

Through the Golden Forest

by

Leif Wårenskjold

Translated by Ted Warren

On my fireplace is a glazed clay pot. In the pot is a withering, ochre golden leaf. A branch, black as soot, casts a Chinese symbol shadow against the red firewall and the braided-iron, shaped in stone gray leaves. The leaves fold together, pale and dull. When the door is open, light from the hall falls between the leaves, and they shine like lights in a fog, a distant reflection of light in the golden forest.

Askeladden (the ash lad) rode a blue ox through a copper forest, a silver forest and a golden forest. We drove a gray car.

The reader may protest: it was Kari Trestakk who rode the blue ox, not Askeladden. That may be true, or almost true. But who is Kari Trestakk and who is Askeladden? Can you interchange them? Would that not cause confusion in the folk-tales?

Our well-fashioned fairy tale images come from Asbjørnsen and Moe, the great storytellers who have created pictures of the figures that follow the Norwegian people through history. We can find no better in world literature. But that does not mean that all of the mystical figures in fairy tales, sagas and legends represent are described. Asbjørnsen and Moe would be the first to protest their fairy tale figures becoming static in time.

Pictures rise to life, light up and fade away. Askeladden is one such picture, known throughout history among all people. In the Norwegian fairy tales, we see one side of him—the Norwegian side! But even this side has unlimited facets. From storyteller to storyteller, from village to village, the fairy tales change form.

Asbjørnsen and Moe set themselves the task of collecting the many facets into a picture. As with all pictures, Askeladden finds himself in a process between rigid and dissolving, between the cold pole and the warm pole. Every artist stands in those processes: to enliven without dissolving, to form without becoming rigid. In pictures, what appears is that which is always moving between energy and form. Only the great artists can recognize the moment of attendance and hold the picture, suspended between life and tradition. And Asbjørnsen and Moe were great artists.

From his summer journeys in Ullensvang in 1846, Jørgen Moe tells us of the storyteller, Blind-Anne:

... under the hanging birch tree's agile, shining-leaved flutter, sat Blind-Anne absorbed in her story, her snow white hair loose under her bonnet. She ran her hands across her forehead; at her feet sat the barefoot, bareheaded, short-sleeved Bjørn whose eyes hung on the old lady's mouth, wanting to snap up the words before they left her lips. Outside, in the sparkling July light, the reflection of the steep walls of the south fjord's green mirror sparkled upon the water; and the lightly rippling sunrays played, glistened and shone in thousands of reflections towards the fjord's distance that closes into looming, gigantic crevices.

Jørgen Moe had Blind-Anne's trust. He shared her respect for tradition in storytelling. In every fairy tale he saw an artistic whole that would unfold in his own writing style. Like all parents who tell the fairy tales, he had certainly experienced the children's demand for a true version of the original, and their intolerance of the free poetry from adults: "Now you fell out of the fairy tale, Mother!" But there are many more storytellers than Asbjørnsen and Moe. So when our images of the fairy tale figures become fixed, it can be helpful to work with other sources. The stories about Askeladden are such an opportunity

Who is Askeladden? He has many names: the ash lad, ash-dust, little boy, little worker, Hans, the youngest son of the king, the widow's son. He is even called Cinderella. Even the gender can change; mythology and its folksy expression, the fairy tale: "Cinder-ella, as they called him, because he constantly lay in and dug the ashes." These names are enough to suggest the danger of "dissolving" if we relate merely to the accessories and not the representation.

Askeladden's helpers also have no fixed pattern. A variety of people, animals and things weave into his stories. He travels through the countryside and various kingdoms on a horse, mule, bear, wolf or ox: "Look in my left eye, you, it is dull," said the ox. "But we dare not be here tonight; get on my back so we can leave. Do not worry about food," said the ox. They took off.

The storyteller from Telemark, Olav Tjoenstaul, remarks that Askeladden rides on an ox. This boy has only one brother, not two, as Espen Askeladden usually has. He experiences something that breaks every picture scheme: the ox transforms into a colorful virgin! Researchers of fairy tales face the same

challenges as any other researchers: The deeper you dig the more complicated it becomes. Who is Askeladden, either dressed in rags or a clown outfit? What does he do? Either he gives his crumbs to a poor woman or he picks up worn out shoe soles or chops off the heads of trolls.

Askeladden is the human being. The lonesome, unknown, and boundless human being. He leaves the pile of ashes and sets out into the world. He does not make haste like Per and Pål. He sees birds under the sky, flowers along the way and an old lady in a ditch. “I am curious about what is happening, what is chopping up on the hill,” he says. “What are you lying here and running after?” he asks the creek that falls out of the cave. Askeladden is interested in looking closer, and he takes the time to ask questions. He picks up what the others leave behind, not only in fairy tales but in his daily life as well.

Once a boy was with his mother and father in a restaurant, eating Sunday dinner. After dessert, he picked up a paper napkin and two burned-out matches. “What are you going to do with that?” his mother asked.

“I am just going to keep them,” replied the boy.

While the family was taking the streetcar home, something happened. A young man wanted to pay for himself and his lady, but when he stuck out his hand to give the money, a twenty-five cent piece fell to the floor and settled in a groove where the conductor could not pick it up. The lady said it was the conductor’s fault and they exchanged angry words. The passengers woke up and listened. Meanwhile the boy rolled up the napkin he had put in his pocket, took out the matchsticks, pushed the coin forward along groove until it rolled out, and handed the money to the conductor.

“Here you are,” said the boy.

Askeladden does not stress out. He does not travel in order to get there. He travels in order to travel. With a good heart he shares the little he has with those who have nothing. He does not carry a heavier load than the future expects of him. He sails across the sea, rides through forests, fights with dragons, trolls and the Red Knight. Because he helps others he is also helped. Because he thinks clearly before he acts, he hits his target. The poor receive powerful helpers. He conquers fear, temptations and enemies. He wins the princess and half the kingdom. He is the Ash Lad from the worker’s farmhouse. But he is also the knight Parsifal, whose name means “he who rides through the forests!” Parsifal fights against the Red Knight. He wanders through the dense forests, finds his helpers, fights against injustice, and wins in the end.

The many fairy tales are like streams and rivers that run through various landscapes. They take on the form and the taste of the landscape through which they flow. But they all carry water from the same source, from the abundance

in heaven. Through hundreds and hundreds of years fairy tales have spread a sparkling net through human souls that would have dried out had they not been sprinkled by these life-giving streams. Fairy tales are variations on a single theme: Humanity's path through trials and transformation. Askeladden is Norway's variation of the theme: the free, searching human being.

Here our reflections are interrupted. Our car swings into the Gausdal Valley over a bridge and down a road that clings to the cliff above a river. The mountainside has received its first evening tones—a cold glaze over red patches. The birch trees along the road display aged leaves. The farms become smaller, the slopes steeper. We climb steadily but carefully to the sky. The motor strains. A brook falls right from the side of the road. Rock and crags reduce our view. Yet we climb. Further up the trees thin out. With a surge we reach the top and drive out on the plateau. The birch trees give way to crab apples trees with white trunks and black spots. Colors spread out upon the plateau and flow into each other like wet aquarelles. We stop at the highest point, 3095 feet above sea level. The air is clear and cold, an icy breeze coming from the west. The horizon is cloudless. The Jötunheim Range reaches its peaks at Glittertind and Galhopiggen, while blue mountains bulge out to the sides, clear and close above the plateau.

The sun stands low. We drive right into it. The road sinks down between green, gray ridges and swings into the sun again. In narrow plunges the car dances forward to a sea of trolled trees, mountain birch dressed in coal black trunks of rude shapes. The sunburned leaves are in gold. We are surrounded by an enflamed landscape. The light of summer has ignited it. The leaves are blooming.

Mile after mile the golden forest stretches across the mountain. It sparks and lightning flashes with supersensible light. We enjoy every new swing in the road and new sights. The colors are pushed to their limits, a sea of gold with light waves against violet mountains. We stop and break a branch off the nearest tree. Soon the gold turns more ochre. The splendor runs out.

On my fireplace is a glazed clay pot. In the pot is a branch of mountain birch. Yet somewhere stands a flaming, golden forest, waiting for Askeladden to ride through on a blue ox.

1. See George Webbe Dasant's edition of Asbjørnsen and Moe, *East of the Sun, West of the Moon, Old Tales from the North*, New York: Dover, 1970, ISBN 486-22521-6. Also available from Kessinger Publisher, ISBN 978-141904358, Amazon.com., 2005.

Asbjørnsen and Moe met at school when they were 13 or 14 years old, and became very good friends. They shared a common interest in fairytales, songs and legends. Asbjørnsen made up his mind to collect as many folktales as possible, and the two young gentlemen decided to work together on this project. While visiting different villages in Norway, they wrote down everything they were told and worked with the material until they were satisfied. It was difficult to retell the stories in written form, as they were all spoken in various Norwegian dialects, but Danish was the only written language in Norway at the time. Since Asbjørnsen and Moe wanted to remain true to their sources, we find a lot of dialect expressions in their books. They published their first collection of folk tales in 1852. Asbjørnsen was also a teacher and Moe was a clergyman.