

Robert Leeson  
Smart Girls  
Forever



illustrated by  
Axel Scheffler



WALKER  
BOOKS

## *For Joanna, Mia and Suzannah*

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First published 1996 by Walker Books Ltd  
87 Vauxhall Walk, London SE11 5HJ

This edition published 2017

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

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This book has been typeset in Plantin

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data:  
a catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4063-8055-2

[www.walker.co.uk](http://www.walker.co.uk)

Smart girls – there's no end to them.

They're bold, they're outrageous.  
They defy danger, death, robbers, giants,  
slavery and sorcery (though they'll make  
magic themselves at the drop of a hat).

They range the world on foot, on  
horseback, even on goat-back, through  
greenwood, desert or mountains. And if the  
landscape doesn't meet their needs, they  
alter it.

Smart Girls rescue brothers, lovers,  
husbands. They fight their way into – and  
out of – outlaw bands. They become rulers  
of distant cities and even outwit the Devil  
himself.

They are Russian, Indian, Irish, Scottish,  
Persian and English. They could be from  
anywhere.

They've always been around and they  
always will be.

Smart girls forever!

# *Natasha*



## *Natasha*

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Natasha was a princess. But she was more than that. She was a winsome wench with a head full of comical fancies.

One day she was combing her long black hair when out popped a louse. She picked it up between her thumb and forefinger and was just about to go “crick” and do away with it, when suddenly she took a fancy to keep it instead.

“No,” said she. “You must be a royal louse. So I shall keep you.”

And the louse answered, “Thank you kindly, Ma’am.”

Natasha was not in the least surprised because her head was full of comical fancies. So she kept the louse and it grew and grew, until it was as big as a mouse.

A louse as big as a mouse cannot be hid,

but Natasha was not at a loss. She carried it out to the royal pasture and put it on a sheep. Every day she went to the flock and talked to the royal louse of this and that, for the louse was both witty and wise.

And if servants saw her there, talking to no one, they just smiled. For it was well known that she was full of comical fancies.

Time passed. Natasha grew more winsome and the louse grew as well, until it was as big as a pup. Natasha was not bothered in the slightest. She shifted it on to a ram, the biggest in the flock.

Soon enough, Natasha grew from a winsome wench into a lovely lady. Yet her head was still full of comical fancies.

As for the louse, it was now as large as a rabbit and Natasha shifted it on to the back of the billy goat. He was lord of the royal herd and as big as a pony with hair like a rug.

All went well and no one guessed Natasha's secret. But one morning she went out into the paddock and there, to her great sadness, she

found the louse lying on its back, legs in the air, dead as a doornail.

Still, Natasha did not mourn. Instead she had the louse skinned and a pair of slippers made of the hide – as supple and shining as the finest leather.

Which was all very fine. Finer still, she found that the slippers of louse leather could talk as well and they were just as witty and wise as the louse had ever been.

Now, about this time, her father told Natasha, “Time for you to get married my dear.”

“But I’m happy as I am, Father,” said she. The Czar frowned, then growled, “Don’t be absurd, all princesses get married.”

“But I’m different, Father.”

The Czar glowered, then roared, “Do as I say, Natasha!”

Now Natasha was a dutiful daughter. She lowered her eyes and looked down at her feet. The slippers of louse leather twinkled at her and a comical fancy came into her head.

“Very well, Father. I will marry the man who can guess what my slippers are made of.”

And so a proclamation was made to the four corners of the land. All the hopeful young men flocked to the palace where Natasha smiled sweetly and asked each suitor, “What are the royal slippers made of?”

“Doeskin,” said the first suitor.

“Oh no,” answered Natasha.

“Calfskin,” said the second.

“Oh no,” answered Natasha.

“Sealskin,” said the third suitor.

And so it went on. Every creature under the sun was suggested by the suitors, but the princess just shook her handsome head and the young men departed, broken-hearted.

Until one tall fellow in a flowing red cloak stepped forward and called out, “The slippers are made of louse leather.”

“Oh no,” chorused the courtiers, aghast.

“Oh yes,” admitted Natasha woefully.

“That’s your husband,” said the Czar.

“Very well,” said Natasha, looking at her