official is lit; what is private keeps silent.

In the town the King found the young schoolmaster Friess capable, and judged that a second would be needed. He was gracious.

The storm broke three days later at Nakskov, when the parish councils presented him with an address of thanks that came very close indeed to claiming the right to vote taxes. The monarch, usually so self-possessed, lost his temper: he had given the people a municipal law; as for affairs of state, he would see to those himself. A witness thought he was about to stamp his foot.

Each town afterwards received the silver coronation medal. Only one survives, that of Nysted, framed in the local archives.

Five years later Christian VIII was dead. Six years later absolute monarchy was dead too. Kings who tour their provinces to reassure them often come home with the foreboding that they

hold them no longer.

40. 1864 – The Twelve in the Churchyard

On 18 April 1864 the Prussians carried Dybbøl. Seven hundred dead and more than five hundred wounded on the Danish side; the retreat to Als, another defeat in June, and the Peace of Vienna, which cost the kingdom a third of its territory and four-tenths of its people.

The wounded had to be lodged somewhere.

Nysted lay as far from the front as one could be in the monarchy, and had the only natural harbour on Lolland's south coast. The wounded were shipped from Als and Sønderborg; on the islet in the lagoon there was a castle, and room.

Count Gregers offered it without asking a penny. "The Count and his family lived in this castle until now," reports a letter printed in the *Berlingske*, "and the government having gratefully accepted the offer, the comital family removed all its considerable household within a few days." The writer judged Aalholm "perhaps one of the best hospitals the army has", with its lofty rooms, its limes, its garden of rare trees: "In short, this little spot is a very paradise."

The town remembered it otherwise: "When the steamer came with the wounded and the sick, the people of Nysted provided carts and strewed straw on the road they were to take." A town that spreads straw beneath the wheels to spare strangers the

jolting: one will find no better picture of what a borough and its castle can be to each other, in their hours.

But one must know where those men were entering. Surgery in 1864 knew nothing of antisepsis; bullets were taken out when they could be, limbs were cut off when they could not, and then came the wound fever. Denmark refused foreign help and refused women to nurse her soldiers, ten years after Florence Nightingale. That is what they lay in, beneath Otto Ludvig's high ceilings, with a view of the lagoon.

Twelve died between April and August.

Mads Hansen, born at Nørre Lyndelse on Funen, a natural child boarded out with a farmer, was wounded at Dybbøl on 12 April and his leg taken off. He died at Aalholm on 26 June: two and a half months between the bullet and the grave. Hans Rasmussen, gunner, born at Tillitse on Lolland itself, died thirty miles from his parish; he was almost home. Hans Christian Hansen of Tarup near Odense did not die of his wounds, but of typhus.

On 6 October 1865 an obelisk was raised in Nysted churchyard "in grateful memory of the twelve defenders of the fatherland who died in 1864 at Aalholm's hospital". And beneath: "The Lord preserve the faithful."

One detail more. The monument was paid for neither by the State, nor by the army, nor by the Count. It was paid for by the people of Nysted, the country parish and Herritslev: plain folk who clubbed together for a stone in honour of twelve strangers

who had been carried into their town and never carried out.

41. 1865 – The Mad Count at Rydhave

Gregers Christian Raben was a doctor of philosophy, Master of the Hunt, chamberlain, member of the Latin Society of Jena. He had married outside the nobility, Anna Margrethe Lund, and the childless couple had adopted a niece of hers, Anna Marie Amalie, born at Næstved in 1832, daughter of a billiard-room keeper. She grew up as Countess Amalie Raben.

A widower in 1851, Gregers could not keep still. He had Søbø on Funen; in the 1860s he acquired besides Rydhave, an old manor of western Jutland near Vinderup, with its octagonal tower and its ghost in the wall. To clear the heath, it was said; and he spent fortunes restoring the house.

Out there, where no one knew the Count of Christiansholm, he became *the mad count*. For his ideas, chiefly: he had frogs brought from France to breed, and dug a pond for them in the wood. The children of the boarding school that occupies Rydhave today are still told that he once shot at a witch.

Then there was the bear. On a winter hunt in Norway he brought down an enormous beast; instead of leaving it there, he had it loaded on a sledge and carted from Norway into Sweden, and from Sweden to Copenhagen, where he presented it to the court. It was served at Christian IX's table. One guest, they say, found it tough. The bear made no career at the Danish court.

Then there was the train. The line from Skive to Struer opened in November 1865. One day, on the platform at Vinderup, the Count watched the Struer train leave five minutes early – by his watch, at least. The stationmaster tried to reason with him.

“Telegraph Struer, sir,” said the Count.

They telegraphed; and a special train, tradition maintains, came back to Vinderup to fetch the triumphant Count.

These tales were gathered in 1957, three generations later; they must be read for what they are, the memory a district keeps of an eccentric squire.

But one of the Norwegian journeys had a sequel the registers attest. The poet Andreas Munch, a widower who had lost wife and sons, met Countess Amalie there. Munch was the first poet Norway had pensioned, one of the fathers of her literature. On 10 October 1865 they were married in the church at Borbjerg, near Ryde, and the wedding was held at Rydhave. The mad count had a national poet for a son-in-law.

When he sold Rydhave in 1873 he left behind more than anecdotes: a foundation of seventy thousand rigsdaler “for the deserving poor of the parish of Ryde and the county of Christiansholm”, binding his two countries into a single work. The man they called mad spent his fortune on reclamation, restoration, learning and charity. It is a madness many sane men might envy.

42. 1869 – The Castle with the Star Tower

In 1869 appeared the second volume of *Old Danish Memories*, a popular work signed Holger Bruun, behind whom hid L.J. Flamand. It was one of those books left lying on the parlour table, and generations of Lollanders discovered there the history of their castle.

The first sentence is already a treasure: Aalholm is “a massive square building with two towers, one of which is fitted up as an astronomical observatory”. The star tower was thus the very emblem of the castle. And the author praises “the fine garden and wood”, rich in rare trees brought back “from foreign lands and other parts of the world” by the late Count, “himself a botanist”. Thirty years after his death in Rio, Frederik Christian is the quiet hero of these pages.

The book also knows that the old castle had “five towers, a wooden spire and two oriels”; five towers where everyone else counts four. An error, or a memory of the gate-tower in the south wing? The excavations will decide.

It goes back further than Burman Becker, to the “sea-kings” of the ninth century; then, thinking better of it, proposes a small coastal fort of Svend Grathe, raised in 1151 against the Wends. Wrongly dated, but well reasoned: an older fortification on the islet, later replaced by the true Aalholm – which is roughly what the museum and the excavations are drawing today.

Above all, it at last tells 1368 as it happened: Iron Henry,

the truce of 8 September, the term of 1 May that came and went, Kersten Kule at Bardewick with his endless reservations. Aalholm was not taken; it was saved by the pen. It makes a scene of 1332 too: the reed-thatched house, the fire, the King through the window, and Count John who “set no store by his half-brother”.

Flamand compiled, and his ninth century is worth nothing. But his pages are a link in the chain, and they remind us who read history in 1869: ordinary people, by lamplight, in their parlours.

43. 1874 – The Poet in the Garden

On 18 September 1874 one of the most celebrated poets of the North sat in the garden of Aalholm, writing.

Andreas Munch, a bishop's son, cousin of the historian P.A. Munch, of the same family as the painter Edvard Munch; first pensioner of the Storting, set to music by Grieg; Norwegian national romanticism in person. He was no tourist: Amalie was his wife, and the family he saw at the castle was his own. The couple wintered in Copenhagen and summered at Nysted, where in 1877–78 they built the Villa Marina in the Italian manner for some eighty thousand kroner, when a skilled workman earned twenty-six øre an hour. Aalholm's park was their neighbour.

His poem, *In the Garden of Aalholm Castle*, has six stanzas. It opens upon the old red-walled castle, murmurous with noble trees, while the sea roars on the shore like a Viking's horn; then

comes the line that shows the poet knew the place: the castle that was once a king's dwelling – and his prison. Royal residence and dungeon, King Hans's chancery and Christopher's cellar, held in a single couplet.

But the heart of the poem is the garden. Stanza after stanza Munch names what he sees: the weeping ash, the grove of firs, the mighty planes beneath which one divines the South, the magnolia, the fig, the laurustinus, the acacias, the cypress lifted towards eternity. It is, he writes, as though a fairy with full hands had scattered beneath the grey northern sky a wealth only the South knows.

It is a botanical inventory in verse, drawn up thirty-five years after the Count's death by an observer who knew how to look. For anyone who would replant the park today, those stanzas are worth a gardener's register.

And the poem closes upon the Danish beechwood keeping faithful watch over this southern garden, then upon moonlight, the mist on the meadows, and the towers of Aalholm guarding the sleeping park. Aarestrup had sung the plane tree as the doctor of Nysted; Munch sang the whole, as son-in-law of the house. Few manors can boast two poets beneath the same tree.

44. 1875 – The Name

Gregers did one thing, nevertheless, for which everyone has been grateful to him ever since.

The county had been called Christiansholm since 1734, after a child who died at twenty-five and left no trace. The castle had been called Aalholm since always, since the eels, since the King in the cellar. The two names had lived side by side for a century, and one of them was the true one.

Gregers asked that it be changed. It was granted. The county of Christiansholm became the county of Aalholm. The mad count gave the castle back its name.

He died childless in 1875. His brother Julius succeeded him, and died in 1879, he too without an heir. The branch was extinct, and Emerentia's county, which was to pass from hand to hand until the end of time, found itself without a master. The deed of foundation required that it then revert to the King.

One imagines the White Lady in those years. Childless master after childless master. She must have walked a great deal.

45. 1880–1881 – The Supreme Court

There was a collateral branch.

Josia Levetzau of Lekkende, privy councillor, nephew of Emerentia's son, was a distant kinsman; but a kinsman, and he had rights. The King had others. In 1880 a blind historian wrote of the affair; in 1881 the quarrel over Aalholm came before the Supreme Court.

It was a battle not of swords but of parchments: Emerentia's patent, read and reread by the best lawyers in the kingdom;

genealogical tables; rules of succession; and the eternal question of what an old woman had meant, a century and a half before, when she wrote “in perpetuity”.

Levetzau won. He had the county and the title, and the name became Raben-Levetzau. Nine generations of one family in one castle: it was Emerentia’s work, and it held because she had written it down.

Josia died in 1889. His son had been administering the estate since 1881; he would be its count for forty-four years, until 1933. His name was Frederik Christopher Otto Raben-Levetzau. Posterity called him His Excellency.

And he was inheriting a ruin with a view.

PART FOUR: HIS EXCELLENCY

46. 1882 – The Young Man and the Garden

Aalholm had gone to seed. Not ruined as after the Swedes, but neglected, as an estate becomes on which two old childless brothers have spent their money on summer-houses. The woods were ill kept, the fields ill drained, the home farm pressed against the castle as in the Middle Ages, and smelling of it. Frederik Christian's great park had grown over everyone's head, and Gregers's stelae leaned at the edges of overgrown walks.

Young Frederik Raben-Levetzau was twenty-five, with degrees in political economy and memories of capitals: he had served the Foreign Office in Vienna and Paris. He knew what a great European house should look like. He decided that Aalholm should be one.

He began with the garden. In 1882, before he was even count, he sent for the Englishman H.E. Milner, the first landscape gardener of his day. Milner walked through the one man's jungle

and the other's Latin labyrinth and drew up a general plan: keep the old, recompose the pleasure-ground in the English manner, merge the Horse Paddock into a landscape that would flow down to the lagoon.

It was grand. Four hundred acres. The Saks København road, which passed beneath the windows, was banished northward onto a new causeway magnificently christened *Alverdens Gang*, the Way of the Whole World. The Reed Lake was dredged and an island of five acres made in it, all flower-beds, *the Pleasance*, where thirteen to fifteen thousand plants were bedded out every year. By the chestnut avenue, behind a wall of finely dressed granite, a kitchen garden and orchard of fourteen acres was laid out, with palm-house, vinery and peach-house, and in the midst a water-tower forty feet high.

The Countess had her own island in the lake. It is still called the Countess's Island. One may stand there today where she stood, and see the castle from the water as she saw it: red, heavy, and yet, in the evening light, smiling.

47. 1884 – The Englishman and the Pheasants

The first year, seven pheasants were shot at Aalholm. Seven.

The pheasant was a recent immigrant to Denmark. In 1761 Moltke had received at Bregentved twenty eggs from the royal pheasantry; a turkey-hen was to sit them at the keeper's; by spring the chicks had been pecked to death. In the nineteenth century

two schools contended. The German released birds almost full-grown and watched them ceaselessly. The English turned the chicks out at four to six weeks: they grew wilder, stronger, better on the wing; but then everything with claws or a hooked beak had to be exterminated without pity.

The master of the English school in Denmark was named Robert Richardson. He came to Aalholm in 1884, with a young keeper, Frederik Saurbrey, as his second. In two years the bag rose to four hundred and seventy-six. From seven to four hundred and seventy-six was no longer progress; it was a transformation.

The Danish Hunting Association, founded that very year, published the bags: in 1887 Aalholm returned two hundred and six pheasants, and the county four hundred and thirteen out of two thousand and two head of game. Frijsenborg counted only eighty. The pheasant was so new that it did not even figure in the game laws; but it already had its price at market, two to three kroner the cock.

In 1888 Frijsenborg carried off Richardson. Saurbrey became head keeper at Bregentved, where the pheasantry reached industrial proportions, eight thousand eggs in 1929; a photograph of 1913 shows him beside Christian X, and Svend Fleuron made him the model for the merciless "Bomb" of his novel. The triumph of the English method in Denmark passes through Aalholm.

And the great autumn shoots, when kings and princes came to

Lolland, rested on seven lean birds of 1884 and on an Englishman who knew what it takes to make four hundred of them.

48. 1885 – The Golden Eagles

On 15 March 1885 a golden eagle was shot at Aalholm.

We know it to the day, for Jonas Collin, in his great list of the birds of Denmark published in 1895, notes under *Aquila fulva*: “At Aalholm, 15 March and 24 October 1885”. A modern revision of all rare records classes both birds: “sk”. Shot.

This was no common raptor. Over six feet of wingspan, a dozen pounds, talons made for hare and fowl – that is, for what a game department called its game. The dates are those of migration: Scandinavian eagles, winter guests, come to glide over the plain of Lolland. Today one would raise binoculars. In 1885 one raised a gun.

It would be wrong to be indignant. In those days the nature of great estates was divided in two: what one wished to multiply, hares, partridges, pheasants; and what ate it, foxes, martens, crows and hawks, what keepers called vermin and were paid for by the head. The Hunting Association had it in its programme: protect the mallard, exterminate the birds of prey.

And at Aalholm, precisely, four-week pheasants had just been turned out into the woods.

1884: the pheasantry. 1885: two eagles. No source says who fired, nor why; it will not be asserted here. But the two facts

belong to the same story. On 16 November 1889 a third eagle fell at Aalholm.

There is a paradox in it. The savants of the age knew many birds because they had been shot, stuffed and reported in the sporting papers. Destruction was the source of knowledge. Frederik Christian had collected birds to understand them; his descendants' keepers killed them to protect the pheasants, and so brought them into science.

Protected in the nesting season in 1922, wholly in 1967, the golden eagles came back; in 1999 a pair reared young in Denmark. Were one to glide tomorrow over the woods of Aalholm, no one would go for a gun. People would stop. They would travel miles to see it.

49. 1885–1889 – The Castle Receives Its Face

In 1885 His Excellency moved the home farm a mile to the north, away from the castle, close to the fields: a new range, drawn by a hand that one recognises as the architect Hans J. Holm's. Where the old farm had stood went stables for twenty saddle and carriage horses and a coach-house for the state carriages.

Then, in 1889, the great work began.

Hans J. Holm was a professor, a historicist, a lover of the Middle Ages; he loved them so much that he invented more of them where they were lacking. He planted himself in the great courtyard, looked at the rectangle the King had drawn in the

thirteenth century, and saw what he could make of it.

He cut the courtyard in two with cross-wings flanked by great square towers. A wide avenue led into the heart of the now symmetrical whole, where one arrived in a court of honour dominated by an enormous stair-tower. Façades and courts received everything historicism could borrow: round-headed and pointed windows, balconies, oriels, copper-clad dormers, stepped gables, tile and slate, half-timbering on carved brackets; a picturesque “pepper-pot” on the north wing; and, to the west, great new loopholes through which no one would ever shoot.

Frederik Christian’s observatory was pulled down. The astronomer gave way to the architect.

On the façade Holm set the seal of the University of Copenhagen and the date 1232, the supposed foundation under Christopher I. One does not argue with a date carved in stone.

Within, it was a theatre. One entered the staircase with its marble steps and oak panelling, and a built-in organ greeted you with its chords. The vestibule was medieval, arcades, columns, painted beams; the north wing a suite of state rooms: cabinets, dining-room, great hall, ballroom, gilt leather on the walls, damask, inlaid parquet, double doors with brass handles, stucco. A row of canopied bedchambers awaited the guests, the royal family at their head.

And during the work, beneath the whitewash of the eastern hall in the north wing, the masons found the name of Frederick II, that of Queen Sophie, those of the councillors; and at the very

bottom, with his cap and his tankard, Christoffer Koryot. The fool had waited three centuries; at last there was a feast again.

The antiquaries of the future would shake their heads over so many stones pulled down and so much authenticity lost. Contemporaries simply gaped. Save Frijsenborg, no Danish house could rival Aalholm. No one yet spoke of protecting monuments; men wanted to re-create. And they re-created.

50. 1890 – The Hunt That Never Was

In the heart of Roden forest there is a place too geometrical to be the work of nature. From a round-point, the Rotunda, eight straight rides radiate through the wood like the spokes of a wheel.

It is the classic figure of a forest made for hunting par force: from the star one follows hounds and quarry to the end of the long vistas. So were the great royal forests of Europe laid out in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; those of North Zealand are today inscribed by UNESCO for that very geometry.

Was the stag ever run at Aalholm? Probably not. The historian Jesper Laursen says so plainly: the star was cut about 1890, when Roden became a deer park, but seems never to have served any purpose. It had the value of a symbol. Hunting par force had been abolished in the Crown's forests for more than a century when those rides were opened.

Then why?

In 1882 His Excellency had taken part in the famous hunt

at Frijsenborg, where Count Mogens Frijs had revived, with an imported pack and an English huntsman, this pleasure of kings. Otto Bache painted the kill, and among the riders, in a greenish coat, brown hat and white breeches, one recognises Count Frederik Raben-Levetzau of Aalholm.

He had ridden in it. Eight years later Roden had its star.

No document says the Count wanted one of his own. But if the link is right, the affair has a rare elegance: he did not want the hunt; he wanted the landscape of the hunt. While Holm was making a medieval theatre of the castle, a star in the woods proclaimed: this is a great house.

The forester Carl E. Kann, in charge of the woods from 1875 to 1918, has his memorial stone in the middle of the Rotunda. The star was cut in his day; perhaps by his hand. The eight rides still run out from there, as if the riders were about to burst from the trees. They never came. Aalholm had its star, and no hunt.

51. 1891–1908 – The Guest List

They came.

In 1891 the Prince of Siam lodged at Aalholm: a young prince of Asia, sent to learn Europe, sleeping beneath a Danish canopy, strolling among American oaks and stuffed bears while the gardeners bedded out fifteen thousand flowers. In November 1902, for four days, the Crown Prince and Princess Alexandrine. In 1906 King Frederick VIII.

And in 1908 the two men whose rivalry would, six years later, set the world ablaze: the Emperor William II and King Edward VII. The same castle, the same park. One sees them walking among Gregers's Latin stelae, the Kaiser with his upturned moustache and his withered arm always hidden, the King of England stout and cigar in mouth, talking of things neither of them meant. Holm's organ had saluted them. Koryot watched them from the top of his wall.

Those who stroll together in the gardens of the mighty do not always know that they will meet again on staff maps.

His Excellency received everyone. But Aalholm was not everything. The census of 1 February 1906 found in the castle a single soul: the housekeeper. The Count was in Copenhagen, Amaliegade 17, almost beneath the King's eaves, with twelve servants; the Countess "abroad", probably at the Villa Beaulieu in Cannes. At the farm, that same day, lived forty-four people, a hundred and twenty cows, twenty-seven horses, and in summer ten young Polish girls in the beet fields.

A castle for a housekeeper, a farm for forty-four; and on the island in the Reed Lake, fifteen thousand flowers that no one looked at.

52. 1901 – The Town Keeps Its Diary

On the threshold of the twentieth century a man of Nysted undertook a rare thing: to describe his town as it was, street

by street, house by house, and then to note, year after year, everything that would change.

It was the doctor, C.A. Hansen. His first volume was entitled *Status 1901*: an inventory, a photograph of the little city on the lagoon at the moment the old world was about to pass the new. No railway, no water-tower, but a harbour, merchants' houses, an old town hall, five centuries of history. To take stock before writing the chronicle was to give his successors the standard of all measurement.

He kept the chronicle himself from 1902; others took it up, down to John Voigt, who laid down the pen in 2006. Two wars, the coming and going of the train, the fortunes of the harbour, weddings and fires, all were set down by people who did not know how the story ended, and for that very reason remembered its details.

For Aalholm it is a treasure: the castle seen from the town. It is the chronicle that notes what Munch's Villa Marina cost; it is these prices, names and dates that no other source preserves. It sleeps in the local archives of Nysted, digitised. And perhaps there is a silent invitation in its stopping in 2006: the chronicle of Nysted awaits its next chronicler.

53. 1903 – The Heath Farmer's Son

On 1 May 1903 a Jutland lad of seventeen stepped off the train at Nysted with a small valise that held his whole world.

Marius Nielsen was an orphan. He came from a heath farm near Læborg, where the sand gave little and demanded everything, and where his father would pick up from the byre floor the wisps of straw that had fallen, for nothing must be wasted. He had served two and a half years with a peasant: no fixed hours, no Sunday, no future. His brother, a coachman at Hardenberg, had shown him the door: go as a farming pupil to a great estate.

Of Lolland he knew two things. His schoolmaster had told him that on the county of Ålholm they grew southern fruits in a park. And at home they told the story of the old woman who went into the apothecary's at Nysted to ask for *cayenne for ten øre, cayenne, cayenne*, in a dialect that set the boys of Læborg howling. Neither the fruits nor the dialect had been exaggerated.

It was, he would write, a revolution in his life. Instead of heath and stunted scrub, the rich soil, the beech-woods of tender green, the Baltic and its boats. A room of his own, with a stove, a washstand and a lamp; a maid who made the bed and lit the fire so that he would be warm when he came in. From April to November a flask of schnapps for the fields. At Easter ten hard-boiled eggs a man. Fixed hours, and after work, go where one liked without asking anyone. He was, he said, *deeply abashed by so much goodness*.

The goodness had a name: the tenant farmer Ulrich, an old man with a long white beard, and his wife, who every Sunday went round the rooms with clean towels. One Sunday in April

she stopped on Marius's threshold.

"What, no fire?"

"It is no longer needed, ma'am."

She shivered, and thought it cold. He never forgot her for those words.

The farm was a great enterprise: seven hundred barrels of land, fourteen teams, a hundred and seventy milch cows, two hundred and fifty pigs. The steward, Baggesen-Schmidt, claimed descent from the poet and earned four hundred and fifty kroner a year; a pupil, a hundred and eighty. The machines dazzled the Jutlander: at home he had threshed a whole winter with the flail; here a steam thresher did two hundred sacks a day. Straw was spread for litter, the dung was laid on the finest turf he had ever seen, and ploughed in. At home they would have wept.

In summer, of a Sunday, the fourteen teams were taken down the high street to the beach, where the men stripped, sprang on bareback and pushed the beasts out until they lost their footing and swam. A swimming horse, he noted, has nothing but its head above the water.

And there was the castle. Marius saw it from without, from the farm side, and that is what makes his eye precious. Twenty horses in the Count's stable, five grooms in yellow livery, breeches and stiff hats, beards forbidden and side-whiskers obligatory; an outrider who followed the young countesses as they put their horses at the stooks at full gallop; five footmen, a cook from Pomerania, a valet who followed the Count to Paris

and to Egypt. Marius made his reckoning, soberly: all of it was paid for by the Count's eight estates; and those who ploughed the land did not own enough of it to fill a flowerpot.

One thing above all struck him. When the Count, and still more the Countess, gave an order, it was never *would you* or *could you*. It was: *You shall!* – heavily stressed, as if to mark well the gulf between Dives and poor Lazarus. So spoke high culture, Marius observed, when one was count, chamberlain, Master of the Hunt and, two years later, Foreign Minister.

The world was changing year by year. The Count had no motor-car; but that year a motor-bus line opened between Nysted and Nykøbing, the first in the country, he believed, chosen because there was no hill. The only little rise was by the farm, and there the bus would stall and roll back; the passengers got down and pushed, and nobody minded. At Nysted he saw his first moving picture: a barber cut off his customer's head, shaved it on the table and put it back. People laughed, he would write fifty years later, and one may smile still.

He stayed only a year. But his father had been in the habit of telling his sons they were good for nothing – not from malice, from ignorance – and Marius had gone out into life feeling himself less than others. On leaving, he received from the tenant Ulrich a character that ended thus: it was a pleasure to recommend him to anyone who might have need of him. The sentence served him later. But above all, he wrote, it gave him back his faith in himself.

Such good conditions, he added, there were surely never at Ålholm, before or since.

It is the only witness to His Excellency's Aalholm written by a man who held a pitchfork. All the others saw the castle from the drawing-rooms. Marius saw it from the Heifers' Meadow.

54. 1905 – The Minister

In 1905 the Count became Minister for Foreign Affairs.

Nothing had destined him for it. J.C. Christensen's government was a farmers' government, and Raben-Levetzau a conservative, landowner, chamberlain, director of the Landmandsbank. But the kingdom needed a minister who had seen the world and spoke its languages, and few such were to be found among the farmers. The Count had been in Vienna and Paris; he had been Denmark's commissioner-general at the Exposition of 1900; he presided over the commission rebuilding Christiansborg. He was building a palace in Copenhagen while Holm rebuilt one on Lolland.

For three years he held in his hands the little kingdom's dealings with a Europe in which Germany was growing, Schleswig was still German, and every sentence had to be weighed on the goldsmith's scales. Then came the Alberti scandal, and he went, and the government fell with him.

He never returned to politics, save to preside over the parish council of Nysted. But among his many dignities, which the

manor-house book of 1938 lists between the Geographical Society and the Chapter of the Orders, there is one that is read too quickly: *President of the Royal Danish Automobile Club*.

Remember it. It will count.

55. 1905 – Norway Takes a King

On 7 June 1905 the Storting declared the union of Norway and Sweden dissolved. Stockholm cried treason; the Swedish fleet cruised off Strömstad, Norway half mobilised, and the talks at Karlstad came within a hair of breaking.

Still it had to be settled what Norway would be: republic or kingdom? And if kingdom, what king?

The throne was offered first, as a courtesy, to a Swedish prince; King Oscar would have none of it. The Norwegian government had from the outset another name in reserve: Prince Carl of Denmark, naval officer, second son of the Crown Prince, and son-in-law to King Edward VII of England through his wife Maud. A king with northern blood and the ear of London: it was ideal.

But one does not take a Danish prince out of Copenhagen without going through the Danish government. And the Foreign Minister of that government was the Count from Lolland.

On the Norwegian side the man of the affair was the diplomat Fritz Wedel Jarlsberg, posted in Copenhagen. The Danish Biographical Dictionary says it soberly: Raben-Levetzau

conveyed Wedel Jarlsberg's approach to Prince Carl. The Count of Aalholm stood between the envoy and the future king.

On 29 June the Prince replied, with conditions: that King Oscar should have definitely renounced for his house; that his grandfather Christian IX and his father-in-law Edward VII should consent; and that Norway and Sweden should first have settled their divorce.

The Count had another care: Stockholm. If Denmark helped Norway too visibly to a Danish king, it would estrange Sweden for a generation; and a small state with Germany at its back cannot afford enemies to the north. So he set himself to moderate the Swedish demands, notably on the razing of the frontier fortresses, the hottest point at Karlstad. Denmark wanted the throne for her prince, but could not let it be thought she had won it.

On 26 October Oscar renounced. The Prince then wanted the Norwegians' own consent; there was talk of republicans. Prime Minister Michelsen would rather have done without a plebiscite; the Danish minister, the Danish court and the Prince insisted. Michelsen gave way. On 12 and 13 November, two hundred and fifty-nine thousand five hundred and sixty-three ayes against sixty-nine thousand two hundred and sixty-four noes. On the 18th the Storting elected the Prince unanimously; the telegram reached Copenhagen that evening, and three hours later Carl accepted, taking the name of Haakon VII. On the 25th, in snow and fog, Drøbak welcomed the new royal pair.

Haakon reigned fifty-two years, stood up to the Germans in 1940, and became the best-loved of Norway's kings. The dynasty that reigns in Oslo today begins with him; and in the wings at its birth one finds the name of a gentleman of Lolland.

56. 1908 – The Count Goes to the King

On Tuesday 8 September 1908 the ministers were waiting at the Copenhagen Custom House for the Dowager Empress Dagmar and Queen Alexandra of England. While they watched for the ship, the Minister of the Interior whispered to the head of government that the Minister of Justice, Alberti, had just given himself up to the police for fraud and forgery. Christensen wrote that evening in his diary: a thunderclap. He dared say nothing to Frederick VIII in the middle of the ceremony, and begged King George of Greece, the sovereign's brother, to break the news to him on the way to the palace.

Alberti had embezzled fifteen millions, enough to buy the whole of Lolland. And Christensen was doubly struck, having that same year had the Treasury lend a million and a half to the savings bank Alberti presided over.

From the Custom House they hurried to the council. Christensen himself raised the question of resignation. Two ministers supported him, among them Count Raben. The others refused: to go would be to confess. They would stay until the Chambers met.

The Count was not satisfied. On the Friday he spoke of leaving; that evening he wrote it. On Saturday 12 September, at half past nine, the two men faced each other.

“I persist, Prime Minister. But I wish first to hear the King.”

Christensen understood they would meet again before any decision. The Count attended the council at ten, King George’s audience at half past eleven. Towards one o’clock the cabinet secretary came in to Christensen: the King would receive him between two and three; Count Raben had asked for his dismissal, and had obtained it. While he was speaking, a messenger arrived with the Count’s letter.

Christensen was furious. On the way to the palace he met Raben by chance in the street. They exchanged a few words and parted, says the diary, rather abruptly.

Frederick VIII was nervous. He announced the Count’s departure and now asked for that of the whole cabinet. Then he spoke at length of Alberti, of the loan, of defence; and there the other quarrel came to light: Raben wanted forts south of Copenhagen, from Køge Bay to Roskilde. If Christensen would propose them, said the King, the Count would stay.

Christensen refused, and uttered the sentence that has been quoted ever since: he could not, after all, buy Count Raben for a few forts.

The cabinet carried on for some weeks and fell on 12 October. Christensen told his friends that the Count had acted on a misunderstanding, in good faith; and that it was all the stranger

that Raben should believe himself called to the next ministry. Men who overthrow a government without having meant to often believe they will be thanked for it.

Alberti was the cause, the loan the weakness; but it was the Count of Aalholm who went to the King. When he came out, the government was beginning to fall. He went home to Aalholm and never appeared again in the politics of the realm.

57. 1909 – The Doctor Who Wrote the Town's History

Nysted was five hundred years old in December 1909, and the town council wanted a book. Again it was the doctor who wrote it.

Carl Adam Hansen, founder of the chronicle, apologised: it ought to have been “a historian by profession”, and Nysted had “never been more than a modest little town”. He was mistaken about the worth of his book.

He saved two sources in it: the parish clerk Wejer's manuscript of 1761 on the church's epitaphs, lent and never returned, of which he had luckily taken a copy; and the town's very charter, Eric of Pomerania's letter of 7 December 1409, burnt with the town hall in 1654, which he copied at the Royal Library from Resen's transcript: freedom “from all bonds, labours and taxes towards our castle of Aaleholm”.

He told there of Johanne Lerche and her poker. He noted that young Count Christian had lived at the farm because the castle was uninhabitable, and that as early as 1551 the bricks of the demolished Franciscan friary had been reused at Aalholm: the friary the castle had protected ended in its walls. He preserved the straw of 1864.

And he kept the episode of 1848, when Gregers offered the town seven or nine small cannon for the redoubt – the “cats’ heads”, which in 1909 still saluted the King’s birthday – with a covering letter the chairman of the council found “sarcastic and wounding in tone”. The mad count remained the mad count, even when he was giving presents.

The book ends upon the future: “The railway line to Nykøbing has been staked out, and in a year or two we shall have the train.” And upon a wish: “May Nysted go forward to a bright and happy future!”

Aarestrup had been doctor at Nysted and made verses. Hansen was doctor and made history. There is in that town a line of doctors who were not content merely to heal.

58. 1913 – The King Comes

In October 1913 Christian X came to Aalholm, and the tutor watched from his window.

It is one of the castle’s prettiest testimonies: not the Count, not the King, but a young man engaged to teach the children, who

watched and took notes. The royal motor on the causeway. The servants drawn up. The Count in uniform, ablaze with orders. The King, tall and stiff as a mast, stepping down and saluting. The music, the flags, the people of Nysted lining the road.

The staff were photographed that year before Holm's façade: footmen, housemaids, cooks, gardeners, coachmen, in their best clothes, with on their faces the consciousness of belonging to something.

It was the summit. Aalholm in 1913 was all His Excellency had wanted: a house of European rank, a king for a guest, a park in its splendour, and hands enough to keep the whole thing in the air.

The following year the war began. Summits have this in common: one recognises them only on the way down.

59. 1915–1921 – The Reckoning, a Second Time

The first thing the Great War took from Aalholm was the gardeners.

Denmark was neutral, the world was not; prices rose, men went away, and the great household that the gardens, the buildings and the entertaining required could no longer be maintained. The Pleasance's fifteen thousand flowers grew fewer; the System ran wild; the great kitchen garden became a market garden that had to pay.

In 1915 the telephone rang at Aalholm: the sale of the Danish

West Indies to the United States was being negotiated, and the former minister was consulted. Denmark sold her tropical islands for twenty-five million dollars.

In 1918 the Bear House was built in the park, in memory of the mad count's bears. In 1919 a daughter of the Count was married at the castle; it was the last great wedding. The Countess, English at heart, had created near Nysted a corner of England, the English School.

Then came the abolition of the entails.

The law was passed in 1919. The counties, Emerentia's like all the others, the whole system of bound land that had carried the nobility for two centuries, were to be dissolved: the land would become free, against a tribute to the State and land for smallholders. For Aalholm, in 1921, it meant one million seven hundred and sixty-seven thousand kroner to the State, two million one hundred and fifteen thousand six hundred to the successors' fund, and six hundred and sixty acres for thirty-five smallholdings. The Count fought to spare Aalholm itself and gave up only a hundred and seventy acres there; Bramsløkke, Egholm and his Zealand estate of Beldringe paid the rest.

The county of Aalholm ceased to exist. The castle was only a castle; the land, only land. The Count was sixty-two. He reigned twelve years more over what remained.

60. 1920 – The Manors’ Fateful Hour

In the early 1920s appeared one of the most ambitious works ever devoted to the houses of Denmark: *Danish Manors about 1920*, three stout volumes, nearly two thousand pages. Aalholm had its chapter in the second.

It is all in three small words of the title: *about 1920*. With the constitution of 1915 and the law of 1919, Denmark had resolved to wind up the last remains of the society of privilege. Four men – the genealogist Louis Bobé, the architectural historian Vilhelm Lorenzen, Baron Berner-Schilden-Holsten and Baron Palle Rosenkrantz, lawyer and the country’s first writer of detective novels – wished to fix that world as it was at the instant of its vanishing. Two scholars and two noblemen raised a monument to the world the law was dismantling.

And Aalholm, at the moment the picture was taken, was at the height of its second glory: Holm’s castle, the royal visit of 1913 with its thrones, its thousand lamps and its fireworks, a master who had been a minister.

But at the castle they knew what 1920 meant – in more ways than one. It was then that the heraldic frieze in the great hall received, beside the arms of Schleswig, the inscription: *until 1864, again 1920*. The joy of reunion and the gravity of abolition, painted on the same walls in the same year.

The family would stay three generations more, until 1995; but as owners, no longer as holders of an entail. The work, being a

snapshot, does not age; it is its moment. It was the last look cast upon the Denmark of living counts.

61. 1931 – The Garden Finds Its Historian

Johannes Tholle was a gardener, a landscape architect, and above all a tireless writer who for half a century rescued from oblivion the gardens, parks and churchyards of the whole country, parish by parish.

In 1931 he gave the historical yearbook of Lolland-Falster twelve pages on *The Garden of Aalholm Castle*, from 1796 to 1920: the first history of the park.

Twelve pages is little. But when in 2002 the historian Gerd Malling took stock of the counts' collections, she found that Frederik Christian's arboretum was "the only part of his work that had been remembered" – and that it was remembered thanks to Tholle. He had come just in time, while those who had known the garden in its splendour could still speak. He gathered the Count's words on "my English garden at Christiansholm", the fifteen hundred species of 1833, the praises of 1849 and 1869, Munch's verses, the gardener Larsen's report of 1897.

It was a funeral oration; it was also a bequest. The herbaria were sold, the birds dispersed, the scores forgotten, the furniture put under the hammer; but a garden cannot be packed in a crate, and its history survived because one man, in 1931, took the trouble to write it. What is written remains when things go

away.

62. 1933 – Farewell

His Excellency died in 1933, after more than half a century at Aalholm.

On 5 June Christian X came to say farewell. Twenty years had passed since the tutor had seen him step down from his motor on the causeway. The King had aged, and so had the country: the slump, unemployment, counties that no longer existed. Yet he came. A photograph shows him, tall, in uniform, entering Holm's staircase, where for once the organ was silent.

The Count was carried to the chapel at Nysted, beside Emerentia and Otto Ludvig.

His son did not have the title of count; the abolition had swept it away. He had to be content with being a baron. Johan Otto Raben-Levetzau was twenty-nine and was inheriting a castle of European rank, a park of four hundred acres, a farm, a villa at Cannes, a flat in Copenhagen – and a century that had no room for any of it.

A baron, as would be seen, was quite enough.

PART FIVE: THE MOTOR BARON

63. 1940–1955 – The Restoration That Failed

Johan Otto Raben-Levetzau had a plan.

He had grown up in his father's Aalholm, in that theatre of pointed arches and gilt leather, and he knew, as any man with eyes knew, that it was no longer a medieval castle but a castle of 1889 dressed up as a medieval one. The Baron wanted the real one back.

In 1943 and 1944, in the midst of the German occupation, he had plans drawn for a restoration that was to “efface his father's brutal interventions”: take off the dormers, strip the false facings, give the Margaret Wing back to the Queen's time. He did part of it. The Margaret Wing was restored; dormers vanished; a stretch of false wall came down. But it was war, money was short, and after the war it did not come back.

In 1945 came the refugees: German civilians, women, children, old men, driven before the Red Army, landed by

thousands on Lolland. At Stubberupgaard, a farm of the estate, barbed wire was strung; they lived behind it for years while Denmark wondered what to do with them. Ten years later, in 1955, the children of the war came to 34 Skansevej: other exiles, other care.

Aalholm passed through this war as it had passed through the others: by being there, by opening its doors, by waiting.

But the Baron had no taste for waiting. He was neither his father, the patient count with a thousand offices, nor his great-grandfather, the travelling naturalist. He was, say the sources with a smile rare in them, *playful*.

And he loved motor-cars.

64. 1944 – The Film

On 31 March 1944, at the Palads in Copenhagen, a twelve-minute documentary was shown before a crime picture: *The Danish South Sea Islands*.

It was the fourth year of the Occupation, and films of that kind served to remind the Danes of what was Danish: the Storstrøm bridge, the churches, the manors, the beet and the sugar-mills, the beach at Marielyst, the ferries, Maribo, Nakskov, Sakskøbing – and Aalholm, and Nysted. Bjarne Henning-Jensen directed, his wife Astrid assisted him, Poul Gram held the camera.

The camera glides over the lagoon, follows the causeway, draws near Holm's façade where the sun sets the brick alight.

These are the oldest moving pictures of the castle. The Baron is forty and has just begun on the Margaret Wing; there is not yet a single car behind the grain-dryer; the park is still Milner's. The film exists still. One may see there Aalholm as it was on the eve of all that was to follow.

65. 1964–1972 – Petrol in the Blood

It was not a pastime. It was a life.

His father had presided over the Automobile Club when the motor-car was a lord's plaything that people stood and gaped at. The son went further. He bought old cars, rare cars, impossible cars, in England, in France, in America, and had them shipped to Lolland, where they were put behind the grain-dryer, in the barns, in the coach-house where the Count's carriages had once slept.

One imagines the steward in the 1950s, a sober man in charge of an estate whose fields and woods were being sold, learning that a new car is on its way from America.

"Where shall we put it, Baron?"

"Behind the grain-dryer."

"There are fourteen there already."

"Well then, behind the fourteen."

By 1964 the collection had become a museum, and the Baron made it a strategy: Aalholm would live no longer from the land but from visitors. In 1972 the castle and park opened to the public, with three hundred vehicles on show: one of the finest

motor museums in northern Europe, on an islet where a king had been chained six centuries before. People came in thousands, from all over Scandinavia and Germany; they went on through Holm's staircase, Frederik Christian's park, the Bear House, without quite understanding what they had seen; and they came back.

They called him *the Motor Baron*. He took it as a compliment, and he was right.

66. 1965 – The Man Who Read the Walls

Were one to crown a king among the sources of this history, the choice would be easy. Chr. Axel Jensen, the great archaeologist of the National Museum, wrote on Aalholm, for *Danish Castles and Manors*, the chapter on which all the rest depends – written in the 1940s and revised in 1965, so late that the young motor museum found a place in it.

He did what no one had done: he read the walls as one reads a manuscript, course after course, and set what he saw against the dry accounts of the old fiefs.

The whole, he writes, “came into being piece by piece, enlarged and altered over two centuries, and was doubtless never finished”. The north-west tower, with its ten-foot walls about the vaulted cellar where the King lay, is the oldest: fourteenth century. The north wall and north-east tower, with flame-coloured bricks as at Vordingborg, may be Valdemar

Atterdag's. The cellars of the south-east corner, with their remnant of a spiral stair, are of the early fifteenth: "with every reserve, one might think of Eric of Pomerania". And the west part of the south wing, where a hall bore Gothic foliage painted about 1400, deserves "not without some reason" the name of the Margaret Wing. He even solved the riddle of the fifth tower: a lowered stretch of roof that gave the corner the air of a tower.

He found a deed of 1336 in which the Bald Count renounced his claims to "dat hus to Alholme", and concluded that John the Mild had built at Aalholm.

His set piece is the building campaign of 1578–1588, reconstructed from the accounts. A stone house of the Nysted friary was pulled down for its materials; the governor Hak Ulfstand was excused three years' payment of five hundred thalers to pay the masons and carpenters himself; the lime came from Mariager, the pine from Gotland. And when the royal pair visited the work in 1585 – the visit the fool immortalised on the wall – there was concluded, writes Jensen with a smile one can guess at, "perhaps as a result of conversations held during the carouse", a new contract: Ulfstand would raise the unfinished towers at his own charge by twelve feet. But Frederick II died in 1588. And that is why the west tower still lacks its top storey today, while the east tower rises highest. The lopsidedness of Aalholm's towers is the monument of a king who died in the middle of a building.

He dared to judge. The transformation of 1889, loyally

described, is condemned in a sentence: a luxury residence “fit for the Foreign Minister and made for great entertainments, wholly in the international taste”, which “might stand anywhere on the Continent”. A change of generation was needed, he said, to remedy it. The Baron had begun in 1944, with the architect Helge Holm, while the National Museum laid bare the foundations of the gate-tower.

The Baron showed him round, no doubt, talking of cars. Jensen looked at the stones. Each had his collection. And the chapter ends on an image one loves: the new Aalholm “smiles cheerfully among the green trees towards the friendly fjord”.

67. 1968–1989 – A Steam Train, a Jet Fighter and a Telephone Box

He could not stop.

Through Milner’s and Frederik Christian’s park he had a narrow-gauge line laid and a real steam locomotive run on it, the Stubberup Strand Bane, which took passengers from the museum to the beach with much smoke, whistling and children leaning out of the windows among the exotic trees.

He bought a discarded jet fighter from the army and set it in the playground.

“What will you do with it, Baron?”

“The children will climb on it.”

“Very good, Baron.”

He bought one of Copenhagen’s old telephone kiosks, little round sentry-boxes with copper roofs where once one could telephone for ten øre, and planted it in the garden west of the castle, where it stood like a well-mannered foreigner among the rhododendrons and the Latin stelae. Why? Because it amused him.

There came a cafeteria, a playground, and, in 1989, a private airfield from which one could fly over the castle and see what the King had seen in 1256: the flat islet, the water all round, the angles.

And the cameras came. In the 1960s and 1970s Aalholm was the setting for a series of light Danish comedies, peopled with scantily clad ladies and country-house misunderstandings. The great hall where Frederick II’s fool had signed the wall served for bedroom farces; actresses in *négligé* ran through the gilt-leather drawing-rooms.

Koryot would have understood. He had waited three centuries, tankard in hand, for someone to laugh beneath his wall again.

68. The Riviera – The Chauffeur Goes Ahead

The Baron did not live only at Aalholm; none of them ever had.

He had a house in Sankt Annæ Plads in Copenhagen. He had – and this is the stroke that paints him best – a hundred acres of dunes on the Ringkøbing Fjord, with which he had fallen in

love in the 1930s, and where he built for himself alone a holiday village: exotic houses, a tennis court, and a sea-water pool filled from the fjord through a hose. A private village, in western Jutland.

And he had, on the Riviera, a yacht with her crew.

When the Baron went to Cannes he flew; it was modern, and he was modern. But a baron does not arrive at the quay in a taxi. So the chauffeur was sent ahead, from Lolland, across Germany and France, day after day, with the Rolls-Royce, so that the Baron might be driven with dignity from the airport to the harbour.

One sees him, that Lolland chauffeur in uniform, at the wheel of a Rolls on the Route Nationale 7, between the vines and the villages, a map on the seat, a baron to collect in three days' time. One sees him at Nice, cap in hand; the Baron steps out into the sunshine, nods, gets in, and says:

“The harbour.”

It was not madness. It was style. But style must be paid for.

69. 1989 – Darkness and Thirteen Degrees

To pay for it he sold land.

First the fields, then the woods. What had carried Aalholm for seven centuries went piece by piece, until both were reduced by about half. The cars cost money, the village in the dunes cost money, the yacht cost money; life cost money, and the Baron had decided to live it.

In 1989 the cellar went to Christie's.

It was famous: dark, thirteen degrees, a fortune in old vintages that generations of counts had laid down as men who knew how to drink. Clarets of the great years, burgundies no longer to be had. The sources call it *the Baron's million-kroner wine*. It vanished in two hours under the London hammer, bottle after bottle, to amateurs the world over who did not know they were buying a piece of Lolland.

One imagines him that evening, alone in the empty cellar, a lamp in his hand, among racks where the dust still kept the shape of the bottles. He was eighty-five. He had regretted nothing. He regretted nothing still.

70. 1990–1991 – The Tunnel and the Treasure

There is a tunnel that runs from Aalholm.

The whole district knows it. It passes beneath the lagoon to the town, say some; to the church, say others, to the chapel where Emerentia lies; to the Dowager Queen's Island; to Bramsløkke. It was dug in the Middle Ages for the King's flight, or in 1658 for the governor's, or the mad count dug it for nothing. In 1990 it was talked of again, as it is every ten years. No one has ever found it. Everyone is sure it exists.

But in 1991 something real was found.

The musicologist Jens Henrik Koudal came to Aalholm on the strength of an old music-book glimpsed in a showcase, and the

visit led him into the south-west tower. There, in a room no one had entered for decades, a treasure was sleeping: some two hundred and twenty-five works of music, manuscript and printed – and in their midst the journal of Count Otto Ludvig Raben, six hundred pages in French of which no inventory had ever made mention. Two centuries in the dark, and one day the light.

The tunnel does not exist. The scores do. Aalholm is like that: one seldom finds there what one is looking for, and often something better.

71. 1992–1996 – The Heavy Inheritance

The Baron died in February 1992. He was eighty-eight and had spent fifty-nine years at Aalholm.

The castle did not go to the elder son. The father had quarrelled with Frederik and struck him out of the succession; Aalholm fell to the younger, John Otto Raben-Levetzau, born at Hellerup in 1950, married since 1976 to Merete, father of three daughters: Amalie, Julie, and Alexandra Constance *Emerentia*. The last name pointed back to the woman who had bought the castle in 1725. The family knew who it was.

They were not new to the house; since 1975 the museum's catalogues show that tourism had already been a family affair. But what John received in 1992 was an economy his father's way of life had emptied: an estate halved, a debt already heavy, and death duties of some six million kroner, not counting the shares

of the widow and the other children. The local paper in 1995 called him *the Baron's son who got the heavy inheritance*. It was not joking.

Yet they opened their doors. The family lived in the west wing and took visitors through *our private sitting-room, with the family photographs*, as far as the bedchamber where the Kaiser and the King of England had slept. The gilt Louis Seize furniture was brought out of the private rooms into the tea-room, where it looked better. Merete found Countess Suzanne's paintbox and re-created the studio in the tower wing. In the old kitchen every copper pan was polished, and a photograph shows the couple considering *the sauce of the day*. Another shows the family before the estate office with Cirkeline the pony, who *always belongs*. In May 1993 they were photographed on top of the tower on opening day; the railing was not yet safe enough for the public.

The brochure of 1993 began with the words: *Our family has lived here since 1725*. It ended with a sentence that sounds today like a prayer: *We are doing our best so that Aalholm may remain in the family*.

It would be easy to tell those years as one long descent. The sources show something else: a family trying several roads at once. John moved a loss-making sawmill from Jutland to Latvia and made a business of it; an auction was held in 1994 to raise cash; they sought to develop the tourism. But the seasons of 1994 and 1995 were poor. On 12 August 1995 John told the paper he

understood very well why visitors were growing scarce.

Nineteen days later, on 31 August, the suspension of payments was on the front page. The next day a photograph shows Merete and John reading the paper with attention before facing the television. Many offered help. The autumn was a race against the clock: a wind-farm project, the divided yes of a town council, the county's reservations. On 1 December John spoke the words anyone who has known the same ordeal will recognise: uncertainty kills. Christmas 1995 was kept at the castle with pensioners for guests. It was the last.

In January 1996 Aalholm was sold to Stig Husted-Andersen. *The era of the Ålholm dynasty is over*, said the paper. The cars belonged to a foundation and were not part of the sale. The contents would be sold separately for the benefit of the three daughters, who would, it was written, have to wait long years for their millions.

From 20 to 23 May 1996 Sotheby's came. Two thousand two hundred and nine lots: the canopied beds, the pictures, the gilt leather, the porcelain, the silver, the whole of Holm's staging for emperors and kings, ranged under numbers and estimates and sold for some twenty-one million six hundred thousand kroner. Dealers, catalogue in hand, went through the state rooms; the organ in the vestibule was silent; Koryot, from his wall, looked on, tankard in hand. The archives at Nysted keep John and Merete's admission cards to their own sale. A magazine quoted them: *We have wept many bitter tears.*

The hammer falls on an era, say the sources. After two hundred and seventy years the ninth generation was leaving the flat island in the lagoon.

John and Merete settled in England with their daughters. John made a new life in the world he knew best, old motor-cars, as Bonhams' representative for Scandinavia – in the very trade that had cost his family the estate. He died in England on 3 January 2013, and his funeral was held in the church at Nysted. The church was full.

The White Lady, says the legend, appears only when the master has no child. John had three. One wonders what Emerentia thought on the day the removal vans stood on the causeway; whether she understood that the perpetual county was ending, not for want of an heir, but for want of money; and whether she looked at the youngest of the girls, the one who bore her name.

72. 1997 – Beer Money for Aalholm

On 8 February 1996 three archivists crossed the causeway. Grethe Ilsøe, provincial archivist, brought with her Erik Nørr and Inge Bundsgaard. The question was whether the castle's archives could be saved.

What they found made her write an alarmed report to the National Archivist: *the room is very damp, dirty and unheated*. A few old files in a cupboard; registers flung anyhow on the

shelves; and most of it in heaps on the bare floor, mixed with books from the library. Erik Nørr would later speak of a midden with a fairly clear stratigraphy: on top the recent layers, where magazines lay beside an eighteenth-century land register.

There lay centuries of Aalholm: the accounts, the peasants' leases, the counts' papers, Frederik Christian's travel notes, and the names of people who never had their portraits painted, in those labour-rolls where a name is sometimes the only door into a life.

And time was pressing. John was heading for bankruptcy; the archives risked being scattered. Five years before, the discovery in the tower had shown what such heaps might hide.

John wanted the archives to stay whole and go to the Provincial Archives. But he wanted too to secure his daughters' future, and asked a fair price. A solution was needed that would save the papers and that a family losing everything could accept. Meanwhile the papers waited in the damp.

The Baron allowed the most precious pieces to be taken to Copenhagen for listing. Three weeks after the visit they were collected, in the very last days the family lived at the castle. Picture the corridor: at one end the removal boxes for England; at the other the archive boxes for Copenhagen. A family was leaving after two hundred and seventy years, and its written memory was leaving with it, but towards another fate.

In Copenhagen a sum was agreed; the Carlsberg Foundation paid it. On 18 April 1997 the Lolland-Falster paper headlined:

Beer Money for Ålholm. A hundred and fifty thousand kroner for the remains of the archives.

The headline was cheerful. Behind it lay a cold room, a family on the point of departure, and a bargain struck at the instant an era ended. Those kroner could not hold back the old world of Aalholm. They allowed it to go on speaking. A good part of this book exists because three people, one February day in 1996, walked into a freezing room and looked at what was lying on the floor.

EPILOGUE: THE FOURTH CAMPAIGN

73. 1995–2012 – The Billionaire Who Collected Castles

The buyer, in January 1996, was Stig Husted-Andersen.

He was a discreet man, a billionaire whom no one really knew, who collected manor houses and seaside villas as others collect stamps. He bought Aalholm and let it sleep. He never lived there, never changed anything. The castle that had received kings and emperors entered a kind of slumber: owned, maintained, but without masters.

He died in 2008, and his three daughters carried on. In 2002 scholars had found, scattered through the country's museums, the counts' collections, the herbarium, the birds, the fossils, which could still be traced back to the tower on Lolland.

In 2012 fell the last stroke of the hammer: the cars left Aalholm. Three hundred vehicles, a lifetime's gathering, forty years on show, went to auction and to the four winds. The

Rolls-Royce the chauffeur had driven to Cannes left on a lorry. Behind the grain-dryer there remained only emptiness.

74. 2019 – After 2019

In 2019 Bo Bendtsen bought the castle with some twelve thousand acres of land and woods.

It is the fourth great campaign in Aalholm's history, say the sources. The first was the kings', who wished to shut the kingdom to the south. The second was the counts': Emerentia's gold, Otto Ludvig's wing, Frederik Christian's park, Holm's theatre. The third was the Baron's: the cars, the train, the visitors. The fourth is under way: the houses are let, people marry in the drawing-rooms, they shoot in Roden forest, and they read the history of the castle, year by year, on a website that has become its new wall-painting.

Lindholm, the little deserted island in the lagoon behind Rødsand, still belongs to the estate. And the eels come back every autumn.

75. Today – Those Who Remained

There was in the Middle Ages a governor of Aalholm named Johan Frille, whom the hardships of war had left crippled.

He grieved that he could no longer ride his good horse. So he required that the horse, saddled, bridled, the stirrups hanging,

should follow him everywhere: through the corridors, into the halls, up and down the stairs. An infirm man in a chair, and behind him a horse in full harness, wherever he went, so that at least he might hear the hooves.

Legend will have it that Sir Johan Frille's horse haunts Aalholm still. People hear it at night, they say, striking the flags of a corridor where no horse goes. It is seeking its master; or perhaps it is still following him.

Christoffer Koryot is still upon the wall of the eastern hall, with his cap and his tankard, beneath the King, the Queen and all the councillors, and he laughs at them all as he has done since 1585.

Christopher II is no longer in the cellar. But those who go down there remark a singular silence.

And Emerentia von Levetzau, who bought a castle for ninety-four thousand nine hundred and twenty-nine rigsdaler and founded a county for eternity, still makes her rounds in the long corridors when the heir is wanting. She keeps watch. She has kept watch for three hundred years.

No one knows whether she walks today. What is known is that the castle is there, on the flat islet in the lagoon where salt water meets sweet, red and heavy, and yet – seen from the south, in the evening light, when the sun passes between the trees above the old walls – smiling.

A king stood here once, and saw only angles.

Beauty came later. But it came.

All the source histories, year by year, at aalholmslot.dk/slot/historie.

SOURCE KEY

Under the Crown

- 1195 Refshaleborg · 1256 Borgen fødes → Prologue
- 1329 Forliget i Ringsted → ch. 1
- 1330 Grevens gave til præsterne → ch. 2
- 1332 Christoffer 2. i fangekælderens → ch. 3
- 1342 “Kongens grove anmasselse” · 1346 Valdemar genvinder · 1360 Hertugen holder hof → ch. 4
- 1359 Da Valdemar Atterdag greb ind fra Aalholm → ch. 5
- 1362 Topmøde · 1366 Ålholm-traktaten → ch. 6
- 1366 Fangerne, prinsessen og de fire skrivere → ch. 7
- 1368 Manden der talte sig fra en belejring → ch. 8
- 1376 To konger, én krone → ch. 9
- 1377 Kejseren stævner hovedsmanden → ch. 10
- 1394 Nordens mægtigste kvinde → ch. 11
- 1394 Fredsmæglerne, der selv blev taget til fange → ch. 12
- 1409 Nysted sættes fri · 1438 Hertug Barnim · 1445 Den 15-årige brud · 1454 Christian I · 1471 Dorothea får pant → ch. 13
- 1423 Aalholms lensmand og alliancen, der skulle vare

- evigt → ch. 14
- 1460 Enkedronningernes livgeding → ch. 15
 - 1503 Kong Hans → ch. 16
 - 1516 Christian II · 1526 Frederik I → ch. 17
 - 1517 Aalholms lensmand og Dyvekes død → ch. 18
 - 1533 Bønderne dræber fogeden · 1534 Nysted stormer slottet → ch. 19
 - 1538 De sidste gråbrødre · 1551 Christian III vinder tilbage → ch. 20
 - 1556 Christian 3. udsteder brev fra Aalholm → ch. 21
 - 1559 Bønderne og den afsatte konges brev → ch. 22
 - 1581 Østfløjen og kongeparret på væggen → ch. 23
 - 1588 Sophies kopibøger · 1594 Enkedronningens ø → ch. 24
 - 1628 Krigsfanger · 1634 Troldkvinden → ch. 25
 - 1658 Over isen → ch. 26
 - 1658 De glemte år · 1671 Brøstfældigheden · 1725 Kongen sælger → ch. 27
 - 1662 Aalholm Amt → ch. 28
 - 1717 Færgemandens puddermonopol → ch. 29
 - 1719 Fire ryttere i Aalholms fængsel → ch. 30

Under the Nobility

- 1725 Grevernes genrejsning · 1734 Enken, drengegreven og grevskabet → ch. 31–32
- 1749 Grevens dagbog · 1775 Opdragelsesbogen · 1779 Den gamle borg bliver moderne → ch. 33

- 1765 Grevens sæler → ch. 34
- 1770 Grevens hemmelige kode → ch. 35
- 1791 Frederik Christian Raben · 1821 Gejrfuglen → ch. 36
- 1830 Antikvarerne opdager Aalholm → ch. 37
- 1838 Gregers Christian Raben → ch. 38 and 44
- 1843 Christian VIII og Caroline Amalie → ch. 39
- 1864 De tolv på kirkegården → ch. 40
- 1865 Den gale greve på Rydhave → ch. 41
- 1869 Gamle danske Minder → ch. 42
- 1874 Andreas Munch → ch. 43
- 1880 Den blinde historiker · 1881 Højesteret → ch. 45
- 1884 Fasanerne → ch. 47 · 1885 Kongeørnene → ch. 48
- 1889 Slottet får sit ansigt · 1890 Grevindens Ø → ch. 46 and 49
- 1890 Parforcejagten → ch. 50
- 1891 Prinsen af Siam · 1902 Prinseparret · 1906 Kongebesøget · 1908 Kejseren og kongen → ch. 51
- 1901 Nysted-krøniken → ch. 52
- 1903 Hedebondens søn – et år på Ålholm → ch. 53
- 1905 Udenrigsministeren → ch. 54
- 1905 Norges konge → ch. 55
- 1908 Greven går til kongen → ch. 56
- 1909 Jubilæumsbogen → ch. 57
- 1913 Christian X set fra huslærerens vindue → ch. 58
- 1915 Telefonen · 1918 Bjørnehuset · 1919 Den Engelske Skole · 1921 Lensafløsningen → ch. 59

- 1920 Danske Herregaarde ved 1920 → ch. 60
- 1931 Tholle om slotshaven → ch. 61
- 1933 Christian X siger farvel → ch. 62
- 1938 Spøgelseshesten, den hvide dame og hofnarren → ch. 23, 32, 38 and 75
- 1940 Baronen · 1945 Flygtningene · 1955 Krigens børn → ch. 63
- 1944 Filmen om Sydhavsøerne → ch. 64
- 1964 Rolls-Roycen bag korntørreriet · 1972 Slottet som museum → ch. 65
- 1965 Chr. Axel Jensen → ch. 66
- 1968 Stubberup Strand Bane · 1976 Filmholdene · 1989 Flyvepladsen → ch. 67
- 1989 Vinkælderen hos Christie's → ch. 69
- 1990 Den hemmelige tunnel · 1991 Nodefundet → ch. 70
- 1992 Den sidste familie · 1995 Slægtsbesiddelsen slutter → ch. 71

The Present

- 1995 Stig Husted-Andersen · 2002 Grevernes samlinger · 2008 Tre søstre · 2012 Bilerne forlader → ch. 73
- 1996 Den store auktion → ch. 71
- 1997 Ølpenge til Aalholm: Arkivet blev reddet → ch. 72
- 2019 Den fjerde kampagne → ch. 74