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**THE WONDERFUL  
ADVENTURES OF NILS**

**SELMA LAGERLÖF**

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The Wonderful Adventures of Nils by Selma Lagerlöf.

First published in 1907.

This translation by Velma Swanston Howard was originally published in 1911.

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# Contents

## Introduction

## The Boy

### The Elf

### The Wild Geese

### The Big Checked Cloth

## Akka from Kebnekaise

### Evening

### Night

### Goose-Play

## The Wonderful Journey of Nils

### On the Farm

### Vittskövle

### In Övid Cloister Park

## Glimminge Castle

### Black Rats and Gray Rats

### The Stork

### The Rat Charmer

## The Great Crane Dance on Kullaberg

## In Rainy Weather

## The Stairway with the Three Steps

## By Ronneby River

## Karlskrona

## The Trip to Öland

## Öland's Southern Point

## The Big Butterfly

## Little Karl's Island

### The Storm

### The Sheep

### Hell's Hole

## Two Cities

### The City at the Bottom of the Sea

### The Living City

The Legend of Småland

The Crows

The Earthen Crock

Kidnapped by Crows

The Cabin

The Old Peasant Woman

From Taberg to Huskvarna

The Big Bird Lake

Jarro, the Wild Duck

The Decoy-Duck

The Lowering of the Lake

Ulvåsa-Lady

The Prophecy

The Homespun Cloth

The Story of Karr and Grayskin

Karr

Grayskin's Flight

Helpless, the Water-Snake

The Nun Moths

The Big War of the Moths

Retribution

The Wind Witch

In Närke

Market Eve

The Breaking Up of the Ice

Thumbietot and the Bears

The Ironworks

The Flood

The Swans

The New Watchdog

Dunfin

The City That Floats on the Water

The Sisters

Stockholm

Skansen

Gorgo, the Eagle

In the Mountain Glen

In Captivity

On Over Gästrikland

The Precious Girdle

Forest Day

A Day in Hälsingland

A Large Green Leaf

The Animals' New Year's Eve

In Medelpad

A Morning in Ångermanland

The Bread

The Forest Fire

Westbottom and Lapland

The Five Scouts

The Moving Landscape

The Meeting

Osa, the Goose Girl, and Little Mats

With the Laplanders

The Next Morning

Homeward Bound!

The First Travelling Day

Legends from Härjedalen

Vermland and Dalsland

A Little Homestead

The Treasure on the Island

On Their Way to the Sea

The Gift of the Wild Geese

The Journey to Vemminghög

Home at Last

The Parting with the Wild Geese

# Introduction

This book, which is the latest work of Sweden's greatest fiction writer, was published in Stockholm, December, 1906. It became immediately the most popular book of the year in Scandinavia.

Four years ago the author received a commission from the National Teachers' Association to write a reader for the public schools.

She devoted three years to Nature study and to familiarising herself with animal and bird life. She sought out hitherto unpublished folklore and legends of the different provinces. These she has ingeniously woven into her story.

The book has been translated into German and Danish, and the book reviewers of Germany and Denmark, as well as those of Sweden, are unanimous in proclaiming this Selma Lagerlöf's best work.

One reviewer has said: "Since the days of Hans Christian Andersen, we have had nothing in Scandinavian juvenile literature to compare with this remarkable book." Another reviewer wrote: "Miss Lagerlöf has the keen insight into animal psychology of a Rudyard Kipling."

Stockholm's *Dagblad* said among other things: "The great author stands as it were in the background. The prophetess is forgotten for the voices that speak through her. It is as though the book had sprung direct from the soul of the Swedish nation."

*Sydsvenska Dagbladet* writes: "The significant thing about this book is: while one follows with breathless interest the shifting scenes and adventures, one learns many things without being conscious of it. . . . The author's imagination unfolds an almost inexhaustible wealth in invention of new, and ever-changing adventures, told in such a convincing way that we almost believe them. As amusement reading for the young, this book is a decided acquisition. The intimate blending of fiction and fact is so subtle that one finds it hard to distinguish where one ends, and the other begins. It is a classic . . . A masterwork."

From *Gefle Posten*: "The author is here—as always, the great storyteller, the greatest, perhaps, in Scandinavian literature since the days of Hans Christian Andersen. To children whose imaginations have been fostered by Ashbjørnsen, Andersen, and *Thousand-and-One Nights*, Nils Holgersson will always be precious, as well as to those of us who are older."

From *Göteborg Posten*: "Selma Lagerlöf has given us a good lift onward. She is the one whom we, in these days, place first and foremost. . . . Among the other work which she has done for us, and for our children, she has recreated our geography for us. . . . Upon imagination's road she has sought to open the child-heart to an understanding of animals, while she tactfully and playfully drops into little knowledge-thirsty minds a comprehensive understanding of the habits and characteristics of different animals. She carries us with her. . . and shapes for us—old and young—a new childhood in tune with the thought of our time. What does she not touch upon in this wonderful book? . . . As Mowgli, who had the key to all the languages of the Jungle, once found his way to all his little brother and sister-hearts in the great civilised world, so shall the Thumbietot of Swedish fairyland lead many little thirsting child-souls, not only on the highways of adventure, but also upon the road of seriousness and learning."

Another critic says: "Beyond all doubt, *Nils Holgersson's Journey* is one of the most noteworthy books ever published in our language. I take it, that no other nation has a book of

this sort. One can make this or that comment on one and another phase of it, but the whole impresses one as so masterful, so great, and so Swedish, that one lays the book down with a sense of gratitude for the privilege of reading such a thing. There is a deep undercurrent of Swedish earnestness all through this tale of Nils Holgersson. It belongs to us. It is a part of us."

*Ny Tid* writes: "Selma Lagerlöf's book contains just as much information—no, twice as much—as the old readers. It acquaints the children with Sweden's nature; it interests them in its bird world—both tame and wild; in its domestic and forest animals, even in its rats. It explains its vegetation, its soil, its mountain-formations, its climatic conditions. It gives you customs, superstitions and the folklore in different sections of the country. It takes in farming industry, manors and factories; cities and peasant-cabins, and even dog-kennels. It has a word for everything; an interest in, and for, everything. For, mark you, this book has not been patched together by the dilettante, by committees... It was written by a highly gifted, warmhearted seer, to whom the child-nature has not been a murky pool to fish in, but a clear, impressionable mirror. The author has fulfilled her mission in a wholly convincing manner. She has had enough imagination and skill to blend all the dry travel and nature material into the harmonious beauty of fable. She knew how to combine the useful with the beautiful, as no pedant of the practical, or the aesthetic, has ever dreamed it. She has converted the absorption of knowledge into a child's game—a pleasure. Her style throughout is the simplest, the most facile for children to grasp... Her utterances are hearty without being boisterous; most playful and humorous without being loquacious. Her work is a model textbook; and just therefore, a finished work of art."

From *Göteborg Morgon Posten*: "The fame of her literary greatness goes forward without a dissenting voice; fills her own land, and travels far and wide outside its borders... Just as modestly as she points a moral, just so delicately and unobtrusively does she give information. Everything comes to you through the adventures, or through the concrete images of imagination's all-compelling form... No one who has retained a particle of his child mind can escape the genuine witchery of the poesy in *Nils Holgersson*."

A new history of literature, entitled *Frauen der Gegenwart*, by Dr. Theodore Klaiber, mentions Miss Lagerlöf as the foremost woman writer of our time, and says that she is receiving the same affectionate homage for her art in other lands, that has been accorded to her in Sweden. Dr. Klaiber does not see in her merely "a dreaming poetess far removed from the world." He finds her too forceful and courageous for this.

"But she sees life with other eyes than do our up-to-date people. All her world becomes saga and legend... More than all other modern authors, she has that all-embracing love for everything which never wanes and never wearies," says Dr. Klaiber.

Torsten Fågelqvist, a well-known Swedish writer, ends his review of the book with these remarks: "Our guide is clear-visioned, many-sided and maternal. She can speak all languages: the language of animals, and the language of flowers; but first and last, childhood's language. And the best of all is, that under her spell all are compelled to become children."

Some of the purely geographical matter in the Swedish original of the "The Story of Karr and Grayskin" and subsequent stories has been eliminated from the English version. The author has rendered valuable assistance in cutting certain chapters and abridging others. Also, with the author's approval, cuts have been made where the descriptive matter was merely of local interest. But the story itself is intact.

Velma Swanston Howard

# The Boy

# The Elf

*Sunday, March twentieth.*

Once there was a boy. He was—let us say—something like fourteen years old; long and loose-jointed and towheaded. He wasn't good for much, that boy. His chief delight was to eat and sleep; and after that—he liked best to make mischief.

It was a Sunday morning and the boy's parents were getting ready to go to church. The boy sat on the edge of the table, in his shirt sleeves, and thought how lucky it was that both father and mother were going away, and the coast would be clear for a couple of hours. "Good! Now I can take down pop's gun and fire off a shot, without anybody's meddling interference," he said to himself.

But it was almost as if father should have guessed the boy's thoughts, for just as he was on the threshold—ready to start—he stopped short, and turned toward the boy. "Since you won't come to church with mother and me," he said, "the least you can do, is to read the service at home. Will you promise to do so?"

"Yes," said the boy, "that I can do easy enough." And he thought, of course, that he wouldn't read any more than he felt like reading.

The boy thought that never had he seen his mother so persistent. In a second she was over by the shelf near the fireplace, and took down Luther's *Commentary* and laid it on the table, in front of the window—opened at the service for the day. She also opened the New Testament, and placed it beside the *Commentary*. Finally, she drew up the big armchair, which was bought at the parish auction the year before, and which, as a rule, no one but father was permitted to occupy.

The boy sat thinking that his mother was giving herself altogether too much trouble with this spread; for he had no intention of reading more than a page or so. But now, for the second time, it was almost as if his father were able to see right through him. He walked up to the boy, and said in a severe tone: "Now, remember, that you are to read carefully! For when we come back, I shall question you thoroughly; and if you have skipped a single page, it will not go well with you."

"The service is fourteen and a half pages long," said his mother, just as if she wanted to heap up the measure of his misfortune. "You'll have to sit down and begin the reading at once, if you expect to get through with it."

With that they departed. And as the boy stood in the doorway watching them, he thought that he had been caught in a trap. "There they go congratulating themselves, I suppose, in the belief that they've hit upon something so good that I'll be forced to sit and hang over the sermon the whole time that they are away," thought he.

But his father and mother were certainly not congratulating themselves upon anything of the sort; but, on the contrary, they were very much distressed. They were poor farmers, and their place was not much bigger than a garden-plot. When they first moved there, the place couldn't feed more than one pig and a pair of chickens; but they were uncommonly industrious and capable folk—and now they had both cows and geese. Things had turned out very well for them; and they would have gone to church that beautiful morning—satisfied and happy—if they hadn't had their son to think of. Father complained that he was dull and lazy; he had not cared to learn anything at school, and he was such an all-round good-for-

nothing, that he could barely be made to tend geese. Mother did not deny that this was true; but she was most distressed because he was wild and bad; cruel to animals, and ill-willed toward human beings. "May God soften his hard heart, and give him a better disposition!" said the mother, "or else he will be a misfortune, both to himself and to us."

The boy stood for a long time and pondered whether he should read the service or not. Finally, he came to the conclusion that, this time, it was best to be obedient. He seated himself in the easy chair, and began to read. But when he had been rattling away in an undertone for a little while, this mumbling seemed to have a soothing effect upon him—and he began to nod.

It was the most beautiful weather outside! It was only the twentieth of March; but the boy lived in West Vemminghög Township, down in Southern Skåne, where the spring was already in full swing. It was not as yet green, but it was fresh and budding. There was water in all the trenches, and the colt's-foot on the edge of the ditch was in bloom. All the weeds that grew in among the stones were brown and shiny. The beech-woods in the distance seemed to swell and grow thicker with every second. The skies were high—and a clear blue. The cottage door stood ajar, and the lark's trill could be heard in the room. The hens and geese pattered about in the yard, and the cows, who felt the spring air away in their stalls, lowed their approval every now and then.

The boy read and nodded and fought against drowsiness. "No! I don't want to fall asleep," thought he, "for then I'll not get through with this thing the whole forenoon."

But—somehow—he fell asleep.

He did not know whether he had slept a short while, or a long while; but he was awakened by hearing a slight noise back of him.

On the windowsill, facing the boy, stood a small looking-glass; and almost the entire cottage could be seen in this. As the boy raised his head, he happened to look in the glass; and then he saw that the cover to his mother's chest had been opened.

His mother owned a great, heavy, iron-bound oak chest, which she permitted no one but herself to open. Here she treasured all the things she had inherited from her mother, and of these she was especially careful. Here lay a couple of old-time peasant dresses, of red homespun cloth, with short bodice and plaited shirt, and a pearl-bedecked breast pin. There were starched white-linen headdresses, and heavy silver ornaments and chains. Folks don't care to go about dressed like that in these days, and several times his mother had thought of getting rid of the old things; but somehow, she hadn't had the heart to do it.

Now the boy saw distinctly—in the glass—that the chest-lid was open. He could not understand how this had happened, for his mother had closed the chest before she went away. She never would have left that precious chest open when he was at home, alone.

He became low-spirited and apprehensive. He was afraid that a thief had sneaked his way into the cottage. He didn't dare to move; but sat still and stared into the looking-glass.

While he sat there and waited for the thief to make his appearance, he began to wonder what that dark shadow was which fell across the edge of the chest. He looked and looked—and did not want to believe his eyes. But the thing, which at first seemed shadowy, became more and more clear to him; and soon he saw that it was something real. It was no less a thing than an elf who sat there—astride the edge of the chest!

To be sure, the boy had heard stories about elves, but he had never dreamed that they were such tiny creatures. He was no taller than a hand's breadth—this one, who sat on the edge of