

THE TALE OF THORSTEIN STAFF-STRUCK

*Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs**

There was a man named Thorarin living in Sunnudal. He was old and saw poorly. He had been a great Viking in his youth. He was not an easy man to get along with, even though he was old. He had one son named Thorstein. Thorstein was a large, strong, even-tempered man, and he worked so hard on his father's farm that he was just as productive as three other men together. Thorarin was not a very wealthy man, but he owned plenty of weapons. The father and son also owned some stud-horses, and they earned most of the money they had by selling stallions, for all of them were good riding-horses and spirited.

There was a man named Thord. He was a farmhand of Bjarni's at Hof. He took care of Bjarni's riding-horses because he was regarded as being good with horses. Thord was very overbearing, and he made people feel that he worked for a powerful man, though he himself became no more valuable or popular for that.

Two men named Thorhall and Thorvald were working for Bjarni at that time. They were always gossiping about everything they heard in the district.

Thorstein and Thord arranged a horse-fight for young stallions. At the fight, Thord's horse was getting the worst of it. Now when Thord found that his horse was being beaten, he dealt Thorstein's horse a heavy blow in the jaw. Thorstein saw this and dealt Thord's horse an even greater blow. Thord's horse ran off, and people really started shouting. Thord then struck Thorstein on the brow with his horse-prod, causing the skin to tear and slip down over his eye. Thorstein then cut off part of his shirt, and bandaged his brow, acting as if nothing had happened, and he asked people not to tell his father about it. The matter was dropped then and there.

* From *AM 162 C fol.*, *AM 156 fol.* and *AM 496 4to*. Translated from *Íslendinga sögur III*.

Thorvald and Thorhall taunted him about this and nicknamed him Thorstein Staff-struck.

Shortly before Yule that winter, the women at Sunnudal got up for work. Thorstein got up too and carried in the hay but then lay back down on the bench. Then old Thorarin, his father, came into the room and asked who was lying there. Thorstein said he was.

'Why were you on your feet so early, son?' asked old Thorarin.

Thorstein answered, 'I don't think there are many others to do the work that must be done around here.'

'Don't you have a headache, son?' asked old Thorarin.

'Not that I am aware of,' said Thorstein.

'What can you tell me, son, about the horse-fight that took place last summer? Weren't you knocked unconscious, kinsman, like a dog?'

'I do not see any honour,' said Thorstein, 'in calling it an attack rather than an accident.'

Thorarin said, 'I would not have thought that I had a coward for a son.'

'Do not say anything now, Father,' said Thorstein, 'that you will later learn is an exaggeration.'

'I will not say as much now,' said Thorarin, 'as I have a mind to.'

Thorstein then got up and grabbed his weapons. He then set off and walked over to the barn where Thord was taking care of Bjarni's horses. Thord was there.

Thorstein found Thord and said to him, 'I want to know, Thord my friend, whether that blow I took from you at the horse-fight last summer was an accident or dealt intentionally, and whether you are willing to compensate me for it.'

Thord answered, 'If you have two mouths, then put your tongue in each of them and say with one that it was an accident, if you like, and with the other that it was dealt in earnest. And that is all the compensation you're going to get from me.'

'Then prepare yourself,' said Thorstein, 'for the possibility that I won't come seeking again.'

Thorstein then ran up to Thord and dealt him his death-blow.

Afterwards he went to the farmhouse at Hof and found a woman outside and said to her, 'Tell Bjarni that a bull has gored his stable-boy Thord, and that Thord will be waiting there until he goes to the barn.'

'You go home,' she replied, 'and I will tell him when I please.'

Thorstein then went home, and the woman to her work.

Bjarni got up that morning, and when he had sat down at the table, he asked where Thord was. The others replied that he must have gone to the horses.

'I would have expected him back by now,' said Bjarni, 'if he were well.'

Then the woman Thorstein had met spoke up and said, 'It's true, as we're often reminded, that we women aren't very smart. Thorstein Staff-struck was here this morning and said that a bull had gored Thord and that he needed help. But I didn't want to wake you then, and afterwards I forgot all about it.'

Bjarni got up from the table, and then went to the barn and found Thord there, dead. He was then buried.

Afterwards, Bjarni prepared an action and had Thorstein outlawed for the killing. But Thorstein remained at home in Sunnudal working for his father, and Bjarni did nothing about it.

That autumn at Hof, the men were sitting by the fire preparing sheep-heads, and Bjarni was lying outside on top of the fire-room wall listening to what they were saying.

Then the brothers Thorhall and Thorvald spoke up and said, 'We never expected, when we were hired at Killer-Bjarni's, that we'd be preparing sheep-heads here, while this outlaw Thorstein is preparing the heads of geldings. It would have been better of him to yield more to his kinsmen in Bodvarsdal than to have his outlaw living like his equal in Sunnudal. But those who are laid down will be done with once they are wounded, and we don't know when he will wipe this stain off his honour.'

A man answered, 'That kind of thing is worse said than unsaid, and anyone would think that trolls had been moving your tongues. We feel that he does not want to deprive the blind father and the other dependants there in Sunnudal of their bread and butter. But it will surprise me if you roast lamb-heads here much longer or praise what happened in Bodvarsdal.'

Then everyone went to eat and to sleep, and Bjarni did not show that he had heard what had been said.

The next morning, Bjarni woke Thorhall and Thorvald and told them to ride to Sunnudal and bring him back Thorstein's severed head by breakfast time.

'You two seem to me,' he said, 'the most likely to wipe the stain from my honour, if I don't have the strength to do it myself.'

Now they knew that they had said too much but went, nevertheless, over to Sunnudal. Thorstein was standing in the doorway whetting a short sword.

When they arrived, he asked them where they were going, and they claimed they were supposed to look for some horses. Thorstein said that they would not have to look far for those 'right here by the hayfield wall'.

'We might not find the horses if you don't show us exactly where they are.'

Then Thorstein stepped outside. And when they had walked out into the hayfield, Thorvald brandished his axe and ran towards him, but Thorstein blocked him with his arm, and he fell down, and Thorstein thrust his short sword through him. Thorhall then wanted to attack, but he went the same way as Thorvald. Thorstein then tied both of them on to their horses and laid the reins over the horses' manes, and drove them homeward. The horses then went home to Hof.

Some farmhands were outside at Hof, and they went in and told Bjarni that Thorvald and Thorhall were home and that their journey had not been made in vain. Bjarni then went outside and saw what the situation was. He did not say any more about it, but had them buried. Then all remained quiet until Yule.

Rannveig spoke up one evening when she and Bjarni had gone to bed: 'What do you think is being discussed most often these days around the district?' she said.

'I don't know,' said Bjarni. 'Many people's words sound like nonsense to me.'

'These days, people say most often that they don't know what Thorstein Staff-struck will have to do before you find it necessary to take revenge on him. He has now slain three of your farmhands. Your thingmen do not think they can count on you for support as long as this goes unavenged. You both do wrong and leave right undone.'

Bjarni answered, 'Now the saying applies that no one learns from another's mistakes. But I will heed what you are telling me, even though Thorstein has killed few innocent men.'

They ended their discussion and slept through the night.

In the morning, Rannveig awoke as Bjarni was taking down his shield. She asked where he was going.

He answered, 'Now Thorstein from Sunnudal and I are going to settle this matter of honour.'

'How many of you are going?' she asked.

'I am not going to lead an army against Thorstein,' he said. 'I will go alone.'

'Don't risk your life alone,' she said, 'against the weapons of that horrible man.'

Bjarni said, 'Now, aren't you being like those women who urge one moment what they regret the next? Well I have listened to enough taunting, both from you and from others, and it won't do any good to try to stop me when I want to go.'

Bjarni then went to Sunnudal. Thorstein was standing in the doorway, and they exchanged a few words.

Bjarni said, 'You are to fight me in single combat today, Thorstein, on the hill here in the hayfield.'

'I am not at all prepared,' said Thorstein, 'to fight with you, but I will leave Iceland on the first ship, for I know that you will have the decency to provide my father with farm help if I go.'

'You aren't going to talk yourself out of this,' said Bjarni.

'You will permit me to see my father first?' asked Thorstein.

'Of course,' said Bjarni.

Thorstein went inside and told his father that Bjarni had come and challenged him to single combat.

Old Thorarin answered, 'Anybody who rangles with a more powerful man in his own district and has dishonoured him cannot expect to wear out too many shirts. I don't feel sorry for you because I think you've brought this on yourself. Now take your weapons and defend yourself bravely, for I would never have stooped before a man like Bjarni in my day, even though he is a great champion. Still, I would rather lose you than have a coward for a son.'

Thorstein then went outside, and they went up on the hill and began to fight hard, badly damaging each other's protective gear.

And when they had fought for a very long time, Bjarni said to Thorstein, 'I'm thirsty now, for I am less used to hard work than you are.'

'Then go to the brook,' said Thorstein, 'and drink.'

Bjarni did so, laying his sword down beside him.

Thorstein picked it up, looked at it and said, 'You could not have had this sword with you in Bodvarsdal.'

Bjarni did not answer. They then went back up the hill and fought for a while. Bjarni found the man a skilled fighter, and the going seemed more difficult than he thought it would be.

'A lot is going wrong for me today,' said Bjarni; 'Now my shoelace has come untied.'

'Tie it then,' said Thorstein.

Bjarni then bent over.

Thorstein went inside, took two shields and a sword, went back up the hill to Bjarni and said to him, 'Here is a shield and sword from my father, and this one will not be blunted any more than the one you already have. I do not want to suffer your blows without a shield any more, but I would gladly have us end this game, for I am afraid that your good fortune will accomplish more than my bad luck, and everyone is eager to live through a struggle if he has the power to do so.'

'It won't do you any good to try and talk your way out of this,' said Bjarni. 'The fight's not over.'

'I will not strike eagerly,' said Thorstein.

Then Bjarni chopped Thorstein's entire shield away from him, and Thorstein chopped Bjarni's away from him.

'Now you're swinging,' said Bjarni.

Thorstein answered, 'You did not deal a lighter blow.'

Bjarni said, 'The same weapon you had earlier today is biting harder for you now.'

Thorstein said, 'I would save myself from a mishap if I could, and I fight in fear of you. I am still willing to submit entirely to your judgement.'

It was then Bjarni's turn to swing, and both of them were now shield-less.

Then Bjarni said, 'It would be a poor bargain to choose a crime over good luck. I will consider myself fully compensated for my three farmhands if you will promise me your loyalty.'

Thorstein said, 'I have had opportunities today to betray you, had my misfortune been stronger than your luck. I will not betray you.'

'I see that you are an excellent man,' said Bjarni. 'You must allow me to go in and see your father,' he said, 'and tell him what I want to.'

'Go as you like for my part,' said Thorstein, 'but be careful.'

Then Bjarni went up to the bed closet where old Thorarin was lying. Thorarin asked who was there, and Bjarni said it was he.

'What's the news, Bjarni my friend?' asked Thorarin.

'Your son Thorstein's death,' answered Bjarni.

'Did he put up any defence?' asked Thorarin.

'I don't think any man has been as keen in battle as your son Thorstein.'

'It doesn't seem strange to me,' said the old man, 'given that you've now defeated my son, that you were a tough opponent in Bodvarsdal.'

Then Bjarni said, 'I want to invite you to Hof. You will hold one of the

two seats of honour as long as you live, and I will be as a son to you.'

'I'm in the position,' said the old man, 'of someone who has no power, and only a fool rejoices in promises. Besides, the promises of you chieftains are such, when you want to comfort a man after you've done something like this, that your relief lasts only a month; then we are treated like other paupers, and with that our injuries are not soon forgotten. Yet whoever makes a bargain with a man like you may nevertheless be pleased with his lot, no matter what people say, and I will accept your offer, so come here into the bed closet. You'll have to come close, because this old man is shaky on his feet from age and poor health, and I'm not quite free from being affected by my son's death.'

Bjarni stepped into the bed closet and took old Thorarin's hand. Then he realized that Thorarin was groping for a short sword and wanted to stab him.

Bjarni pulled back his hand and said, 'You miserable old fart! Now you'll get what you deserve! Your son Thorstein is alive and he is going to live with me at Hof. You will be given slaves to do your farm work, and you will not lack anything as long as you live.'

Thorstein then went home to Hof with Bjarni and remained with him until the day he died, and no man was thought to be his equal in integrity and bravery.

Bjarni maintained his honour, and he became more popular and more even-keeled the older he grew. He dealt with difficulties better than anyone, and he turned strongly towards religion during the latter part of his life. Bjarni travelled abroad and made a pilgrimage to Rome. He died on that journey. He now rests in a city called Vateri, a great city not far this side of Rome.

Bjarni was blessed with many descendants. His son was Beard-Broddi, who appears frequently in sagas and was the most excellent man of his day. Bjarni's daughter was named Halla, the mother of Gudrid, whom Kolbein the Lawspeaker married. Another of Bjarni's daughters was Yngvild, whom Thorstein Sidu-Hallsson married. Their son was Magnus, the father of Einar, the father of Bishop Magnus. Amundi was another of Thorstein and Yngvild's sons. He married Sigrid, the daughter of Thorgrim the Blind. Amundi's daughter was Hallfrid, the mother of Amundi, the father of Gudmund, the father of Magnus the Godi and of Thora, whom Thorvald Gizurason married, and of another Thora, the mother of Orm of Svinafell. Another of Amundi's daughters was Gudrun, the mother of Thordis, the

mother of Helga, the mother of Gudny Bodvarsdottir, the mother of Thord, Sighvat and Snorri Sturluson. Another of Amundi's daughters was Rannveig, the mother of Stein, the father of Gudrun, the mother of Arnfrid, whom Stout-Helgi married. Another daughter of Amundi's was Thorkatla, the mother of Arnbjorg, the mother of Finn the Priest, Thorgeir and Thurid. And many leading men are descended from them.

There ends the story of Thorstein Staff-struck.

Translated by ANTHONY MAXWELL

THE TALE OF HALLDOR SNORRASON II

*Halldórs þáttur Snorrasonar hinn síðari**

I As has been told earlier, Halldor Snorrason had been in Constantinople with Harald, and had come west with him, from Russia to Norway. He had received much honour and respect from King Harald. He was with the king that winter while he was staying in Kaupang.

But as the winter passed and spring approached, people began preparing their trading voyages early because there had been little or no passage of ships from Norway recently, owing to the hostilities and unrest that had existed between Norway and Denmark. As the spring passed, King Harald became aware that Halldor Snorrason was growing ever more unhappy. One day, the king asked him what was on his mind.

Halldor answered, 'I long to go to Iceland, my lord.'

The king said, 'Many others would have shown greater longing to go home. What means of travel have you got? How are you spending your money?'

He answered, 'I'm spending it quickly, because I have nothing but the clothes I am wearing.'

'A long service and many perils have received little reward then. I will give you a ship and a crew. Your father will be able to see that you haven't served me for nothing.'

Halldor thanked the king for the gift. Several days later, Halldor met the king and the king asked him how many crew members he had taken on.

He answered, 'All those men available for service have already got themselves positions, so I can get no one. Therefore I expect that the ship that you gave me will have to be left behind.'

The king said, 'Then the gift was not an act of friendship. We will wait and see what happens about oarsmen.'

* *Morkenskinnu* version. Translated from *Íslendinga sögur III*.