

Graham Brack  
A Master Mercurius Short Story

In Dulci  
Jubilo



# **In Dulci Jubilo**

**Graham Brack**

After my mother died, and my grandmother was left on her own, I tried to persuade her to come to live with me in Leiden; well, not exactly with me, because the University has rules about old women cluttering up the place, but near enough that I could look after her.

I loved my grandmother dearly, but I will not pretend that she was an easy woman to deal with. Like many older ladies, she sometimes confused “plain speaking” with downright rudeness. Like most Dutch women, she was addicted to cleanliness and could be scathing about those whose standards did not meet her own. I could imagine her walking through the academy building and dipping her finger into the crevices of the wood carvings to see whether the dusting had been thorough enough. And like most grandmothers, she was keen to see me married, this being a necessary precursor to what she really wanted, a clutch of great-grandchildren.

This last desire was thwarted by my ordination as a Catholic priest, though, since I was required by my bishop to keep that secret, I could never explain my bachelor status to her adequately and was obliged to suffer the sighs and lamentations of an old woman who believed, wrongly, that I was setting my standards too high, her view being, broadly stated, that any living human being with a womb was better than nothing.

‘What about Jannetje, the miller’s daughter?’

‘She’s already married, Grandma.’

‘Yes, but he’s sickly. She’ll be a widow before long. Speaking of widows, there’s the woman who lives behind the mill.’

‘She’s already got four children. She won’t want to give me any more, even if she’s still young enough to bear them.’

‘Aren’t there any women in Leiden?’

‘I can’t support a wife on my earnings yet.’

‘When I married your grandfather we didn’t have two stuivers in our pockets. We certainly didn’t have money to buy a new pair of boots.’

She nodded at my feet, as if not going around with your toes poking out was the height of extravagant living.

Nevertheless, each Christmas when term finished I would steel myself for the journey home to spend the festive season with her. I would not have had it any other way. My ears would be bent, but she was my family, and she adored me.

But this Christmas of 1679 would be different. In October I had buried her and now I was alone in the world. When the minister wrote to me to tell me of her passing I had rushed back as quickly as I could, and took the opportunity to pay him a visit at which I asked for an account of her last hours.

‘Did she suffer?’ I enquired.

‘I think not. She was just a tired old lady whose candle of life finally died, peacefully and quietly.’

‘Did she say any last words?’

‘She was a little confused. She seemed to think her husband might still be alive. But she certainly was thinking of you.’

‘Really?’

‘Yes. She said you would have to choose a wife without her help now. And then she expired.’

Thus it was that I stood over her grave, wondering whether I had been a little selfish but also knowing that I serve a greater master, required to give my whole heart to God and his church. Having said that, I am not aware that Reformed ministers, who usually are married, are any less devoted to His service. They certainly have better laundry.

As Christmas 1679 approached I was unsure how exactly I would spend the festive season. There was no point in returning to my old home given that I had no family there, nor did I have a house to stay in any longer, and I had not lived there for over twenty years. At the same time I had no idea what happened in Leiden.

If I had wanted to make the journey, the north wind had blown fiercely for some days, bringing with it flurries of snow, and I did not choose to walk into it for long. Even the barges were finding travel difficult, because it was reported that the canals and rivers were freezing in places. It is very unusual for them to freeze completely, but there were lumps of ice in the water and the towpaths were too treacherous even for heavy horses in places.

‘Are you leaving us for Christmas, Master?’ asked Mechtild as she wiped the table top in the refectory.

‘No, I’m not going anywhere. Am I the only one keeping you here?’

‘Bless you, Master, you won’t be alone. Most of the students will go home, but there are one or two who are orphans, and some of the staff have no other homes to go to.’

‘I suppose I’m in that number now. How many will be around?’

Mechtild silently checked off some names on her fingers.

‘The Rector and his lady live in so they come to us to dine. Albrecht and I will be here, of course.’

If anything was calculated to take the joy out of Christmas it was Albrecht’s “cooking”. Some heretics had spent less time in the flames than his meat. Someone must once have told him that meat tastes better when the exterior has been caramelized, since which time he ensured that nothing left his kitchen undercooked.

‘Then there are the students I mentioned and a few staff. Say ten in all,’ Mechtild continued. ‘But we make merry, Master. You need have no fear of an ungodly Christmas, but neither do we lack festivity.’

If I felt any lack of enthusiasm, it would not do to show it, I thought.

‘Then it’s decided, Mechtild. I will join you. But tell me, do you and Albrecht have no holiday?’

‘Bless you, Master, what wife ever expects a holiday? If I were not here, I’d still be cooking for him.’

‘But he’s a master cook.’

‘Aye, but I prefer to cook,’ Mechtild replied. ‘It’s better that way,’ she added sotto voce, and I knew exactly what she meant. At least then she would have something edible for Christmas.

Further enquiries adduced the information that there were at least four staff who would not be in their own homes at Christmas.

Leiden was originally planned as a college where staff and students lived in halls. Unlike the great Catholic universities of Europe, the lecturers were not priests, and therefore many were married and

chose to keep their own houses. The University approved of this since it saved them the trouble of building or buying many more large buildings, which was a problem in Leiden. Being in an old walled city, space was hard to find, and the opportunity to clear sites and build afresh did not come very often. The result was that the University acquired a variety of buildings around the city, some more functional than others, and would have been hard-pressed to accommodate us all.

Of the students and staff many did what I had always done, returning to their families for Christmas; but some came from distant lands and it was not practical to travel home for the twelve days of Christmas. One came from Sweden, and a couple from England. There was also a Scotsman. Together we would keep Christmas in a curious *mélange* of customs from these respective countries.

We met together one evening to agree that we would not buy each other gifts for St Nicholas' Eve or Christmas or New Year, partly because we could not have agreed on when to give them. We Dutch give our presents early, and although the Reformers disapproved of the commemoration of Saints' Days and tried to persuade us to move gift-giving to Christ's birthday, we are also an obstinate people and eventually they stopped trying. Our English and Scottish brethren proved more pliable, though it was not very long ago that the English parliament had tried to suppress Christmas festivities too. Anyway, we were not giving presents, but resolved that we should instead mark the birth of Our Lord by acts of charity and service.

I cannot quite remember which of us had the idiotic idea that we should do the cooking to give Albrecht and Mechtild a holiday. I can only assume that it must have been late in the evening when, perhaps, the wine and ale had overcome our critical faculties. But someone went to the kitchen to convey our suggestion and Mechtild and Albrecht soon appeared, so transparently happy with this proposal that it seemed unkind to attempt to rescind it.

‘Do any of you actually know how to cook?’ I hissed.

‘No, but it can’t be difficult,’ said John Denham, one of the Englishmen. ‘After all, unlearned women can do it, so surely five lecturers should be able to manage it?’

There spoke a man with two doctorates and absolutely no common sense. Universities attract such people.

Karl Svensson was fairly sure that there were books on cooking in our library. If there were, I had never noticed them, and I have no idea why a university would have such things. There was certainly no point in asking Albrecht if he had ever consulted them.

It was the Scot, Andrew Meldrum, who saved our embarrassment by suggesting that we should each serve a while in the kitchen so Albrecht and Mechtild could tutor us in their art, cunningly leaving unsaid the obvious conclusion that we would pay all possible attention to Mechtild’s instruction and utterly ignore that of Albrecht. Nevertheless, the couple were happy to agree, and I think I caught that maternal pride in Mechtild’s eye at the thought of teaching five learned men to produce something approaching a meal.

How little she knew! There is such a world of difference between being able to construe New Testament Greek or operate for the stone and managing to get a piece of pastry to stick to the top of a pie.

It was a cold winter. The wind whistled cruelly along the canals causing pedestrians to scurry for the shelter of buildings. Those of us who had no business outside kept close to our fires and stoves, occasionally glancing out of the windows and pitying those who had to work out of doors. It was no time to be a forester, a farmer or a sailor. The cold weather slowed the putrefaction of food, making it possible to shop less often.

Those who have assiduously followed these memoirs will understand how unpleasant the weather was when I say that I had not been to Jan Steen's inn on the Langebrug for nearly two weeks. Steen himself had died earlier in the year, but somehow the name had stuck and it will always be Steen's inn to me. Ordinarily I went there four or five times a week to read a book in the company of a tankard of fine ale, but the canalside cobbles were so icy that I feared meeting a watery end in the black waters, especially since there were few people around to hear my screams; and I suspect that the water was so cold that I might have found it hard to raise a scream anyway.

Nevertheless, those who had places to go to keep Christmas drifted out of the city, by barge, by horse or, if sufficiently unlucky, on foot. From the tower of the Marekerk I could see small figures

wrapped in cloaks trudging slowly away from me across the mud and ice like pawns on a chessboard.

The first tutorial with Mechtild took place on Saturday, 16<sup>th</sup> December, when she taught us the rudiments of pastry-making. One of us discovered that making pastry is a really good way of cleaning your hands, though it makes the pastry inedible. Denham's pastry was so delicate that the filling dropped through the base of the pie, whereas mine seemed fine going into the oven, but came out like a brick full of meat. Mechtild was gracious and refused to criticise, merely remarking that few people get it right first time.

On the Tuesday we tried her patience by attempting to use the roasting spit. In my defence, it is harder than it looks to cook a large piece of meat evenly. Say what you will about Albrecht, at least his joints were evenly incinerated. We could not even manage that. Svensson justified his failure by claiming that he likes his meat rare, which could explain the left side of his joint but not the blackened right side.

However, the incident germane to this tale had nothing to do with our cooking. Mechtild appeared with a frown.

'Which of you boys...'

Yes, she really called us boys.

'Which of you boys is responsible for the pie on the windowsill?'

We all looked in the direction indicated.

'There is no pie on the windowsill,' I said.

'Exactly!' said Mechtild. 'But there was earlier. There was a fine pigeon pie.'

Now that she mentioned it I could recall the smell of hot pastry when we entered the room.

‘It was cooling at the window,’ Mechtild explained.

‘It would certainly cool today,’ Meldrum remarked. ‘Has it fallen on the path outside?’

Mechtild was too short to see clearly, but Meldrum leaned out and – for no good reason that I could think of – looked down, then left and right, before concluding that there was no pie there.

Mechtild was usually as gentle as a lamb, but at that moment she looked more like a bull, and not a particularly placid one.

‘Are you sure none of you has had it?’ she asked.

‘Why would we lie to you?’ Denham responded in genuine perplexity.

‘Because you lads would lie to get yourselves out of trouble. But I’m going to ask Master Mercurius to look me in the eye and tell me you’re all innocent.’

‘Why? Because he never lies?’ Denham asked.

‘No, because if he tries he’s no good at it,’ Mechtild replied.

This was true. I never lie to save myself, you understand, but once in a while a little white lie spares people’s feelings. However, my cheeks immediately redden if I try to fib and, if nobody says anything, I usually contradict myself and own up to the untruth within seconds.

‘So, Master Mercurius, what do you know about the disappearing pie?’

‘Absolutely nothing, Mechtild, I swear.’

She eyed me fiercely for what seemed an age before wiping her hands on her apron and resuming her work.

‘Fair enough. It’ll be some urchin or other passing by, I suppose.’

She went off to the pantry to collect some onions leaving me to reflect that if a street urchin was responsible, he must be a remarkably tall urchin to reach that window.

On the Wednesday before Christmas we made bread. It was quite satisfying, though hard work kneading the dough. I could recall as a boy watching my mother and grandmother doing so. My mother was quite delicate about it, whereas my grandmother tackled dough like a footpad going for the throat of a rich man. Much to my surprise, our dough rose well and cooked well, and we were soon looking at a dozen beautiful loaves. Admittedly Mechtild had made seven in the time we had taken to make one each, and the kitchen did not need a dozen loaves with so many students away, so Mechtild set them aside to cool with the intention of keeping some and taking a few to the *hofjes*, the almshouses where the old people live. We would gladly have eaten the warm bread but Mechtild told us that to do so would cause the most appalling gastric disturbance because everyone knew that eating bread before the yeast cooled would cause it to go on fermenting in your bowels and risk an explosion.

Mijnheer Lawrence, the fifth of our number, begged to differ.

‘Mechtild, as a physician permit me to say that is perfect rot.’

The rest of us looked at each of them and then at each other.

Lawrence might know about the human body but Mechtild knew

about bread and if there was a risk of exploding our bowels we chose not to run it.

‘I’ll prove it,’ said Lawrence, ripping a piece off a loaf and swallowing it. ‘You’ll see.’

Mechtild stared at him wide-eyed before announcing ‘May God have mercy upon your soul!’

The odd thing was that when we came back an hour later as instructed, there were only eleven loaves there, one of them missing one end.

‘Who’s the joker?’ asked Mechtild.

Even Denham was in earnest this time.

‘We swear that none of us know anything about this. We have been together at the tavern, Mechtild.’

‘Well, this was no urchin,’ Mechtild announced, ‘because the bread was not on the sill but on the bench beneath.’

When all had left I examined the window. There was no glass in it, because the kitchen was usually hot anyway, but the two shutters could be secured from the inside. The bench was about a hand-span below the sill so the bread could barely be seen; but then I recalled that the loaves had been piled high in two baskets, so they would have been visible, and they could certainly have been smelled.

Whoever was stealing the food must be passing the window regularly, I thought, so it should be possible to set a trap for them.

Thursday found us roasting turnips and learning how to use vegetables such as kale or cabbage, and baking apples in the oven. We consumed all the vegetables, but we set the apples aside to cool

while we ate the rest. This time there were two apples missing when we returned to collect them, and this despite the fact that we were in the kitchen all the time.

‘Mechtild,’ I asked, ‘did any food go missing on Monday?’

‘Monday?’ pondered Mechtild.

‘The day before Tuesday,’ Albrecht kindly explained.

Mechtild thought hard.

‘I wouldn’t say it went missing,’ said Mechtild at length, ‘but I could have sworn the cheese shrank.’

‘Shrank?’

‘You know, got smaller. It’s always hard to tell once you’ve cut into it, but I said to Albrecht at the time that I thought we had more cheese left.’

‘That’s true,’ said Albrecht. ‘I remember now. She thought I must have helped myself. Not that I’m not entitled, but I didn’t.’

Given that we were not in the kitchen on Monday, this suggested that it was not a practical trick being played by one of my colleagues.

I suppose that kitchens always have food stolen, and if the University kitchen had suffered less from that than most perhaps it was because nobody would knowingly steal Albrecht’s cooking twice. Mechtild’s pastry, on the other hand, must have been a great temptation to anyone passing. Mechtild has often caused me to think about breaking one of the Ten Commandments myself. [Marginal note: Van der Meer suggested that I might have been tempted to break two. He is right, but the second one was not the prohibition on adultery that he was thinking of, I’ll wager, because I know how his

grubby mind works. No, I was in danger of coveting her recipe book, though the last few days had shown that you need skill as well as recipes. Giving me Mechtild's recipe book would have been as useful as giving a horse a bible.]

On Friday I volunteered to go to the fish market to see what was available. I had an ulterior motive, of course; as a Catholic I should not eat meat on Fridays. For most of the year this was a problem for me, and usually I tried to leave any meat unobtrusively; this would be harder to do in a small group of diners. I know some will say that Advent has its own dietary rules, but I am strict with myself when I can be, so finding fish to eat would be acceptable, and at that time of year there is little fresh meat but still some fresh sea fish, provided the fishermen can sail.

I have no idea what kind of fish I bought, except that it was large and astonishingly ugly. The stallholder assured me that it made good eating, and it appeared very fresh, so I was bearing it back to the University, a matter of just a few minutes' walk, when it occurred to me that I ought not to carry it through the main entrance but should go round the back to take it directly to the kitchens, which is why I was approaching the building from the rear when I noticed a hooded figure looking in at the window. I ducked behind a tree, during which time I presume he looked about him, for, seeing nobody near at hand he reached in and tucked something inside his jerkin and quickly scurried away.

I was torn between getting rid of the heavy fish and following the villain without further delay, but there was nowhere to hide the fish and I was certain that the local cats would ensure that I had no fish

to come back to if I left it behind a bush, so I struggled across the snowy ground trying to keep the thief in sight while secreting myself behind convenient bushes.

The figure turned to the side and I realised that he was making for the stables. While the Rector has the use of a ceremonial carriage, Dr Drelincourt did not care to use it often, so the horses were kept in a field where they could exercise more readily, therefore once the students had gone home the stables were usually empty. The figure looked about him once more before opening the door and sliding through the narrow gap.

Looking back, it was foolhardy of me to track him. He might have been armed, and given the severe penalties for theft he would have been well-advised to silence me with a knife. Nonetheless, I crept up to the stables and listened for a while to the low voices within.

I could hear a man's voice and a woman's, though I could not hear all that they said. They were taking pains not to be detected there. Nevertheless, now that I knew who was stealing the food I had a duty to put a stop to it to safeguard the reputation of the staff under suspicion, so I carefully tugged on the door to open it, considerably hampered by the large fish in my arms.

As the door opened the light fell upon a couple sitting against the far wall. The man sprang to his feet but I saw to my relief that he was unarmed.

'Who are you and what are you doing here?' I asked.

'Please, mijnheer, we meant no harm,' the man pleaded, and the young woman began to cry.

I am not sufficiently hard-hearted to ignore a woman's tears. In fact, my usual response to a crying woman is to blub a bit myself.

'Please don't cry,' I said. 'I mean you no harm either. I saw you stealing some food and I want to persuade you to repent and change your ways.'

I had, by now, come into full view, and the couple could see my clerical robe.

'Alas, we cannot!' the man cried. 'I steal only to keep us alive, and I take no more than is necessary for that.'

'Nevertheless, you're stealing,' I said, adopting my sternest tone. 'The Bible does not distinguish between large thefts and small ones.'

'The crops failed on our farm and we were evicted when we couldn't pay the rent,' the woman said. 'We have nowhere to go, and Job couldn't get any work once the growing season ended. We ran out of savings.'

She rose to her knees and implored me not to discover them.

'We'll go somewhere else and not trouble you again,' she sobbed, 'if only you'll take pity on us and let us go.'

I was at a loss for words. I am supposed to encourage the keeping of God's Commandments, and I cannot turn a blind eye to sin, whatever the cause; but I am also one who preaches the mercy of God towards mankind, and it seems to me that I should be a conduit of that mercy. What would severity achieve for a couple such as this, driven to theft by extremity?

While I stammered a few incoherent noises, my eye was caught by something else. The woman was heavily with child.

Now, I know what you are thinking, dear reader; a pregnant woman near her time taking refuge in a stable – where have I heard that before? The parallel was not lost on me. If I had lived nearly seventeen hundred years ago, and somehow been transported to Bethlehem, and come across Our Lady in her stable, what would I have done for her? Surely anything I could! The child this woman was bearing was not Our Lord, but does that really make a difference, because Jesus said that when we feed the hungry, or clothe the naked, we do it for Him?

As I dictate this now my reasoning seems rather lame and sentimental, but I assure you that at the time I had no doubt what I must do.

‘You can’t stay out here in this weather,’ I said. ‘Pick up your things and come with me.’

I led them into the Academy building (by the back door, of course) and through to the warmth of the kitchen. They gazed about them in wonder, and Job removed his cap and clutched it in his hands.

‘Where are we going, mijnheer?’ he asked.

‘To a good fire and a kindly woman,’ I replied, pushing open the door.

To Mechtild’s credit, she did not waver when I explained what I had heard.

‘The stable is no place for a woman in your condition, my dear,’ she exclaimed. ‘Come to the fire and let us warm those icy hands. As for you,’ she said to me, ‘stop standing like a simpleton with that

fish in your arms and put it on the slab there. That will make a fine supper for us and our guests.'

Lawrence was summoned to examine the woman whose name, we discovered, was Aleijda.

'She is undernourished at a time when she should be feeding well to prepare for her birth,' he told us.

'She must stay here,' Mechtild insisted. 'We cannot turn her out and risk the health of both her and her child.'

I was doubtful, but Lawrence agreed.

'What chance does a child have born out of doors in this weather?' he asked, then answered his own question. 'You don't need a medical degree to answer that one, Mercurius.'

Albrecht had put Job to work fetching wood and peat for the stoves, to which work he fell willingly. I will not deny that I have had uncharitable thoughts about Albrecht in the past, but on this occasion he showed great charity and compassion. It didn't improve his cooking, but you can't have everything.

'Where can we put them?' I asked Mechtild while our guests were enjoying some warm broth.

'That's simple enough,' Mechtild answered. 'Your rooms.'

'Mine? Where will I go?'

'I'm sure one of the others will give you somewhere to sleep. Anyway, you've napped in the chair by the great fire many a time.'

I gulped, but I had to acknowledge that she was right. I climbed the stairs and began to pack a bag for my temporary removal, and was just descending the stairs again with it in my hand when I had an unhappy accident.

I ran into the Rector. Literally.

Charles Drelincourt was such a gentleman that he immediately apologised for his clumsiness, which only made me feel worse. I am fairly sure that the University regulations permitted him to have me flogged for such a misdemeanour.

‘Are you going somewhere, Master?’

‘Er –’ I began, but went no further.

‘Are you quite well?’ he asked. Since he was a physician he could answer that for himself.

‘I – er –’ I continued, which did not advance our conversation much.

‘You seem a little confused,’ he decided, and there seemed no alternative to confessing all. I asked him to follow me to the kitchen, hoping that for once my judgement was sound and that he was as compassionate as I thought he was, though all history shows that I am an appalling judge of character for the most part.

Curiosity displayed in his features, he consented to come with me and as we went I explained what I had found. The young couple quailed as he appeared before them, and were quite taken aback when he took Aleijda by the chin and demanded to see her tongue and the whites of her eyes. I have no idea what this ritual achieves but doctors always seem to think it important.

‘Well,’ Drelincourt announced after this cursory examination, ‘she cannot be turned out in her condition.’

He walked to the window to think, and I followed him, hoping to move him towards mercy for them.

‘I know they’re thieves,’ I said, ‘but please...’

‘Stop wittering, Mercurius,’ Drelincourt snapped. ‘The University can afford to give needy people some food. We are not impoverished and we have a responsibility to the people of this town.’

‘I thought maybe they could stay in my room until she is delivered...’

Drelincourt had a narrow nose, which accentuated the impression that his eyes were boring through you when he looked intently at you. When he glared it was like being face to face with an angry owl.

‘And then the baby will need to stay indoors until it grows and strengthens. Don’t be an idiot, Mercurius; she won’t be able to leave when she is delivered.’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said, suitably chastened. ‘I’m just trying to be helpful.’

‘The best thing you can do for them now is to shut up and let me think,’ Drelincourt said.

‘You’re not going to turn them over to the magistrates?’ I whispered.

‘Of course not. We want to stop them stealing, don’t we? Well, the easiest way of doing that is to give them what they need so they don’t have to steal it.’

I had not thought of it that way.

‘Let the man work around the University. There is always some work somewhere fetching or carrying. If he steals again it’s your neck, Mercurius, so keep an eye on him, but I’ll find a room for them. They can spend their days down here where it’s warm.’

‘Thank you, Rector,’ I said. ‘You’re a generous man.’

‘It’s Christmas, Mercurius. I hope we are all considerate to the poor.’

‘And after?’ I asked.

‘Let’s see how the child fares,’ Drelincourt said, ‘but providing food and a bed in exchange for work ought to be possible.’

I rushed to tell the couple of their good fortune, but Aleijda was not there. She had been taken for a bath by Mechtild. I know a lot of doctors counsel against bathing because it weakens the constitution and can lead to fluxes and muscle wasting, but apparently it is a good thing for women with child, who must be kept as clean as possible. I know this is inconsistent but I cannot explain the way doctors think. All I know is that when you see a doctor the chances are that whatever you are doing is precisely the wrong thing and you must do the exact opposite (and pay them a fee for telling you so).

We shared Christmas together, and a blessed and merry time it was too. Job was such a good-natured man that even though he was not as educated as the rest of us, yet he was good company. We spent Christmas evening learning how to make a variety of knots in lengths of rope, knowledge in which we were all terribly deficient; and when, a couple of days after Christmas, Aleijda began her travails, a traveller passing by would have found five men pacing anxiously about the hall as if we all believed ourselves to be the father.

Aleijda was delivered of a boy on Holy Innocents’ Day, which was very fitting. He was small, perhaps because of her deprivation while she was carrying him, but none the less beautiful for that.

Mechtild produced little blankets and some clothes for the infant and declared him to be quite the handsomest baby born in Leiden for some time.

There was one further surprise in store for me, but I did not discover this until we took him to the Hooglandse Kerk to be baptised.

And if little Mercurius Jobszoon ever reads this, your name is my fault. I'm sorry.