

The Troll's Cave

Heimerich and Ida are caught by a troll and taken to its cave to be eaten. Years later, Abelard and Klaus travel to the cave seeking a lost weapon.

Once, there was a boy, Heimerich, who was always mean to his sister, Ida. He would call her horrid names and chase her with their father's longsword all about the house pretending she was a monster to be slain. Ida helped their mother cook dinner each night as it was the only time she could escape her brother's mischief. She had quickly taken to cooking, growing very good for her age and making her mother very proud.

The family lived in a home with a red roof and it stood by a forest which surrounded a tall mountain. The father had built the house years before and, with its red roof, it was the source of much envy from those that lived nearby.

One day the mother told her children - "Go out to the forest and fetch me firewood so that we may be warm throughout the night." The children agreed and put cloaks on, for it was snowing outside. Before they left, their mother warned them not to stray too far in the forest. "Always keep our red roof in your sight or else you will surely wander into the hands of a troll and be eaten."

"A troll, mother says, what an awful beast. I bet father would be proud if I brought him its head." Thought Heimerich and he took up his father's longsword.

The children agreed not to walk far and left the house. Winter had spread her white shawl over the land and the trees were icy and bare. At the edge of the forest the pair looked about. The red roof of their house was clear to see and their footprints left a path behind them in the snow.

Ida was a good daughter and always listened to her mother but Heimerich was foolish and head-strong and so thought to ignore her warning.

"The best sticks will be with the biggest trees, deep in the forest. We should go in and take them." Said Heimerich and he swung their father's longsword at a tree. "I need to find this hideous troll and cut off its head." He thought.

But Ida refused to disobey their mother and so they collected wood there at the edge of the forest and went back to their mother who thanked them.

"Go out into the forest and fetch me herbs so that I may cook a wonderful dinner." She said, "Always keep our red roof in your sight or else you will surely wander into the hands of a troll and be eaten."

Out they went again into the cold, cloaks wrapped tight about them, Heimerich holding his father's longsword.

"The best herbs will grow deep in the forest. We should go in and pick them." Said Heimerich.

“I told you before and I’ll tell you again, I am not going into that forest as mother forbade it.”
Replied Ida.

“You must not care about cooking. For if you did, you would collect the best herbs.” Goaded Heimerich. “Our mother did not say to stay out of the forest, but to keep the red roof of our house in sight.”

Ida was unsure and looked about for herbs where they stood . Heimerich schemed and looked about for himself. He picked up a handful of dead leaves from the ground and shouted “I’ve found the herbs that we seek!” before throwing the leaves in Ida’s face. This upset Ida greatly and, as she could find no herbs, she relented.

“Fine, we may go into the trees a little. But, we must keep our house with the red roof in sight just as mother said.” And they went a short way into the forest. She looked back often and made sure the red roof could be seen through the branches.

“This is far enough.” Said Ida. “Any further and I will not see the red roof.”

“You are small. I can see the red roof just fine from up here. Follow my lead and we shan't get lost.” Said Heimerich. So Ida followed him far into the trees, so far that they came to the foot of the mountain. Here it was dark, for the mountain cast a shadow over them.

“Surely you cannot see our red roof from here?” Asked Ida.

“I can see the red roof plain as day.” Lied Heimerich, looking back. “Come, the best herbs will grow over here.” He led her to a cave mouth. “Surely this is the home of the troll I hunt.” Thought Heimerich. He was right and, just then, the troll rose up out of the ground and seized the children. It held them in its great hands, at the end of arms as thick as trees, and held them up high. With its coal eyes it looked at them and said -

“Who are you that walks by my cave?

Two small children, foolish or brave?”

Heimerich swung his father’s longsword at the troll’s head but struck only air for his short arms lacked the reach he needed. The troll laughed to see the boy try, then it took the children deep into its mountain lair. The cave was carpeted with bones of dead men and animals that crunched under the troll’s steps and a stink hung on the dark air. It sat down at a huge stone table and there was a sound like thunder all about them as its stomach rumbled.

“My belly is empty, it’s time to eat.

I’ll start with your head and end with your feet.”

With that, it turned Ida upside down and dangled her over its gnashing teeth.

“You’re eating us wrong!” Cried Ida. “We would taste ever so better if you cooked us first. You aren’t supposed to eat raw meat, it’s no good.” The troll paused and curled its lip at Ida in clear displeasure.

“I’ll gobble you raw for I cannot cook.
I would like to learn but I haven’t a book.”

And it started lowering her again towards its gaping maw.

“You don’t need a book! My mother taught me all that she knows, and I can teach you. Please, put us down!” Again the troll paused, then it nodded its head. It put the children down gently and clapped its hands with glee. Heimerich fled to a corner of the cave where he cowered and wept, gripping his father’s longsword tightly. Ida dusted off her clothes.

“I shall collect firewood and herbs. In the meantime you must wash your hands.” While she prepared, the troll stomped to a pool outside the cave and wrung its paws well under the water. With the wood she gathered, Ida built a fire at the mouth of the cave big enough to cook a troll’s dinner. When it returned from the pool, the troll bent down to speak with the little girl.

“Come now Ida, what’s for my dinner?
Quickly now, before I get any thinner.”

Ida looked around. Her eyes fell upon Heimerich and she remembered all the times that he had chased her and teased her and hit her and her face still smarted from the leaves he had thrown at her. She said -

“We’ll make a hog roast fit for my mother,
But instead of a pig, we’ll cook my fat brother.”

Heimerich blanched and started to protest, he swung the longsword about and called Ida every name under the sun. The troll took his longsword and, with it, skewered him fast, putting an end to his insults once and for all.

The little girl showed the troll how to prepare the meat with herbs before turning it slowly over the fire until golden all over. The smoky smell filled the cave. The troll did as it was told and found that it liked cooking very much. She taught it the names of all the herbs and their smells. The troll listened carefully to the lessons and laughed as it learnt, it was much like Ida in its joy for cooking.

When the time came to eat, Ida said grace and it swallowed the meal whole.

“That tasted much better than anything raw,
But it was only a morsel, I want to eat more.”

With its coal eyes the troll looked at Ida and fingered the longsword which lay on the table and she knew it would soon eat her too. She came up with a clever trick to allow her escape, saying -

“Oh troll, that course was only to start,
Next we will make a delicious stone tart.”

She instructed the troll to take the largest boulder in the room, sprinkle it with herbs just as they had done for the previous dish, and set it to cook over the fire. Then she said “Eat up!” and the troll swallowed it whole.

The little girl laughed and explained her ruse before skipping out of the cave back into the snow. The troll tried to stand but the weight of the stone held it fast to the seat. More and more it struggled but it could not move an inch. It sat defeated and streams of tears streaked the hideous face.

“I should’a saw through the little girl’s lie.
“Now I’m condemned to wither and die.”

Ida walked through the forest trying to find home, but the footprints she had left earlier had been hidden by fresh snow and, without being able to see the red roof, she was soon lost amongst the trees. After walking and walking and walking some more, she sat down on a stump to rest. A raven had been watching her progress from the branches above and it now flew down and landed at her feet

“Where are you going little girl? You’re walking in circles all through the woods.” It cawed.

“I’m trying to find my way home. Will you take me to my house with the red roof?” She asked.

The raven agreed and she took hold of the wingtip of the raven and together they flew from the forest.

“How happy I am to see my red roof.” Thought Ida as she saw her home.

Her mother had prepared a most wonderful meal, and the last portion was fed to the raven as thanks for its help.

One hundred years later, Ida told her grandsons Abelard and Klaus the tale of the troll. The boys often fought, but they shared a love of adventure and the mention of their great-grandfather’s longsword excited them both greatly. Klaus said to his brother “We should find that old cave, and take back the sword which was lost long ago.” Abelard agreed. They packed supplies that would last two days and tools to hunt if they needed to. Drawing their capes around them, they set out together with hearts set in shared ambition.

The family still lived in the house with the red roof and in the years since Ida was young, the forest had grown to surround the house. The boys had grown up playing amongst the trees and so had no fear of exploring the forest.

A river now flowed from the cave, through the forest, and all the way down to the coast. When the brothers came across the river, Klaus suggested they build a boat. They collected wood from the trees around them and the planks were as red as the roof of their home.

Abelard was the younger boy and he coveted his brother’s belongings; he would take things from Klaus, which was often the cause of their fighting. When Ida would bake them gingersnaps, Abelard would rather eat those given to Klaus. And so it was that, while constructing the boat, Klaus accused his brother: "You have stolen my twine. I twisted it myself and know that this is not my twine." Abelard bristled and denied ever taking it, but refused to show the twine with which he was working. Klaus turned a blind eye but knew his brother had filched it from him. “Why must he always take what isn’t his?” Klaus thought.

When the red boat was built, Abelard proclaimed “This is *my* red boat and with it we shall sail to the cave.” He hopped onboard and stood proudly at the bow.

On the red boat they journeyed upriver until they were in the shadow of the mountain. So close to success, they embraced and spoke gayly of all that they would do with a sword: the lands they would travel, the foes they would vanquish. It was again as though they had never bickered or fought but were the closest of friends.

From the boat, the brothers used their slings to launch rocks at birds in the branches above. All these they missed, but they laughed as the birds left their perches and darted away through the forest. The *thwack* of stones hitting wood preceded them upriver.

At last, they came to the cave. Inside, they found the source of the river was the troll's skull. The skeleton still sat at the stone table even after one hundred years had passed. The water poured from its eyes, through the great ribs, over the boulder, and into a lake below. Above the water, the table was raised and at its edge the pommel of the sword glinted. The brothers sailed the red boat close to the table in order to reach it.

“With this sword, I'll head out to earn my fortune. Tales will be sung of me throughout the kingdom.” Said Abelard. Klaus thought of the selfishness of his brother, and of his stolen twine, and he decided to prevent Abelard from taking the sword for himself. As the younger boy reached for the pommel, leaning over the water, Klaus pushed him into the black lake and there he drowned. Klaus took the longsword for himself; he tested its weight and it suited him very well. He said -

“Of Abelard, no tales will be told,
Sleeping forever in waters cold.”

Klaus sailed from the cave and, in the following years, he became most famous across the land.

In the roots of the mountain, the bones of the troll still weep. It is said that if you pass by that place, even now, its spirit can be heard.

“Hark, small children - be kind to each other,
Or else you'll fall foul of your sister or brother.
Your sins will push you here to this cave,
To keep me company in my terrible grave.”