

GOOD NEIGHBORS

By Bob Barton

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THERE WAS ONCE a woman named Matte and a man named Toller, and they moved into a tumbledown cottage at the mouth of a wild heathland. From that moment on their friends stopped coming to visit.

“There are trolls living out there. Fierce mountain trolls!” they exclaimed. “What are you thinking?”

But trolls didn’t frighten Matte and Toller.

“If you do what is fair and right to all living things, there’s nothing to be afraid of,” they explained.

Nevertheless, their friends stayed away. They were much too terrified.

Matte and Toller worked hard. They hammered, sawed, plastered and painted. They mended the broken windows, fixed the sagging moss-covered roof and replaced doors. In no time the little cottage was cozy and snug.

Now it happened that one evening as Matte and Toller were climbing into bed there was a loud thump, thump, thump on the door.

Toller glanced nervously at Matte. Together they tiptoed to the door and opened it a crack.

Suddenly the door was pushed wide and a little man brushed past the startled couple.

“Good evening,” he cried in a shrill voice.

He wore a red cap on his head. His white beard touched the floor. Tied around his waist was a leather apron that held a hammer, a chisel and tongs.

Matte and Toller knew instantly that he was a troll, but he appeared friendly and good natured and they were not afraid of him.

“Well, I see,” said the little fellow, looking at them with sharp, bright eyes, “that you know well enough who I am.”

“We do!”

“Do you intend to live here?”

“Most certainly.”

“Then let me explain how matters stand,” said the little man. “We are poor mountain trolls whom people have left no other homes on earth save deep caves where the sun can never shine down upon us. Our king fears that you might harm us and he sends me to beg you to let us live in peace.”

“Stars above!” cried Matte. “Toller and I would never harm a fly. The world is plenty big enough for all of us.”

“Excellent! Excellent!” replied the troll. And he nearly jumped out of his skin with joy. “In return,” he promised, “we will do you all the good in our power. Now, good-night.”

As he skipped toward the open doorway, Matte called, “Will you not take a bite of supper?” And she rushed to the stove and spooned porridge into a bowl.

“Thank you, no,” called the troll. “Our king awaits my return. I must deliver this good news immediately.”

And with that the little fellow vanished into the night.

In the weeks and months that followed, Matte and Toller toiled in their fields — clearing rocks, tilling, planting and weeding. From time to time they caught a glimpse of the trolls going in and out of their caves. Always they were careful to do nothing to disturb them.

The trolls soon lost their fear of the couple and went in and out of their cottage as if it were their own. If they borrowed a pot or copper kettle from the kitchen, they always brought it back again and set it on the same spot from which they had taken it.

In return, they repaid Toller and Matte with many kindnesses. Sometimes they would come out of their caves during the night, break stones, gather them from the fields and heap them along the edges. At harvest time they collected fallen ears of corn from the fields and stacked them neatly beside the cottage so that none were lost to the couple.

Each holiday season Toller and Matte set out in front of the caves nice dishes of fine milk porridge.

Time went on and one day Matte gave birth to a baby girl. They named the child Inge. Shortly afterwards Matte became so ill that Toller feared for her life. He went from farm to farm, village to village, henwife to pastureman, alehouse to apothecary seeking advice, but no one knew what to suggest to make her well again.

Night after night Toller stayed up to comfort Matte and look after the baby. One night he was so tired that he fell asleep on his feet. Suddenly he woke with a start. The cottage teemed with trolls. There were trolls scrubbing floors. There were trolls washing dishes. The cottage looked as fresh and as clean as a spring morning. Then Toller noticed a troll rocking Inge and another beside Matte's pillow holding a special herb potion to her lips.

As soon as the trolls discovered that Toller was watching, they cleared out of the cottage like a herd of stampeding sheep. The following morning Matte seemed better. Before many days had passed she was able to leave her bed and take up her work again.

And so it went over many years that Matte, Inge, Toller and the trolls lived in peace and harmony. With each passing year the family's situation grew better. Eventually the little cottage was replaced by a roomier house, the cramped shed by an airy barn and the barren wild heath became a patchwork of copper-colored wheat fields, beds of yellow sunflowers, rows of silk tasseled corn and lush green pastures.

Then one evening as Toller and Matte settled into bed there was a *thump, thump, thump* at the door, and the little troll entered.

Toller and Matte sat up in surprise. He was not in his usual outfit. On his head he wore a shabby woolen cap. A heavy muffler was wrapped around his neck. A sheepskin was draped over his shoulders. His cheeks were stained with tears.

"Greetings to you both," he sniffed. "Our king has requested that you all come with me now to our mountain. It is a matter of great importance."

More tears ran down the side of the man's nose as he said this. Toller and Matte tried to comfort him and learn the reason for his sadness, but the little fellow only wept more and would not tell them about the cause of his grief.

Matte, Toller and Inge followed him outside into the damp mist. They crossed the grazing pastures and tramped through brush and bramble. They entered a narrow valley and stumbled over sharp ragged rocks. Gradually the ground sloped down and they entered the mouth of a soaring granite cave decorated with huge bunches of sweet

willow, cotton grass, crowfoot and other wildflowers that once grew on the heath. At the far end a long table stretched across the width of the cave. It was lit with candles and heaped with wortbread, ham sausage, rye cake, speckled apples and thick wedges of yellow cheese. A horde of trolls crowded around the table with their heads down. Nobody spoke. Nobody moved. The family was squeezed in next to the troll king. Then the trolls began to eat gloomily and there was much sighing, coughing and rubbing of eyes.

Something was terribly wrong.

When the meal was over, the troll king rose to his feet. “Toller, Matte and Inge, I invited you here to express our goodwill and thank you for the kindness you have shown us over the many years we have been neighbors. But now we are forced to flee. This once wild heath has given way to too many new farms and too many people. The smell of bacon frying, the noise of church bells ringing, ringing, ringing, and the barking of dogs is more than we can bear. Once again we must seek new homes in the wild forests to the north. And so we bid you farewell.”

When the troll king had finished speaking, all the trolls came to Matte and Toller and shook hands with them. But when they came to Inge they said, “To you dear Inge we give something to remember us by when we have gone.”

As they said this each took up a stone from the ground and dropped it into the pocket of Inge’s apron. Then one by one they filed out of the cave, each carrying a backpack and clutching a stout walking stick, as their king led the way.

Matte, Inge and Toller followed them outside. They stood squinting their eyes to hold back the tears. Then, feeling more lonely than they had ever felt in their lives, they made their way back across the heath.

When she woke the next morning, Inge remembered the stones in her apron pocket. She emptied them onto her bed. She couldn’t believe her eyes. The stones were all a-dazzle! They shone and sparkled emerald, amethyst, cobalt, jet, sapphire and silver gray.

Inge called out to her mother and father.

“Look,” she said, holding out a handful of stones. They all marveled at the shiny blues, blacks, greens, grays and ambers.

“Oh, Inge,” cried her mother. “Do you know what this is? The trolls have given the colors of their eyes to the stones. That’s what they have left you to remember them by.”

And to this day precious stones sparkle and shine because the mountain trolls gave them the colors of their eyes, so that Inge, Matte and Toller would never forget them.