

LAGERLÖF
SELMA

THE
TREASURE

Selma Lagerlöf
The Treasure

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The Treasure:

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CHAPTER I

AT SOLBERGA PARSONAGE

In the days when King Frederik the Second of Denmark ruled over Bohuslen [FOOTNOTE: Frederik the Second reigned from 1544 to 1588. At that time, Bohuslen, now a province of southwest Sweden, formed part of Norway and was under the Danish Crown. – Trans.] there dwelt at Marstrand a poor hawker of fish, whose name was Torarin. This man was infirm and of humble condition; he had a palsied arm, which made him unfit to take his place in a boat for fishing or pulling an oar. As he could not earn his livelihood at sea like all the other men of the skerries, he went about selling salted and dried fish among the people of the mainland. Not many days in the year did he spend at home; he was constantly on the road from one village to another with his load of fish.

One February day, as dusk was drawing on, Torarin came driving along the road which led from Kungshall up to the parish of Solberga. The road was a lonely one, altogether deserted, but this was no reason for Torarin to hold his tongue. Beside him on

the sledge he had a trusty friend with whom to chat. This was a little black dog with shaggy coat, and Torarin called him Grim. He lay still most of the time, with his head sunk between his feet, and answered only by blinking to all his master said. But if his ear caught anything that displeased him, he stood up on the load, put his nose in the air, and howled worse than a wolf.

"Now I must tell you, Grim, my dog," said Torarin, "that I have heard great news today. They told me both at Kungshall and at Kareby that the sea was frozen. Fair, calm weather it has been this long while, as you well know, who have been out in it every day; and they say the sea is frozen fast not only in the creeks and sounds, but far out over the Cattegat. There is no fairway now for ship or boat among the islands, nothing but firm, hard ice, so that a man may drive with horse and sledge as far as Marstrand and Paternoster Skerries."

To all this the dog listened, and it seemed not to displease him. He lay still and blinked at Torarin.

"We have no great store of fish left on our load," said Torarin, as though trying to talk him over. "What would you say to turning aside at the next crossways and going westward where the sea lies? We shall pass by Solberga church and down to Odsmalskil, and after that I think we have but seven or eight miles to Marstrand. It would be a fine thing if we could reach home for once without calling for boat or ferry."

They drove on over the long moor of Kareby, and although the weather had been calm all day, a chill breeze came sweeping

across the moor, to the discomfort of the traveller.

"It may seem like softness to go home now when trade is at its best," said Torarin, flinging out his arms to warm them. "But we have been on the road for many weeks, you and I, and have a claim to sit at home a day or two and thaw the cold out of our bodies."

As the dog continued to lie still, Torarin seemed to grow more sure of his ground, and he went on in a more cheerful tone:

"Mother has been left alone in the cottage these many days. I warrant she longs to see us. And Marstrand is a fine town in winter-time, Grim, with streets and alleys full of foreign fishermen and chapmen. There will be dancing in the wharves every night of the week. And all the ale that will be flowing in the taverns! That is a thing beyond your understanding."

As Torarin said this he bent down over the dog to see whether he was listening to what was said to him.

But as the dog lay there wide awake and made no sign of displeasure, Torarin turned off at the first road that led westward to the sea. He flicked the horse with the slack of the reins and made it quicken its pace.

"Since we shall pass by Solberga parsonage," said Torarin, "I will even put in there and ask if it be true that the ice bears as far as to Marstrand. The folk there must know how it is."

Torarin had said these words in a low voice, without thinking whether the dog was listening or not. But scarcely were the words uttered when the dog stood up on the load and raised a terrible

howl.

The horse made a bound to one side, and Torarin himself was startled and looked about him to see whether wolves were in pursuit. But when he found it was Grim who was howling, he tried to calm him.

"What now?" he said to him. "How many times have you and I driven into the parson's yard at Solberga! I know not whether Herr Arne [FOOTNOTE: At the time of this story "Herr" was a title roughly corresponding to "Sir." – Trans.] can tell us how it is with the ice, but I will be bound he'll give us a good supper before we set out on our sea voyage."

But his words were not able to quiet the dog, who raised his muzzle and howled more dismally than ever.

At this Torarin himself was not far from yielding to an uncanny feeling. It had now grown almost dark, but still Torarin could see Solberga church and the wide plain around it, which was sheltered by broad wooded heights to landward and by bare, rounded rocks toward the sea. As he drove on in solitude over the vast white plain, he felt he was a wretched little worm, while from the dark forests and the mountain wastes came troops of great monsters and trolls of every kind venturing into the open country on the fall of darkness. And in the whole great plain there was none other for them to fall upon than poor Torarin.

But at the same time he tried again to quiet the dog.

"Bless me, what is your quarrel with Herr Arne? He is the richest man in the country. He is of noble birth, and had he not

been a priest there would have been a great lord of him."

But this could not avail to bring the dog to silence. Then Torarin lost patience, so that he took Grim by the scruff of the neck and threw him off the sledge.

The dog did not follow him as he drove on, but stood still upon the road and howled without ceasing until Torarin drove under a dark archway into the yard of the parsonage, which was surrounded on its four sides by long, low wooden buildings.

II

At Solberga parsonage the priest, Herr Arne, sat at supper surrounded by all his household. There was no stranger present but Torarin.

Herr Arne was an old white-haired man, but he was still powerful and erect. His wife sat beside him. To her the years had been unkind; her head and her hands trembled, and she was nearly deaf. On Herr Arne's other side sat his curate. He was a pale young man with a look of trouble in his face, as though he was unable to support all the learning he had gathered in during his years of study at Wittenberg.

These three sat at the head of the table, a little apart from the rest. Below them sat Torarin, and then the servants, who were old like their master. There were three serving-men; their heads were bald, their backs bent, and their eyes blinked and watered. Of women there were but two. They were somewhat younger and

more able-bodied than the men, yet they too had a fragile look and were afflicted with the infirmities of age.

At the farthest end of the table sat two children. One of them was Herr Arne's niece, a child of no more than fourteen years. She was fair-haired and of delicate build; her face had not yet reached its fullness, but had a promise of beauty in it. She had another little maid sitting beside her, a poor orphan without father or mother, who had been given a home at the parsonage. The two sat close together on the bench, and it could be seen that there was great friendship between them.

All these folk sat at meat in the deepest silence. Torarin looked from one to another, but none was disposed to talk during the meal. All the old servants thought to themselves: "It is a goodly thing to be given food and to be spared the sufferings of want and hunger, which we have known so often in our lives. While we are eating we ought to have no thought but of giving thanks to God for His goodness."

Since Torarin found no one to talk to, his glance wandered up and down the room. He turned his eyes from the great stove, built up in many stages beside the entrance door, to the lofty four-post bed which stood in the farthest corner of the room. He looked from the fixed benches that ran round the room to the hole in the roof, through which the smoke escaped and wintry air poured in.

As Torarin the fish hawker, who lived in the smallest and poorest cabin on the outer isles, looked upon all these things, he thought: "Were I a great man like Herr Arne I would

not be content to live in an ancient homestead with only one room. I should build myself a house with high gables and many chambers, like those of the burgomasters and aldermen of Marstrand."

But more often than not Torarin's eyes rested upon a great oaken chest which stood at the foot of the four-post bed. And he looked at it so long because he knew that in it Herr Arne kept all his silver moneys, and he had heard they were so many that they filled the chest to the very lid.

And Torarin, who was so poor that he hardly ever had a silver piece in his pocket, said to himself: "And yet I would not have all that money. They say Herr Arne took it from the great convents that were in the land in former days, and that the old monks foretold that this money would bring him misfortune."

While yet these thoughts were in the mind of Torarin, he saw the old mistress of the house put her hand to her ear to listen. And then she turned to Herr Arne and asked him: "Why are they whetting knives at Branchog?"

So deep was the silence in the room that when the old lady asked this question all gave a start and looked up in fright. When they saw that she was listening for something, they kept their spoons quiet and strained their ears.

For some moments there was dead stillness in the room, but while it lasted the old woman became more and more uneasy. She laid her hand on Herr Arne's arm and asked him: "How can it be that they are whetting such long knives at Branchog this

evening?"

Torarin saw that Herr Arne stroked her hand to calm her. But he was in no mind to answer and ate on calmly as before.

The old woman still sat listening. Tears came into her eyes from terror, and her hands and her head trembled more and more violently.

Then the two little maids who sat at the end of the table began to weep with fear. "Can you not hear them scraping and filing?" asked the old mistress. "Can you not hear them hissing and grating?"

Herr Arne sat still, stroking his wife's hand. As long as he kept silence no other dared utter a word.

But they were all assured that their old mistress had heard a thing that was terrifying and boded ill. All felt the blood curdling in their veins. No one at the table raised a bit of food to his mouth, except old Herr Arne himself.

They were thinking of the old mistress, how it was she who for so many years had had charge of the household. She had always stayed at home and watched with wise and tender care over children and servants, goods and cattle, so that all had prospered. Now she was worn out and stricken in years, but still it was likely that she and none other should feel a danger that threatened the house.

The old lady grew more and more terrified. She clasped her hands in her helplessness and began to weep so sorely that the big tears ran down her shrunken cheeks.

"Is it nothing to you, Arne Arneson, that I am so sore afraid?" she complained.

Herr Arne bent his head to her and said: "I know not what it is that affrights you."

"I am in fear of the long knives they are whetting at Branchog," she said.

"How can you hear them whetting knives at Branchog?" said Herr Arne, smiling. "The place lies two miles from here. Take up your spoon again and let us finish our supper."

The old woman made an effort to overcome her terror. She took up her spoon and dipped it in the milk bowl, but in doing it her hand shook so that all could hear the spoon rattle against the edge. She put it down again at once. "How can I eat?" she said. "Do I not hear the whining of the whetstone, do I not hear it grating?"

At this Herr Arne thrust the milk bowl away from him and clasped his hands. All the others did the same, and the curate began to say grace.

When this was ended, Herr Arne looked down at those who sat along the table, and when he saw that they were pale and frightened, he was angry.

He began to speak to them of the days when he had lately come to Bohuslen to preach the Lutheran doctrine. Then he and his servants were forced to fly from the Papists like wild beasts before the hunter. "Have we not seen our enemies lie in wait for us as we were on our way to the house of God? Have we not been

driven out of the parsonage, and have we not been compelled to take to the woods like outlaws? Does it beseem us to play the coward and give ourselves up for lost on account of an evil omen?"

As Herr Arne said this he looked like a valiant champion, and the others took heart anew on hearing him.

"Ay, it is true," they thought. "God has protected Herr Arne through the greatest perils. He holds His hand over him. He will not let His servant perish."

III

As soon as Torarin drove out upon the road his dog Grim came up to him and jumped up on to the load. When Torarin saw that the dog had been waiting outside the parsonage his uneasiness came back. "What, Grim, why do you stay outside the gate all the evening? Why did you not go into the house and have your supper?" he said to the dog. "Can there be aught of ill awaiting Herr Arne? Maybe I have seen him for the last time. But even a strong man like him must one day die, and he is near ninety years old."

He guided his horse into a road which led past the farm of Branchog to Odsmalskil.

When he was come to Branchog he saw sledges standing in the yard and lights shining through the cracks of the closed shutters. Then Torarin said to Grim: "These folks are still up. I will go

in and ask if they have been sharpening knives here tonight."

He drove into the farmyard, but when he opened the door of the house he saw that a feast was being held. Upon the benches by the wall sat old men drinking ale, and in the middle of the room the young people played and sang.

Torarin saw at once that no man here thought of making his weapon ready for a deed of blood. He slammed the door again and would have gone his way, but the host came after him. He asked Torarin to stay, since he had come, and led him into the room.

Torarin sat for a good while enjoying himself and chatting with the peasants. They were in high good humour, and Torarin was glad to be rid of all his gloomy thoughts.

But Torarin was not the only latecomer to the feast that evening. Long after him a man and a woman entered the door. They were poorly clad and lingered bashfully in the corner between door and fireplace.

The host at once came forward to his two guests. He took the hand of each and led them up the room. Then he said to the others: "Is it not truly said that the shorter the way the more the delay? These are our nearest neighbors. Branchog had no other tenants besides them and me."

"Say rather there are none but you," said the man. "You cannot call me a tenant. I am only a poor charcoal-burner whom you have allowed to settle on your land."

The man seated himself beside Torarin and they began to

converse. The newcomer told Torarin how it was he came so late to the feast. It was because their cabin had been visited by three strangers whom they durst not leave, three journeymen tanners who had been with them all day. When they came in the morning they were worn out and ailing; they said they had lost their way in the forest and had wandered about for a whole week. But after they had eaten and slept they soon recovered their strength, and when evening came they had asked which was the greatest and richest house thereabout, for thither they would go and seek for work. The wife had answered that the parsonage, where Herr Arne dwelt, was the best place. Then at once they had taken long knives out of their packs and begun to sharpen them. They were at this a good while, with such ferocious looks that the charcoal-burner and his wife durst not leave their home. "I can still see them as they sat grinding their knives," said the man. "They looked terrible with their great beards that had not been cut or tended for many a day, and they were clad in rough coats of skin, which were tattered and befouled. I thought I had three werewolves in the house with me, and I was glad when at last they took themselves off."

When Torarin heard this he told the charcoal-burner what he himself had witnessed at the parsonage.

"So it was true enough that this night they whetted knives at Branchog," said Torarin, laughing. He had drunk deeply, because of the sorrow and heaviness that were upon him when he came, seeking to comfort himself as best he could. "Now I am of good

cheer again," said he, "since I am well assured it was no evil omen the parson's lady heard, but only these tanners making ready their gear."

IV

Long after midnight a couple of men came out of the house at Branehog to harness their horses and drive home.

When they had come into the yard they saw a great fire flaring up against the sky in the north. They hastened back into the house and cried out: "Come out! Come out! Solberga parsonage is on fire!"

There were many folks at the feast, and those who had a horse leapt upon his back and made haste to the parsonage; but those who had to run with their own swift feet were there almost as soon.

When the people came to the parsonage nobody was to be seen, nor was there any sign of movement; all seemed to be asleep, though the flames rose high into the air.

Yet it was none of the houses that burned, but a great pile of wood and straw and faggots that had been stacked against the wall of the old dwelling. It had not been burning long. The flames had done no more than blacken the sound timber of the wall and melt the snow on the thatched roof. But now they had begun to take hold of the thatch.

Everyone saw at once that this was arson. They began to

wonder whether Herr Arne and his wife were really asleep, or whether some evil had befallen them.

But before the rescuers entered the house they took long poles and pulled away the burning faggots from the wall and clambered up to the roof to tear off the thatch, which had begun to smoke and was ready to catch fire.

Then some of the men went to the door of the house to enter and call Herr Arne; but when the first man came to the threshold he turned aside and made way for him who came next.

The second man took a step forward, but as he was about to grasp the door-handle he turned away and made room for those who stood behind him.

It seemed a ghastly door to open, for a broad stream of blood trickled over the threshold and the handle was besmeared with blood.

Then the door opened in their faces and Herr Arne's curate came out. He staggered toward the men with a deep wound in his head, and he was drenched with blood. For an instant he stood upright and raised his hand to command silence. Whereupon he spoke with the death rattle in his voice: "This night Herr Arne and all his household have been murdered by three men who climbed down through the smoke-hole in the roof and were clad in rough skins. They threw themselves upon us like wild beasts and slew us."

He could utter no more. He fell down at the men's feet and was dead.

They then entered the room and found all as the curate had said.

The great oaken chest in which Herr Arne kept his money was gone, and Herr Arne's horse had been taken from the stable and his sledge from the shed.

Sledge tracks led from the yard across the glebe meadows down to the sea, and twenty men hastened away to seize the murderers. But the women set themselves to laying out the dead and carried them from the bloody room out upon the pure snow.

Not all of Herr Arne's household could be found; there was one missing. It was the poor little maid whom Herr Arne had taken into his house. There was much wondering whether, perchance, she had been able to escape, or whether the robbers had taken her with them.

But when they made careful search through the room they found her hidden away between the great stove and the wall. She had kept herself concealed there throughout the struggle and had taken no hurt at all, but she was so sick with terror that she could neither speak nor answer a question.

CHAPTER II

ON THE QUAYS

The poor maid who had escaped the butchery had been taken by Torarin to Marstrand. He had conceived so great pity for her that he had offered her lodging in his cramped cabin and a share of the food which he and his mother ate.

"This is the only thing I can do for Herr Arne," thought Torarin, "in return for all the times he has bought my fish and allowed me to sit at his table."

"Poor and lowly as I am," thought Torarin, "it is better for the maid that she go with me to the town than that she stay here among the country folk. In Marstrand are many rich burgesses, and perhaps the young maid may take service with one of them and so be well cared for."

When first the girl came to the town she sat and wept from morning to night. She bewailed Herr Arne and his household, and lamented that she had lost all who were dear to her. Most of all she wept for her foster sister, and said she wished she had not hidden herself against the wall, so that she might have shared death with her.

Torarin's mother said nothing to this so long as her son was at home. But when he had gone on his travels again she said one morning to the girl:

"I am not rich enough, Elsalill, to give you food and clothing that you may sit with your hands in your lap and nurse your sorrow. Come with me down to the quays and learn to clean fish."

So Elsalill went with her down to the quays and stood all day working among the other fish cleaners.

But most of the women on the quays were young and merry. They began to talk to Elsalill and asked her why she was so silent and sorrowful.

Then Elsalill began to tell them of the terrible thing that had befallen her no more than three nights ago. She spoke of the three robbers who had broken into the house by the smoke-hole in the roof and murdered all who were near and dear to her.

As Elsalill told her tale a black shadow fell across the table at which she worked. And when she looked up three fine gentlemen stood before her, wearing broad hats with long feathers and velvet clothes with great puffs, embroidered in silk and gold.

One of them seemed to be of higher rank than the others; he was very pale, his chin was shaven, and his eyes sat deep in his head. He looked as though he had lately been ill. But in all else he seemed a gay and bold-faced cavalier, who walked on the sunny quays to show his fine clothes and his handsome face.

Elsalill broke off both work and story. She stood looking at him with open mouth and staring eyes. And he smiled at her.

"We are not come hither to frighten you, mistress," said he, "but to beg that we too may listen to your tale."

Poor Elsalill! Never in her life had she seen such a man. She

felt she could not speak in his presence; she merely held her peace and cast her eyes upon her work.

The stranger began again: "Be not afraid of us, mistress! We are Scotsmen who have been in the service of King John of Sweden ten full years, but now have taken our discharge and are bound for home. We have come to Marstrand to find a ship for Scotland, but when we came hither we found every channel and firth frozen over, and here we must bide and wait. We have no business to employ us, and therefore we range about the quays to meet whom we may. We should be happy, mistress, if you would let us hear your tale."

Elsalill knew that he had talked thus long to let her recover from her emotion. At last she thought to herself: "You can surely show that you are not too homely to speak to a noble gentleman, Elsalill! For you are a maiden of good birth and no fisher lass."

"I was but telling of the great butchery at Solberga parsonage," said Elsalill. "There are so many who have heard that story."

"Yes," said the stranger, "but I did not know till now that any of

Herr Arne's household had escaped alive."

Then Elsalill told once more of the wild robbers' deed. She spoke of how the old serving-men had gathered about Herr Arne to protect him and how Herr Arne himself had snatched his sword from the wall and pressed upon the robbers, but they had overcome them all. And the old mistress had taken up her husband's sword and set upon the robbers, but they had only

laughed at her and felled her to the floor with a billet of wood. And all the other women had crouched against the wall of the stove, but when the men were dead the robbers came and pulled them down and slew them. "The last they slew," said Elsalill, "was my dear foster sister. She begged for life so piteously, and two of them would have let her live; but the third said that all must die, and he thrust his knife into her heart."

While Elsalill was speaking of murder and blood the three men stood still before her. They did not exchange a glance with each other, but their ears grew long with listening, and their eyes sparkled, and sometimes their lips parted so that the teeth glistened.

Elsalill's eyes were full of tears; not once did she look up whilst she was speaking. She did not see that the man before her had the eyes and teeth of a wolf. Only when she had finished speaking did she dry her eyes and look up at him.

But when he met Elsalill's glance his face changed in an instant. "Since you have seen the murderers so well, mistress," said he, "you would doubtless know them again if you met them?"

"I have no more than seen them by the light of the brands they snatched from the hearth to light their murdering," said Elsalill; "but with God's help I'll surely know them again. And I pray to God daily that I may meet them." "What mean you by that, mistress?" asked the stranger. "Is it not true that the murderous vagabonds are dead?"

"Indeed, I have heard so," said Elsalill. "The peasants who set out after them followed their tracks from the parsonage down to a hole in the ice. Thus far they saw tracks of sledge-runners upon the smooth ice, tracks of a horse's hoofs, tracks of men with heavy nailed boots. But beyond the hole no tracks led on across the ice, and therefore the peasants supposed them all dead."

"And do you not believe them dead, Elsalill?" asked the stranger.

"Oh, yes, I think they must be drowned," said Elsalill; "and yet I pray to God daily that they may have escaped. I speak to God in this wise: 'Let it be so that they have only driven the horse and the sledge into the hole, but have themselves escaped.'"

"Why do you wish this, Elsalill?" asked the stranger.

The tender maid Elsalill, she flung back her head and her eyes shone like fire. "I would they were alive that I might find them out and seize them. I would they were alive that I might tear their hearts out. I would they were alive that I might see their bodies quartered and spiked upon the wheel."

"How do you think to bring all this about?" said the stranger.

"For you are only a weak little maid."

"If they were living," said Elsalill, "I should surely bring their punishment upon them. Rather would I go to my death than let them go free. Strong and mighty they may be, I know it, but they would not be able to escape me."

At this the stranger smiled upon her, but Elsalill stamped her foot.

"If they were living, should I not remember that they have taken my home from me, so that I am now a poor lass, compelled to stand here on the cold quay and clean fish? Should I not remember that they have slain all those near to me, and should I not remember most of all the man who plucked my foster sister from the wall and slew her who was so dear to me?"

But when the tender little maid gave proof of such great wrath, the three Scottish campaigners burst out laughing. So full of merriment were they that they went off, lest Elsalill might take offence. They walked across the harbour and up a narrow alley which led to the market-place. But long after they were out of sight Elsalill heard their roars of loud and scornful laughter.

CHAPTER III

THE MESSENGER

A week after his death Herr Arne was buried in Solberga church, and on the same day an inquest was held upon the murder in the assize house at Branehog.

Now Herr Arne's fame was such throughout Bohuslen, and so many people came together on the day of his funeral, both from the mainland and the islands, that it was as though an army had assembled about its leader. And so great a concourse moved between Solberga church and Branehog that toward evening not an inch of snow could be seen that had not been trampled by men's feet.

But late in the evening, when all had gone their ways, came Torarin the fish hawker driving along the road from Branehog to Solberga.

Torarin had talked with many men in the course of the day; again and again had he told the story of Herr Arne's death. He had been well entertained too at the assize and had been made to empty many a mug of ale with travellers from afar.

Torarin felt dull and heavy and lay down upon his load. It saddened him to think that Herr Arne was gone, and as he approached the parsonage a yet more grievous thought began

to torment him. "Grim, my dog," he said, "had I believed that warning of the knives I might have warded off the whole disaster. I often think of that, Grim, my dog. It disquiets my spirit, I feel as though I had had a part in taking Herr Arne's life. Now remember what I say – next time I hear such a thing I will hold it true and be guided by it!"

Now while Torarin lay dozing upon his load with eyes half closed, his horse went on as he pleased, and on coming to Solberga parsonage he turned into the yard from old habit and went up to the stable door, Torarin being all unwitting. Only with the stopping of the sledge did he rise up and look about him; and then he fell a-shuddering, when he saw that he was in the yard of a house where so many people had been murdered no more than a week before.

He seized the reins at once to turn his horse and drive into the road again, but at that moment he felt a hand upon his shoulder and looked round. Beside him stood old Olof the groom, who had served at the parsonage as long as Torarin could remember.

"Have you such haste to leave our house tonight, Torarin?" said the man. "Let be and come indoors! Herr Arne sits there waiting for you."

A thousand thoughts came into Torarin's head. He knew not whether he was dreaming or awake. Olof the groom, whom he saw standing alive and well beside him, he had seen a week before lying dead amongst the others with a great wound in his throat.

Torarin took a firmer hold of the reins. He thought the best

thing for him was to make off as soon as he could. But Olof the groom's hand still lay upon his shoulder, and the old fellow gave him no peace.

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