

SELMA LAGERLÖF

# The Saga of Gösta Berling

*Translated by* PAUL NORLEN  
*Introduction by* GEORGE C. SCHOOLFIELD

PENGUIN BOOKS



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## THE SAGA OF GÖSTA BERLING

SELMA LAGER LARGERLÖF (1858-1940) was born and raised in the Swedish province of Värmland. She was teaching at a girls school in Landskrona when she was awarded a literary prize for what would become five chapters of *The Saga of Gösta Berling* (1891). Becoming a full-time writer after 1895 allowed her to travel to Italy and the Near East, where she gathered material for novels such as *Jerusalem* (1901-2). Her best-known work internationally, *The Wonderful Adventures of Nils* (1907), was conceived as a geography textbook for Swedish schools. Lagerlöf's success allowed her to buy back her childhood home, Mårbacka, sold at auction after the death of her father. In 1909 Lagerlöf became the first woman—and first Swedish author—to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. Five years later she became the first woman elected to the Swedish Academy. Her later works include *The Emperor of Portugallia* (1914) and several memoirs, including the remarkable *Diary of Selma Ottild Lovisa Lagerlöf* (1932). Many of her books have been made into films, most notably perhaps *The Saga of Gösta Berling* in 1924. Lagerlöf was a widely known and respected public figure in Sweden and abroad, a position that often placed heavy demands on her time and energy. She died at Mårbacka on March 16, 1940.

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## Introduction

Selma Ottilia Lovisa Lagerlöf was born on November 20, 1858, at Mårbacka, her parents' small estate in the Swedish province of Värmland. She was the third child of Erik Gustaf Lagerlöf, a sometime lieutenant in the Royal Värmland Regiment, and Louise Lagerlöf, née Wallroth, whose father was a well-to-do merchant and *brukspatron* or “foundry owner.” The paternal side of the family had many pastors over the generations, including the poet and churchman Esaias Tegnér, of whose verse epic *Frithiofs saga* (1825), about a Viking with Byronic overtones, Erik Gustaf was inordinately fond. Erik Gustaf's widowed mother lived with the family, and was the teller of the Värmland tales Selma heard in the nursery; the lieutenant's spinster sister, Lovisa, occupied the spacious pantry of the main house. Selma's older and younger sisters, Anna and Gerda, were both prettier than she, and would readily find husbands, as did Erik Gustaf's sister Anna, who wed the dashing, improvident noncommissioned officer Carl von Wachenfeldt, and died after seventeen years of marital misery. Lagerlöf describes von Wachenfeldt—he sounds not a little like Gösta Berling—in her first memoir volume (*Mårbacka*, 1922), where he is called, punningly, Vackerfeldt, “Pretty-field.” Graying and wrinkled, he became a hanger-on at the estate. Two brothers, Daniel, the eldest sibling, who became a physician, and Johan, who immigrated to America, completed the family roster.

Selma was plain and slightly lame. The cross-country wanderings of the majoresse and Elisabet in *The Saga of Gösta Berling* may be the author's compensatory fantasies. As for dancing—a major entertainment of the Värmland gentry—she recalled, in *Ett barns memoarer* (*Memories of My Childhood*, 1930), how Erik Gustaf forced her to attend a ball at nearby Sunne, and no one invited her to the floor. Yet, for all one knows, she did not resent this apparently cruel (or encouraging) gesture on her father's part; receiving the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1909, the first woman and the first Swede to do so, she directed her acceptance speech to his memory: “I have never met anyone who cherishes such love and respect for poetry and poets.”

Like her sisters, Selma was homeschooled, and her sedentary childhood was happy. She began writing stories and verse, borrowing figures from her books, “the sultans of the Arabian Nights, the knights of Walter Scott, the saga-kings of Snorri Stur luson,” Iceland's medieval historian and poet. Nonetheless, in *Ett barns memoarer*, she revealed that she was not always placid. She thought she caught Uncle Wachenfeldt cheating at cards, and fell into a fit of rage. Taken off to the children's room by her mother, she believed she saw a large, dark cave, with a swampy bottom, where a dragon rested, like the monster battled by Saint Göran in Stockholm's Great Church. “The cave was myself.”

At fifteen Selma was allowed to enroll in the Advanced Female Teachers' Seminary in Stockholm. There, according to her stylized account in *En saga om en saga* (*A Tale About a Tale*, 1908), she had the illumination that would lead to *The Saga of Gösta Berling*. Trudging along a drab street with a pack of books after a lesson, she thought of two enormously popular masterpieces that she knew from home. The one was *Fredmans epistlar* (*Fredman's Epistles*, 1790) by Carl Michael Bellman, songs to be sung, as it were, by the denizens of Stockholm's taverns.<sup>1</sup> (Lagerlöf devoted a chapter in *Mårbacka* to the Bellman songs performed in her home; “love for them stayed in the hearts of the Mårbacka children their whole life through.”) The other work she remembered was *Fänrik Ståls sägner* (*Tales of*

*Tales of Ensign Stål*, 1848, 1860) by the Swedish-speaking Finn Johan Ludvig Runeberg (1804-77) the Ensign is a veteran of the War of 1808-9, in which Sweden had lost Finland to Russia. The “Tales are portraits, in verse, of the variously hardbitten or youthful officers and men of the defeated Swedish-Finnish Army. Selma told herself: “The world in which you have lived down there in Värmland is no less remarkable than Fredman’s or Ensign Stål’s. If you can only learn how to treat it, you’ll actually have material just as rewarding.” During a visit at home, Selma heard from her father about a friend from his youth, exceptionally gifted but given to drink, eking out an existence as a tutor and pastoral adjunct. “One fine day,” Selma went on, writing in the third person, “the hero even got a name, and was called Gösta Berling. Where she got the name from, she never knew.” Legions of Lagerlöf specialists have tried to ferret out the model or models for Gösta, just as they have for the majoress—the once beautiful Margareta Celsing, before her forced marriage to the loathsome beau-fancier Major Samzelius and her long affair with her true love, Altringer.

Having finished the teachers’ seminary, Selma found a job at the Elementary School for Girls in Landskrona, across the Öre sund from Copenhagen. She held the post for ten years (1885- 95), taking leave in 1891 to finish *Gösta*. She was a well-liked teacher; her subjects were church history, Swedish history, a bit of natural science, and arithmetic. She did not detest foggy south Sweden—Skåne—where Strindberg would during his “exile” (1896- 97) in Lund.<sup>2</sup> She thrived in Landskrona’s “Sewing Union” (a hotbed of incipient feminism) and burst into print with theater reviews for the local newspaper. Branching out, she published sonnets as well as play and opera reviews in *Dagny*, the new woman’s magazine in Stockholm. In 1890 she won first prize in a contest announced by *Idun*, a woman’s weekly, submitting five chapters that would shortly find their way into *Gösta*, among them “Ghost Stories.” The judges announced that her entry was “one of the most remarkable belletristic works we have seen the light of day in our country during the most recent decades.”

Yet Selma Lagerlöf also had plenty of familial burdens to bear. Her father, long in failing health (he tried to cure himself with drink), died in the summer before she reported for duty in Landskrona. Mårbacka’s economy had gone from bad to worse in the course of his illness; it passed catastrophically enough, to brother Johan before the father’s death, and then briefly to sister Gertrud and her husband. By 1888 the home was put up for sale at public auction; Selma attended, wanting to see Mårbacka one last time “before strangers take possession of it.” In Landskrona she lived in the loft of her school. But she was not alone as she plugged away at her manuscript. Aunt Lovisa, who “could not realize that she was seventy” and gobbled bonbons, moved in with her, and her widowed mother came to stay from time to time.

The Berling project went through stages. First it was a set of verse “romances,” in the fashion of her father’s favorite *Frithiof* and Runeberg’s *Tales of Ensign Stål*, next a drama (one act of which has survived). Finally Lagerlöf settled on short prose narratives, fitted into the frame of twelve months from Christmas to Christmas, the year the cavaliers ruled the roost at Ekeby, the estate that is the center of action in the novel.

Plenty of ingredients went into *Gösta*. For example, the uncanny “Wandering Willie’s Tale” is Walter Scott’s *Redgauntlet* rubbed off on “Ghost Stories.” Selma, of course, had known the tales of Hans Christian Andersen from her earliest years. The sobriquet “The Traveling Companion” that she gave Sophie Elkan—the beautiful, highstrung widow and novelist she met in 1894—was borrowed from Andersen’s story about the “strange fellow” who leads innocent Johannes to happiness through marvelous or frightening lands. Elkan accompanied Selma to Italy and Sicily, a journey that provided

the background for Selma's second novel, *Antikrists mirakler* (*The Miracles of Antichrist*, 1897), and to the Holy Land for *Jerusalem I-II* (1901-2). Zachris Topelius, another teller of so-called fairytales from Finland, loomed so large for Lagerlöf that she devoted her only biography to him (1920); "his name was surrounded by an aura of beloved and pleasant memories." Topelius was also famous, in Runeberg's wake, for *Fältskärens berättelser* (*The Stories of a Field Surgeon*, 1857-64), novellas told by still another veteran of the War of 1808-9, about events in Sweden's and Finland's history from the death of Gustav II Adolf, the "Swedish Lion" in the Thirty Years' War, to the start of the reign of Gustav III, Bellman's art-loving patron. The field surgeon is particularly proud of the fact that he has been a "reader of many books," altogether like Selma, and that he was born the same day as Napoleon. Two striking characters in *Gösta*—vain, superficial Countess Märta Dohna and brave cousin Kristoffer—are leftovers from the Napoleonic Age.

Living when and where she did, Lagerlöf of course knew her Ibsen. Peer Gynt's sudden condemnation of his drunken and extremely inventive dreaming, "lies and damned poetry," in the second act of that great verse play (1864), is quoted in *Gösta* in one of Lagerlöf's numerous authorial interruptions, at the end of chapter 11: "Oh, latter-day children! I do not ask anyone to give credence to these old stories. They may be nothing more than lies and poetry." Gregers Werle, whose persuasive tales cause the suicide of young Hedvig in Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (1884), is called by Ibsen "the thirteenth man at table," like *Gösta*'s Sintram, the would-be devil at the Christmas Eve feast whose suborning of the cavaliers leads to the expulsion of the majoresse, and the year of their misrule Sintram roams the roads around the lake called Löven (Fryken in geographic fact), "seeking the ruin of souls," like Satan in the prayer to Saint Michael at the end of the Tridentine Mass. His relations with the evil one are left murky in *The Saga of Gösta Berling*: Is he truly in league with the devil or rather a destructive and deranged meddler?

Kierkegaard's *Enten-Eller* (*Either-Or*, 1843) was among Lagerlöf's many books in the Landskrona loft, even though abstruse texts were not customarily her cup of tea. She made her way as far as the chapter titled "The Direct Erotic Stages of the Musical Erotic," Kierkegaard's interpretation of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, helping to form her image of Gösta Berling as a seducer. Also, it is tempting to conjecture that Lagerlöf, living in the cultural ambiance of Copenhagen, read the Danish classic *Phantasterne* (*The Phantasts*, 1857) of Hans Egede Schack. Its narrator, Conrad Malcolm, eventually is able to turn his daydreaming to positive ends; his friend Christian is destroyed by dreaming; a third comrade, stolid Thomas, is no dreamer at all. At the end of chapter 10, "The Young Countess," Gösta salutes the dream in his great speech to the somnolent and grumpy cavaliers: "Of all the things that hands have built, what is there that has not fallen or will not fall? Oh, people, throw down the trowel and the clay form! Spread the mason's apron over your head and lie down to build the bright palace of dreams!"

However, Gösta's longest dream of love, his passion for the young countess, will lead to his quiet, unromantic marriage with her, in order to give a legal father to her as yet unborn child, by her doltish husband. (The poor infant expires straightaway.) He will settle down with her, working at his lathe, friend to the poor, a humble peasant fiddler in the lonely forestcroft. One wonders if this forced happy ending (viewed with considerable skepticism by Lagerlöf's first Swedish biographer, Elin Wägner) draws on the plan of Goethe's *Faust* (in part two) to drain swamps and serve mankind thereby. Otherwise, the echoes of *Faust* in *Gösta* are detectible enough, or, for that matter, all too obvious—for example, the pact with the devil (Sintram as a provincial Mephistopheles). In the final lines of *Faust* "Das Ewig-Weibliche / Zieht uns hinan" (The Eternal Womanly / draws us onward and upward); in

Lagerlöf's finale, Göstais saved by Elisabet and by the majoresse who expires to the sound of the foundry's hammer. The cavaliers have at last undertaken honest work.

Elisabet—who shares a name with Wagner's redemptress in *Tannhäuser*—has delivered her lecture on “heroic gestures, heroic ostentation,” to Gösta, who is lying bound on the floor. As is Gösta's wont, he offers an excuse: “We cavaliers are not free men. . . . We have promised one another to live for happiness and only for happiness.” Elisabet rejoins, “Woe to you . . . that you should be the most cowardly among the cavaliers and last in improvement of any of them!” Lagerlöf came to love the pattern of the man gone astray, redeemed by the savior woman; in *En herrgårdssägen* (*From a Swedish Homestead*, 1899), the mad peddler-and-peasant-fiddler, “Billy Goat,” is restored to his former handsome and cultured self, the estate owner and violinist Gunnar Hede, by the psychoanalytical skills of Ingrid, the frail girl whom Billy Goat, despite his madness, has saved from being buried alive. In Lagerlöf's last completed novel, *Anna Svärd* (1928), the ex-pastor Karl-Artur Ekenstedt—formerly silly, self-righteous, destructive—returns to Värmland after seven years of rehabilitation as a missionary in Africa, and approaches the cottage of his long-neglected wife, the eponymous Anna Svärd. The reader never finds out what happens: does she continue her interrupted labor of his salvation?

Lagerlöf frankly revealed the impact Thomas Carlyle's *French Revolution* had made on her as she wrote *Gösta*. The “people from the woods” march on the cavaliers in chapter 32, “The Girl from Nygård”—“dark, embittered men jostle down toward Ekeby's great estate; hungry women with crying children on their arms.” Moreover, Carlyle's urgent rhetoric, engaging and stirring his audience, informs Lagerlöf's own apostrophic style. Similarly, the powerful and often abusive language of the prophets in the Old Testament crops up whenever the theme of “God's storm” appears. Like other Swedish children of her time, Lagerlöf had been spoon-fed on the cadences of the Charles XII Bible, an equivalent to the King James version. As the chapters “Drought” and “The Girl from Nygård” richly prove, Lagerlöf possessed a particular genius for panoramas of disaster, and there are several such passages in her work: the slow death of a herd of two hundred goats, freezing in the forest, which touches off the madness of Gunnar Hede; the sinking of the passenger liner *L'Univers* in *Jerusalem*; an uncanny foreshadowing of the *Titanic*'s collision with the iceberg; the drowned sailors after the Battle of Jutland, floating in their lifejackets, their eyes picked out by gulls, in *Bannlyst* (*The Outcasts*, 1918). Sometimes her biblical allusions are quietly hilarious. Congratulating Squire Julius on his retinue of happy girls, she writes, “Fortunate are they who can rejoice at the sunshine of life and do not need a gourd to shield their head!” Here she's referring to God's gracious effort to console Jonah in his discontent after his adventure with the whale: “And the Lord prepared a gourd and made it come up over Jonah, that it might be a shadow over his head to deliver him from his grief.”

Once *Gösta* had become a Swedish bestseller, marketing efforts were made to emphasize the festive, jovial existence of Gösta Berling and his crew. The drawings by Georg Pauli in later Swedish editions often resemble nothing so much as the illustrations by “Phiz,” Hablot Knight Browne, for Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*. Certainly there is a great deal of rollicking humor in *Gösta*, the “specific Swedish exuberance” praised by Fredrik Böök—the eventual kingmaker of the Swedish Academy, the man behind Thomas Mann's Nobel Prize in 1929. Böök also fostered the belief that “the bitter and the negative” were “completely foreign” to Lagerlöf. The connoisseur of arts and letters Hans Erland Larsson wrote that “she can scarcely paint anything but the comfortable, the solid, the good perceptions that propelled Lagerlöf swiftly into the status not only of a national icon, but also of a dependable provider of benevolent parables.

Undoubtedly, the strong admixture of humor, on many levels, contributed to Gösta's fame. Lagerlöf does not hesitate to undercut her loudmouthed hero as he and the trusty Beerencrutz, pulled in the sleigh by the black steed Don Juan, abduct the surprised but willing Elisabet Dohna from Scharling's birthday party at Munkerud: "Beerencrutz . . . look, this is life. Just as Don Juan races away with the young woman, so time races away with every person." Beerencrutz tells him to shut up: "Now they're coming after us!" Yet Gösta will not be silent: "I am Gösta Berling . . . lord of ten thousand kisses and thirteen thousand love letters. Cheers for Gösta Berling! Catch him, if you can!"

Gösta returns to Ekeby that night, in that wonderful epilogue to chapter 10, one of the parade pieces in the book. The old cavaliers want to sleep, but Gösta will not stop talking. "He just talks" (*Han bara pratar*, in plain Swedish). After he has held forth for a while, "a few snores began to sound behind the yellow-checked curtains," but "most of [the cavaliers] swore and complained at him and his follies." Lagerlöf's Gösta resembles another splashy hero of European fiction of the time: D'Annunzio's Andrea Sperelli in *Il Piacere* (*Pleasure*, 1889), the master of all the arts, the constant orator, the constant self-praiser. Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray, from 1890, likewise unbelievably gifted and handsome, comes to a fall far more radical than Andrea's or Gösta's—he is perhaps fetched by the devil, as he loses his eternal youth. Gösta, maybe, is in danger of being fetched by the evil one too. Still, as Sintram points out, he is not yet ripe.

Like Andrea and, more discreetly, Dorian, Gösta is a seducer: the point is made repeatedly. However, the Danish critic Georg Brandes, himself notoriously priapic—in 1888 he drove the Scanian novelist Victoria Benedictsson, abandoned by him, to suicide—cast doubt on Gösta's ultimate success with the ladies, an omission Brandes naughtily attributed to Selma's inexperience: "throughout, one feels that the narrator is a maiden lady, for whom a large area of life . . . is a closed book." Seemingly Gösta takes none of his loves to bed, not Anna Stjärnhök, not Marianne Sinclair, not even Elisabet after their hole-in-the-corner marriage. For Brandes, the embraces "are cold as snow and the night." The sparks of carnal fire ignited by Anna, Marianne, Elisabet, flicker out quickly.

In 1942 Elin Wägner said that Gösta was "a diaphanous and elusive figure," and Brandes thought that "psychology was the weak side" of the *Saga*. "The outlines of his form are given, but never more than the outlines. He stands before the reader, living, only in each separate situation, never as a whole, never as a human being." These strictures are unfair to Lagerlöf's implicative artistry. Gösta, an inordinately gifted speaker when the fit is on him, also has a gift for self-pity (he imagines his congregation rising up against him) and self-exculpation. He is vain, taking his revenge on the countess when she rejects his invitation to dance; it is "no honor," she says, to dance with the man who has refused to help free his benefactress, the majoress. He is the poet who has never written poetry (so he says), but when he does, the product is ever so slightly mawkish, far less gripping than the sincere verses of rejected Marianne Sinclair. Cowardly on occasion, he is also brave, soft-hearted and empathetic: confronted by an animal "poet" and "king," he cannot bring himself to shoot the charging bear at Gurlita Bluff.

He can be thoughtlessly cruel: he decks out the dead-drunk Captain Lennart—the ex-convict, come home to his wife—as a robber. The deed resembles the nasty trick played on the drunken visitor in Rudyard Kipling's "A Friend's Friend" in *Plain Tales from the Hills*; but there the victim deserves the treatment. (Lagerlöf admired Kipling's *Jungle Book*, which she read before starting out on *Nils Holgerssons underbara resa* [*The Wonderful Adventures of Nils*, 1906].) Nonetheless, Gösta may serve here as an instrument of the Almighty, moving in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.

rejected by his wife, Captain Lennart becomes “God’s pilgrim.” The trick played on the feeble-minded, beautiful “Girl from Nygård” is more appalling: the planned wedding, at which she is left waiting “in the kitchen.” Gösta departs to dam off the flash flood threatening Ekeby, and then leaves that worthwhile and essential task in order to help the runaway Countess Elisabet.

The Nygård girl, who bears a physical resemblance to Elisabet, returns to her forest home and falls to her death—accident or suicide? Anna Stjärnhök has accused Gösta, to the young Countess Elisabet, of having caused the death—a kind of suicide—of another simple soul, pious Ebba Dohna, surely a case of sour grapes on Anna’s part (Gösta having renounced Anna with lightning speed amid her protestations of pain at doing so). She tells Elisabet about the “murder” of Ebba Dohna, she says, falsely moralizing, because she does not want him “to become a married woman’s lover.” Three chapters later, she washes (she claims) her hands of Gösta after having learned that he abandoned the necessary task of saving Ekeby from the surging waters in order to serve as the countess’s “slave, house page.” “So I see . . . that God does not have only one string on his bow. I will put my heart at ease and stay where I am needed. He can make a man of Gösta Berling without me.”

In the case of the Nygård girl, as in Ebba’s, Gösta’s excuses are flimsy: “I never promised the girl from Nygård that I would marry her! ‘Come here next Friday, then you’ll see something funny’ was all that I said to her. I can’t help it if she liked me.” Gösta delivers this excuse for the daft girl’s death in response to Elisabet’s outcry, “Oh Gösta, Gösta, how could you?” But Gösta has misapprehended the reason for Elisabet’s question. She has remonstrated with him because he told the mob threatening Ekeby that she “was good and pure,” not because he caused the Nygård girl’s death. Gösta, in his turn, says nothing more about the dead girl, but praises Elisabet’s “lovely soul.” Lagerlöf is full of surprises and hints. Can it be that Elisabet, like Gösta, is self-centered? The reader, who has become fascinated by Lagerlöf’s actually quite complex characters, is relieved to learn, in the next chapter, that Gösta, roaming the woods in suicidal despair, wants “to die at the place where the Nygård girl had been killed.” He feels remorse, after all, for the joke and its consequences.

The engaged reader also feels some distress at the lot of refined Elisabet, marooned in the forest croft with her poet-fiddler Gösta, served and entertained by unbalanced Löwenborg and his painted piano table. The majoresse says, “It will be a gloomy life for you, Gösta,” and adds, “for Elisabet too.” Indeed, the future for the novel’s cast looks very bleak. Love, or Eros, so often apostrophized, seldom turns out well. Anna Stjärnhök enters into a “marriage” with the dead fiancé, Ferdinand Ugglå, she has never loved. The late-life marriage of Ulrika Dillner to Sintram, of course, is doomed from the start, and, luckily for her, is annulled thanks to Anna Stjärnhök’s valor. The miserly pastor of Broby blooms at the thought of a reunion, forty years too late, with the love of his youth. After their weekend of happiness, she departs, content at this new memory—“such a magnificent dream”—and the pastor “sits in his desolate home and wept in desperation.” Marianne Sinclair, caught kissing Gösta in the *tableau vivant*, carried off by him, subjected to harrowing adventures (including the dreadful scene when, on the icy night, she is shut out of her father’s house), has her beauty ruined by smallpox, and is abandoned by Gösta, who puts the blame on her: “He didn’t want to be her plaything any longer.” In chapter 27, “Old Ballads,” Marianne is wooed and won by Knight Sunshine, Adrian [Löwensköld]. “It was not happiness, not unhappiness, but she would try to live with that man.”<sup>3</sup>

As for the cavaliers,<sup>4</sup> they have to leave Ekeby, despite their belated turn to honest work. Bound for his forest croft, Gösta will not accept the gift of Ekeby (already partly burned by the cavalier Kevenhüller’s final invention) from the dying majoresse. Gösta delivers his farewell oration to them

but his words will do them no good, deprived of their refuge, as they are, by his decision. “The pain of old age awaited them.” He gives them cold comfort by wanting, he says, to believe that they have learned the answer to the questions of how “a man could be both happy and good.” Whether Gösta eloquent to the end, realizes it or not, he paraphrases the Hávamál of the *Elder Edda* about the existential choice between selflessness and selfishness. The “dear old men,” the cavaliers, also get a handsome sendoff from the narrator, even more verbally gifted than Gösta himself.

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Selma Lagerlöf was scarcely the naïve or artless teller of tales as she was perceived by some observers, for example, the refined poet and judge of literature Oscar Levertin, to whom Georg Brandes had assigned the task of presenting Lagerlöf to Germany (1904) in a handsome series, *Die Literatur*. Thomas Mann, that master of irony, knew better. Introducing the *Gesammelte Werke*, the ten-volume set of her works issued in Munich (1924), Mann described the portrait of her included in it: her “bright, energetic face” looked toward the observer “in its pinched asymmetry, kindly and almost sly,” and sly she was. The chapter “Lady Musica” quite unbelievably requires the twelve cavaliers to perform Haydn’s Ninety-Second Symphony. Its mostly merry melodies are intended to lift Gösta’s gloom after Elisabet’s escape into an unknown fate. Löwenborg plays his soundless Beethoven on his piano table; is the reader supposed to think of deaf Beethoven? In the chapter’s last line, the “melancholy” of Gösta is dispelled; the Swedish word is *mjältsjukan*. Did Lagerlöf want her Swedish audience to think of “Mjältsjukan,” the famous confessional lyric of Esaias Tegnér, the son of Värmland, the erotically tormented Bishop of Växjö?

Lagerlöf plays many little jokes on her readers. Sintram gets his name from a tale by Friedrich de Motte-Fouqué, *Sintram und seine Gefährten* (1815), about a splendid young knight from Drontheim (Trondhjem in Norway); in a reenactment of Albrecht Dürer’s *Ritter, Tod und Teufel* (Knight, Death and Devil), this Sintram thrusts the cruciform hilt of his sword at the evil one and sends “the terrible stranger” flying. The prim British novelist Charlotte Yonge translated it as *Sintram and His Companions*, and the book became a children’s classic in late Victorian England. In chapter 4, “Gösta Berling, the Poet,” Gösta throws the three volumes, bound in red leather, of Madame de Staël’s *Corinne, ou L’Italie* (1814-15) to the wolves, pursuing him and Anna Stjärnhök through the winter night, as he sets forth in his sleigh to save Anna from marriage to ugly, old Dahlberg. Does this mean that *The Saga of Gösta Berling* will triumph over de Staël’s protracted tale of the fiery Corinne’s passion for the considerably less passionate Lord Oswald Nelvil? That Lagerlöf’s Värmland, in the North, is just as exciting as Corinne’s Italy, with its art treasures so minutely described?

Lagerlöf was a patriot of her native province, tucked up against the Norwegian border, and the birthplace of great men—Tegnér; the historian Anders Fryxell (a very old man Selma knew in her childhood and celebrated in *Mårbacka*); the poet Erik Gustaf Geijer, Tegnér’s contemporary. One of Geijer’s often anthologized poems describes the independent peasant (one likes to think, from Värmland), another the charcoal burners who provided the fuel for the rural iron foundries attached to the Värmland estates. Geijer devoted a picturesque segment of his memoirs to this grand form of cottage industry; his father owned a foundry at Ransäter, not far from *Gösta Berling* country. The foundries were on the brink of their decline in the 1820s, when the novel is set; they would fall victim to the railroads and city factories. Water transportation from Ekeby, on the route taken by the



cavaliers in chapter 17, “Iron from Ekeby,” was no longer necessary, nor were the countryside foundries. A nostalgia for the Värmland of the past emerged decades before Lagerlöf conceived *Gösta*—in *Wermlänningarne*, “tragic-comic speech, song, and dance play” (1846), by Fredrik August Dahlgren with music by Andreas Randel. (*Oklahoma!* might be a rough American equivalent.) *Gösta*’s success was prepared, in some measure, by Dahlgren and Randel’s beloved quasi-operetta.

Sven Stolpe has made the alluring proposal that *Gösta* is, in fact, a series of “little operas,” with verbal arias, melodramatic situations, and, above all, the outsized emotions to be found in the nineteenth-century repertoire. And, as every operagoer knows, the characters in Donizetti, Bellini, Verdi, are controlled by a God often appealed to or railed against. Just so in *Gösta*; in its “Prologue or overture, the majoreess says, when Gösta wants to lay himself down and die: “Oh, you may fly boldly, you wild birds, but our Lord knows the net that will catch you.” Never missing the chance for self-dramatization, Gösta agrees: “He is a great and strange God. . . . He has eluded me and rejected me, but he will not let me die. His will be done!”

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The full manuscript of *Gösta* was accepted by Fritiof Hellberg’s “humbug-house” in Stockholm, the derogatory term coined by the novelist Bo Bergman, who had seen the samples in *Idun* and looked forward to the book’s publication in a worthier venue. Some reviews were favorable: the young poet Gustaf Fröding, from Värmland, destined to become one of Sweden’s greatest poets, liked the way his compatriot conjured up the glories of their common home. Major critics were far less enthusiastic. The dean of the critical corps, Karl Warburg, thought *Gösta* was a “mightily strange narration” and was irritated by “the *unnaturalness of the style*” (his italics). He recommended that the authoress undertake “retellings of folk-tales . . . which she ought to be able to reproduce with a poetic mood.” A crueler blow was delivered by Carl David af Wirsén, the powerful secretary of the Swedish Academy; he compared *Gösta* to antiquated, sentimental novels aimed at a female audience. Composing the “modern” part of a monumental history of Sweden’s literature (1911), Warburg made torturous amends: “The faults of the book, which at first caught the eyes of professional critics and which, in several quarters, caused an undervaluing of its merits, were partly its jumpy, rather loose structure . . . and partly its uncontestedly, albeit not uncontested, mannered style.” Wirsén opposed Lagerlöf’s selection for the Nobel Prize, trying instead to advance the candidacy of Algernon Charles Swinburne for all people.

A sea change in *The Saga of Gösta Berling*’s fortunes came shortly; the above-mentioned Georg Brandes wrote his glowing review of the Danish translation for the tone-setting newspaper *Politiken*. Just returned from a Christmas vacation in Copenhagen, Selma sent her mother a clipping, “nice to read after Warburg and Wirsén, for Brandes is the most distinguished man in the North.” He made no bones about his enthusiasm for “the material’s surprising singularity and the originality of the presentation,” going on to the “narrative’s rhythmically fluid, often quite simply lyric style. Privately the authoress must have written a great deal of verse in order to achieve this prose.” *Gösta*’s variety was wonderful: “[Lagerlöf] wanted to paint not a picture but a whole picture-gallery.” Yet Brandes, too, unmindful of the consequences, gave his authority to the notion of Lagerlöf as a “naïve” artist: “her warm, living imagination is like a child’s. Exactly like a child’s.” The child is full of surprises: “We are led along detours until, without being prepared, we suddenly stand face to face with what the

author wants to show us.”

Immediately, Selma Lagerlöf was recruited by the ambitious publisher Karl Otto Bonnier and became a luminary of his stable, to the financial advantage of them both. The story collection *Osynliga länkar* (*Invisible Links*) appeared at Bonniers in 1894, followed by a new edition of *Gösta Berling* acquired from Hellberg, in 1895, the year Selma resigned from her teaching post. In 1897 she moved to Falun, the old mining town in Dalecarlia, a neighboring province to Värmland, and just as rich in local lore; it had a distinctive literary (and supernatural) nimbus because of E. T. A. Hoffmann's tale "The Mines at Falun." Lagerlöf's younger sister Gerda lived there with her husband, as did a sturdy friend from Landskrona days, Valborg Olander, of whom Sophie Elkan, the traveling companion, was not a little jealous. The year of Lagerlöf's honorary doctorate at Uppsala, 1907, her aunt Lovisa died, and, for the funeral, Selma returned to Värmland and to look in on Mårbacka, purchasing it in 1911. She transformed it into a profitable farm, run by herself, supported by a large staff. A keen businesswoman, she produced super-healthy oatmeal, labeled "Mårbacka Oats-Power." Mårbacka attracted so many sightseers and wellwishers that she had trouble finding the peace to write. Grete Garbo tried to drop in on her in the summer of 1935, but she was in the hospital at Karlstad. They met the next year in Stockholm; Lagerlöf's theatrical adaptation of *The Saga of Gösta Berling* had had its premiere there in March 1935, to mixed reviews. Only nineteen, Garbo had played the role of Elisabeth in Mauritz Stiller's silent film of 1924, called, in English, *The Atonement of Gösta Berling*.

Lagerlöf fell afoul of the Nazi propaganda machine after 1933 for bringing Jewish intellectuals such as her biographer Walter Berendsohn and the poet Nelly Sachs, to safety in Sweden. When the Soviet Union attacked Finland on November 30, 1939, she hesitated to think of her country going to its neighbor's aid, lest the Russians retaliate, "a hard fate for old Sweden." Nevertheless, she gave the beleaguered Finns all the gold medals she had received over the long course of her career. She died at Mårbacka on March 16, 1940, her sister Gerda at her side. In a last letter to a friend, she told her not to brood so much: "You know that we human beings haven't been vouchsafed the gift of looking into God's council chamber."

The success and example of *The Saga of Gösta Berling* may have encouraged Verner von Heidenstam—a future Nobel Prize winner (1916)—to complete *Karolinerna* (*The Charles Men*, 1897-98), a double series of carefully wrought novellas centered on Charles XII, the "warrior king" whose extravagant military adventures started the destruction of the Swedish Empire. The ten interconnected novellas of the Norwegian Trygve Andersen's *I Cancelliraadens Dage* (*In the Days of the Councillor*, 1897), take place in a backwater of the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>5</sup> Sigrid Undset's novels from medieval Norway, collectively called after their heroine, Kristin Lavransdatter, appeared from 1920 on, expanding on a world Lagerlöf had briefly entered in the novellas of *Drottningar i Kungahälsjön* (*Queens of Kungahälla*, 1899). It has been suggested that the sudden fame of Undset, younger by a quarter of a century (and a Nobel Prize winner, 1928), prompted the aging Lagerlöf to embark on her own set of novels that move from the age of Charles XII to, principally, the 1830s in Värmland: *Löwensköldska ringen* (*The Ring of the Löwenskölds*, 1925); *Charlotte Löwensköld* (1925); and *Annika Svärd* (1928). Was envy a creative stimulus here? Long ago, Lagerlöf herself had been the target of envy: Strindberg planned to do a caricature of her as "Tekla Lagerlök" (Laurel-Onion) in his hateful *Svarta fanor* (*Black Banners*, 1907), and, never a recipient of the Nobel Prize, he harrumphed that "some people value my dramatic production (forty plays) more highly than the Great Selma

Novels.” (Did he remember that, in 1887, he had written a very popular novel, *Hemsöborna* [*The People of Hemsö*], whose hero, the Värmländer Carlsson, plays a trick on the drunken Pastor Nordström even more drastic than the one Gösta and his fellows play on Captain Lennart?) During Isak Dinesen’s (Karen Blixen’s) years in Africa, authorial envy may again have been at work. Blixen refused to agree that, as the manageress of a coffee farm, she in any way resembled the pipe-smoking majoreess. Grabbing an opening provided by an American correspondent, she allowed that great writers, such as “Ibsen, Shaw, Tolstoy, and Lagerlöf, are likely to lose something of their talent in later years,” a thrust at the Löwensköld cycle. Surely, the author of *Seven Gothic Tales* and *Winter Tales* had learned from Lagerlöf, whose books were on the library shelves at Blixen’s Mbogani House.

*The Saga of Gösta Berling* came out in German in 1896, the first of what would be six translations. Marie Herzfeld, the literarily acute friend of Hugo von Hofmannsthal, touted it in the climactic essay of *Die skandinavische Literatur und ihre Tendenzen* (*Scandinavian Literature and its Tendencies*, 1898): “a mixture of adventure novel, educational novel [bildungsroman, high praise in the German critical vocabulary], and psychological novel.” Thomas Mann quickly became a faithful reader of the author of “the old tale” of Gösta Berling (calling it a *Mär*, a word suggestive of the *Nibelungenlied*). For Rainer Maria Rilke *Gösta* was “incomparable” and, like Mann, he closely followed Lagerlöf’s production (even trying to read *Nils Holgersson* in the original Swedish). But he gave up on her in the midst of reading *Bannlyst* (*The Outcast*, 1918, strangely called *Das Heilige Leben*, “The Holy Life,” in German), not grasping that the murderer Lamprecht was still another of Lagerlöf’s arrogant and egotistical specimens of evil, a theme first broached in *Sintram* and then in the Scots mercenary’s home invasion and mass-murder of *Herr Arnes penningar* (*Sir Arne’s Hoard*, 1903), which was turned into a play, *Winterballade*, by Gerhart Hauptmann, in the war year 1917. From his Swiss refuge in 1920, Rilke wrote, about *Das Heilige Leben*: “I was quite cross with this old school marm” and “there’s no depending on Selma Lagerlöf any longer.” Paul Géraldy, the French playwright and master of the *bon mot*, compared Lagerlöf to Homer; Marguérite Yourcenar, the author of *Hadrian’s Memoirs*, devoted a major essay to the “conteuse épique,” concluding with praise of the “admirable tales, pure as the unpolluted lakes of Värmland,” and especially one of the paralympomena to *Gösta*, “The Tale from Halstanäs,” in *Osynliga länkar*, on the later years of Colonel Beerencrutz. Russia welcomed *Iosta Berling* with open arms (from 1904 on); the scholar Maria Nikolayeva proposes that Värmland’s estate life seemed immediately familiar to an audience steeped in Turgenev, and Vivian Edström sees a “direct correspondence” between pious Ebba Dohna and Lisaveta Michailovna, who enters a cloister in *A Nest of Gentlefolk*. (Nikolayeva also wonders if Lagerlöf’s easy switches from the real to the fantastic, as in “Ghost Stories,” rubbed off on Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*.) The music historian Alan Mallach has recently claimed that Riccardo Zandonai’s opera *cavalieri di Ekebù* (1925), with a libretto by Arturo Rossato, is not an oddity but rather a gem in the “autumn” of Italian *verismo*. Zandonai-Rossato emphasize the dark side of Lagerlöf’s vision: the villains, Samzelius and *Sintram*, have much dirty work to do; the majoreess, “la Comandante,” allotted a telling mezzo-soprano part; and the loves of a tormented “Giosta” are reduced to one, frightened Anna. The orchestration—plenty of bass clarinet, bassoon, and tuba—is heavy, the incessant percussion effects eerie.

In the Anglophone world, *Gösta* got several translations from 1898 on, by Pauline Bancroft Flach, Lillie Tudeer, and Robert Bly (a revision of Flach), but has never found a critical champion, or been taken quite seriously. Peter Graves has tracked down Lagerlöf’s reputation in England. Not very accurate comparisons have been made with Thomas Hardy and George Eliot, among others. D. H. Lawrence

translating Giovanni Verga's *Mastro Don Gesualdo* in Sicily, decided that Verga's text was "one of the genuine emotional extremes of European literature: just as Selma Lagerlöf or Knut Hamsun may be the other extreme, northwards." Yet Verga seems "more real than these." Voices that could have carried weight (Graves names Shaw, H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, Rebecca West, Virginia Woolf) stayed silent. In the United States, Henry Goddard Leach, for years the head of the American Scandinavian Foundation, wrote an introduction (1918) to a reprint of Lillie Tudeer's translation (1898), and told how, on a walking tour of Värmland, he discovered that Värmland people were "blithe today but not so romantic" as their forebears in Gösta Berling's time. It is profoundly to be hoped that Paul Norlen's translation will win Selma Lagerlöf's novel the serious critical attention it deserves.

GEORGE C. SCHOOLFIELD

## NOTES

[1](#) Fredman ("Peace-man," a pun on Latin *bellum*, "war"), the prostitute Ulla Winblad, the bass-player Father Berg, the wigmaker Mow itz, Corporal Mollberg, and more.

[2](#) Strindberg used this university-and-cathedral town as the threatening backdrop of his play *Påsk* (*Easter*, 1901).

[3](#) In *Anna Svärd*, written some thirty-five years after *Gösta*, Marianne has died after a year of marriage to Adrian. The sometime Knight Sunshine bullies his second wife—who plays to his moods—and five plain daughters. He is drowned trying to save his ne'er-do-well brother's perky child (from a union with a gypsy woman), and the little girl, a tow-headed charmer, also dies under the ice. (She has been kidnapped by the wrong-headed zealot Karl-Artur Ekenstedt.) Gustava Sinclair's affection for her vile-tempered husband, Melchior, can bloom only after he has been felled by a stroke.

[4](#) Historically, the military men among the cavaliers, Beerencrutz, Fuchs, Kristian, Kristoffer, Örneclou, Ruster, are already discards, leftovers from Sweden's last continental adventures, in Pomerania and at the Battle of Leipzig (1813), the "Battle of Nations," where Swedish artillery played a small part in Napoleon's defeat. Captain Lennart has been involved, like shady Sintram, in the futile little war with Norway of 1814. (That former half of the "Twin Kingdoms of Denmark-Norway" had been bestowed on Sweden by the Treaty of Kiel, and the belligerent Norwegians wanted to be rid of their new "personal union" with the Swedish crown.) Rather ungratefully, Lagerlöf adduces no veterans from the war with Russia of 1808-9, celebrated by Johan Ludvig Runeberg.

[5](#) Danish rule in Norway, incorporated by the councillor himself, was decaying, as was the Danish-Norwegian official class, amid gaming, drinking, and adultery.

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## Suggestions for Further Reading

The Northland Edition of Selma Lagerlöf's works (through 1914) appeared in 1917 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Page). Single translations of later works, including the three volumes of memoirs, were published by Doubleday from 1924 to 1937. Most monographs on Lagerlöf in English are antiquated: Harry E. Maule's worshipful *Selma Lagerlöf: The Woman, Her Work, Her Message* (Doubleday, 1917); 1926); Walter A. Berendsohn's *Selma Lagerlöf, Her Life and Work* (Doubleday, 1932), adapted from the German original edition of 1927; Hanna Astrup Larsen's *Selma Lagerlöf* (Doubleday, 1936); a chapter on Lagerlöf in Al rik Gustafson's *Six Scandinavian Novelists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940; New York: American Scandinavian Foundation, 1940). Vivi Edström's *Selma Lagerlöf* (Boston: Twayne, 1984) is compact and dependable. "The Scandalous Selma Lagerlöf" by Niels Afzelius, *Scandinavica* 5 (1966), a reduction and translation of the title essay in his *Selma Lagerlöf: den förargelseväckande* (Lund: Glerrup, 1969), is strongly to be recommended, as are the helpful articles by Erland Lagerroth, "The Narrative Art of Selma Lagerlöf: Two Problems," *Scandinavian Studies* 31 (1961) and "Selma Lagerlöf Research 1900-1964, A Survey and an Orientation," *Scandinavian Studies* 37 (1965). For Lars G. Warne's *History of Swedish Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996), Susan Brantly spoke of the "importance of history and tradition in *Gösta*, and Selma Lagerlöf's "acute sense of divine providence." A full life-and-works volume of Selma Lagerlöf in English, taking her copious correspondence and recent scholarship into account, is desideratum.

The secondary literature in Swedish is enormous: Vivi Edström's Gothenburg dissertation of 1966, *Livets stigar: Tiden, handlingen och livskänslan i Gösta Berlings saga* (The Paths of Life: Time, Action, and Life-Feeling in *Gösta Berling's Saga*, with English summary; Stockholm: Norstedt, 1966) is basic, as is her *Selma Lagerlöf: Livets vågspel* (Life's Daring Game; Stockholm: Natur och kultur, 2002). Henrik Wivel's *Snödrottningen: En bok om Selma Lagerlöf och kärleken* (The Snow Queen: A Book about Selma Lagerlöf and Love; Copenhagen: Gad, 1988; Stockholm: Bonniers, 1990), is fascinating because of its effort to uncover "the hidden Selma Lagerlöf." Two recent and important studies concern themselves with the Swedish reception of Selma Lagerlöf: Lisbeth Stenberg's *Genialisk lek: Kritik och överskridande i Selma Lagerlöfs tidiga författarskap* (Genius at Play: Criticism and Transcendence in Selma Lagerlöf's Early Texts; Gothenburg: Göteborgs universitet, 2001), and Anna Nordlund's *Selma Lagerlöfs underbara resa genom den svenska litteraturhistorien 1891-1996* (The Wonderful Adventures of Selma Lagerlöf Through Swedish Literary History 1891-1996; Stockholm: Östling, 2005), both with English summary.

Peter Graves's "The Reception of Selma Lagerlöf in Britain" appeared in *Selma Lagerlöf Seen from Abroad / Selma Lagerlöf i utlandsperspektiv*, edited by Louise Vinge (Stockholm: Royal Academy of Letters, 1998). Unfortunately, the symposium's papers included neither a survey of Selma Lagerlöf's reception in America, nor a thorough exploration of Selma Lagerlöf's overwhelming popularity in German-speaking countries. (Sibylle Schweitzer's *Selma Lagerlöf: Eine Bibliographie* [Marburg: Schriften der Universitätsbibliothek Marburg, 1900], provided a necessary tool for such an investigation.)



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## A Note on the Translation

Not one but two English translations of *The Saga of Gösta Berling* appeared soon after it was first published in Sweden in 1891: a British version by Lillie Tudeer (1898) and an American version by Pauline Bancroft Flach (1898). Both versions have been criticized for omissions large and small, while Tudeer occasionally adds material not found in the original. The eight chapters omitted from Tudeer's version were reinstated (translated by Velma Swanston Howard) in a 1918 edition of the Tudeer translation published by the American Scandinavian Foundation. Since then, however, no one has attempted a complete, new translation into English. (In 1962 the American poet Robert Bly published an edited version of Flach's translation.) Among the many challenges in translating Lagerlöf is capturing the various registers in her narrative voice (from deceptively simple to passionately lyrical, with more than an occasional touch of unabashed melodrama). The present translator has tried to convey the author's distinctive voice in English and produce a narrative that is a pleasure to read—as it is in Swedish.

I wish to thank Tracey Sands and Sonia Wichmann for reading and commenting on draft versions of the translation; Linnea Donnen for help with weaving terminology; and Tiina Nunnally, Lori Aronson, Reinhall, and Linda Schenck for helpful suggestions.

This translation is dedicated to the memory of Göran Tunström (1937-2000), a fine novelist and a stalwart champion of the works of Selma Lagerlöf.

PAUL NORLEN

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# PROLOGUE

## I. THE MINISTER

At long last the minister stood in the pulpit.

The congregation raised their heads. So, there he was after all. The service would not be canceled this Sunday, as it had been the previous Sunday and many Sundays before that.

The minister was young, tall, slender, and radiantly handsome. If you had set a helmet on his head and hung a sword and breastplate on him, you could have chiseled him in marble and named the image after the most beautiful of the Athenians.

The minister had the deep eyes of a poet and the firm, rounded chin of a general; everything about him was lovely, fine, expressive, glowing through and through with genius and spiritual life.

The people in the church felt strangely subdued seeing him like that. They were more accustomed seeing him stagger out of the inn in the company of merry companions, such as Beerencreutz, the colonel with the ample white mustaches, and the strong Captain Kristian Bergh.

He had been drinking so excessively that he had not been able to perform his duties for several weeks, and the congregation had been compelled to complain about him, first to his dean and then to the bishop and the consistory. Now the bishop had come to the parish to conduct an inquiry. He was sitting in the chancel with a gold cross on his chest, with clergymen from Karlstad and ministers from the neighboring parishes seated around him.

There was no doubt that the minister's conduct had exceeded the bounds of what was permitted. At that time, in the 1820s, there was a certain degree of indulgence in matters of drinking, but this man had neglected his office for the sake of drinking, and now he would lose it.

He stood in the pulpit, waiting, while the last verse of the pulpit hymn was being sung.

A sense of certainty came over him, as he was standing there, that he had nothing but enemies in the church, enemies in every pew. Among the gentry in the balcony, among the farmers down in the church, enemies among the confirmands in the chancel, nothing but enemies. An enemy was pumping the organ, an enemy played it. He had enemies in the church wardens' pew. Everyone hated him—everyone—from the little children who were carried into the church, up to the church sexton, a former and arthritic soldier who had been at the battle of Leipzig.

The minister would have liked to fall down on his knees and beg them for mercy.

But the very next moment a dull anger came over him. He remembered well what he had been like a year ago, when he ascended this pulpit for the first time. He was an irreproachable man at that time, and now he was standing there, looking down at the man with the gold cross around his neck who had come there to judge him.

While he read the introduction, wave after wave of blood rushed up to his face; this was anger.



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