

## Stith Thompson - The Folktale - p85-86

### F. EXTRAORDINARY STRENGTH

In the story of The Bear's Son (Type 301) we have already encountered the supernaturally strong hero. The same introduction leads to the train of events in that story is very frequently used as an opening of an entirely different tale. A very common designation for this story is Strong John (Type 650). It begins in the same way as The Bear's Son by accounting for the hero's origin. Frequently he is actually a son of a bear and a woman, though sometimes he may simply have the strength of a bear because his mother had been carried off and was still in captivity to the bear at the time of his birth. Other extraordinary origins are ascribed to him: he may be the son of a woman of the sea or of a kind of wood-nymph, or of a troll woman and a man who has merely dreamed a connection with her. Finally, he may be said to be struck from iron by a smith. Whatever may be his marvelous birth, his usually precocious. His mother suckles him until he is well grown, and even before his weaning he practices his strength by uprooting trees. He is finally sent from home on account of his enormous appetite. For his journey he takes along a giant cane (sometimes said to hold fifty cattle). He undertakes to work for a smith, but he drives the anvil into the ground and he throws trees onto the roof of the smithy and breaks it.

Thus far the tale is identical with The Bear's Son. Instead of meeting the extraordinary companions and having adventures in the lower world, the hero in this story goes to work for a man with whom he enters into a strange contract. The stories differ among themselves as to the details. The three most popular are these. As payment for his year's labor he is to be allowed to give his master a single blow: the stroke sends the man to the sky; or he is to receive in payment all the grain he can carry off: he makes away with the whole crop. The third bargain is known as the anger bargain (Motif K172). Severe punishment shall be given to the first of the bargainers to become angry. The youth heaps all kinds of indignities on the master to provoke his anger and finally annoys him beyond endurance, so that in the end when his anger explodes the boy gives him a great blow or even sometimes cuts off his ears. The interest in the story largely consists in these tricks which the hero plays on the master. When he is asked to thresh grain, he breaks the flail and makes a new one of the stable roof beams. Similarly, when he is to clear land or to dig ditches or to plow, he breaks the tools or kills or injures the work animals.(25) The master tries his best to kill the youth, but the latter

always turns things to his own advantage.(26) The boy is sent to the devil's mill, but he drives the devils to his master's house. Likewise when he is sent for a wild horse or demons in hell, he brings them back with him. The master commands him to dig a well. While he is down below the master throws a millstone on him, but the strong boy puts it around his neck as a collar and asks that chickens stop scratching sand on him.

Many other separate incidents in this story also appear elsewhere. Such, for example, are the long nursing of the strong hero (Motif F611.2.3), and the supernatural birth from an object (Motifs F611.1.11, T540). The setting out of the hero, especially his adventures at the smithy, are strongly reminiscent of the Siegfried myth. In other respects even the casual reader is reminded of the story of Hercules, not only because of the strength of the hero, but particularly because some of the tasks, such as bringing the devils from hell, are practically identical.

In spite of all these connections with ancient myth or with separate anecdotes or with the folktale of The Bear's Son, Strong John, as a modern oral tradition is a very definite entity, well constructed by the Scandinavians and Baltic peoples. Nearly four hundred versions have been reported in Finland and Estonia alone. It is also known in nearly every European country, but seems to extend very little into Asia. The French have brought it to Canada where it is still told, not only by their descendants, but by Indians both in Nova Scotia and in British Columbia. A Portuguese version has come by way of the Cape Verde Islands to Massachusetts.

Any distribution study of Strong John is made difficult because of its close relation with The Bear's Son. One is not always quite sure whether cataloguers have been careful to discriminate between the two types. It seems fair to say, however, that the special development of the strong man motif seen in this story has been essentially European. Some kinds of tales of powerful men are found nearly everywhere, and it is natural that some of the incidents should be similar.

(25). For details of these impudent or destructive acts, see the whole series of types numbered from 1000 to 1029. These sometimes appear independently or in small groups. Some of them are widespread, but others are confined to the Baltic and Scandinavian countries, where they have received vigorous development.

(26). Many incidents which appear in this section of the tales are found separately or in other connections. See Types 11 15 to 1122.