



Tales of the Nisses

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scandinavia

Scandinavian

Intermediate
8 min read

The Nis is the same being that is called Kobold in Germany, and Brownie in Scotland. He is in Denmark and Norway also called Nisse god Dreng (Nissè good lad), and in Sweden, Tomtegubbe (the old man of the house).

He is of the dwarf family, and resembles them in appearance, and, like them, has the command of money, and the same dislike to noise and tumult.

His usual dress is grey, with a pointed red cap, but on Michaelmas-day he wears a round hat like those of the peasants.

No farm-house goes on well without there is a Nis in it, and well is it for the maids and the men when they are in favour with him. They may go to their beds and give themselves no trouble about their work, and yet in the morning the maids will find the kitchen swept up, and water brought in; and the men will find the horses in the stable well cleaned and curried, and perhaps a supply of corn cribbed for them from the neighbours' barns.

There was a Nis in a house in Jutland. He every evening got his groute at the regular time, and he, in return, used to help both the men and the maids, and looked to the interest of the master of the house in every respect.

There came one time a mischievous boy to live at service in this house, and his great delight was, whenever he got an opportunity, to give the Nis all the annoyance in his power.

Late one evening, when everything was quiet in the house, the Nis took his little wooden dish, and was just

going to eat his supper, when he perceived that the boy had put the butter at the bottom and had concealed it, in hopes that he might eat the groute first, and then find the butter when all the groute was gone. He accordingly set about thinking how he might repay the boy in kind. After pondering a little he went up into the loft where a man and the boy were lying asleep in the same bed. The Nis whisked off the bed clothes, and when he saw the little boy by the tall man, he said—

“Short and long don’t match,” and with this word he took the boy by the legs and dragged him down to the man’s feet. He then went up to the head of the bed, and—

“Short and long don’t match,” said he again, and then he dragged the boy up to the man’s head. Do what he would he could not succeed in making the boy as long as the man, but persisted in dragging him up and down in the bed, and continued at this work the whole night long till it was broad daylight.

By this time he was well tired, so he crept up on the window stool, and sat with his legs dangling down into the yard. The house-dog—for all dogs have a great enmity to the Nis—as soon as he saw him began to bark at him, which afforded him much amusement, as the dog could not get up to him. So he put down first one leg and then the other, and teased the dog, saying—

“Look at my little leg. Look at my little leg!”

In the meantime the boy had awoke, and had stolen up behind him, and, while the Nis was least thinking of it, and was going on with his, “Look at my little leg,” the boy tumbled him down into the yard to the dog, crying out at the same time—

“Look at the whole of him now!”

There lived a man in Thyrsting, in Jutland, who had a Nis in his barn. This Nis used to attend to his cattle, and at night he would steal fodder for them from the neighbours, so that this farmer had the best fed and most thriving cattle in the country.

One time the boy went along with the Nis to Fugleriis to steal corn. The Nis took as much as he thought he could well carry, but the boy was more covetous, and said—

“Oh! take more. Sure, we can rest now and then!”

“Rest!” said the Nis. “Rest! and what is rest?”

“Do what I tell you,” replied the boy. “Take more, and we shall find rest when we get out of this.”

The Nis took more, and they went away with it, but when they came to the lands of Thyrsting, the Nis grew tired, and then the boy said to him—

“Here now is rest!” and they both sat down on the side of a little hill.

“If I had known,” said the Nis, as they sat. “If I had known that rest was so good, I’d have carried off all that was in the barn.”

It happened, some time after, that the boy and the Nis were no longer friends, and as the Nis was sitting one day in the granary-window with his legs hanging out into the yard, the boy ran at him and tumbled him back into the granary. The Nis was revenged on him that very night, for when the boy was gone to bed he stole down to where he was lying and carried him as he was into the yard. Then he laid two pieces of wood across the well and put him lying on them, expecting that when he awoke he would fall, from the fright, into the well and be drowned. He was, however, disappointed, for the boy came off without injury.

There was a man who lived in the town of Tirup who had a very handsome white mare. This mare had for many years belonged to the same family, and there was a Nis attached to her who brought luck to the place.

This Nis was so fond of the mare that he could hardly endure to let them put her to any kind of work, and he used to come himself every night and feed her of the best; and as for this purpose he usually brought a superfluity of corn, both thrashed and in the straw, from the neighbours’ barns, all the rest of the cattle enjoyed the advantage, and they were all kept in exceedingly good condition.

It happened at last that the farm-house passed into the hands of a new owner, who refused to put any faith in what they told him about the mare, so the luck speedily left the place, and went after the mare to a poor neighbour who had bought her. Within five days after his purchase, the poor farmer began to find his circumstances gradually improving, while the income of the other, day after day, fell away and diminished at such a rate that he was hard set to make both ends meet.

If now the man who had got the mare had only known how to be quiet and enjoy the good times that were come upon him, he and his children and his children’s children after him would have been in flourishing

circumstances till this very day. But when he saw the quantity of corn that came every night to his barn, he could not resist his desire to get a sight of the Nis. So he concealed himself one evening at nightfall in the stable, and as soon as it was midnight he saw how the Nis came from his neighbour's barn and brought a sack full of corn with him. It was now unavoidable that the Nis should get a sight of the man who was watching, so he, with evident marks of grief, gave the mare her food for the last time, cleaned and dressed her to the best of his ability, and when he had done, turned round to where the man was lying, and bid him farewell.

From that day forward the circumstances of both the neighbours were on an equality, for each now kept his own.

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