

LAGERLÖF

SELMA

THE WONDERFUL
ADVENTURES OF NILS

Selma Lagerlöf

The Wonderful Adventures of Nils

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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 arm-chair, 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 Skane, 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 window-sill, 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 head-dresses, 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 the chest. He had an old, wrinkled and beardless face, and was dressed in a black frock coat, knee-breeches and a broad-brimmed black hat. He was very trim and smart, with his white laces about the throat and wrist-bands, his buckled shoes, and the bows on his garters. He had taken from the chest an embroidered piece, and sat and looked at the old-fashioned handiwork with such an air of veneration, that he did not observe the boy had awakened.

The boy was somewhat surprised to see the elf, but, on the other hand, he was not particularly frightened. It was impossible to be afraid of one who was so little. And since the elf was so absorbed

in his own thoughts that he neither saw nor heard, the boy thought that it would be great fun to play a trick on him; to push him over into the chest and shut the lid on him, or something of that kind.

But the boy was not so courageous that he dared to touch the elf with his hands, instead he looked around the room for something to poke him with. He let his gaze wander from the sofa to the leaf-table; from the leaf-table to the fireplace. He looked at the kettles, then at the coffee-urn, which stood on a shelf, near the fireplace; on the water bucket near the door; and on the spoons and knives and forks and saucers and plates, which could be seen through the half-open cupboard door. He looked at his father's gun, which hung on the wall, beside the portrait of the Danish royal family, and on the geraniums and fuchsias, which blossomed in the window. And last, he caught sight of an old butterfly-snare that hung on the window frame. He had hardly set eyes on that butterfly-snare, before he reached over and snatched it and jumped up and swung it alongside the edge of the chest. He was himself astonished at the luck he had. He hardly knew how he had managed it – but he had actually snared the elf. The poor little chap lay, head downward, in the bottom of the long snare, and could not free himself.

The first moment the boy hadn't the least idea what he should do with his prize. He was only particular to swing the snare backward and forward; to prevent the elf from getting a foothold and clambering up.

The elf began to speak, and begged, oh! so pitifully, for his freedom. He had brought them good luck – these many years – he said, and deserved better treatment. Now, if the boy would set him free, he would give him an old coin, a silver spoon, and a gold penny, as big as the case on his father's silver watch.

The boy didn't think that this was much of an offer; but it so happened – that after he had gotten the elf in his power, he was afraid of him. He felt that he had entered into an agreement with something weird and uncanny; something which did not belong to his world, and he was only too glad to get rid of the horrid thing.

For this reason he agreed at once to the bargain, and held the snare still, so the elf could crawl out of it. But when the elf was almost out of the snare, the boy happened to think that he ought to have bargained for large estates, and all sorts of good things. He should at least have made this stipulation: that the elf must conjure the sermon into his head. "What a fool I was to let him go!" thought he, and began to shake the snare violently, so the elf would tumble down again.

But the instant the boy did this, he received such a stinging box on the ear, that he thought his head would fly in pieces. He was dashed – first against one wall, then against the other; he sank to the floor, and lay there – senseless.

When he awoke, he was alone in the cottage. The chest-lid was down, and the butterfly-snare hung in its usual place by the window. If he had not felt how the right cheek burned, from that box on the ear, he would have been tempted to believe the whole thing had been a dream. "At any rate, father and mother will be sure to insist that it was nothing else," thought he. "They are not likely to make any allowances for that old sermon, on account of the elf. It's best for me to get at that reading again," thought he.

But as he walked toward the table, he noticed something remarkable. It couldn't be possible that the cottage had grown. But why was he obliged to take so many more steps than usual to get to the table? And what was the matter with the chair? It looked no bigger than it did a while ago; but now he had to step on the rung first, and then clamber up in order to reach the seat. It was the same thing with the table. He could not look over the top without climbing to the arm of the chair.

"What in all the world is this?" said the boy. "I believe the elf has bewitched both the armchair and the table – and the whole cottage."

The Commentary lay on the table and, to all appearances, it was not changed; but there must have been something queer about that too, for he could not manage to read a single word of it, without actually standing right in the book itself.

He read a couple of lines, and then he chanced to look up. With that, his glance fell on the looking-glass; and then he cried aloud: "Look! There's another one!"

For in the glass he saw plainly a little, little creature who was dressed in a hood and leather breeches.

"Why, that one is dressed exactly like me!" said the boy, and clasped his hands in astonishment. But then he saw that the thing in the mirror did the same thing. Then he began to pull his hair and pinch his arms and swing round; and instantly he did the same thing after him; he, who was seen in the mirror.

The boy ran around the glass several times, to see if there wasn't a little man hidden behind it, but he found no one there; and then he began to shake with terror. For now he understood that the elf had bewitched him, and that the creature whose image he saw in the glass – was he, himself.

THE WILD GEESE

The boy simply could not make himself believe that he had been transformed into an elf. "It can't be anything but a dream – a queer fancy," thought he. "If I wait a few moments, I'll surely be turned back into a human being again."

He placed himself before the glass and closed his eyes. He opened them again after a couple of minutes, and then expected to find that it had all passed over – but it hadn't. He was – and remained – just as little. In other respects, he was the same as before. The thin, straw-coloured hair; the freckles across his nose; the patches on his leather breeches and the darns on his stockings, were all like themselves, with this exception – that they had become diminished.

No, it would do no good for him to stand still and wait, of this he was certain. He must try something else. And he thought the wisest thing that he could do was to try and find the elf, and make his peace with him.

And while he sought, he cried and prayed and promised everything he could think of. Nevermore would he break his word to anyone; never again would he be naughty; and never, never would he fall asleep again over the sermon. If he might only be a human being once more, he would be such a good and helpful and obedient boy. But no matter how much he promised – it did not help him the least little bit.

Suddenly he remembered that he had heard his mother say, all the tiny folk made their home in the cowsheds; and, at once, he concluded to go there, and see if he couldn't find the elf. It was a lucky thing that the cottage-door stood partly open, for he never could have reached the bolt and opened it; but now he slipped through without any difficulty.

When he came out in the hallway, he looked around for his wooden shoes; for in the house, to be sure, he had gone about in his stocking-feet. He wondered how he should manage with these big, clumsy wooden shoes; but just then, he saw a pair of tiny shoes on the doorstep. When he observed that the elf had been so thoughtful that he had also bewitched the wooden shoes, he was even more troubled. It was evidently his intention that this affliction should last a long time.

On the wooden board-walk in front of the cottage, hopped a gray sparrow.

He had hardly set eyes on the boy before he called out: "Teetee! Teetee!

Look at Nils goosey-boy! Look at Thumbietot! Look at Nils Holgersson

Thumbietot!"

Instantly, both the geese and the chickens turned and stared at the boy; and then they set up a fearful cackling. "Cock-el-i-coo," crowed the rooster, "good enough for him! Cock-el-i-coo, he has pulled my comb." "Ka, ka, kada, serves him right!" cried the hens; and with that they kept up a continuous cackle. The geese got together in a tight group, stuck their heads together and asked: "Who can have done this? Who can have done this?"

But the strangest thing of all was, that the boy understood what they said. He was so astonished, that he stood there as if rooted to the doorstep, and listened. "It must be because I am changed into an elf," said he. "This is probably why I understand bird-talk."

He thought it was unbearable that the hens would not stop saying that it served him right. He threw a stone at them and shouted:

"Shut up, you pack!"

But it hadn't occurred to him before, that he was no longer the sort of boy the hens need fear. The whole henyard made a rush for him, and formed a ring around him; then they all cried at once: "Ka, ka, kada, served you right! Ka, ka, kada, served you right!"

The boy tried to get away, but the chickens ran after him and screamed, until he thought he'd lose his hearing. It is more than likely that he never could have gotten away from them, if the house

cat hadn't come along just then. As soon as the chickens saw the cat, they quieted down and pretended to be thinking of nothing else than just to scratch in the earth for worms.

Immediately the boy ran up to the cat. "You dear pussy!" said he, "you must know all the corners and hiding places about here? You'll be a good little kitty and tell me where I can find the elf."

The cat did not reply at once. He seated himself, curled his tail into a graceful ring around his paws – and stared at the boy. It was a large black cat with one white spot on his chest. His fur lay sleek and soft, and shone in the sunlight. The claws were drawn in, and the eyes were a dull gray, with just a little narrow dark streak down the centre. The cat looked thoroughly good-natured and inoffensive.

"I know well enough where the elf lives," he said in a soft voice, "but that doesn't say that I'm going to tell *you* about it."

"Dear pussy, you must tell me where the elf lives!" said the boy. "Can't you see how he has bewitched me?"

The cat opened his eyes a little, so that the green wickedness began to shine forth. He spun round and purred with satisfaction before he replied. "Shall I perhaps help you because you have so often grabbed me by the tail?" he said at last.

Then the boy was furious and forgot entirely how little and helpless he was now. "Oh! I can pull your tail again, I can," said he, and ran toward the cat.

The next instant the cat was so changed that the boy could scarcely believe it was the same animal. Every separate hair on his body stood on end. The back was bent; the legs had become elongated; the claws scraped the ground; the tail had grown thick and short; the ears were laid back; the mouth was frothy; and the eyes were wide open and glistened like sparks of red fire.

The boy didn't want to let himself be scared by a cat, and he took a step forward. Then the cat made one spring and landed right on the boy; knocked him down and stood over him – his forepaws on his chest, and his jaws wide apart – over his throat.

The boy felt how the sharp claws sank through his vest and shirt and into his skin; and how the sharp eye-teeth tickled his throat. He shrieked for help, as loudly as he could, but no one came. He thought surely that his last hour had come. Then he felt that the cat drew in his claws and let go the hold on his throat.

"There!" he said, "that will do now. I'll let you go this time, for my mistress's sake. I only wanted you to know which one of us two has the power now."

With that the cat walked away – looking as smooth and pious as he did when he first appeared on the scene. The boy was so crestfallen that he didn't say a word, but only hurried to the cowhouse to look for the elf.

There were not more than three cows, all told. But when the boy came in, there was such a bellowing and such a kick-up, that one might easily have believed that there were at least thirty.

"Moo, moo, moo," bellowed Mayrose. "It is well there is such a thing as justice in this world."

"Moo, moo, moo," sang the three of them in unison. He couldn't hear what they said, for each one tried to out-bellow the others.

The boy wanted to ask after the elf, but he couldn't make himself heard because the cows were in full uproar. They carried on as they used to do when he let a strange dog in on them. They kicked with their hind legs, shook their necks, stretched their heads, and measured the distance with their horns.

"Come here, you!" said Mayrose, "and you'll get a kick that you won't forget in a hurry!"

"Come here," said Gold Lily, "and you shall dance on my horns!"

"Come here, and you shall taste how it felt when you threw your wooden shoes at me, as you did last summer!" bawled Star.

"Come here, and you shall be repaid for that wasp you let loose in my ear!" growled Gold Lily.

Mayrose was the oldest and the wisest of them, and she was the very maddest. "Come here!" said she, "that I may pay you back for the many times that you have jerked the milk pail away from

your mother; and for all the snares you laid for her, when she came carrying the milk pails; and for all the tears when she has stood here and wept over you!"

The boy wanted to tell them how he regretted that he had been unkind to them; and that never, never – from now on – should he be anything but good, if they would only tell him where the elf was. But the cows didn't listen to him. They made such a racket that he began to fear one of them would succeed in breaking loose; and he thought that the best thing for him to do was to go quietly away from the cowhouse.

When he came out, he was thoroughly disheartened. He could understand that no one on the place wanted to help him find the elf. And little good would it do him, probably, if the elf were found.

He crawled up on the broad hedge which fenced in the farm, and which was overgrown with briars and lichen. There he sat down to think about how it would go with him, if he never became a human being again. When father and mother came home from church, there would be a surprise for them. Yes, a surprise – it would be all over the land; and people would come flocking from East Vemminghög, and from Torp, and from Skerup. The whole Vemminghög township would come to stare at him. Perhaps father and mother would take him with them, and show him at the market place in Kivik.

No, that was too horrible to think about. He would rather that no human being should ever see him again.

His unhappiness was simply frightful! No one in all the world was so unhappy as he. He was no longer a human being – but a freak.

Little by little he began to comprehend what it meant – to be no longer human. He was separated from everything now; he could no longer play with other boys, he could not take charge of the farm after his parents were gone; and certainly no girl would think of marrying *him*.

He sat and looked at his home. It was a little log house, which lay as if it had been crushed down to earth, under the high, sloping roof. The outhouses were also small; and the patches of ground were so narrow that a horse could barely turn around on them. But little and poor though the place was, it was much too good for him *now*. He couldn't ask for any better place than a hole under the stable floor.

It was wondrously beautiful weather! It budded, and it rippled, and it murmured, and it twittered – all around him. But he sat there with such a heavy sorrow. He should never be happy any more about anything.

Never had he seen the skies as blue as they were to-day. Birds of passage came on their travels. They came from foreign lands, and had travelled over the East sea, by way of Smygahuk, and were now on their way North. They were of many different kinds; but he was only familiar with the wild geese, who came flying in two long rows, which met at an angle.

Several flocks of wild geese had already flown by. They flew very high, still he could hear how they shrieked: "To the hills! Now we're off to the hills!"

When the wild geese saw the tame geese, who walked about the farm, they sank nearer the earth, and called: "Come along! Come along! We're off to the hills!"

The tame geese could not resist the temptation to raise their heads and listen, but they answered very sensibly: "We're pretty well off where we are. We're pretty well off where we are."

It was, as we have said, an uncommonly fine day, with an atmosphere that it must have been a real delight to fly in, so light and bracing. And with each new wild geese-flock that flew by, the tame geese became more and more unruly. A couple of times they flapped their wings, as if they had half a mind to fly along. But then an old mother-geese would always say to them: "Now don't be silly. Those creatures will have to suffer both hunger and cold."

There was a young gander whom the wild geese had fired with a passion for adventure. "If another flock comes this way, I'll follow them," said he.

Then there came a new flock, who shrieked like the others, and the young gander answered: "Wait a minute! Wait a minute! I'm coming."

He spread his wings and raised himself into the air; but he was so unaccustomed to flying, that he fell to the ground again.

At any rate, the wild geese must have heard his call, for they turned and flew back slowly to see if he was coming.

"Wait, wait!" he cried, and made another attempt to fly.

All this the boy heard, where he lay on the hedge. "It would be a great pity," thought he, "if the big goosey-gander should go away. It would be a big loss to father and mother if he was gone when they came home from church."

When he thought of this, once again he entirely forgot that he was little and helpless. He took one leap right down into the goose-flock, and threw his arms around the neck of the goosey-gander. "Oh, no! You don't fly away this time, sir!" cried he.

But just about then, the gander was considering how he should go to work to raise himself from the ground. He couldn't stop to shake the boy off, hence he had to go along with him – up in the air.

They bore on toward the heights so rapidly, that the boy fairly gasped. Before he had time to think that he ought to let go his hold around the gander's neck, he was so high up that he would have been killed instantly, if he had fallen to the ground.

The only thing that he could do to make himself a little more comfortable, was to try and get upon the gander's back. And there he wriggled himself forthwith; but not without considerable trouble. And it was not an easy matter, either, to hold himself secure on the slippery back, between two swaying wings. He had to dig deep into feathers and down with both hands, to keep from tumbling to the ground.

THE BIG CHECKED CLOTH

The boy had grown so giddy that it was a long while before he came to himself. The winds howled and beat against him, and the rustle of feathers and swaying of wings sounded like a whole storm. Thirteen geese flew around him, flapping their wings and honking. They danced before his eyes and they buzzed in his ears. He didn't know whether they flew high or low, or in what direction they were travelling.

After a bit, he regained just enough sense to understand that he ought to find out where the geese were taking him. But this was not so easy, for he didn't know how he should ever muster up courage enough to look down. He was sure he'd faint if he attempted it.

The wild geese were not flying very high because the new travelling companion could not breathe in the very thinnest air. For his sake they also flew a little slower than usual.

At last the boy just made himself cast one glance down to earth. Then he thought that a great big rug lay spread beneath him, which was made up of an incredible number of large and small checks.

"Where in all the world am I now?" he wondered.

He saw nothing but check upon check. Some were broad and ran crosswise, and some were long and narrow – all over, there were angles and corners. Nothing was round, and nothing was crooked.

"What kind of a big, checked cloth is this that I'm looking down on?" said the boy to himself without expecting anyone to answer him.

But instantly the wild geese who flew about him called out: "Fields and meadows. Fields and meadows."

Then he understood that the big, checked cloth he was travelling over was the flat land of southern Sweden; and he began to comprehend why it looked so checked and multi-coloured. The bright green checks he recognised first; they were rye fields that had been sown in the fall, and had kept themselves green under the winter snows. The yellowish-gray checks were stubble-fields – the remains of the oat-crop which had grown there the summer before. The brownish ones were old clover meadows: and the black ones, deserted grazing lands or ploughed-up fallow pastures. The brown checks with the yellow edges were, undoubtedly, beech-tree forests; for in these you'll find the big trees which grow in the heart of the forest – naked in winter; while the little beech-trees, which grow along the borders, keep their dry, yellowed leaves way into the spring. There were also dark checks with gray centres: these were the large, built-up estates encircled by the small cottages with their blackening straw roofs, and their stone-divided land-plots. And then there were checks green in the middle with brown borders: these were the orchards, where the grass-carpet was already turning green, although the trees and bushes around them were still in their nude, brown bark.

The boy could not keep from laughing when he saw how checked everything looked.

But when the wild geese heard him laugh, they called out – kind o' reprovngly: "Fertile and good land. Fertile and good land."

The boy had already become serious. "To think that you can laugh; you, who have met with the most terrible misfortune that can possibly happen to a human being!" thought he. And for a moment he was pretty serious; but it wasn't long before he was laughing again.

Now that he had grown somewhat accustomed to the ride and the speed, so that he could think of something besides holding himself on the gander's back, he began to notice how full the air was of birds flying northward. And there was a shouting and a calling from flock to flock. "So you came over to-day?" shrieked some. "Yes," answered the geese. "How do you think the spring's getting on?" "Not a leaf on the trees and ice-cold water in the lakes," came back the answer.

When the geese flew over a place where they saw any tame, half-naked fowl, they shouted: "What's the name of this place? What's the name of this place?" Then the roosters cocked their heads and answered: "Its name's Lillgarde this year – the same as last year."

Most of the cottages were probably named after their owners – which is the custom in Skåne. But instead of saying this is "Per Matssons," or "Ola Bossons," the roosters hit upon the kind of names which, to their way of thinking, were more appropriate. Those who lived on small farms, and belonged to poor cottagers, cried: "This place is called Grainscarce." And those who belonged to the poorest hut-dwellers screamed: "The name of this place is Little-to-eat, Little-to-eat, Little-to-eat."

The big, well-cared-for farms got high-sounding names from the roosters – such as Luckymeadows, Eggberga and Moneyville.

But the roosters on the great landed estates were too high and mighty to condescend to anything like jesting. One of them crowed and called out with such gusto that it sounded as if he wanted to be heard clear up to the sun: "This is Herr Dybeck's estate; the same this year as last year; this year as last year."

A little further on strutted one rooster who crowed: "This is Swanholm, surely all the world knows that!"

The boy observed that the geese did not fly straight forward; but zigzagged hither and thither over the whole South country, just as though they were glad to be in Skåne again and wanted to pay their respects to every separate place.

They came to one place where there were a number of big, clumsy-looking buildings with great, tall chimneys, and all around these were a lot of smaller houses. "This is Jordberga Sugar Refinery," cried the roosters. The boy shuddered as he sat there on the goose's back. He ought to have recognised this place, for it was not very far from his home.

Here he had worked the year before as a watch boy; but, to be sure, nothing was exactly like itself when one saw it like that – from up above.

And think! Just think! Osa the goose girl and little Mats, who were his comrades last year! Indeed the boy would have been glad to know if they still were anywhere about here. Fancy what they would have said, had they suspected that he was flying over their heads!

Soon Jordberga was lost to sight, and they travelled towards Svedala and Skaber Lake and back again over Görringe Cloister and Häckeberga. The boy saw more of Skåne in this one day than he had ever seen before – in all the years that he had lived.

Whenever the wild geese happened across any tame geese, they had the best fun! They flew forward very slowly and called down: "We're off to the hills. Are you coming along? Are you coming along?"

But the tame geese answered: "It's still winter in this country. You're out too soon. Fly back! Fly back!"

The wild geese lowered themselves that they might be heard a little better, and called: "Come along! We'll teach you how to fly and swim."

Then the tame geese got mad and wouldn't answer them with a single honk.

The wild geese sank themselves still lower – until they almost touched the ground – then, quick as lightning, they raised themselves, just as if they'd been terribly frightened. "Oh, oh, oh!" they exclaimed. "Those things were not geese. They were only sheep, they were only sheep."

The ones on the ground were beside themselves with rage and shrieked:

"May you be shot, the whole lot o' you! The whole lot o' you!"

When the boy heard all this teasing he laughed. Then he remembered how badly things had gone with him, and he cried. But the next second, he was laughing again.

Never before had he ridden so fast; and to ride fast and recklessly – that he had always liked. And, of course, he had never dreamed that it could be as fresh and bracing as it was, up in the air; or that there rose from the earth such a fine scent of resin and soil. Nor had he ever dreamed what it could be like – to ride so high above the earth. It was just like flying away from sorrow and trouble and annoyances of every kind that could be thought of.

AKKA FROM KEBNEKAISE

EVENING

The big tame goosey-gander that had followed them up in the air, felt very proud of being permitted to travel back and forth over the South country with the wild geese, and crack jokes with the tame birds. But in spite of his keen delight, he began to tire as the afternoon wore on. He tried to take deeper breaths and quicker wing-strokes, but even so he remained several goose-lengths behind the others.

When the wild geese who flew last, noticed that the tame one couldn't keep up with them, they began to call to the goose who rode in the centre of the angle and led the procession: "Akka from Kebnekaise! Akka from Kebnekaise!" "What do you want of me?" asked the leader. "The white one will be left behind; the white one will be left behind." "Tell him it's easier to fly fast than slow!" called the leader, and raced on as before.

The goosey-gander certainly tried to follow the advice, and increase his speed; but then he became so exhausted that he sank away down to the drooping willows that bordered the fields and meadows.

"Akka, Akka, Akka from Kebnekaise!" cried those who flew last and saw what a hard time he was having. "What do you want now?" asked the leader – and she sounded awfully angry. "The white one sinks to the earth; the white one sinks to the earth." "Tell him it's easier to fly high than low!" shouted the leader, and she didn't slow up the least little bit, but raced on as before.

The goosey-gander tried also to follow this advice; but when he wanted to raise himself, he became so winded that he almost burst his breast.

"Akka, Akka!" again cried those who flew last. "Can't you let me fly in peace?" asked the leader, and she sounded even madder than before.

"The white one is ready to collapse." "Tell him that he who has not the strength to fly with the flock, can go back home!" cried the leader. She certainly had no idea of decreasing her speed – but raced on as before.

"Oh! is that the way the wind blows," thought the goosey-gander. He understood at once that the wild geese had never intended to take him along up to Lapland. They had only lured him away from home in sport.

He felt thoroughly exasperated. To think that his strength should fail him now, so he wouldn't be able to show these tramps that even a tame goose was good for something! But the most provoking thing of all was that he had fallen in with Akka from Kebnekaise. Tame goose that he was, he had heard about a leader goose, named Akka, who was more than a hundred years old. She had such a big name that the best wild geese in the world followed her. But no one had such a contempt for tame geese as Akka and her flock, and gladly would he have shown them that he was their equal.

He flew slowly behind the rest, while he deliberated whether he should turn back or continue. Finally, the little creature that he carried on his back said: "Dear Morten Goosey-gander, you know well enough that it is simply impossible for you, who have never flown, to go with the wild geese all the way up to Lapland. Won't you turn back before you kill yourself?"

But the farmer's lad was about the worst thing the goosey-gander knew anything about, and as soon as it dawned on him that this puny creature actually believed that he couldn't make the trip, he decided to stick it out. "If you say another word about this, I'll drop you into the first ditch we ride over!" said he, and at the same time his fury gave him so much strength that he began to fly almost as well as any of the others.

It isn't likely that he could have kept this pace up very long, neither was it necessary; for, just then, the sun sank quickly; and at sunset the geese flew down, and before the boy and the goosey-gander knew what had happened, they stood on the shores of Vomb Lake.

"They probably intend that we shall spend the night here," thought the boy, and jumped down from the goose's back.

He stood on a narrow beach by a fair-sized lake. It was ugly to look upon, because it was almost entirely covered with an ice-crust that was blackened and uneven and full of cracks and holes – as spring ice generally is.

The ice was already breaking up. It was loose and floating and had a broad belt of dark, shiny water all around it; but there was still enough of it left to spread chill and winter terror over the place.

On the other side of the lake there appeared to be an open and light country, but where the geese had lighted there was a thick pine-growth. It looked as if the forest of firs and pines had the power to bind the winter to itself. Everywhere else the ground was bare; but beneath the sharp pine-branches lay snow that had been melting and freezing, melting and freezing, until it was hard as ice.

The boy thought he had struck an arctic wilderness, and he was so miserable that he wanted to scream. He was hungry too. He hadn't eaten a bite the whole day. But where should he find any food? Nothing eatable grew on either ground or tree in the month of March.

Yes, where was he to find food, and who would give him shelter, and who would fix his bed, and who would protect him from the wild beasts?

For now the sun was away and frost came from the lake, and darkness sank down from heaven, and terror stole forward on the twilight's trail, and in the forest it began to patter and rustle.

Now the good humour which the boy had felt when he was up in the air, was gone, and in his misery he looked around for his travelling companions. He had no one but them to cling to now.

Then he saw that the goosey-gander was having even a worse time of it than he. He was lying prostrate on the spot where he had alighted; and it looked as if he were ready to die. His neck lay flat against the ground, his eyes were closed, and his breathing sounded like a feeble hissing.

"Dear Morten Goosey-Gander," said the boy, "try to get a swallow of water! It isn't two steps to the lake."

But the goosey-gander didn't stir.

The boy had certainly been cruel to all animals, and to the goosey-gander in times gone by; but now he felt that the goosey-gander was the only comfort he had left, and he was dreadfully afraid of losing him.

At once the boy began to push and drag him, to get him into the water, but the goosey-gander was big and heavy, and it was mighty hard work for the boy; but at last he succeeded.

The goosey-gander got in head first. For an instant he lay motionless in the slime, but soon he poked up his head, shook the water from his eyes and sniffed. Then he swam, proudly, between reeds and seaweed.

The wild geese were in the lake before him. They had not looked around for either the goosey-gander or for his rider, but had made straight for the water. They had bathed and primped, and now they lay and gulped half-rotten pond-weed and water-clover.

The white goosey-gander had the good fortune to spy a perch. He grabbed it quickly, swam ashore with it, and laid it down in front of the boy. "Here's a thank you for helping me into the water," said he.

It was the first time the boy had heard a friendly word that day. He was so happy that he wanted to throw his arms around the goosey-gander's neck, but he refrained; and he was also thankful for the gift. At first he must have thought that it would be impossible to eat raw fish, and then he had a notion to try it.

He felt to see if he still had his sheath-knife with him; and, sure enough, there it hung – on the back button of his trousers, although it was so diminished that it was hardly as long as a match. Well, at any rate, it served to scale and cleanse fish with; and it wasn't long before the perch was eaten.

When the boy had satisfied his hunger, he felt a little ashamed because he had been able to eat a raw thing. "It's evident that I'm not a human being any longer, but a real elf," thought he.

While the boy ate, the goosey-gander stood silently beside him. But when he had swallowed the last bite, he said in a low voice: "It's a fact that we have run across a stuck-up goose folk who despise all tame birds."

"Yes, I've observed that," said the boy.

"What a triumph it would be for me if I could follow them clear up to Lapland, and show them that even a tame goose can do things!"

"Y-e-e-s," said the boy, and drawled it out because he didn't believe the goosey-gander could ever do it; yet he didn't wish to contradict him. "But I don't think I can get along all alone on such a journey," said the goosey-gander. "I'd like to ask if you couldn't come along and help me?" The boy, of course, hadn't expected anything but to return to his home as soon as possible, and he was so surprised that he hardly knew what he should reply. "I thought that we were enemies, you and I," said he. But this the goosey-gander seemed to have forgotten entirely. He only remembered that the boy had but just saved his life.

"I suppose I really ought to go home to father and mother," said the boy. "Oh! I'll get you back to them some time in the fall," said the goosey-gander. "I shall not leave you until I put you down on your own doorstep."

The boy thought it might be just as well for him if he escaped showing himself before his parents for a while. He was not disinclined to favour the scheme, and was just on the point of saying that he agreed to it – when they heard a loud rumbling behind them. It was the wild geese who had come up from the lake – all at one time – and stood shaking the water from their backs. After that they arranged themselves in a long row – with the leader-geese in the centre – and came toward them.

As the white goosey-gander sized up the wild geese, he felt ill at ease. He had expected that they should be more like tame geese, and that he should feel a closer kinship with them. They were much smaller than he, and none of them were white. They were all gray with a sprinkling of brown. He was almost afraid of their eyes. They were yellow, and shone as if a fire had been kindled back of them. The goosey-gander had always been taught that it was most fitting to move slowly and with a rolling motion, but these creatures did not walk – they half ran. He grew most alarmed, however, when he looked at their feet. These were large, and the soles were torn and ragged-looking. It was evident that the wild geese never questioned what they tramped upon. They took no by-paths. They were very neat and well cared for in other respects, but one could see by their feet that they were poor wilderness-folk.

The goosey-gander only had time to whisper to the boy: "Speak up quickly for yourself, but don't tell them who you are!" – before the geese were upon them.

When the wild geese had stopped in front of them, they curtsied with their necks many times, and the goosey-gander did likewise many more times. As soon as the ceremonies were over, the leader-geese said: "Now I presume we shall hear what kind of creatures you are."

"There isn't much to tell about me," said the goosey-gander. "I was born in Skanor last spring. In the fall I was sold to Holger Nilsson of West Vemminghög, and there I have lived ever since." "You don't seem to have any pedigree to boast of," said the leader-geese. "What is it, then, that makes you so high-minded that you wish to associate with wild geese?" "It may be because I want to show you wild geese that we tame ones may also be good for something," said the goosey-gander. "Yes, it would be well if you could show us that," said the leader-geese. "We have already observed how much you know about flying; but you are more skilled, perhaps, in other sports. Possibly you are strong in a swimming match?" "No, I can't boast that I am," said the goosey-gander. It seemed to him

that the leader-geese had already made up her mind to send him home, so he didn't much care how he answered. "I never swam any farther than across a marl-ditch," he continued. "Then I presume you're a crack sprinter," said the goose. "I have never seen a tame goose run, nor have I ever done it myself," said the goosey-gander; and he made things appear much worse than they really were.

The big white one was sure now that the leader-geese would say that under no circumstances could they take him along. He was very much astonished when she said: "You answer questions courageously; and he who has courage can become a good travelling companion, even if he is ignorant in the beginning. What do you say to stopping with us for a couple of days, until we can see what you are good for?" "That suits me!" said the goosey-gander – and he was thoroughly happy.

Thereupon the leader-geese pointed with her bill and said: "But who is that you have with you? I've never seen anything like him before." "That's my comrade," said the goosey-gander. "He's been a goose-tender all his life. He'll be useful all right to take with us on the trip." "Yes, he may be all right for a tame goose," answered the wild one. "What do you call him?" "He has several names," said the goosey-gander – hesitantly, not knowing what he should hit upon in a hurry, for he didn't want to reveal the fact that the boy had a human name. "Oh! his name is Thumbietot," he said at last. "Does he belong to the elf family?" asked the leader-geese. "At what time do you wild geese usually retire?" said the goosey-gander quickly – trying to evade that last question. "My eyes close of their own accord about this time."

One could easily see that the goose who talked with the gander was very old. Her entire feather outfit was ice-gray, without any dark streaks. The head was larger, the legs coarser, and the feet were more worn than any of the others. The feathers were stiff; the shoulders knotty; the neck thin. All this was due to age. It was only upon the eyes that time had had no effect. They shone brighter – as if they were younger – than any of the others!

She turned, very haughtily, toward the goosey-gander. "Understand, Mr. Tame-geese, that I am Akka from Kebnekaise! And that the goose who flies nearest me – to the right – is Iksi from Vassijaure, and the one to the left, is Kaksi from Nuolja! Understand, also, that the second right-hand goose is Kolmi from Sarjektjakko, and the second, left, is Neljä from Svappavaara; and behind them fly Viisi from Oviksfjällen and Kuusi from Sjangeli! And know that these, as well as the six goslings who fly last – three to the right, and three to the left – are all high mountain geese of the finest breed! You must not take us for land-lubbers who strike up a chance acquaintance with any and everyone! And you must not think that we permit anyone to share our quarters, that will not tell us who his ancestors were."

When Akka, the leader-geese, talked in this way, the boy stepped briskly forward. It had distressed him that the goosey-gander, who had spoken up so glibly for himself, should give such evasive answers when it concerned him. "I don't care to make a secret of who I am," said he. "My name is Nils Holgersson. I'm a farmer's son, and, until to-day, I have been a human being; but this morning – " He got no further. As soon as he had said that he was human the leader-geese staggered three steps backward, and the rest of them even farther back. They all extended their necks and hissed angrily at him.

"I have suspected this ever since I first saw you here on these shores," said Akka; "and now you can clear out of here at once. We tolerate no human beings among us."

"It isn't possible," said the goosey-gander, meditatively, "that you wild geese can be afraid of anyone who is so tiny! By to-morrow, of course, he'll turn back home. You can surely let him stay with us overnight. None of us can afford to let such a poor little creature wander off by himself in the night – among weasels and foxes!"

The wild goose came nearer. But it was evident that it was hard for her to master her fear. "I have been taught to fear everything in human shape – be it big or little," said she. "But if you will answer for this one, and swear that he will not harm us, he can stay with us to-night. But I don't believe our night quarters are suitable either for him or you, for we intend to roost on the broken ice out here."

She thought, of course, that the goosey-gander would be doubtful when he heard this, but he never let on. "She is pretty wise who knows how to choose such a safe bed," said he.

"You will be answerable for his return to his own to-morrow."

"Then I, too, will have to leave you," said the goosey-gander. "I have sworn that I would not forsake him."

"You are free to fly whither you will," said the leader-geese.

With this, she raised her wings and flew out over the ice and one after another the wild geese followed her.

The boy was very sad to think that his trip to Lapland would not come off, and, in the bargain, he was afraid of the chilly night quarters. "It will be worse and worse," said he. "In the first place, we'll freeze to death on the ice."

But the gander was in a good humour. "There's no danger," said he. "Only make haste, I beg of you, and gather together as much grass and litter as you can well carry."

When the boy had his arms full of dried grass, the goosey-gander grabbed him by the shirt-band, lifted him, and flew out on the ice, where the wild geese were already fast asleep, with their bills tucked under their wings.

"Now spread out the grass on the ice, so there'll be something to stand on, to keep me from freezing fast. You help me and I'll help you," said the goosey-gander.

This the boy did. And when he had finished, the goosey-gander picked him up, once again, by the shirt-band, and tucked him under his wing. "I think you'll lie snug and warm there," said the goosey-gander as he covered him with his wing.

The boy was so imbedded in down that he couldn't answer, and he was nice and comfy. Oh, but he was tired! – And in less than two winks he was fast asleep.

NIGHT

It is a fact that ice is always treacherous and not to be trusted. In the middle of the night the loosened ice-cake on Vomb Lake moved about, until one corner of it touched the shore. Now it happened that Mr. Smirre Fox, who lived at this time in Övid Cloister Park – on the east side of the lake – caught a glimpse of that one corner, while he was out on his night chase. Smirre had seen the wild geese early in the evening, and hadn't dared to hope that he might get at one of them, but now he walked right out on the ice.

When Smirre was very near to the geese, his claws scraped the ice, and the geese awoke, flapped their wings, and prepared for flight. But Smirre was too quick for them. He darted forward as though he'd been shot; grabbed a goose by the wing, and ran toward land again.

But this night the wild geese were not alone on the ice, for they had a human being among them – little as he was. The boy had awakened when the goosey-gander spread his wings. He had tumbled down on the ice and was sitting there, dazed. He hadn't grasped the whys and wherefores of all this confusion, until he caught sight of a little long-legged dog who ran over the ice with a goose in his mouth.

In a minute the boy was after that dog, to try and take the goose away from him. He must have heard the goosey-gander call to him: "Have a care, Thumbietot! Have a care!" But the boy thought that such a little runt of a dog was nothing to be afraid of and he rushed ahead.

The wild goose that Smirre Fox tugged after him, heard the clatter as the boy's wooden shoes beat against the ice, and she could hardly believe her ears. "Does that infant think he can take me away from the fox?" she wondered. And in spite of her misery, she began to cackle right merrily, deep down in her windpipe. It was almost as if she had laughed.

"The first thing he knows, he'll fall through a crack in the ice," thought she.

But dark as the night was, the boy saw distinctly all the cracks and holes there were, and took daring leaps over them. This was because he had the elf's good eyesight now, and could see in the dark. He saw both lake and shore just as clearly as if it had been daylight.

Smirre Fox left the ice where it touched the shore. And just as he was working his way up to the land-edge, the boy shouted: "Drop that goose, you sneak!"

Smirre didn't know who was calling to him, and wasted no time in looking around, but increased his pace. The fox made straight for the forest and the boy followed him, with never a thought of the danger he was running. All he thought about was the contemptuous way in which he had been received by the wild geese; and he made up his mind to let them see that a human being was something higher than all else created.

He shouted, again and again, to that dog, to make him drop his game. "What kind of a dog are you, who can steal a whole goose and not feel ashamed of yourself? Drop her at once! or you'll see what a beating you'll get. Drop her, I say, or I'll tell your master how you behave!"

When Smirre Fox saw that he had been mistaken for a scary dog, he was so amused that he came near dropping the goose. Smirre was a great plunderer who wasn't satisfied with only hunting rats and pigeons in the fields, but he also ventured into the farmyards to steal chickens and geese. He knew that he was feared throughout the district; and anything as idiotic as this he had not heard since he was a baby.

The boy ran so fast that the thick beech-trees appeared to be running past him – backward, but he caught up with Smirre. Finally, he was so close to him that he got a hold on his tail. "Now I'll take the goose from you anyway," cried he, and held on as hard as ever he could, but he hadn't strength enough to stop Smirre. The fox dragged him along until the dry foliage whirled around him.

But now it began to dawn on Smirre how harmless the thing was that pursued him. He stopped short, put the goose on the ground, and stood on her with his forepaws, so she couldn't fly away. He

was just about to bite off her neck – but then he couldn't resist the desire to tease the boy a little. "Hurry off and complain to the master, for now I'm going to bite the goose to death!" said he.

Certainly the one who was surprised when he saw what a pointed nose, and heard what a hoarse and angry voice that dog which he was pursuing had, – was the boy! But now he was so enraged because the fox had made fun of him, that he never thought of being frightened. He took a firmer hold on the tail, braced himself against a beech trunk; and just as the fox opened his jaws over the goose's throat, he pulled as hard as he could. Smirre was so astonished that he let himself be pulled backward a couple of steps – and the wild goose got away. She fluttered upward feebly and heavily. One wing was so badly wounded that she could barely use it. In addition to this, she could not see in the night darkness of the forest but was as helpless as the blind. Therefore she could in no way help the boy; so she groped her way through the branches and flew down to the lake again.

Then Smirre made a dash for the boy. "If I don't get the one, I shall certainly have the other," said he; and you could tell by his voice how mad he was. "Oh, don't you believe it!" said the boy, who was in the best of spirits because he had saved the goose. He held fast by the fox-tail, and swung with it – to one side – when the fox tried to catch him.

There was such a dance in that forest that the dry beech-leaves fairly flew! Smirre swung round and round, but the tail swung too; while the boy kept a tight grip on it, so the fox could not grab him.

The boy was so gay after his success that in the beginning, he laughed and made fun of the fox. But Smirre was persevering – as old hunters generally are – and the boy began to fear that he should be captured in the end. Then he caught sight of a little, young beech-tree that had shot up as slender as a rod, that it might soon reach the free air above the canopy of branches which the old beeches spread above it.

Quick as a flash, he let go of the fox-tail and climbed the beech tree. Smirre Fox was so excited that he continued to dance around after his tail.

"Don't bother with the dance any longer!" said the boy.

But Smirre couldn't endure the humiliation of his failure to get the better of such a little tot, so he lay down under the tree, that he might keep a close watch on him.

The boy didn't have any too good a time of it where he sat, astride a frail branch. The young beech did not, as yet, reach the high branch-canopy, so the boy couldn't get over to another tree, and he didn't dare to come down again. He was so cold and numb that he almost lost his hold around the branch; and he was dreadfully sleepy; but he didn't dare fall asleep for fear of tumbling down.

My! but it was dismal to sit in that way the whole night through, out in the forest! He never before understood the real meaning of "night." It was just as if the whole world had become petrified, and never could come to life again.

Then it commenced to dawn. The boy was glad that everything began to look like itself once more; although the chill was even sharper than it had been during the night.

Finally, when the sun got up, it wasn't yellow but red. The boy thought it looked as though it were angry and he wondered what it was angry about. Perhaps it was because the night had made it so cold and gloomy on earth, while the sun was away.

The sunbeams came down in great clusters, to see what the night had been up to. It could be seen how everything blushed – as if they all had guilty consciences. The clouds in the skies; the satiny beech-limbs; the little intertwined branches of the forest-canopy; the hoar-frost that covered the foliage on the ground – everything grew flushed and red. More and more sunbeams came bursting through space, and soon the night's terrors were driven away, and such a marvellous lot of living things came forward. The black woodpecker, with the red neck, began to hammer with its bill on the branch. The squirrel glided from his nest with a nut, and sat down on a branch and began to shell it. The starling came flying with a worm, and the bulfinch sang in the tree-top.

Then the boy understood that the sun had said to all these tiny creatures: "Wake up now, and come out of your nests! I'm here! Now you need be afraid of nothing."

The wild-goose call was heard from the lake, as they were preparing for flight; and soon all fourteen geese came flying through the forest. The boy tried to call to them, but they flew so high that his voice couldn't reach them. They probably believed the fox had eaten him up; and they didn't trouble themselves to look for him.

The boy came near crying with regret; but the sun stood up there – orange-coloured and happy – and put courage into the whole world. "It isn't worth while, Nils Holgersson, for you to be troubled about anything, as long as I'm here," said the sun.

GOOSE-PLAY

Monday, March twenty-first.

Everything remained unchanged in the forest – about as long as it takes a goose to eat her breakfast. But just as the morning was verging on forenoon, a goose came flying, all by herself, under the thick tree-canopy. She groped her way hesitatingly, between the stems and branches, and flew very slowly. As soon as Smirre Fox saw her, he left his place under the beech tree, and sneaked up toward her. The wild goose didn't avoid the fox, but flew very close to him. Smirre made a high jump for her but he missed her; and the goose went on her way down to the lake.

It was not long before another goose came flying. She took the same route as the first one; and flew still lower and slower. She, too, flew close to Smirre Fox, and he made such a high spring for her, that his ears brushed her feet. But she, too, got away from him unhurt, and went her way toward the lake, silent as a shadow.

A little while passed and then there came another wild goose. She flew still slower and lower; and it seemed even more difficult for her to find her way between the beech-branches. Smirre made a powerful spring! He was within a hair's breadth of catching her; but that goose also managed to save herself.

Just after she had disappeared, came a fourth. She flew so slowly, and so badly, that Smirre Fox thought he could catch her without much effort, but he was afraid of failure now, and concluded to let her fly past – unmolested. She took the same direction the others had taken; and just as she was come right above Smirre, she sank down so far that he was tempted to jump for her. He jumped so high that he touched her with his tail. But she flung herself quickly to one side and saved her life.

Before Smirre got through panting, three more geese came flying in a row. They flew just like the rest, and Smirre made high springs for them all, but he did not succeed in catching any one of them.

After that came five geese; but these flew better than the others. And although it seemed as if they wanted to lure Smirre to jump, he withstood the temptation. After quite a long time came one single goose. It was the thirteenth. This one was so old that she was gray all over, without a dark speck anywhere on her body. She didn't appear to use one wing very well, but flew so wretchedly and crookedly, that she almost touched the ground. Smirre not only made a high leap for her, but he pursued her, running and jumping all the way down to the lake. But not even this time did he get anything for his trouble.

When the fourteenth goose came along, it looked very pretty because it was white. And as its great wings swayed, it glistened like a light, in the dark forest. When Smirre Fox saw this one, he mustered all his resources and jumped half-way up to the tree-canopy. But the white one flew by unhurt like the rest.

Now it was quiet for a moment under the beeches. It looked as if the whole wild-geese-flock had travelled past.

Suddenly Smirre remembered his prisoner and raised his eyes toward the young beech-tree. And just as he might have expected – the boy had disappeared.

But Smirre didn't have much time to think about him; for now the first goose came back again from the lake and flew slowly under the canopy. In spite of all his ill luck, Smirre was glad that she came back, and darted after her with a high leap. But he had been in too much of a hurry, and hadn't taken the time to calculate the distance, and he landed at one side of the goose. Then there came still another goose; then a third; a fourth; a fifth; and so on, until the angle closed in with the old ice-gray one, and the big white one. They all flew low and slow. Just as they swayed in the vicinity of Smirre Fox, they sank down – kind of inviting-like – for him to take them. Smirre ran after them and made leaps a couple of fathoms high – but he couldn't manage to get hold of a single one of them.

It was the most awful day that Smirre Fox had ever experienced. The wild geese kept on travelling over his head. They came and went – came and went. Great splendid geese who had eaten themselves fat on the German heaths and grain fields, swayed all day through the woods, and so close to him that he touched them many times; yet he was not permitted to appease his hunger with a single one of them.

The winter was hardly gone yet, and Smirre recalled nights and days when he had been forced to tramp around in idleness, with not so much as a hare to hunt, when the rats hid themselves under the frozen earth; and when the chickens were all shut up. But all the winter's hunger had not been as hard to endure as this day's miscalculations.

Smirre was no young fox. He had had the dogs after him many a time, and had heard the bullets whizz around his ears. He had lain in hiding, down in the lair, while the dachshunds crept into the crevices and all but found him. But all the anguish that Smirre Fox had been forced to suffer under this hot chase, was not to be compared with what he suffered every time that he missed one of the wild geese.

In the morning, when the play began, Smirre Fox had looked so stunning that the geese were amazed when they saw him. Smirre loved display. His coat was a brilliant red; his breast white; his nose black; and his tail was as bushy as a plume. But when the evening of this day was come, Smirre's coat hung in loose folds. He was bathed in sweat; his eyes were without lustre; his tongue hung far out from his gaping jaws; and froth oozed from his mouth.

In the afternoon Smirre was so exhausted that he grew delirious. He saw nothing before his eyes but flying geese. He made leaps for sun-spots which he saw on the ground; and for a poor little butterfly that had come out of his chrysalis too soon.

The wild geese flew and flew, unceasingly. All day long they continued to torment Smirre. They were not moved to pity because Smirre was done up, fevered, and out of his head. They continued without a let-up, although they understood that he hardly saw them, and that he jumped after their shadows.

When Smirre Fox sank down on a pile of dry leaves, weak and powerless and almost ready to give up the ghost, they stopped teasing him.

"Now you know, Mr. Fox, what happens to the one who dares to come near Akka of Kebnekaise!" they shouted in his ear; and with that they left him in peace.

THE WONDERFUL JOURNEY OF NILS

ON THE FARM

Thursday, March twenty-fourth.

Just at that time a thing happened in Skåne which created a good deal of discussion and even got into the newspapers but which many believed to be a fable, because they had not been able to explain it.

It was about like this: A lady squirrel had been captured in the hazelbrush that grew on the shores of Vomb Lake, and was carried to a farmhouse close by. All the folks on the farm – both young and old – were delighted with the pretty creature with the bushy tail, the wise, inquisitive eyes, and the natty little feet. They intended to amuse themselves all summer by watching its nimble movements; its ingenious way of shelling nuts; and its droll play. They immediately put in order an old squirrel cage with a little green house and a wire-cylinder wheel. The little house, which had both doors and windows, the lady squirrel was to use as a dining room and bedroom. For this reason they placed therein a bed of leaves, a bowl of milk and some nuts. The cylinder wheel, on the other hand, she was to use as a play-house, where she could run and climb and swing round.

The people believed that they had arranged things very comfortably for the lady squirrel, and they were astonished because she didn't seem to be contented; but, instead, she sat there, downcast and moody, in a corner of her room. Every now and again, she would let out a shrill, agonised cry. She did not touch the food; and not once did she swing round on the wheel. "It's probably because she's frightened," said the farmer folk. "To-morrow, when she feels more at home, she will both eat and play."

Meanwhile, the women folk on the farm were making preparations for a feast; and just on that day when the lady squirrel had been captured, they were busy with an elaborate bake. They had had bad luck with something; either the dough wouldn't rise, or else they had been dilatory, for they were obliged to work long after dark.

Naturally there was a great deal of excitement and bustle in the kitchen, and probably no one there took time to think about the squirrel, or to wonder how she was getting on. But there was an old grandma in the house who was too aged to take a hand in the baking; this she herself understood, but just the same she did not relish the idea of being left out of the game. She felt rather downhearted; and for this reason she did not go to bed but seated herself by the sitting-room window and looked out.

They had opened the kitchen door on account of the heat; and through it a clear ray of light streamed out on the yard; and it became so well lighted out there that the old woman could see all the cracks and holes in the plastering on the wall opposite. She also saw the squirrel cage which hung just where the light fell clearest. And she noticed how the squirrel ran from her room to the wheel, and from the wheel to her room, all night long, without stopping an instant. She thought it was a strange sort of unrest that had come over the animal; but she believed, of course, that the strong light kept her awake.

Between the cow-house and the stable there was a broad, handsome carriage-gate; this too came within the light-radius. As the night wore on, the old grandma saw a tiny creature, no bigger than a hand's breadth, cautiously steal his way through the gate. He was dressed in leather breeches and wooden shoes like any other working man. The old grandma knew at once that it was the elf, and she was not the least bit frightened. She had always heard that the elf kept himself somewhere about the place, although she had never seen him before; and an elf, to be sure, brought good luck wherever he appeared.

As soon as the elf came into the stone-paved yard, he ran right up to the squirrel cage. And since it hung so high that he could not reach it, he went over to the store-house after a rod; placed it against the cage, and swung himself up – in the same way that a sailor climbs a rope. When he had reached the cage, he shook the door of the little green house as if he wanted to open it; but the old grandma didn't move; for she knew that the children had put a padlock on the door, as they feared that the boys on the neighbouring farms would try to steal the squirrel. The old woman saw that when the boy could not get the door open, the lady squirrel came out to the wire wheel. There they held a long conference together. And when the boy had listened to all that the imprisoned animal had to say to him, he slid down the rod to the ground, and ran out through the carriage-gate.

The old woman didn't expect to see anything more of the elf that night, nevertheless, she remained at the window. After a few moments had gone by, he returned. He was in such a hurry that it seemed to her as though his feet hardly touched the ground; and he rushed right up to the squirrel cage. The old woman, with her far-sighted eyes, saw him distinctly; and she also saw that he carried something in his hands; but what it was she couldn't imagine. The thing he carried in his left hand he laid down on the pavement; but that which he held in his right hand he took with him to the cage. He kicked so hard with his wooden shoes on the little window that the glass was broken. He poked in the thing which he held in his hand to the lady squirrel. Then he slid down again, and took up that which he had laid upon the ground, and climbed up to the cage with that also. The next instant he ran off again with such haste that the old woman could hardly follow him with her eyes.

But now it was the old grandma who could no longer sit still in the cottage; but who, very slowly, went out to the back yard and stationed herself in the shadow of the pump to await the elf's return. And there was one other who had also seen him and had become curious. This was the house cat. He crept along slyly and stopped close to the wall, just two steps away from the stream of light. They both stood and waited, long and patiently, on that chilly March night, and the old woman was just beginning to think about going in again, when she heard a clatter on the pavement, and saw that the little mite of an elf came trotting along once more, carrying a burden in each hand, as he had done before. That which he bore squealed and squirmed. And now a light dawned on the old grandma. She understood that the elf had hurried down to the hazel-grove and brought back the lady squirrel's babies; and that he was carrying them to her so they shouldn't starve to death.

The old grandma stood very still, so as not to disturb them; and it did not look as if the elf had noticed her. He was just going to lay one of the babies on the ground so that he could swing himself up to the cage with the other one – when he saw the house cat's green eyes glisten close beside him. He stood there, bewildered, with a young one in each hand.

He turned around and looked in all directions; then he became aware of the old grandma's presence. Then he did not hesitate long; but walked forward, stretched his arms as high as he could reach, for her to take one of the baby squirrels.

The old grandma did not wish to prove herself unworthy of the confidence, so she bent down and took the baby squirrel, and stood there and held it until the boy had swung himself up to the cage with the other one. Then he came back for the one he had entrusted to her care.

The next morning, when the farm folk had gathered together for breakfast, it was impossible for the old woman to refrain from telling them of what she had seen the night before. They all laughed at her, of course, and said that she had been only dreaming. There were no baby squirrels this early in the year.

But she was sure of her ground, and begged them to take a look into the squirrel cage and this they did. And there lay on the bed of leaves, four tiny half-naked, half blind baby squirrels, who were at least a couple of days old.

When the farmer himself saw the young ones, he said: "Be it as it may with this; but one thing is certain, we, on this farm, have behaved in such a manner that we are shamed before both animals and human beings." And, thereupon, he took the mother squirrel and all her young ones from the

cage, and laid them in the old grandma's lap. "Go thou out to the hazel-grove with them," said he, "and let them have their freedom back again!"

It was this event that was so much talked about, and which even got into the newspapers, but which the majority would not credit because they were not able to explain how anything like that could have happened.

VITTSKÖVLE

Saturday, March twenty-sixth.

Two days later, another strange thing happened. A flock of wild geese came flying one morning, and lit on a meadow down in Eastern Skåne not very far from Vittskövle manor. In the flock were thirteen wild geese, of the usual gray variety, and one white goosey-gander, who carried on his back a tiny lad dressed in yellow leather breeches, green vest, and a white woollen toboggan hood.

They were now very near the Eastern sea; and on the meadow where the geese had alighted the soil was sandy, as it usually is on the sea-coast. It looked as if, formerly, there had been flying sand in this vicinity which had to be held down; for in several directions large, planted pine-woods could be seen.

When the wild geese had been feeding a while, several children came along, and walked on the edge of the meadow. The goose who was on guard at once raised herself into the air with noisy wing-strokes, so the whole flock should hear that there was danger on foot. All the wild geese flew upward; but the white one trotted along on the ground unconcerned. When he saw the others fly he raised his head and called after them: "You needn't fly away from these! They are only a couple of children!"

The little creature who had been riding on his back, sat down upon a knoll on the outskirts of the wood and picked a pine-cone in pieces, that he might get at the seeds. The children were so close to him that he did not dare to run across the meadow to the white one. He concealed himself under a big, dry thistle-leaf, and at the same time gave a warning-cry. But the white one had evidently made up his mind not to let himself be scared. He walked along on the ground all the while; and not once did he look to see in what direction they were going.

Meanwhile, they turned from the path, walked across the field, getting nearer and nearer to the goosey-gander. When he finally did look up, they were right upon him. He was so dumfounded, and became so confused, he forgot that he could fly, and tried to get out of their reach by running. But the children followed, chasing him into a ditch, and there they caught him. The larger of the two stuck him under his arm and carried him off.

When the boy, who lay under the thistle-leaf saw this, he sprang up as if he wanted to take the goosey-gander away from them; then he must have remembered how little and powerless he was, for he threw himself on the knoll and beat upon the ground with his clenched fists.

The goosey-gander cried with all his might for help: "Thumbietot, come and help me! Oh, Thumbietot, come and help me!" The boy began to laugh in the midst of his distress. "Oh, yes! I'm just the right one to help anybody, I am!" said he.

Anyway he got up and followed the goosey-gander. "I can't help him," said he, "but I shall at least find out where they are taking him."

The children had a good start; but the boy had no difficulty in keeping them within sight until they came to a hollow where a brook gushed forth. But here he was obliged to run alongside of it for some little time, before he could find a place narrow enough for him to jump over.

When he came up from the hollow the children had disappeared. He could see their footprints on a narrow path which led to the woods, and these he continued to follow.

Soon he came to a cross-road. Here the children must have separated, for there were footprints in two directions. The boy looked now as if all hope had fled. Then he saw a little white down on a heather-knoll, and he understood that the goosey-gander had dropped this by the wayside to let him know in which direction he had been carried; and therefore he continued his search. He followed the children through the entire wood. The goosey-gander he did not see; but wherever he was likely to miss his way, lay a little white down to put him right.

The boy continued faithfully to follow the bits of down. They led him out of the wood, across a couple of meadows, up on a road, and finally through the entrance of a broad *allée*. At the end

of the *allée* there were gables and towers of red tiling, decorated with bright borders and other ornamentations that glittered and shone. When the boy saw that this was some great manor, he thought he knew what had become of the goosey-gander. "No doubt the children have carried the goosey-gander to the manor and sold him there. By this time he's probably butchered," he said to himself. But he did not seem to be satisfied with anything less than proof positive, and with renewed courage he ran forward. He met no one in the *allée*— and that was well, for such as he are generally afraid of being seen by human beings.

The mansion which he came to was a splendid, old-time structure with four great wings which inclosed a courtyard. On the east wing, there was a high arch leading into the courtyard. This far the boy ran without hesitation, but when he got there he stopped. He dared not venture farther, but stood still and pondered what he should do now.

There he stood, with his finger on his nose, thinking, when he heard footsteps behind him; and as he turned around he saw a whole company march up the *allée*. In haste he stole behind a water-barrel which stood near the arch, and hid himself.

Those who came up were some twenty young men from a folk-high-school, out on a walking tour. They were accompanied by one of the instructors. When they were come as far as the arch, the teacher requested them to wait there a moment, while he went in and asked if they might see the old castle of Vittskövle.

The newcomers were warm and tired; as if they had been on a long tramp. One of them was so thirsty that he went over to the water-barrel and stooped down to drink. He had a tin box such as botanists use hanging about his neck. He evidently thought that this was in his way, for he threw it down on the ground. With this, the lid flew open, and one could see that there were a few spring flowers in it.

The botanist's box dropped just in front of the boy; and he must have thought that here was his opportunity to get into the castle and find out what had become of the goosey-gander. He smuggled himself quickly into the box and concealed himself as well as he could under the anemones and colt's-foot.

He was hardly hidden before the young man picked the box up, hung it around his neck, and slammed down the cover.

Then the teacher came back, and said that they had been given permission to enter the castle. At first he conducted them no farther than the courtyard. There he stopped and began to talk to them about this ancient structure.

He called their attention to the first human beings who had inhabited this country, and who had been obliged to live in mountain-grottoes and earth-caves; in the dens of wild beasts, and in the brushwood; and that a very long period had elapsed before they learned to build themselves huts from the trunks of trees. And afterward how long had they not been forced to labour and struggle, before they had advanced from the log cabin, with its single room, to the building of a castle with a hundred rooms – like Vittskövle!

It was about three hundred and fifty years ago that the rich and powerful built such castles for themselves, he said. It was very evident that Vittskövle had been erected at a time when wars and robbers made it unsafe in Skåne. All around the castle was a deep trench filled with water; and across this there had been a bridge in bygone days that could be hoisted up. Over the gate-arch there is, even to this day, a watch-tower; and all along the sides of the castle ran sentry-galleries, and in the corners stood towers with walls a metre thick. Yet the castle had not been erected in the most savage war time; for Jens Brahe, who built it, had also studied to make of it a beautiful and decorative ornament. If they could see the big, solid stone structure at Glimminge, which had been built only a generation earlier, they would readily see that Jans Holgersen Ulfstand, the builder, hadn't figured upon anything else – only to build big and strong and secure, without bestowing a thought upon making it beautiful and comfortable. If they visited such castles as Marsvinsholm, Snogeholm and Övid's Cloister – which

were erected a hundred years or so later – they would find that the times had become less warlike. The gentlemen who built these places, had not furnished them with fortifications; but had only taken pains to provide themselves with great, splendid dwelling houses.

The teacher talked at length – and in detail; and the boy who lay shut up in the box was pretty impatient; but he must have lain very still, for the owner of the box hadn't the least suspicion that he was carrying him along.

Finally the company went into the castle. But if the boy had hoped for a chance to crawl out of that box, he was deceived; for the student carried it upon him all the while, and the boy was obliged to accompany him through all the rooms. It was a tedious tramp. The teacher stopped every other minute to explain and instruct.

In one room he found an old fireplace, and before this he stopped to talk about the different kinds of fireplaces that had been used in the course of time. The first indoors fireplace had been a big, flat stone on the floor of the hut, with an opening in the roof which let in both wind and rain. The next had been a big stone hearth with no opening in the roof. This must have made the hut very warm, but it also filled it with soot and smoke. When Vittskövle was built, the people had advanced far enough to open the fireplace, which, at that time, had a wide chimney for the smoke; but it also took most of the warmth up in the air with it.

If that boy had ever in his life been cross and impatient, he was given a good lesson in patience that day. It must have been a whole hour now that he had lain perfectly still.

In the next room they came to, the teacher stopped before an old-time bed with its high canopy and rich curtains. Immediately he began to talk about the beds and bed places of olden days.

The teacher didn't hurry himself; but then he did not know, of course, that a poor little creature lay shut up in a botanist's box, and only waited for him to get through. When they came to a room with gilded leather hangings, he talked to them about how the people had dressed their walls and ceilings ever since the beginning of time. And when he came to an old family portrait, he told them all about the different changes in dress. And in the banquet halls he described ancient customs of celebrating weddings and funerals.

Thereupon, the teacher talked a little about the excellent men and women who had lived in the castle; about the old Brahes, and the old Barnekows; of Christian Barnekow, who had given his horse to the king to help him escape; of Margareta Ascheberg who had been married to Kjell Barnekow and who, when a widow, had managed the estates and the whole district for fifty-three years; of banker Hageman, a farmer's son from Vittskövle, who had grown so rich that he had bought the entire estate; about the Stjernsvärds, who had given the people of Skåne better ploughs, which enabled them to discard the ridiculous old wooden ploughs that three oxen were hardly able to drag. During all this, the boy lay still. If he had ever been mischievous and shut the cellar door on his father or mother, he understood now how they had felt; for it was hours and hours before that teacher got through.

At last the teacher went out into the courtyard again. And there he discoursed upon the tireless labour of mankind to procure for themselves tools and weapons, clothes and houses and ornaments. He said that such an old castle as Vittskövle was a mile-post on time's highway. Here one could see how far the people had advanced three hundred and fifty years ago; and one could judge for oneself whether things had gone forward or backward since their time.

But this dissertation the boy escaped hearing; for the student who carried him was thirsty again, and stole into the kitchen to ask for a drink of water. When the boy was carried into the kitchen, he should have tried to look around for the goosey-gander. He had begun to move; and as he did this, he happened to press too hard against the lid – and it flew open. As botanists' box-lids are always flying open, the student thought no more about the matter but pressed it down again. Then the cook asked him if he had a snake in the box.

"No, I have only a few plants," the student replied. "It was certainly something that moved there," insisted the cook. The student threw back the lid to show her that she was mistaken. "See for yourself – if – "

But he got no further, for now the boy dared not stay in the box any longer, but with one bound he stood on the floor, and out he rushed. The maids hardly had time to see what it was that ran, but they hurried after it, nevertheless.

The teacher still stood and talked when he was interrupted by shrill cries. "Catch him, catch him!" shrieked those who had come from the kitchen; and all the young men raced after the boy, who glided away faster than a rat. They tried to intercept him at the gate, but it was not so easy to get a hold on such a little creature, so, luckily, he got out in the open.

The boy did not dare to run down toward the open *allée*, but turned in another direction. He rushed through the garden into the back yard. All the while the people raced after him, shrieking and laughing. The poor little thing ran as hard as ever he could to get out of their way; but still it looked as though the people would catch up with him.

As he rushed past a labourer's cottage, he heard a goose cackle, and saw a white down lying on the doorstep. There, at last, was the goosey-gander! He had been on the wrong track before. He thought no more of housemaids and men, who were hounding him, but climbed up the steps – and into the hallway. Farther he couldn't come, for the door was locked. He heard how the goosey-gander cried and moaned inside, but he couldn't get the door open. The hunters that were pursuing him came nearer and nearer, and, in the room, the goosey-gander cried more and more pitifully. In this direst of needs the boy finally plucked up courage and pounded on the door with all his might.

A child opened it, and the boy looked into the room. In the middle of the floor sat a woman who held the goosey-gander tight to clip his quill-feathers. It was her children who had found him, and she didn't want to do him any harm. It was her intention to let him in among her own geese, had she only succeeded in clipping his wings so he couldn't fly away. But a worse fate could hardly have happened to the goosey-gander, and he shrieked and moaned with all his might.

And a lucky thing it was that the woman hadn't started the clipping sooner. Now only two quills had fallen under the shears' when the door was opened – and the boy stood on the door-sill. But a creature like that the woman had never seen before. She couldn't believe anything else but that it was Goa-Nisse himself; and in her terror she dropped the shears, clasped her hands – and forgot to hold on to the goosey-gander.

As soon as he felt himself freed, he ran toward the door. He didn't give himself time to stop; but, as he ran past him, he grabbed the boy by the neck-band and carried him along with him. On the stoop he spread his wings and flew up in the air; at the same time he made a graceful sweep with his neck and seated the boy on his smooth, downy back.

And off they flew – while all Vittskövle stood and stared after them.

IN ÖVID CLOISTER PARK

All that day, when the wild geese played with the fox, the boy lay and slept in a deserted squirrel nest. When he awoke, along toward evening, he felt very uneasy. "Well, now I shall soon be sent home again! Then I'll have to exhibit myself before father and mother," thought he. But when he looked up and saw the wild geese, who lay and bathed in Vomb Lake – not one of them said a word about his going. "They probably think the white one is too tired to travel home with me to-night," thought the boy.

The next morning the geese were awake at daybreak, long before sunrise. Now the boy felt sure that he'd have to go home; but, curiously enough, both he and the white goosey-gander were permitted to follow the wild ones on their morning tour. The boy couldn't comprehend the reason for the delay, but he figured it out in this way, that the wild geese did not care to send the goosey-gander on such a long journey until they had both eaten their fill. Come what might, he was only glad for every moment that should pass before he must face his parents.

The wild geese travelled over Övid's Cloister estate which was situated in a beautiful park east of the lake, and looked very imposing with its great castle; its well planned court surrounded by low walls and pavilions; its fine old-time garden with covered arbours, streams and fountains; its wonderful trees, trimmed bushes, and its evenly mown lawns with their beds of beautiful spring flowers.

When the wild geese rode over the estate in the early morning hour there was no human being about. When they had carefully assured themselves of this, they lowered themselves toward the dog kennel, and shouted: "What kind of a little hut is this? What kind of a little hut is this?"

Instantly the dog came out of his kennel – furiously angry – and barked at the air.

"Do you call this a hut, you tramps! Can't you see that this is a great stone castle? Can't you see what fine terraces, and what a lot of pretty walls and windows and great doors it has, bow, wow, wow, wow? Don't you see the grounds, can't you see the garden, can't you see the conservatories, can't you see the marble statues? You call this a hut, do you? Do huts have parks with beech-groves and hazel-bushes and trailing vines and oak trees and firs and hunting-grounds filled with game, wow, wow, wow? Do you call this a hut? Have you seen huts with so many outhouses around them that they look like a whole village? You must know of a lot of huts that have their own church and their own parsonage; and that rule over the district and the peasant homes and the neighbouring farms and barracks, wow, wow, wow? Do you call this a hut? To this hut belong the richest possessions in Skåne, you beggars! You can't see a bit of land, from where you hang in the clouds, that does not obey commands from this hut, wow, wow, wow!"

All this the dog managed to cry out in one breath; and the wild geese flew back and forth over the estate, and listened to him until he was winded. But then they cried: "What are you so mad about? We didn't ask about the castle; we only wanted to know about your kennel, stupid!"

When the boy heard this joke, he laughed; then a thought stole in on him which at once made him serious. "Think how many of these amusing things you would hear, if you could go with the wild geese through the whole country, all the way up to Lapland!" said he to himself. "And just now, when you are in such a bad fix, a trip like that would be the best thing you could hit upon."

The wild geese travelled to one of the wide fields, east of the estate, to eat grass-roots, and they kept this up for hours. In the meantime, the boy wandered in the great park which bordered the field. He hunted up a beech-nut grove and began to look up at the bushes, to see if a nut from last fall still hung there. But again and again the thought of the trip came over him, as he walked in the park. He pictured to himself what a fine time he would have if he went with the wild geese. To freeze and starve: that he believed he should have to do often enough; but as a recompense, he would escape both work and study.

As he walked there, the old gray leader-geese came up to him, and asked if he had found anything eatable. No, that he hadn't, he replied, and then she tried to help him. She couldn't find any nuts either, but she discovered a couple of dried blossoms that hung on a brier-bush. These the boy ate with a good relish. But he wondered what mother would say, if she knew that he had lived on raw fish and old winter-dried blossoms.

When the wild geese had finally eaten themselves full, they bore off toward the lake again, where they amused themselves with games until almost dinner time.

The wild geese challenged the white goosey-gander to take part in all kinds of sports. They had swimming races, running races, and flying races with him. The big tame one did his level best to hold his own, but the clever wild geese beat him every time. All the while, the boy sat on the goosey-gander's back and encouraged him, and had as much fun as the rest. They laughed and screamed and cackled, and it was remarkable that the people on the estate didn't hear them.

When the wild geese were tired of play, they flew out on the ice and rested for a couple of hours. The afternoon they spent in pretty much the same way as the forenoon. First, a couple of hours feeding, then bathing and play in the water near the ice-edge until sunset, when they immediately arranged themselves for sleep.

"This is just the life that suits me," thought the boy when he crept in under the gander's wing. "But to-morrow, I suppose I'll be sent home."

Before he fell asleep, he lay and thought that if he might go along with the wild geese, he would escape all scoldings because he was lazy. Then he could cut loose every day, and his only worry would be to get something to eat. But he needed so little nowadays; and there would always be a way to get that.

So he pictured the whole scene to himself; what he should see, and all the adventures that he would be in on. Yes, it would be something different from the wear and tear at home. "If I could only go with the wild geese on their travels, I shouldn't grieve because I'd been transformed," thought the boy.

He wasn't afraid of anything – except being sent home; but not even on Wednesday did the geese say anything to him about going. That day passed in the same way as Tuesday; and the boy grew more and more contented with the outdoor life. He thought that he had the lovely Övid Cloister park – which was as large as a forest – all to himself; and he wasn't anxious to go back to the stuffy cabin and the little patch of ground there at home.

On Wednesday he believed that the wild geese thought of keeping him with them; but on Thursday he lost hope again.

Thursday began just like the other days; the geese fed on the broad meadows, and the boy hunted for food in the park. After a while Akka came to him, and asked if he had found anything to eat. No, he had not; and then she looked up a dry caraway herb, that had kept all its tiny seeds intact.

When the boy had eaten, Akka said that she thought he ran around in the park altogether too recklessly. She wondered if he knew how many enemies he had to guard against – he, who was so little. No, he didn't know anything at all about that. Then Akka began to enumerate them for him.

Whenever he walked in the park, she said, that he must look out for the fox and the marten; when he came to the shores of the lake, he must think of the otters; as he sat on the stone wall, he must not forget the weasels, who could creep through the smallest holes; and if he wished to lie down and sleep on a pile of leaves, he must first find out if the adders were not sleeping their winter sleep in the same pile. As soon as he came out in the open fields, he should keep an eye out for hawks and buzzards; for eagles and falcons that soared in the air. In the bramble-bush he could be captured by the sparrow-hawks; magpies and crows were found everywhere and in these he mustn't place any too much confidence. As soon as it was dusk, he must keep his ears open and listen for the big owls, who flew along with such soundless wing-strokes that they could come right up to him before he was aware of their presence.

When the boy heard that there were so many who were after his life, he thought that it would be simply impossible for him to escape. He was not particularly afraid to die, but he didn't like the idea of being eaten up, so he asked Akka what he should do to protect himself from the carnivorous animals.

Akka answered at once that the boy should try to get on good terms with all the small animals in the woods and fields: with the squirrel-folk, and the hare-family; with bullfinches and the titmice and woodpeckers and larks. If he made friends with them, they could warn him against dangers, find hiding places for him, and protect him.

But later in the day, when the boy tried to profit by this counsel, and turned to Sirle Squirrel to ask for his protection, it was evident that he did not care to help him. "You surely can't expect anything from me, or the rest of the small animals!" said Sirle. "Don't you think we know that you are Nils the goose boy, who tore down the swallow's nest last year, crushed the starling's eggs, threw baby crows in the marl-ditch, caught thrushes in snares, and put squirrels in cages? You just help yourself as well as you can; and you may be thankful that we do not form a league against you, and drive you back to your own kind!"

This was just the sort of answer the boy would not have let go unpunished, in the days when he was Nils the goose boy. But now he was only fearful lest the wild geese, too, had found out how wicked he could be. He had been so anxious for fear he wouldn't be permitted to stay with the wild geese, that he hadn't dared to get into the least little mischief since he joined their company. It was true that he didn't have the power to do much harm now, but, little as he was, he could have destroyed many birds' nests, and crushed many eggs, if he'd been in a mind to. Now he had been good. He hadn't pulled a feather from a goose-wing, or given anyone a rude answer; and every morning when he called upon Akka he had always removed his cap and bowed.

All day Thursday he thought it was surely on account of his wickedness that the wild geese did not care to take him along up to Lapland. And in the evening, when he heard that Sirle Squirrel's wife had been stolen, and her children were starving to death, he made up his mind to help them. And we have already been told how well he succeeded.

When the boy came into the park on Friday, he heard the bullfinches sing in every bush, of how Sirle Squirrel's wife had been carried away from her children by cruel robbers, and how Nils, the goose boy, had risked his life among human beings, and taken the little squirrel children to her.

"And who is so honoured in Övid Cloister park now, as Thumbietot!" sang the bullfinch; "he, whom all feared when he was Nils the goose boy? Sirle Squirrel will give him nuts; the poor hares are going to play with him; the small wild animals will carry him on their backs, and fly away with him when Smirre Fox approaches. The titmice are going to warn him against the hawk, and the finches and larks will sing of his valour."

The boy was absolutely certain that both Akka and the wild geese had heard all this. But still Friday passed and not one word did they say about his remaining with them.

Until Saturday the wild geese fed in the fields around Övid, undisturbed by Smirre Fox.

But on Saturday morning, when they came out in the meadows, he lay in wait for them, and chased them from one field to another, and they were not allowed to eat in peace. When Akka understood that he didn't intend to leave them in peace, she came to a decision quickly, raised herself into the air and flew with her flock several miles away, over Färs' plains and Linderödsosen's hills. They did not stop before they had arrived in the district of Vittskövle.

But at Vittskövle the goosey-gander was stolen, and how it happened has already been related. If the boy had not used all his powers to help him he would never again have been found.

On Saturday evening, as the boy came back to Vomb Lake with the goosey-gander, he thought that he had done a good day's work; and he speculated a good deal on what Akka and the wild geese would say to him. The wild geese were not at all sparing in their praises, but they did not say the word he was longing to hear.

Then Sunday came again. A whole week had gone by since the boy had been bewitched, and he was still just as little.

But he didn't appear to be giving himself any extra worry on account of this thing. On Sunday afternoon he sat huddled together in a big, fluffy osier-bush, down by the lake, and blew on a reed-pipe. All around him there sat as many finches and bullfinches and starlings as the bush could well hold – who sang songs which he tried to teach himself to play. But the boy was not at home in this art. He blew so false that the feathers raised themselves on the little music-masters and they shrieked and fluttered in their despair. The boy laughed so heartily at their excitement, that he dropped his pipe.

He began once again, and that went just as badly. Then all the little birds wailed: "To-day you play worse than usual, Thumbietot! You don't take one true note! Where are your thoughts, Thumbietot?"

"They are elsewhere," said the boy – and this was true. He sat there and pondered how long he would be allowed to remain with the wild geese; or if he should be sent home perhaps to-day.

Finally the boy threw down his pipe and jumped from the bush. He had seen Akka, and all the wild geese, coming toward him in a long row. They walked so uncommonly slow and dignified-like, that the boy immediately understood that now he should learn what they intended to do with him.

When they stopped at last, Akka said: "You may well have reason to wonder at me, Thumbietot, who have not said thanks to you for saving me from Smirre Fox. But I am one of those who would rather give thanks by deeds than words. I have sent word to the elf that bewitched you. At first he didn't want to hear anything about curing you; but I have sent message upon message to him, and told him how well you have conducted yourself among us. He greets you, and says, that as soon as you turn back home, you shall be human again."

But think of it! Just as happy as the boy had been when the wild geese began to speak, just that miserable was he when they had finished. He didn't say a word, but turned away and wept.

"What in all the world is this?" said Akka. "It looks as though you had expected more of me than I have offered you."

But the boy was thinking of the care-free days and the banter; and of adventure and freedom and travel, high above the earth, that he should miss, and he actually bawled with grief. "I don't want to be human," said he. "I want to go with you to Lapland." "I'll tell you something," said Akka. "That elf is very touchy, and I'm afraid that if you do not accept his offer now, it will be difficult for you to coax him another time."

It was a strange thing about that boy – as long as he had lived, he had never cared for anyone. He had not cared for his father or mother; not for the school teacher; not for his school-mates; nor for the boys in the neighbourhood. All that they had wished to have him do – whether it had been work or play – he had only thought tiresome. Therefore there was no one whom he missed or longed for.

The only ones that he had come anywhere near agreeing with, were Osa, the goose girl, and little Mats – a couple of children who had tended geese in the fields, like himself. But he didn't care particularly for them either. No, far from it! "I don't want to be human," bawled the boy. "I want to go with you to Lapland. That's why I've been good for a whole week!" "I don't want to forbid you to come along with us as far as you like," said Akka, "but think first if you wouldn't rather go home again. A day may come when you will regret this."

"No," said the boy, "that's nothing to regret. I have never been as well off as here with you."

"Well then, let it be as you wish," said Akka.

"Thanks!" said the boy, and he felt so happy that he had to cry for very joy – just as he had cried before from sorrow.

GLIMMINGE CASTLE

BLACK RATS AND GRAY RATS

In south-eastern Skåne – not far from the sea there is an old castle called Glimminge. It is a big and substantial stone house; and can be seen over the plain for miles around. It is not more than four stories high; but it is so ponderous that an ordinary farmhouse, which stands on the same estate, looks like a little children's playhouse in comparison.

The big stone house has such thick ceilings and partitions that there is scarcely room in its interior for anything but the thick walls. The stairs are narrow, the entrances small; and the rooms few. That the walls might retain their strength, there are only the fewest number of windows in the upper stories, and none at all are found in the lower ones. In the old war times, the people were just as glad that they could shut themselves up in a strong and massive house like this, as one is nowadays to be able to creep into furs in a snapping cold winter. But when the time of peace came, they did not care to live in the dark and cold stone halls of the old castle any longer. They have long since deserted the big Glimminge castle, and moved into dwelling places where the light and air can penetrate.

At the time when Nils Holgersson wandered around with the wild geese, there were no human beings in Glimminge castle; but for all that, it was not without inhabitants. Every summer there lived a stork couple in a large nest on the roof. In a nest in the attic lived a pair of gray owls; in the secret passages hung bats; in the kitchen oven lived an old cat; and down in the cellar there were hundreds of old black rats.

Rats are not held in very high esteem by other animals; but the black rats at Glimminge castle were an exception. They were always mentioned with respect, because they had shown great valour in battle with their enemies; and much endurance under the great misfortunes which had befallen their kind. They nominally belong to a rat-folk who, at one time, had been very numerous and powerful, but who were now dying out. During a long period of time, the black rats owned Skåne and the whole country. They were found in every cellar; in every attic; in larders and cowhouses and barns; in breweries and flour-mills; in churches and castles; in every man-constructed building. But now they were banished from all this – and were almost exterminated. Only in one and another old and secluded place could one run across a few of them; and nowhere were they to be found in such large numbers as in Glimminge castle.

When an animal folk die out, it is generally the human kind who are the cause of it; but that was not the case in this instance. The people had certainly struggled with the black rats, but they had not been able to do them any harm worth mentioning. Those who had conquered them were an animal folk of their own kind, who were called gray rats.

These gray rats had not lived in the land since time immemorial, like the black rats, but descended from a couple of poor immigrants who landed in Malmö from a Libyan sloop about a hundred years ago. They were homeless, starved-out wretches who stuck close to the harbour, swam among the piles under the bridges, and ate refuse that was thrown in the water. They never ventured into the city, which was owned by the black rats.

But gradually, as the gray rats increased in number they grew bolder. At first they moved over to some waste places and condemned old houses which the black rats had abandoned. They hunted their food in gutters and dirt heaps, and made the most of all the rubbish that the black rats did not deign to take care of. They were hardy, contented and fearless; and within a few years they had become so powerful that they undertook to drive the black rats out of Malmö. They took from them attics, cellars and storerooms, starved them out or bit them to death for they were not at all afraid of fighting.

When Malmö was captured, they marched forward in small and large companies to conquer the whole country. It is almost impossible to comprehend why the black rats did not muster themselves into a great, united war-expedition to exterminate the gray rats, while these were still few in numbers. But the black rats were so certain of their power that they could not believe it possible for them to lose it. They sat still on their estates, and in the meantime the gray rats took from them farm after farm, city after city. They were starved out, forced out, rooted out. In Skåne they had not been able to maintain themselves in a single place except Glimminge castle.

The old castle had such secure walls and such few rat passages led through these, that the black rats had managed to protect themselves, and to prevent the gray rats from crowding in. Night after night, year after year, the struggle had continued between the aggressors and the defenders; but the black rats had kept faithful watch, and had fought with the utmost contempt for death, and, thanks to the fine old house, they had always conquered.

It will have to be acknowledged that as long as the black rats were in power they were as much shunned by all other living creatures as the gray rats are in our day – and for just cause; they had thrown themselves upon poor, fettered prisoners, and tortured them; they had ravished the dead; they had stolen the last turnip from the cellars of the poor; bitten off the feet of sleeping geese; robbed eggs and chicks from the hens; and committed a thousand depredations. But since they had come to grief, all this seemed to have been forgotten; and no one could help but marvel at the last of a race that had held out so long against its enemies.

The gray rats that lived in the courtyard at Glimminge and in the vicinity, kept up a continuous warfare and tried to watch out for every possible chance to capture the castle. One would fancy that they should have allowed the little company of black rats to occupy Glimminge castle in peace, since they themselves had acquired all the rest of the country; but you may be sure this thought never occurred to them. They were wont to say that it was a point of honour with them to conquer the black rats at some time or other. But those who were acquainted with the gray rats must have known that it was because the human kind used Glimminge castle as a grain store-house that the gray ones could not rest before they had taken possession of the place.

THE STORK

Monday, March twenty-eighth.

Early one morning the wild geese who stood and slept on the ice in Vomb Lake were awakened by long calls from the air. "Trirop, Trirop!" it sounded, "Trianut, the crane, sends greetings to Akka, the wild goose, and her flock. To-morrow will be the day of the great crane dance on Kullaberg."

Akka raised her head and answered at once: "Greetings and thanks!

Greetings and thanks!"

With that, the cranes flew farther; and the wild geese heard them for a long while – where they travelled and called out over every field, and every wooded hill: "Trianut sends greetings. To-morrow will be the day of the great crane dance on Kullaberg."

The wild geese were very happy over this invitation. "You're in luck," they said to the white goosey-gander, "to be permitted to attend the great crane dance on Kullaberg!" "Is it then so remarkable to see cranes dance?" asked the goosey-gander. "It is something that you have never even dreamed about!" replied the wild geese.

"Now we must think out what we shall do with Thumbietot to-morrow – so that no harm can come to him, while we run over to Kullaberg," said Akka. "Thumbietot shall not be left alone!" said the goosey-gander. "If the cranes won't let him see their dance, then I'll stay with him."

"No human being has ever been permitted to attend the Animal's Congress, at Kullaberg," said Akka, "and I shouldn't dare to take Thumbietot along. But we'll discuss this more at length later in the day. Now we must first and foremost think about getting something to eat."

With that Akka gave the signal to adjourn. On this day she also sought her feeding-place a good distance away, on Smirre Fox's account, and she didn't alight until she came to the swampy meadows a little south of Glimminge castle.

All that day the boy sat on the shores of a little pond, and blew on reed-pipes. He was out of sorts because he shouldn't see the crane dance, and he just couldn't say a word, either to the goosey-gander, or to any of the others.

It was pretty hard that Akka should still doubt him. When a boy had given up being human, just to travel around with a few wild geese, they surely ought to understand that he had no desire to betray them. Then, too, they ought to understand that when he had renounced so much to follow them, it was their duty to let him see all the wonders they could show him.

"I'll have to speak my mind right out to them," thought he. But hour after hour passed, still he hadn't come round to it. It may sound remarkable – but the boy had actually acquired a kind of respect for the old leader-geese. He felt that it was not easy to pit his will against hers.

On one side of the swampy meadow, where the wild geese fed, there was a broad stone hedge. Toward evening when the boy finally raised his head, to speak to Akka, his glance happened to rest on this hedge. He uttered a little cry of surprise, and all the wild geese instantly looked up, and stared in the same direction. At first, both the geese and the boy thought that all the round, gray stones in the hedge had acquired legs, and were starting on a run; but soon they saw that it was a company of rats who ran over it. They moved very rapidly, and ran forward, tightly packed, line upon line, and were so numerous that, for some time, they covered the entire stone hedge.

The boy had been afraid of rats, even when he was a big, strong human being. Then what must his feelings be now, when he was so tiny that two or three of them could overpower him? One shudder after another travelled down his spinal column as he stood and stared at them.

But strangely enough, the wild geese seemed to feel the same aversion toward the rats that he did. They did not speak to them; and when they were gone, they shook themselves as if their feathers had been mud-spattered.

"Such a lot of gray rats abroad!" said Iksi from Vassipaire. "That's not a good omen."

The boy intended to take advantage of this opportunity to say to Akka that he thought she ought to let him go with them to Kullaberg, but he was prevented anew, for all of a sudden a big bird came down in the midst of the geese.

One could believe, when one looked at this bird, that he had borrowed body, neck and head from a little white goose. But in addition to this, he had procured for himself large black wings, long red legs, and a thick bill, which was too large for the little head, and weighed it down until it gave him a sad and worried look.

Akka at once straightened out the folds of her wings, and curtsied many times as she approached the stork. She wasn't specially surprised to see him in Skåne so early in the spring, because she knew that the male storks are in the habit of coming in good season to take a look at the nest, and see that it hasn't been damaged during the winter, before the female storks go to the trouble of flying over the East sea. But she wondered very much what it might signify that he sought her out, since storks prefer to associate with members of their own family.

"I can hardly believe that there is anything wrong with your house, Herr Ermenrich," said Akka.

It was apparent now that it is true what they say: a stork can seldom open his bill without complaining. But what made the thing he said sound even more doleful was that it was difficult for him to speak out. He stood for a long time and only clattered with his bill; afterward he spoke in a hoarse and feeble voice. He complained about everything: the nest – which was situated at the very top of the roof-tree at Glimminge castle – had been totally destroyed by winter storms; and no food could he get any more in Skåne. The people of Skåne were appropriating all his possessions. They dug out his marshes and laid waste his swamps. He intended to move away from this country, and never return to it again.

While the stork grumbled, Akka, the wild goose who had neither home nor protection, could not help thinking to herself: "If I had things as comfortable as you have, Herr Ermenrich, I should be above complaining. You have remained a free and wild bird; and still you stand so well with human beings that no one will fire a shot at you, or steal an egg from your nest." But all this she kept to herself. To the stork she only remarked, that she couldn't believe he would be willing to move from a house where storks had resided ever since it was built.

Then the stork suddenly asked the geese if they had seen the gray rats who were marching toward Glimminge castle. When Akka replied that she had seen the horrid creatures, he began to tell her about the brave black rats who, for years, had defended the castle. "But this night Glimminge castle will fall into the gray rats' power," sighed the stork.

"And why just this night, Herr Ermenrich?" asked Akka.

"Well, because nearly all the black rats went over to Kullaberg last night," said the stork, "since they had counted on all the rest of the animals also hurrying there. But you see that the gray rats have stayed at home; and now they are mustering to storm the castle to-night, when it will be defended by only a few old creatures who are too feeble to go over to Kullaberg. They'll probably accomplish their purpose. But I have lived here in harmony with the black rats for so many years, that it does not please me to live in a place inhabited by their enemies."

Akka understood now that the stork had become so enraged over the gray rats' mode of action, that he had sought her out as an excuse to complain about them. But after the manner of storks, he certainly had done nothing to avert the disaster. "Have you sent word to the black rats, Herr Ermenrich?" she asked. "No," replied the stork, "that wouldn't be of any use. Before they can get back, the castle will be taken." "You mustn't be so sure of that, Herr Ermenrich," said Akka. "I know an old wild goose, I do, who will gladly prevent outrages of this kind."

When Akka said this, the stork raised his head and stared at her. And it was not surprising, for Akka had neither claws nor bill that were fit for fighting; and, in the bargain, she was a day bird, and as soon as it grew dark she fell helplessly asleep, while the rats did their fighting at night.

But Akka had evidently made up her mind to help the black rats. She called Iksi from Vassijaure, and ordered him to take the wild geese over to Vonib Lake; and when the geese made excuses, she said authoritatively: "I believe it will be best for us all that you obey me. I must fly over to the big stone house, and if you follow me, the people on the place will be sure to see us, and shoot us down. The only one that I want to take with me on this trip is Thumbietot. He can be of great service to me because he has good eyes, and can keep awake at night."

The boy was in his most contrary mood that day. And when he heard what Akka said, he raised himself to his full height and stepped forward, his hands behind him and his nose in the air, and he intended to say that he, most assuredly, did not wish to take a hand in the fight with gray rats. She might look around for assistance elsewhere.

But the instant the boy was seen, the stork began to move. He had stood before, as storks generally stand, with head bent downward and the bill pressed against the neck. But now a gurgle was heard deep down in his windpipe; as though he would have laughed. Quick as a flash, he lowered the bill, grabbed the boy, and tossed him a couple of metres in the air. This feat he performed seven times, while the boy shrieked and the geese shouted: "What are you trying to do, Herr Ermenrich? That's not a frog. That's a human being, Herr Ermenrich."

Finally the stork put the boy down entirely unharmed. Thereupon he said to Akka, "I'll fly back to Glimminge castle now, mother Akka. All who live there were very much worried when I left. You may be sure they'll be very glad when I tell them that Akka, the wild goose, and Thumbietot, the human elf, are on their way to rescue them." With that the stork craned his neck, raised his wings, and darted off like an arrow when it leaves a well-drawn bow. Akka understood that he was making fun of her, but she didn't let it bother her. She waited until the boy had found his wooden shoes, which the stork had shaken off; then she put him on her back and followed the stork. On his own account, the boy made no objection, and said not a word about not wanting to go along. He had become so furious with the stork, that he actually sat and puffed. That long, red-legged thing believed he was of no account just because he was little; but he would show him what kind of a man Nils Holgersson from West Vemminghög was.

A couple of moments later Akka stood in the storks' nest. It had a wheel for foundation, and over this lay several grass-mats, and some twigs. The nest was so old that many shrubs and plants had taken root up there; and when the mother stork sat on her eggs in the round hole in the middle of the nest, she not only had the beautiful outlook over a goodly portion of Skåne to enjoy, but she had also the wild brier-blossoms and house-leeks to look upon.

Both Akka and the boy saw immediately that something was going on here which turned upside down the most regular order. On the edge of the stork-nest sat two gray owls, an old, gray-streaked cat, and a dozen old, decrepit rats with protruding teeth and watery eyes. They were not exactly the sort of animals one usually finds living peaceably together.

Not one of them turned around to look at Akka, or to bid her welcome. They thought of nothing except to sit and stare at some long, gray lines, which came into sight here and there – on the winter-naked meadows.

All the black rats were silent. One could see that they were in deep despair, and probably knew that they could neither defend their own lives nor the castle. The two owls sat and rolled their big eyes, and twisted their great, encircling eyebrows, and talked in hollow, ghost-like voices, about the awful cruelty of the gray rats, and that they would have to move away from their nest, because they had heard it said of them that they spared neither eggs nor baby birds. The old gray-streaked cat was positive that the gray rats would bite him to death, since they were coming into the castle in such great numbers, and he scolded the black rats incessantly. "How could you be so idiotic as to let your best fighters go away?" said he. "How could you trust the gray rats? It is absolutely unpardonable!"

The twelve black rats did not say a word. But the stork, despite his misery, could not refrain from teasing the cat. "Don't worry so, Monsie house-cat!" said he. "Can't you see that mother Akka

and Thumbietot have come to save the castle? You can be certain that they'll succeed. Now I must stand up to sleep – and I do so with the utmost calm. To-morrow, when I awaken, there won't be a single gray rat in Glimminge castle."

The boy winked at Akka, and made a sign – as the stork stood upon the very edge of the nest, with one leg drawn up, to sleep – that he wanted to push him down to the ground; but Akka restrained him. She did not seem to be the least bit angry. Instead, she said in a confident tone of voice: "It would be pretty poor business if one who is as old as I am could not manage to get out of worse difficulties than this. If only Mr. and Mrs. Owl, who can stay awake all night, will fly off with a couple of messages for me, I think that all will go well."

Both owls were willing. Then Akka bade the gentleman owl that he should go and seek the black rats who had gone off, and counsel them to hurry home immediately. The lady owl she sent to Flammea, the steeple-owl, who lived in Lund cathedral, with a commission which was so secret that Akka only dared to confide it to her in a whisper.

THE RAT CHARMER

It was getting on toward midnight when the gray rats after a diligent search succeeded in finding an open air-hole in the cellar. This was pretty high upon the wall; but the rats got up on one another's shoulders, and it wasn't long before the most daring among them sat in the air-hole, ready to force its way into Glimminge castle, outside whose walls so many of its forebears had fallen.

The gray rat sat still for a moment in the hole, and waited for an attack from within. The leader of the defenders was certainly away, but she assumed that the black rats who were still in the castle wouldn't surrender without a struggle. With thumping heart she listened for the slightest sound, but everything remained quiet. Then the leader of the gray rats plucked up courage and jumped down in the coal-black cellar.

One after another of the gray rats followed the leader. They all kept very quiet; and all expected to be ambushed by the black rats. Not until so many of them had crowded into the cellar that the floor couldn't hold any more, did they venture farther.

Although they had never before been inside the building, they had no difficulty in finding their way. They soon found the passages in the walls which the black rats had used to get to the upper floors. Before they began to clamber up these narrow and steep steps, they listened again with great attention. They felt more frightened because the black rats held themselves aloof in this way, than if they had met them in open battle. They could hardly believe their luck when they reached the first story without any mishaps.

Immediately upon their entrance the gray rats caught the scent of the grain, which was stored in great bins on the floor. But it was not as yet time for them to begin to enjoy their conquest. They searched first, with the utmost caution, through the sombre, empty rooms. They ran up in the fireplace, which stood on the floor in the old castle kitchen, and they almost tumbled into the well, in the inner room. Not one of the narrow peep-holes did they leave uninspected, but they found no black rats. When this floor was wholly in their possession, they began, with the same caution, to acquire the next. Then they had to venture on a bold and dangerous climb through the walls, while, with breathless anxiety, they awaited an assault from the enemy. And although they were tempted by the most delicious odour from the grain bins, they forced themselves most systematically to inspect the old-time warriors' pillar-propped kitchen; their stone table, and fireplace; the deep window-niches, and the hole in the floor – which in olden time had been opened to pour down boiling pitch on the intruding enemy.

All this time the black rats were invisible. The gray ones groped their way to the third story, and into the lord of the castle's great banquet hall – which stood there cold and empty, like all the other rooms in the old house. They even groped their way to the upper story, which had but one big, barren room. The only place they did not think of exploring was the big stork-nest on the roof – where, just at this time, the lady owl awakened Akka, and informed her that Flammaea, the steeple owl, had granted her request, and had sent her the thing she wished for.

Since the gray rats had so conscientiously inspected the entire castle, they felt at ease. They took it for granted that the black rats had flown, and didn't intend to offer any resistance; and, with light hearts, they ran up into the grain bins.

But the gray rats had hardly swallowed the first wheat-grains, before the sound of a little shrill pipe was heard from the yard. The gray rats raised their heads, listened anxiously, ran a few steps as if they intended to leave the bin, then they turned back and began to eat once more.

Again the pipe sounded a sharp and piercing note – and now something wonderful happened. One rat, two rats – yes, a whole lot of rats left the grain, jumped from the bins and hurried down cellar by the shortest cut, to get out of the house. Still there were many gray rats left. These thought of all the toil and trouble it had cost them to win Glimminge castle, and they did not want to leave

it. But again they caught the tones from the pipe, and had to follow them. With wild excitement they rushed up from the bins, slid down through the narrow holes in the walls, and tumbled over each other in their eagerness to get out.

In the middle of the courtyard stood a tiny creature, who blew upon a pipe. All round him he had a whole circle of rats who listened to him, astonished and fascinated; and every moment brought more. Once he took the pipe from his lips – only for a second – put his thumb to his nose and wiggled his fingers at the gray rats; and then it looked as if they wanted to throw themselves on him and bite him to death; but as soon as he blew on his pipe they were in his power.

When the tiny creature had played all the gray rats out of Glimminge castle, he began to wander slowly from the courtyard out on the highway; and all the gray rats followed him, because the tones from that pipe sounded so sweet to their ears that they could not resist them.

The tiny creature walked before them and charmed them along with him, on the road to Vallby. He led them into all sorts of crooks and turns and bends – on through hedges and down into ditches – and wherever he went they had to follow. He blew continuously on his pipe, which appeared to be made from an animal's horn, although the horn was so small that, in our days, there were no animals from whose foreheads it could have been broken. No one knew, either, who had made it. Flammea, the steeple-owl, had found it in a niche, in Lund cathedral. She had shown it to Bataki, the raven; and they had both figured out that this was the kind of horn that was used in former times by those who wished to gain power over rats and mice. But the raven was Akka's friend; and it was from him she had learned that Flammea owned a treasure like this. And it was true that the rats could not resist the pipe. The boy walked before them and played as long as the starlight lasted – and all the while they followed him. He played at daybreak; he played at sunrise; and the whole time the entire procession of gray rats followed him, and were enticed farther and farther away from the big grain loft at Glimminge castle.

THE GREAT CRANE DANCE ON KULLABERG

Tuesday, March twenty-ninth.

Although there are many magnificent buildings in Skåne, it must be acknowledged that there's not one among them that has such pretty walls as old Kullaberg.

Kullaberg is low and rather long. It is not by any means a big or imposing mountain. On its broad summit you'll find woods and grain fields, and one and another heather-heath. Here and there, round heather-knolls and barren cliffs rise up. It is not especially pretty up there. It looks a good deal like all the other upland places in Skåne.

He who walks along the path which runs across the middle of the mountain, can't help feeling a little disappointed. Then he happens, perhaps, to turn away from the path, and wanders off toward the mountain's sides and looks down over the bluffs; and then, all at once, he will discover so much that is worth seeing, he hardly knows how he'll find time to take in the whole of it. For it happens that Kullaberg does not stand on the land, with plains and valleys around it, like other mountains; but it has plunged into the sea, as far out as it could get. Not even the tiniest strip of land lies below the mountain to protect it against the breakers; but these reach all the way up to the mountain walls, and can polish and mould them to suit themselves. This is why the walls stand there as richly ornamented as the sea and its helpmeet, the wind, have been able to effect. You'll find steep ravines that are deeply chiselled in the mountain's sides; and black crags that have become smooth and shiny under the constant lashing of the winds. There are solitary rock-columns that spring right up out of the water, and dark grottoes with narrow entrances. There are barren, perpendicular precipices, and soft, leaf-clad inclines. There are small points, and small inlets, and small rolling stones that are rattlingly washed up and down with every dashing breaker. There are majestic cliff-arches that project over the water. There are sharp stones that are constantly sprayed by a white foam; and others that mirror themselves in unchangeable dark-green still water. There are giant troll-caverns shaped in the rock, and great crevices that lure the wanderer to venture into the mountain's depths – all the way to Kullman's Hollow.

And over and around all these cliffs and rocks crawl entangled tendrils and weeds. Trees grow there also, but the wind's power is so great that trees have to transform themselves into clinging vines, that they may get a firm hold on the steep precipices. The oaks creep along on the ground, while their foliage hangs over them like a low ceiling; and long-limbed beeches stand in the ravines like great leaf-tents.

These remarkable mountain walls, with the blue sea beneath them, and the clear penetrating air above them, is what makes Kullaberg so dear to the people that great crowds of them haunt the place every day as long as the summer lasts. But it is more difficult to tell what it is that makes it so attractive to animals, that every year they gather there for a big play-meeting. This is a custom that has been observed since time immemorial; and one should have been there when the first sea-wave was dashed into foam against the shore, to be able to explain just why Kullaberg was chosen as a rendezvous, in preference to all other places.

When the meeting is to take place, the stags and roebucks and hares and foxes and all the other four-footers make the journey to Kullaberg the night before, so as not to be observed by the human beings. Just before sunrise they all march up to the playground, which is a heather-heath on the left side of the road, and not very far from the mountain's most extreme point. The playground is inclosed on all sides by round knolls, which conceal it from any and all who do not happen to come right upon it. And in the month of March it is not at all likely that any pedestrians will stray off up there. All the strangers who usually stroll around on the rocks, and clamber up the mountain's sides the fall storms have driven away these many months past. And the lighthouse keeper out there on the point; the old fru on the mountain farm, and the mountain peasant and his house-folk go their accustomed ways, and do not run about on the desolate heather-fields.

When the four-footers have arrived on the playground, they take their places on the round knolls. Each animal family keeps to itself, although it is understood that, on a day like this, universal peace reigns, and no one need fear attack. On this day a little hare might wander over to the foxes' hill, without losing as much as one of his long ears. But still the animals arrange themselves into separate groups. This is an old custom.

After they have all taken their places, they begin to look around for the birds. It is always beautiful weather on this day. The cranes are good weather prophets, and would not call the animals together if they expected rain. Although the air is clear, and nothing obstructs the vision, the four-footers see no birds. This is strange. The sun stands high in the heavens, and the birds should already be on their way.

But what the animals, on the other hand, observe, is one and another little dark cloud that comes slowly forward over the plain. And look! one of these clouds comes gradually along the coast of Öresund, and up toward Kullaberg. When the cloud has come just over the playground it stops, and, simultaneously, the entire cloud begins to ring and chirp, as if it was made of nothing but tone. It rises and sinks, rises and sinks, but all the while it rings and chirps. At last the whole cloud falls down over a knoll – all at once – and the next instant the knoll is entirely covered with gray larks, pretty red-white-gray bulfinches, speckled starlings and greenish-yellow titmice.

Soon after that, another cloud comes over the plain. This stops over every bit of land; over peasant cottage and palace; over towns and cities; over farms and railway stations; over fishing hamlets and sugar refineries. Every time it stops, it draws to itself a little whirling column of gray dust-grains from the ground. In this way it grows and grows. And at last, when it is all gathered up and heads for Kullaberg, it is no longer a cloud but a whole mist, which is so big that it throws a shadow on the ground all the way from Höganäs to Mölle. When it stops over the playground it hides the sun; and for a long while it had to rain gray sparrows on one of the knolls, before those who had been flying in the innermost part of the mist could again catch a glimpse of the daylight.

But still the biggest of these bird-clouds is the one which now appears. This has been formed of birds who have travelled from every direction to join it. It is dark bluish-gray, and no sun-ray can penetrate it. It is full of the ghastliest noises, the most frightful shrieks, the grimmest laughter, and most ill-luck-boding croaking! All on the playground are glad when it finally resolves itself into a storm of fluttering and croaking: of crows and jackdaws and rooks and ravens.

Thereupon not only clouds are seen in the heavens, but a variety of stripes and figures. Then straight, dotted lines appear in the East and Northeast. These are forest-birds from Göinge districts: black grouse and wood grouse who come flying in long lines a couple of metres apart. Swimming-birds that live around Måkläppen, just out of Falsterbo, now come floating over Öresund in many extraordinary figures: in triangular and long curves; in sharp hooks and semicircles.

To the great reunion held the year that Nils Holgersson travelled around with the wild geese, came Akka and her flock – later than all the others. And that was not to be wondered at, for Akka had to fly over the whole of Skåne to get to Kullaberg. Beside, as soon as she awoke, she had been obliged to go out and hunt for Thumbietot, who, for many hours, had gone and played to the gray rats, and lured them far away from Glimminge castle. Mr. Owl had returned with the news that the black rats would be at home immediately after sunrise; and there was no longer any danger in letting the steeple-owl's pipe be hushed, and to give the gray rats the liberty to go where they pleased.

But it was not Akka who discovered the boy where he walked with his long following, and quickly sank down over him and caught him with the bill and swung into the air with him, but it was Herr Ermenrich, the stork! For Herr Ermenrich had also gone out to look for him; and after he had borne him up to the stork-nest, he begged his forgiveness for having treated him with disrespect the evening before.

This pleased the boy immensely, and the stork and he became good friends. Akka, too, showed him that she felt very kindly toward him; she stroked her old head several times against his arms, and commended him because he had helped those who were in trouble.

But this one must say to the boy's credit: that he did not want to accept praise which he had not earned. "No, mother Akka," he said, "you mustn't think that I lured the gray rats away to help the black ones. I only wanted to show Herr Ermenrich that I was of some consequence."

He had hardly said this before Akka turned to the stork and asked if he thought it was advisable to take Thumbietot along to Kullaberg. "I mean, that we can rely on him as upon ourselves," said she. The stork at once advised, most enthusiastically, that Thumbietot be permitted to come along. "Certainly you shall take Thumbietot along to Kullaberg, mother Akka," said he. "It is fortunate for us that we can repay him for all that he has endured this night for our sakes. And since it still grieves me to think that I did not conduct myself in a becoming manner toward him the other evening, it is I who will carry him on my back – all the way to the meeting place."

There isn't much that tastes better than to receive praise from those who are themselves wise and capable; and the boy had certainly never felt so happy as he did when the wild goose and the stork talked about him in this way.

Thus the boy made the trip to Kullaberg, riding stork-back. Although he knew that this was a great honour, it caused him much anxiety, for Herr Ermenrich was a master flyer, and started off at a very different pace from the wild geese. While Akka flew her straight way with even wing-strokes, the stork amused himself by performing a lot of flying tricks. Now he lay still in an immeasurable height, and floated in the air without moving his wings, now he flung himself downward with such sudden haste that it seemed as though he would fall to the ground, helpless as a stone; now he had lots of fun flying all around Akka, in great and small circles, like a whirlwind. The boy had never been on a ride of this sort before; and although he sat there all the while in terror, he had to acknowledge to himself that he had never before known what a good flight meant.

Only a single pause was made during the journey, and that was at Vomb Lake when Akka joined her travelling companions, and called to them that the gray rats had been vanquished. After that, the travellers flew straight to Kullaberg.

There they descended to the knoll reserved for the wild geese; and as the boy let his glance wander from knoll to knoll, he saw on one of them the many-pointed antlers of the stags; and on another, the gray herons' neck-crests. One knoll was red with foxes, one was gray with rats; one was covered with black ravens who shrieked continually, one with larks who simply couldn't keep still, but kept on throwing themselves in the air and singing for very joy.

Just as it has ever been the custom on Kullaberg, it was the crows who began the day's games and frolics with their flying-dance. They divided themselves into two flocks, that flew toward each other, met, turned, and began all over again. This dance had many repetitions, and appeared to the spectators who were not familiar with the dance as altogether too monotonous. The crows were very proud of their dance, but all the others were glad when it was over. It appeared to the animals about as gloomy and meaningless as the winter-storms' play with the snow-flakes. It depressed them to watch it, and they waited eagerly for something that should give them a little pleasure.

They did not have to wait in vain, either; for as soon as the crows had finished, the hares came running. They dashed forward in a long row, without any apparent order. In some of the figures, one single hare came; in others, they ran three and four abreast. They had all raised themselves on two legs, and they rushed forward with such rapidity that their long ears swayed in all directions. As they ran, they spun round, made high leaps and beat their forepaws against their hind-paws so that they rattled. Some performed a long succession of somersaults, others doubled themselves up and rolled over like wheels; one stood on one leg and swung round; one walked upon his forepaws. There was no regulation whatever, but there was much that was droll in the hares' play; and the many animals who

stood and watched them began to breathe faster. Now it was spring; joy and rapture were advancing. Winter was over; summer was coming. Soon it was only play to live.

When the hares had romped themselves out, it was the great forest birds' turn to perform. Hundreds of wood-grouse in shining dark-brown array, and with bright red eyebrows, flung themselves up into a great oak that stood in the centre of the playground. The one who sat upon the topmost branch fluffed up his feathers, lowered his wings, and lifted his tail so that the white covert-feathers were seen. Thereupon he stretched his neck and sent forth a couple of deep notes from his thick throat. "Tjack, tjack, tjack," it sounded. More than this he could not utter. It only gurgled a few times way down in the throat. Then he closed his eyes and whispered: "Sis, sis, sis. Hear how pretty! Sis, sis, sis." At the same time he fell into such an ecstasy that he no longer knew what was going on around him.

While the first wood grouse was sissing, the three nearest – under him – began to sing; and before they had finished their song, the ten who sat lower down joined in; and thus it continued from branch to branch, until the entire hundred grouse sang and gurgled and sissed. They all fell into the same ecstasy during their song, and this affected the other animals like a contagious transport. Lately the blood had flowed lightly and agreeably; now it began to grow heavy and hot. "Yes, this is surely spring," thought all the animal folk. "Winter chill has vanished. The fires of spring burn over the earth."

When the black grouse saw that the brown grouse were having such success, they could no longer keep quiet. As there was no tree for them to light on, they rushed down on the playground, where the heather stood so high that only their beautifully turned tail-feathers and their thick bills were visible – and they began to sing: "Orr, orr, orr."

Just as the black grouse began to compete with the brown grouse, something unprecedented happened. While all the animals thought of nothing but the grouse-game, a fox stole slowly over to the wild geese's knoll. He glided very cautiously, and came way up on the knoll before anyone noticed him. Suddenly a goose caught sight of him; and as she could not believe that a fox had sneaked in among the geese for any good purpose, she began to cry: "Have a care, wild geese! Have a care!" The fox struck her across the throat – mostly, perhaps, because he wanted to make her keep quiet – but the wild geese had already heard the cry and they all raised themselves in the air. And when they had flown up, the animals saw Smirre Fox standing on the wild geese's knoll, with a dead goose in his mouth.

But because he had in this way broken the play-day's peace, such a punishment was meted out to Smirre Fox that, for the rest of his days, he must regret he had not been able to control his thirst for revenge, but had attempted to approach Akka and her flock in this manner.

He was immediately surrounded by a crowd of foxes, and doomed in accordance with an old custom, which demands that whosoever disturbs the peace on the great play-day, must go into exile. Not a fox wished to lighten the sentence, since they all knew that the instant they attempted anything of the sort, they would be driven from the playground, and would nevermore be permitted to enter it. Banishment was pronounced upon Smirre without opposition. He was forbidden to remain in Skåne. He was banished from wife and kindred; from hunting grounds, home, resting places and retreats, which he had hitherto owned; and he must tempt fortune in foreign lands. So that all foxes in Skåne should know that Smirre was outlawed in the district, the oldest of the foxes bit off his right earlap. As soon as this was done, all the young foxes began to yowl from blood-thirst, and threw themselves on Smirre. For him there was no alternative except to take flight; and with all the young foxes in hot pursuit, he rushed away from Kullaberg.

All this happened while black grouse and brown grouse were going on with their games. But these birds lose themselves so completely in their song, that they neither hear nor see. Nor had they permitted themselves to be disturbed.

The forest birds' contest was barely over, before the stags from Håckeberga came forward to show their wrestling game. There were several pairs of stags who fought at the same time. They rushed at each other with tremendous force, struck their antlers dashing together, so that their points were entangled; and tried to force each other backward. The heather-heaths were torn up beneath their hoofs; the breath came like smoke from their nostrils; out of their throats strained hideous bellowings, and the froth oozed down on their shoulders.

On the knolls round about there was breathless silence while the skilled stag-wrestlers clinched. In all the animals new emotions were awakened. Each and all felt courageous and, strong; enlivened by returning powers; born again with the spring; sprightly, and ready for all kinds of adventures. They felt no enmity toward each other, although, everywhere, wings were lifted, neck-feathers raised and claws sharpened. If the stags from Håckeberga had continued another instant, a wild struggle would have arisen on the knolls, for all had been gripped with a burning desire to show that they too were full of life because the winter's impotence was over and strength surged through their bodies.

But the stags stopped wrestling just at the right moment, and instantly a whisper went from knoll to knoll: "The cranes are coming!"

And then came the gray, dusk-clad birds with plumes in their wings, and red feather-ornaments on their necks. The big birds with their tall legs, their slender throats, their small heads, came gliding down the knoll with an abandon that was full of mystery. As they glided forward they swung round – half flying, half dancing. With wings gracefully lifted, they moved with an inconceivable rapidity. There was something marvellous and strange about their dance. It was as though gray shadows had played a game which the eye could scarcely follow. It was as if they had learned it from the mists that hover over desolate morasses. There was witchcraft in it. All those who had never before been on Kullaberg understood why the whole meeting took its name from the crane's dance. There was wildness in it; but yet the feeling which it awakened was a delicious longing. No one thought any more about struggling. Instead, both the winged and those who had no wings, all wanted to raise themselves eternally, lift themselves above the clouds, seek that which was hidden beyond them, leave the oppressive body that dragged them down to earth and soar away toward the infinite.

Such longing after the unattainable, after the hidden mysteries back of this life, the animals felt only once a year; and this was on the day when they beheld the great crane dance.

IN RAINY WEATHER

Wednesday, March thirtieth.

It was the first rainy day of the trip. As long as the wild geese had remained in the vicinity of Vomb Lake, they had had beautiful weather; but on the day when they set out to travel farther north, it began to rain, and for several hours the boy had to sit on the goose-back, soaking wet, and shivering with the cold.

In the morning when they started, it had been clear and mild. The wild geese had flown high up in the air – evenly, and without haste – with Akka at the head maintaining strict discipline, and the rest in two oblique lines back of her. They had not taken the time to shout any witty sarcasms to the animals on the ground; but, as it was simply impossible for them to keep perfectly silent, they sang out continually – in rhythm with the wing-strokes – their usual coaxing call: "Where are you? Here am I. Where are you? Here am I."

They all took part in this persistent calling, and only stopped, now and then, to show the goosey-gander the landmarks they were travelling over. The places on this route included Linderödsosen's dry hills, Ovesholm's manor, Christianstad's church steeple, Bäckaskog's royal castle on the narrow isthmus between Oppmann's lake and Ivö's lake, Ryss mountain's steep precipice.

It had been a monotonous trip, and when the rain-clouds made their appearance the boy thought it was a real diversion. In the old days, when he had only seen a rain-cloud from below, he had imagined that they were gray and disagreeable; but it was a very different thing to be up amongst them. Now he saw distinctly that the clouds were enormous carts, which drove through the heavens with sky-high loads. Some of them were piled up with huge, gray sacks, some with barrels; some were so large that they could hold a whole lake; and a few were filled with big utensils and bottles which were piled up to an immense height. And when so many of them had driven forward that they filled the whole sky, it appeared as though someone had given a signal, for all at once, water commenced to pour down over the earth, from utensils, barrels, bottles and sacks.

Just as the first spring-showers pattered against the ground, there arose such shouts of joy from all the small birds in groves and pastures, that the whole air rang with them and the boy leaped high where he sat. "Now we'll have rain. Rain gives us spring; spring gives us flowers and green leaves; green leaves and flowers give us worms and insects; worms and insects give us food; and plentiful and good food is the best thing there is," sang the birds.

The wild geese, too, were glad of the rain which came to awaken the growing things from their long sleep, and to drive holes in the ice-roofs on the lakes. They were not able to keep up that seriousness any longer, but began to send merry calls over the neighbourhood.

When they flew over the big potato patches, which are so plentiful in the country around Christianstad – and which still lay bare and black – they screamed: "Wake up and be useful! Here comes something that will awaken you. You have idled long enough now."

When they saw people who hurried to get out of the rain, they reproved them saying: "What are you in such a hurry about? Can't you see that it's raining rye-loaves and cookies?"

It was a big, thick mist that moved northward briskly, and followed close upon the geese. They seemed to think that they dragged the mist along with them; and, just now, when they saw great orchards beneath them, they called out proudly: "Here we come with anemones; here we come with roses; here we come with apple blossoms and cherry buds; here we come with peas and beans and turnips and cabbages. He who wills can take them. He who wills can take them."

Thus it had sounded while the first showers fell, and when all were still glad of the rain. But when it continued to fall the whole afternoon, the wild geese grew impatient, and cried to the thirsty forests around Ivö's lake: "Haven't you got enough yet? Haven't you got enough yet?"

The heavens were growing grayer and grayer and the sun hid itself so well that one couldn't imagine where it was. The rain fell faster and faster, and beat harder and harder against the wings, as it tried to find its way between the oily outside feathers, into their skins. The earth was hidden by fogs; lakes, mountains, and woods floated together in an indistinct maze, and the landmarks could not be distinguished. The flight became slower and slower; the joyful cries were hushed; and the boy felt the cold more and more keenly.

But still he had kept up his courage as long as he had ridden through the air. And in the afternoon, when they had lighted under a little stunted pine, in the middle of a large morass, where all was wet, and all was cold; where some knolls were covered with snow, and others stood up naked in a puddle of half-melted ice-water, even then, he had not felt discouraged, but ran about in fine spirits, and hunted for cranberries and frozen whortleberries. But then came evening, and darkness sank down on them so close, that not even such eyes as the boy's could see through it; and all the wilderness became so strangely grim and awful. The boy lay tucked in under the goosey-gander's wing, but could not sleep because he was cold and wet. He heard such a lot of rustling and rattling and stealthy steps and menacing voices, that he was terror-stricken and didn't know where he should go. He must go somewhere, where there was light and heat, if he wasn't going to be entirely scared to death.

"If I should venture where there are human beings, just for this night?" thought the boy. "Only so I could sit by a fire for a moment, and get a little food. I could go back to the wild geese before sunrise."

He crept from under the wing and slid down to the ground. He didn't awaken either the goosey-gander or any of the other geese, but stole, silently and unobserved, through the morass.

He didn't know exactly where on earth he was: if he was in Skåne, in Småland, or in Blekinge. But just before he had gotten down in the morass, he had caught a glimpse of a large village, and thither he directed his steps. It wasn't long, either, before he discovered a road; and soon he was on the village street, which was long, and had planted trees on both sides, and was bordered with garden after garden.

The boy had come to one of the big cathedral towns, which are so common on the uplands, but can hardly be seen at all down in the plain.

The houses were of wood, and very prettily constructed. Most of them had gables and fronts, edged with carved mouldings, and glass doors, with here and there a coloured pane, opening on verandas. The walls were painted in light oil-colours; the doors and window-frames shone in blues and greens, and even in reds. While the boy walked about and viewed the houses, he could hear, all the way out to the road, how the people who sat in the warm cottages chattered and laughed. The words he could not distinguish, but he thought it was just lovely to hear human voices. "I wonder what they would say if I knocked and begged to be let in," thought he.

This was, of course, what he had intended to do all along, but now that he saw the lighted windows, his fear of the darkness was gone. Instead, he felt again that shyness which always came over him now when he was near human beings. "I'll take a look around the town for a while longer," thought he, "before I ask anyone to take me in."

On one house there was a balcony. And just as the boy walked by, the doors were thrown open, and a yellow light streamed through the fine, sheer curtains. Then a pretty young fru came out on the balcony and leaned over the railing. "It's raining; now we shall soon have spring," said she. When the boy saw her he felt a strange anxiety. It was as though he wanted to weep. For the first time he was a bit uneasy because he had shut himself out from the human kind.

Shortly after that he walked by a shop. Outside the shop stood a red corn-drill. He stopped and looked at it; and finally crawled up to the driver's place, and seated himself. When he had got there, he smacked with his lips and pretended that he sat and drove. He thought what fun it would be to be permitted to drive such a pretty machine over a grainfield. For a moment he forgot what he was

like now; then he remembered it, and jumped down quickly from the machine. Then a greater unrest came over him. After all, human beings were very wonderful and clever.

He walked by the post-office, and then he thought of all the newspapers which came every day, with news from all the four corners of the earth. He saw the apothecary's shop and the doctor's home, and he thought about the power of human beings, which was so great that they were able to battle with sickness and death. He came to the church. Then he thought how human beings had built it, that they might hear about another world than the one in which they lived, of God and the resurrection and eternal life. And the longer he walked there, the better he liked human beings.

It is so with children that they never think any farther ahead than the length of their noses. That which lies nearest them, they want promptly, without caring what it may cost them. Nils Holgersson had not understood what he was losing when he chose to remain an elf; but now he began to be dreadfully afraid that, perhaps, he should never again get back to his right form.

How in all the world should he go to work in order to become human? This he wanted, oh! so much, to know.

He crawled up on a doorstep, and seated himself in the pouring rain and meditated. He sat there one whole hour – two whole hours, and he thought so hard that his forehead lay in furrows; but he was none the wiser. It seemed as though the thoughts only rolled round and round in his head. The longer he sat there, the more impossible it seemed to him to find any solution.

"This thing is certainly much too difficult for one who has learned as little as I have," he thought at last. "It will probably wind up by my having to go back among human beings after all. I must ask the minister and the doctor and the schoolmaster and others who are learned, and may know a cure for such things."

This he concluded that he would do at once, and shook himself – for he was as wet as a dog that has been in a water-pool.

Just about then he saw that a big owl came flying along, and alighted on one of the trees that bordered the village street. The next instant a lady owl, who sat under the cornice of the house, began to call out: "Kivitt, Kivitt! Are you at home again, Mr. Gray Owl? What kind of a time did you have abroad?"

"Thank you, Lady Brown Owl. I had a very comfortable time," said the gray owl. "Has anything out of the ordinary happened here at home during my absence?"

"Not here in Blekinge, Mr. Gray Owl; but in Skåne a marvellous thing has happened! A boy has been transformed by an elf into a goblin no bigger than a squirrel; and since then he has gone to Lapland with a tame goose."

"That's a remarkable bit of news, a remarkable bit of news. Can he never be human again, Lady Brown Owl? Can he never be human again?"

"That's a secret, Mr. Gray Owl; but you shall hear it just the same. The elf has said that if the boy watches over the goosey-gander, so that he comes home safe and sound, and – "

"What more, Lady Brown Owl? What more? What more?"

"Fly with me up to the church tower, Mr. Gray Owl, and you shall hear the whole story! I fear there may be someone listening down here in the street." With that, the owls flew their way; but the boy flung his cap in the air, and shouted: "If I only watch over the goosey-gander, so that he gets back safe and sound, then I shall become a human being again. Hurrah! Hurrah! Then I shall become a human being again!"

He shouted "hurrah" until it was strange that they did not hear him in the houses – but they didn't, and he hurried back to the wild geese, out in the wet morass, as fast as his legs could carry him.

THE STAIRWAY WITH THE THREE STEPS

Thursday, March thirty-first.

The following day the wild geese intended to travel northward through Allbo district, in Småland. They sent Iksi and Kaksi to spy out the land. But when they returned, they said that all the water was frozen, and all the land was snow-covered. "We may as well remain where we are," said the wild geese. "We cannot travel over a country where there is neither water nor food." "If we remain where we are, we may have to wait here until the next moon," said Akka. "It is better to go eastward, through Blekinge, and see if we can't get to Småland by way of Möre, which lies near the coast, and has an early spring."

Thus the boy came to ride over Blekinge the next day. Now, that it was light again, he was in a merry mood once more, and could not comprehend what had come over him the night before. He certainly didn't want to give up the journey and the outdoor life now.

There lay a thick fog over Blekinge. The boy couldn't see how it looked out there. "I wonder if it is a good, or a poor country that I'm riding over," thought he, and tried to search his memory for the things which he had heard about the country at school. But at the same time he knew well enough that this was useless, as he had never been in the habit of studying his lessons.

At once the boy saw the whole school before him. The children sat by the little desks and raised their hands; the teacher sat in the lectern and looked displeased; and he himself stood before the map and should answer some question about Blekinge, but he hadn't a word to say. The schoolmaster's face grew darker and darker for every second that passed, and the boy thought the teacher was more particular that they should know their geography, than anything else. Now he came down from the lectern, took the pointer from the boy, and sent him back to his seat. "This won't end well," the boy thought then.

But the schoolmaster had gone over to a window, and had stood there for a moment and looked out, and then he had whistled to himself once. Then he had gone up into the lectern and said that he would tell them something about Blekinge. And that which he then talked about had been so amusing that the boy had listened. When he only stopped and thought for a moment, he remembered every word.

"Småland is a tall house with spruce trees on the roof," said the teacher, "and leading up to it is a broad stairway with three big steps; and this stairway is called Blekinge. It is a stairway that is well constructed. It stretches forty-two miles along the frontage of Småland house, and anyone who wishes to go all the way down to the East sea, by way of the stairs, has twenty-four miles to wander.

"A good long time must have elapsed since the stairway was built. Both days and years have gone by since the steps were hewn from gray stones and laid down – evenly and smoothly – for a convenient track between Småland and the East sea.

"Since the stairway is so old, one can, of course, understand that it doesn't look just the same now, as it did when it was new. I don't know how much they troubled themselves about such matters at that time; but big as it was, no broom could have kept it clean. After a couple of years, moss and lichen began to grow on it. In the autumn dry leaves and dry grass blew down over it; and in the spring it was piled up with falling stones and gravel. And as all these things were left there to mould, they finally gathered so much soil on the steps that not only herbs and grass, but even bushes and trees could take root there.

"But, at the same time, a great disparity has arisen between the three steps. The topmost step, which lies nearest Småland, is mostly covered with poor soil and small stones, and no trees except birches and bird-cherry and spruce – which can stand the cold on the heights, and are satisfied with little – can thrive up there. One understands best how poor and dry it is there, when one sees how small the field-plots are, that are ploughed up from the forest lands; and how many little cabins the

people build for themselves; and how far it is between the churches. But on the middle step there is better soil, and it does not lie bound down under such severe cold, either. This one can see at a glance, since the trees are both higher and of finer quality. There you'll find maple and oak and linden and weeping-birch and hazel trees growing, but no cone-trees to speak of. And it is still more noticeable because of the amount of cultivated land that you will find there; and also because the people have built themselves great and beautiful houses. On the middle step, there are many churches, with large towns around them; and in every way it makes a better and finer appearance than the top step.

"But the very lowest step is the best of all. It is covered with good rich soil; and, where it lies and bathes in the sea, it hasn't the slightest feeling of the Småland chill. Beeches and chestnut and walnut trees thrive down here; and they grow so big that they tower above the church-roofs. Here lie also the largest grain-fields; but the people have not only timber and farming to live upon, but they are also occupied with fishing and trading and seafaring. For this reason you will find the most costly residences and the prettiest churches here; and the parishes have developed into villages and cities.

"But this is not all that is said of the three steps. For one must realise that when it rains on the roof of the big Småland house, or when the snow melts up there, the water has to go somewhere; and then, naturally, a lot of it is spilled over the big stairway. In the beginning it probably oozed over the whole stairway, big as it was; then cracks appeared in it, and, gradually, the water has accustomed itself to flow alongside of it, in well dug-out grooves. And water is water, whatever one does with it. It never has any rest. In one place it cuts and files away, and in another it adds to. Those grooves it has dug into vales, and the walls of the vales it has decked with soil; and bushes and trees and vines have clung to them ever since – so thick, and in such profusion, that they almost hide the stream of water that winds its way down there in the deep. But when the streams come to the landings between the steps, they throw themselves headlong over them; this is why the water comes with such a seething rush, that it gathers strength with which to move mill-wheels and machinery – these, too, have sprung up by every waterfall.

"But this does not tell all that is said of the land with the three steps. It must also be told that up in the big house in Småland there lived once upon a time a giant, who had grown very old. And it fatigued him in his extreme age, to be forced to walk down that long stairway in order to catch salmon from the sea. To him it seemed much more suitable that the salmon should come up to him, where he lived.

"Therefore, he went up on the roof of his great house; and there he stood and threw stones down into the East sea. He threw them with such force that they flew over the whole of Blekinge and dropped into the sea. And when the stones came down, the salmon got so scared that they came up from the sea and fled toward the Blekinge streams; ran through the rapids; flung themselves with high leaps over the waterfalls, and stopped.

"How true this is, one can see by the number of islands and points that lie along the coast of Blekinge, and which are nothing in the world but the big stones that the giant threw.

"One can also tell because the salmon always go up in the Blekinge streams and work their way up through rapids and still water, all the way to Småland.

"That giant is worthy of great thanks and much honour from the Blekinge people; for salmon in the streams, and stone-cutting on the island – that means work which gives food to many of them even to this day."

BY RONNEBY RIVER

Friday, April first.

Neither the wild geese nor Smirre Fox had believed that they should ever run across each other after they had left Skåne. But now it turned out so that the wild geese happened to take the route over Blekinge and thither Smirre Fox had also gone.

So far he had kept himself in the northern parts of the province; and since he had not as yet seen any manor parks, or hunting grounds filled with game and dainty young deer, he was more disgruntled than he could say.

One afternoon, when Smirre tramped around in the desolate forest district of Mellanbygden, not far from Ronneby River, he saw a flock of wild geese fly through the air. Instantly he observed that one of the geese was white and then he knew, of course, with whom he had to deal.

Smirre began immediately to hunt the geese – just as much for the pleasure of getting a good square meal, as for the desire to be avenged for all the humiliation that they had heaped upon him. He saw that they flew eastward until they came to Ronneby River. Then they changed their course, and followed the river toward the south. He understood that they intended to seek a sleeping-place along the river-banks, and he thought that he should be able to get hold of a pair of them without much trouble. But when Smirre finally discovered the place where the wild geese had taken refuge, he observed they had chosen such a well-protected spot, that he couldn't get near.

Ronneby River isn't any big or important body of water; nevertheless, it is just as much talked of, for the sake of its pretty shores. At several points it forces its way forward between steep mountain-walls that stand upright out of the water, and are entirely overgrown with honeysuckle and bird-cherry, mountain-ash and osier; and there isn't much that can be more delightful than to row out on the little dark river on a pleasant summer day, and look upward on all the soft green that fastens itself to the rugged mountain-sides.

But now, when the wild geese and Smirre came to the river, it was cold and blustery spring-winter; all the trees were nude, and there was probably no one who thought the least little bit about whether the shore was ugly or pretty. The wild geese thanked their good fortune that they had found a sand-strip large enough for them to stand upon, on a steep mountain wall. In front of them rushed the river, which was strong and violent in the snow-melting time; behind them they had an impassable mountain rock wall, and overhanging branches screened them. They couldn't have it better.

The geese were asleep instantly; but the boy couldn't get a wink of sleep. As soon as the sun had disappeared he was seized with a fear of the darkness, and a wilderness-terror, and he longed for human beings. Where he lay – tucked in under the goose-wing – he could see nothing, and only hear a little; and he thought if any harm came to the goosey-gander, he couldn't save him.

Noises and rustlings were heard from all directions, and he grew so uneasy that he had to creep from under the wing and seat himself on the ground, beside the goose.

Long-sighted Smirre stood on the mountain's summit and looked down upon the wild geese. "You may as well give this pursuit up first as last," he said to himself. "You can't climb such a steep mountain; you can't swim in such a wild torrent; and there isn't the tiniest strip of land below the mountain which leads to the sleeping-place. Those geese are too wise for you. Don't ever bother yourself again to hunt them!"

But Smirre, like all foxes, had found it hard to give up an undertaking already begun, and so he lay down on the extremest point of the mountain edge, and did not take his eyes off the wild geese. While he lay and watched them, he thought of all the harm they had done him. Yes, it was their fault that he had been driven from Skåne, and had been obliged to move to poverty-stricken Blekinge. He worked himself up to such a pitch, as he lay there, that he wished the wild geese were dead, even if he, himself, should not have the satisfaction of eating them.

When Smirre's resentment had reached this height, he heard rasping in a large pine that grew close to him, and saw a squirrel come down from the tree, hotly pursued by a marten. Neither of them noticed Smirre; and he sat quietly and watched the chase, which went from tree to tree. He looked at the squirrel, who moved among the branches as lightly as though he'd been able to fly. He looked at the marten, who was not as skilled at climbing as the squirrel, but who still ran up and along the branches just as securely as if they had been even paths in the forest. "If I could only climb half as well as either of them," thought the fox, "those things down there wouldn't sleep in peace very long!"

As soon as the squirrel had been captured, and the chase was ended, Smirre walked over to the marten, but stopped two steps away from him, to signify that he did not wish to cheat him of his prey. He greeted the marten in a very friendly manner, and wished him good luck with his catch. Smirre chose his words well – as foxes always do. The marten, on the contrary, who, with his long and slender body, his fine head, his soft skin, and his light brown neck-piece, looked like a little marvel of beauty – but in reality was nothing but a crude forest dweller – hardly answered him. "It surprises me," said Smirre, "that such a fine hunter as you are should be satisfied with chasing squirrels when there is much better game within reach." Here he paused; but when the marten only grinned impudently at him, he continued: "Can it be possible that you haven't seen the wild geese that stand under the mountain wall? or are you not a good enough climber to get down to them?"

This time he had no need to wait for an answer. The marten rushed up to him with back bent, and every separate hair on end. "Have you seen wild geese?" he hissed. "Where are they? Tell me instantly, or I'll bite your neck off!" "No! you must remember that I'm twice your size – so be a little polite. I ask nothing better than to show you the wild geese."

The next instant the marten was on his way down the steep; and while Smirre sat and watched how he swung his snake-like body from branch to branch, he thought: "That pretty tree-hunter has the wickedest heart in all the forest. I believe that the wild geese will have me to thank for a bloody awakening."

But just as Smirre was waiting to hear the geese's death-rattle, he saw the marten tumble from branch to branch – and plump into the river so the water splashed high. Soon thereafter, wings beat loudly and strongly and all the geese went up in a hurried flight.

Smirre intended to hurry after the geese, but he was so curious to know how they had been saved, that he sat there until the marten came clambering up. That poor thing was soaked in mud, and stopped every now and then to rub his head with his forepaws. "Now wasn't that just what I thought – that you were a booby, and would go and tumble into the river?" said Smirre, contemptuously.

"I haven't acted boobyishly. You don't need to scold me," said the marten. "I sat – all ready – on one of the lowest branches and thought how I should manage to tear a whole lot of geese to pieces, when a little creature, no bigger than a squirrel, jumped up and threw a stone at my head with such force, that I fell into the water; and before I had time to pick myself up –"

The marten didn't have to say any more. He had no audience. Smirre was already a long way off in pursuit of the wild geese.

In the meantime Akka had flown southward in search of a new sleeping-place. There was still a little daylight; and, beside, the half-moon stood high in the heavens, so that she could see a little. Luckily, she was well acquainted in these parts, because it had happened more than once that she had been wind-driven to Blekinge when she travelled over the East sea in the spring.

She followed the river as long as she saw it winding through the moon-lit landscape like a black, shining snake. In this way she came way down to Djupafors – where the river first hides itself in an underground channel – and then clear and transparent, as though it were made of glass, rushes down in a narrow cleft, and breaks into bits against its bottom in glittering drops and flying foam. Below the white falls lay a few stones, between which the water rushed away in a wild torrent cataract. Here mother Akka alighted. This was another good sleeping-place – especially this late in the evening, when no human beings moved about. At sunset the geese would hardly have been able to camp there,

for Djupafors does not lie in any wilderness. On one side of the falls is a paper factory; on the other – which is steep, and tree-grown – is Djupadal's park, where people are always strolling about on the steep and slippery paths to enjoy the wild stream's rushing movement down in the ravine.

It was about the same here as at the former place; none of the travellers thought the least little bit that they had come to a pretty and well-known place. They thought rather that it was ghastly and dangerous to stand and sleep on slippery, wet stones, in the middle of a rumbling waterfall. But they had to be content, if only they were protected from carnivorous animals.

The geese fell asleep instantly, while the boy could find no rest in sleep, but sat beside them that he might watch over the goosey-gander.

After a while, Smirre came running along the river-shore. He spied the geese immediately where they stood out in the foaming whirlpools, and understood that he couldn't get at them here, either. Still he couldn't make up his mind to abandon them, but seated himself on the shore and looked at them. He felt very much humbled, and thought that his entire reputation as a hunter was at stake.

All of a sudden, he saw an otter come creeping up from the falls with a fish in his mouth. Smirre approached him but stopped within two steps of him, to show him that he didn't wish to take his game from him.

"You're a remarkable one, who can content yourself with catching a fish, while the stones are covered with geese!" said Smirre. He was so eager, that he hadn't taken the time to arrange his words as carefully as he was wont to do. The otter didn't turn his head once in the direction of the river. He was a vagabond – like all otters – and had fished many times by Vomb Lake, and probably knew Smirre Fox. "I know very well how you act when you want to coax away a salmon-trout, Smirre," said he.

"Oh! is it you, Gripe?" said Smirre, and was delighted; for he knew that this particular otter was a quick and accomplished swimmer. "I don't wonder that you do not care to look at the wild geese, since you can't manage to get out to them." But the otter, who had swimming-webs between his toes, and a stiff tail – which was as good as an oar – and a skin that was water-proof, didn't wish to have it said of him that there was a waterfall that he wasn't able to manage. He turned toward the stream; and as soon as he caught sight of the wild geese, he threw the fish away, and rushed down the steep shore and into the river.

If it had been a little later in the spring, so that the nightingales in Djupafors had been at home, they would have sung for many a day of Gripe's struggle with the rapid. For the otter was thrust back by the waves many times, and carried down river; but he fought his way steadily up again. He swam forward in still water; he crawled over stones, and gradually came nearer the wild geese. It was a perilous trip, which might well have earned the right to be sung by the nightingales.

Smirre followed the otter's course with his eyes as well as he could. At last he saw that the otter was in the act of climbing up to the wild geese. But just then it shrieked shrill and wild. The otter tumbled backward into the water, and dashed away as if he had been a blind kitten. An instant later, there was a great crackling of geese's wings. They raised themselves and flew away to find another sleeping-place.

The otter soon came on land. He said nothing, but commenced to lick one of his forepaws. When Smirre sneered at him because he hadn't succeeded, he broke out: "It was not the fault of my swimming-art, Smirre. I had raced all the way over to the geese, and was about to climb up to them, when a tiny creature came running, and jabbed me in the foot with some sharp iron. It hurt so, I lost my footing, and then the current took me."

He didn't have to say any more. Smirre was already far away on his way to the wild geese.

Once again Akka and her flock had to take a night fly. Fortunately, the moon had not gone down; and with the aid of its light, she succeeded in finding another of those sleeping-places which she knew in that neighbourhood. Again she followed the shining river toward the south. Over Djupadal's manor, and over Ronneby's dark roofs and white waterfalls she swayed forward without alighting. But

a little south of the city and not far from the sea, lies Ronneby health-spring, with its bath house and spring house; with its big hotel and summer cottages for the spring's guests. All these stand empty and desolate in winter – which the birds know perfectly well; and many are the bird-companies who seek shelter on the deserted buildings' balustrades and balconies during hard storm-times.

Here the wild geese lit on a balcony, and, as usual, they fell asleep at once. The boy, on the contrary, could not sleep because he hadn't cared to creep in under the goosey-gander's wing.

The balcony faced south, so the boy had an outlook over the sea. And since he could not sleep, he sat there and saw how pretty it looked when sea and land meet, here in Blekinge.

You see that sea and land can meet in many different ways. In many places the land comes down toward the sea with flat, tufted meadows, and the sea meets the land with flying sand, which piles up in mounds and drifts. It appears as though they both disliked each other so much that they only wished to show the poorest they possessed. But it can also happen that, when the land comes toward the sea, it raises a wall of hills in front of it – as though the sea were something dangerous. When the land does this, the sea comes up to it with fiery wrath, and beats and roars and lashes against the rocks, and looks as if it would tear the land-hill to pieces.

But in Blekinge it is altogether different when sea and land meet. There the land breaks itself up into points and islands and islets; and the sea divides itself into fiords and bays and sounds; and it is, perhaps, this which makes it look as if they must meet in happiness and harmony.

Think now first and foremost of the sea! Far out it lies desolate and empty and big, and has nothing else to do but to roll its gray billows. When it comes toward the land, it happens across the first obstacle. This it immediately overpowers; tears away everything green, and makes it as gray as itself. Then it meets still another obstacle. With this it does the same thing. And still another. Yes, the same thing happens to this also. It is stripped and plundered, as if it had fallen into robbers' hands. Then the obstacles come nearer and nearer together, and then the sea must understand that the land sends toward it her littlest children, in order to move it to pity. It also becomes more friendly the farther in it comes; rolls its waves less high; moderates its storms; lets the green things stay in cracks and crevices; separates itself into small sounds and inlets, and becomes at last so harmless in the land, that little boats dare venture out on it. It certainly cannot recognise itself – so mild and friendly has it grown.

And then think of the hillside! It lies uniform, and looks the same almost everywhere. It consists of flat grain-fields, with one and another birch-grove between them; or else of long stretches of forest ranges. It appears as if it had thought about nothing but grain and turnips and potatoes and spruce and pine. Then comes a sea-fiord that cuts far into it. It doesn't mind that, but borders it with birch and alder, just as if it was an ordinary fresh-water lake. Then still another wave comes driving in. Nor does the hillside bother itself about cringing to this, but it, too, gets the same covering as the first one. Then the fiords begin to broaden and separate, they break up fields and woods and then the hillside cannot help but notice them. "I believe it is the sea itself that is coming," says the hillside, and then it begins to adorn itself. It wreathes itself with blossoms, travels up and down in hills and throws islands into the sea. It no longer cares about pines and spruces, but casts them off like old every day clothes, and parades later with big oaks and lindens and chestnuts, and with blossoming leafy bowers, and becomes as gorgeous as a manor-park. And when it meets the sea, it is so changed that it doesn't know itself. All this one cannot see very well until summertime; but, at any rate, the boy observed how mild and friendly nature was; and he began to feel calmer than he had been before, that night. Then, suddenly, he heard a sharp and ugly yowl from the bath-house park; and when he stood up he saw, in the white moonlight, a fox standing on the pavement under the balcony. For Smirre had followed the wild geese once more. But when he had found the place where they were quartered, he had understood that it was impossible to get at them in any way; then he had not been able to keep from yowling with chagrin.

When the fox yowled in this manner, old Akka, the leader-geese, was awakened. Although she could see nothing, she thought she recognised the voice. "Is it you who are out to-night, Smirre?"

said she. "Yes," said Smirre, "it is I; and I want to ask what you geese think of the night that I have given you?"

"Do you mean to say that it is you who have sent the marten and otter against us?" asked Akka. "A good turn shouldn't be denied," said Smirre. "You once played the goose-game with me, now I have begun to play the fox-game with you; and I'm not inclined to let up on it so long as a single one of you still lives even if I have to follow you the world over!"

"You, Smirre, ought at least to think whether it is right for you, who are weaponed with both teeth and claws, to hound us in this way; we, who are without defence," said Akka.

Smirre thought that Akka sounded scared, and he said quickly: "If you, Akka, will take that Thumbietot – who has so often opposed me – and throw him down to me, I'll promise to make peace with you. Then I'll never more pursue you or any of yours." "I'm not going to give you Thumbietot," said Akka. "From the youngest of us to the oldest, we would willingly give our lives for his sake!" "Since you're so fond of him," said Smirre, "I'll promise you that he shall be the first among you that I will wreak vengeance upon."

Akka said no more, and after Smirre had sent up a few more yowls, all was still. The boy lay all the while awake. Now it was Akka's words to the fox that prevented him from sleeping. Never had he dreamed that he should hear anything so great as that anyone was willing to risk life for his sake. From that moment, it could no longer be said of Nils Holgersson that he did not care for anyone.

KARLSKRONA

Saturday, April second.

It was a moonlight evening in Karlskrona – calm and beautiful. But earlier in the day, there had been rain and wind; and the people must have thought that the bad weather still continued, for hardly one of them had ventured out on the streets.

While the city lay there so desolate, Akka, the wild goose, and her flock, came flying toward it over Vemmön and Pantarholmen. They were out in the late evening to seek a sleeping place on the islands. They couldn't remain inland because they were disturbed by Smirre Fox wherever they lighted.

When the boy rode along high up in the air, and looked at the sea and the islands which spread themselves before him, he thought that everything appeared so strange and spook-like. The heavens were no longer blue, but encased him like a globe of green glass. The sea was milk-white, and as far as he could see rolled small white waves tipped with silver ripples. In the midst of all this white lay numerous little islets, absolutely coal black. Whether they were big or little, whether they were as even as meadows, or full of cliffs, they looked just as black. Even dwelling houses and churches and windmills, which at other times are white or red, were outlined in black against the green sky. The boy thought it was as if the earth had been transformed, and he was come to another world.

He thought that just for this one night he wanted to be brave, and not afraid – when he saw something that really frightened him. It was a high cliff island, which was covered with big, angular blocks; and between the blocks shone specks of bright, shining gold. He couldn't keep from thinking of Maglestone, by Trolle-Ljungby, which the trolls sometimes raised upon high gold pillars; and he wondered if this was something like that.

But with the stones and the gold it might have gone fairly well, if such a lot of horrid things had not been lying all around the island. It looked like whales and sharks and other big sea-monsters. But the boy understood that it was the sea-trolls, who had gathered around the island and intended to crawl up on it, to fight with the land-trolls who lived there. And those on the land were probably afraid, for he saw how a big giant stood on the highest point of the island and raised his arms – as if in despair over all the misfortune that should come to him and his island.

The boy was not a little terrified when he noticed that Akka began to descend right over that particular island! "No, for pity's sake! We must not light there," said he.

But the geese continued to descend, and soon the boy was astonished that he could have seen things so awry. In the first place, the big stone blocks were nothing but houses. The whole island was a city; and the shining gold specks were street lamps and lighted window-panes. The giant, who stood highest up on the island, and raised his arms, was a church with two cross-towers; all the sea-trolls and monsters, which he thought he had seen, were boats and ships of every description, that lay anchored all around the island. On the side which lay toward the land were mostly row-boats and sailboats and small coast steamers; but on the side that faced the sea lay armour-clad battleships; some were broad, with very thick, slanting smokestacks; others were long and narrow, and so constructed that they could glide through the water like fishes.

Now what city might this be? That, the boy could figure out because he saw all the battleships. All his life he had loved ships, although he had had nothing to do with any, except the galleys which he had sailed in the road ditches. He knew very well that this city – where so many battleships lay – couldn't be any place but Karlskrona.

The boy's grandfather had been an old marine; and as long as he had lived, he had talked of Karlskrona every day; of the great warship dock, and of all the other things to be seen in that city. The boy felt perfectly at home, and he was glad that he should see all this of which he had heard so much.

But he only had a glimpse of the towers and fortifications which barred the entrance to the harbour, and the many buildings, and the shipyard – before Akka came down on one of the flat church-towers.

This was a pretty safe place for those who wanted to get away from a fox, and the boy began to wonder if he couldn't venture to crawl in under the goosey-gander's wing for this one night. Yes, that he might safely do. It would do him good to get a little sleep. He should try to see a little more of the dock and the ships after it had grown light.

The boy himself thought it was strange that he could keep still and wait until the next morning to see the ships. He certainly had not slept five minutes before he slipped out from under the wing and slid down the lightning-rod and the waterspout all the way down to the ground.

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