

The Tale of Thorstein Shiver

origin: Iceland

date of composition: unknown. Possibly 14th c. CE

It is said that the following summer King Olaf attended feasts in the east around Vik and elsewhere. He feasted at a farm called Reim with a large company of men. There was a man accompanying the king at that time named Thorstein Thorkelsson. His father Thorkel was the son of Asgeir Scatter-brain, who was the son of Audun Shaft. Thorstein was an Icelandic man, who had come to the king the previous winter.

In the evening while people were sitting at the drinking tables, King Olaf made a speech. He said that none of his men should go alone to the outhouse during the night, and that anyone who had to go must have someone go with him. Everyone drank heartily that night, and when the tables were taken down they all went to bed.

Now in the middle of the night, Thorstein the Iclander woke up and had to go to the toilet. The man lying next to him was sleeping soundly, and Thorstein certainly did not want to wake him up. So he got up, slipped into his shoes, threw on a heavy cloak and went out to the privy. The outhouse was big enough for eleven people to sit on each side of it. Thorstein sat on the seat nearest the door. When he had been sitting there a few moments, he saw a demon climb up on the seat farthest in and sit down.

Thorstein asked, 'Who's there?'

The fiend answered, 'It's Thorkel the Thin who fell with the other corpses fighting with King Harold War-tooth.'

'And where did you come from?' asked Thorstein.

The demon said he had just arrived from Hell.

‘What can you tell me about that place?’ asked Thorstein.

It replied, “What do you want to know?”

“Who endures the torments of Hell best?”

“No one endures them better,” replied the demon, “Than Sigurd the killer of the Serpent Fafnir” [note: Sigurd is a famous Norse hero]

“What kind of torment does he suffer?”

“He kindles the oven,” answered the ghost.

“That doesn’t strike me as much of a torment,” said Thorstein.

“Oh yes it is,” replied the demon, “for he is also the kindling!”

“There is something in that then,” Thorstein said. “Now who has the hardest time enduring Hell’s torments?”

The ghost answered, “Starkad the Old takes it worst, for he cries out so terribly that his screaming is a greater torment to the rest of us fiends than almost anything else, and we never get any reprieve from it.”

“What torment is it,” asked Thorstein, “that he takes it so badly, as brave a man as he is said to have been?”

“He stands up to his ankles in fire.”

“Why, that doesn’t seem like much to me,” replied Thorstein, “as great a hero as he was.”

“Then you don’t get it,” said the ghost. “Only the soles of his feet are sticking up out of the flames!”

“Now that’s something,” said Thorstein. “Let me hear you scream once the way that Starkad does.”

“All right,” said the demon.

He then threw open his jaws and let fly a great howl, while Thorstein pulled the fur trimming of his cloak up around his head.

He was not very impressed and asked, “Is that the best you can do?”

“Far from it,” replied the demon, “for that is only the cry given by us tiny devils.”

“Scream like Starkad does once,” said Thorstein.

“All right,” said the demon.

He then began to scream a second time so terribly that Thorstein thought it monstrous that such a little fiend could howl so loudly. Again Thorstein wrapped his cloak around his head, but the crying paralyzed him, and he fainted.

Then the demon asked, “Why are you so quiet now?”

When he had recovered, Thorstein replied, “I’m silent because I’m amazed at what a horrible voice you have, as little a demon as you appear to be. Was that Starkad’s loudest cry?”

“Not even close,” he answered, “it was more like his quietest.”

“Stop beating about the bush,” said Thorstein, “and let me hear the loudest cry.”

The demon agreed to it. Thorstein prepared himself by folding the cloak, winding it around his head and then holding it there with both hands. The ghost had moved closer to Thorstein by three seats with each cry, so that there were now only three seats left

between them. The demon then inflated his cheeks in a terrible manner, rolled his eyes and began to howl so loudly that it exceeded all measure for Thorstein.

At that very moment, the church bell rang out, and Thorstein fell unconscious to the floor. The demon reacted to the bell by tumbling to the floor. The sound could be heard for a long time down in the ground. Thorstein recovered quickly. He stood up and went to his bed and lay down.

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Now in the morning everyone got up. The king went to the chapel and heard Mass. After that they sat down to eat. The king was not terribly cheerful.

He addressed his men, “Did anyone go alone to the privy last night?”

Thorstein came forth and fell down before the king, admitting that he had disobeyed his order.

The king replied, “It was not such a serious offence against me, but you prove what is said about you Icelanders—that you are very stubborn. But did anything happen?”

Thorstein then told the whole story.

The king asked, “What good did you think his crying would do you?”

“I want to tell you that, my lord. I thought that since you had warned all of us not to go out there alone, and since the devil showed up, that we would not leave the place unharmed. But I reckoned that you would wake up when he cried out, my lord, and I knew I would be helped if you found out about it.”

“Indeed it happened,” said the king, “that I woke up to the sound, and I knew what was going on. I had the bell rung because I knew that nothing else could help you. But weren’t you frightened when the demon began to scream?”

Thorstein answered, “I don’t know what it means to be frightened, my lord.”

“Was there no fear in your heart?” asked the king.

“I wouldn’t say so,” Thorstein replied, “because when I heard the last cry a shiver nearly ran down my spine.”

The king replied, “You will now receive your nickname and be called Thorstein Shiver from now on. Here is a sword I’d like to give you in honor of the occasion.”

Thorstein thanked him.

It is said that Thorstein was made one of King Olaf’s men and stayed with him thereafter until he fell on Olaf’s longship The Serpent alongside the king’s other champions.