

The Elf Mound

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Several lizards darted briskly in and out of the cracks of a hollow tree. They understood each other perfectly, for they all spoke lizard language.

"My! How it rumbles and buzzes in the old elf mound," said one lizard. "It rumbles and bumbles so that I haven't had a wink of sleep for the past two nights. I might as well have a toothache, for that also prevents me from sleeping."

"There's something afoot," said another lizard. "Until the cock crowed for dawn, they had the mound propped up on four red poles to give it a thoroughgoing airing. And the elf maidens are learning to stamp out some new dances. Something is surely afoot."

"Yes, I was just talking about it with an earthworm I know," said a third lizard. "He came straight from the mound, where he has been nosing around night and day. He overheard a good deal. For he can't see, poor thing, but he knows his way around and makes an uncommonly good eavesdropper. They expect company in the elf mound, distinguished visitors, but the earthworm wouldn't say who they are. Or maybe he didn't know. All the will-o'-the-wisps have been told to parade with their torches, as they are called, and all of the flat silver and gold plate with which the hill is well stocked is being polished and put out in the moonlight."

"Who *can* the visitors be?" the lizards all wanted to know. "What in the world is going on? Listen to the hustle! listen to the bustle!"

Just at that moment the elf mound opened, and an old-maid elf minced out of it. The woman had no back, but otherwise she was quite properly dressed, with her amber jewelry in the shape of a heart. She kept house for her distant cousin, the old king of the elves, and she was very spry in the legs. *Trip, trot*, away she went. How she hurried and scurried off to see the night raven down in the marsh.

"You are hereby invited to the elf mound, this very night," she told him. "But may I ask you to do us a great favor first? Please deliver the other invitations for us. As you have no place of your own where you can entertain, you must make yourself generally useful. We shall have some very distinguished visitors-goblins of rank, let me tell you. So the old elf king wants to make the best impression he can."

"Who is being invited?" the night raven asked.

"Oh, everybody may come to the big ball-even ordinary mortals if they talk in their sleep or can do anything else that we can do. But at the banquet the company must be strictly select. Only the very best people are invited to it. I've threshed that out thoroughly with the elf king, because I insist we should not even invite ghosts. First of all, we must invite the old man of the sea and his daughters. I suppose they won't like to venture out on dry land, but we can at least give them a comfortable wet stone to sit on, or something better, and I don't think they'll refuse this time. Then we must have all the old trolls of the first degree, with tails. We must ask the old man of the stream, and the brownies, and I believe we should ask the grave-pig, the bone-horse, and the church dwarf, though they live under churches and, properly speaking, belong to the clergy, who are not our sort of people at all. Still that is their vocation, and they are closely related to us, and often come to call."

"Cra!" said the night raven as he flew to summon the guests.

On their mound, the elf maidens had already begun to dance, and they danced with long scarves made of mist and moonlight. To those who care for scarf dancing, it was most attractive.

The large central hall of the elf mound had been especially prepared for this great night. The floor was washed with moonlight, and the walls were polished with witch wax, which made them glisten like the petals of a tulip. The kitchen abounded with skewered frogs, snakeskins stuffed with small children's fingers, fungus salad made of mushroom-seed, wet mouse noses, and hemlock. There was beer of the swamp witch's brewing, and sparkling salpeter champagne from graveyard vaults. All very substantial! Rusty nails and ground glass from church windows were among the delicacies.

The old elf king had his gold crown polished with powdered slate pencil. It was a prize pupil's slate pencil, and a prize pupil's slate pencil is not so easy for an elf king to obtain. The curtains in the bedroom were freshly starched with snail slime. Oh, how they did hustle and bustle.

"Now we shall burn horsehair and pig's bristles for incense, and my duty is done," said the housekeeper.

"Dear papa elf," said his youngest daughter, "will you tell me now who the guests of honor are to be?"

"Well," he said, "it's high time that I told you. I have made a match for two of my daughters. Two of you must be ready to get married without fail. The venerable goblin chief of Norway, who lives in the old Dovrefjeld Mountains, and possesses a gold mine and crag castles and strongholds much better than people can imagine, is on his way here with his two sons, and each son wants a wife. The old goblin chief is a real Norwegian, honest and true, straightforward and merry. I have known him for many a year, and we drank to our lasting friendship when he came here to get his wife. She's dead now, but she was the daughter of the king of the chalk cliffs at Möen. I used to tell him that he got married on the chalk, as if he had bought his wife on credit. How I look forward to seeing him again. His sons, they say, are rough and rowdy. But they'll improve when they get older. It's up to you to polish them."

"How soon will they come?" one of his daughters asked.

"That depends on the wind and the weather," he said. "They are thrifty travelers, they will come by ship when they have a chance. I wanted them to travel overland, by way of Sweden, but the old gentleman wouldn't hear of it. He doesn't keep up with the times, and I don't like that."

Just then two will-o'-the-wisps came tumbling in, one faster than the other and therefore he got there first. Both of them were shouting:

"Here they come, here they come!"

"Hand me my crown. Let me stand where the moon shines most brightly," the elf king said.

His daughters lifted their long scarves and curtsied low to the ground.

There came the venerable goblin chief from the Dovrefjeld, crowned with sparkling icicles and polished fir cones, muffled in his bearskin coat, and wearing his sledge-boots. His sons dressed quite differently, with their throats uncovered and without suspenders. They were husky fellows.

"Is that a hill?" The smallest of the two brothers pointed his finger at the elf mound. In Norway we would call it a hole."

"Son!" cried the old goblin chief. "Hills come up, and holes go down. Have you no eyes in your head?"

The only thing that amazed them, they said, was the language that people spoke here. Why, they could actually understand it."

"Don't make such tomfools of yourselves," said their father, "or people will think you ignoramuses."

They entered the elf mound, where all the best people were gathered, though they assembled so fast that they seemed swept in by the wind. Nevertheless the arrangements were delightfully convenient for everybody. The old man of the sea and his daughters were seated at the table in large casks of water, which they said made them feel right at home. Everybody had good table manners except the two young Norwegian goblins, who put their feet on the table as if anything they did were all right.

"Take your feet out of your plates," said the old goblin chief, and they obeyed, but not right away. They had brought fir cones in their pockets to tickle the ladies sitting next to them. To make themselves comfortable, they pulled off their boots and gave them to the ladies to hold. However, their father, the old Dovre goblin, conducted himself quite differently. He talked well of the proud crags of Norway, and of waterfalls rushing down in a cloud of spray, with a roar like thunder and the sound of an organ. He told how the salmon leap up through the waterfall, when they hear the nixies twang away on golden harps. He described bracing winter nights on which the sleigh bells chime, and boys with flaming torches skim over polished ice so clear that one can see the startled fish swish away underfoot. Yes, he had a way of talking that made you both hear and see the sawmill sawing and the boys and girls as they sang and danced the Norwegian Hallinge dance. Hurrah! In the wink of an eye the goblin chief gave the old-maid elf such a kiss that it smacked, though they weren't in the least related.

Then the elf maidens must do their dances, first the ordinary dances and then the dance where they stamped their feet, which set them off to perfection. Then they did a really complicated one called, "A dance to end dancing." Keep us and save us, how light they were on their feet. Whose leg was whose? Which were arms and which were legs? They whipped through the air like shavings at a planing mill. The girls twirled so fast that it made the bone-horse's head spin, and he staggered away from the table.

"Whir-r-r," said the goblin chief. "The girls are lively enough, but what can they do besides dancing like mad, spinning like tops, and making the bone-horse dizzy?"

"I'll show you what they can do," the elf king boasted. He called his youngest daughter. She was as thin and fair as moonlight. She was the most dainty of all the sisters, and when she took a white wand in her mouth it vanished away. That was what she could do. But the goblin chief said this was an art he wouldn't like his wife to possess, and he didn't think his sons would either.

The second daughter could walk alongside herself as if she had a shadow, which is something that trolls don't possess. The third was a very different sort of girl. She had studied brewing with the swamp witch, and she was a good hand at seasoning alder stumps with glowworms.

"Now this one would make a good housewife," said the goblin chief, winking instead of drinking to her, for he wanted to keep his wits clear.

The fourth daughter played upon a tall, golden harp. As soon as she fingered the first string everyone kicked up his left leg, for all of the troll tribe are left-legged. And as soon as she fingered the second string, everyone had to do just as she said.

"What a dangerous woman," said the goblin chief. His sons were very bored, and they strolled out of the elf mound as their father asked, "What can the next daughter do?"

"I have learned to like Norwegians," she told him. "I'll never marry unless I can live in Norway."

But her youngest sister whispered in the old goblin's ear, "She only says that because of the old Norwegian saying, that even though the world should fall the rocks of Norway

would still stand tall, that's why she wants to go there. She's afraid to die."

"Hee, hee," said the goblin, "somebody let the cat out of the bag. Now for the seventh and last."

"The sixth comes before the seventh," said the elf king, who was more careful with his arithmetic. But the sixth daughter would not come forward.

"I can only tell the truth," she said, "so nobody likes me, and I have enough to do to sew upon my shroud."

Now came the seventh and last daughter. What could she do? She could tell tales, as many as ever she pleased.

"Here are my five fingers," said the old goblin. "Tell me a story for each of them."

The elf maiden took him by the wrist, and he chuckled till he almost choked. When she came to the fourth finger, which wore a gold ring just as if it knew that weddings were in the air, the old goblin said, "Hold it fast, for I give you my hand. I'll take you to wife myself."

The elf maiden said that the stories of Guldbrand, the fourth finger, and of little Peter Playfellow, the fifth finger, remained to be told.

"Ah, we shall save those until winter," said the old goblin chief. "Then you shall tell me about the fir tree and the birch; of the ghost presents and of the creaking frost. You will be our teller of tales, for none of us has the knack of it. We shall sit in my great stone castle where the pine logs blaze, and we shall drink our mead out of the golden horns of old Norwegian kings. I have two that water goblin washed into my hand. And while we sit there side by side, Sir Garbo will come to call, and he will sing you the mountain maidens' song. How merry we then shall be! The salmon will leap in the waterfall, and beat against our stone walls, but he'll never get in to where we sit so snug. Ah, I tell you, it is good to live in glorious old Norway. But where have the boys gone?"

Where indeed? They were charging through the fields, blowing out the will-o'-the-wisps who were coming so modestly for their torchlight parade.

"Is that a way to behave?" said the goblin chief. "I have chosen a stepmother for you, so come and choose wives of your own."

But his sons said they preferred speeches and drink to matrimony. So they made speeches, and they drank healths, and turned their glasses bottom side up to show how empty they were. Then they took off their coats, and lay down on the table to sleep, for they had no manners. But the old goblin danced around the room with his young bride, and changed his boots for hers, which was much more fashionable than merely exchanging rings.

"There's that cock crowing!" the old-maid housekeeper of the elves warned them. "Now we must close the shutters to keep the sun from burning us."

So they closed the mound. But outside the lizards darted around the hollow tree, and one said to the other: "Oh, how we liked that old Norwegian goblin chief!"

"I preferred his jolly sons," said the earthworm, but then he had no eyes in his head, poor thing.