



ASTRID LINDGREN

RONIA, The Robber's Daughter



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TRANSLATED BY
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PUFFIN BOOKS

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Summary: Ronja, who lives with her father and his band of robbers in a castle in the woods, causes trouble when she befriends the son of a rival robber chieftain.

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One

ON THE NIGHT THAT RONIA WAS BORN A THUNDERSTORM WAS RAGING over the mountains, such a storm that all the goblinfolk in Matt's Forest crept back in terror to their holes and hiding places. Only the fierce harpies preferred stormy weather to any other and flew, shrieking and hooting, around the robbers' stronghold on Matt's mountain. Their noise disturbed Lovis, who was lying within, preparing to give birth, and she said to Matt, "Drive the hell-harpies away and let me have some quiet. Otherwise I can't hear what I'm singing!"

The fact was that Lovis liked to sing while she was having her baby. It made things easier, she insisted, and the baby would probably be all the jollier if it arrived on earth to the sound of a song.

Matt took his crossbow and shot off a few arrows through one of the arrow slits of the fort. "Be off with you, harpies!" he shouted. "I'm going to have a baby tonight—get that into your heads, you hags!"

"Ho, ho, he's going to have a baby tonight," hooted the harpies. "A thunder-and-lightning baby, small and ugly it'll be, ho, ho!"

Then Matt shot again, straight into the flock, but they simply jeered at him and flew off across the treetops, hooting angrily.

While Lovis lay there, giving birth and singing, and while Matt quelled the wild harpies as best he could, his robbers were sitting by the fire down in the great stone hall, eating and drinking and behaving as rowdily as the harpies themselves. After all, they had to do something while they waited, and all twelve of them were waiting for what was about to happen up there in the tower room. No child had ever been born in Matt's Fort in all their robber days there.

Noddle-Pete was waiting most of all.

"That robber baby had better come soon," he said. "I'm old and rickety, and my robbing days will soon be over. It would be fine to see a new robber chief here before I'm finished."

He had scarcely stopped speaking when the door opened and Matt rushed in, quite witless with delight. He raced all the way around the hall, leaping high with joy and shrieking like a madman.

"I've got a child! Do you hear me—I've got a child!"

"What sort of child is it?" asked Noddle-Pete over in his corner.

"A robber's daughter, joy and gladness!" shouted Matt. "A robber's daughter—here she comes!"

And over the high threshold stepped Lovis with her baby in her arms. All the robbers' noise turned off at once.

"I do believe that's made your beer go down the wrong way," said Matt. He took the baby girl from Lovis and carried her around among the robbers.

"Here! Want to see the most beautiful child ever born in a robbers' fort?"

His daughter lay there in his arms, looking up at him with wide, bright eyes.

"That child understands just about everything already—you can see that," said Matt.

"What will you call her?" asked Noddle-Pete.

"Ronia," said Lovis. "I decided that a long time ago."

"What if it had been a boy?" said Noddle-Pete.

Lovis gave him a calm, stern look. "If I decide my baby is to be called Ronia, it will *be* a Ronia!"

Then she turned to Matt. "Shall I take her now?"

But Matt did not want to hand over his daughter. He stood there gazing in admiration at her clear eyes, her little mouth, her black tufts of hair, her helpless hands, and he trembled with love.

"You, baby, you're already holding my robber heart in those little hands," he said. "I don't understand it, but that's how it is."

"Could I hold her for a bit?" Noddle-Pete asked, and Matt laid Ronia in his arms as if she were a golden egg.

"I give you the new robber chieftain you've been talking about all this time. Don't drop her, whatever you do, or it will be your last hour!"

But Noddle-Pete just smiled his toothless smile at Ronia. "There's

no real weight to her," he said, surprised, raising and lowering her a couple of times.

That made Matt angry, and he snatched his baby back. "What did you expect, numskull? A great fat robber chieftain with a bulging belly and a pointed beard, eh?"

All the robbers realized then that there must be no comments about this child if they wanted to keep Matt in a good mood. And it really was not wise to annoy him. So they set to work at once, praising and extolling the newborn baby. They also emptied a great many tankards of beer in her honor, which made Matt happy. He threw himself down on his high seat among them and showed off his remarkable child again and again.

"This is going to plague the life out of Borka," said Matt. "He can sit there in his miserable robbers' den and gnash his teeth with jealousy. Yes, death and destruction! There will be such a gnashing that all the wild harpies and gray dwarfs in Borka's Wood will hold their ears, believe me!"

Noddle-Pete nodded gleefully and said with a little snigger, "Sure enough, it will plague the life out of Borka. Now Matt's line will live on, but Borka's line will be finished and done for."

"Yes," said Matt, "finished and done for, sure as death! As far as I know, Borka has not managed to get a child, and is not likely to either."

Then came a crack of thunder the like of which had never been heard in Matt's Wood before. It made even the robbers turn pale, and Noddle-Pete fell flat on his back, weak as he was. A piteous little cry came unexpectedly from Ronia, and that shook Matt worse than the thunderclap.

"My child's crying!" he shrieked. "What do we do, what do we do?"

But Lovis was standing by calmly. She took the baby from him and put her to her breast, and there was no more crying.

"That was a good crack," said Noddle-Pete, when he too had calmed down a little. "I'll take my dying oath it struck."

Yes, the lightning had struck and in earnest, too, as they saw when morning came. The ancient fortress high up on Matt's Mountain had been cleft down the middle. From the highest battlements to the deepest vault of the dungeons, the fortress was now split in two halves, with a chasm between them.

"Ronja, your young life has gotten off to a grand start," said Lovis, as she stood by the shattered wall with the baby in her arms, looking at the disaster.

Matt was raging like a wild animal. How could this have been allowed to happen to his forefathers' old fortress? But Matt could not go on being angry about anything for long, and he could always find reasons to take comfort.

"Oh, well, we shan't have so many twists and turns and cellar pits and rubbish to keep track of. And perhaps no one will need to get lost in Matt's Fort any more. Remember what it was like when Noddle-Pete went astray and didn't turn up for four days!"

Noddle-Pete did not enjoy being reminded of this occasion. Was it his fault he had gotten lost? He had only been trying to find out how vast and rambling Matt's Fort really was, and had indeed found it big enough to get lost in. Poor thing, he was almost half dead before he finally found his way back to the great stone hall. Thank goodness the robbers had been bawling and kicking up enough noise

for him to hear them a long way off; otherwise he would never have gotten back.

"In any case, we have never used the whole fort," said Matt, "and we will go on living in our hall and bedrooms and tower rooms where we have always lived. The only thing that annoys me is that we have lost our outhouse. Yes, death and destruction! It's on the other side of the chasm now, and I'm sorry for anyone who can't contain himself until we manage to build a new one."

But that was soon dealt with, and life in Matt's Fort went on exactly as before—except that now there was a child there. A little child, who succeeded bit by bit in sending Matt and all his robbers more or less mad, in Lovis's view. Not that it hurt them to become a little gentler-handed and milder-mannered, but there should be moderation in all things. And it really was strange to see twelve robbers and one robber chieftain sitting there like a lot of sheep, beaming and blissful just because a small child had learned to crawl around the stone hall, as if there had never been a greater miracle on earth. It was true that Ronia scampered about unusually fast because she had a trick of pushing off with her left foot, which the robbers thought absolutely astounding. But, after all, most children do learn to crawl, as Lovis said, *without* loud cheers, and without their father seeing it as a reason to forget everything else and positively neglect his work.

"Do you want Borka to take over all the robbing in Matt's Forest as well?" she asked sharply, when the robbers, with Matt at their head, came storming home early just because they had to see Ronia eating her porridge before Lovis put her into her hanging cradle for the night.