

HOW THE PRIDE OF THOR WAS BROUGHT LOW

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FROM the sunny heights of Asgard, the Asa folk were wont to look upon the earth and to take pleasure in its welfare and in the happiness of its people. But all too often they saw with dismay that the Frost Giants from their cold Northern home of ice and snow sent forth cruel blasts which nipped the buds, withered the flowers of spring, and saddened the hearts of men. So one day that mighty Asa who is called Thor determined to go forth and teach these Giant folk how to behave themselves better. Calling for his chariot of brass, which was drawn by two mighty goats from whose teeth and hoofs sparks continually flew, he was about to drive away when Red Loki came running up and begged to be taken, too.

To this Thor agreed, for he had rather a liking for Loki in spite of his mischievous tricks, and in a few minutes they were hurtling through the air at a great rate.

All day long they drove, and at evening time reached the borders of Giantland where stood the hut of a poor peasant. Seeing this, the two Asas determined to try to obtain shelter for the night.

The peasant was a goodhearted fellow and gladly welcomed them under his roof; but he had only a bit of black bread to offer them for supper, and this was by no means a satisfactory meal for two hungry gods. But Thor was quite equal to the occasion.

"Fear not," said he kindly, "I will provide meat in plenty for you and your family as well as for ourselves."

Then he went out, killed his two goats, cut them up, and threw them into a great cauldron which the peasant's wife at his request had set to boil upon the fire. The skins meantime he spread with care upon the floor.

The stew was soon cooked to perfection, whereupon Thor invited the man and his wife and children to eat as much as they would.

"Be careful, however," said he, "not to break a single bone, but to throw them all into the skins spread out on the floor."

This they promised to do, but during the meal Red Loki, wishing to see what would happen if they disobeyed, persuaded the boy, Thialfi, the peasant's son, to break one of the bones in order to suck out the marrow, saying that no one could possibly know that he had done so. Then they lay down to sleep, the bones of the animals wrapped in the goatskins being upon the floor.

Next morning, just before daybreak Thor arose, and having stretched himself took up his mighty hammer and gave the goatskins a tap. Immediately the goats sprang up as much alive as ever they were, and perfectly well save that one of them limped.

Then Thor knew at once that his commands had been disobeyed and the whole household soon knew it too. His brows sank over his eyes and he grasped his hammer so hard that his knuckles grew white. The terrified peasant fell down on his face before him; and when Thor lifted the hammer to destroy him the whole household wept aloud and begged for mercy, promising to give him all they had in the world as an atonement.

When Thor saw their terror, his anger left him and he agreed to take as a ransom the children of the peasant, a boy and girl, called Thialfi and Roskva. And they became his servants and have been always in his company since that time.

Leaving his goats in charge of the peasant, Thor went forward toward Giantland accompanied by Loki and the two children; and the boy Thialfi, who was the fleetest of foot of all living creatures, carried Thor's bag.

After walking all day through a bleak and barren country wrapped in a thick mist, they came at nightfall to a great wood which seemed to offer neither provisions, nor roof to shelter under for the night. At length, after searching about for a very long time they came to what seemed to be a large hall of misty and uncertain shape, the door of which was as wide as the whole building.

So they entered, and finding everything within empty and dark they determined to go no farther, and stretched themselves, hungry and weary as they were, upon the ground.

In the middle of the night they were awakened by what seemed to be a great earthquake. The earth trembled beneath them and the house shook.

Calling upon his companions, Thor arose, and fearing lest the roof should fall upon them he drew them into an inner room, and seating himself in the doorway, took up his hammer and prepared to defend himself and them if anything should befall. But nothing further happened save a renewed trembling of the ground and a curious, regularly recurring sound, like a loud groan or roar.

When it began to grow light Thor went out and saw, not far off a huge giant lying on the ground fast asleep; and he understood that it was his snores which had caused the ground to shake and which had sounded like a roar or groan.

Suddenly the giant awoke, and sprang up so quickly that Loki and the children, who had followed Thor, jumped behind a tree. But Thor, who was afraid of nothing, only grasped his hammer tightly and asked his name.

"I am called Skrymir," said the giant, looking down at him, and, catching sight of his hammer of which all in heaven and earth had heard, he went on: "I don't need to ask your name, for I see you are Thor. But what have you done with my glove?"

As he said these last words, he stretched out a huge hand and picked up his glove, which Thor to his great astonishment found to be the house in which he had spent the night; and the inner room was the place for the thumb.

Hearing that they were on their way toward Giantland, Skrymir asked if he might accompany them; and as he seemed a good-natured fellow they agreed. But first they sat down to eat their breakfast. Skrymir ate his huge meal out of a great provision sack, and eyed with much merriment the wallet which held the food of and his companions.

"'Tis like a little toy," said he; but Thialfi answered crossly:

"Toy it may be to you, but it has made my shoulders ache very finely, I can tell you. I could hardly sleep all night for the pain."

Then Skrymir laughed, and took the bag and put it into his sack, slinging the whole over his shoulder as if it had been a feather.

After this they all set off together, and that day they covered an immense distance, for the giant took such huge strides that they had to run the whole time in order to keep up with him.

When it grew dark, Skrymir led them into a vast wood where no habitation was to be found, and bade them take up their quarters under a huge oak. The others were weary and hungry beyond words, for they had not stopped all day either to eat or rest; but Skrymir seemed only sleepy, and was preparing to begin his snores when Loki, whom fasting had put decidedly out of temper, sharply reminded him that they had had no supper. Pushing the great sack over to them, the giant sleepily replied that they were welcome to all that it contained and immediately fell into a deep slumber.

But when Loki tried to undo the mouth of the sack he could not get one knot loosened, nor could he even get one of the strings to stir. Then Thor tried with all his strength, but could do nothing. This was a serious matter, for they were all starving with hunger by this time; so Thor in a great rage snatched up his hammer in both hands, stepped up to where Skrymir was lying and dashed the hammer with all his force at his head.

At this blow, which would have smashed the skull of most men, the giant drowsily opened one eye, saying: "Did a leaf fall on my head just now? Good night to all of you. I suppose you have now had your supper and are going to bed."

At this the Asas were so astonished that they meekly replied that they were just going to do that very thing. And they went and lay down under another oak. But there was no sleep for them, for, besides their fear and hunger, the whole wood resounded with the giant's snores so that it seemed as though it thundered all the time.

At last Thor could stand it no longer, so he went over to him, and swinging his hammer with all his skill brought it down with such a crash that he knew by the feel of it that it had sunk deep into the head.

But the giant only turned over, saying sleepily: "What was that? Did an acorn fall upon my head? How is it with you, friend Thor?"

Then Thor answered hastily that he had only just waked up, and that it was midnight and still time to sleep.

The god was now alarmed, and he decided that if it were possible he would get in a third blow which should put an end altogether to the most extraordinary companion he had ever had.

So he lay watching for Skrymir to go fast asleep again, and shortly before day-break his chance came.

Creeping up, he clutched the hammer with all his might and dashed it at the giant's temples with such force that it sank up to the handle.

Scarcely had he time to pull it out again than Skrymir sat up and began to yawn, rubbing his eyes and stroking his temples and saying:

"Are there any birds sitting in the tree above me? I thought, as I woke up, that some moss from the branches fell upon my head. Ho there! Thor, are you awake? You seem to be moving early this morning. Let us all get up and continue our journey, for we are now not far from Giant Town."

Filled with astonished dismay at the failure of his attempts, Thor roused his companions, and all set off hungry and dispirited at the giants heels. Presently they began to whisper together as to the events of the night, and of the enormous strength and size of their companion, but after awhile Skrymir looked down at them and said:

"We have now come to two ways: mine goes to the north where you see yon mountains; yours, if you still wish to reach Giant Town, lies there to the east. So here we part company, but first let me give you some useful advice.

"I have heard you whispering to one another that I am not small of stature; but when you come to Giant Town you will see greater folk still. So do not brag too much of your own powers, for the Giant folk will not put up with the boasting of such insignificant little fellows as you be.

"But if you want to be quite wise, turn back now to your own place, for that is the best thing you can do."

So saying, Skrymir shouldered his great sack and, turning his back upon them, went off through the forest with such huge strides that he was soon lost to sight.

Now Loki was much disposed to follow the advice of the giant and turn back to Asgard, but of this Thor would not hear. So they continued their journey until noonday, when they saw before them a great town standing in the midst of an immense plain. The walls and gates of the town were so high that they had to bend their necks right back before they could see the top of them, and when they came nearer still they found the gate was fast shut.

But this gate had bars, and was made to keep in the Giant folk, not to keep out smaller people of whose visits they had never thought. So the two Asas and their servants found little difficulty in creeping through the bars and so getting into the town.

The first thing they saw was a great hall, toward which they went, and finding the door open they entered, and saw in the center of it two benches, enormously high and wide upon which sat a number of giants. In their midst, upon a platform high as the roof of an ordinary house, sat the King of the Giants, to whom they advanced and made their bows. At first the King looked about on the floor as though they were too small for him to see, but at length he cast a scornful glance upon them, and with a grin that showed all his teeth said:

"Is this little fellow the great god Thor, of whom we have heard so much? Perhaps, however, you are bigger in strength than in size. Now, for what feats are you and your companions prepared? For you must know this, that no one is allowed to stay here unless he be more skilled in some craft or accomplishment than any other man."

At this Red Loki, who was so dreadfully hungry that he scarcely knew what he was saying, called out: "I know what I can do better than anyone else! I will soon prove that there is no one present who can eat his food faster than I can."

Then said the King of the Giants: "That is a feat to be proud of if you speak the truth, and you shall try it immediately."

So he called from the bench a man named Logi, and bade him come out on the floor and try his strength against Loki.

The others took a huge trough full of meat and set it on the floor and they put Logi at one end and Loki at the other.

Both of them ate as fast as they possibly could, and met in the middle of the trough. But though Loki had such an immense appetite and had eaten every scrap of meat off the bones, Logi had eaten up the flesh and bones and the trough as well.

So Loki had to confess that he had been beaten.

Then the Giant King looked at the boy Thialfi and asked: "What use is that lad in heaven or earth?"

And Thialfi answered that he would run faster than anyone whom the Giant King liked to name.

"That is a good feat," said the King, "but it is to be hoped you can run really fast, for you will have something to do to win this race."

So saying, he took them outside where there was an excellent race course along the flat plain; and he called up a young man whose name was Hugi, and bade him run a race with Thialfi.

In the first heat of that race, although Hugi ran so fast, yet, when he turned to run back, he met Thialfi face to face. Then the King of the Giants encouraged the lad, saying: "Never before has come anyone hither who was swifter of foot than you."

Then they ran the second heat, and when Hugi reached the goal, Thialfi was three-quarters of the way thither.

Then said the giant: "Well run, Thialfi; yet I do not think that you will win this race. However, we shall see what happens in the third heat."

When this was run, Hugi had reached the goal and turned back again ere poor Thialfi was barely half way there.

At this all the giants began to applaud Hugi, saying that he had fairly won the race; and Thialfi was obliged to go sadly away.

The King of the Giants next inquired what feats Thor could show prove the truth of the tales men told of his great strength; and the Asa, who was now very thirsty, and at all times a mighty man at the bowl, said that he would drink deeper than anyone in the whole world.

So they returned to the hall, where the King called upon his cup-bearer to bring the horn out of which his valiant giants drank; and this was filled with ale and handed to Thor.

Then said the King of the Giants: "With us 'tis thought that the man is a good drinker who empties his horn at one draught; he who takes it off in two is but moderately thirsty; but he who cannot empty in three is but a wretched drinker, and not worthy of the name."

Thor looked at the horn, and thinking within himself: "This is not a difficult task, for the horn though it seems deep is not very large," took a drink which he quite thought would have drained the vessel. But when he could drink no longer for lack of breath, he looked in the horn and there was the ale still brimming over the edge.

Then the giant chuckled and said: "Well drunk, good Thor, but you have by no means emptied the horn. It seems to me, indeed, that men have boasted too much of your fine deeds. I would not have believed that you would have taken so long to drink up the ale. However, I don't doubt you will finish it at the second draught."

Thor reddened with wrath at these scoffing words, and took up the horn intending to drink the ale to the last dregs. But, try as he would, he could not get the end of the horn to tip up completely, and when he set it down it seemed to him that he had drunk less than at the first time. Yet some difference had been made, for the horn could now be carried without spilling.

"Ha! ha!" laughed the giant. "Is this your skill, good Thor? Are you not leaving rather much for your third draught? It looks to me as if that will have to be the greatest of them all."

Then Thor got very angry indeed, and, setting the horn to his mouth, drank with all his might and main, so that when he could do no more and had set it down again the ale had certainly grown less.

"Ha! ha!" roared the giant. "They think too highly of you in the world above, my little Thor. Now what other game would you like to try?"

"Whatever you like," answered Thor very grumpily, for none of the Asas liked being laughed at.

So the giant said: "Young lads here think it nothing but play to lift my cat up from the ground, and I should never have suggested such a feat to the strength of Asa Thor had I not discovered that he is much less of a man than I thought."

Then he called: "Puss! Puss!" in a voice that shook the house; upon which an enormous gray cat sprang forth on the floor before them.

Rather annoyed at being asked to do such an easy thing, Thor went over to the animal, put his arm round it and tried to lift it up. But the more he tugged and strained the more the cat arched its back, so that his strength was exerted vainly; and in the end, when he was black in the face with the efforts he had made, he had only succeeded in lifting up one paw.

Then the giant repeated his scornful laugh, saying: "That's just as I expected. The cat is rather large, and Thor is small-tiny, indeed, compared with the great men who are here with us."

"Tiny, indeed!" roared Thor, in great wrath. "Let anyone you like come and wrestle with me and I will show you if my strength is as tiny as you seem to think."

At this the giant pretended to look about him on the benches, saying: "I don't see anyone here who would not think it beneath him to wrestle with such a puny fellow. Let me see! Let me see! Ah! call hither my old nurse, Elli, and let Thor wrestle with her if he wants to. She has thrown to the ground before now men who thought themselves as strong as this little Thor."

At his call there came into the hall an old woman-so old that Thor refused at first to close with her. But the giants mocked him so that at length he seized her round the waist. Yet the tighter he grasped her the firmer she stood. At length she began to grip him in her turn. Thor lost his footing almost at once and, though he wrestled valiantly, she brought him onto his knee.

At this the giant interfered, saying that no more was necessary to show who was the stronger and that it was getting too late for any more contests. Then he bade them seat themselves at supper, and after a royal feast conducted them to their beds with the kindest hospitality. But Thor spent all that night in bitterness, for his pride had been brought very low.

At daybreak next morning the Asas and their companions arose and prepared to depart. Before they set out, however, their host appeared on the scene and insisted upon their eating a hearty breakfast, after which he offered to show them the most direct way out of the city.

As they set out, the Giant King grew strangely silent and thoughtful and did not speak to them until they stood outside the gates. Then, as they were about to bid him farewell, he suddenly asked Thor how he thought his journey had turned out.

To this, Thor, deeply humbled and mortified by all that had occurred, said that he felt much disgraced at the knowledge that henceforth the giants would call him a man of little account. But to his intense surprise the giant shook his head, saying: "Had I my way, you should never enter this city again, and if I had known before how strong you were you should never have come into it, for you have very nearly brought utter ruin upon us all.

"Know then, first of all, that I have deceived you with magical delusions the whole time. For I was that giant Skrymir who met you in the woods, and who tied up the mouth of the provision sack with invisible iron threads so that you could not unloose it.

"That same night you struck with your hammer three great blows upon my head, the least of which would have made an end of me if it had hit me. But in the darkness I managed each time to bring a mountain between me and your hammer without your seeing it; and if you want to see the marks you made in it you have but to look at that mountain above my city, with its top cloven into three great dales.

"Next, when you came to my hall, Loki contested with Logi, my courtier, as to who should eat the fastest. But he whose name was Logi is really Fire, and in consequence he could eat up trough and bones and all in no time. When Thialfi ran his race, he ran against Hugi who is no other than Thought, and no one, of course, can run as fast as he.

"When you yourself drank from that horn, then indeed was seen a marvel which I should never have thought possible. You did not see that one end of the horn stood in the sea, which you were drinking all the time. And when you reach the shore you will see how much the sea has ebbed by your draughts

"Nor was it less marvelous to me that you lifted up the paw of the cat. For that cat was none other than the Serpent which lies around the whole earth with its tail in its mouth. When it took the form of a cat you lifted it so that it was obliged to arch itself almost up to the sky; and then we all trembled, for we feared that you would pull it altogether out of the sea.

"Your struggle with Elli was perhaps the most amazing of all. For she is Old Age, of whom none has ever got the better.

"And now depart, O Asa folk, and 'twill be better for us both if we never see each other again."

Now when Thor heard how he had been tricked, he grasped his hammer with intent to dash both the giant and his city to pieces. But when he looked for them, both had disappeared, and he found himself standing with his companions in the midst of a large plain on which was no sign of habitation.

Then he knew that the power of the Giant folk would not yield to force, and thinking of their strange adventures Thor and his companions returned to Asgard.