

Assipattle and the Stoorworm

A legend from the Orkney Islands

As told by Bea Ferguson

There was once a dreadful and evil race of creatures known as the Stoorworm; enormous, fearful sea monsters and the largest and most fearful of all was the Mester Stoorworm.

Nobody knew where he had come from, but it was said that he had been created by the Devil. He had grown so large that his body curled right around the world. His massive forked tongue could sweep entire cities into the sea or crush the largest castle, but he could also use it to pick up men working in the fields or a single ship out at sea. His breath was foul and poisonous to any living thing that came within a mile of it and when he yawned, the earth shook, and fields would flood.

Everyone dreaded the Stoorworm ever reaching their land because then they would have to feed it and satisfy his terrible hunger. Every Saturday at sunrise, the Stoorworm would wake, open his cavernous mouth, yawn nine times and demand a meal of seven young maidens.

Now, a long time ago, the Stoorworm arrived off the coast of an ancient country, much to the consternation of all the people there. A spae-man, who had the reputation for being very wise, told the king what they would have to do to keep the Stoorworm happy; the folk would have to feed the beast with seven young girls every Saturday at sunrise.

As you can imagine, the local folk were less than happy about this and soon grew very angry at having to give up their daughters and watch them being so cruelly devoured in the jaws of the monster. So the spae-man went to the king and said that he thought if the King were to give up his own daughter, the most beautiful girl in the whole country, then the worm would leave and trouble them no more.

The King was horrified. The Princess was his only daughter and he loved her dearly. But his duty to the Kingdom was clear and he was forced to agree - to save the land his beloved daughter should go to the Stoorworm. The grief-stricken King asked that his daughter be spared for three weeks so that a proclamation could be sent out to all the land. If anyone would fight and kill the monster, he would receive his daughter's hand in marriage, half the kingdom and his famous sword Sikkersnapper, which he had inherited from Odin himself.

Thirty six warriors arrived at the castle, but when they caught sight of the Stoorworm, twelve fell ill and had to be taken home, twelve ran away and the other twelve got so drunk that they were fit for nothing. The King decided that there was nothing for it but that he should fight the Stoorworm himself and he determined that the very next morning he would take his sword and go out to conquer the worm.

But before he got the chance to do so, an unlikely hero arrived – he was called Assipattle. The youngest of seven sons, Assipattle lived with his father and mother and brothers on a farm. All his family worked hard on the farm except for Assipattle. He spent his days lying beside the big open fire in the kitchen where he became covered in the thick ashes from the peat, and hence he got the name of Assipattle - Ashboy. Assipattle's mother and father despaired of him and his brothers cursed him for a fool, kicking and beating him regularly. The entire family would laugh out loud when Assipattle told fantastic tales and sagas in which he was always the hero of countless incredible battles.

When he heard of the King's plea and the rewards on offer, Assipattle slipped away from the farm and rode on his father's horse, which could run faster than the wind, until he arrived at the coast where the monster lay. He set out to sea in a little boat carrying a knife and an iron pot in which lay a smouldering peat from the hearth.

As he approached the slumbering monster he could see its head as big as a mountain with eyes like dark round lochs.

The sun began to rise and as it was Saturday, the creature began to yawn. Assipattle steered closer as the creature yawned a second time. With each yawn a vast tide of water was swept down into the Worm's throat until finally, when he was close enough, one of these waves swept Assipattle's tiny little boat into the Stoorworm's cavernous mouth.

Assipattle and his boat were carried through the mouth, then down a long throat, through twisting passages and deep dark tunnels. Mile after mile he was whirled, with sea water gurgling all around him until at last the current lessened and the water level dropped. The boat grounded and Assipattle knew he only had a short time before the Stoorworm yawned again so climbed from his boat and ran as he had never run before.

Turning one corner after another he finally came across the creature's liver. Pulling out his knife, Assipattle cut a hole in the liver and stuffed the smouldering peat into the wound. He blew on the peat for all he was worth, until finally it took light. With a crackle and a splutter the Worm's monstrous liver began to burn and was soon blazing like a bonfire.

Assipattle ran back to his boat and managed to jump aboard, but only just in time for the burning liver had made the Stoorworm retch. A flood of water from its stomach picked up the little boat and set it hurtling back towards the Worm's mouth. With a spray of water, Assipattle was spewed from the monster's mouth and hurtled back over the sea before landing safely on the shore.

Once back on shore, Assipattle watched as the fire grew bigger. Black smoke billowed from the monster's nostrils and in his agony his forked tongue shot out and up into the sky and then fell with such a crash that it made a deep rift in the earth. The tide rushed into the rift and became the Baltic Sea.

The Stoorworm twisted and writhed in torment, flinging his head up into the sky. Every time it fell back to earth the whole world shook and groaned. With each fall, teeth dropped from its foaming mouth. The first lot of falling teeth became the Orkney Islands and the next, the Shetland Islands. Last of all, when the Stoorworm was almost dead, the Faroe Islands fell with an almighty splash.

In the end the creature coiled up its huge body into a great mass and there it remains to this day, we call it Iceland. The fire that still dances to this day from the mountains is the liver of the Stoorworm still burning.

Once the sky had cleared and the sun shone again, the King took Assipattle into his arms and called him his son and the people rejoiced that the Stoorworm was dead.

Assipattle was given the sword, Sikkersnapper and half the kingdom and luckily, he and the Princess fell in love for, a week later, they were married in great style in the Royal Palace. They lived in happiness and joy, and if they are not dead they are living still.

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