

Thor goes fishing

Do Not Write

The god Thor had had a long spell out in the east catching giants and he felt the need of a change. Not that he wanted to stay at home. His wife Sif was delightful, lovely to look at, lively to talk to, but she did not like his untidiness, the way he left his boots and socks lying about and occasionally she got sharp with him. After a time at home, Thor felt he was getting under everybody's feet and he pined for freedom and action. On the occasion of which we are speaking, he had been in Bilskirnir rather longer than usual because the dwarf wheelwrights were still working on one of his chariot hubs so he decided on two things: he would leave his vehicle and goats at home and he would tramp off to the sea to try to find and fight the World Serpent, Jormungander.

Before he left his palace he thought it best to disguise himself somewhat, so he curled his normally unruly hair and beard, dressed in a suit of rather dandified clothes and played the part of a young fop. He carefully hid his hammer away in a pouch which he wore at his belt like a sporran.

He left the shores of Midgard and sailed alone right across the ocean until he came to a sandy part of the coast of Jotunheim owned by a giant called Hymir. Thor pulled his boat well above high-water mark, strode up to Hymir's door and because it was evening, boldly asked for a night's lodging. The giant was something of a recluse. He did not like being disturbed and he certainly did not like having to give anything away although he was a very prosperous fisherman and farmer and had plenty of worldly goods. One of his prize possessions was a herd of silky-haired black cattle with white horns.

The fact that Hymir always went fishing in the early morning after he had done the dairy work seemed to Thor an excellent thing. He would propose accompanying the giant when he fished in the hope of seeing the World Serpent.

Grudgingly Hymir accepted Thor as a lodger. The laws of hospitality made it impossible for him to do anything else. Next morning, just before daybreak, Thor heard the giant creaking his way out of bed and fumbling for his clothes in the dark. He was too mean to light a candle. He was going to milk the cows before rowing out to sea for the morning's fishing.

Thor lay back for half an hour and when he judged the dairy chores would be done, he got up and dressed himself. He met Hymir carrying the last two milk churns front the dairy to a running brook where the giant was going to set them in the water to cool.

"You'll be going fishing now, no doubt," said Thor, "I'd like to come with you."

"Don't want any Passengers," grunted Hymir.

"Not as a passenger," said Thor, "I mean to row with you and to help you to fish."

"You don't look much of a one for pulling an oar," said Hymir, "not in those trousers."

"You'd be surprised," said Thor. "Tell me, what do I use for bait?"

Hymir nodded his head towards the stockyard where his cattle were munching the early morning feed of hay.

"Help yourself," he said nastily, meaning there was plenty of dung lying about.

Thor chose to misunderstand him. He cut off the head of a steer thinking to himself that even the World Serpent might be tempted with that.

Hymir glared but said nothing. The ill-assorted pair made their way across a belt of pebbles to where Hymir's rowing boat was pulled up onto the sand. Together they launched it, Hymir grumbling all the time muttering, "I can't see what help I'm going to get from this fellow. If I row out as far as I normally do this puny dandy is going to freeze."

Thor was losing Patience and even thought of getting out his hammer and finishing Hymir off, but he held himself in, being determined to try his strength in quite another quarter. "

"Don't fuss so," he said, "I don't care how far we row from the shore, I shan't be the first to ask to turn back." Thor made himself comfortable on a thwart, picked up a couple of oars and started to row. Hymir rowed forward in the prow gazing sullenly at Thor's back but no matter how he tried to speed up the strokes he was unable to better his companion's efforts. At last he decided to admit the young dandy was best and said they had come far enough.

"These are the banks where I always angle for flat-fish," he growled ill-temperedly.

The god knew they would have to press on to have any hope of encountering the Serpent so he cried, "No, no! Just a bit further! If you're tired, take a rest and I'll row alone."

Hymir bit his lip and they pulled on smartly for another half hour. The giant spoke out a little more vigorously: "This is far enough! If we go any further from shore we might catch something we don't want - and it won't be a cold!" he cried.

Still Thor refused to stop rowing and once again Hymir had to help. At last, the giant pulled his dripping oars on board and said, "Stop!"

"Why?" asked Thor.

The giant had to tell the truth. "Because," he said, "we are already above the territory of the World Serpent. Don't you realize it's dangerous to stay around here?"

"If this is good enough for Jormungander then it's good enough for me!" cried Thor. "This is where we can expect the best catches to be. Get the fishing rods out!"

He grabbed the biggest of the giant's rods and a line as thick as his wrist and an iron hook large enough to trouble a whale.

"This'll do for me!" he said and fastened the ox's head firmly onto the hook.

He flung the head overboard. It entered the water with a smacking splash and the big round eyes seemed to regard him reproachfully as the head and horns sank slowly down into the depths of the sea.

Hymir himself was forced to fish as well, but he took care to choose a thin little rod with a tiny hook and only a sprat for bait. He had no intention of tangling with the World Serpent if he could avoid it. Like any other anglers, the pair sat hunched in the boat, one watching one side and one the other. In fact Hymir uneasily scanned both sides; he was so frightened that Thor would catch something out of the ordinary.

Down below on the sea bottom the World Serpent was lying with his tail firmly gripped between his jaws. The dim light from the surface clouded over and Jormungander saw two big bull's eyes and a pair of white horns drift slowly down towards him. He raised one of his huge lips, all warty and barnacled, and sucked a hole between his teeth large enough to allow the ox head to be drawn through. It was already halfway down his throat when he felt the hook prong into his gullet. He coughed and a great belch of a billow rose up under the giant's boat and nearly turned it over. But the hook would not come out.

When the Serpent realized he had taken a well baited hook, he threshed about so monstrously that Thor's line and rod were almost jerked out of his hands and the god skinned the underside of both wrists on the rough wood of the gunnel. The smart made Thor fizz with rage and he called up all his divine power and dug in with his heels, bracing both feet so hard against the boat bottom that he hauled the serpent up to the side!

Nobody ever saw a more blood-freezing sight than Thor did, as his eyes goggled down at the Serpent, and the great beast from below glared up and blew a cloud of poison into the air. They say the giant Hymir blanched, then turned yellow with terror at the sight of the Serpent's tail-filled jaws, the massive teeth, the bulbous eyes, the bladderwrack round his horn, the barnacled neck. All the time the sea swashed violently into and out of the boat. Hymir had but one thought - to save himself. He grabbed the sharp knife he used for cutting the bait which was swilling about in the bottom around his feet and with a couple of stout hacks chopped Thor's fishing line in two. The sea water swished off both ends of the cord and the World Serpent sank back into the ocean to disappear in a whirlpool of bubbles.

Thor raised his fist in mad mortification. At the very moment of success he had been baulked of his prey. He would have given anything to have had the head and horns of Jormungander mounted and fixed onto one of the walls of his palace Bilskirnir. It was not to be. And perhaps it was just as well, for he had forgotten the dire consequences prophesied if ever the World Serpent's tail should be wrenched from his mouth.

Thor vented his rage on Hymir. He gave him such a sickening blow as he brought down his raised fist that the giant turned a cartwheel out of the boat and the last Thor saw of him was the soles of his feet. Then the god rowed angrily back to shore and made his way home to Asgard.