

Tovelil's Ring

© 2013, Lotte & Søren Hammer

A fairy-tale thriller inspired by the Danish writer Ebbe Kløvedal Reich, whose trilogy of the history of Denmark deserves a warm recommendation if you are looking for a good read.

Once, long ago, in Hundested, all the way out on the tip of the nose of Zealand, a woodland troll came strolling by. Spring was here and the woods were more magnificent than ever, with supple buds about to bloom. Here and there, little light-green frontrunners were even peeking out, unable to stand the wait. They had grown before the others, and now they were gingerly looking out at a world where everything was trickling and babbling, creeping and crawling, living and laughing, because the sun was high in the sky, spreading its warmth upon all.

It was a time of unrest and upheaval. Many things were changing, the entire world as the woodland troll knew it was shifting. The olden times were coming to an end, everything was standing right on the brink of something entirely new. Creatures who had previously reigned supreme were disappearing. The last of the great dragons had flown away. It had been centuries since anyone had seen one. Why, even the smallest dragons, those barely equipped to light a pipe, had been gone for ages. But the nixes, the elves, the fairies, the sylphs, the strange people of the mountains, and many, many more were too on the wane. Even the eldertrolls whose footfalls used to echo for miles through the landscape had crawled underground. Only the woodland trolls were still here, and a small number of pixies. They lived on the farms and threw poxes on the farmer's cattle if they didn't like the food they were served. And then there was man. Man was gaining ground; the era that was dawning belonged to man.

But all of this was unknown to the woodland troll. It happily walked through the woods of spring, and to the birds that looked down at it, it gave off an impression of being full of pride at being what it was: a woodland troll. It could hardly believe its luck! Standing three feet tall, it was so small that it could easily seek cover from the rain under a fern. Its body was hairy, especially its legs, its tail was strong and always held in the air. It was, in all aspects, exactly what a woodland troll should be, a perfect specimen. It had been born long ago in another forest, to a litter where not everyone had been named. So when it got its own woods to roam through, it had named itself Troll. It felt that it was a good, natural name.

Troll picked up the pace even though it was not heading anywhere in particular. Spring just made it feel so wonderfully restless, as if it were looking for something without knowing what it was. Sometimes, it even ran. Why not? It was its own master, after all.

And then, just like that, abracadabra, it stood face to face with another woodland troll. It was a she, and Troll suddenly knew that he was a he, and all was well. Trollette was her name, and what a name. Troll was just thinking how she was probably feeling as insecure as he was, when Trollette looked him over, shrugged at the thought that he was probably as good as any other troll, and said:

- Your cave or mine?

And then, without pausing, she added:

- You don't have to worry about the whole gold thing; we'll just skip that part.

The last time she had met a male troll, he had gone to find gold for her and never come back. Maybe he had died, maybe he had – which was insufferable to think about – met another troll girl. She would not risk that happening again. She was not the youngest troll anymore, she would have to admit, and she did have certain needs that would have to be met, but she could do just fine without gold. What would she want with that anyway?

But Troll did not agree. The ancient ways of the woodland trolls had from the dawn of time dictated that the male troll had to give something made out of gold to the female troll. Size was not important, but it had to be gold. And not until then was it appropriate to live together in the same cave. It was the key to a happy life together and the arrival of healthy little trolls. The tradition was passed on from mother to son in grave earnestness through a special song. Troll still remembered the sound of his mother's deep voice booming through his childhood cave. Right before he was kicked out to live on his own, she had sternly sung it to him and his brothers: *No gold, no baby trolls, Gold is joy, remember that, my boy*. These were profound truths not to be taken lightly by any woodland troll. That was why he took off at once. He promised to be back within a year or three, and then he set out to find gold. Meanwhile, Trollette tried to hold him back until she had to give up and let him go. *Oh no, not again*, she moaned, as she turned around and went back to her cave.

Troll went to find the king and the queen. That was the only idea he could think of. Here, he would offer them his services in exchange for gold. An excellent plan, he thought, as he left Hundested and tried to find the royal castle that was located close to Roskilde. He

concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other, which made the road ahead feel a little less long.

Once at the castle, he went straight to the queen's chambers. He jumped up on a table and introduced himself:

- My name is Troll, I am a ...

He got no further before the queen interrupted him: *Yes, that part I believe I've figured out for myself, thank you. Why have you come?*

Troll told her all about his Trollette and the ancient ways of the trolls. He had to earn some gold, a ring, a brooch, a coin, it made no difference as long as it was made out of gold. And then he had thought of the royal castle ...

Once again, the queen interrupted him. This was something that came quite naturally to her.

- *The palace*, don't ever say the castle; please remember that.

Troll nodded, *the palace*, always *the palace*; that was fine by him. And queen Sofie – that was her name – went on:

- Recently, the king was on a raid to the land of the Wends. He went for the honour and the glory, and to kill Wends and chop up gods: Svantevit, Rygievit, Porevit, all kinds of vits whose names I don't remember. And there, in that strange country, he heard that real kings don't live in castles, they live in palaces. So now, the castle is called *the palace* – If you'd like to keep that pretty little troll head on your shoulders, at least. But look out into the courtyard out there. Tell me what you see.

Troll looked outside just as a young woman passed by. Troll was unsure of what the queen wanted him to see, so he carefully said:

- I see a buxom girl, a maiden that takes joy in her food, and she's got very healthy teeth.

The queen who was as thin as a wilted twig gnarled:

- Maiden!? Oh please, silly troll. But what you said about food is right, she eats for ten. Her name is Tovelil, and ever since she came to town the king is changed. She fannies about all chaste in the daytime. I don't know who would ever believe that act of hers, because everybody knows that she is with him every night. And ever since their first night together, she has been sucking up to him, calling him Valdemar the Great, and that much I can tell

you, troll, that's a lie! But that sort of thing gets you far with men, and now he has promised her that she will become the first concubine in all of Denmark. I don't know where he gets it from, nobody knows what that word means, but the girl is beside herself with joy. I'm worried that he will breed with her.

Troll wondered if he should perhaps have offered his services to Tovelil instead. There might be more future in her, but he didn't say anything. Instead, he straightened his back and sucked in his belly to show her what a fine troll he was. The queen looked him over, raised an eyebrow and said:

- What are you even good for, troll?

That was a question that Troll hadn't thought about. He was good at being a woodland troll, and that was it, but shouldn't that be more than enough?

- Can you turn invisible?

Troll shook his head.

- No, can you?

- Well, then you'll just have to see to it that she doesn't notice you. But you're quite small, so maybe it won't be a problem, said the queen. Then she whispered in his ear what she wanted him to do.

Troll didn't know what to think. The queen's proposal seemed very ... ultimate, and dangerous at that. *What if king Valdemar ...* he started asking, but the queen interrupted him:

- Easy there, little troll, easy. Think of all the gold I'll give you, and think of how you can snuggle up to Trollette once you're back home. You can make cute little troll babies all night long, and all winter too.

That made sense, and work was work, so Troll finally said yes to the queen's proposal. She said:

- Remember, Troll: lots of firewood, better too much than too little. And now, go find yourself a nook somewhere to sleep in. You have an early day tomorrow.

The next morning, when nobody was yet awake, Troll went to hide behind the bathhouse. He waited for Tovelil to come and watched her in all her buxomness as she stepped out of her clothes, went inside the bathhouse, and closed the door behind her. *Oh my, the king has his hands full*, Troll thought, before he found himself a thick branch that he used to lock the bathhouse door shut with. Then he went to get a big pile of beech tree

logs. He put them all in the bathhouse oven that was operated from outside. Then he ran up to queen Sofie's room to tell her of his deed and ask for his reward.

She found it hard to give gold away, so she went to get Tovelil's jewellery box. *She won't need this anymore anyways.* And though finding it hard to part with even that, she got out the crudest ring she could find and gave it to Troll.

But no sooner had Troll taken the ring than a horrible piercing shriek rang throughout the town. It was completely unbearable to listen to. It was the king. He had found Tovelil, and now he was bellowing out his anger and chock with a force that made the timber frame of the castle tremble and the thatching fall of the roof, palace or no palace. And Troll thought that now might be as good a time as any to head back to Hundested. He ran as fast as his stumpy little legs would carry him until he finally made it in to the woods where he felt safe.

The way home was even easier than the way out. Troll trotted along in the best of moods, happy about himself and his life: He had a wonderful ring and a beautiful troll girl to come home to. The sun was shining, he felt its warmth on his fur, and he released all the joy he had inside of him in a homemade rhyme about the unfortunate Tovelil. He sang it so loud that it made the birds leave their nests, and the mice seek their holes.

Randy was the King when you came to Town
You made him Sing when you dropped your Gown
And he loved you
White were your teeth, you were fatter than most,
But inside the bathhouse you looked like Sunday Roast,
When he found you.

That was a fine rhyme, thought Troll, a classic woodland troll rhyme. He sang it again and again, this time in a daring version, replacing teeth with cheeks, now that no one was listening.

Back in Hundested, in Trollette's cave, he presented her with the ring and told her all about the king and the queen and Tovelil. He especially emphasised how brave he had been and how much he had risked his life when he blocked the door and over-heated the bathhouse, tuning it into an oven. And then he added:

- I've even made a rhyme.

- Grave robber, low-down thieving troll, killer of concubines!

Trollette was distraught, and Troll decided to save his rhyme for a year or a century, until the timing was better. But it would make no difference. Showing all signs of contempt, Trollette threw her ring as far away as she could. She would have nothing to do with a stolen ring, just as she would have nothing to do with Troll. Then she let out a scream that was full of rage, turned her back on Troll and went back into her cave. Immediately after, she blocked off its opening with a big rock.

Troll would simply have to go his own, sad way, while the thought of long winter nights together in the warmth of the cave, and a big litter of healthy baby trolls closed itself around him like an unobtainable fantasy. He felt horrible. Once at home in his own lonely cave, he went out and found a young oak. He dug a hole under its roots and buried Tovelil's ring. Gone and covered in dirt, that blasted ring.

And then he spent a year trying to forget where he had hid it. After that, he spent a year forgetting that he had forgotten, and then he didn't know anything. Meanwhile, he never became that same happy troll again. Since then, king Valdemar and queen Sofie have slipped into history while their bodies turned to dust, and one day, Troll didn't come out of his cave. And even later, the forest changed. It fell under municipal jurisdiction and was straightened out, thinned out, and hollowed out; it had to be natural for people to use it. But the ring was still there, buried deep under ground, now underneath a rotten, wilted stump of a tree.

But nothing is hidden forever, to that end time is too long and fate too patient. And one day, a young man with the senses of a raven comes walking by and finds the ring as is fitting to his nature. And can he resist the temptation of giving it to his girlfriend, he should seek out the place called Kimmer Hegn close to Roskilde, and the isthmus that cuts its way through the cove. Here, when the wind is right, he will still be able to hear the roar of king Valdemar as it dances with the laughter of queen Sofie, and here he will find a small stone circle. Here, he should place the ring of Tovelil under the bottom stone, the stone whose one side is still charred black from many centuries ago when it was part of a bathhouse wall ... And then – and only then – will he have a long and happy life.