

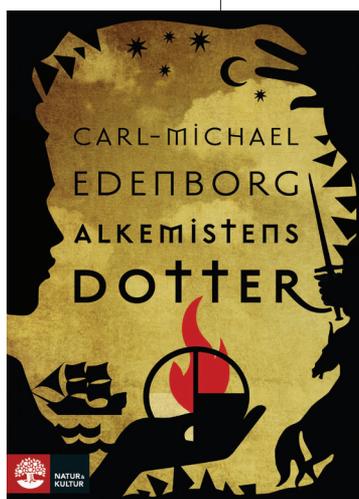
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# *The Alchemist's Daughter*

**Carl-Michael Edenborg**

introduced and translated by

Fiona Graham



*Alkemistens dotter*,  
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*The Alchemist's Daughter*, set at the very end of the eighteenth century, is the dark tale of a young noblewoman, the last in a line of Manichaeian alchemists, whose late father ordered her to destroy the world through alchemy. The book is a kind of *Bildungsroman*, in which the heroine travels across Europe to study the occult arts, and, eventually, to liberate herself from her father's influence. Having escaped from captivity in Berlin, she is making her way across northern Germany towards Swedish territory when we meet her here.

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## Chapter 28

There were times during my wanderings when I once again plunged, in dread and torment, into the dark night of the soul. The attacks would come suddenly – my heart beating apace, my breath coming in gasps – and the world would melt away. At a given temperature, even hard metal will liquefy in the crucible; in the same way, a tremor would run through my field of vision, through my senses, and all would be transmuted.

The tall pine trees swayed their hips like hired men at a dance; the clouds became hard and sharp-edged, shimmering like crystals in the firmament; the dry earth beneath my feet became pliant and springy, as though I were walking on the belly of a vast, dormant beast; I feared that it would awake and swallow me up.

At times it felt as though my skin was becoming distended, tautened; I would touch my face with my fingertips, and it seemed to have expanded into something huge and alien, like a warm fruit. Clustered about me stood faceless people; twist and turn as they might, they always had their backs to me. A butterfly, alighting on my hand, seemed to me like a dark opening into another world; I longed to go there, to enter the realm of shadows. Each blade of grass became a metallic ray of ethereal light, a blaze of grass; I could see straight through the blue of the heavens into the black emptiness beyond.

Now and then I would glimpse Father in the distance, always walking away

from me; he gave the impression of deep sadness, walking as though bowed in sorrow. I would run towards him, but he was faster than me; I was a child abandoned to my own devices.

The more distance I put between myself and Berlin, that foul sink of a city, the less often I was engulfed by these terrors. The kindnesses I encountered, too, helped put me on a more even keel. How good-hearted people can be! I would knock at the most squalid dwellings, hovels with barely a stick of furniture inside, yet the tired women would share their poverty and give me their blessing.

*After an interlude with a family of travelling musicians, the heroine continues on her journey.*

I had heard from a travelling trader that the Swedish Governor-General of Pomerania, Hans Henric von Essen, had his residence in Greifswald. I decided to set course for that city and lay my business before him. But as I approached the outskirts, my courage deserted me. Too many people, too much that resembled Berlin: it all made me feel ill at ease and downcast. I departed from my route, wandering aimlessly in a loop around the city while I struggled to regain my nerve, and spent the night to the north-west, near a little village. The weather was still hot and dry. I resolved to walk straight into the city next day, without further ado, and to pay a call on the Governor.

The stars shrieked their mute cries above me where I lay stretched out on the edge of a field, shielded from the road by a rock. An irrational terror of the city battered me from within; I clasped my hands, enjoining the Formless One beyond the universe to stiffen the sinews of my soul, but no reply came. Still, just a short while later a ewe lumbered towards me and lay down at my side. I laid my arms around her and fell asleep, safely enfolded in her warmth.

I was woken early in the morning by a voice. Shaking my head in a daze, I sat up and caught sight of a gentleman, propping himself on his stick just a few yards away and addressing a flock of sheep in Latin as they grazed imperturbably before him. He had not yet seen me. Apart from the two of us and the sheep, there was no other living creature to be seen in the landscape of rolling meadows that stretched away into the distance.

Although the man wore old-fashioned knee breeches, he was wigless and bare-headed, with bushy hair. Initially, he spoke softly and sentimentally to the beasts, as though they could understand his Latin; then he worked himself up, waving his arms and apostrophising the flock, grimacing hideously the while; receiving only the odd bleat in response, he burst out laughing and then fell silent.

He was about to continue his walk along the road when he caught sight of me. He was startled. I took an instant liking to his face; it was narrow, handsome and oddly feminine, with full lips, large eyes and steeply arched eyebrows, and there was something deer-like about his gangling body. He laughed.

‘What have we here, a pastoral nymph? Or a shepherdess, perchance?’

‘Are you Swedish, sir?’





*Alkemistens dotter*  
was reviewed by  
Fiona Graham in SBR  
2015:2.

Edenborg's first  
novel under his own  
name, *Mitt grymma  
öde* (*My Cruel Fate*),  
was reviewed by  
Janny Middelbeek-  
Oortgiesen in  
SBR 2013:1.

His laugh, though louder now, was not unfriendly; rather, it resembled a cheery trumpet fanfare.

'A nymph who speaks Swedish – that's no everyday occurrence! How can this be?'

I rose uncertainly to my feet, mumbling shyly:

'Please, sir, I'm far from home and want only to return to the place I come from.'

He beckoned me to him. I stepped forward and curtsied. He inspected me, shook his head at my dirty face and matted hair, took out his handkerchief from the breast pocket of his coat and rubbed a little of the grime off my cheeks.

'Pray don't cry, girl. Trust me, I shall help you in any way I can. Your name?'

Too shaken to reflect that I ought to be cautious and not assume that he was on my side, I sobbed out:

'Rebis Drakenstierna.'

The man pursed his lips, audibly drawing in air through his nose, and nodded:

'Drakenstierna? A noblewoman, eh? But of the poorer sort, I see? As for me, they call me Thorild, Thomas by name; I am a free man, albeit married and a professor.'

'Mr Thorild, if you could help me to find the Governor, I am certain that he would help me to return home, and I should be infinitely grateful.'

'The Governor? Von Essen? Hmm, no, I wouldn't count on it. Instead, I propose that you come home with me, and let my wife give you a bath and some clothes, then we can discuss things over lunch.'

He extended his hand, I took his arm and we set off. I could not hold back the tears. He patted my hand gently.

'Cry, my dear, just cry, it will do you good. Soon you can have a bath and a glass of coffee, that'll restore your spirits to quivering life – and all will be for the best in the best of all possible worlds.'

It was not a long walk. Mr Thorild lived in a hamlet on the fringes of Greifswald, in a modest house with a small garden. He introduced me to his wife Gustava and his children. He explained to his wife how he had happened upon me, and asked her to take care of me as best she could.

*Gustava bathes and dresses Rebis. Though kindly, she is somewhat suspicious.*

When we descended to the main ground-floor room, the walls of which were covered with bookshelves bowed under the weight of many tomes, Thorild cried out so loudly that the house trembled, his gaze fixed on me.

'Yes! Just so! Beauty! Truth! Youth! Strength! And Vigour!'

Clasping his hands repeatedly, he bounded up and down on the spot, laughing excessively. Suddenly he stopped, took a few steps towards me, gripped my hands and continued:

'No sooner did I see you than I knew you were an angel! And lo and behold – now you are wearing this yellow gown lent by my dearest Gustava, my first conviction is vindicated! Such are the workings of genius! I am not afraid to say it! With heart and soul in exquisite unity! With the loftiest ambitions, without fear, free of unnatural bonds and fetters! Thus, in poverty and dirt, I discerned that which is most elevated and beautiful, aye, the very

The real-life Thomas Thorild (1759-1808) was a Swedish poet, critic and philosopher who was banished for political agitation in 1792 and then became a professor and librarian in Greifswald in Pomerania.

manifestation of universal harmony in miniature!

I stammered, 'You are too kind, Mr Thorild.'

Tittering, Mrs Thorild whispered in my ear; her husband, an ecstatic expression on his face, humming and puffing, feigned not to hear her words – but I heard them most distinctly:

'He's very enthusiastic, my husband: don't let him frighten you. But do keep him at arm's length: his great enthusiasm makes him a force of nature, if you know what I mean.'

In some confusion at being addressed by both parties in such different ways, I merely curtsied as deeply as I could, which seemed to satisfy the pair of them. Suddenly Thorild's eyebrows, already high, rose still further:

'But dearest! My adored one! Light of my life! Where are the victuals? What now? Why are we standing here? This angel must be starving! Give her all we have in the house!'

'That's not much, alas,' muttered Gustava, leading me out into the kitchen, where she sat me down on a stool and furnished me with bread, salted butter and a jar of ale.

The meal was delectable in its simplicity: it was the first I had eaten at a table for several weeks, better than the most luxurious of buffets at the Prussian court.

Between mouthfuls I burst out in thanks:

'Oh, Madam, if you only knew how grateful, how happy I am. This bread and butter is the food of the gods.'

'Food is the best seasoning.'

'Hunger, you mean?'

'Is it your business how I choose to express myself?'

'Forgive me. This tastes so heavenly.'

'Don't cry, girl.'

From the door opening came Thorild's voice:

'Let the girl cry!'

His wife turned towards him, threatening him with a wooden spoon:

'Why should she sit and cry in my kitchen – when she's been given bread and butter and ale?'

'You've given ale to a slip of a girl?'

'What am I supposed to give her, then? The cupboard's bare!'

Taking a few steps towards her, Thorild bellowed:

'The devil it is! And if it is bare, it'll be you that's emptied it!'

'If you weren't such a skinflint, and if you were capable of doing an honest day's work, we wouldn't need to have an empty cupboard!'

'Oh! How I regret penning my treatise on the Natural Elevation of the Female Sex!'

'Write a novel instead, you thieving old rogue! And don't sit poring over your unintelligible philosophies night after night!'

'Who are you calling a thieving old rogue, you brazen baggage?'

With my heart pounding and tears running down my cheeks, I cowered over the table and attempted to force down the coarse bread, dipping it in the butter dish. Unperturbed by my presence, husband and wife continued their bickering with a crescendo of insults, but soon their voices became calmer, they began to apologise, and finally they fell into each other's arms, sobbing and bestowing audible kisses on one another.

'My adored, exquisite bloom!'  
'My darling genius of a husband!'  
'Never again will I raise my voice against you.'  
'No, we mustn't quarrel.'

Into the kitchen trooped the two children, clad only in shifts. Apparently accustomed to their parents' performance, they sat down wordlessly on either side of me and helped themselves to the bread.

'No butter for breakfast, children!'  
'But *she's* having some.'  
'Miss Drakenstierna is a guest.'  
'I want some butter!'  
'No, don't take the butter away!'  
'Butter, butter, butter!'

Thorild pounded the floor with his boot and bawled:

'Hell's teeth, can't you keep those brats quiet, woman!'

'Are you yelling at me again now?'

'Oh, this is insupportable! Miss Drakenstierna, come with me! Let us take a walk. It's splendid weather. We cannot stay in this hellhole – that would be a veritable betrayal of the sublime and the beautiful.'