

TROLL FOREST

A Norwegian *Eventyr* (folktale)

By

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Peter knew he should have started on his journey home well before the sun had slipped past mid-afternoon. The laying out of the hay to dry on Farmer Nilsson's ancient fences took longer than he had planned. But, he nearly burst with pride when Farmer Nilsson paid him three whole *kroner* for his labors. This was his first venture to earn money outside of his own valley. His mother would be proud of him and want to give him a *stor klem*, a great big hug, but he would refuse it. He was a man now. After all, he was in his fourteenth summer.

Peter could feel his cup tapping the side of his leg as he took long strides to shorten the distance home. His cup was his treasure. He had looped a piece of rope through the handle and tied it to his belt. He wore his cup proudly, like a knight wore his

sword. His father had carved it from of the burl of a felled birch tree. Peter had watched as his father whittled a design into its wooden sides. Then, with a heated tool, he burnt Peter's name, letter by letter, into the wood. The cup was all he had to remember his father by. He and his mother ran the farm all alone now. They struggled to pay the rent.

The sunlight got weaker as Peter strode deeper into the forest. He heard the welcoming sound of water as it dashed and played among the rocks of a nearby stream. The stream was pure blue-green glacier water, cold and refreshing. Peter untied the rope from his cup. He dipped it deep into the icy flowing waters. As he drank he watched the last golden-orange crescent of the sun before it disappeared behind the mountaintop. Peter set his cup on the top of a fallen log. He had forgotten that darkness came earlier on this side of the valley.

Peter felt tired and he knew he would have to spend the night in the forest. He ate some cheese and bread and decided to camp a short distance from the stream. He reached into his knapsack and pulled out a woolen blanket and the case holding his fiddle. I will comfort myself with a tune before I sleep, he thought. First, Peter played a merry dancing jig but this was too lively. Next, he chose a melody that his mother often sang to him as a boy, it had always made him sleepy. He played and played until he yawned, then he wrapped his blanket around himself and settled into a bed of cozy reindeer moss.

As he lay there trying to sleep Peter remembered the troll stories his father had told sitting around the fire. The stories scared him when he was little. The trolls were big and hairy and came out only at night. Trolls were said to be mischievous and untrustworthy, often being blamed for a missing cow or pig. Folks said that if a troll is

caught out after sunrise he will turn into a giant boulder. Even though Peter thought himself too old to be frightened by such stories, he found they were haunting him as he fell into a fitful sleep.

He awoke to hear deep rolling voices coming out of the forest. His heart pounding, he snuck behind a large old spruce tree and peeked out between the branches. A large-boned woman with her hair forced back tightly into a braid approached the stream swinging a big iron frying pan. She was singing. She splashed the frying pan into the water and scooped out a fresh salmon. She took several logs and arranged them into a campfire, then carefully set stones in a circle around it. A few scratches of flint and a spark ignited the fire. The flames crackled and leapt high up into the air.

An enormous man emerged out of the darkness. He had to be at least 8 feet tall! Peter could see his silhouette in the firelight. His hair branched out in all directions like wild trees on the mountaintop, his beard was long and scraggly. His hands and arms were huge, laced with bulging muscles. Dangling from one ear was a large hoop earring, made of pure gold. Riding on his back was a youngling. The youngling was dressed in a ragged shirt and an oversized pair of patched overalls, held up by a bright red suspender. His hair was a tufted mass of curls. He, like his father, wore one golden earring.

Wow! That one earring would be enough to buy a whole farm, Peter thought wistfully.

His heart sank when he spotted his cup, exactly where he had left it, sitting on the log near the edge of the stream. He slunk deeper into his hideaway frantically pulling handfuls of thick moss and pine needles over himself. Please don't steal my cup, Peter pleaded silently.

The woman laughed as she fried the salmon. She pulled a black coffee kettle from her skirts. Soon Peter could smell fresh coffee brewing.

The family ate heartily and noisily, wiping their mouths on the backs of their hairy hands. The two grownups slurped coffee from huge tin mugs. The youngling scurried away to play along the stream. He stomped closer and closer to Peter's hiding place!

"Ho, ho! I find me a cup," he squealed. He ran back to his folks to show off the prize. The mother, amused, gave him a playful splash of coffee. Peter winced, for his cup had never held anything but crystal clear mountain water.

Suddenly the big man grabbed the big woman around the waist and they started to dance. They twirled and whirled and laughed as round and round they went. The youngling joined in spinning and kicking his bare feet up into the air, all the while holding on tight to his newfound cup. Peter yearned to snatch his cup right out of the child's hands!

Peter had to do something. He couldn't bear to lose his cup. "I will play music for them, and then they will know the cup belongs to me." He slid silently out from the protection of the big spruce tree, fetched his fiddle and started to play. At first he played timidly, afraid of what the troll-like people might do to him. To his amazement, the more he played the bolder he became. And the faster he played, the wilder the family danced. Finally the youngling fell in a dizzy swoon to the ground.

"Ho, ho!" He held onto his tummy and let out one very boisterous hiccup.

"Me got hicky-yups, Mama!"

Peter began to play his mother's lullaby to calm the child.

The big woman hummed along as she cradled the youngling in her arms. She carried him to a mossy patch near the stream and tucked him in with a tattered quilt. She kissed her youngling on his forehead as she slid the cup from the child's grasp. She filled the cup with water from the stream, allowing the child to sip it slowly.

Peter wove the magic of his music and watched as the youngling's eyelids drooped in slumber. The Mother placed the cup on top of the nearby log and turned her ruddy colored face in the direction of the music.

Peter's hands were trembling but he kept playing his gentle melody. The mother's eyes, the color of a robin's egg, met Peter's and they locked for an instant. She grinned a toothless grin, then tipped her head to one side and winked at him, as if to say thank you. Peter, entranced by her, watched as she grabbed her many skirts and kicked up her heels to join her big man dancing round the campfire.

Peter no longer felt afraid. He played more tunes, all that he could remember by heart. It was nearing morning, his arms ached and his eyes were scratchy and tired.

Then as quickly as the forest couple started to dance, they stopped, put out the fire, washed the pan and kettle and headed back into the forest. The sleepy youngling, wrapped in his quilt, snuggled into in his father's arms.

Exhausted, Peter fell into a deep sleep. He awoke with the early rays of sunlight streaming over him. He shook himself off and rolled up his blanket, brushing the bits of moss and lichen that still clung to it. He placed his fiddle and bow in their case. It was time to reclaim his cup. With each step he took he reassured himself that his cup would be there, sitting on top of the log. But as he came closer he saw that the top of the log was empty. He searched all around the campsite but not a single trace was left behind from

these strange forest folk. Not an ash from the campfire or one footprint from the huge twirling dancing feet. Peter wondered if it was all a silly dream.

He cupped his hands into the icy stream and washed his face, allowing the water to refresh him. But he couldn't take even a sip to drink, not without his cup. The air had a chill to it, causing him to shiver. It was time for him to finish his journey. Peter shook his head sadly, trying to shake off the emptiness he felt. The loss of his cup was overwhelming.

As Peter neared the edge of the campsite he heard a sound that both he and his father had loved, the call of a hoot owl. Strange, he thought, owls are not usually out during daylight hours. He looked up into the branches of a sturdy old birch tree. The sun glimmered through the quaking leaves playing hide and seek with him. Peter sighed and then with a long stride headed into the forest, he was wishing to be home. He would welcome his mother's warm smile and, *store klemmer*, big hugs.

Peter heard the owl hoot once again. He turned toward the sound and looked at the tall birch tree. The owl hooted a third time. Peter's eyes strained to see the owl, stepping up close to the tree to further inspect it. He couldn't believe his eyes! Dangling from a branch at eye level was his cup! Joyfully, he reached for it. How did it get to be here, hanging on this tree? He lifted the cup from the branch feeling the curve of the wood and the carved letters of his name on his fingers. He brought it up to his face hoping it wouldn't smell like troll coffee. As he did, his eye caught a beam of golden light. There on the bottom of his cup lay an earring! An enormous golden hoop! It would be more than enough to buy his mother's farm. "It must be a gift from the trolls! They are

thanking me for playing my fiddle for them!” Peter sang out loud and strong into the depths of the forest. “Thank you forest trolls! Thank you for saving my mother’s farm!”

Peter ran all the way home. He found his mother patiently waiting for him, smiling. He gave her a *stor klem*, a great big hug. And then, he proudly presented her with the golden earring, and the three whole *kroner* he had earned.