

## Shortshanks

by Sir George Webbe Dasent  
from *Popular Tales from the Norse*

Once on a time, there was a poor couple who lived in a tumble-down hut, in which there was nothing but black want, so that they hadn't a morsel to eat, nor a stick to burn. But though they had next to nothing of other things, they had God's blessing in the way of children, and every year they had another babe. Now, when this story begins, they were just looking out for a new child; and, to tell the truth, the husband was rather cross, and he was always going about grumbling and growling, and saying, 'For his part, he thought one might have too many of these God's gifts.' So when the time came that the babe was to be born, he went off into the wood to fetch fuel, saying, 'he didn't care to stop and see the young squaller; he'd be sure to hear him soon enough, screaming for food.'

Now, when her husband was well out of the house, his wife gave birth to a beautiful boy, who began to look about the room as soon as ever he came into the world.

'Oh! dear mother', he said, 'give me some of my brother's cast-off clothes, and a few days' food, and I'll go out into the world and try my luck; you have children enough as it is, that I can see.'

'God help you, my son!' answered his mother; 'that can never be, you are far too young yet.'

But the tiny one stuck to what he said, and begged and prayed till his mother was forced to let him have a few old rags, and a little food tied up in a bundle, and off he went right merrily and manfully into the wide world. But he was scarce out of the house before his mother had another boy, and he too looked about him, and said:

'Oh, dear mother! give me some of my brother's old clothes and a few days' food, and I'll go out into the world to find my twin-brother; you have children enough already on your hands, that I can see.'

'God help you, my poor little fellow!' said his mother; 'you are far too little, this will never do.'

But it was no good; the tiny one begged and prayed so hard, till he got some old tattered rags and a bundle of food; and so he wandered out into the world like a man, to find his twin-brother. Now, when the younger had walked a while, he saw his brother a good bit on before him, so he called out to him to stop.

'Holloa! can't you stop? why, you lay legs to the ground as if you were running a race. But you might just as well have stayed to see your youngest, brother before you set off into the world in such a hurry.'

So the elder stopped and looked round; and when the younger had come up to him and told him the whole story, and how he was his brother, he went on to say:

'But let's sit down here and see what our mother has given us for food.' So they sat down together, and were soon great friends.

Now when they had gone a bit farther on their way, they came to a brook which ran through a green meadow, and the youngest said now the time was come to give one another names, 'Since we set off in such a hurry that we hadn't time to do it at home, we may as well do it here.'

'Well!' said the elder, 'and what shall your name be?'

'Oh!' said the younger, 'my name shall be Shortshanks; and yours, what shall it be?'

'I will be called King Sturdy', answered the eldest.

So they christened each other in the brook, and went on; but when they had walked a while they came to a cross road, and agreed they should part there, and each take his own road. So they parted, but they hadn't gone half a mile before their roads met again. So they parted the second time, and took each a road; but in a little while the same thing happened, and they met again, they scarce knew how; and the same thing happened a third time also. Then they agreed that they should each choose a quarter of the heavens, and one was to go east and the other west; but before they parted, the elder said:

'If you ever fall into misfortune or need, call three times on me, and I will come and help you; but mind you don't call on me till you are at the last pinch.'

'Well!' said Shortshanks, 'if that's to be the rule, I don't think we shall meet again very soon.'

After that they bade each other good-bye, and Shortshanks went east, and King Sturdy west.

Now, you must know, when Shortshanks had gone a good bit alone, he met an old, old crook-backed hag, who had only one eye, and Shortshanks snapped it up.

'Oh! oh!' screamed the hag, 'what has become of my eye?'

'What will you give me', asked Shortshanks, 'if you get your eye back?'

'I'll give you a sword, and such a sword! It will put a whole army to flight, be it ever so great', answered the old woman.

'Out with it, then!' said Shortshanks.

So the old hag gave him the sword, and got her eye back again. After that, Shortshanks wandered on a while, and another old, old crook-backed hag met him who had only one eye, which Shortshanks stole before she was aware of him.

'Oh, oh! whatever has become of my eye', screamed the hag.

'What will you give me to get your eye back?' asked Shortshanks.

'I'll give you a ship', said the woman, 'which can sail over fresh water and salt water, and over high hills and deep dales.'

'Well! out with it', said Shortshanks.

So the old woman gave him a little tiny ship, no bigger than he could put in his pocket, and she got her eye back again, and they each went their way. But when he had wandered on a long, long way, he met a third time an old, old crook-backed hag, with only one eye. This eye,

too, Shortshanks stole; and when the hag screamed and made a great to-do, bawling out what had become of her eye, Shortshanks said:

'What will you give me to get back your eye?'

Then she answered:

'I'll give you the art how to brew a hundred lasts of malt at one strike.'

Well! for teaching that art the old hag got back her eye, and they each went their way.

But when Shortshanks had walked a little way, he thought it might be worth while to try his ship; so he took it out of his pocket, and put first one foot into it, and then the other; and as soon as ever he set one foot into it, it began to grow bigger and bigger, and by the time he set the other foot into it, it was as big as other ships that sail on the sea. Then Shortshanks said:

'Off and away, over fresh water and salt water, over high hills and deep dales, and don't stop till you come to the king's palace.'

And lo! away went the ship as swiftly as a bird through the air, till it came down a little below the king's palace, and there it stopped. From the palace windows people had stood and seen Shortshanks come sailing along, and they were all so amazed that they ran down to see who it could be that came sailing in a ship through the air. But while they were running down, Shortshanks had stepped out of his ship and put it into his pocket again; for as soon as he stepped out of it, it became as small as it was when he got it from the old woman. So those who had run down from the palace saw no one but a ragged little boy standing down there by the strand. Then the king asked whence he came, but the boy said he didn't know, nor could he tell them how he had got there. There he was, and that was all they could get out of him; but he begged and prayed so prettily to get a place in the king's palace; saying, if there was nothing else for him to do, he could carry in wood and water for the kitchen-maid, that their hearts were touched, and he got leave to stay there.

Now when Shortshanks came up to the palace, he saw how it was all hung with black, both outside and in, wall and roof; so he asked the kitchen-maid what all that mourning meant?

'Don't you know?' said the kitchen-maid; 'I'll soon tell you: the king's daughter was promised away a long time ago to three ogres, and next Thursday evening one of them is coming to fetch her. Ritter Red, it is true, has given out that he is man enough to set her free, but God knows if he can do it; and now you know why we are all in grief and sorrow.'

So when Thursday evening came, Ritter Red led the Princess down to the strand, for there it was she was to meet the Ogre, and he was to stay by her there and watch; but he wasn't likely to do the Ogre much harm, I reckon, for as soon as ever the Princess had sat down on the strand, Ritter Red climbed up into a great tree that stood there, and hid himself as well as he could among the boughs. The Princess begged and prayed him not to leave her, but Ritter Red turned a deaf ear to her, and all he said was:

'Tis better for one to lose life than for two.'

That was what Ritter Red said.

Meantime Shortshanks went to the kitchen-maid, and asked her so prettily if he mightn't go down to the strand for a bit?

'And what should take you down to the strand?' asked the kitchen-maid. 'You know you've no business there.'

'Oh, dear friend', said Shortshanks, 'do let me go? I should so like to run down there and play a while with the other children; that I should.'

'Well, well!' said the kitchen-maid, 'off with you; but don't let me catch you staying there a bit over the time when the brose for supper must be set on the fire, and the roast put on the spit; and let me see; when you come back, mind you bring a good armful of wood with you.'

Yes! Shortshanks would mind all that; so off he ran down to the strand.

But just as he reached the spot where the Princess sat, what should come but the Ogre tearing along in his ship, so that the wind roared

and howled after him. He was so tall and stout it was awful to look on him, and he had five heads of his own.

'Fire and flame!' screamed the Ogre.

'Fire and flame yourself!' said Shortshanks.

'Can you fight?' roared the Ogre.

'If I can't, I can learn', said Shortshanks.

So the Ogre struck at him with a great thick iron club which he had in his fist, and the earth and stones flew up five yards into the air after the stroke.

'My!' said Shortshanks, 'that was something like a blow, but now you shall see a stroke of mine.'

Then he grasped the sword he had got from the old crook-backed hag, and cut at the Ogre; and away went all his five heads flying over the sand. So when the Princess saw she was saved, she was so glad that she scarce knew what to do, and she jumped and danced for joy. 'Come, lie down, and sleep a little in my lap', she said to Shortshanks, and as he slept she threw over him a tinsel robe.

Now you must know, it wasn't long before Ritter Red crept down from the tree, as soon as he saw there was nothing to fear in the way, and he went up to the Princess and threatened her until she promised to say it was he who had saved her life; for if she wouldn't say so, he said he would kill her on the spot. After that he cut out the Ogre's lungs and tongue, and wrapped them up in his handkerchief, and so led the Princess back to the palace, and whatever honours he had not before, he got then, for the king did not know how to find honour enough for him, and made him sit every day on his right hand at dinner.

As for Shortshanks, he went first of all on board the Ogre's ship, and took a whole heap of gold and silver rings, as large as hoops, and trotted off with them as hard as he could to the palace. When the kitchen-maid set her eyes on all that gold and silver, she was quite scared, and asked him:

'But dear, good, Shortshanks, wherever did you get all this from?' for she was rather afraid he hadn't come rightly by it.

'Oh!' answered Shortshanks, 'I went home for a bit, and there I found these hoops, which had fallen off some old pails of ours, so I laid hands on them for you, if you must know.'

Well! when the kitchen-maid heard they were for her, she said nothing more about the matter, but thanked Shortshanks, and they were good friends again.

The next Thursday evening it was the same story over again; all were in grief and trouble, but Ritter Red said, as he had saved the Princess from one Ogre, it was hard if he couldn't save her from another; and down he led her to the strand as brave as a lion. But he didn't do this Ogre much harm either, for when the time came that they looked for the Ogre, he said, as he had said before:

"Tis better one should lose life than two', and crept up into his tree again. But Shortshanks begged the kitchen-maid to let him go down to the strand for a little.

'Oh!' asked the kitchen-maid, 'and what business have you down there?'

'Dear friend', said Shortshanks. 'do pray let me go. I long so to run down and play a while with the other children.'

Well! the kitchen-maid gave him leave to go, but he must promise to be back by the time the roast was turned, and he was to mind and bring a big bundle of wood with him. So Shortshanks had scarce got down to the strand, when the Ogre came tearing along in his ship, so that the wind howled and roared around him; he was twice as big as the other Ogre, and he had ten heads on his shoulders.

'Fire and flame!' screamed the Ogre.

Fire and flame yourself!' answered Shortshanks.

'Can you fight?' roared the Ogre.

'If I can't, I can learn', said Shortshanks.

Then the Ogre struck at him with his iron club; it was even bigger than that which the first Ogre had, and the earth and stones flew up ten yards into the air.

My!' said Shortshanks, 'that was something like a blow now you shall see a stroke of mine.' Then he grasped his sword, and cut off all the Ogre's ten heads at one blow, and sent them dancing away over the sand.

Then the Princess said again to him, 'Lie down and sleep a little while on my lap'; and while Shortshanks lay there, she threw over him a silver robe. But as soon as Ritter Red marked that there was no more danger in the way, he crept down from the tree, and threatened the Princess, till she was forced to give her word, to say it was he who had set her free; after that, he cut the lungs and tongue out of the Ogre, and wrapped them in his handkerchief, and led the Princess back to the palace. Then you may fancy what mirth and joy there was, and the king was at his wits' end to know how to show Ritter Red honour and favour enough.

This time, too, Shortshanks took a whole armful of gold and silver rings from the Ogre's ship, and when he came back to the palace the kitchen-maid clapped her hands in wonder, asking wherever he got all that gold and silver from. But Shortshanks answered that he had been home a while, and that the hoops had fallen off some old pails, so he had laid his hands on them for his friend the kitchen-maid. So when the third Thursday evening came, everything happened as it had happened twice before; the whole palace was hung with black, and all went about mourning and weeping. But Ritter Red said he couldn't see what need they had to be so afraid; he had freed the Princess from two Ogres, and he could very well free her from a third; so he led her down to the strand, but when the time drew near for the Ogre to come up, he crept into his tree again, and hid himself. The Princess begged and prayed, but it was no good, for Ritter Red said again:

"Tis better that one should lose life than two.'

That evening, too, Shortshanks begged for leave to go down to the strand.

'Oh!' said the kitchen-maid, 'what should take you down there?'



But he begged and prayed so, that at last he got leave to go, only he had to promise to be back in the kitchen again when the roast was to be turned. So off he went, but he had scarce reached the strand when the Ogre came with the wind howling and roaring after him. He was much, much bigger than either of the other two, and he had fifteen heads on his shoulders.

'Fire and flame!' roared out the Ogre.

'Fire and flame yourself!' said Shortshanks.

'Can you fight?' screamed the Ogre.

'If I can't, I can learn', said Shortshanks.

'I'll soon teach you', screamed the Ogre, and struck at him with his iron club, so that the earth and stones flew up fifteen yards into the air.

'My!' said Shortshanks, 'that was something like a blow; but now you shall see a stroke of mine.'

As he said that, he grasped his sword, and cut off all the Ogre's fifteen heads at one blow, and sent them all dancing over the sand.

So the Princess was freed from all the Ogres, and she both blessed and thanked Shortshanks for saving her life.

'Sleep now a while on my lap', she said; and he laid his head on her lap, and while he slept, she threw over him a golden robe.

'But how shall we let it be known that it is you that have saved me?' she asked, when he awoke.

'Oh, I'll soon tell you', answered Shortshanks. 'When Ritter Red has led you home again, and given himself out as the man who has saved you, you know he is to have you to wife, and half the kingdom. Now, when they ask you, on your wedding-day, whom you will have to be your cup-bearer, you must say, "I will have the ragged boy who does odd jobs in the kitchen, and carries in wood and water for the kitchen-maid." So when I am filling your cups, I will spill a drop on his plate, but none on yours; then he will be wroth, and give me a blow, and the

same thing will happen three times. But the third time you must mind and say, "Shame on you! to strike my heart's darling; he it is who set me free, and him will I have!"

After that Shortshanks ran back to the palace, as he had done before; but he went first on board the Ogre's ship, and took a whole heap of gold, silver, and precious stones, and out of them he gave the kitchen-maid another great armful of gold and silver rings.

Well! as for Ritter Red, as soon as ever he saw that all risk was over, he crept down from his tree, and threatened the Princess till she was forced to promise she would say it was he who had saved her. After that, he led her back to the palace, and all the honour shown him before was nothing to what he got now, for the king thought of nothing else than how he might best honour the man who had saved his daughter from the three Ogres. As for his marrying her, and having half the kingdom, that was a settled thing, the king said. But-when the wedding-day came, the Princess begged she might have the ragged boy who carried in wood and water for the cook to be her cup-bearer at the bridal-feast.

'I can't think why you should want to bring that filthy beggar boy in here', said Ritter Red; but the Princess had a will of her own, and said she would have him, and no one else, to pour out her wine; so she had her way at last. Now everything went as it had been agreed between Shortshanks and the Princess; he spilled a drop on Ritter Red's plate, but none on hers, and each time Ritter Red got wroth and struck him. At the first blow Shortshank's rags fell off which he had worn in the kitchen; at the second the tinsel robe fell off; and at the third the silver robe; and then he stood in his golden robe, all gleaming and glittering in the light. Then the Princess said:

'Shame on you! to strike my heart's darling! he has saved me, and him will I have!'

Ritter Red cursed and swore it was he who had set her free; but the king put in his word, and said:

'The man who saved my daughter must have some token to show for it.'

Yes! Ritter Red had something to show, and he ran off at once after his handkerchief with the lungs and tongues in it, and Shortshanks fetched all the gold and silver, and precious things, he had taken out of the Ogres' ships. So each laid his tokens before the king, and the king said:

'The man who has such precious stores of gold, and silver, and diamonds, must have slain the Ogre, and spoiled his goods, for such things are not to be had elsewhere.'

So Ritter Red was thrown into a pit full of snakes, and Shortshanks was to have the Princess and half the kingdom.

One day Shortshanks and the king were out walking, and Shortshanks asked the king if he hadn't any more children?

'Yes', said the king, 'I had another daughter; but the Ogre has taken her away, because there was no one who could save her. Now you are going to have one daughter, but if you can set the other free whom the Ogre has carried off, you shall have her too with all my heart, and the other half of my kingdom.'

'Well', said Shortshanks, 'I may as well try; but I must have an iron cable, five hundred fathoms long, and five hundred men, and food for them to last fifteen weeks, for I have a long voyage before me.'

Yes! the king said he should have them, but he was afraid there wasn't a ship in his kingdom big enough to carry such a freight.

'Oh! if that's all', said Shortshanks, 'I have a ship of my own.'

With that he whipped out of his pocket the ship he had got from the old hag.

The king laughed, and thought it was all a joke; but Shortshanks begged him only to give him what he asked, and he should soon see if it was a joke. So they got together what he wanted, and Shortshanks bade him put the cable on board the ship first of all; but there was no one man who could lift it, and there wasn't room for more than one at a time round the tiny ship. Then Shortshanks took hold of the cable by one end, and laid a link or two into the ship; and as he threw in the links, the ship grew bigger and bigger, till at last it got so big, that

there was room enough and to spare in it for the cable, and the five hundred men, and their food, and Shortshanks, and all. Then he said to the ship:

'Off and away, over fresh water and salt water, over high hill and deep dale, and don't stop till you come to where the king's daughter is.' And away went the ship over land and sea, till the wind whistled after it.

So when they had sailed far, far away, the ship stood stock still in the middle of the sea.

'Ah!' said Shortshanks, 'now we have got so far; but how we are to get back is another story.'

Then he took the cable and tied one end of it round his waist, and said:

'Now, I must go to the bottom, but when I give the cable a good tug, and want to come up again, mind you all hoist away with a will, or your lives will be lost as well as mine'; and with these words overboard he leapt, and dived down, so that the yellow waves rose round him in an eddy.

Well, he sank and sank, and at last he came to the bottom, and there he saw a great rock rising up with a door in it, so he opened the door and went in. When he got inside, he saw another Princess, who sat and sewed, but when she saw Shortshanks, she clasped her hands together and cried out:

'Now, God be thanked! you are the first Christian man I've set eyes on since I came here.'

'Very good', said Shortshanks; 'but do you know I've come to fetch you?'

'Oh!' she cried, 'you'll never fetch me; you'll never have that luck, for if the Ogre sees you, he'll kill you on the spot.'

'I'm glad you spoke of the Ogre', said Shortshanks; 'twould be fine fun to see him; whereabouts is he?'

Then the Princess told him the Ogre was out looking for some one who could brew a hundred lasts of malt at one strike, for he was going to give a great feast, and less drink wouldn't do.

'Well! I can do that', said Shortshanks.

'Ah!' said the Princess, 'if only the Ogre wasn't so hasty, I might tell him about you; but he's so cross; I'm afraid he'll tear you to pieces as soon as he comes in, without waiting to hear my story. Let me see what is to be done. Oh! I have it; just hide yourself in the side-room yonder, and let us take our chance.'

Well! Shortshanks did as she told him, and he had scarce crept into the side-room before the Ogre came in.

'HUF!' said the Ogre; 'what a horrid smell of Christian man's blood!'

'Yes!' said the Princess, 'I know there is, for a bird flew over the house with a Christian man's bone in his bill, and let it fall down the chimney. I made all the haste I could to get it out again, but I dare say it's that you smell.'

'Ah!' said the Ogre, 'like enough.'

Then the Princess asked the Ogre if he had laid hold of any one who could brew a hundred lasts of malt at one strike?

'No', said the Ogre, 'I can't hear of any one who can do it.'

'Well', she said, 'a while ago, there was a chap in here who said he could do it.'

'Just like you, with your wisdom!' said the Ogre; 'why did you let him go away then, when you knew he was the very man I wanted?'

'Well then, I didn't let him go', said the Princess; 'but father's temper is a little hot, so I hid him away in the side-room yonder; but if father hasn't hit upon any one, here he is.'

'Well', said the Ogre, 'let him come in then.'

So Shortshanks came in, and the Ogre asked him if it were true that he could brew a hundred lasts of malt at a strike?

'Yes it is', said Shortshanks.

'Twas good luck then to lay hands on you', said the Ogre, 'and now fall to work this minute; but heaven help you if you don't brew the ale strong enough.'

'Oh', said Shortshanks, 'never fear, it shall be stinging stuff'; and with that he began to brew without more fuss, but all at once he cried out:

'I must have more of you Ogres to help in the brewing, for these I have got a'nt half strong enough.'

Well, he got more--so many, that there was a whole swarm of them, and then the brewing went on bravely. Now when the sweet-wort was ready, they were all eager to taste it, you may guess; first of all the Ogre, and then all his kith and kin. But Shortshanks had brewed the wort so strong that they all fell down dead, one after another, like so many flies, as soon as they had tasted it. At last there wasn't one of them left alive but one vile old hag, who lay bed-ridden in the chimney-corner.

'Oh you poor old wretch', said Shortshanks, 'you may just as well taste the wort along with the rest.'

So, he went and scooped up a little from the bottom of the copper in a scoop, and gave her a drink, and so he was rid of the whole pack of them.

As he stood there and looked about him, he cast his eye on a great chest, so he took it and filled it with gold and silver; then he tied the cable round himself and the Princess and the chest, and gave it a good tug, and his men pulled them all up, safe and sound. As soon as ever Shortshanks was well up, he said to the ship,

'Off and away, over fresh water and salt water, high hill and deep dale, and don't stop till you come to the king's palace'; and straightway the ship held on her course, so that the yellow billows foamed round her. When the people in the palace saw the ship sailing up, they were not slow in meeting them with songs and music, welcoming Shortshanks

with great joy; but the gladdest of all was the king, who had now got his other daughter back again.

But now Shortshanks was rather down-hearted, for you must know that both the princesses wanted to have him, and he would have no other than the one he had first saved, and she was the youngest. So he walked up and down, and thought and thought what he should do to get her, and yet do something to please her sister. Well, one day as he was turning the thing over in his mind, it struck him if he only had his brother King Sturdy, who was so like him that no one could tell the one from the other, he would give up to him the other princess and half the kingdom, for he thought one-half was quite enough.

Well, as soon as ever this came into his mind, he went outside the palace and called on King Sturdy, but no one came. So he called a second time a little louder, but still no one came. Then he called out the third time 'King Sturdy' with all his might, and there stood his brother before him. 'Didn't I say!' he said to Shortshanks, 'didn't I say you were not to call me except in your utmost need? and here there is not so much as a gnat to do you any harm', and with that he gave him such a box on the ear that Shortshanks tumbled head over heels on the grass.

'Now shame on you to 'hit so hard!' said Shortshanks. 'First of all I won a princess and half the kingdom, and then I won another princess and the other half of the kingdom; and now I'm thinking to give you one of the princesses and half the kingdom. Is there any rhyme or reason in giving me such a box on the ear?'

When King Sturdy heard that, he begged his brother to forgive him, and they were soon as good friends as ever again.

'Now', said Shortshanks, 'you know, we are so much alike, that no one can tell the one from the other; so just change clothes with me and go into the palace; then the princesses will think it is I that am coming in, and the one that kisses you first you shall have for your wife, and I will have the other for mine.'

And he said this because he knew well enough that the elder king's daughter was the stronger, and so he could very well guess how things would go. As for King Sturdy, he was willing enough, so he changed clothes with his brother and went into the palace. But when he came

into the Princesses' bower they thought it was Shortshanks, and both ran up to him to kiss him; but the elder, who was stronger and bigger, pushed her sister on one side, and threw her arms round King Sturdy's neck, and gave him a kiss; and so he got her for his wife, and Shortshanks got the younger Princess. Then they made ready for the wedding, and you may fancy what a grand one it was, when I tell you, that the fame of it was noised abroad over seven kingdoms.