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IMAGINATION OVER KNOWLEDGE

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Charcoal Nils And The Troll-woman

In the old days there lived on a headland that juts out into the northwestern corner of Lake Rasval, in the neighborhood of the Linde mining-district, a charcoal-burner named Nils, generally known as Charcoal Nils. He let a farm-hand attend to his little plot of land, and he himself made his home in the forest, where he chopped wood in the summer and burned it to charcoal in the winter. Yet no matter how hard he struggled, his work was unblessed with reward, and no one ever spoke of him save as poor Charcoal Nils.

One day, when he was on the opposite shore of the lake, near the gloomy Harsberg, a strange woman came up to him, and asked whether he needed some one to help him with his charcoal burning.

"Yes, indeed," said he, "help would be welcome." So she began to gather blocks of wood and tree-trunks, more than Charcoal Nils could have dragged together with his horse, and by noon there was enough wood for a new kiln. When evening came, she asked the charcoal-burner whether he were satisfied with the day's work she had done, and if she were to come back the next day.

That suited the charcoal-burner perfectly, and she came back the next day and all the following ones. And

when the kiln had been burned out she helped Nils clear it, and never before had he had such a quantity of charcoal, nor charcoal of so fine a quality.

So she became his wife and lived with him in the wood for three years. They had three children, yet this worried Nils but little, seeing that she looked after them, and they gave him no trouble.

But when the fourth year came, she grew more exacting, and insisted on going back to his home with him, and living with him there. Nils wished to hear nothing about this; yet since she was so useful to him in his charcoal-burning, he did not betray his feelings, and

said he would think it over.

It happened one Sunday that he went to church—where he had not been for many years, and what he heard there brought up thoughts he had not known since the innocent days of his childhood. He began to wonder whether there were not some hocus-pocus about the charcoal-burning, and

whether it were not due to the forest woman, who aided him so willingly.

Preoccupied with this and other thoughts, he forgot while returning to his kiln, that he had promised the strange woman at the very beginning, when she had



first helped him, that, whenever he had been home and was returning to the kiln, he would rap three times with his ax against an old pine-tree not far from it. On this occasion, as we have said, he forgot the sign, and as a result he saw something that nearly robbed him of his wits.

As he drew near the kiln, he saw it all aflame, and around it stood the three children and their mother, and they were clearing out the kiln. They were pulling down and putting out so that flames, smoke and ashes whirled sky-high, but instead of the spruce-branches that were generally used to put out the fire, they had bushy tails which they dipped in the snow!

When Charcoal Nils had looked on for a while, he slunk back to the old pine-tree, and made its trunk echo to the sound of his three ax-strokes till one could hear them on the Harsberg. Then he went to the kiln, as though he had seen nothing, and all went on as before. The kiln was glowing with a handsome, even glow, and the tall woman was about and working as usual.

As soon as she saw Charcoal Nils, she came back with her pressing demand that he take her home to his little house, and that they live there.

"Yes, that shall come about," said Nils to console her, and turned back home to fetch a horse. But instead he went out on the headline of Kallernäs, on the eastern shore of Lake Rasval, where a wise man lived, and asked the latter what he should do.

The old man advised him to go home and hitch his horse to his charcoal-wagon, but to hitch the horse in such

wise that there would be not a single loop either in the harness or traces. Then he was to mount the horse and ride back to the kiln without stopping, have the troll-woman and her children get into the wagon, and at once drive out on the ice with them.

The charcoal-burner did as the old man told him, saddled his horse, paying strict attention that there were no loops in saddle or bridle, rode across the ice through the wood to his kiln, and told the troll-woman and her children to get in. Then he quickly turned back through the wood, out on the ice, and there let his horse run as fast as he could. When he reached the middle of the lake, he saw a pack of wolves running along in the direction of Aboda-land, at the northern end of the lake, and heading for the ice. Then he tore the saddle-harness from the traces, so that the wagon with the troll-folk was left standing on the bare ice, and rode as fast as his horse could carry him for the opposite shore. When the trolls saw the wolves they began to scream.

"Turn back, turn back!" cried the mother. "And if you will not for my sake, then at least do so for the sake of Vipa, your youngest daughter!" But Charcoal Nils rode for the shore without looking back. Then he heard the troll-woman calling on others for aid.

"Brother in the Harsberg, Sister in Stripa, Cousin in Ringfels; Take the loop and pull!"

"There is no loop to pull!" came the answer from deep within the Harsberg. "Then catch him at Harkallarn."

"He is not riding in that direction." The reply came from Ringfels.

And indeed Charcoal Nils did not ride in that direction; but over stick and stone straight to his own home. Yet when he reached his own courtyard, the horse fell, and a shot from the trolls tore away a corner of the stable. Nils shortly after fell sick, and had to lie a-bed for a number of weeks. When he was well again he sold his forest land, and worked the little farm by the cottage until his death. So that was one occasion when the troll-folk came off second best.