



A review of
**Troll Magic:
Hidden Folk
from the Mountains
and Forests of Norway**

Katherine Langrish

Towering one-eyed trolls lumber through the forests, huge monsters with gaping jaws rise up from the sea, and shape-changing nökk hide in the mountain lakes, eager to lure passersby to a watery death. These are some of the creatures that inhabit the art of Theodor Kittelsen. His world is both mysterious and familiar, sinister and humorous – a borderland between the human and fantastical, rooted in Norway's majestic and untamed terrain. (vii)

The artist Theodor Kittelsen (1857-1914) is famous for his evocative representations of the Norwegian landscape, and the trolls, huldrefolk and other odd creatures which inhabit it. He was one of the illustrators of Asbjørnsen and Moe's *Norske Folkeeventyr* (*Norwegian Folktales*) and *Trolldskab*, published in 1892, was originally intended as a collaboration between him and his compatriot Jonas Lie, who would write the stories. Lie's contribution failed to materialise, however, so Kittelsen wrote them himself and did a very good job. Tiina Nunnally has now translated it into English for the first time as *Troll Magic*.

Maybe it was a good thing Lie dropped out. It's impossible to say whether the stories inspired the illustrations or the other way around: they complement one another perfectly, and Kittelsen's prose style varies according to the subject. The illustration to the first tale, 'The Forest Troll', depicts darkening mountain ranges, jagged-edged with fir-trees – with the grim, giant head of the Forest Troll rising among them, one eye glowing like an ember. You might expect a grim story to go with it, but instead Kittelsen provides a lyrical, semi-autobiographical account of childhood delight in the wild wonder of the forest, and in the troll-apparition which 'displayed all the eeriness and terror; all the gold and glittery sheen that our child-souls demanded. . . . We wanted to be scared.' (4)

'On the Way to a Feast at the Troll Castle' is quite different. Sprightly yet melancholy, it tells of a mixed group of trolls, male, female and children, setting out on a journey to a feast at fabled Soria Moria Castle. They wade waist-deep through pine forests, break off bits of

their own rocky bodies, and walk in circles for a hundred years. At last their patience is rewarded, and the illustration shows them crossing the last ridge to see the golden castle waiting for them. Their names, 'Trond, Kaare, Ivar Eldfjørpungen, Baard, Bobben of Musgjerd, and old Guri Suppetryne' are traditional: Bobben of Musgjerd is the eponymous, unwelcome troll suitor in a tale from Ole Andreas Øverland's 'From a Bygone Era: Legends and Records' (1888), and three of the other names appear in Act 2 of Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* (1867) when the herd-girls run over the hill shouting,

‘Trond of Valfeld! Baard and Kaare!
Listen, trolls! Would you sleep in our arms?’ (59)

Other tales adopt the framework often chosen by Asbjørnsen, of the colloquial first-person narrator who tells the story as if it has happened to himself or a neighbour. In 'The Nisse', we meet the master of a house in which a nisse (the Norse brownie) is causing havoc.

The homeowner was ... a dry old geezer with a black stain under his nose from snuff. The strangest thing about him was his chin, which jutted out so far that ... his jaw looked exactly like a cream pitcher. Every time I looked at that pitcher-face of his, he would smile and greet me with such sneering arrogance that I always regretted being the first to doff my hat and step forward. (29)

The man's sister lives with him; she wears 'a heart-shaped silver locket' around her neck, which she often opens, sniffing tearfully. (What's inside? The portrait or woven hair of a dead lover?) Her brother despises her as a fool. At night, the nisse rackets around the house throwing crockery about and opening windows to let in the snow, and Kittelsen subtly hints that maybe – just maybe – the 'old spinster' could tell a few tales about that nisse, if only her brother would listen.

Another story, 'On Mount Kolsaas', employs sly social satire. Anne, a kitchen maid, secretly follows her mistress to a witches' dance on top of the mountain, and spies in the throng many 'respectable' local ladies:

[T]he pharmacist's wife – just imagine, the pharmacist's wife! And was that actually Miss Adriansen over there? ... Good gracious, there sat old Berte Haugane, who sold blueberries and smelled like a cowshed. And she was sitting there so amiably next to that haughty Miss Ulrike Prebensen. How astonishing to see her beside

that snooty woman who always said to the grocer, 'Be so good as to serve me first!'

Anne had to bite her thumb to keep from laughing. (49)

'The Draug' tells of an old trader living in a house built out from a cliff on pilings set in the sea, written in a style reminiscent of Jonas Lie's eerie tales of Finn witches, mermen, trolls and others (his *Weird Tales from Northern Seas* was published in English by Kegan Paul, 1893). In vivid, homely detail, Kittelsen describes how the old fellow lies in bed one night, smoking and reading, with a storm raging outside:

The house creaked, the wind whistled through all the cracks, and the old wallpaper bulged in the shifting air pressure.

All of a sudden there was a mighty slap on the floor right under the bed. It sounded as if someone had struck the underside of the floorboards with a big wet mitten. (63)

That slap is no wave, but the calling card of the draug, the living-dead 'corpse-eater' who haunts the seas and whose huge fist pulls fishermen down to drown.

Other tales in the collection are almost entirely descriptive. In 'The Dragon', Kittelsen presents a word-picture of the once-terrifying creature dormant in its cave, 'sleeping the heavy sleep of death'. Words and illustration work together, contrasting the cold silence of the cave with the 'bright and sunwarmed' life outside, where a bird sits singing on a branch, 'I'm so happy, so happy!' (16). 'A Jutul Battle' reimagines a mountain thunderstorm as a battle between 'two gigantic jutuls' (80), while the picture and words of 'The Fossegrim' evoke this spirit sitting on the edge of the turbulent waterfall, playing his fiddle 'with great resonant strokes' (11): 'Everything must be swept up in the notes, then sent outward to spill over the edge of the waterfall and into the whirlpool below.' (11)

Not every descriptive passage is quite so successful. 'The Mermaid' and its accompanying illustration are both rather bland; Kittelsen's imagination works better with the rugged, vigorous, eerie and grotesque, than with the conventionally pretty. But – by turns lyrical, comical, scary and sly – this book is sheer delight, and it's wonderful to be able to read Kittelsen's words as well as to lose oneself in his glorious illustrations.

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