



# Tonight's Bedtime Story

Fairy Tales for Sleepy Children

presents

## House Island

*From "The Fairy Book" by Miss Mulock*



here lived in Norway, not far from the city of Drontheim, a rich and prosperous gentleman. He had an only daughter, called Aslog, the fame of whose beauty spread far and wide. The greatest men of the country sought her, but all were alike unsuccessful in their suit. Her father, who thought his daughter delayed her choice only that she might choose the better, forbore to interfere, and exulted in her prudence. But when, at length, the richest and noblest had tried their fortune with as little success as the rest, he grew angry, called his daughter, and said to her:—

“Hitherto I have left you to your free choice, but since I see that you reject all without any distinction, and the very best of your suitors seem not good enough for you, I will keep measures no longer with you. What! shall my family become extinct, and my inheritance pass away into the hands of strangers? I will break your stubborn spirit. I give you now till the festival of the great Winter-night; by that time you must make your decision, or prepare to accept the husband whom I myself shall select.”

Now Aslog secretly loved a youth named Orm, handsome, noble and brave. She loved him with her whole soul, and would sooner die than bestow her hand on another. But Orm was poor, and poverty compelled him to keep his love as secret as her own.

When Aslog saw the darkness of her father’s countenance, and heard his angry words, she turned pale as death, for she knew his temper, and doubted not but that he would put his threats into execution. Without uttering a word in reply, she retired to her chamber, and pondered vainly how to escape the storm that hung over her. The great festival approached nearer and nearer, and her anguish increased every day.

At last the lovers resolved on flight. Orm knew a secure place, where they could hide until they found an opportunity of quitting the country. So at night, when all were asleep, he led the trembling Aslog over the snow and ice-fields away to the mountains. The moon and the stars lighted them on their way. They had under their arms a few articles of dress and some skins of animals, which were all they could carry. They ascended the mountains the whole night long, till they reached a lonely spot inclosed with lofty rocks. Here Orm conducted the weary Aslog into a cave, the low and narrow entrance to which was hardly perceptible, but it soon enlarged to a great hall, reaching deep into the mountain. He kindled a fire, and they now, reposing on their skins, sat in the deepest solitude far away from all the world.

Orm was the first who had discovered this cave, which is shown to this very day. But as no one then knew anything of it, they were safe from the pursuit of Aslog’s father. They passed the whole winter in this retirement, contented and even happy; for they knew they were married, and belonged to one another, and no cruel father could separate them more. Orm used to go a-hunting, and Aslog stayed at home in the cave, minded the fire, and prepared the necessary food. Frequently did she mount the points of the rocks, but her eyes, did they wander ever so far, saw only glittering snow-fields.

The spring now came on—the woods were green—the meadows put on their various colors, people began to wander out for summer pleasuring, and Aslog could but rarely and with circumspection venture to leave the cave. One evening Orm came in with the

intelligence that he had recognised her father's servants in the distance, and that he could hardly have been unobserved by them. "They will surround this place," continued he, "and never rest till they have found us; we must quit our retreat, then, without a moment's delay."

They accordingly descended on the other side of the mountain, and reached the strand, where they fortunately found a boat. Orm pushed off, and the boat drove into the open sea. They had escaped their pursuers, but they were now exposed to dangers of another kind: whither should they turn? They could not venture to land, for Aslog's father was lord of the whole coast, and they would infallibly fall into his hands. Nothing then remained for them but to commit their bark to the wind and waves. They were driven along the entire night. At break of day the coast had disappeared, and they saw nothing but the sky, the sea, and the waves. They had not brought one morsel of food with them, and thirst and hunger began now to torment them. Three days did they toss about in this state of misery, and Aslog, faint and exhausted, saw nothing but certain death before her.

At length, on the evening of the third day, they discovered an island of tolerable magnitude, and surrounded by a number of smaller ones. Orm immediately steered for it, but, just as he came near it, there suddenly rose a violent wind, and the sea rolled every moment higher and higher. He turned about with a view of approaching it on another side, but with no better success; his vessel, as often as it neared the island, was driven back as if by an invisible power. "God help us!" he cried, and crossed himself, and looked on poor Aslog, who seemed to be dying of weakness before his eyes. But scarcely had the exclamation passed his lips when the storm ceased, the waves subsided, and the vessel came to the shore without encountering any hindrance. Orm jumped out on the beach; some mussels that he found on the strand strengthened and revived the exhausted Aslog, so that she was soon able to leave the boat.

The island was overgrown with low dwarf shrubs, and seemed to be uninhabited; but when they had reached the middle of it, they discovered a house, which appeared to be half under the surface of the earth. In the hope of meeting with human help, the wanderers approached it. They listened, but the most perfect silence reigned there. Orm at length opened the door, and they both walked in: but what was their surprise, to find everything regulated and arranged as if for inhabitants, yet not a single living creature visible. The fire was burning on the hearth, in the middle of the room, and a kettle with fish hung on it, apparently only waiting for some one to take it up and eat it. The beds were made, and ready to receive their wearied tenants. Orm and Aslog stood for some time dubious, and looked on with a certain degree of awe, but at last, overcome by hunger, they took up the food and ate. When they had satisfied their appetites, and still discovered no human being, they gave way to weariness, and laid themselves in the beds, which looked so peaceful and inviting to their wearied limbs.

They had expected to be awakened in the night by the owners of the house on their return home, but their expectation was not fulfilled; they slept undisturbed till the morning sun shone in upon them. No one appeared on any of the following days, and it seemed as if some invisible power had made ready the house for their reception. They spent the whole summer in perfect happiness: they were, to be sure, solitary, yet they did not miss mankind. The wild birds' eggs, and the fish they caught, yielded them provisions in abundance.

When autumn came, Aslog brought forth a son. In the midst of their joy at this, they were surprised by a wonderful apparition. The door opened on a sudden, and an old woman stepped in. She wore a handsome blue dress; there was something proud, but at the same time something strange, in her appearance.

“Do not be afraid,” said she, “at my unexpected appearance. I am the owner of this house, and I thank you for the clean and neat state in which you have kept it, and for the good order in which I find everything with you. I would willingly have come sooner, but I had no power to do so till this little heathen (pointing to the new-born babe) was come to the light. Now I have free access. Only fetch no priest from the mainland to christen it, or I must depart again. If you will in this matter comply with my wishes, you may not only continue to live here, but all the good that ever you can wish for I will do you. Whatever you take in hand shall prosper; good luck shall follow you wherever you go. But break this condition, and depend upon it that misfortune after misfortune will come on you, and even on this child will I avenge myself. If you want anything, or are in danger, you have only to pronounce my name three times, and I will appear and lend you assistance. I am of the race of the old giants, and my name is Guru. But beware of uttering in my presence the name of Him whom no giant may hear of, and never venture to make the sign of the cross, or to cut it on beam or board in the house. You may dwell in this house the whole year long, only be so good as to give it up to me on Yule evening, when the sun is at the lowest, as then we celebrate our great festival, and then only are we permitted to be merry. At least, if you should not be willing to go out of the house, keep yourselves up in the loft as quiet as possible the whole day long, and as you value your lives do not look down into the room below until midnight is past. After that you may take possession of everything again.”

When the old woman had thus spoken she vanished, and Aslog and Orm lived without any disturbance, contented and happy. Orm never made a cast of his net without getting a plentiful draught; he never shot an arrow from his bow that it was not sure to hit; in short, whatever they took in hand, were it ever so trifling, evidently prospered.

When Christmas came, they cleaned up the house in the best manner, set everything in order, kindled a fire on the hearth, and as the twilight approached they went up to the loft, where they remained quite still and quiet. At length it grew dark; they thought they heard a sound of whizzing and snorting in the air, such as the swans used to make in the winter time. There was a hole in the roof over the fireplace, which might be opened and shut either to let in the light from above, or to afford a free passage for the smoke. Orm lifted up the lid, which was covered with a skin, and put out his head. But what a wonderful sight then presented itself to his eyes! The little islands around were all lit up with countless blue lights, which moved about without ceasing, jumped up and down, then skipped to the shore, assembled together, and came nearer and nearer to the large island where Orm and Aslog lived. At last they reached it, and arranged themselves in a circle around a large stone not far from the shore, and which Orm well knew. But what was his surprise when he saw that the stone had now completely assumed the form of a man, though a monstrous and gigantic one! He could clearly perceive that the little blue lights were borne by Dwarfs whose pale clay-coloured faces, with their huge noses and red eyes, disfigured too by birds' bills and owls' eyes, were supported by misshapen bodies, and they tottered and wobbled about here and there, so that they seemed to be at the same time merry and in pain. Suddenly, the circle

opened; the little ones retired on each side, and Guru—who was the woman Guru, whom Orm recognised immediately, though she had risen in stature and size so as to be almost as gigantic as the stone man—advanced towards it. She threw both her arms round the image, which immediately seemed to receive life and motion. Then the Dwarfs, with wonderful capers and grimaces, began a song, or, to speak more properly, a howl, with which the whole island resounded and almost trembled at the noise. Orm, quite terrified, drew in his head, and he and Aslog remained in the dark, so still that they hardly ventured to draw their breath.

The procession moved on towards the house, as might be clearly perceived by the nearer approach of the shouting and crying. They were now all come in, light and active; the Dwarfs were heard jumping about on the benches, and heavy and loud sounded at intervals the steps of the giants. Orm and his wife listened to the clattering of the plates, and the shouts of joy with which they celebrated their banquet. When it was over and midnight drew near, they began to dance to that ravishing fairy-tune, which some have heard in the rocky glens, and learned by listening to the underground musicians. As soon as Aslog caught the sound of this air, she felt an irresistible longing to see the dance. Nor was Orm able to keep her back. “Let me look,” said she, “or my heart will burst.” She took her child and placed herself at the extreme end of the loft, whence, without being observed, she could see all that passed. Long did she gaze, without taking off her eyes for an instant, on the dance—on the bold and wonderful springs of the little creatures, who seemed to float in the air, and not so much as to touch the ground, while the ravishing melody of the Elves filled her whole soul. The child, meanwhile, which lay in her arms grew sleepy and drew its breath heavily, and, without ever thinking on the promise she had given the old woman, she made, as is usual, the sign of the cross over the mouth of the child, and said, “Christ bless you, my babe!”

The instant she had spoken the word there was raised a horrible, piercing cry. The Dwarfs tumbled head over heels out at the door with terrible crushing and crowding, their lights went out, and in a few minutes the whole house was clear of them and left desolate. Orm and Aslog, frightened to death, hid themselves in the most retired nook they could find. They did not venture to stir till daybreak, and not till the sun shone through the hole in the roof down on the fireplace did they feel courage enough to descend from the loft.

The table remained still covered as the underground people had left it; all their vessels, which were of silver, and manufactured in the most beautiful manner, lay upon it. In the middle of the room, there stood upon the ground a huge copper kettle half full of sweet mead, and by the side of it a drinking-horn of pure gold. In the corner rested, against the wall, a stringed instrument, not unlike a dulcimer, which, as people believe, the Giantesses used to play on. They gazed on what was before them, full of admiration, but without venturing to lay their hands on anything; how great and fearful was their amazement, when, on turning about, they saw sitting at the table an immense figure, which Orm instantly recognised as the Giant whom Guru had animated by her embrace. He was now a cold and hard stone. While they were standing gazing on it, Guru herself entered the room in her giant form. She wept so bitterly, that her tears trickled down on the ground. It was long ere her sobbing permitted her to utter a single word; at last she spoke:—

“Great affliction have you brought on me, and henceforth I must weep while I live; yet as I know that you have not done this with evil intentions, I forgive you, though it were a trifle for me to crush the whole house like an egg-shell over your heads.”

“What have we done?” cried Orm and Aslog, penetrated with the deepest sorrow.

“Alas!” answered she, “my husband, whom I love more than myself, there he sits, petrified for ever; never again will he open his eyes! Three hundred years lived I with my father on the island of Kunnan, happy in the innocence of youth, as the fairest among the Giant-maidens. Mighty heroes sued for my hand; the sea around that island is still filled with the rocky fragments which they hurled against each other in their combats. Andfind won the victory, and I plighted myself to him. But ere I was married came the detestable Odin into the country, who overcame my father, and drove us all from the island. My father and sisters fled to the mountains, and since that time my eyes have beheld them no more. Andfind and I saved ourselves on this island, where we for a long time lived in peace and quiet, and thought it would never be interrupted. But destiny which no one escapes, had determined it otherwise. Oluf came from Britain. They called him the Holy, and Andfind instantly found that his voyage would be inauspicious to the Giants. When he heard how Oluf’s ship rushed through the waves, he went down to the strand and blew the sea against him with all his strength. The waves swelled up like mountains. But Oluf was still more mighty than he; his ship flew unchecked through the billows like an arrow from a bow. He steered direct for our island. When the ship was so near that Andfind thought he could reach it with his hands, he grasped at the forepart with his right hand, and was about to drag it down to the bottom, as he had often done with other ships. But Oluf, the terrible Oluf, stepped forward, and crossing his hands over each other, he cried with a loud voice, “Stand there as a stone till the last day,” and in the same instant my unhappy husband became a mass of rock. The ship sailed on unimpeded, and ran direct against the mountain, which it cut through, and separated from it the little island which lies out yonder.

“Ever have I passed my life alone and forlorn. On Yule-eve alone can petrified Giants receive back their life for the space of seven hours, if one of their race embraces them, and is at the same time willing to sacrifice a hundred years. I loved my husband too well not to bring him back to life every time that I could do it, even at this price, and I have not even counted how often I have done it, that I might not know the hour when I myself should share his fate, and at the moment when I threw my arms around him become stone like him. But, alas! even this comfort is taken from me; I can never more by any embrace awake him. He has heard the Name which I dare not utter, and never again will he see the light until the dawn of the last day shall bring it.

“I now go hence, and you will behold me no more. All that is here in the house I give you; my dulcimer alone will I keep. But let no one venture to fix his habitation on the small islands that lie around here. There dwell the little underground people whom you saw at the festival, and I will protect them as long as I live!”

With these words Guru vanished. The next spring Orm took the golden horn and the silverware to Drontheim, where no one knew him. The value of these precious metals was so great that he was able to purchase everything requisite for a wealthy man. He laded his

ship with his purchases, and returned back to the island, where he spent many years in unalloyed happiness, and Aslog's father was soon reconciled to his wealthy son-in-law.

The huge image remained sitting in the house; no human power was able to move it. So hard was the stone, that hammer and axe flew in pieces without making the slightest impression upon it. The giant sat there till a holy man came to the island, who with one single word removed him back to his former station, where he stands to this hour. The copper kettle, which the underground people left behind them, was preserved as a memorial upon the island, which bears the name of House Island to the present day.

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