

# **The Elves**

Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm

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### First Tale

A shoemaker, through no fault of his own, had become so poor that he had only leather enough for a single pair of shoes. He cut them out one evening, then went to bed, intending to finish them the next morning. Having a clear conscience, he went to bed peacefully, commended himself to God, and fell asleep. The next morning, after saying his prayers, he was about to return to his work when he found the shoes on his workbench, completely finished. Amazed, he did not know what to say. He picked up the shoes in order to examine them more closely. They were so well made that not a single stitch was out of place, just as if they were intended as a masterpiece. A customer soon came by, and he liked the shoes so much that he paid more than the usual price for them.

The shoemaker now had enough money to buy leather for two pairs of shoes. That evening he cut them out, intending to continue his work the next morning with good cheer. But he did not need to do so, because when he got up they were already finished. Customers soon bought them, paying him enough that he now could buy leather for four pairs of shoes. Early the next morning he found the four pairs finished. And so it continued; whatever he cut out in the evening was always finished the following morning. He now had a respectable income and with time became a wealthy man.

One evening shortly before Christmas, just before going to bed, and having already cut out a number of shoes, he said to his wife, "Why don't we stay up tonight and see who is giving us this helping hand."

His wife agreed to this and lit a candle. Then they hid themselves behind some clothes that were hanging in a corner of the room. At midnight two cute little naked men appeared. Sitting down at the workbench, they picked up the cut-out pieces and worked so unbelievable quickly and nimbly that the amazed shoemaker could not take his eyes from them. They did not stop until they had finished everything. They placed the completed shoes on the workbench, then quickly ran away.

The next morning the wife said, "The little men have made us wealthy. We must show them our thanks. They are running around with nothing on, freezing. Do you know what? I want to sew some shirts, jackets, undershirts, and trousers for them, and knit a pair of stockings for each of them, and you should make a pair of shoes for each of them."

The husband said, "I agree," and that evening, when everything was finished, they set the presents out instead of the unfinished work. Then they hid themselves in order to see what the little men would do. At midnight they came skipping up, intending to start work immediately. When they saw the little clothes instead of the cut-out leather, they at first seemed puzzled, but then delighted. They quickly put them on, then stroking the beautiful clothes on their bodies they sang:

Sind wir nicht Knaben glatt und fein?  
Was sollen wir länger Schuster sein!

Are we not boys, neat and fine?  
No longer cobblers shall we be!

Then they hopped and danced about, jumping over chairs and benches. Finally they danced out of the house. They never returned, but the shoemaker prospered, succeeding in everything that he did.

## Second Tale

Once upon a time there was a poor servant girl who was diligent and neat. Every day she swept out the house and shook the sweepings onto a large pile outside the door. One morning just as she was beginning her work she found a letter on the pile of sweepings. She could not read, so she stood her broom in the corner and took the letter to her employers. It was an invitation from the elves, asking the girl to serve as godmother at the baptism of one of their children.

At first the girl did not know what she should do, but finally they convinced her to accept. It would not be right, they said, to decline such an invitation.

Three elves came and led her to a hollow mountain where the little people lived. Everything there was small, but more ornate and splendid than can be described. The new mother was lying in a bed of ebony decorated with pearl buttons. The covers were embroidered with gold. The cradle was made of ivory, and the bathtub of gold. The girl stood in as godmother, and then wanted to go back home, but the elves asked her fervently to stay with them for three days. She agreed to do so, and the time passed pleasantly and joyfully. The little people did everything to make her happy.

Finally she wanted to return home. They filled her pockets with gold and led her outside the mountain. She arrived home. Wanting to begin her work, she picked up the broom that was still standing in the corner and started to sweep. Then some strange people came out of the house and asked her who she was and what she was doing there. It was not three days, as she thought, that she had spent in the mountain with the little men, but rather seven years. In the meantime her former employers had died.

## Third Tale

A mother had her child taken from the cradle by elves. In its place they laid a changeling with a thick head and staring eyes who would do nothing but eat and drink. In distress she went to a neighbor and asked for advice. The neighbor told her to carry the changeling into the kitchen, set it on the hearth, make a fire, and boil water in two eggshells. That should make the changeling laugh, and if he laughs it will be all over with him. The woman did everything just as her neighbor said. When she placed the eggshells filled with water over the fire, the blockhead said:

Nun bin ich so alt  
Wie der Westerwald,  
Und hab nicht gesehen,  
Daß jemand in Schalen kocht.

Now I am as old  
As the Wester Wood,  
But have never seen anyone  
Cooking in shells.

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And he began laughing about it. When he laughed, a band of little elves suddenly appeared. They brought the rightful child, set it on the hearth, and took the changeling away.