



# *The Dwarf's Banquet*

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scandinavia

Scandinavian

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*Intermediate*

*20 min read*

There lived in Norway, not far from the city of Dronheim, a powerful man who was blessed with all the goods of fortune. A part of the surrounding country was his property, numerous herds fed on his pastures, and a great retinue and a crowd of servants adorned his mansion. He had an only daughter, called Aslog, the fame of whose beauty spread far and wide. The greatest men of the country sought her, but all were alike unsuccessful in their suit, and he who had come full of confidence and joy, rode away home silent and melancholy. Her father, who thought his daughter delayed her choice only to select, forbore to interfere, and exulted in her prudence, but when at length the richest and noblest tried their fortune with as little success as the rest, he grew angry and called his daughter, and said to her—

“Hitherto I have left you to your free choice, but since I see that you reject all without any distinction, and the very best of your suitors seems not good enough for you, I will keep measures no longer with you. What! shall my family become extinct, and my inheritance pass away into the hands of strangers? I will break your stubborn spirit. I give you now till the festival of the great winter-night. Make your choice by that time, or prepare to accept him whom I shall fix on.”

Aslog loved a youth named Orm, handsome as he was brave and noble. She loved him with her whole soul, and she would sooner die than bestow her hand on another. But Orm was poor, and poverty compelled him to serve

in the mansion of her father. Aslog's partiality for him was kept a secret, for her father's pride of power and wealth was such that he would never have given his consent to a union with so humble a man.

When Aslog saw the darkness of his countenance, and heard his angry words, she turned pale as death, for she knew his temper, and doubted not that he would put his threats into execution. Without uttering a word in reply, she retired to her chamber, and thought deeply but in vain how to avert the dark storm that hung over her. The great festival approached nearer and nearer, and her anguish increased every day.

At last the lovers resolved on flight.

"I know," said Orm, "a secure place where we may remain undiscovered until we find an opportunity of quitting the country."

At night, when all were asleep, Orm led the trembling Aslog over the snow and ice-fields away to the mountains. The moon and the stars, sparkling still brighter in the cold winter's night, lighted them on their way. They had under their arms a few articles of dress and some skins of animals, which were all they could carry. They ascended the mountains the whole night long till they reached a lonely spot enclosed with lofty rocks. Here Orm conducted the weary Aslog into a cave, the low and narrow entrance to which was hardly perceptible, but it soon enlarged to a great hall, reaching deep into the mountain. He kindled a fire, and they now, reposing on their skins, sat in the deepest solitude far away from all the world.

Orm was the first who had discovered this cave, which is shown to this very day, and as no one knew anything of it, they were safe from the pursuit of Aslog's father. They passed the whole winter in this retirement. Orm used to go a-hunting, and Aslog stayed at home in the cave, minded the fire, and prepared the necessary food. Frequently did she mount the points of the rocks, but her eyes wandered as far as they could reach only over glittering snow-fields.

The spring now came on: the woods were green, the meadows pat on their various colours, and Aslog could but rarely, and with circumspection, venture to leave the cave. One evening Orm came in with the intelligence that he had recognised her father's servants in the distance, and that he could hardly have been unobserved by them whose eyes were as good as his own.

"They will surround this place," continued he, "and never rest till they have found us. We must quit our retreat

then without a minute's delay."

They accordingly descended on the other side of the mountain, and reached the strand, where they fortunately found a boat. Orm shoved off, and the boat drove into the open sea. They had escaped their pursuers, but they were now exposed to dangers of another kind. Whither should they turn themselves? They could not venture to land, for Aslog's father was lord of the whole coast, and they would infallibly fall into his hands. Nothing then remained for them but to commit their bark to the wind and waves. They drove along the entire night. At break of day the coast had disappeared, and they saw nothing but the sky above, the sea beneath, and the waves that rose and fell. They had not brought one morsel of food with them, and thirst and hunger began now to torment them. Three days did they toss about in this state of misery, and Aslog, faint and exhausted, saw nothing but certain death before her.

At length, on the evening of the third day, they discovered an island of tolerable magnitude, and surrounded by a number of smaller ones. Orm immediately steered for it, but just as he came near to it there suddenly arose a violent wind, and the sea rolled higher and higher against him. He turned about with a view of approaching it on another side, but with no better success. His vessel, as often as he approached the island, was driven back as if by an invisible power.

"Lord God!" cried he, and blessed himself and looked on poor Aslog, who seemed to be dying of weakness before his eyes.

Scarcely had the exclamation passed his lips when the storm ceased, the waves subsided, and the vessel came to the shore without encountering any hindrance. Orm jumped out on the beach. Some mussels that he found upon the strand strengthened and revived the exhausted Aslog so that she was soon able to leave the boat.

The island was overgrown with low dwarf shrubs, and seemed to be uninhabited; but when they had got about the middle of it, they discovered a house reaching but a little above the ground, and appearing to be half under the surface of the earth. In the hope of meeting human beings and assistance, the wanderers approached it. They listened if they could hear any noise, but the most perfect silence reigned there. Orm at length opened the door, and with his companion walked in; but what was their surprise to find everything regulated and arranged as if for inhabitants, yet not a single living creature visible. The fire was burning on the hearth in the middle of the room, and a kettle with fish hung on it, apparently only waiting for some one to take it off and

eat. The beds were made and ready to receive their weary tenants. Orm and Aslog stood for some time dubious, and looked on with a certain degree of awe, but at last, overcome with hunger, they took up the food and ate. When they had satisfied their appetites, and still in the last beams of the setting sun, which now streamed over the island far and wide, discovered no human being, they gave way to weariness, and laid themselves in the beds to which they had been so long strangers.

They had expected to be awakened in the night by the owners of the house on their return home, but their expectation was not fulfilled. They slept undisturbed till the morning sun shone in upon them. No one appeared on any of the following days, and it seemed as if some invisible power had made ready the house for their reception. They spent the whole summer in perfect happiness. They were, to be sure, solitary, yet they did not miss mankind. The wild birds' eggs and the fish they caught yielded them provisions in abundance.

When autumn came, Aslog presented Orm with a son. In the midst of their joy at his appearance they were surprised by a wonderful apparition. The door opened on a sudden, and an old woman stepped in. She had on her a handsome blue dress. There was something proud, but at the same time strange and surprising in her appearance.

“Do not be afraid,” said she, “at my unexpected appearance. I am the owner of this house, and I thank you for the clean and neat state in which you have kept it, and for the good order in which I find everything with you. I would willingly have come sooner, but I had no power to do so, till this little heathen (pointing to the new-born babe) was come to the light. Now I have free access. Only, fetch no priest from the mainland to christen it, or I must depart again. If you will in this matter comply with my wishes, you may not only continue to live here, but all the good that ever you can wish for I will cause you. Whatever you take in hand shall prosper. Good luck shall follow you wherever you go; but break this condition, and depend upon it that misfortune after misfortune will come on you, and even on this child will I avenge myself. If you want anything, or are in danger, you have only to pronounce my name three times, and I will appear and lend you assistance. I am of the race of the old giants, and my name is Guru. But beware of uttering in my presence the name of him whom no giant may hear of, and never venture to make the sign of the cross, or to cut it on beam or on board of the house. You may dwell in this house the whole year long, only be so good as to give it up to me on Yule evening, when the sun is at the lowest, as then we celebrate our great festival, and then only are we permitted to be merry. At least, if you should not be willing to go out of the house, keep yourselves up in the loft as quiet as

possible the whole day long, and, as you value your lives, do not look down into the room until midnight is past. After that you may take possession of everything again.”

When the old woman had thus spoken she vanished, and Aslog and Orm, now at ease respecting their situation, lived, without any disturbance, content and happy. Orm never made a cast of his net without getting a plentiful draught. He never shot an arrow from his bow that missed its aim. In short, whatever they took in hand, were it ever so trifling, evidently prospered.

When Christmas came, they cleaned up the house in the best manner, set everything in order, kindled a fire on the hearth, and, as the twilight approached, they went up to the loft, where they remained quiet and still. At length it grew dark. They thought they heard a sound of flying and labouring in the air, such as the swans make in the winter-time. There was a hole in the roof over the fire-place which might be opened or shut either to let in the light from above or to afford a free passage for the smoke. Orm lifted up the lid, which was covered with a skin, and put out his head, but what a wonderful sight then presented itself to his eyes! The little islands around were all lit up with countless blue lights, which moved about without ceasing, jumped up and down, then skipped down to the shore, assembled together, and now came nearer and nearer to the large island where Orm and Aslog lived. At last they reached it and arranged themselves in a circle around a large stone not far from the shore, and which Orm well knew. What was his surprise when he saw that the stone had now completely assumed the form of a man, though of a monstrous and gigantic one! He could clearly perceive that the little blue lights were borne by dwarfs, whose pale clay-coloured faces, with their huge noses and red eyes, disfigured, too, by birds' bills and owls' eyes, were supported by misshapen bodies. They tottered and wobbled about here and there, so that they seemed to be, at the same time, merry and in pain. Suddenly the circle opened, the little ones retired on each side, and Guru, who was now much enlarged and of as immense a size as the stone, advanced with gigantic steps. She threw both her arms about the stone image, which immediately began to receive life and motion. As soon as the first sign of motion showed itself the little ones began, with wonderful capers and grimaces, a song, or, to speak more properly, a howl, with which the whole island resounded and seemed to tremble. Orm, quite terrified, drew in his head, and he and Aslog remained in the dark, so still that they hardly ventured to draw their breath.

The procession moved on towards the house, as might be clearly perceived by the nearer approach of the shouting and crying. They were now all come in, and, light and active, the dwarfs jumped about on the

benches, and heavy and loud sounded, at intervals, the steps of the giants. Orm and his wife heard them covering the table, and the clattering of the plates, and the shouts of joy with which they celebrated their banquet. When it was over, and it drew near to midnight, they began to dance to that ravishing fairy air which charms the mind into such sweet confusion, and which some have heard in the rocky glens, and learned by listening to the underground musicians. As soon as Aslog caught the sound of the air she felt an irresistible longing to see the dance, nor was Orm able to keep her back.

“Let me look,” said she, “or my heart will burst.”

She took her child and placed herself at the extreme end of the loft whence, without being observed, she could see all that passed. Long did she gaze, without taking off her eyes for an instant, on the dance, on the bold and wonderful springs of the little creatures who seemed to float in the air and not so much as to touch the ground, while the ravishing melody of the elves filled her whole soul. The child, meanwhile, which lay in her arms, grew sleepy and drew its breath heavily, and without ever thinking of the promise she had given to the old woman, she made, as is usual, the sign of the cross over the mouth of the child, and said—

“Christ bless you, my babe!”

The instant she had spoken the word there was raised a horrible, piercing cry. The spirits tumbled head over heels out at the door, with terrible crushing and crowding, their lights went out, and in a few minutes the whole house was clear of them and left desolate. Orm and Aslog, frightened to death, hid themselves in the most retired nook in the house. They did not venture to stir till daybreak, and not till the sun shone through the hole in the roof down on the fire-place did they feel courage enough to descend from the loft.

The table remained still covered as the underground people had left it. All their vessels, which were of silver, and manufactured in the most beautiful manner, were upon it. In the middle of the room there stood upon the ground a huge copper kettle half-full of sweet mead, and, by the side of it, a drinking-horn of pure gold. In the corner lay against the wall a stringed instrument not unlike a dulcimer, which, as people believe, the giantesses used to play on. They gazed on what was before them full of admiration, but without venturing to lay their hands on anything; but great and fearful was their amazement when, on turning about, they saw sitting at the table an immense figure, which Orm instantly recognised as the giant whom Guru had animated by her embrace. He was now a cold and hard stone. While they were standing gazing on it, Guru herself entered the

room in her giant form. She wept so bitterly that the tears trickled down on the ground. It was long ere her sobbing permitted her to utter a single word. At length she spoke—

“Great affliction have you brought on me, and henceforth must I weep while I live. I know you have not done this with evil intentions, and therefore I forgive you, though it were a trifle for me to crush the whole house like an egg-shell over your heads.”

“Alas!” cried she, “my husband, whom I love more than myself, there he sits petrified for ever. Never again will he open his eyes! Three hundred years lived I with my father on the island of Kunnan, happy in the innocence of youth, as the fairest among the giant maidens. Mighty heroes sued for my hand. The sea around that island is still filled with the rocky fragments which they hurled against each other in their combats. Andfind won the victory, and I plighted myself to him; but ere I was married came the detestable Odin into the country, who overcame my father, and drove us all from the island. My father and sisters fled to the mountains, and since that time my eyes have beheld them no more. Andfind and I saved ourselves on this island, where we for a long time lived in peace and quiet, and thought it would never be interrupted. Destiny, which no one escapes, had determined it otherwise. Oluf came from Britain. They called him the Holy, and Andfind instantly found that his voyage would be inauspicious to the giants. When he heard how Oluf’s ship rushed through the waves, he went down to the strand and blew the sea against him with all his strength. The waves swelled up like mountains, but Oluf was still more mighty than he. His ship flew unchecked through the billows like an arrow from a bow. He steered direct for our island. When the ship was so near that Andfind thought he could reach it with his hands, he grasped at the fore-part with his right hand, and was about to drag it down to the bottom, as he had often done with other ships. Then Oluf, the terrible Oluf, stepped forward, and, crossing his hands over each other, he cried with a loud voice—”

“Stand there as a stone till the last day!’ and in the same instant my unhappy husband became a mass of rock. The ship went on unimpeded, and ran direct against the mountain, which it cut through, separating from it the little island which lies yonder.”

“Ever since my happiness has been annihilated, and lonely and melancholy have I passed my life. On Yule eve alone can petrified giants receive back their life, for the space of seven hours, if one of their race embraces them, and is, at the same time, willing to sacrifice a hundred years of his own life. Seldom does a giant do that.

I loved my husband too well not to bring him back cheerfully to life, every time that I could do it, even at the highest price, and never would I reckon how often I had done it that I might not know when the time came when I myself should share his fate, and, at the moment I threw my arms around him, become the same as he. Alas! now even this comfort is taken from me. I can never more by any embrace awake him, since he has heard the name which I dare not utter, and never again will he see the light till the dawn of the last day shall bring it.”

“Now I go hence! You will never again behold me! All that is here in the house I give you! My dulcimer alone will I keep. Let no one venture to fix his habitation on the little islands which lie around here. There dwell the little underground ones whom you saw at the festival, and I will protect them as long as I live.”

With these words Guru vanished. The next spring Orm took the golden horn and the silver ware to Drontheim where no one knew him. The value of the things was so great that he was able to purchase everything a wealthy man desires. He loaded his ship with his purchases, and returned to the island, where he spent many years in unalloyed happiness, and Aslog’s father was soon reconciled to his wealthy son-in-law.

The stone image remained sitting in the house. No human power was able to move it. So hard was the stone that hammer and axe flew in pieces without making the slightest impression upon it. The giant sat there till a holy man came to the island, who, with one single word, removed him back to his former station, where he stands to this hour. The copper kettle, which the underground people left behind them, was preserved as a memorial upon the island, which bears the name of House Island to the present day.

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