

Robin Redbreast

Selma Lagerlof

Table of Contents

<u>Robin Redbreast</u>	1
<u>Selma Lagerlof</u>	2

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IT happened at that time when our Lord created the world, when He not only made heaven and earth, but all the animals and the vegetable growths as well, at the same time giving them their names.

There have been many histories concerning that time, and if we knew them all, we would then have light upon everything in this world which we cannot now comprehend.

At that time it happened, one day, when our Lord sat in His Paradise and painted the little birds, that the colors in our Lord's paint pot gave out, and the goldfinch would have been without color if our Lord had not wiped all His paint brushes on its feathers.

It was then that the donkey got his long ears, because he could not remember the name that had been given him. No sooner had he taken a few steps along the meadows of Paradise than he forgot, and three times he came back to ask his name. At last our Lord grew somewhat impatient, took him by his two ears and said: "Thy name is ass, ass, ass!" And while He thus spake our Lord pulled both of his ears that the ass might hear better, and remember what was said to him.

It was on the same day, also, that the bee was punished.

Now, when the bee was created, it began immediately to gather honey, and the animals and human beings who caught the delicious odor of the honey came and wanted to taste of it. But the bee wanted to keep it all for himself, and with his poisonous sting pursued every living creature that approached his hive. Our Lord saw this and at once called the bee and punished it.

"I gave thee the gift of gathering honey, which is the sweetest thing in all creation," said our Lord, "but I did not give thee the right to be cruel to thy neighbor. Remember well that every time thou stingest any creature who desires to taste of thy honey thou shalt surely die!"

Ah, yes! it was at that time that the cricket became blind and the ant missed her wings.

So many strange things happened on that day!

Our Lord sat there, big and gentle, and planned and created all day long, and towards evening He conceived the idea of making a little grey bird. "Remember your name is robin redbreast," said our Lord to the bird, as soon as it was finished. Then He held it in the palm of His open hand and let it fly.

After the bird had been testing his wings a bit, and had seen something of the beautiful world in which he was destined to live, he became curious to see what he himself was like. He noticed that he was entirely grey, and that the breast was just as grey as all the rest of him. Robin redbreast twisted and turned in every direction as he viewed himself in the mirror of a clear lake, but he couldn't find a single red feather. Then he flew back to our Lord.

Our Lord sat there on His throne, big and gentle. Out of His hands came butterflies that fluttered about His head, doves cooed on His shoulders, and out of the earth about Him grew the rose, the lily and the daisy.

The little bird's heart beat heavily with fright, but with easy curves he flew nearer and nearer our Lord till at last he rested on our Lord's hand. Then our Lord asked what the little bird wanted.

"I only want to ask you about one thing," said the little bird.

"What is it that you wish to know?" said our Lord.

"Why should I be called redbreast, when I am all grey, from the bill to the very end of my tail? Why am I called redbreast when I do not possess one single red feather?"

The bird looked beseechingly on our Lord with its tiny black eyes—then turned its head. About him he saw pheasants all red under a sprinkle of gold dust, cocks with red combs, parrots with marvelous red-neck bands, to say nothing about the butterflies, the goldfinches and the roses! And naturally he thought how little he needed—just one tiny drop of color on his breast—and he, too, would be a beautiful bird, and not a misnomer. "Why should I be called redbreast when I am so entirely grey?" asked the bird once again, and waited for our

Robin Redbreast

Lord to say—Ah! my friend, I see that I have forgotten to paint your breast feathers red, but wait a moment and all shall be done.

But our Lord only smiled a little and said: "I have called you robin redbreast, and robin redbreast shall your name be, but you must look to it that you yourself earn your red breast feathers." Then our Lord lifted His hand and let the bird fly once more—out into the world.

The bird flew down into Paradise, meditating deeply. What could a little bird like him do to earn for himself red feathers? The only thing he could think of was to make his nest in a brier bush. He built it in among the thorns in the close thicket. It looked as if he waited for a roseleaf to cling to his throat and give him color.

Countless years had come and gone since that day, which was the happiest in all the world! Human beings had already advanced so far that they had learned to cultivate the earth and sail the seas. They had procured clothes and ornaments for themselves, and had long since learned to build big temples and great cities—such as Thebes, Rome and Jerusalem.

Then there dawned a new day, one that will long be remembered in the world's history. On the morning of this day robin redbreast sat upon a little naked hillock outside of Jerusalem's walls and sang to his young ones, who rested in a tiny nest in a brier bush.

Robin redbreast told the little ones all about that wonderful day of creation, and how the Lord had given names to everything, just as each redbreast had told it, ever since the first redbreast had heard God's word and gone out of God's hand. "And mark you," he ended sorrowfully, "so many years have gone, so many roses have bloomed, so many little birds have come out of their eggs since Creation day, but robin redbreast is still a little grey bird. He has not yet succeeded in gaining his red feathers."

The young ones opened wide their tiny bills, and asked if their forbears had never tried to do any great thing to earn the priceless red color.

"We have all done what we could," said the little bird, "but we have all gone amiss. Even the first robin redbreast met one day another bird exactly like himself, and he began immediately to love it with such a mighty love that he could feel his breast glow. Ah! he thought then, now I understand! It was our Lord's meaning that I should love with so much ardor that my breast should grow red in color from the very warmth of the love that lives in my heart. But he missed it, as all those who came after him had missed it, and as even you shall miss it."

The little ones twittered, utterly bewildered, and began to mourn because the red color would not come to beautify their little downy grey breasts.

"We had also hoped that song would help us," said the grown-up bird, speaking in long drawn-out tones. "The first robin redbreast sang until his breast swelled within him, he was so carried away—and he dared to hope anew. Ah! he thought, it is the glow of the song which lives in my soul that will color my breast feathers red. But he missed it, as all the others have missed it, and as even you shall miss it." Again was heard a sad "peep" from the young ones' half-naked throats.

"We had also counted on our courage and our valor," said the bird. "The first robin redbreast fought bravely with other birds until his breast flamed with the pride of conquest. Ah! he thought, my breast feathers shall become red from the love of battle which burns in my heart. He too missed it, as all those who came after him had missed it, and, as even you shall miss it." The young ones peeped courageously that they still wished to try and win the much-sought-after prize, but the bird answered them sorrowfully that it would be impossible. What could they do when so many splendid ancestors had missed the mark? What could they do more than love, sing and fight? What could—

The little bird stopped short in the middle of the sentence, for out of one of Jerusalem's gates came a crowd of people marching, and the whole procession rushed up towards the hillock where the bird had its nest. There were riders on proud horses, soldiers with long spears, executioners with nails and hammers. There were judges and priests in the procession, weeping women, and above all a mob of mad, loose people running about—a filthy, howling mob of loiterers.

The little grey bird sat trembling on the edge of his nest. He feared each instant that the little brier bush would be trampled down and his young ones killed!

"Be careful!" he cried to the little defenceless young ones, "creep together and remain quiet. Here comes a horse that will ride right over us! Here comes a warrior with iron-shod sandals! Here comes the whole wild, storming mob!" Immediately the bird ceased his cry of warning and grew calm and quiet. He almost forgot the

Robin Redbreast

danger hovering over him. Finally he hopped down into his nest and spread his wings over the young ones.

"Oh! this is too terrible," said he; "I don't want you to witness this awful sight! There are three miscreants who are going to be crucified!" And he spread his wings so the little ones could see nothing.

They caught only the sound of hammers, the cries of anguish and the wild shrieks of the mob.

Robin redbreast followed the whole spectacle with his eyes, which grew big with terror. He could not take his glance from the three unfortunates.

"How terrible human beings are!" said the bird after a little. "It isn't enough that they should nail these poor creatures to a cross, but they must needs place a crown of piercing thorns on the head of one of them. I see that the thorns have wounded his brow so that the blood flows," he continued. "And this man is so beautiful—and he looks about him with such mild glances that every one ought to love him. I feel as if an arrow were shooting through my heart when I see him suffer!"

The little bird began to feel a stronger and stronger pity for the thorn-crowned sufferer. Oh! if I were only my brother the eagle, thought he, I would draw the nails from his hands, and with my strong claws I would drive away all those who torture him. He saw how the blood trickled down, from the brow of the crucified one, and he could no longer remain quiet in his nest. Even if I am little and weak, I can still do something for this poor tortured one—thought the bird. Then he left his nest and flew out into the air, striking wide circles around the crucified one. He flew about him several times without daring to approach, for he was a shy little bird who had never dared to go near a human being. But little by little he gained courage, flew close to him and drew with his little bill a thorn that had become imbedded in the brow of the crucified one. And as he did this there fell on his breast a drop of blood from the face of the crucified one. It spread quickly and colored all the little thin breast feathers.

Then the crucified one opened his lips and whispered to the bird: "Because of thy compassion, thou hast won all that thy kind have been striving after ever since the world was created."

As soon as the bird had returned to his nest his young ones cried to him: "Thy breast is red, thy breast feathers are redder than the roses!"

"It is only a drop of blood from the poor man's forehead," said the bird. "It will vanish as soon as I bathe in a pool or a clear well."

But no matter how much the little bird bathed, the red color did not vanish. And when his little ones grew up, the blood-red color shone also on their breast feathers, just as it shines on every robin redbreast's throat and breast until this very day.