

Selma Lagerlöf's speech at the Nobel Banquet at Grand Hôtel, Stockholm, December 10, 1909.

A few days ago I was sitting in the train, bound for Stockholm. It was early evening; there was little light in my compartment and none at all outside. My fellow passengers were dozing in their respective corners, and I was very quiet, listening to the rattling of the train.

And then I began to think of all the other times I had come up to Stockholm. It had usually been to do something difficult - to pass examinations or to find a publisher for my manuscript. And now I was coming to receive the Prize in Literature. That, too, I thought would be difficult.

All through this autumn I had lived at my old home in Värmland in complete solitude, and now I should have to step forward in the presence of so many people. I had become shy of life's bustle in my solitary retreat and was apprehensive at the thought of facing the world.

Deep within me, however, was a wondrous joy at receiving this Prize, and I tried to dispel my anxiety by thinking of those who would rejoice at my good fortune. There were my good friends, my brothers and sisters and, first and foremost, my old mother who, sitting back home, was happy to have lived to see this day.

But then I thought of my father and felt a deep sorrow that he should no longer be alive, and that I could not go to him and tell him that I had been awarded the Nobel Prize. I knew that no one would have been happier than he to hear this. Never have I met anyone with his love and respect for the written word and its creators, and I wished that he could have known that the Swedish Academy had bestowed on me this great Prize. Yes, it was a deep sorrow to me that I could not tell him.

Anyone who has ever sat in a train as it rushes through a dark night will know that sometimes there are long minutes when the coaches slide smoothly along without so much as a shudder. All rustle and bustle cease and the sound of the wheels becomes a soothing, peaceful melody. The coaches no longer seem to run on rails and sleepers but glide into space. Well, that is how it was as I sat there and thought how much I should like to see my old father again. So light and soundless was the movement of the train that I could hardly imagine I was on this earth. And so I began to daydream: «Just think, if I were going to meet Father in Paradise! I seem to have heard of such things happening to other people - why, then, not to myself?» The train went gliding on but it had a long way to go yet, and my thoughts raced ahead of it. Father will certainly be sitting in a rocking chair on a veranda, with a garden full of sunshine and flowers and birds in front of him. He will be reading Fritjofs saga, of course, but when he sees me he will put down his book, push his spectacles high up on his forehead, and get up and walk toward me. He will say, «Good day, my daughter, I am very glad to see you», or «Why, you are here, and how are you, my child», just as he always used to do.

He will settle again in his rocking chair and only then begin to wonder why I have come to see him. «You are sure there is nothing amiss?» he will ask suddenly. «No, Father, all is well», I will reply. But then, just as I am about to break my news to him, I will decide to keep it back just a while longer and try the indirect approach. «I have come to ask you for advice, Father,» I will say, «for I am very heavily in debt.»

«I am afraid you will not get much help from me in this matter», Father will reply. «One may well say of this place that, like the old estates in our Värmland, it has everything except

money.»

«Ah, but it is not money that I owe, Father.» «But that's even worse», Father will say. «Begin right at the beginning, daughter.»

«It is not too much to ask that you should help, Father, for it was all your fault right from the beginning. Do you remember how you used to play the piano and sing Bellman's songs to us children and how, at least twice every winter, you would let us read Tegnér and Runeberg and Andersen? It was then that I first fell into debt. Father, how shall I ever repay them for teaching me to love fairy tales and sagas of heroes, the land we live in and all of our human life, in all its wretchedness and glory?»

Father will straighten up in his rocking chair and a wonderful look will come into his eyes. «I am glad that I got you into this debt», he will say. «Yes, you may be right, Father, but then remember that that is not all of it. Think how many creditors I have. Think of those poor, homeless vagabonds who used to travel up and down Värmland in your youth, playing the fool and singing all those songs. What do I not owe to them, to their mischief and mad pranks! And the old men and women sitting in their small grey cottages as one came out of the forest, telling me wonderful stories of water-sprites and trolls and enchanted maidens lured into the mountains. It was they who taught me that there is poetry in hard rocks and black forests. And think, Father, of all those pale, hollow-cheeked monks and nuns in their dark cloisters, the visions they saw and the voices they heard. I have borrowed from their treasure of legends. And our own peasants who went to Jerusalem - do I owe them nothing for giving me such glorious deeds to write about? And I am in debt not only to people; there is the whole of nature as well. The animals that walk the earth, the birds in the skies, the trees and flowers, they have all told me some of their secrets.»

Father will smile and nod his head and look not at all worried. «But don't you understand, Father, that I carry a great burden of debt?» I will say, and look more and more serious. «No one on earth knows how I can repay it, but I thought that you, in Heaven, would know.» «We do», Father will say and be as carefree and relaxed as he used to be. «Never fear, child, there is a remedy for your trouble.»

«Yes, Father, but that's not all. I am also heavily in debt to those who have formed and moulded our language into the good instrument that it is, and taught me to use it. And, then, am I not in debt to those who have written in prose and in verse before my time, who have turned writing into art, the torchbearers, the pathfinders? The great Norwegians, the great Russians who wrote when I was a child, do I not owe them a thousand debts? Has it not been given to me to live in an age in which my own country's literature has reached its highest peak, to behold the marble emperors of Rydberg, the world of Snoilsky's poetry, Strindberg's cliffs, Geijerstam's country-folk, the modern men of Anne-Charlotte Edgren and Ernst Ahlgren, Heidenstam's Orient? Sophie Elkan, who has brought history to life, Fröding and his tales of Värmland's plains, Levertin's legends, Hallström's Thanatos, and Karlfeldt's Dalekarlian sketches, and much else that was young and new, all that nourished my fantasy, drove me on to compete, and made the dreams bear fruit - do I not owe them anything?»

«Yes, yes», Father will say. «You are right, yours is a heavy debt but, never fear, we will find a way.»

«I don't think, Father, that you really understand how hard it is for me. You don't realize that I am also in debt to my readers. I owe them so much - from the old King and his youngest son,

who sent me on my apprentice's wanderings through the South, to the small schoolchildren who scribbled a letter of thanks for Nils Holgersson. What would have become of me if no one had wanted to read my books? And don't forget all those who have written of me. Remember the famous Danish critic who, with a few words, won me friends all over Denmark! And he who could mix gall and ambrosia in a more masterly fashion than anyone in Sweden had ever done before his time. Now he is dead. Think of all those in foreign lands who have worked for me. I owe them gratitude, Father, both for their praise and for their censure.»

«Yes, yes», Father will say, and I shall see him look a little less calm. Surely, he will begin to understand that it will not be easy to help me.

«Remember all who have helped me, Father!» I shall say. «Think of my faithful friend, Esselde, who tried to open doors for me when no one dared to believe in me. Think of others who have cared for and protected my work! Think of my good friend and travelling companion, who not only took me south and showed me all the glories of art but made life itself happier and lighter for me. All the love that has come to me, the honours, the distinctions! Do you not understand now that I had to come to you to ask how such debts can be paid?»

Father has lowered his head and does not look so hopeful any more.

«I agree, Daughter, it is not going to be easy to find help for you but, surely, there is nothing more you owe anyone?»

«Yes, Father, I have found it difficult enough to bear all that I owed before, but my biggest debt has not yet come. That is why I had to come to you for advice.» I cannot understand how you could owe still more», Father will say. «Oh, yes », I will reply, and then I will tell him all about this.

«I just cannot believe the Academy... », Father will say but, looking at me and seeing my face, he will know it is all true. And, then, every wrinkle in his face will tremble and tears will come into his eyes.

«What am I to say to those who put my name up for the Prize and to those who have made the decision - think, Father, it is not only honour and money they are bestowing on me. They have shown that they have trust enough in me to single me out before the whole world. How shall I repay this debt?»

Father will sit and still no words will come as he thinks. Then, drying tears of joy from his eyes, he will bang down his fist on the arm of the rocking chair and say, «I will not rack my brains about problems that no one in Heaven or on earth can solve. I am too happy that you have been given the Nobel Prize to worry about anything!»

Your Majesties, Your Royal Highnesses, Ladies and Gentlemen - having received no better answer than this to all my questions, it only remains to me to ask you to join me in the toast which I have the honour to propose to the Swedish Academy.

Selma Lagerlöf