

The Tale of Thorstein Staff-Smitten

translated by Eirikr Magnusson and William Morris

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There was a man called Thorarin, who dwelt in Sunnudale, an old man and feeble of sight: he had been a red-hand viking in his younger days, nor was he a man good to deal with though he were old. One son he had, hight Thorstein, a big man, sturdy, but well ruled, who worked in such wise about his father's house that three men else would not have turned out more work. Thorstein was not a wealthy man, but good weapons he had: stud-horses also that father and son owned, that brought them in the most of their money, whereas they would sell away the horse-colts, who were such that they never failed either in bottom or courage.

There was one Thord, a house-carle of Biarni of Hof: he took heed of Biarni's riding-horses, for a horse-learned man he was accounted. Thord was a very unjust man, and would let many a man feel that he was house-carle of a mighty man: yet was he not of better worth therefor, nor better befriended. Two others also abode with Biarni, one named Thorhall, the other Thorvald: great tale-bearers about all that they heard in the country-side.

Now Thorstein and Thord set afoot a horse-fight for the young horses, and when they drove them together Thord's horse was put to the worse: so Thord smote Thorstein's horse on the nose with a great stroke when he saw he was getting the worst of it; which thing Thorstein saw, and smote Thord's horse in return a stroke bigger yet, so that Thord's horse ran away, and men fell a-whooping hugely.

Then Thord smote Thorstein with his horse-staff, and the stroke came on the brow so that the skin fell over the eyes. So Thorstein tore a clout from his shirt and bound up his brow, and made as if nought had happened, and bade men hide this from his father; and so the matter dropped. But Thorhall and Thorvald made a mock of this, and called him Thorstein Staff-smitten.

A little before Yule that winter the women rose up early to their work at Sunnudale, and then stood up Thorstein and bare in hay, and afterward lay down on a bench. Now cometh in old Thorarin, his father, and asked who lay there, and Thorstein told of himself.

"Why art thou so early afoot, son?" said old Thorarin.

Thorstein answered: "There are few to mate with me in the work I win here."

"Art thou not ailing in the head-bone, son?" said Thorarin.

"I know nought thereof," said Thorstein.

"What canst thou tell me, son, of the Horse-meet last summer? Wert thou not beaten into swooning like a hound, kinsman?"

"I think it not worth while," said Thorstein, "to account it a stroke; it was a chance hap rather."

Thorarin said: "I should not have thought it, that I could have a faint-heart for a son."

"Father," said Thorstein, "speak thou nought but what thou wilt not think overmuch said in time to come."

"I will not say so much as my heart would," said Thorarin.

Now rose up Thorstein and taketh his weapons, and went his ways from home till he came to the horse-house where Thord was a-heeding the horses of Biarni, and there he found Thord.

So Thorstein came up to him and said to him:

"I would wot, friend Thord, whether that was a chance blow that I gat from thee last summer at the Horse-meet, or if it were done wilfully of thee?"

Thord answereth: "If thou hast two mouths, thrust thou thy tongue now in one, now in the other and call the one a chance stroke and the other a wilful: lo, there all the boot thou gettest of me."

"See to it," said Thorstein, "that I most like shall not claim boot of thee again." And he fell on him therewith and smote him his death-blow.

Then he went to the house at Hof, and met a woman without and said to her: "Tell thou to Biarni that a beast hath gored Thord, his horse boy, and that he will abide him there by the horse-house till he cometh."

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"Go thy ways home, man," said she, "and I will tell it when it seemeth good to me."

So Thorstein went home and the woman went to her work.

Biarni rose up that morning, and when he was gotten to table he asked where Thord was, and men answered that he must have gone to the horses.

"I should have thought he would have been home by now if he were well," said Biarni.

Then the woman whom Thorstein had met took up the word: "True it is what is oft said of us womanfolk, that there is little of wits at work where we women are. Here came this morning Thorstein Staff-smitten, and said that a beast had gored Thord so that he might not help himself:

but I was loth to wake thee, and so it slipped out of my head."

Then Biarni went from the table and out to the horse-house, and found Thord slain; and he was buried thereafter.

Biarni set a-foot a bloodsuit, and had Thorstein made guilty of the slaying: but Thorstein abode at home in Sunnudale and worked for his father, and Biarni let things be.

In the autumn sat men by the singeing-fires at Hof, but Biarni was lying outside the wall of the fire-hall, and hearkened thence the talk of men.

Now those brethren Thorhall and Thorvald take up the word: "We thought not when we first took up abode with Slaying Biarni that we should have been singeing lambs' heads here, while Thorstein, Biarni's outlaw, was singeing wethers' heads at Sunnudale: better had it been to have spared his kin something more in Bodvarsdale rather than to have let his outlaw hold his head so high in Sunnudale; but 'most men are foredone when wounds befall them:' nor wot we when he will wipe this stain from his honour."

A certain man answered: "It is worse to say such words than to hold peace over them: like it is that the trolls have set the tongues wagging in the heads of you. For we deem that Biarni is loth to take the help and sustenance from the sightless father and other helpless creatures at Sunnudale. Marvellous I shall deem it if ye are oft a-singeing lambs' heads here, or laughing over what betid in Bodvarsdale."

Now go men to table and so to sleep, and nought was it seen of Biarni that he had taken to heart what had been talked.

But the next morning Biarni waked Thorhall and Thorvald, and bade them ride to Sunnudale, and bring him at breakfast-tide the head of Thorstein sheared from his body: "For meseemeth ye are the most like to wipe the stain from my honour if I have not heart to do it myself."

Now deem they that they have assuredly spoken overmuch, but they go their ways nevertheless till they come to Sunnudale.

Thorstein stood in the door there whetting a sax, and when they came thereto he asked them what they would, and they said they must needs seek their horses: so Thorstein said they had but a little way to seek, "For here they are by the garth."

"It is not sure," say they, "that we shall find the horses, unless thou show us of them clearly."

So Thorstein went out; and when they were come down into the garth Thorvald hove up his axe and ran at him: Thorstein smote him with his hand so that he fell forward, and then put the sax through him. Then would Thorhall be on him, and fared in likewise with Thorvald. Then Thorstein bindeth them both a-horseback, and layeth the reins on the horses' necks, and bringeth them all on to the road, and home now go the horses to Hof.

The house-carles were without at Hof, and they go in and tell Biarni that Thorvald and his fellow were come home, and they said that they had not gone for nought. So Biarni goeth out and seeth how their dealings have gone; and he made no words about the matter, but had them laid in earth, and all is now quiet till Yule over.

Then Rannveig took up the word one night, when they came into bed together, Biarni and she—

"What thinkest thou is most talked of in the country-side?" saith she.

"I wot not," saith Biarni: "many men are unnoteworthy of their words," saith he.

"Well," says she, "this is oftenest in men's mouths, 'What will Thorstein Staff-smitten do that thou wilt think thou must needs avenge?' He hath now slain three of thy house-carles: and thy Thingmen think that there is no upholding in thee if this be unavenged; and the hands laid on knee are ill-laid for thee."

Biarni answereth: "Now it comes to that which is said: 'None will be warned by another's woe;' yet will I hearken to what thou sayest. Few men though hath Thorstein slain sackless."

Therewith they drop this talk and sleep away the night.

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On the morrow wakeneth Rannveig as Biarni took down his shield, and asked him what he would? He answereth: "We shall shift and share honour between us in Sunnudale to-day, Thorstein and I." "How many in company?" saith she.

"I will not drag a host against Thorstein," saith he. "I shall fare alone."

"Do it not," saith she, "to risk thyself alone under the weapons of that man of Hell!"

Said Biarni: "Yea, dost thou not after the fashion of women, bewailing now what ye egged on to then? A long while oft I bare the taunts both of thee and of others, but it will not avail to stay me when I will be afoot."

So fareth now Biarni to Sunnudale, where stood Thorstein in the door, and certain words went between them. Said Biarni: "To-day shalt go with me, Thorstein, to the single-fight on yonder knoll amidst the home-mead."

"All is lacking to me," said Thorstein, "that I might fight with thee:

but I will get me abroad so soon as a ship saileth; for I know of thy manliness, that thou wilt get work done for my father if I fare from him."

"It availeth not to cry off," said Biarni.

"Give me leave then to see my father first," said Thorstein.

"Yea, sure," saith Biarni.

So Thorstein went in and told his father that Biarni was come thither, who bade him to single fight. Old Thorarin answered—

"A man must look for it if he have to do with one mightier than he, and abide in the same country-side with him, and hath done him some dishonour, that he will not live to wear out many shirts. Nor may I mourn for thee, for me seemeth thou hast earned it: so take thy weapons and do thy manliest. Time has been when I would not have budged before such as Biarni: yet is he the greatest of champions. Now would I rather lose thee than have a coward son."

So Thorstein went out, and then they went to the Knoll, and fell a-fighting eagerly, smiting the armour sorely from each other. And when they had fought a long while, Biarni said to Thorstein: "I am athirst, for I am more unwont to the work than thou."

"Go thou to the brook and drink, then," said Thorstein.

That did Biarni, and laid his sword down beside him. Thorstein took up the sword and looked on it, and said: "This sword thou wilt not have had in Bodvarsdale."

Biarni answered not, and they went up again on to the Knoll, and fought for an hour's space; and Biarni deemed the man skilled of fight, and faster on foot than he had looked for.

"Many haps hinder me to-day," said Biarni; "now is my shoe-tie loose."

"Bind it up, then," said Thorstein.

So Biarni stoops down; but Thorstein went in and brought out two shields and a sword, and went to the Knoll to Biarni, and said to him "Here is a shield and a sword which my father sendeth thee, and the blade will not dull more in smiting than that which thou hast had heretofore. And for me, I am loth to stand shieldless any longer before thy strokes; nay, I were fain to leave this play, for I fear me that thy luck will go further than my lucklessness: and every lad listeth to live if he may rule the rede."

"It availeth not to beg off," said Biarni we shall fight on yet."

"I will not smite first," said Thorstein.

Then Biarni smote away all the shield from Thorstein, and after Thorstein smote the shield from Biarni.

"A great stroke," said Biarni.

Thorstein answered: "Thine was no less."

Biarni said: "Better biteth now that same weapon of thine which thou hast borne all day afore."

Thorstein said: "I would spare myself an ill hap if I might; and with thee I fight afeard: I will let all the matter lie under thy dooming."

And now it was Biarni's turn to smite, and they were both shieldless.

So Biarni said: "It will be an ill bargain to take a crime to one instead of a good-hap: I shall deem me well paid for my three house-carles by thee alone if thou wilt be true to me."

Thorstein answereth: "Time and place served me to-day that I might have bewrayed thee, if so be my haplessness had been mightier than thy good hap: I will not bewray thee."

"I see of thee," said Biarni, "that thou art peerless among men. Give me leave to go in to thy father, and tell

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him such things as I will."

"Go thou in as for me," said Thorstein, "but fare thou warily."

So Biarni went in, and to the shut-bed wherein lay the carle Thorarin.

Thorarin asked who went there; and Biarni named himself.

"What tidings tellest thou me, my Biarni?" said Thorarin.

"The slaying of Thorstein thy son," said Biarni.

"Made he any defence?" said Thorarin.

"I think no man hath been better man at arms than was Thorstein thy son."

"Nought wondrous," said the old man; "though thou wert hard to deal with in Bodvarsdale if thou hast overcome my son."

Then said Biarni: "I bid thee to Hof, and thou shalt sit in the second high-seat whiles thou livest, and I will be to thee in a son's stead."

"So it fareth with me," said the old man, "as with them who have no might, that: 'Oft is the fool fain of promise.' But such are the promises of you great men, when ye will appease a man after such haps as this, that it is a month's rest to us, and thereafter are we held even as worthy as other poor wretches, and no sooner for all that do our sorrows wear out.

Nevertheless, he who taketh handsel of such a man as thee may be well content with his lot, when matters are to be doomed on; and this handsel will I take of thee. So come thou on to my shut-bed floor, and draw very nigh, for the old carle tottereth on his feet now with eld and feebleness; nor deem it so but my dead son yet runneth in my head."

So Biarni went up on to the shut-bed floor, and took old Thorarin by the hand, and found him fumbling with a sax which he had a mind to thrust into Biarni. So he drew aback his hand and said: "Wretchedest of old carles! now shall it go as meet is betwixt us! Thorstein thy son lives, and shall home with me to Hof: but I will get thee thralls to work for thee, nor shalt thou want for aught whiles thou livest."

So Thorstein fared home to Hof with Biarni, and served him till his death-day, and was deemed peerless of any man for manhood and courage.

Biarni kept his honour still, and waxed ever in friendship and good conditions the older he grew; and was the best proven of all men, and was a man of great faith in his latter days. He fared abroad and went south, and in that journey died, and resteth in the burg called Valeri, a little way hitherward from Rome-town. Biarni was a man happy of kin: his son was Skeggbroddi, much told of in tale, a man peerless in his days.

So here an end of telling of Thorstein Staff-smitten.