

The Elf Hill

Hans Christian Andersen

DanishScandinavian

Intermediate

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Several lizards were running about, very quick, in the clefts of an old tree trunk. They could understand one another very well, for they all spoke the lizard language.

“Dear, what a rumbling and bumbling there is in the old Elf Hill,” said one of the lizards. “I haven’t been able to close an eye the last two nights for the noise. I might just as well have had the toothache all the time, for I don’t get any sleep then.”

“There’s something up there,” said the second lizard, “they stood the hill up on four red stakes right up to cockcrow. It’s had a real good airing, and the Elf girls have learnt some new dances, with stamping in ’em.”

“There’s something up. I’ve been talking to a lob-worm I know,” said the third lizard. “He came straight up out of the hill where he’d been burrowing in the ground for nights and days; he’d heard a lot. He can’t see, poor beast, but he can feel about in front of him and listen, that he can do. They’re expecting visitors to-day in the Elf Hill, visitors of distinction, but whom, the lob-worm wouldn’t say, or else he didn’t know. All the will-o’-the-wisps have been summoned to make a torchlight procession—that’s what they call it—and the silver and gold, which there’s a lot of in the hill, is to be polished and set out in the moonlight.”

“Now, who can the visitors be?” said all the lizards. “What can be afoot? Listen! What a bustle, what a hustle!”

At that very moment the Elf Hill opened, and an old Elf maid (she had no back but was otherwise very well got up) came tripping out. She was the old Elf King’s housekeeper, distantly related to the family, and had an

amber heart on her forehead. Her legs went twinkling along. Trip! trip! Bless her heart, how she did trip it—right away down into the marsh, to the night-raven.

“You are invited to the Elf Hill, yes, and for tonight,” said she, “but first you’ll do us a very great service, won’t you? Undertake invitations? You can easily manage it, for you’ve no house to look after. We have some very distinguished guests, Troll folk, who are of great importance, and so the old King is going to show himself off.”

“Who are to be invited?” asked the night-raven.

“Why, to the big ball everybody can come, even humans, if they can talk in their sleep or do any little thing of the kind that belongs to our race; but for the high table there has to be a very strict selection: we want only the most distinguished people. I had quite a quarrel with the King, for I insist that we can’t even have ghosts. The Merman and his daughter must be invited first. They don’t much like coming on the land, but they shall every one of them have a wet stone to sit on, or something better, and in that case I don’t think they’ll refuse this time. All old Trolls of the first class, with tails, the riverman and the nixies, we must have, and I think we can’t pass over the grave-pig, the death-horse and the church brownie. They do belong, properly speaking, to the clergy, who are not of our sort, but that is after all merely official; they are nearly related to us and call on us quite regularly.”

“Bra!” said the night-raven, and flew off to invite the guests. The Elf girls were already dancing on the Elf Hill—dancing with long scarves woven of mist and moonshine, which looked exceedingly pretty—to people who like that sort of thing. Inside the Hill the great hall was thoroughly smartened up, the floor washed with moonshine, the walls rubbed down with witches-butter, so that they shone like petals of tulips held up to the light. In the kitchens were quantities of frogs on the spit, snake skins with little children’s fingers in them, salads of toadstool spawn, wet mouse-noses and hemlock, ale of the Marshwoman’s brewing, shining wine of saltpetre from the vault cellars—all this very substantial; rusty nails and church-window glass for cracking at dessert.

The old King had his crown polished with powdered slate pencil—sixth form slate pencil—and it is extremely difficult for the Elf King to procure sixth-form slate pencil. In the bedroom they hung the curtains up and made them fast with snail slime. There was a bustle and a hustle, and no mistake.

“Now we must fumigate with horse-hair and pigs’ bristles,” said the old Elf maid; “and then I think I shall have done my share.”

“Father, darling,” said the youngest of the daughters, “do please tell me who the grand visitors are.”

“Well, well,” said he, “I may as well tell you. Two of my daughters must hold themselves in readiness to be married. Two will certainly be. The old Troll gentleman from up in Norway—he, I mean, who lives in the old Dovrefell and owns all the great cliff castles built of boulders, and a gold-mine which is better than folk think—he’s coming down here with his two lads; they’re to look out a wife apiece. The old fellow is a regular honest old Norseman, merry and bright. I know him of old when we drank brotherhood. He was down here then to fetch his wife. She’s dead now; she was a daughter of the cliff King of Moen. He took his wife off the chalk (*really* on tick), as the saying is. Oh, how I do want to see that old

Norse Troll fellow again! The boys they say are rather unmannerly youngsters—fit for the stick—but that may be doing them an injustice, and no doubt they will be good enough when they’re a bit seasoned. Let me see that you can teach them how to behave.”

“And when do they get here?” asked one of the daughters. “That depends on wind and weather,” said the King; “they are travelling cheap: they’re coming here by a chance ship. I wanted them to come overland by Sweden, but the old man doesn’t cotton to that side even now. He doesn’t keep up with the times, and I don’t like that.”

At that moment two will-o’-the-wisps came skipping in, one faster than the other, so he arrived first.

“They’re coming, they’re coming!” they cried.

“Give me my crown and let me stand in the moonlight,” said the King. The daughters gathered up their trains and curtsied down to the ground.

There stood the old Troll from the Dovrefell, with a crown of hardened icicles and polished fir cones, and for the rest he had on a bearskin and fur boots. His sons, on the other hand, went bare-headed and without braces, for they were hardy fellows.

“That a hill?” asked the youngest boy; and pointed at the Elf Hill. “Up in Norway we should call that a hole.”

“Lads,” said the old man, “a hole goes in, a hill sticks out; have you no eyes in your heads?”

The only thing that surprised them down here, they said, was that they could understand the talk straight off.

“Don’t make an exhibition of yourselves,” said the old man. “Anyone would think you were no more than half baked.”

With that they went into the Elf Hill, where a smart company indeed was gathered—in such a hurry one would think they had been blown together—and all the arrangements for everyone were charming and choice. The sea folk sat at table in large tubs of water; they said it was just like being in their own home. Everybody’s table manners were correct except those of the two young Norse Trolls. They put their legs up on the table; but then they imagined that everything they did became them.

“Feet out of the food!” said the old Troll, and they obeyed, though not quite promptly. They tickled the ladies next them with fir cones that they’d brought in their pockets, and then took off their boots to be more comfortable, and gave them to the ladies to hold. But their father, the old Troll from Dovrefell, his manners were totally different. He described most delightfully the great Norse fells, and the forces that leapt down them, foaming white, with a booming like the crash of thunder or the peal of an organ. He told of the salmon that leapt up against the rushing water, while the nixie played on his harp of gold. He told of the glistening winter nights when the sleigh bells tinkled and the boys skimmed, with flaming torches, over the bright ice that was so transparent you could see the fish start beneath your feet. Ah, he could tell of it all so that one could see and hear what he described. There were the saw-mills at work, there were the lads and lassies singing ballads and dancing the “Hallinge”. Hurrah! And with that the Troll gave the old Elf maid a smacking uncle’s kiss, a regular buss—and yet they weren’t related—not a bit.



“Round and round they went, such whirling and twirling.” Illustration by W. Heath Robinson, published in Hans Andersen’s Fairy Tales by Hans Christian Andersen (1913), Constable.

Next the Elf girls had to dance—plain dances and stamping dances, too, and did it well. Then came the figure dances—“treading a measure” as they call it. Bless their hearts! How they did work their legs! You couldn’t tell which was top and which was tail, couldn’t see which was arms and which was legs; they went in and out of each other like wood shavings at the saw-mills, and then they whirled round and round till the death-horse felt sick and had to leave the table.

“Prrr,” said the old Troll; “that’s leg-work if you like. But what can they do besides dance and stretch their legs and turn themselves into whirlwinds?” “That you shall see,” said the Elf King; and called up his youngest daughter. She was as slim and clear as moonshine, the most delicate of all the sisters. She took a white chip in her mouth, and there!—she was clean gone! That was her accomplishment. But the old Troll said that was a trick he didn’t care about in a wife, and he didn’t think his boys would like it either.

The second could walk by the side of her own self and look as if she had a shadow, which Troll people don’t have.

The third was of quite another sort. She had taken lessons in the Marshwoman’s brewery, and it was she who knew how to lard alder stumps with glow-worms. “She’ll make a good housewife,” said the Troll, and winked his eye at her, for he didn’t care to drink many toasts.

Then came the fourth Elf girl. She had a great gold harp to play on, and when she struck the first string everybody lifted up their left leg (Troll folk are left-legged), and when she struck the second string, they all had to do what she wanted.

“That’s a dangerous woman,” said the Troll; but the two sons went off outside the Hill, for they were bored with the proceedings.

“And what can the next daughter do?” inquired the Troll.

“I have learnt to love all that is Norse,” said she; “and I shall never marry unless I can go to Norway.”

But the littlest of the sisters whispered to the old Troll: “That’s only because she’s heard, in a Norse ballad, that when the world comes to an end the Norse cliffs will still stand, for gravestones, and so she wants to go there;

she's so frightened of being destroyed."

"Oh ho!" said the Troll; "that cat's out of the bag. But what can the seventh and last do?"

"The sixth comes before the seventh," said the Elf King, for he could count. But the sixth wouldn't come forward properly. "I can only tell people the truth," she said. "Nobody cares about me, and I've quite enough to do to make my own grave-clothes."

Then came the seventh and last; and what could she do? Why! She could tell stories, as many as ever she liked.

"Here are all my five fingers," said the old Troll; "tell me one for each of 'em."

And the Elf Maid took him by the wrist, and he laughed till he choked, and when she came to Gold Band, that had a gold ring about his waist, as if he knew there was to be a betrothal, the Troll said: "Stick to what you've got, the hand is yours: I'll take you for a wife myself."

The Elf Maid said there were still stories to tell about Gold Band and little Peter Playman. "We'll hear them in the winter time," said the Troll; "and we'll hear about the fir and the birch and the fairy gifts and the ringing frost. You'll have lots to tell, for there's no one up there that can do it properly, and we'll sit in the stone hall where the fir chips blaze, and drink mead out of the golden horns of the old Norse Kings—the Nixie's given me a couple of them; and while we sit there the Garbo will come and pay us a visit. He'll sing you all the herd-girls' songs; it will be jolly. The salmon will leap in the force and dash against the stone walls, but they won't get in. Ah, you may take it from me, there are good times in dear old Norway. But where are the boys?"

Ah! Where were the boys? They were running about in the marsh, blowing out the will-o'-the-wisps, who had come so obligingly, and were to make a torchlight procession.

"Gadding about like that!" said the old Troll. "I've got a mother for you, and now you may take an aunt for yourselves."

But the boys said they had rather make speeches and drink brotherhood. Marrying? No, they didn't care about that. So they did make speeches and drank brotherhood, and hung the glasses on their fingertips to show they'd drunk them out; and then took off their coats and lay down on the table to sleep, for they had no false modesty. But the old Troll danced round the room with his young bride, and exchanged boots with her, which is more distinguished than exchanging rings.

"There's the cock crowing," said the old Elf maid, who was housekeeper. "We must shut the shutters now, to keep the sun from burning us alive."

So the Hill shut.

But outside, the lizards still ran up and down the old split tree, and one said to the other: "Oh, how I do like that old Norse Troll, to be sure!"

"I like the boys better," said the lob-worm: but then of course he couldn't see, poor beast.

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