

Bjorn the Mouse

This is a story, not the story of a boy or a girl, not the story of warrior or a ship or a horse or a lion. It is the story of a little mouse. His name was Bjorn (like B-your-n), which means ‘bear’ in the language where he came from. Bears are fierce and dangerous there, but our Bjorn was only a little mouse.

He lived in Norway, where the sea reaches with long arms into deep valleys called fjords between the mountains. It is a land of steep slopes and tall forests. Bjorn didn’t like to be up in the forest, he liked to be down where the people lived, clustered on the little flatter places where there was stony soil near the shore. Where people lived there was always food, Bjorn reckoned: seeds of oats or barley, apples and berries, bits of cheese, scraps of bread or scrapings of porridge. Their houses were always nice and warm, and the deep layer of warm sweet-scented rushes on the floor meant he could always find a snug hollow to curl up in out of the way. All the long dark winter he lived snug and happy among the chatter of people. It was their dogs he was afraid of, and several times he barely escaped being munched up by strong white doggy teeth.

But when spring melted the snow and the sun shone warmly on the little shoots of green outside, he couldn’t help stealing out the door to feel the mild breeze and smell the spring. What was this? Another mouse was bounding over by the last of the woodpile outside the house. Who might this be? A lady mouse it was, who called herself Signy, and Bjorn squeaked with pleasure when she came jumping over to him. They weren’t long getting acquainted, I can tell you, and they romped all up and down the vegetable bed among the stumps of last year’s cabbages.

There was great stir and bustle in the houses clustered about. Children were bringing buckets of fresh water from the well to fill barrels, huge folds of cloth were being brought out of the houses -- the women had been working hard a-weaving all winter -- and the men were scraping down the big wooden ship that sat beside the water's edge. Signy was all curiosity and jumped fearlessly along bundles stashed by the ship, but Bjorn was uneasy about all that cold water, and squeaked by the shore, begging for her to come back. But she only laughed and shook her whiskers at him.

As the days went the people worked furiously. The children gathered moss to use as toilet paper, the cloth got mounted on the ship as huge sails, the men sharpened their axes and swords and packed their extra clothes in little chests. The chests were brought on board and arranged as seats facing forward along the deck. Signy danced up and down between them, she laughed and dodged when the warriors roared and kicked at her. Bjorn quivered on the shore squeaking piteously. Soon men and boys and a few of the women climbed up the gangplank, the others on shore cried and waved goodbye. The sails were being hoisted, Signy teetered on the gunwale near the stern, the ship began to heave. Just as the gangway was being drawn up, with a last desperate rush, Bjorn scampered up to join Signy. She danced for joy to have him with her, but he just trembled.

The voyage down the fjord was bad enough for Bjorn, who felt sea-sick straight away, but that was nothing to how he felt when they got out of the fjord into the open sea. Poor little Bjorn lay huddled below. He was wet and bedraggled with water and vomit, and when Signy coaxingly told him that there was food a-plenty on board, he could only hide his head under his paw and cry.

The ship heaved and tossed, the waves splashed over them, the men shouted and sang as they heaved on the sails. Later when the wind dropped, they took up their oars and rowed, and when the stars sprang out in the sky, still they rowed, singing as they went.

Bjorn was the grateful little mouse the day they came to land. He tottered after Signy off the ship, and swore he'd never go near the sea again. He and Signy weren't long meeting others of their kind, but oh, how different these mice were! Their fur was funny, and their faces were somehow odd. The first ones they met laughed at them, and one came up and challenged them, calling them rude names. Suddenly Bjorn felt as fierce as his name. 'I am Bjorn the bear-mouse,' he squeaked. 'And this is my lady-friend, Signy. Signy is going to have babies soon, so we are going to settle down right here where the humans are building this house. These are our humans, we came with them, and we belong with them. So if you don't like it, that's too bad, because we're staying right here.'

Bjorn and Signy were the first Scandinavian mice to come to the Shetland Islands, and they had many children. Other mice like them came over after, too, for the ships went back and forth a great deal. And their descendants are still there to this day, in Shetland and Orkney and around. But they are still quite different from the mainland mice that live in the rest of Scotland.

1. Questions

1. What does 'Bjorn' mean in Norwegian?
 2. What is a fjord?
 3. Describe how the women and children helped get the ship ready for launching.
 4. What kind of food did Bjorn like to eat?
 5. Where did the warriors store their belongings?
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2. The first time the Vikings met Eskimos, they may have felt rather like Bjorn and Flicka meeting the mice in Scotland. What other peoples would the Vikings have encountered who they might have thought looked strange?
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3. Mice and rats have spread with people around the world. Dogs, horses, goats and cats have too. What is the difference between these two groups? Can you think of some other animals in the first group? Can you think of some other animals in the second group? List some of the benefits and problems that these two groups bring to us.