

The Magic Hill

Nimble lizards scurried about the cracked bark of an old tree. They understood each other perfectly, for they were speaking in lizard tongue.

"No, just listen how it rumbles, how it boils inside the magic hill," said one lizard. "Because of their fussing, I haven't closed my eyes for two nights. I'd rather have a toothache; there's no peace either way."

"They're up to something in there!" said the second lizard. "At night they lift the hill onto four pillars of fire, and it stands thus until the cocks crow—clearly they want to air it out thoroughly. And the forest maidens are rehearsing new dances with stamping. They're definitely up to something in there."

"I wonder who these guests are?" the lizards grew agitated. "And what is being planned? Just listen how it boils, how it rumbles!"

At that very moment, the magic hill split open, and from within, quickly shuffling her little legs, emerged an old forest maiden. True, she had no back, but otherwise she looked quite respectable. She was a distant relative of the Forest King, served as his housekeeper, and wore an amber heart upon her forehead. Her legs flashed rapidly—one-two, one-two! My, how she trotted off, straight into the bog where the nightjar lived.

"You are invited to the Forest King; the celebration will take place tonight," she said. "But first, we would like to ask you for a favor. Would you agree to deliver the invitations? After all, you don't host receptions yourselves; it wouldn't hurt to help others! We are expecting distinguished foreigners, trolls, if that means anything to you. And the old Forest King does not wish to make a fool of himself."

"Whom should we invite?" asked the nightjar.

"Well, for the grand ball we invite everyone indiscriminately, even humans, provided they can talk in their sleep or engage in some other activity related to our line of work. But for the supper, it has been decided to be highly selective, inviting only the highest nobility. How much I argued with the Forest King! In my opinion, we shouldn't even invite ghosts. First and foremost, we must invite the Sea King with his daughters. True, they do not much care for being on land, but we shall seat them on wet stones, or perhaps devise something even better. Hopefully, this time they won't refuse. Then we must invite all the old trolls of the highest rank, those with tails. Afterwards—the Water Spirit and the House Spirits. Furthermore,

I believe we cannot overlook the Cemetery Pig, the three-legged headless horse, and the Gnome-Churchwarden. True, they belong to another kind of unclean force and seem attached to the church, but ultimately that is merely their occupation, while we are still close kin, and they often visit us."

"Very well!" said the nightjar and flew off to summon the guests.

Meanwhile, the forest maidens were already whirling atop the magic hill.

They were rehearsing a dance with veils, long veils woven from mist and moonlight. And those who appreciate such things would find their dance very beautiful. Inside the hill, everything had been scrubbed and licked clean. The floor of the enormous hall was washed with moonlight, and the walls were wiped with witches' salve, so they sparkled just like tulips in the sun. The kitchen was bursting with provisions; frogs were being roasted on spits, sausage made from slow-worms was being stuffed with children's fingers, salads were prepared from toadstools, pickled mouse snouts, and hemlock. Beer was brought from the Bog-Woman, from her brewery, and sparkling wine made from saltpeter was delivered straight from the cemetery vaults. Everything was prepared according to the finest recipes, and for dessert, they intended to serve rusty nails and broken church glass.

The old Forest King ordered his crown to be polished with crushed slate, not ordinary slate, but the kind used by the top student. Obtaining such slate for the Forest King is no easy task! In the bedroom, curtains were hung and glued fast with snake saliva. In short, chaos reigned supreme.

"Well, now just smoke a bit with horsehair and pig bristle, and I consider my job done!" said the old forest maiden.

"Papa! Dearest!" the youngest daughter pestered the Forest King. "Do tell, who exactly are these distinguished foreigners?"

"Well then!" replied the King. "Perhaps I may as well say. Two of my daughters shall become brides today. Two of you will have to depart for foreign lands today. Today an old Norwegian troll will arrive, the one who lives in the Dovre Mountains. How many stone castles he has built upon wild cliffs! And how many gold mines he possesses—far more than people think. He is traveling with his two sons, who must choose wives for themselves. The old troll is a truly honest Norwegian, straightforward and cheerful. We have known each other for a long time; we once drank together as brothers. He came here once for a wife; she is no longer among the living. She was the daughter of the King of Chalk Cliffs from the island of Møn. And, as they say, the game was played for chalk. Oh, how I have missed the old troll! True, there are rumors about the sons, that they were poorly raised and are

great troublemakers. But perhaps people are simply slandering them. Once they marry, they will surely settle down. I hope you will be able to bring them under control."

"When will they arrive?" asked one of the daughters.

"That depends entirely on the weather and the wind," answered the Forest King.

"They are not accustomed to economizing; they travel by ship! I advised them to journey overland through Sweden, but the old troll still refuses to even look in that direction. He lags behind the times, and that is what displeases me."

Suddenly, two bog lights came hopping along, one trying to outrun the other and thus arriving first.

"They're coming! They're coming!" they cried.

"Let me put on my crown," commanded the Forest King, "and stand where the moon shines brightest."

The daughters gathered their long veils and curtsied almost to the ground. Before them stood the Dovre Troll wearing a crown of sturdy icicles and polished fir cones. He was wrapped in a bear-fur coat, and his feet were sunk in warm boots. The sons, however, strutted without suspenders and with bare chests—they fancied themselves heroes.

"And this is a hill?" asked the younger one, poking a finger at the magic hill. "In Norway, we call this a pit."

"Children!" said the old man. "A pit goes down; a Hill goes up. Have you no eyes?"

The young fellows declared that the only thing surprising them was how they could immediately, without preparation, understand the local language.

"Do not pretend," said the old man. "Otherwise, they will think you completely uneducated."

Everyone entered the magic hill. An exquisite society had already gathered there, and so quickly it seemed as though the guests had been blown there by the wind. In the hall, everything was arranged so that each invitee felt right at home. The Water Spirits and mermaids sat in large tubs of water, saying they felt very cozy. Everyone behaved at the table as proper, except the young Norwegian trolls, who immediately propped their legs up on the table—for in their opinion, everything they did was exceedingly charming.

"Take your feet out of the dishes!" snapped the Dovre Troll, and the brothers obeyed, though not immediately.

It was time for the forest maidens to show how they danced, and they performed both simple dances and dances with stamping, which they did skillfully! Then came a real ballet, where one was supposed to "lose oneself in the whirl of the dance." My, how they began kicking up their legs! Everyone's eyes grew dizzy: one couldn't tell where the hands were, where the feet, where one sister ended and another began; sometimes they rolled like wheels, sometimes spun like tops, until finally the three-legged headless horse felt ill and had to leave the table.

"Hmm," said the old troll, "they do it fiercely! But what else can they do besides dancing, kicking up their legs, and spinning like tops?"

"You shall see presently," said the Forest King and summoned the youngest. She was the most beautiful of the sisters, tender and transparent as moonlight. She placed a white splinter in her mouth and became invisible—that was what she could do!

However, the Dovre Troll said he would not wish for a wife capable of performing such tricks, nor would his sons likely care for it.

The second sister knew how to walk alongside herself, as if she were her own shadow, though trolls have no shadows.

The third had quite different inclinations—she had learned to brew beer from the Bog-Woman herself. It was she who so skillfully stuffed alder roots with fireflies!

"She will make a good housewife!" said the old troll and winked at her, but he did not drink the beer, not wishing to drink too much.

The fourth forest maiden stepped forward; in her hands she held a large golden harp. She struck the strings once, and the guests lifted their left leg, for all trolls are left-handed. She struck a second time, and everyone was ready to do whatever she

he commands.

"What a dangerous woman!" said the old troll, but his sons turned and walked out of the hill; they were already tired of all this.

"And what can the next one do?" asked the old troll.

"I have learned to love everything Norwegian," said the fifth daughter. "And I will marry only a Norwegian; I dream of getting to Norway."

But the youngest sister whispered into the troll's ear:

"She simply learned from a Norwegian song that Norwegian rocks will stand even when the end of the world comes. That is why she wants to climb onto them—she is terribly afraid of perishing."

"Ha-ha!" said the old troll. "Well, so be it! And where is the seventh and last?"

"First the sixth," said the Forest King; he, at least, knew how to count. But the sixth would not show herself for anything.

"All I can do is speak the truth to people's faces," she insisted, "and no one likes that. I might as well sew myself a shroud."

Then came the turn of the seventh and last daughter. What could she do? Oh, she knew how to tell fairy tales, and as many as one's heart desired.

"Here are my five fingers," said the Dovre Troll. "Tell me a tale about each."

The forest maiden took his hand and began to tell, and he rolled with laughter. When she reached the ring finger, which wore a golden ring around its waist as if it knew betrothal was inevitable, the old troll declared:

"Hold my hand tighter. It is yours. I myself take you as my wife."

But the forest maiden replied that she had not yet told the tale of the ring finger nor of the little finger.

And indeed, where were the boys? They were racing across the field, extinguishing the marsh lights that had lined up neatly in a row, preparing for a torchlight procession.

"Enough idling! I have found a mother for you! And you may marry your aunts."

But the sons answered that they would rather make speeches and drink brotherhood toasts; they had no desire to marry. And so they made speeches, drank brotherhood toasts, and turned their glasses upside down, wanting to show that every drop had been consumed. Then they stripped off their clothes and lay down to sleep right on the table—they were not given to modesty. Meanwhile, the old troll danced with his young bride and even exchanged shoes with her, for that is far more interesting than exchanging rings.

"The rooster crows," said the old forest maiden, who acted as hostess. "Time to close the shutters, or we shall burn up here from the sun."

And the hill closed.

Along the cracked old tree, lizards scurried up and down, and one said to the other:

"Oh, I liked the old Norwegian troll so much!"

"But I liked the sons better," said the earthworm, though he was completely blind, poor thing.