



Tomten (Gnome)

Midwinter nights the frost is deep,
The stars are glistening and sparkling.
All on the lonely farm are asleep
Move le ss through midnight darkling.
Silent the road where the moon glides bright,
Snow on the boughs is gleaming white,
White on the rooftops gleaming.
All but the Gnome are dreaming.

Grey he appears at the great barn door,
Watches the drifts blow flatter,
Looks, as so many winters before,
Up at the moon's bright platter.
Notes where the spruce trees, shaggy and tall,
Draw round the farm their shadowy wall.
And—though it profit him little—
Ponders a curious riddle.

Combs his fingers through beard and hair
Shakes his head with the hood on:
"That's too much for me, I declare,
That'un I'm just no good on."
Then, as ever when questions irk,
Shrugging it off he sets to work:
Hurries in all directions,
Makes his rounds and inspections.

Goes to the toolshed and dark storehouse,
Tries all the locks and latches.
Huge by their stanchions dream the cows,
Moonlight gilding their patches;
Harness and whip forgotten quite
Prince in the stable dreams all night:
The manger he's drooping over
Seems heaped with sweet-scented clover.

Goes to the fold where lambs and sheep
Drowse in their fleece together,
Proud on his perch the rooster's asleep
In the henhouse, out of the weather.
Tony, bedded in straw, feels fine,
Thumps his tail with a friendly whine.
Part of the watch is Tony's;
He and the Gnome are cronies.

Lastly the Gnome steals in to see
All is well with his neighbours,
Certain of old this family
Honours his nightly labours.
To the nursery then on tiptoe creeps,
Sees how sound each little one sleeps.
Let nobody misconstrue this:
His greatest joy is to do this.

Father and son he has seen them there
Year upon year unending
Slumber as children--come from where?
Generations descending
On generations and swiftly so
Bloom, age, vanish--where did they go?
The riddle that brooks no guesses
Presses again and presses.

Back to his hayloft stumps the Gnome.
High in its fragrance vested
There is his stronghold, there his home,
Near where the swallow nested.
Now her nest is empty and cold,
But when flowers are white and gold
She will return, this swallow,
Calling her mate to follow.

Then she is always eager to chat,
Twitters of all her travels.
But no of the riddle nagging him—that,
Nothing she says unravels.
The brilliant moon through a chink in the wall
Shines on the old chap, beard and all.
Moonbeam on grey beard glistens,
Pondering still, he listens.

Hushed lie forest and farm and all,
Frozen the whole of existence.
Only the voice of the waterfall,
Muffled, speaks from the distance.
The old Gnome listens and, half in dream,
Thinks he hears Time flow by like a stream,
Wonders whatever its course is,
Wonders wherever the source is.

Midwinter nights the frost is deep,
The stars are glistening and sparkling.
All on the lonely farm are asleep
Sound through the small hours darkling.
Silent the road where the moon sinks bright,
Snow on the boughs is gleaming white,
White on the rooftops gleaming.
All but the Gnome are dreaming.

It was written by Viktor Rydberg 1828-1895) and Christmas wouldn't really be Christmas without it in Sweden. It was translated into English for the first time by Judith Moffett. The illustration is by Jenny Nystrom (1854-1946).