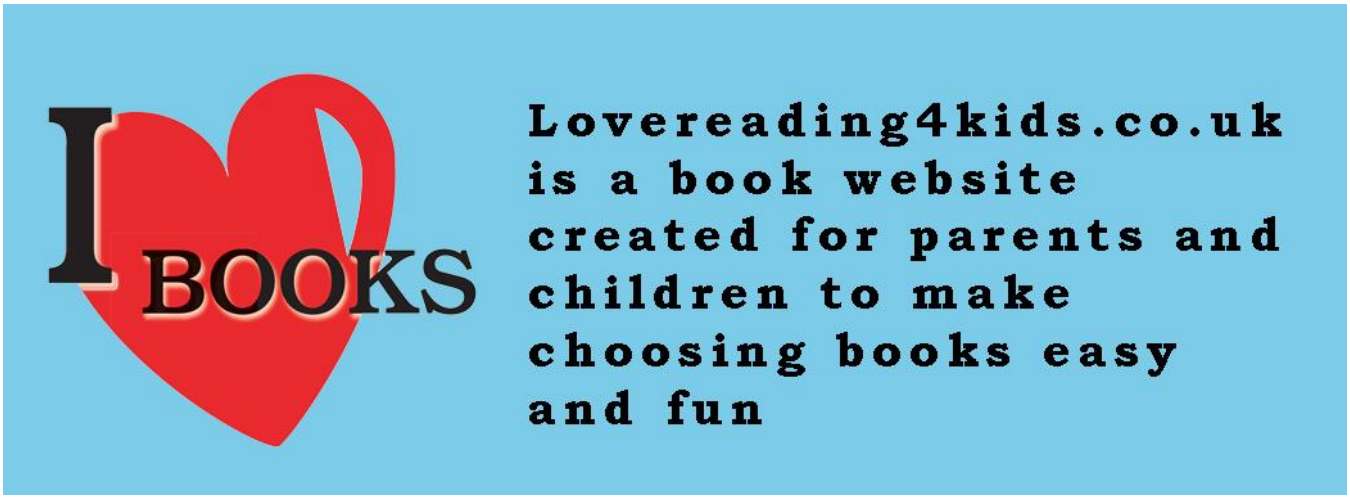

Opening extract from

Seacrow Island

Written by

Astrid Lindgren

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A Day in June

If you go down to the quay in Stockholm on a summer morning and see a little white boat called *Seacrow I* lying there, that is the right boat to take and all you have to do is to go on board. For at ten o'clock precisely she will ring her bell for departure and back out from the quay. She is now setting out on her usual trip, which ends at the island that lies the farthest out in the sea of all the islands in the Stockholm archipelago. *Seacrow I* is a purposeful, energetic little steamer and she has made this journey three times a week in summer and once a week in winter for more than thirty years, although she is probably quite unconscious of the fact that she plows through waters different from any others on the face of the earth. She crosses wide expanses of open water and steams through narrow channels, past hundreds of green islands and thousands of gray, bare rocks. She does not go fast and the sun is low when at last she

reaches the quay at Seacrow Island, the island which has given her its name. She has no need to go any farther, for there is only the open sea beyond with its bare rocks and its islands where nobody lives except eider ducks, gulls, and other sea birds.

But there are people on Seacrow Island. Not many, at most twenty—that is, in the winter. But in the summer there are the summer visitors as well.

Just such a family of summer visitors was aboard *Seacrow I* one day in June a few years ago. It consisted of a father and his four children, and their name was Melkerson. They lived in Stockholm and none of them had been to Seacrow Island before. And so they were very excited, especially Melker, the father.

"Seacrow Island," he said. "I like the name. That was why I took the house."

Malin, his nineteen-year-old daughter, looked at him and shook her head. What a scatterbrained father she had! He was almost fifty, but he was as impulsive as a child and more irresponsible than his own sons. Now he was standing there as excited as any child on Christmas Eve, expecting them all to be wildly enthusiastic about his idea of taking a summer cottage on Seacrow Island.

"It's like you, Daddy," said Malin, "it's exactly like you to take a cottage on an island which you have never even seen, just because you like the name."

"That's what I would have thought everybody did," Melker replied. He thought for a moment and then said, "Or perhaps one has to be an author and be more or less crazy to do a thing like that. Only a name—Seacrow Island! Perhaps other people would have gone and looked at the place before taking it."

"Lots would have—but not you."

"Well, never mind, I'm on my way there *now,"* said Melker cheerfully.

And he gazed around him with his gay, blue eyes. He saw all the things he loved most: the pale waters, the islands and reefs, the old gray rocks, the shore with its old houses and jetties and boathouses—he felt as if he wanted to stretch out his hand and caress them. Instead, he grasped Johan and Niklas by the nape of the neck.

"Do you realize how beautiful it all is? Do you realize how lucky you are to live in the midst of all this for a whole summer?"

Johan and Niklas said that they did realize it and Pelle said he realized it too.

"Well, why don't you shout for joy then?" said Melker. "Would you mind my asking for a spot of jubilation?"

"How do you do it?" Pelle asked. He was only seven years old and could not show joy to order.

"You yodel," said Melker, and laughed. Then he tried

to yodel a little himself and all his children giggled obediently.

"You sound like a cow mooing," said Johan, and Malin remarked, "Wouldn't it be better, just to be on the safe side, to wait until we've seen the cottage before you start crowing?"

Melker did not think so. "The agent said the cottage was wonderful, and one has to believe what people say. He assured me that it was an old, homey, delightful cottage."

"If only we could get there soon," said Pelle. "I want to see the cottage now."

Melker looked at his watch. "In an hour's time, my boy! By that time we shall all be very hungry, and guess what we shall be doing then?"

"Eating," suggested Niklas.

"Exactly. We'll sit outside the house in the sunshine and eat the wonderful meal that Malin will have cooked for us. We shall be having it on the green grass, of course—and we will just sit there and feel that summer has come!"

"Oh!" said Pelle. "I'll soon be shouting for joy."

But then he decided to do something else. His father had said there was an hour to go, and there must still be things he could do aboard this boat. He had done most of the exploring. He had climbed up all the companionways

and looked in all the exciting corners and cupboards. He had put his nose into the pilot's room and been chased away. He had tried to get up to the captain on the bridge and had been sternly ordered off. He had stood looking down into the engine room, watching all the machinery as it went around and around. He had drunk lemonade and eaten rolls and had thrown bits of his rolls to the hungry gulls. He had chatted with almost everybody on board. He had tried to see how fast he could run from one end of the boat to the other, and he had got in everybody's way at every stopping place as the crew threw baggage ashore. Now he began to look around for something new, and it was then that he discovered a couple of passengers he had not noticed before.

Far astern he saw an old man sitting with a little girl, and on the seat beside the girl was a cage with a raven in it. A live raven! That made Pelle hurry, for he loved all living creatures, everything that moved, flew, or crawled beneath the sky, every bird, fish, and four-footed animal. "Dear little animals," he called them all and he included frogs, wasps, grasshoppers, beetles, and other small insects. But now here was a raven, a real live raven.

The little girl smiled at him, a sweet, toothless smile, as he stopped in front of the cage.

"Is this your raven?" he asked, and poked a finger between the bars to try to stroke the bird. But this was a

mistake, for the raven immediately pecked at his finger and he hurriedly drew it back.

"Be careful!" said the little girl. "Yes, he *is* my raven, isn't he, Grandpa?"

The old man beside her nodded. "Yes, of course, it's Stina's raven," he explained to Pelle. "At any rate, while she's with me on Seacrow Island."

"Do you live on Seacrow Island?" said Pelle, delighted. "I'm going to live there too this summer. I mean, Father and I are going to live on Seacrow Island."

The old man looked at him in an interested way. "Are you, indeed? Then I suppose it's you who have taken the old Carpenter's Cottage?"

Pelle nodded eagerly. "Yes, it's us. Is it nice there?"

The old man put his head on one side and looked as if he were thinking. Then he broke into a funny little laugh. "Yes, it's nice, but of course it depends on what you like."

"What do you mean?" asked Pelle.

The old man laughed again. "Well, either you like it when it rains in through the roof or you don't."

"Or you *don't,"* came as a sort of echo from the little girl. "I *don't."*

Pelle grew rather thoughtful. He must tell Daddy that, but not just now. Now he wanted to look at the raven. It must be fun to have a raven, because everyone would

want to come and look at it, especially a big boy like him. Of course, Stina was only a little girl, at most five years old, but Pelle was willing to put up with her as a friend for the sake of the raven, at any rate until he had found something better.

"I'll come to see you one day," he said kindly. "Which house do you live in?"

"In a red one," said Stina, which was a lead, but not much more.

"You can ask where old man Söderman lives," said her grandfather. "Everyone knows it."

The raven blustered about in its cage and seemed very restless. Pelle had another try at poking in his finger, but the bird pecked him again.

"He's very wise," said Stina. "The wisest bird in all the world, Grandpa says."

Pelle thought this was boasting, as neither Stina nor her grandfather could possibly know which bird was the wisest in the world.

"My grandma has a parrot," said Pelle, "and she can say 'Go to blazes'!"

"There's nothing difficult in that," said Stina. "My grandmother can say that too."

Pelle laughed loudly. "It isn't my grandma who says it! It's the parrot!"

Stina did not like being laughed at. She was offended.

"You should say what you mean then," she said crossly. She turned her head away and looked out over the rail. She did not want to talk to Pelle any more.

"Good-by," said Pelle and went off to find his scattered family. He found Johan and Niklas on the upper deck, and as soon as he saw them he knew that something was wrong. Both of them looked so gloomy that Pelle felt anxious. Had he done something he shouldn't have done? "What is it?" he asked.

"Look over there," said Niklas, and pointed with his thumb. Leaning against the rail a little farther away stood Malin and beside her a tall young man in a light-blue polo-necked sweater. They were chatting and laughing together and the boy in the sweater was looking at Malin, *their* Malin, as if he had just found a beautiful little nugget of gold where he least expected it.

"Here we go again," said Niklas. "I thought it would be better when we got away from town."

Johan shook his head. "Don't you believe it! If you put Malin on a rock in the middle of the Baltic, there'd be some boy or other swimming out to the rock within five minutes."

Niklas glared at the polo-necked sweater. "We ought to put up a notice beside her, *Anchorage Forbidden!*"

Then he looked at Johan and they both laughed. They did not really mind when anyone began to pay attention to

Malin, which, according to Johan, happened about once every quarter of an hour. They were not really serious, but in spite of it all they were secretly a little anxious. What if Malin fell in love one fine day and it all ended in an engagement and marriage and that sort of thing?

"How would we get on without Malin?" Pelle would say, and that was what they all thought and felt. For Malin was the family's anchor and support. Ever since the day their mother had died, when Pelle was born, Malin had been like a mother to all the boys, including Melker, a childish and very unhappy little mother for the first few years, but by degrees more and more capable of "wiping their noses, washing, scolding, and baking" as she herself described it.

"But you only scold when you really have to," Pelle always maintained. "Usually you are as soft and kind and good as a rabbit."

Until recently Pelle had not understood why Johan and Niklas had been so against Malin's admirers. He had felt absolutely sure that Malin would go on belonging to the family forever, no matter how many polo-necks circled around her. It was Malin herself who had disturbed his peace of mind. It happened when Pelle was in bed one night, trying to go to sleep. Malin was in the bathroom next door and was singing a song, which finished, "She left school, got married, and had a family."

"Left school." Yes, that was just what Malin had done, and then . . . then he supposed you just waited for the rest. Now he understood what would happen! Malin would marry and they would be left all alone with Mrs. Nilsson, who came for four hours a day and then went. It was an unbearable thought, and Pelle rushed in despair to his father. "Daddy, when will Malin get married and have a family?" he asked in a trembling voice.

Melker looked surprised. He had not heard that Malin had any plans of that sort, and he did not realize that it was a question of life and death to Pelle.

"When is it going to happen?" Pelle insisted.

"That day and hour must remain hidden from us," joked Melker. "There's no need for you to worry about it, son."

But Pelle *had* worried about it ever since, not all the time, of course, or even every day, but now and then on special occasions, like now, for instance. Pelle stared toward Malin and the polo-necked sweater. As a matter of fact they were just saying good-by, because the young man was getting off at the next stop.

"Good-by, Krister," shouted Malin.

And the sweater shouted back, "I'll come over with my motorboat one day and look you up!"

"You'd better not," muttered Pelle angrily. And he decided to ask his father to put up one of those notices

Niklas had talked about—*Anchorage Forbidden*—on the jetty at Seacrow Island. Obviously it would have been easier to have Malin to themselves in peace if she had not been so pretty. Pelle realized that. Not that he had looked at her particularly, but he knew she was pretty. Everybody said so. They thought that fair hair and green eyes like Malin's were very pretty. No doubt the polo-necked sweater thought so too.

"Who was that?" asked Johan, when Malin came over to the boys.

"No one in particular. Just someone I met at a party the other day. Quite nice."

"You be careful," said Johan. "Write those words in your diary in capital letters."

For Malin was not the daughter of an author for nothing. She wrote too, but only in her secret diary. In it she gave free rein to all her secret thoughts and dreams and described all the exploits of the Melkerson boys, including Melker's.

"You wait until I publish my secret diary, then you'll all be laughing on the other side of your faces."

"Ha, ha! You'll come out the worst of anyone," Johan assured her. "I'm sure you're careful to mention *all* your sheiks in the right order."

"Keep a list, so you'll never forget any of them," suggested Niklas. "Olaf the Fourteenth, Karl the

Fifteenth, Lennart the Sixteenth, Johan the Seventeenth. It'll be a lovely little list."

And Johan and Niklas were convinced that the polo-necked sweater would be Krister the Eighteenth.

"I would like to know how she describes him in her diary," said Niklas.

"A boy with very short hair," suggested Johan. "Generally foul and sloppy."

"That's only what *you* think," said Niklas.

But Malin did not write a word about Krister the Eighteenth in her diary. He got off at his stop and left no lasting impression, for only a quarter of an hour later Malin had a much more important meeting, which made her forget everything else. It was when the boat arrived at the next jetty and she saw Seacrow Island for the first time. Of this meeting she wrote:

"Malin, Malin, where have you been so long? This island has been lying here waiting for you, calmly and quietly, for such a long time, with its little boathouses, its old village street, its jetties and fishing boats and all its beauty, and you have not even known of its existence. Isn't that dreadful? I wonder what God thought when He made this island. 'I will have a little bit of everything,' I expect He thought. 'I will have bare, gray rocks, green trees, oaks and birch trees, meadows with flowers, yes, the whole island will be adrift with red roses and white

hawthorn on the June day one thousand million years ahead when Malin Melkerson arrives.' Yes, dear Johan and Niklas, I know what you would think if you ever read this. '*Must* you be so conceited!' But I am not being conceited. I am only glad that God made Seacrow Island just as it is and not in any other way, and that He then thought of placing it, like a jewel, farthest out in the sea, where it has remained in peace just as He first created it, and that He has allowed me to come here."

Melker had said, "You'll see—all the islanders will come down to the quay to welcome us. We'll be a sensation."

But it was not quite like that. It was pouring rain when the steamer arrived, and on the quay stood one solitary little person and a dog. This person was female and about seven years old. She stood absolutely still as if she had grown up out of the quay. The rain poured down on her but she did not move. It seemed almost as if God had made her as part of the island, thought Malin, and had put her there to be the ruler and guardian of the island to all eternity.

"I've never felt as small," wrote Malin in her journal, "as I did when I walked down the gangplank in the streaming rain under that child's gaze, carrying all

my luggage. Her eyes seemed to take in everything. I thought she must be the Spirit of Seacrow Island, and as if we should not be accepted by the island if we were not accepted by that child. And so I said as sweetly as I could, as one does to little children, 'What's your name?'

" 'Tjorven,' she said. Just that!

" 'And your dog?' I said.

"She looked me straight in the eye and asked calmly, 'Do you want to know if he's my dog or what his name is?'

" 'Both,' I said.

" 'He *is* my dog and his name is Bosun,' she said, and it was as if a queen had deigned to present her favorite animal. And what an animal! He was a St. Bernard, the biggest one I've ever seen in my life. He was just as majestic as his owner and I began to wonder whether all the creatures on this island were of the same breed and very superior to us humble beings from the city. But then a friendly soul arrived, who turned out to be the island's shopkeeper. He seemed to be a normal human being, for he welcomed us to Seacrow Island and told us that his name was Nisse Grankvist. But then he said rather surprisingly, 'Go home, Tjorven,' to the majestic child. Just imagine, he dared command her and he was actually her father! But his command did not have much effect.

" 'Who said so?' asked the child sternly. 'Did Mummy?'

" 'No, I say so,' said her father.

" 'Then I won't go home,' said the child. 'I'm here to meet the boat.'

"As the shopkeeper was busy checking his goods from the boat, he had no time to deal with his obstreperous daughter, so she stood there watching while we collected our belongings. We must have been a sorry sight just then, and nothing escaped her, for I felt her eyes on us as we set off toward Carpenter's Cottage.

"There were other eyes watching us besides Tjorven's. Behind the curtains of the windows all along the street, eyes were looking out at us as we trailed along. It was pouring rain and even Father began to look rather thoughtful.

"When it was coming down at its very hardest, Pelle said, 'Daddy, did you know that it rains in through the roof of Carpenter's Cottage?'

"Daddy stopped dead in the middle of a puddle and asked, 'Who says?'

" 'Old man Söderman,' said Pelle, and it sounded as if he were speaking of an intimate friend.

"Daddy pretended to be quite indifferent. 'Oh, I see! Old man Söderman, whoever this prophet of woe may be, says so! And of course old man Söderman *knows,* although the agent said nothing of the sort to me.'

" 'Didn't he know?' I said. 'Didn't he say it was a pleasant old summer residence, particularly when it rained, because then there was a delightful little swimming pool in the middle of the living room?'

"Daddy gave me a long look but did not answer. And then we arrived.

" 'Hello, Carpenter's Cottage,' said Daddy. 'Allow me to introduce the Melkerson family—Melker and his poor little children.'

"It was a red one-story house, and the moment I saw it I had no doubt at all that it did rain in through the roof. But I liked it. I liked it from the very start. Daddy, on the other hand, was horrified. I don't know anyone who goes from one extreme to the other as quickly as he does. He stood quite still and stared despondently at the summer cottage he had rented for himself and his children.

" 'What are you waiting for?' I said. 'Nothing's going to change it.'

"So he took heart and we all went in."