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ASGARD AND THE NORSE HEROES · RE-TOLD BY KATHARINE F. BOULT

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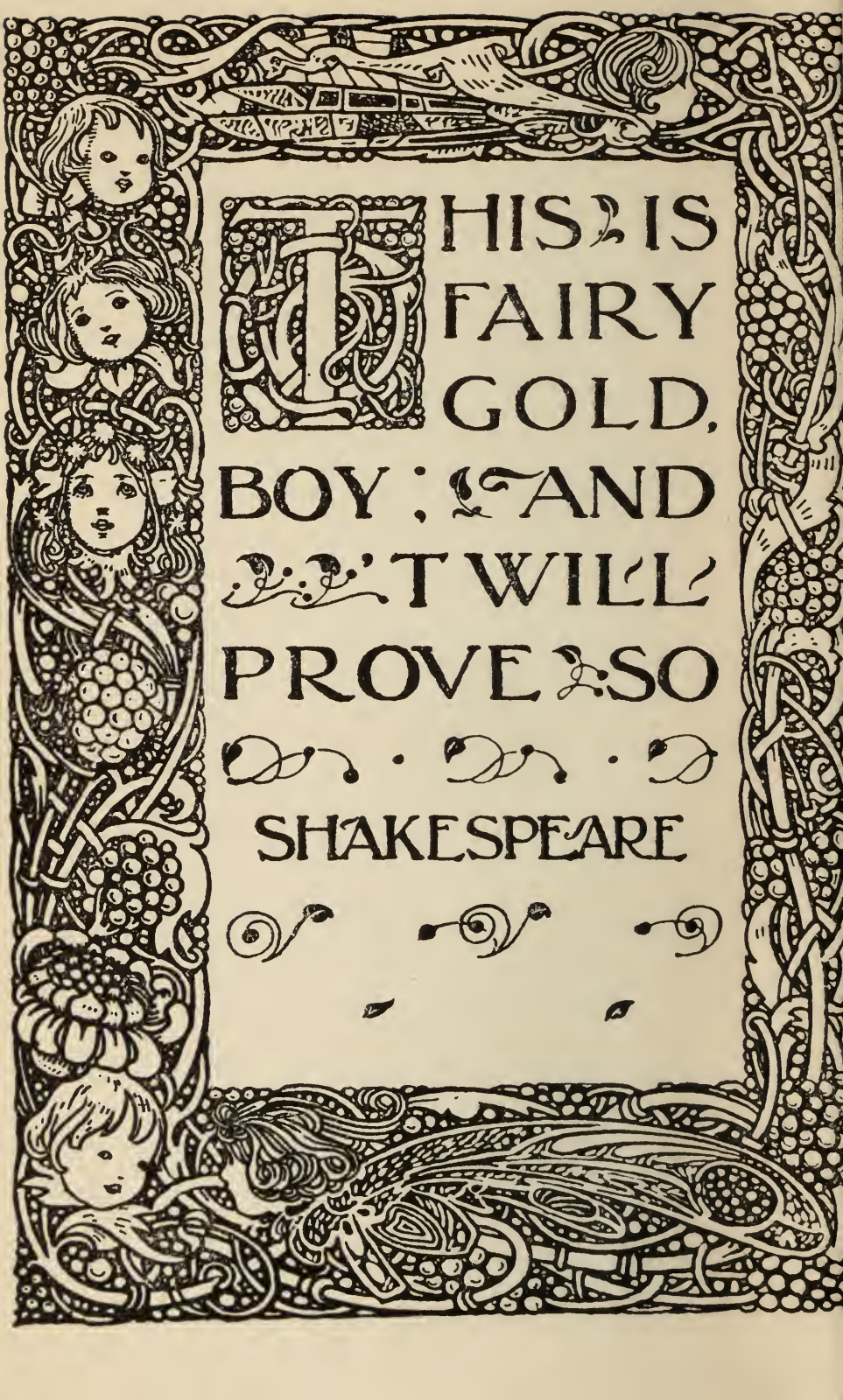
THIS IS
FAIRY
GOLD,
BOY: AND
'T WILL
PROVE SO
SHAKESPEARE

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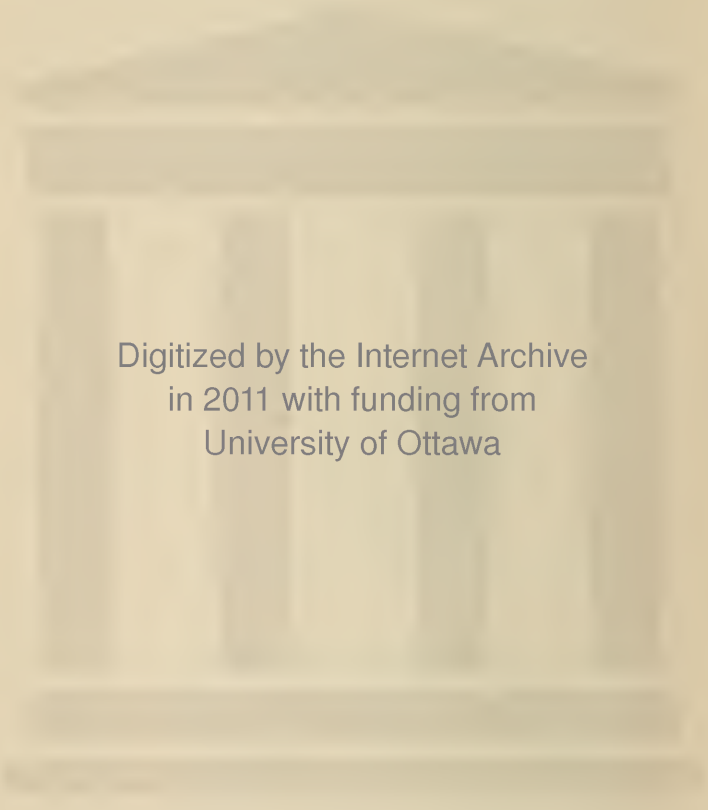

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INTRODUCTION

OF THE SETTLEMENT OF ICELAND

ELEVEN hundred years ago, the men of Norway, or vikings, were dreaded throughout all the coasts of Europe.

Each summer the hapless people living near the shore looked out in fear lest they should see the hated long-ships, with bright-coloured sails, carved dragon-prow and rows of shields along either side, come speeding over the waves, bringing the fair-haired, blue-eyed warriors to plunder and burn and kill. And each Sunday they prayed in church to be delivered from the fury of the Northmen.

Now Norway was a poor country, divided by high mountains into many dales, up which the long dark sea-fjords threaded their way, and there was not work for all the men in the land; the fields and cattle were, therefore, cared for by thralls and women. The men spent their winters in hunting, drinking, and fighting their neighbours, and, when spring came, they drew their long-ships out of the viks, or small bays, where they had been housed for the winter, and sailed away, south, west, or east, to harry the people of other countries and gather the riches they coveted—gold, jewels, amber, silks, and the fine soft cloth of the south.

From these bays or viks they were called vikings. The word has nothing to do with a royal race; their kings were known as sea-kings when they went a-roving.

It was no hardship to them to fight. Their religion taught them that to be a warrior was the finest thing in life and that to die in battle would lead them to eternal feasting with their gods in the glorious hall of Valhalla. Every dale or group of dales in Norway had its own king or earl (jarl), and each of these was always ready to fight the chiefs near him.

It chanced that, in 860, a handsome, haughty boy of ten, called Harald, succeeded to his father's kingdom, which was one of the largest districts in the land. By his bravery and cleverness he mastered his followers and kept them obedient, although, for some years, he does not seem to have thought of adding to his realm. But one day he saw fair Gyda, the daughter of a neighbouring jarl.

She was so beautiful, that, fired by love, the young king could think of nothing but her proud blue eyes and curling golden hair, and at last he called two of his chief jarls and said:

"I must marry fair Gyda. Go ye and tell her father. Say that I need no dowry with her, but Gyda must come speedily and be my queen."

This pleased the father of Gyda much, for the goods that were given with a maiden in marriage were a heavy tax upon her parents; he took the messengers to Gyda, where she sat spinning, and told her of the king's demand, thinking she would rejoice.

But he did not know his daughter's temper.

She stopped her wheel and looked from the jarls to her father with a mocking smile on her red lips.

"I wed with a kinglet, a ruler of one or two dales?" she cried. "Nay, when I wed, my lord must be lord of all; a king and ruler of his fellows throughout all Norway."

Her father stormed and threatened, the lords spoke her fair, but all was useless. Gyda smiled and shook her head and span and span, until at last the jarls went back to Harald and faithfully told her words. "Said she so?" cried the king, springing up. "By mine honour she is right. Behold, I swear by Odin and the greater gods that my hair shall remain unshorn until all Norway is mine and I can lay its crown at Gyda's feet!"

So began the new life of Harald Haarfagr—Harald of the Fair Hair—and before many years were past his vow was fulfilled and he was lord of all Norway. Some of the kings he fought with and killed, some agreed to serve under him and pay him tribute, and some of the smaller jarls he left alone, since they were not strong enough to harm him or to give trouble.

But some there were—the most powerful and spirited—who would not bow before him. Since they would not be subdued and become his men, they were driven forth, first to the Outer Isles, then, as Harald's power increased and his heavy hand reached them even there, they passed on—some to the courts of Athelstan of England and of the King of Dublin, others to settlements in the Isle of

Man and on the British coasts. Even far inland they went, as our place-names show.

One powerful jarl there was, named Yngolf, who, with some of his friends, felt that he could never be happy under a king, but must have a realm of his own. Making up a brave company, he sailed out north-west in search of an island that the Northmen had long known, but had never used as a settlement.

The wind served them well and they sailed on and on, past the Faroe Islands until, far ahead, they made out a misty coast-line. Then Yngolf, according to old custom, threw overboard a wooden door in order to land where the current should have driven it ashore. But it was carried out of sight so speedily that Yngolf was forced to find a landing for himself in a fjord that is called by his name to this day. For the island was Iceland, and this is how the Northmen first came to make a home there.

Clearing away some of the birch forests that then covered most of the island, Yngolf and his people built themselves houses and ploughed their land, being joined later on by many friends from Norway who tired of Harald's stern rule. There they set up a republic that lasted four hundred years, and there they kept their customs, their religion and their old legends far more carefully than they could have done in Norway, where they would have mingled constantly with men of other nations.

Thus it is to the haughty speech of a beautiful girl that we owe the treasure of Icelandic literature,

giving us a vivid picture of their life a thousand years ago.

The Icelanders knew well the value of their poems and treasured them above all their other possessions.

The skalds—poets and rune-makers—who learnt those sagas, as they were called, and passed them on from one generation to another, were the most honoured men in the whole nation, given the highest place at feasts and rewarded with costly gifts—gold arm-rings or brooches, lengths of the soft cloth they prized, cattle, horses, or even land.

Gathered round the great hall fire on the long evenings of the Arctic night, with raging winds and bitter cold and snow outside, these people, who had no books, listened eagerly, each trying who could best unravel the riddles of the skalds. For they had a curious and clever way of hiding a word in its description, that they called "kenning"—sometimes easy to be seen, sometimes very far-fetched. For instance, a ship became the "steed of the waves," sleep became "the meeting place of dreams"—and great was the joy when the singer devised a kenning that no one could guess.

It was not until about the year 1200 that these legends were written down and, during the many winters that they had been told and re-told and had passed from skald to skald, they suffered much change. But we may be thankful that, during the centuries that the Northmen ravaged Europe, burning the writings and chronicles of other nations, their own were being preserved for them and us in the distant Arctic island.

The oldest writing that we have is the *Younger* or *Prose Edda*, finished by Snorro Sturlasson about 1222. He spent many years in gathering the legends, sparing no pains to compare one version with another so that his work might be perfect. These are the stories told here, but from allusions scattered through them we know that many must have been lost.

No one can tell how the name of Edda—which means great-grandmother—should have been given to it, but for hundreds of years in Iceland the best poetry was called Edda.

The other, the *Elder Edda*, was written down at a later time, but the poems in it are far older than Snorro's Edda. So old are they, indeed, that some can only be interpreted by the light of the *Younger Edda*, and others cannot be understood at all. No one knows who first wrote it, but the bishop who discovered it in the seventeenth century called it Sæmund's Edda, from a learned Icelander who lived more than a hundred years before Snorro Sturlasson.

There is, however, no proof that it is really the work of Sæmund.

In every nation many of the religious faiths and traditions can be traced back to the forces of Nature.

Thus the Northmen pictured the ice, snow, and biting Arctic winds with which they were in yearly conflict, as evil giants watching and waiting to devour them, and they called their land Jötunheim. The crawling sea-fogs and overspreading darkness

that, as seamen, they dreaded more than cold and tempest, arose from Niflheim—the home of mist—in the lowest of whose nine underworlds waited Hel, the goddess of death; the burning mountain, Hekla, sending its eternal fires high into the southern heavens became Surtur, the dark god of the flaming sword, against whom, when once he moved, they would be powerless, since it was decreed that he should set their world aflame. Through the repetitions and alterations of the skalds, these beliefs became, in course of time, welded with those that the Northmen had brought from their old home, in which we find traces of many stories belonging to the religions of other great nations.

Thus their world begins with chaos, as it does in the Bible. The wise woman in the "Völuspa" sings:

> "Aforetime naught was,
> Nor sand, nor sea, nor cool waves;
> No earth nor heaven above,
> But only the Chasm.
> Sun knew not her dwelling
> Nor moon his realm,
> The stars had not their place."

Then the one giant, saved from the flood of Ymir's blood takes refuge in his bark and begins a new race of giants, exactly like the Deluge in Genesis.

Perhaps the most interesting likeness of all is in the legend of the sacred tree, Yggdrasil; for a holy tree has a place in almost all the great religions. There is the Tree of Knowledge in the Bible, the holy tree in the pictures found amid the ruins of

Babylon and Nineveh, and the sacred tree of Buddha.

Many people account for this by saying that Odin and the Æsir were once a conquering people who, ages ago, came up from the south-east, through Russia, and finally settled in Norway, bringing with them their beliefs and customs, and displacing the older gods—the Vanir—with the Finnish race that then lived in Norway.

However this may be, a wonderful store of interest is to be found in comparing these northern myths with those of Greece and other lands; in seeing how the carrying off of Persephone to the Underworld and the imprisonment of Idûn by the eagle-giant both refer to the loss of summer; in seeing the likeness of the adventures of Thor to the labours of Heracles, of Surtur of the Flaming Sword to Krishna or Vishnu of Indian mythology; in comparing the death of Baldur with that of Adonis; and the continual strife of the gods and Loki with the battle of light and darkness, good and evil, in the religion of Persia.

But most wonderful of all is the feeling that runs through all these poems, that Odin himself recognises and speaks of—that over him and all the gods is a Higher Power, a Fate that none can withstand, a Mighty Being Who orders all things, Who will reign over the new and glorious country of peace that should come when the older gods and Asgard have passed away.

With all their faults, these Northmen were a noble race, faithful in friendship, honouring their

plighted word, considerate to women, cheerful under difficulty, always ready to make the best of hardship and trouble. It is well for us that we can count them—spread throughout all England as they were—among our forefathers and can claim a share in their noble legends. Nor shall we ever forget, since the days of our week take their names from the gods of Asgard and in keeping Christmas we celebrate the winter Yuletide feast of our Norse ancestors.

CHAPTER I

OF THE CHIEF GODS

THE chief gods were these:

Odin (German, Wotan; English, Woden), chief of the Æsir and father of Time, has many names; Valfödr, father of the chosen, or slain, because to him belong the freemen (Einherjar) killed in battle; Sigfödr, father of Victory; All-Father; Long Beard; Vegtam, or the Wanderer; the Raven's God, from the two ravens, Hugin and Mugin, that fly daily through the world and return to perch on his shoulder and croak of all that they have seen and heard; and God of the Hanged, since once for nine days and nights, for the sake of men, he hung over Niflheim.

He is a tall long-bearded man with one eye. In Asgard he is clad in golden armour with a gleaming helm, he carries a white shield and a lightning-darting spear, Gungnir, and on his arm is the great gold ring, Draupnir, that every ninth night drops eight gold rings as precious as itself. Fair warrior-maidens attend him when he rides forth to battle—the Valkyrjar, Chosers of the Slain—on white cloud horses. He never eats, but lives on wine alone; the food set before him he gives to his wolves, Freki and Geri. His palace is Gladsheim and he rides the swift eight-legged horse, Sleipnir.

On earth Odin becomes a traveller in a broad hat and a long blue or grey cloak; then he eats and drinks as mortals do. His sons are Thor, Baldur,

Tŷr, Hödr, the blind god; Hermödr, who goes on earth-journeys with his father and does his errands; Vidr and Vali, who are to avenge Baldur and Odin.

Frigga, his wife, chief of the Asynjar (goddesses), is a gracious and beautiful lady who, with her maidens, Fulla, Gna, and Hlyn, watches over the people of earth as she sits in her palace, Fensalir, spinning threads of gold—for she is skilled in all matters of the household. She knows the destiny of all men, but her lips are closed, and not even to Odin does she speak of her knowledge. One of her most cherished treasures is a dress of falcons' feathers, in which she can fly over the world.

Thor, also called Ving-Thor, Hlorridi, or the Fire-Rider, strongest of the gods, is powerfully built and red-bearded; he wears a crown of twelve stars and is the protector of peasants and workers in the fields. His is the noble and arduous task of saving gods and men from the onslaughts of the giant race. Ever on the watch, he needs the help of his three dwarf-wrought possessions, Miölnir, an enchanted mace or club, that returns to his hand no matter how far it is flung, and that will shrink until it fits into his pouch; gloves of iron, needed to grasp Miölnir; and Megingjardr, a belt that doubles his strength.

Thor rides in a chariot drawn by two goats, and is more often found in company with Loki than any other of the gods.

Baldur, the Shining One, giver of all good, is wise and perfect in judgment, bringing peace and happiness wherever he passes. He is married to the lovely Nanna, and their son is Forseti, the wise

judge and lawgiver who dwells in Glitnir. Baldur's palace is Breidablik—Broad-View—on whose walls are engraved runes that bring the dead to life and wherein no evil thing may enter.

Tŷr, the great god of war, is tall, slender, and noble of aspect. The old poem says that he is "wise, fair, and radiant with gold; brave is he also beyond all other gods." In the story of Fenris-ulf we shall see that this is true. It was the custom to engrave his name on sword-blades to ensure victory.

Vidr, the Silent One, lives in the midst of trackless forests far from the haunts of men, in Landvidi. He it is who, in the last great battle, shall avenge his father Odin's death. He can walk on air or water and is said by some to be shod with iron; others say that his shoes are of all the leather shreds thrown away by the shoemakers of earth.

Then there are strong, blind *Hödr*, the innocent slayer of Baldur; *Vali*, who grew to manhood in one day to avenge his brother; *Bragi* the poet, called "long-bearded son of Odin," to whom vows were made over the wine-cup; and, lastly, there is Loki.

Loki, the Fire God, perhaps the most interesting of all from the strange change in his nature as the story goes on, is not an Ase (god) at all. He is constantly called Utgard (stranger) Loki and is probably a Van, since the Wind Giant was his father. At first he was pleasant and helpful, doing good among men in his own freakish way, like a sprite; while to Odin and the gods he was so useful —helping them through many perils by his ready

wit—that All-Father swore with him blood-brotherhood and would never begin a banquet unless Loki were present. He was very handsome, lithe, and graceful, and while he lived with his gentle wife, Sigyn, he spread abroad the soft warmth of fire, to be of service to gods and men. But as time went on—just as fire is a good servant but a bad master—he grew in power and in evil, and, in the end, became the bane of the gods, taking, with his three terrible children, a large part in the destruction of the gods

Besides the Æsir there was another race living in friendship with them in Asgard, thought to be the gods of an older time; they were called Vanir. Their part was to rule the light-elves, the dwarfs, or swart-elves, and the fairies and sprites.

The difference between Æsir and Vanir is that the Æsir cared for and helped the dwellers in Midgard—the children of men—while the Vanir, except their king who protected seafarers, took no heed of men but ruled the spirits of air and earth, the insects, and the flowers.

Niördr, their king, was very tall and stately, matched in beauty by Baldur alone. He governed the peaceful winds and waves, watched over sailors and fishermen, bringing them prosperity and riches. He lived in a glorious palace near the sea; his children were *Frey* and *Freyja*.

To *Frey* fell the special duty of ruling the rain-clouds and the light-elves; therefore his palace (Elfheim) was not in Asgard, but was set in the sun. He rode in a chariot drawn by the hog,

Gyllinbursti (Gold-Bristle), and owned the wondership, Skidbladnir, that would sail to any place desired and would fold up when not needed. He married a lovely giantess named Gerd, and his feast was held at mid-winter, when a boar's head was served in honour of Gold-Bristle, and this is why we still have boar's head at Christmas-tide.

Freyja, his sister, was the wife of Odr, one of the gods. About her there is much uncertainty, as she is often mixed up with Frigga. It is clear, however, that she was a Vana and the goddess of springtime, her work being to care for the flowers and grasses and protect the green things of earth. She rode in a chariot drawn by two cats.

Heimdal, most mysterious of the gods, is counted among the Vanir, although he is sometimes called a son of Odin. He had nine mothers, the giant daughters of the clouds, and was nourished by the strength of the earth and the cold sea. He was made the warder of the heavenly rainbow bridge, Bifröst, for he was ever sleepless, could see a hundred miles round by night or day and had ears so keen that he could hear the grass grow. His horn, Gjöllar, was hidden under Yggdrasil and, when he blew it, the sound was heard to the far ends of the earth. His palace was Himinbjörg, among the mist-clouds, there he lived and drank sweet mead.

There were many other gods and goddesses, but they played but a small part in the life of Asgard. There were also some of the better giantesses living on the green sea-shores of Jötunheim, who being milder than their kinsfolk, married both Æsir and Vanir.

CHAPTER II

OF KING GYLFI AND THE BEGINNING OF THE WORLD

In the morning of the northern world, before history was, there dwelt in Sweden a king named Gylfi, who was wise above all men so that his people dwelt in peace and prosperity far beyond all other nations.

From the stars he learnt the magic of runes whereby he might call the dead from their sleep, might rid his kingdom of noxious beasts, and might change his own shape at will. So wise was he, indeed, that he was ever searching, by means of his skalds, for new truths that might help him in the service of his people.

Now it came about one day that, when he met his nobles for the weekly feast, no skalds were there.

"How comes it?" he asked; and his people made answer that some were sick, some gone a-journeying.

And the king was sad, so that he would neither eat nor drink. "What is life without poetry?" he asked. "Food is there, but its savour is gone. Drink we can get, but the gifts of the gods—music and song—are hard to come by and given to but few."

And as he sat, silent and gloomy, sweet chords were heard without, the door fell open, and there stood a woman, very fair and tall beyond all

other women, picking gently at the strings of her harp. Slowly she swept up the great hall singing a song—first low and sad, of death and the grave; then loud and wild, of battle and the splendid Valkyrjar, and lastly noble, thrilling, mysterious, of Odin and the Æsir, of the joys of Valhalla and the glittering hills of Asgard.

Such splendour of song King Gylfi had never heard. After long silence he said:

"Give me thy name, fair maiden, and ask what thou wilt in payment of thy lay."

"I am Gefiunn of the land of gods and giants, great king. All I would ask is such land as I and my four bulls may plough in a day and a night."

"That is but a small matter," the king replied, and the maid took her leave, to return after a few days with four bulls, so mighty and so gleaming white, that never had their like been seen on earth, and Gylfi knew, of a surety, that they came from the gods.

They were yoked to a plough of a hundred shares and, with them, Gefiunn ploughed and ploughed, tearing the very rocks from their foundations. And when the hours of the day and night were passed the giant-maiden drove them out into the sea, dragging with them the land they had ploughed up. As she met the great waves, she grew and grew until they reached but to her waist; she, caring nothing, waded on until she came to a shallow place; there she made fast her land and called it Zealand, and thus it is named unto this day. And the hole that she left became a lake that is called Wener in Sweden.

Landing upon her island, she spoke runes over her bulls, so that they returned to their own shape, and, behold, they were her four young sons. With them she built a fair dwelling and there lived with Skjöld, her husband.

But King Gylfi, as he sat by the shore of the lake she had left, pondered on that wondrous song and felt that he must learn more of these strange and powerful gods of Asgard, since neither his skalds nor his runes could tell him aught of them. To this end his resolve was taken.

By means of his runes he took the shape of a traveller, old and grey; whether to deceive the gods we know not or, mayhap, to try their wisdom, since, if they knew him not, they would be no true gods. Over snow-laden mountains and through dark forests Gylfi took his lonely way until, after many days, he came to a lofty palace roofed with plates of glistening gold; the walls were of massive stone and the foundations set deep in the mountains.

Now this was a dream-palace, fashioned by the gods, who beheld from afar the approach of the traveller.

At the gate stood a man making play with seven short swords, that he tossed aloft into the air, catching each in turn as it fell, so that the shining circle was ever complete.

This man stopped the king and asked:

"Thy name and state, O friend?"

"Gangler am I by name and traveller by state. Whose is this mighty dwelling?"

"It is the home of our kings; enter if thou so desire and I will bring thee to their presence."

Gangler thanked him and entered, murmuring as he went the words of the time-old saying:

"Look well to each gate, lest foes be in ambush against thee."

This warning he regarded as he passed through many courts, filled with folks eating, drinking, playing, wrestling, and going about their business, until he came into a hall where there were three thrones set, one above another, and upon each throne sat a man.

"These," said his leader, "are Har, the Lofty One; Jafnhar, He who is equal with the Lofty One; and Thridi the Third."

Then spoke Har, the Lofty One:

"Here art thou welcome, O guest, to meat and drink at thy pleasure. What is thine errand in our land?"

"Mine errand, O king, is to gain that which I prize above meat and drink—knowledge. Whom hast thou here of learning and wisdom to answer my questions?"

The Three smiled and Jafnhar said:

"Stand thou below. Make clear thy questions, and answers from the three of us thou shalt not lack."

Thus Gangler, from the words of those mighty kings, learnt all that is herein set down.

Great is the Supreme God, All-Father, Who has fashioned land and sea, heaven and air; Who has made man and given him the spirit that shall live on when the body is out-worn and useless. Then shall the just dwell with him in Gimle, the house of

friendship, and the evil descend to Niflheim, the land of gloom deep below the ninth world!

In the beginning all was but darkness and everlasting cold and the chasm of chasms, Ginnungagap; the moon knew not his place[1] nor the sun her station, only far in the uttermost depths of northern darkness lay Niflheim and, in the midst of it, the fountain Hvergelmer, whence flowed the rivers of Anguish and Death, of the Tempest, the Whirlwind, and the Abyss.

Far to the south, beyond the chasm-world, was a dread land of fire, Muspelheim, where, later on, dwelt Surtur of the Flaming Sword, waiting until the evil day of the gods should dawn, when he would split Asgard asunder and set the world in flames.

From the meeting of the frost of Niflheim and the fire of Muspelheim in the midmost air, came drops of dew that, by the power of Him Who Governed, became a giant, named Ymir. From Ymir sprang the race of wicked giants—Sons of the Frost—that ever thwarted and were at war with the gods.

Again, by the will of the Great One, came a soft haze out of the south that melted the hoarfrost; from these drops was formed a cow, called Œdhumla, by whose milk Ymir was nourished. She lived by licking the salt rocks, and, as she licked, there sprang forth, first the fair golden hair of a man, then the head, and, after many days, came

[1] In some Northern languages the sun is feminine and the moon masculine.

out the complete man—Büre—strong, good, and beautiful.

Later on, from the union of Büre's son, Bore, with the daughter of a giant, was born Odin, first of the Æsir, and his brothers Vili and Ve.[1]

Great was the hatred of the children of Bore for the evil race of giants, and it came about in time that they slew Ymir; his blood gushed forth in so great a flood that all the giants of the frost were engulfed save one, by name Bergelmer. He, being in his bark upon the waters, was borne upon the waves of Ymir's blood and thus saved from drowning. Fleeing to the uttermost region of snow and ice, called Jötunheim, he there preserved the giant race to harass gods and men.

From the body of Ymir, which they threw into Ginnungagap, Odin and his brothers made the round, flat earth, encompassed by the deep sea—that was his blood—on whose farther shores dwelt the giants. Of his bones they made the mountains, of his teeth the rocks; his brains they tossed high in air to become clouds, and, taking his eyebrows, they made of them a fair place that they named Midgard.

But they passed unnoticed small pieces of Ymir's flesh; these bred maggots that writhed and crept into dark corners underground and among the rocks, and so became a race of dwarfs, black, mischievous and wicked, but skilled in the finding of gems and gold and in all metal-work.

Now Odin looked upon fair Midgard, with its

[1] The brothers of Odin drop out after this and are only mentioned in one doubtful saga.

hills and lakes, its forests and green valleys, and it seemed to him an ill thing that it should be empty of life; on this he pondered as he and his brothers walked beside the sea. And as they talked they came upon the trunk of an ash-tree and the trunk of an alder, lying cast up by the waves.

In sport they carved of them the shapes of a man and a woman, and Odin said:

"See, my brothers, these shall be the first of our people. I give them life and a soul."

"And I," said Vili, "will give them power to move and reason to know where they would go."

"And I," said Ve, "will give them five senses to use in Midgard, and garments to clothe them until they fashion their own."

And they called the man Aske and the woman Embla. From these two, living in Midgard, descended the whole race of men that Odin, All-Father, loved and watched over from his throne, Hlidskjalf, the Watch-Tower.

Nor were these all the races that found place within the ring of ice that edged the world round. Besides gods, giants, dwarfs, and men there were the countless, harmless, elfin tribes that painted the flowers, made beds for the streamlets as they flowed from their earth-springs and tended the insects and small beasts. These were joyous, gentle and always busy, capricious but prone to good when counselled aright and were often used as messengers by the gods.

Lastly there were the Vanir, spirits of the breeze, the air, the water, powerful for good and wishful to live in friendship with the Æsir, so that their king,

Niördr, with his children Frey and Freyja, spent much time in Asgard, where they lived in equality with the gods.

Now, as yet there was neither day nor night and All-Father, looking out over the world, beheld a giant-maiden, dark and gentle — for the giant women were not all evil—whose name was Night. Her he wedded to a child of his own kin, called Daglingr and their son was called Day. Since he would have all employed, he set Night and Day in the sky, giving them swift horses with which to travel round the world. The horse of Night was Hrymfaxi—Frost Mane—from whose bit drops the morning dew, and that of Day was Skinfaxi—Shining Mane—whose beams light the earth.

Now there was a man in Midgard who had two children so beautiful that, in his pride, he named them Moon and Sun. For his punishment, the god caught them up to be the attendants of Night and Day. Lest they should loiter in their task, he sent after each a wolf to follow and devour them—but this could not come to pass until the day of darkness—Ragnarök.

And this was the fashion of the world.

In the midst stood Yggdrasil, the mighty ash-tree — suffering earth-bearer — that upheld the world, its wide-spreading branches reaching high above Asgard into the distant heavens.

Three were its roots and they lay far apart.

The first struck deep into Niflheim, beneath which lay the Home of Death and at this root Nidhöggr, the evil serpent, gnawed unceasingly, encouraged in his cruel work by Ratatösk, the

squirrel of mischief, that chattered ever as it ran up and down, sowing enmity between Nidhöggr and an eagle that dwelt in the highest branches of Yggdrasil.

The second lay far away under the giants' frozen land; near it gushed forth the Well of Knowledge, guarded by Mimir the Wise.

The third root was strangely set on high above the clouds in the uttermost heaven; beneath it lay the holy spring of Time, Urd, and by it dwelt the three dread sister-Fates — the Nornir — Urda the Past, Verdandi the Present, and Skulda the Future —whose work was to keep the root of Yggdrasil moist with the blessed white water, that it might be green and strong, and to weave the fate of gods and men and write it on the Shield of Destiny. Among the branches of the ash-tree ran the four stags that guard sleep; there, also, dwelt an eagle with a hawk perched on his forehead. He, knowing all things from the beginning of time to the day of destruction, bore always in mind the wickedness of Nidhöggr, and muttered threats that Ratatösk, overhearing, repeated to the serpent to make his venom the greater.

Now All-Father, looked out from Asgard over the beautiful world, away to the far edge where, beyond the ice-barrier, he knew the giants waited and watched for chances of ill-doing. As he stood, the noble lady, Frigga, came to his side, answering his thought.

"Will their evil prevail?" she said. "Can we, my husband, save these poor world-folks from the giants?"

"For a time we may," Odin answered, "but we must watch unceasingly. To that end we will build palaces here in Asgard and each of us shall have a share in the work. But, sweet wife, remember always that, though we may fail at last, there, far away in the southern heavens of Clear Blue, lies that place, brighter than the sea and boundless beyond our power to conceive, the golden glory, the blessed Gimle, where no sin may come and where gods and men shall dwell in peace, when toil here is ended."

Then noble Frigga bent her head in silence, for she knew all, and hand in hand the first of the gods went to call the others to their happy work.

First they built Gladsheim, close to the golden-leaved wood, Glasir; this was for All-Father himself, and in it they made the lofty hall, Valhalla, of the five hundred and forty doors, for the reception of the nobly slain and the Einherjar chosen for Odin by his beautiful warrior-maidens, the Valkyrjar. There they feasted on the flesh of a boar, Sæhrimnir, that each morning was whole again and ready for the evening meal. High above the palace was set a throne that Odin named Hlidskjalf, the Watch-Tower, whence he could see over all the earth. Another home he had that was roofed with silver and called Valaskjalf.

Frigga, also, had more than one home, and Thor had a strange cloud palace called Bilskirnir, the Winding House, with five hundred and forty floors.

Besides all these, the Æsir made a mighty smithy for the working of metals, in particular of gold,

which they used for all their household vessels, for, until the giant-women came up to Asgard and cast greedy eyes upon the precious metal, the gods thought no more of it than of iron.

Many other great buildings there were, set about the beautiful plain of Ida and the fair hills of Asgard, and the Æsir rejoiced as they gazed around. Over all swept the magnificent arch of Bifröst, the treble-hued rainbow, and Odin turned and said: "See, children, how Bifröst bids us climb yet higher, humbly to learn of the holy Nornir and drink in wisdom from the fountain of Urd. Let us mount and ride."

And the glorious procession took its way across the plain to the luminous trembling end of the bridge, where golden-toothed Heimdal stood on guard.

With a smile of welcome he threw open the gate and they swept proudly on, singing a song of joyous thanksgiving for the beauty and the peace of all around them; but, when great Thor would have set foot upon the bridge, Heimdal barred the way with his spear.

"What is this?" cried the god, in anger.

"To thee, great brother, is the pathway closed," Heimdal answered, shaking his head.

"And why?" the haughty Ase demanded.

"Because Bifröst is fashioned delicately, lest it should bear the weight of a giant; were it stronger they might, by guile, pass through my gate and so climb up to Urd. Thy weight, great brother, would set it in a blaze."

Thor laughed a little, then he said wistfully:

"Is there, then, no road for me. Am I shut out for ever from the daily council of the gods?"

"Nay, nay," said Heimdal, laughing and showing his golden teeth, "a way there is for thee, though somewhat damp and chill"—and the White Van pointed to the rolling clouds of mist that surged from the edge of the precipice up to the highest point, where the spreading branches of Yggdrasil stood out against the Clear Blue. "Damp and chill indeed, but safe for thy mighty tread are the mist-rivers, Körmt and Œrmt."

Then Thor, humbled, took his hard and lonely way to join the Æsir by the sacred fountain, where they gathered the wisdom of the Nornir, while they watched them, singing and spinning, as they wove the web of destiny and cut in lengths the threads of the lives of men.

And while the Æsir grew in strength and knowledge, the Asynjar renewed their beauty with the magic water that whitened all it touched, and fed the fair white swans that sang for their delight.[1]

But for the last part of their stay they would sit in silence and think of Gimle and the joy to come, when all their toil for the sons of men and all the horror of Ragnarök should be overpast, while calm, whitehaired Urda, Verdandi of the eager, brilliant eyes, and quiet Skulda through her veil, watched them with loving, pitying looks.

For the sister Fates knew all the sorrow and the joy to come.

[1] In early days the belief in the singing of swans was widely spread.

CHAPTER III

OF ALL-FATHER'S SACRIFICE

When all was ordered in Asgard and on earth, Odin sat one day upon Hlidskjalf in deep thought.

"All is not yet well," he murmured, "I have set these earth-men in Midgard to be happy; the Vanir are in friendship with me and will keep the light-elves to their task of giving sunshine and rain; the dwarfs I have subdued so that they will forge iron and metals for daily use, but with the powers of evil I can do nothing."

"More wisdom must be mine," he mused, after long silence, "and I can gain it only from the Well of Knowledge. Would Mimir, its guardian, but give me one draught to show me how to guide the world aright!"

Then, descending from Hlidskjalf, he took his way to the far edge of the world and leaned over into the mirk and stifling smoke that rose from the seething cauldron of Niflheim—the home of grey mist, the nine worlds of Sorrow, Sin, and Death—to watch the forces of darkness writhe and curl and moan.

For nine days and nights did All-Father hang over the abyss, and when he drew back his resolve was taken.

All the wisdom of Mimir would not be too great to fight that evil Underworld.

Bidding farewell to Frigga, he took the form of a man and set forth by flood and fell, through the

haunts of men and over the heaving seas, far down to the mirk land of the ancient sage.

As he went slowly on, he saw, looming through the grey twilight, the grave clear eyes of Mimir, under their bushy brows, fixed pityingly upon him.

"What wouldst thou with me, O Lord of the High World?" the old man asked.

"Give me, I pray thee, O Mimir, a draught of thy spring, that I may the better judge how to rule in justice and save my people from the terror of the giants."

But Mimir shook his head and the Ase's heart sank. Must he return, unsatisfied, by that long and toilsome way?

"The water of my spring can only be come at through toil and sacrifice, O All-Father. Toil hast thou had in plenty, but what of sacrifice?"

"Ask what thou wilt, O sage. Aught that is in my power shall be thine."

"Thou speakest without knowledge," said the deep calm voice. "From many have I heard those words, yet none has been found to pay the price I ask. Give me that which thou most valuest."

Then All-Father was silent, for most of all the world did he value his dear son, Baldur the Beautiful.

But Mimir knew his thought and smiled.

"Baldur's time is not yet come; work hath he still to do, although the Nornir—fateful sisters—have cut short his thread of life."

"Ask then. I have said it shall be thine."

"Thy right eye."

Odin drew back and bowed his head.

Was it indeed worth while to pay this heavy price?

Then through his mind passed the memory of the helpless sons of men, whom he himself had fashioned, of the happy homesteads he had passed, of the golden fields rich with grain, of the fishers singing as they sped over the blue waves, of the children laughing at their play—of all the fair land that he had made, which must be swept away should the giants grow in strength.

He raised his head, and his two eyes, for the last time, met Mimir's steadfastly.

"I will pay the price," he said and, plucking out his right eye, he laid it in the sage's hand.

Then Mimir, with a grave smile of content, gave him a mighty horn of the sacred water, and Odin drank and drank until all was gone. As he handed back the beaker, all that had been vague and dark became clear to him, and he hid his face in his grey cloak, stunned with the knowledge of the grief and horror, the beauty and the final joy of all.

Mimir's voice broke the long silence.

"'Tis well," he said; "here, watered by the silver fountain, shall thine eye remain; a sign that thou—highest of the Gods—hast given thy best for the sons of men.

And All-Father turned and took his way back to upper earth in deep thought, for now he knew what to do for his people's highest good. What the Nornir, in obedience to the Mighty One, decreed he could not alter, but he might have worked much ill by striving unwittingly against their will.

As he passed all fell back in reverence at the new light and meaning they read in his glance. Thus was a song made:

> " Where is thine eye, All-Father?
> Does it lie in the depths of the sea?
> Nay, clear in the fountain of Mimir
> Gleams the price that the Sage received,
> Bathed in mead, as each morning wakens,
> By the hand of the Ancient of Days."

From this time the Æsir spent much of their time going back and forth among the people of Midgard, each taking his or her appointed place, so that all might work with peace and smoothness.

In their journeyings they grew to know many of the children of men, but, of them all, both Æsir and Vanir most loved and honoured Kvasir the poet, to whom they had given their best gifts—wisdom, goodness, and a joyous spirit, to which Bragi added the power of song—so that wherever Kvasir went, either in Midgard or among the light-elves, there followed peace and happiness. Only to the swart-elves he did not go, for he knew that naught that he could do would change their evil natures and that the dark caverns of the Underworld would stifle his gentle songs.

This angered the dwarfs, for they coveted his wisdom, and they met one day in council. Down in their hall, lighted by the glow of the furnace-fire, they crowded and chattered, wagging their little beards and clenching their tiny gnarled fists, led in their wicked plot by their two chiefs, Fjalar and Galar.

" Why," said Fjalar, " should the earth-men

and those foolish light-elves rejoice in Kvasir and we be left out? The Æsir meant him for us all, and surely we are more worthy than creatures who do naught but tend the flowers."

They muttered and shouted, jumping up and down and screaming with wrath, until Galar beckoned them into silence.

"Draw close, my brothers, and listen," he said.

Then the small black-hooded men drew near and hearkened as he whispered, nodding at times and breaking into wicked chuckles.

Then they dispersed, dancing with glee and clapping their hands. Now what Galar had said was this:

"If we can catch Kvasir, kill him and make mead of his blood, all his wisdom and song will be ours to drink as we will."

They made a great feast for the poet, who was touched at their repentance and too gentle to say them nay; but when he came they treacherously slew him and poured his blood, mixed with honey, into three great pots, of which the largest was called Odhrærir. These they hid away, with many nods and winks, in their deepest cavern.

Ere long all the world missed Kvasir, but none knew where he had gone, so great had been the cunning of the swart-elves; and, in much concern, Odin and Niördr met to see what might be done. Then Niördr said:

"Frey, my son who rules the light-elves, tells me that there has been much stir among the dwarfs. Would it be well that he should go and question them?"

" Bid him go," said All-Father, and Frey sped away.

The little crooked men stood in a line before the shining Van like a row of simple children, while Fjalar spoke for them.

" Kvasir? truly have we seen him. He is dead. So great was his knowledge that none could talk with him, so that it choked him and he fell down dead."

Not a word more would he say, and, turning sullen at Frey's further questions, he wriggled away into the dark passages of the mountain, so that the Van must needs return to the upper world unsatisfied.

Time passed and it might well have been that their wickedness would never have come to light had they not grown bold with their drunkenness and conceit and, climbing sturdily into the upper world, found their way to the borders of Jötunheim.

There, by a river, they found Gilling the giant fast asleep and, for pure boasting, they slew him and, after him, his wife.

" Now," said they, " we are no longer small and weak. The slayers of giants are we! "

Singing and quarrelling, as their ill-luck would have it, they marched straight into the clutches of Suttung, the brother of dead Gilling. Hearing their chant, he swooped down upon them, and, gathering them up by hundreds in handfuls, waded out to a great flat rock in mid-ocean and threw them down to starve and die.

Sobered by their terror, they wept and prayed for mercy.

"Take our gold and jewels, good master giant; treasures have we more precious than earth can show. All shall be thine, if thou wilt but carry us back to shore."

Suttung, standing knee-deep in the ocean, laughed in scorn.

"What need I of jewels, earth-worms?" he asked. "More have I in one room than lie in all the caves of Svartheim."

Then said Fjalar, desperate at their plight:

"Take us back, O Suttung, and we will give thee a drink such as neither gods nor mortals ever had—the draught of knowledge, love, and poesy."

"Hum!" said Suttung, "that sounds something new and marvellous." Making more inquiry he at last agreed to take the ransom and, sweeping up the little moaning people, he set them down at the gates of Svartheim, where they delivered up the three vessels. The giant had no wish to drink the sweet liquor; all he desired was to possess something precious that all the world longed for in vain. Carrying it off, he hid it in the depths of a mountain, then he called his beautiful daughter, Gunnlöd.

"Watch my treasure, maiden," he said; "sleep neither by night nor day, lest robbers come and take it from us."

And fair Gunnlöd, although she thought it strange that her father should set such store by three kettles of mead, fetched her spinning-wheel and sat down to watch.

Now Odin grieved still for lost Kvasir and searched for his body far and wide, but it was

hidden deep underground, far from the sight even of Heimdal. But it chanced that, as Suttung was carrying off the kettles of mead, Hugin and Munin, the ravens of All-Father, were flying over the land and spied him. "What is this?" they croaked and, making friends with a swart-elf, who had no fear of a bird, they speedily learnt the truth and carried it to their lord.

Odin rose up in deep thought.

"The spirit of wisdom and poetry must not lie hidden in a giant's cave," he said. "Mine must be the task to bring it home to gladden gods and men."

As Vegtam the Wanderer he set forth to Jötunheim and made his way to the steading of Baugi, brother to Suttung, whom he found much troubled for want of labourers at his hay-harvest.

"I will labour for thee," said the traveller, "so thou give me the reward I crave."

"And that is——?" asked Baugi.

"A draught of Suttung's mead."

"That is none so easy, since my brother will neither drink himself nor give to others; but I will do my best."

Then Odin laboured through harvest time, doing the work of nine men, and, at the close, Baugi and he took their way to Suttung's home.

Baugi spoke his brother fair, but Suttung would have none of him. "A pretty thing," he said angrily, "that for work done for thee, I should give reward. Get thee gone; my treasure shalt thou not touch."

With this rebuff Baugi went back to Odin.

"Since fair means fail, we will try cunning," said the Ase; "let us go to the mountain where it lies hid. See, here is my augur, Rati, that will bore the hardest rock; make me a hole therein." Baugi took the augur and bored for a while, then, "See, it is done," said he.

Odin drew near and blew into the hole, but behold! the dust flew out. "Is this thy boasted strength?" he asked sternly; "bore on."

Then Baugi worked yet harder, and this time the dust blew inwards. Then Odin changed himself into a small worm and wriggled so quickly through the hole that Baugi, who stabbed at him with Rati, missed him.

Once inside the mountain, Odin took his own god-shape and, wrapped in his purple star-studded mantle, threaded the rock passages—guided by the crooning of a soft low voice—until he came to the innermost chamber, where Gunnlöd sat watching over Odhrærir.

Dazzled at the glory of the god, the giant-maiden bent before him. "What would my lord with me?" she asked gently.

"A kiss from thy lips, shelter for three days, and a draught from Odhrærir," he replied.

"They are thine," she answered, and during those three days Odin drank so deeply of the mead that all three vessels were empty.

"Sweet maid," he said, on the third morning, "farewell! My thanks and blessing for thy help. Thy good deed shall make bright the world."

But the god thought nothing of forsaken Gunn-

löd, left alone with the memory of the radiant stranger who had disturbed her calm.

Taking the form of an eagle, the Ase soared in ever-widening circles up and up until the tear-filled eyes of the giant maiden could follow him no more, then took his triumphant way back to Asgard.

But Suttung was sharp-eared. Catching the flap of giant wings and seeing whence the eagle came, he guessed that he had been robbed and, throwing on his own eagle dress, he started in pursuit.

Stronger in flight than Odin, he drew rapidly nearer and nearer, so that the watching Æsir on the walls of Asgard trembled with fear for the precious draught their hero carried.

"Let us get ready cups," they cried, "that when he reaches us none may be lost."

With one last wild swoop the god plunged down and, with Suttung close behind, poured out the mead through his beak into the vessels that the Æsir held. Baulked of his prey, the giant fell back with harsh cries of rage and was seen no more, and the exultant gods stowed away the precious drink in safety.

Since that day, each true poet has drunk of the magic draught of poetry, saved by All-Father from the giant to gladden the sons of men.

CHAPTER IV

OF FREY AND GERD, THE GIANT MAID

FREY, the son of Niördr, dwelt happily in Asgard, gay and busy with the work of ruling the light-elves, seeing that they made each flower open at its appointed season, that the sun shone at the right time, and that the harvest was abundant both in hay and rye.

One hot summer evening, tired with his labour and sighing for a breath of the cool air that sometimes blew at sundown from the chill mountains of Jötunheim, he called his faithful friend and companion, Skyrnir, and said:

"See thou that the glow-elves light the lamps of the worms and fire-flies. I am aweary and would breathe the fresh air from All-Father's high seat."

"From Hlidskjalf?" cried Skyrnir, aghast. "Frey, art thou fey? Thou knowest that none may seat themselves thereon save All-Father himself."

"Nevertheless, I will sit there," said Frey impatiently and, shaking off his friend, he climbed the path to the topmost point of Asgard and, springing lightly on to the seat, leant his arms on the back of the throne to gaze abroad. Over Asgard, over Midgard, over the southern sea to where, high above Muspelheim, he made out the golden sheen that hid Gimle; then he turned to the north.

where the snow peaks of Jötunheim soared far aloft into the Clear Blue.

There he lingered longest, for the breeze was cool and fresh, and in the clear light he made out the house of Gymir the giant, set in a green spot near the shore.

As he gazed the door opened and there came forth a maiden so fair that Frey was dazzled, and for a moment hid his eyes.

Then, eagerly, he looked again, and as she walked back and forth through the croft, she raised her white arms above her head, so that the gleam of them lighted up sea and sky, setting also a flame glowing in Frey's heart that would never more be quenched.

Then she went into the house and closed the door, so that it seemed to Frey that darkness fell on all the land.

With heavy footfall and bent head he took his way home, and from that day sadness fell upon him, so that the elves looked at him askance and tip-toed, whispering, about their work.

This was the punishment that fell upon Frey, for having dared to sit in the seat of Odin, chief of the gods.

Now this was after the marriage of Niördr to Skadi, Thiassi's daughter, who loved her step-son much. In great concern she went to take counsel of Skyrnir.

"Tell me," she said, "what ails our boy. He eats not, nor drinks, and his eyes are full of care. Go thou and question him."

But Skyrnir shook his head.

He knew that the cloud had fallen on Frey on that fatal evening when he had mounted Hlidskjalf, but he was not minded to tell.

"Hard words should I get," he replied. "Better were it that thou shouldst speak."

This she would not do, but she caused Niördr to persuade Skyrnir to go. He found Frey on the shore of the sea next opposite to Jötunheim's strand.

"Tell me, my comrade, what ails thee. Why is all dark between us for the first time since we were lads together? Open thy heart to me."

Frey, weary with brooding, burst forth into words, and told of his love for the giant maiden.

Skyrnir nodded gloomily.

"I know her; she is Gerd, the daughter of Gymir.[1] Never will Niördr and the Æsir let thee wed her, lest the flowers suffer. Moreover, round the steading of Gymir burns for strangers a flicker-flame that none may pass and live. Put aside that thought and seek a bride among the children of the Æsir or the Vanir."

"Never!" cried Frey angrily. "The flowers may wither and the streams dry up and the sun hide her face for ever for all I care, should Gerd not be mine."

And Skyrnir shrugged his shoulders and went back to tell Skadi of his ill-success, while Frey went back to the shore to gaze across at Gymir's strand.

The sharp-witted and freakish elves quickly missed their master's eye and went off to games of their own, leaving the flowers to droop and the

[1] The Frost Giant.

watercourses to die up. So neglectful were they that one or two of the younger Frost-giants actually crept into Asgard and swept bare the gardens.

Great was the wrath of the Asynjar, for they loved their flowers. Without delay they went to Niördr with complaints of his son. Niördr called Skyrnir into council and, hearing all, said:

"If this marriage must be, it must. Go thou, Skyrnir, and see this maid."

"Without weapons can I not venture into Jötunheim," said Skyrnir. "If I do this thing Frey's magic sword must I have as a free gift, since it alone could prevail against the giants, and his horse must he lend me for my journey, for he alone could jump the fire around the hall of Gymir."

"They shall be thine," cried Frey eagerly, when he heard of his friend's plan, "only go quickly and bring me back my bride."

Girt with the sword and riding the noble horse, Skyrnir started on his quest, and as he went he spoke:

"By darksome ways, over hoary mountains and through gloomy vales must we wend, my steed; for, were we to take ship, all Jötunheim would be on guard. This way, by good chance, shall we not be seen."

Three days they plodded on, and on the third day at evening they reached the steading. Round the outer edge burned the flicker-flame so high and wide that no horse could jump it.

"Now, my steed," said Skyrnir, "leap for thy master's sake."

And the brave horse looked, drew back, then shot forward, clearing the fire at one bound. Skyrnir turned to look back and behold, there was no fire, but only a shepherd sitting on a howe.

"Tell me, herdsman," asked the rider, "is there aught to fear from the hounds of Gymir that I hear baying in the garth? Can I come at speech with the maiden, his daughter?"

"Fey art thou or a spirit, since thou hast passed the fire," answered the giant herd, "but no talk wilt thou get with Gymir's fair maid."

"Fey am I not. If I live I live, and if I die I die, but speech will I have with Gerd. Go bid her see me."

At that moment a bond-maid looked out of the door, for her mistress had said:

"What is that noise that shakes the earth and makes the weapons clatter on the walls?"

"A warrior it is," the maid replied, "he stands beside his horse and the horse is grazing."

"Bid him within, to drink of our clear mead," Gerd said, "though I fear me the slayer of my brother is he."[1]

And as Skyrnir bowed before her, she went on:

"Art thou of the Æsir or the Vanir that thou canst cross the fire to visit me, O stranger?"

"Neither Ase nor Van nor elf am I, O Gerd, but a messenger bringing these eleven apples of gold to turn thy love to Frey."

The maiden looked coldly at the glittering fruit.

"Gold will not buy my love for any man," she said.

[1] This refers to a story of which no trace remains.

"Wilt thou have Draupnir, the magic ring of Odin?"

"No ring will I take. I lack not gold in my father's house."

Then Skyrnir was perplexed and knew not how to deal with this ice-cold maid.

"Since fair words avail not," thought he, "needs must that I try foul."

Making pretence of great wrath, he drew the sword of Frey and whirled it round his head.

"See!" he cried, "with this steel will I slay thee, hewing thy head from thy body if thou refuse to wed my friend."

But Gerd smiled calmly, saying:

"What care I for thy sword? Better is death than love unwanted. Were my father here, thou wouldst not crow so loud."

Then Skyrnir called down upon her a mighty curse, for he was minded to earn truly the sword of Frey.

With eyes flashing fire he stood over the marble-cold maiden and spoke thus:

"Over thee do I chant runes of might,
Runes of power unknown to giants.
With my magic sword I touch thee
Bending thee to my will;
Tamed must thou be!
Banned by the wise for ever
On eagle's crag shalt thou crouch
Thine eyes turned Hel-wards ever.
Food that thou loathest shalt thou eat,
Nor ever taste of pleasure.
A mock shalt thou be, the livelong day
To giants and gods and earth-men.
Loveless and lorn shalt thou weep alway.
Like a thistle withered and cast aside
Pine thou and die, with thy beauty gone.

No spouse shall lead thee to his home
Save a giant, three-headed, of evil mien.
Odin is wroth with thee, Frey shall hate thee!
Perish, thou scornful one, signed with my runes! "

But as Skyrnir made as if to begin the rune-signs of utmost power over her, Gerd, with a moan of terror, sank to her knees before him, with sobbing cries for mercy.

" No mercy will I have," said Skyrnir solemnly, " unless thou promise thy love to Frey, the son of Niördr, king of the Vanir."

" I do! I do! " she said. " Take off thy runes and drink a brimming cup of our golden mead. Ah, woe is me! " she went on as she arose," that I should mate with one of the Vanir."

The bond-maid brought forward the cup and Gerd put it into Skyrnir's hand. As he took it, he said:

" No mead will I taste until I have thy promise and thy plighted word, O maiden. When and where wilt thou meet our Van? "

She bent her head and thought for a time, while Skyrnir eyed her sternly.

" Warm is the wood of Barri and known to us both. There, on the third night from this, shall the son of Niördr come to claim me."

" 'Tis well," said Skyrnir, and mounting his red horse he rode away. But this time no fire barred his path, the way back to Asgard was smooth, and sunshine flooded all the land.

In the garth of Elfheim Frey, pale and grave, stood waiting.

" How hast thou sped? " he asked eagerly.

"Tell me ere thou off-saddle. Is it thy pleasure or mine?"

"Both, good Frey," Skyrnir smiled; "thy sword is mine and the maiden is thine. In Barri wood will she meet thee three nights from this."

And all the tiny elves, listening, clapped their hands like silvery marriage bells and danced round, crying:

"Gerd is coming to give joy to Frey, our lord! In three days! In three days!"

Speeding off, they carried the joyous news to the Asynjar, that the bride-feast might be made ready, and Frey said impatiently:

"One night is long; still longer are two. How can I bear a third without my Gerd?"

But All-Father, when he heard all, looked very grave and shook his head.

"How will Frey fare at Ragnarök?" he mused. "How will he face Surtur without the magic sword that he has bartered for love of a maid?"

But Ragnarök was far away; and a joyous life did Frey and Gerd live until it dawned.

CHAPTER V

OF BREISINGA-MEN AND FREYJA

None rejoiced more in the happiness of Frey with Gerd than his fair sister, Freyja, since her marriage with Odr—one of the Æsir—was all peace and blessing. One daughter they had—called Hnos, the precious one—and they dwelt in Folkvang, the palace within which was the great hall Sessrymir.

Freyja had much work to keep her gay and busy, for, not only must she overlook the elves with Frey, but the earth-women constantly turned to her for succour and advice. Then sometimes she must also ride to battle with Odin's Valkyrjar, to take her share of the slain.

But it befell that, upon a day, all was still in Asgard. Summer heat lay over all, the elves slept in the shade, the Valkyrjar—since there were no wars in Midgard—were bathing in the blue lake. Niördr, Freyja's father, had gone with his giant-wife to her mountain home, and Frey and Gerd were on a journey with Odr.

Time hung heavy on the white Vana's hands, for the heat gave her much discomfort and panting, she strolled down a dark and rocky path that led to the home of the swart-elves, hoping there to find shade and coolness.

Freyja knew well that she should have no dealings with the dwarf folk, but she was young

and dull and some strange spirit of mischief urged her forward, although she murmured:

"My father bade me hold no converse with the little dark men. I will but peep and then steal away."

On she passed, seeing nothing to hold her fancy until the blows of metal on metal struck upon her ear, very far away but clear and silvery.

Guided by the sound, she threaded her way through the dark passages until she came out into a fire-lit cave, where four misshapen dwarfs were gathered round a stone table.

Their little heads were close together, and they whispered to each other with shrill, impish chuckles. They did not seem to see her, and she crept forward quietly until she could look over their heads.

They were putting the last touches to a jewel of such brightness that Freyja drew back, dazzled and gasping—then looked and looked again. It was a necklace of gold set with such gems as she had never seen, blazing in a glorious sheen of mingled colours, brighter than the flower-studded meadows in spring-time.

In her eagerness to see, she leant forward over the table, and the dwarfs, who had heard her from the first, winked at each other and feigned to be more busy with their work, making the light play among the gems as they flashed the necklace back and forth.

At length the Vana could bear the sight no longer, and disobeyed her father.

"What have you there, small men?" she asked.

"Breisinga-men," answered Alfrig. "A treasure for a goddess."

"When we find one fair enough," added Dvalin.

"Or good enough," said Berling.

"Or who will pay our price," whispered Grer.

"And am I the goddess?" laughed Freyja, for she knew how beautiful she was.

"Maybe," they answered all together and leered at her with twinkling eyes.

"What is the price? Much gold can I give, since my husband and my father give me all."

"Gold!" they laughed in scorn. "More gold have we than lies in all Asgard."

"Then what would ye have?" she asked impatiently, for the cunning creatures were waving Breisinga-men, in all its sparkling glory, before her longing eyes.

The small black men looked at each other, then Alfrig spoke:

"Whoso would wear Breisinga-men must give us her embraces."

"To one of you?"

"To each and all."

Freyja shrank back with a cry of dismay.

To yield a kiss to one of these misshapen creatures of the Underworld would be a loathly horror, to give one to each would be terrible beyond imagination. And how could she face husband and father if she but touched one of them?

Sadly she turned away, and the magic of the necklace might have passed had she not looked round as she reached the doorway.

The dwarfs were holding aloft Breisinga-men,

flashing its gorgeous many-coloured flames through the depths of the cave.

Unable to withstand it, she flew back with outstretched hands.

"Give it to me!" she cried. "Give me the necklace and I will pay your price."

She sank on her knees, and the horrible little creatures, gloating over her beauty, stroked her hair, patted her shoulders, and took the unwilling kisses that she gave them with closed eyes.

At last they clasped Breisinga-men on her neck and let her go, following her lagging steps with shrill triumphant cries.

"Freyja has kissed us! Freyja has stooped to us! Nevermore can she look with scorn upon us dwarfs."

As the Vana took her upward way, the jewel seemed an iron band round her neck, a leaden weight upon her heart. It was not the necklace, but the memory of her disobedience and treachery to father and husband that lay heavy on her soul.

Yet how beautiful was Breisinga-men! Would not Odr think her more lovely than ever in its light? Never, never must she let him know the price at which it had been gained!

Through Folkvang she went, seeking her spouse, but no one had seen him; with sinking heart she hurried through the gardens calling: "Odr! Odr!" but none answered.

She stood still and pondered, then sped over the meadows to consult the wise queen, Frigga.

The goddess looked at her, as the glittering

jewels rose and fell with her panting breath, with grave, sad eyes.

"Odr is gone," she said gently, "no evil could he bear—least of all such evil thoughts in her he loved best. Alone and afar he wanders, distraught by the betrayal of his wife.

Freyja tore off Breisinga-men.

"Mother, O Mother! send it back to the dwarfs and let me have my love again!"

Frigga shook her head.

"That is thy punishment, poor child. In tears and sorrow must thou atone for thy disobedience. Breisinga-men cannot be given back."

"Then I will seek him throughout the world, for never shall I rest until he forgives me."

Calling for her chariot, drawn by two great cats, she sped swiftly out of Asgard, through the forests, fields and cities of Midgard, with eager questions for Odr, but never did she come up with him.

Some shook their heads, others had seen him pass, but nowhere was he to be found.

Exhausted and spiritless, the poor Vana went back to her desolate home.

None came near her save Frigga. Niördr and Frey were angered, the goddesses vexed and envious of her ill-gotten jewel. Only the gentle heart of Frigga—knowing all and pardoning all—held a place for the outcast.

"Mother Queen!" the Vana moaned, "am I accursed? Will Odr never come? Shall I never more be free from this terrible bond?"

"In time, my child, in time," Frigga would reply, for she could not tell all she knew.

Now when Freyja had, to All-Father's thinking, suffered enough, he looked into the mind of Loki and found there the wish to possess Breisinga-men. And he smiled, for he and Frigga alone knew that Freyja's happiness could only return through the stealing of the necklace. Thus no hindrance was made to the plot of the Fire God.

It took much time to plan and was not easy, since none could enter Freyja's bower unasked; but, at length, one night he prowled around with stealthy footsteps seeking an opening whereby he might enter.

He had reckoned without the Sleepless Watcher.

From his post at the gate of Bifröst, where he sat drinking sweet mead, Heimdal looked out over the sleeping world and his fine ear caught the sound of Loki's foot. With piercing eyes he searched hither and thither until he marked the lithe dark form.

"What mischief now?" he muttered. "No good ever comes where Loki hovers."

Then he beheld Loki change himself into a fly, trying to creep through the keyhole, but there was no air and the Fire God cannot live without breath; at last, after trying many things, he crawled upon the roof and found between the silver thatch-straws a tiny hole through which he disappeared.

The great White Van gazed on into the chamber of Freyja; the Vana lay sleeping, her arm thrown across her neck hiding the shining gems, and by her side stood Loki. But the necklace clasp was

under her neck, and there was no way to come at it.

Muttering runes, the Fire God shrank and shrank until he became a flea and, springing on to Freyja's cheek, he bit her; she started and turned so that the clasp was clear to see. Seizing Breisinga-men the cunning god fled in all haste.

Filled with wrath, the Heavenly Warder strode down to Asgard; catching up Loki he cut at him with his sword, but only a pillar of fire towered up to heaven.

Then began a magic combat.

Heimdal became a cloud that threatened to quench the fire, but Loki became a bear that started to drink up the rain-cloud. Heimdal took the shape of a yet larger bear and Loki fled to the water in the form of a seal, to be followed by a mightier one. Furiously and long they fought until the water was churned to foam and stained with blood.

In the end Heimdal prevailed, and Loki was forced to beg for mercy.

"Give up the necklace," said Heimdal.

"I will not," snapped Loki; but Heimdal made as if to begin the battle once more and, with curses, Loki yielded.

Wounded and weary but well satisfied, the Watcher plodded back to Asgard, and there, at the command of All-Father, mounted his horse, Gulltopp, and took the way down to Svartheim, where he delivered up Breisinga-men to the dwarfs, its makers, with words of stern warning for the future.

Then he went back to the peace of Himinbjörg, and, ere many days were past, rejoiced to see lost Odr taking the path up to Folkvang.

Then he turned away, for the meeting of Odr and Freyja—the married lovers—was a sight that neither Æsir nor Vanir might look upon.

CHAPTER VI

OF BRAGI THE POET AND IDÛN

All was silence. Over land and sea, from uttermost Jötunheim to the highest leaf of Yggdrasil, brooded a silver mist—the mist of rest.

Then, on the sea, something stirred. A ship made by the dwarfs came into sight on the slow-heaving waters; swiftly it sped on, without sails, without oars, without wind, for it was Skidbladnir, the ship of Frey, that Bragi—the golden-tongued singer—had borrowed for his voyage.

On the deck he lay, not sleeping but dreaming, as he lightly touched the tender strings of his harp, of the secrets that poets alone can fathom—the mystery of love and sorrow, of life and death.

So he passed on until the ship came into the harbour where the Dwarf of Death held sway—no tree was to be seen, no flower, no sign of life. Then he sprang up in noble defiance and, seizing his harp, sang a Song of Life that roused the enchanted world and gave it breath and movement.

Thus is it ever with the skalds. At the touch of their hand, the sound of their voice, death melts into sweet memory, sorrow is healed, and life comes to its rich fulfilment.

Still singing, Bragi stepped on shore and took his way over the barren ground, marking not that as he went the land became clothed in verdure, trees and shrubs sprang into life and beauty.

But soon, through the verses of his song, he felt a presence near him, and he looked far ahead into a fresh and shady grove. There he saw a fairy maiden, lovely as the spring dawn, flitting from light to shadow, stooping to touch the brown earth as she passed. And where her delicate fingers rested the flowers came thick.

Wakened from his dream, he, still singing, followed her through grove and woodland until, in a dim glade, midst ferns and moss, beside a gushing fountain, he found the lady of his search.

In her white robe, girdled with green, and her crown of blossoms she had thrown herself down beside the water, and in pure joy of heart was touching the earth with her tiny finger-tips, laughing in glee as she named each flower that sprang.

"Now Baldur's eye-brow," she said; "most of that since it is the best, then forget-me-not for my father and sisters, then—ah, who art thou?" she broke off in dismay, rising slowly to her feet as the god made his way through the thicket before her.

"No one that thou needst fear, maiden. I am Bragi of Asgard. And thou?"

At his name the fair child sank to her knees and folded her hands.

"Idûn am I, great lord. Youngest daughter of Ivald the elf-lord. What may I do to pleasure thee?"

"Idûn, Idûn! spirit of youth! Beloved, come. Stay with me ever; be the soul of my song."

And Bragi sang for Idûn alone a song more

exquisite than any that the Æsir had ever heard, and Idûn, hearkening, felt the spell steal over her, drawing her closer to the god. And, as he dropped the harp, she crept into his outstretched arms.

Thus were immortal song and beauty and youth made one.

Hand in hand, they passed onward and upward, wending their happy way to Asgard and the welcome of the joyous Æsir and Asynjar, who prepared a home for their cherished singer in the loveliest of the groves under the protecting arm of Yggdrasil. Here the flowers were the brightest, the trees the most noble, and what wonder? since in Idûn's grove spring-time was everlasting. No leaf fell withered, no blossom dropped languidly from its stem; the Vanir sent their light-elves with sweetest perfume and clearest colours for fruit and flowers and whispered the soft secrets of the summer air. Here the birds wore their gayest plumage, the squirrels were the deepest red, the lizards and the fish in Idûn's fountain the most brilliant in all wide Asgard.

In the midst of the garden stood the sacred tree that was the chief care of the Lady of the Grove—the trust of the Æsir, who knew well that their treasure was safe in Idûn's hands.

For upon this tree grew the apples with which Æsir and Einherjar renewed their youth. Each day when they had eaten of Sæhrimnir, the boar that is ever renewed, they took their way to Idûn's grove to share, at her hands, the apples that none but she could pluck, and to listen to the wondrous strains of Bragi, telling the story that never ends.

So great was the peace that Bragi's fair wife would never leave her home, even to visit Frigga and the other goddesses. Each morning she plucked her lap full of apples for the day's use and laid them in a casket of crystal, bound with gold. Nor was the casket ever empty; however many she might take out one always remained.

Never did the gods miss their visit, since illness and age and death could not touch them when they ate, and when duty took them far away, they carried with them a store of the red-gold fruit.

To one only was the visit irksome.

Loki, growing in evil as the years went by, hated the grove and its peace and the need of going there to keep his youth and comeliness. His sharp tongue ached with the desire to pour forth wickedness, and since this might not be—for even he dreaded the wrath of the gods—he slunk into the background in sullen silence.

Now it befell one morning that, as Idûn gathered her fruit with a joyous song, Bragi watched her with a sad, tender smile. It seemed to him that her notes had deepened and sweetened since she had come to Asgard to take the welfare of the gods into her small white hands, and he grieved that he must cast the first shadow over her radiant face.

"Sweet wife," he said as she closed the casket with a ringing laugh, "couldst thou be happy if I left thee for awhile? Couldst thou rest content?"

"Not happy nor content," she amended gently; "but if it must be—since I know thy reason must be good—I have it in me to be patient and count the days till thy return."

Then he held her close and told her of the toiling thousands down in Midgard, to whom poetry and song were the highest, brightest points in life, and of how he must go to teach them more.

"We of the Æsir must each go in turn," he went on. "Even now All-Father, Hönir, and Loki are journeying there to see that justice is done in the land. But all they cannot do; I have my part. Too long have I left the Earth-Dwellers unvisited, so loth was I to leave thee, and their work grows dull and irksome and their feet shod with lead for lack of the joy that my song alone can give. I must go through the farm-stead and to the workers in the towns, teaching them afresh, then will I return to thee, beloved, and rest."

Idûn bravely kissed her love, bidding him god-speed, and watched him take the downward path to Midgard until she could see no longer. Then, lonely and chill, she stood by her fountain, longing for the lengthening of the shadows to bring the Æsir to their daily feast.

Suddenly, as she waited, the sunlight went out and a cloud darkened the clear water. Looking up in alarm, she saw hovering over her a giant-eagle with fierce yellow eyes, cruel talons, and wide-spread wings. In terror she fled into the palace and thence watched the creature poising almost motionless until he had spied out every corner of the grove; then soaring slowly up and away, he disappeared in the mist that hung over Jötunheim.

Clasping her hands over her beating heart, Idûn whispered: "Oh, that Bragi had not left me!

Would but the Asynjar stay with me when they come!"

Yet when the gods arrived she would not cloud their welcome but gave them of her store with courteous gentleness. Only the stately, keen-eyed Frigga, knowing all things, saw her trouble and drew her aside.

"My child," she said, "return with me to Volkvang to wait until Bragi comes again. Thou art lonely and are not used, as I am, to thy lord's absence."

But Idûn shook her head with a shy, grateful glance.

"My gracious lady would not think well of me should I desert my post."

And Frigga said no more, well-pleased that this fairy maiden should have will and strength to share the burden that gods must ever bear for men.

Thus little Idûn waited, doing her duty to each day that passed; letting no shadow of her loneliness fall upon her flowers, lest their brightness should be dimmed, nor on her birds lest they should forget the songs that Bragi had taught them. And in her work she found peace to watch patiently for the return of her love.

CHAPTER VII

OF THIASSI THE GIANT

Now, as Bragi had said, some time before Odin had set out with Hönir and Loki to see how prospered the sons of men.

He was none too pleased that Loki should go, yet without him journeys were hard, since he was matchless in resource and cunning. News of all the country-side came to him with the ease of a bird's flight, and food could he find in the barest region—for on earth even All-Father himself must eat.

It came about that one chill evening, after wandering all day through dense forests, they reached a wide dale where they could see no village.

"Cattle are here," said Loki, who had flitted on ahead, "but no one to tend them. Since eat we must, a calf from the herd will serve."

All-Father seated himself beneath a tree to rest and ponder on all he had seen and done; but he was uneasy and wished that he had commanded his ravens, Hugin and Munin, to find him as they did in Asgard and tell him all they knew.

While Hönir gathered sticks and prepared the spit, Loki sped off on his noiseless shoes. He was quickly back with a calf across his shoulders, and while Hönir cut up the meat and stuck it on the spit, he set the sticks ablaze.

But although they turned their hardest and

Loki tried to keep the fire bright, the meat remained raw.

Loki heaped on fuel, fanning it the while, but all in vain; in some strange way the fire died down, heartless and black.

Then Odin, sure that his forebodings were just, said:

"Supperless must we sleep in this waste place, perchance better fortune will be ours at dawn."

"No more than now," croaked a harsh voice above, and, looking up, they beheld a giant eagle glaring at them from a branch.

"Foul bird!" cried Loki in a rage, "leave us in peace. What need to molest travellers?"

"Give me of thy meat and it shall cook," said the bird.

"Willingly," said Odin, "so that we also have some."

Loki was by no means minded to make a pact, for the creature had beaten him in his own kingdom —fire; but since All-Father had spoken he must needs hide his wrath, and, moodily, he made place for the eagle, who fluttered down and fanned the flame with his wings, so that the meat was quickly ready.

But now the Æsir had much ado to get even a morsel, for the eagle ate so fast that it seemed likely that he would make an end of the whole. At that Loki let forth his rage; snatching up a stake that lay near he struck at the bird. The blow gave forth a ringing sound, and, to his dismay, he found that he could neither let go his hold of the staff nor yet tear it loose from the eagle's body.

With a croak of triumph the giant-bird spread his wings and dragged the screaming Loki away in the gathering darkness, Odin and Hönir watching until they disappeared.

Then All-Father said:

"This, then, was what I feared. That was Thiassi, chief of the storm giants, and I misdoubt me of trouble to come. Hönir, at dawn we must wend our way with all speed back to Asgard."

All through the long night the Ase watched and thought, but he could not fathom the wickedness of Thiassi.

For Loki he did not fear, his cunning could be trusted to prevail against the storm giant's might. Indeed, unwilling as was Odin to lose his companion and blood-brother, he knew full well that the day was drawing nigh when Loki must be driven from the home of the gods.

At the first ray of light they set forth, but ere they had gone far Loki, limping and battered, met them—too crestfallen to give tongue to his usual mocking speech and making short answers, that told nothing, to their questions.

In chill silence they reached the Glittering City.

Now when the eagle had flown off, with Loki hanging to his staff, he had sailed so close to the ground that the Fire God's feet had been torn and bruised as they trailed or caught among rocks and stumps, but the bird took no notice of his cries until they came to a stony desert place. Then he folded his wings and sat glaring at Loki, as he lay

panting and whimpering, his arms still tight held to the staff.

"What is thy will, vile giant?" he gasped at length.

"A small thing," grated Thiassi, "and a thing after thine own heart."

"Let me hear."

"I love that fair maid, Idûn, who tends the apple-garden of the gods. She and her casket must be mine."

"Then take her," said Loki, although he knew well what was to come. "She is small and weak."

"Fool!" hissed Thiassi, "thou knowest well that I cannot touch her in her garden. Thou must entice her forth."

"That will I not," said Loki. "Without her and her fruit what would the Æsir be?"

"Old and outworn, fair sport for us in Jötunheim," chuckled the giant.

"And I with them! Nay, go elsewhere for help."

The eagle spread his great pinions over the prostrate god.

"Then we will fly on," he said.

"Wait, wait!" shrilled Loki, who was not minded for another such flight. "Let me think."

Thiassi folded his wings, his yellow eye burning viciously. He knew that he would get his will.

"If I am carried to Jötunheim," thought Loki, "it will be either to be quenched for ever or else to live in bondage. Better were it to give up Idûn and trust to my cunning to get the apples for myself when the Æsir have vanished."

"I will do it," he said aloud; "I will tempt Idûn from her grove. The rest must be thy part."

Then Thiassi flew heavily away and Loki, sullen and bruised, went to meet the Æsir.

Now it was no easy thing, as the Asynjar had found, to tempt fair Idûn from her home. If she withstood the wish of Frigga it would hardly be that she would give way to Loki; yet, because she was lonely and sad, he thought it might be possible.

He took the way to wound her in the most tender part—her duty to the gods.

Daily he went with them to the grove, but most often he refused the fruit she offered. Idûn looked at him in timid reproach, asking:

"Is aught amiss with my apple, Loki? Here is the third time thou hast refused it."

Loki shrugged his shoulders.

"The fruit is poor," he said, "better grows outside."

"How can that be? No fruit is there to equal that of the gods."

But Loki smiled in scorn and would not say.

As time went on his silence affected her more; in none could she confide since Bragi was away. Each day she grew sadder and more troubled, until the wily Fire God deemed the time ripe for speech, and he lingered on when the gods bade her farewell.

Idûn glanced at him as he leant against the fountain, looking at her casket with a sneering smile.

"Wilt thou never taste again, Loki?" she asked.

"Willingly," said he, "if thou wilt first come

and see those great apples of red and gold of which I told thee."

Idûn pondered.

None had forbidden her to leave the grove; it was of her own free will that she stayed. If she could find yet fairer apples for the gods she would be doing their pleasure, and why should this not be?

Loki was wise, small liking though she had for him; why should he speak falsely to her?

"I will go with thee," she said slowly, "but my casket will I carry with me, lest any steal in to take it while I am gone."

"As thou wilt," said Loki, carelessly, and he strolled ahead of her out of the gate.

Without the grove, the forest looked dark and forbidding, heavy storm-clouds lowered, and the wind whispered eerily.

"Loki! Loki! I am afraid," Idûn cried. "Without Bragi I dare not venture."

"Then hie thee back," the Fire God replied, slipping between her and the gate of her home, as Thiassi, with a rush of mighty eagle wings, swooped down, caught up Idûn and bore her swiftly to his dark stronghold in Jötunheim.

There, in the gloom of eternal winter, he hid her in a rock-hewn chamber that none might enter save his daughter, Skadi, and Idûn pined, growing each day more sad and wan for lack of husband, friend, and home; yet she remained steadfast to her trust.

Each day Thiassi came—no longer an eagle, but a giant of hideous mien—to demand her apples,

first with fair words then with rage and threats; but neither availed, the fairy maid was firm. At length one day he wrenched the casket from her grasp, shouting:

"Since thou wilt not give, I will take!" and forced it open.

But behold! there was nothing within.

"How is this?" he blustered. And, through her tears, pale Idûn smiled.

"Only for my hand are the apples, Thiassi; kill me if thou wilt, but never shalt thou taste the fruit of the gods."

Enraged, the giant sent his daughter to try her, but Skadi also failed, and in tempestuous wrath he hurried away to hold counsel with the other giants, leaving Idûn for a time in peace.

Now in Asgard was dire dismay. Daily the Æsir went to Idûn's grove and wondered at her absence.

"The child should have warned us that she had planned to follow Bragi," Niördr said pettishly. He knew that he was the most handsome god of all in Asgard, and he could not think of growing old without dismay.

Many of the others murmured also; only Frigga —knowing all and telling nothing—looked down and shook her head.

Day by day, lacking their luscious fruit, Æsir and Asynjar grew older and feebler, while Loki rejoiced, although he, too, felt that the youthful joy of life was gone for ever.

"Look well at Queen Frigga," he whispered

to the indignant handmaid, Fulla, "her hair is already sparse and grey. Soon she will look older than the oldest Norn."

"Thor fails fast," he chuckled to calm Baldur, "soon his gloves will not suffice him to hold Miölnir."

But he spoke too loud. Thor overheard. Catching him by the ear, "Thou ribald Utgard Loki," he thundered. "If I mistake not this coil is of thy making."

All turned to gaze at Loki, and Frigga's face brightened under its weary lines. Her son would save them yet.

Seeing Loki's guilty, furtive glances hither and thither, Thor went on, as he raised his mace:

"The Asynjar say that Idûn was last seen with thee. Where is she now? Speak quickly, or I crush thee to pulp."

Then the Fire God, seeing that in truth death was near at hand, and not being minded to go to his terrible daughter in Helheim, told all that he had done, putting the blame on Thiassi. The gods listened, taking no heed of his excuses.

"With thee, for thy misdeeds, does it lie to fetch Idûn home," said Odin gravely.

"That I cannot. How can I prevail against a giant who has already bested me?"

"That is for thee to find out. Thine is the mischief, 'tis thine to make amends."

Loki sat and bit his nails, while all sat wearily round him, until Thor tweaked hard at his ear.

"I will do it—be gentle, Thor—if Frigga will but lend me her falcon dress."

Clothed in soft feathers, he flew straight to the stronghold of Thiassi and slipped through the small barred window of Idûn's rock-prison.

"Loki! Loki!" she cried, with outstretched hands, "it is strange that I should rejoice to see thee after all the evil thou hast wrought. Hast thou come to take me home? Here, in a short while, shall I pine and die."

"That I have," he said roughly, "but thou must do my bidding. Hold tight thy casket and shrink; shrink until I can take thee in my claws."

And he spoke runes of power over her so that she shrank until she became a nut, that Loki caught up in haste; then, slipping through the bars, he rose high in air and flew with utmost speed towards Asgard.

But ere he was out of sight Thiassi returned from his council with his giant friends and misdoubted him of the speck he saw in the sky.

"Skadi!" he shouted, "ere I put off my eagle skin, haste and see if Idûn is safe in her chamber."

"She is gone!" Skadi cried, hurrying back, "and, with her, the crystal casket."

With a scream of rage Thiassi rushed on the falcon's track and, his flight being by far the stronger, he made sure that he would overtake them.

The Æsir, watching on the walls of Asgard, stood in dread. Then Hönir cried:

"Let us gather wood and fire it. Perchance, weak as we are, we may do something. Flame will not harm Loki and will be a rampart against Thiassi."

With all their feeble strength the gods fell to and, with many anxious side-glances at the rapidly growing specks in the sky, raised a mighty pile in feverish haste. This they fired, and the crackling flames rose up even to the lowest branches of Yggdrasil.

In one moment, Loki, with a rush, burst through the glowing wall and fell exhausted on the ground at Frigga's feet, and Thiassi followed, unable to check his flight.

Carried through the roaring flame by his own weight, he singed his great wings and dropped like a thunderbolt at the feet of Thor.

In an instant Miölnir was out, and one blow laid the evil giant dead before them.

Then the exultant god stooped down, plucked out the yellow eagle-eyes and flung them high up into the sky.

" Bide ye there! " he said laughing, " as stars to light the heavens. Thus wilt thou do more good than ever before in thy life."

Safe in the embrace of the loving Asynjar, little Idûn wept and was comforted. In triumph they led her to her grove, where they feasted once more and regained their youth and vigour and beauty.

Thither, in a few days, came Bragi to hear all and make of it a song. A song of his fair young wife, the Spring; of her imprisonment with the harsh giant, Winter; of her rescue by the warmth of Fire. Thus were all young and happy once more.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WEDDING OF SKADI

But this was not the end of Loki's evil trick; there was Skadi yet to be reckoned with. Thiassi's handsome giant-daughter was not minded to let his death go unavenged, else would she have been put to shame. She was mild and good-natured, but the giant folk would ever have blood for blood.

Arming herself with helm and chain-armour, she strode up to Asgard and demanded a hearing of the assembled gods.

Odin smiled gently on her as she stood—a taller, mightier Valkyrja—before him.

"What wouldst thou of us, maiden?" he asked.

"Justice, O Ruler of Asgard!" she cried. "At the hands of the Æsir did my father meet his death, and nightly his eyes look down upon me, urging me to vengeance. Choose ye which shall meet me in single combat." And she raised her spear.

Her beauty was so great that all were unwilling to do her hurt; the Æsir looked at Odin to speak for them.

"Maiden," he said, "through thy father's ill-doing came his death and not through us. Yet, since it was at our hands that he died, we are willing to make atonement. Wouldst thou join us here in Asgard and become one of us by marriage?"

Skadi thought.

What she saw of Asgard pleased her well; it was fairer and brighter than her rugged home in Thrymheim; she liked well the peace of the soft breezes after the cold winds that roared around her rock castle. Also the gods looked a goodly race as they stood facing her, with laughter in their eyes. She looked slowly from one to another and saw that two there were, more stately and beautiful than all the rest—Baldur and Niördr—and, of the two, Baldur found most favour in her eyes.

"Agreed," she said at last, "so I may choose the man that suits me best."

"Even that will I grant," said Odin, "but thou must choose him—by his feet."

At this the Æsir laughed outright, and Skadi, although not well pleased, was fain to agree, feeling that she would know and choose Baldur.

Once more, before the bandage was fixed across her forehead, she gazed hard at the Shining God—but at his face

"I shall know thee," she muttered, and gave her hand to Hönir, who led her round the half-circle of smiling gods.

Once round she paused:

"Take me once more around," she said, and Hönir obeyed. Before a pair of feet—high-arched and delicate—she stopped and, tearing off the bandage: "I choose thee!" she said, "thou art Baldur."

But alas for Skadi! she had chosen Niördr, the genial god of the summer seas, and all the Æsir laughed again.

"What sayest thou, Niördr, art thou willing?" asked All-Father.

"Since the honour of the gods is pledged, I will redeem it," he replied, holding out his hand to Skadi. "Come, fair maiden, to my palace, Noatûn, by the sea."

Thus Skadi was received among the Asynjar, and for a time the new life suited her well. Then the daughter of the rugged mountains and the blustering winds grew to hate the smiling summer sea and soft plashing waves of her husband's amber palace and to long for the cold grey mists and frowning mountains of Thrymheim.

At last she begged Niördr that they should spend their time part in her home and part in his, and to this he agreed. But they were not happy thus, and Niördr sang:

"Drear are the hills
And long the nights;
Hateful the voice
Of the howling wolves,
Of the growling bears,
And the eagles wild.
I long for the lapping
Of waves on the shore
And the swan-song clear
That I hear no more."

This raised the wrath of Skadi, and she replied:

"Sleep had I none
By thy hateful waves
For the noise of thy swans
And thy sea-mews' cries.
Oh for my mists
And my mountains grim,
No more will I bide
By the smooth sea-strand."

"As thou wilt," said Niördr; "go thou back to thy home and leave me to mine. Friends shall we remain if we be parted."

And joyously Skadi sped back to Thrymheim to spend the long winter on skates or hunting the beasts of the forest, while Niördr continued his peaceful work, overlooking the fisher-folk and the ship-men who sailed over the summer seas. But the stormy ocean was left to old Œgir, who dwelt in a crystal hall far out to sea and loved the noise of the storm and crash of the whirlwind. Once a year at flax-harvest did he and his wife, Ran, make a great feast for the Æsir, of which we shall hear later.

CHAPTER IX

OF HOW THOR CAME BY MIÖLNIR

Now it came about that Thor, returning one day from a journey with All-Father, found his palace, Bilskirnir, strangely quiet. From floor to floor he went, calling for Sif, his wife, but no answer came to him, none knew where she had gone.

After long search he found her hidden, sobbing, behind a misty heap of grey clouds, her head wrapped in a thick veil.

"What is this?" he asked, as he raised her gently and drew back the veil.

"O Thor! Thor!" she cried, "I am shamed and set at naught. Never more shall I dare to face the Æsir and Asynjar. See!" And Thor saw that the thick golden braids of her glorious hair, that had reached below her knee, had been shorn close to her head.

"Who has done this?" he thundered, for the hair of Sif was the pride of Asgard.

Sif shook her head.

"How can I tell," she said sadly. "I slept for awhile in the shade of the grove, and when I woke my hair was gone."

"There is but one who would play this scurvy trick," raged Thor, "and he shall rue it. Comfort thee, my sweeting, there is no shame for thee; the shame is Loki's, if I mistake not."

And Thor strode away to seek the mischief-

maker in such wrath and haste that the ground trembled beneath his tread.

The Æsir were gathering for their evening meal and when Loki beheld the angry god drawing near, he made as if to slip away unnoticed, but Thor was too quick. Catching the Fire God by the throat he shook and shook him until the teeth rattled in his head, and Odin cried:

"Softly, softly, son Thor; if there be aught against Loki make it plain to us and he shall answer for it. To slay him will advance thee nothing."

"Nay," growled Thor, "but it would advance the gods; since this niddering will bring us all to ruin."

He threw Loki from him and the Fire God, panting but still sneering, lay where he fell. Then Thor told the evil plight of Sif, and loud were the murmurs against the wanton deed. As they died down All-Father spoke:

"What atonement shall Loki make for this insult. Speak, my son."

"He shall cause the swart-elves to fashion hair of gold in place of that which he has stolen from Sif and, should he fail, I claim to break every bone in his body."

To the Æsir this bargain seemed but just, and Loki, scrambling to his feet, sped noiselessly away, trusting to his honeyed tongue to cajole the swart-elves.

"It will go hard with me," he muttered, "if I cannot outwit both dwarfs and gods."

Never did Loki tell the price that he paid to the swart-elves for their aid, and, by his silence, the

gods knew that it must be heavy, but ere long he was back in Asgard face to face with them. First, from his wallet he brought out the long and beautiful hair of gold that he placed upon the head of Sif, where it rooted and grew in such abundance that the Asynjar clapped their hands in gladness at its brightness. Next he handed to Odin a spear.

"That," said he, "is Gungnir. With it All-Father will never miss his mark."

Lastly, from his wallet he drew a small ship folded up.

"See, Frey, this is Skidbladnir. It will grow to the size you need when you will and it will sail, despite adverse winds, to any point you wish."

Thus the frowns with which he had been greeted were turned to smiles and the Fire God, as was his wont, began to make boasts, thereby bringing on himself more trouble.

"Ha! Ha!" he laughed, "now the Æsir can see that none of the dwarfs can touch my smiths. The rest of the swart-elves are mere tinkers beside the sons of Ivaldi."

A growl of anger broke in upon his speech, and he stopped short to listen.

Now it chanced that Brock, the dwarf, was within hearing, and it was well known that his brother, Sindri, was first of all smiths.

The small dark creature rushed at Loki, shouting:

"Take back thy words, vain babbler, Sindri is second to none."

"Bah," jeered Loki, "be silent, small man, and wag not thy beard at me. What canst thou know of smith-work?"

Brock stamped and shrieked with rage.

"Thy head against mine, Utgard Loki," he spluttered. "The gods shall decide who is the better smith."

"As thou wilt," and Loki shrugged his shoulders. "Go thou and see what Sindri can do, and bring it here eight nights from this. I wager that thy head will be mine."

Brock hastened away to the cave-world and, finding his brother, told him of all that had befallen. Sindri thought for a while.

"We can prevail," he said at length; "but thou must do thy part, which is to keep the bellows working. Shouldst thou stop but for a minute thou art lost."

The brethren set to work.

Sindri put into the fire a hog-skin, murmuring runes the while, and Brock pulled steadily at the great bellows, despite a gad-fly that stung his hands again and again.

At length Sindri ceased his muttering and said:

"Brother, it is enough."

The fire died down and he drew forth the wild hog, Gold-Bristle.

Brock gazed on it with joy.

"That is well for the first, brother," he said.

"The next will be harder," Sindri answered as, from a hidden place in the cave, he gathered a handful of rich red gold and set it in the glow. Again Brock wielded the bellows, and again the fly came and stung him on the neck; but he knew that it must be Loki hindering his work and he listened

to the solemn music of Sindri's runes, paying no heed to the torment.

Again Sindri bade him cease and, as Brock waited in breathless silence, his brother brought out an arm-ring of such dazzling brightness that it lighted up the whole cave, and round its band ran runes that only Sindri could read. He chuckled happily.

"This," said he, "is good. It is Draupnir, that each ninth night shall drop eight rings like to itself. Odin himself must be the wearer."

Brock laughed in triumph as Sindri laid Draupnir aside.

"Loki is doomed," he said.

"May be," his brother answered, "but we will run no risk, for against us are working all the giants of Jötunheim. Now comes the hardest. See, therefore, that thou slacken not for one moment, no matter what shall befall."

He cast into the raging fire a bar of iron and drew back to the farthest corner of the cave to make his runes, while Brock, throwing off his jerkin, pulled at the bellows with might and main. The only sounds were the sob of the bellows and the rhythmic roar as the clear flames rose and fell; the work was almost ended when the gad-fly, savage and desperate, stung Brock on the eyelid, so that blood gushed down into his eye. For one second he ceased blowing to dash aside the stream, and in a moment the fire sank and went black. Sindri hurried up, with dismay on his brow, leaving the last rune unspoken. As he peered into the ashes his face cleared.

"It is well," he said, drawing a great battle-mace from the embers. "Small harm is done; it might have been longer in the haft, but it will serve."

Proudly he whirled the mighty weapon round his head, laughing a deep laugh, while Brock looked on in wonder.

"This is Miölnir, that only Thor can wield, the safeguard of Asgard against the giants. Go, little brother, carry off thy treasures and bring me the head of Utgard Loki to see. He bodes good neither to gods nor men and it will rejoice me to see him dead."

Little Brock staggered, heavy-laden, into the hall of the Æsir.

"See, All-Father," he said, "the gifts of Sindri the smith to thee. Will not Draupnir and its offspring rings be more to thee than Gungnir?"

Odin thanked him, but made no other answer.

"To thee, Frey, my brother sends this boar, to carry thee over mountains and valleys, through mists and clouds, and to travel by night if thou wilt, since the gleam of his bristles will make the darkness bright."

Frey also thanked him, but said no more.

"For thee, Thor, hath Sindri sent Miölnir, a solemn trust to aid thee in the ceaseless battle for gods and men against the raging hosts of Jötunheim."

Thor sprang forward to grasp the handle, without a word, but his face grew bright with high purpose. With all his skill and strength he whirled the dread weapon round and round his head so that Æsir

and Asynjar drew back in alarm. Only All-Father sat calm and still and said solemnly:

"Sindri hath judged aright. No treasure can equal this gift of Miölnir, to be the guard of gods and men. Brock has prevailed. Yet surely he would not ask the death of Loki; will he not choose some lighter ransom?"

"Nay, All-Father," Brock shook his swarthy head. "Had I failed, Loki would scarce have let me go."

He turned towards the place where the Fire God had stood, but he was there no longer.

Neither was great Thor in his place. Seeing Loki creep stealthily away, he had followed him and in a moment he returned, dragging Loki by the ear.

It was an ill hour for the Fire God, yet even then his cunning saved him.

"My head is thine, Swart Face," he said, "but not the neck. Cut off my head, but wound not the neck, lest the anger of the gods fall upon thee."

Thus was Brock baulked of his reward, and great was his wrath.

"Yet one thing will I do," he cried bitterly, "and the gods will not say me nay. Thy mocking lips will I sew together that they make evil no more."

With Sindri's awl and the thong Vartari, he joined the lips of Loki, so that until his cunning, after many days, got him loose he could speak no word.

Then for a time his spirit was mild and his

mischief less, so that Thor, who was wishful to try Miölnir on the giants, thought well to take him on the journey, since his cunning was ever useful. For Odin, having in mind the war that must some day come, was minded that his son should spy out the strength of the giants in Jötunheim.

CHAPTER X

OF THOR'S DOINGS IN JÖTUNHEIM

Soon after dawn Thor and Loki set forth in the chariot drawn by two goats; swiftly they sped through Midgard, and the people, hearing the heavy rumbling, said: "Hark! Great Thor, the peasants' god, goes by. While he watches we are safe."

As evening drew on, they stopped at a cottage door to beg a night's shelter. The man and his wife gave them welcome, saying:

"Little have we to set before you, lords, but that little is offered with joy. Thialfi, Röskva, fly to wait upon our guests."

Then Thialfi, the boy, who was the swiftest runner in all Midgard, took their cloaks and Röskva, the girl, helped her mother to spread the table and set out the goat cheese and barley bread for supper.

"Better than this can we do," said Thor, with a laugh, as he looked with kindly eye on the meagre fare. Going outside with Loki he slew his two goats and speedily made them ready for the pot.

"Here is a supper for the gods," he said, "but see you that no bones are broken or lost. When the meat is eaten, gather all into the two skins and lay them in the corner by the fire."

Then they all sat and ate merrily, but Loki, ever ripe for mischief, spoke low to Thialfi.

"There is good marrow in these bones," said he; "it were a pity to waste it. Break one and see."

And foolish Thialfi broke the thigh bone and sucked out the marrow, then laid the pieces together in the skin.

At dawn Thor, the Fire-Rider, rose and, going to the warm corner where lay the skins, he waved Miölnir over them and muttered powerful runes, and behold! the goats sprang up hale and whole, but one was lame in a hind leg.

"What is this?" thundered the god in terrible wrath. "Who has done this thing? My command was that no bone should be broken."

"It was I," said Thialfi, throwing himself trembling at Thor's feet. "I alone am to blame."

"Be not wroth, O lord!" begged the father and mother; "take all that we have, but spare our son."

The Ase was touched by their grief.

"I want not your goods," he answered, "the more"—here his piercing glance fell on Loki—"that I think this mischief was not of the boy's hatching. Care for my goats while I am absent, and lend me your children for my servants. Then will all go well with you."

To this the parents gladly agreed, and with thanks and blessings the Æsir set forth, closely followed by Thialfi and Röskva, bearing their wallets. For many days they passed on through the wildest regions of Midgard, until at last they came to the shore of the northern sea, and, far away on the distant skyline, made out the faint blue mist of Jötunheim.

Then Ving-Thor turned to Thialfi and said kindly: "Our way lies there in the giants' land. If thou and thy sister fear to follow, take thy way home now."

Thialfi looked at Röskva, who smiled and bent her head.

"My lord," he answered, "bad servants should we be and niddering, did we leave thee when hard days come. Lead and we follow."

The god nodded, well pleased and, taking the children by the hand, waded out into the sea. They swam on and on until the rugged shore of Jötunheim was reached, and to neither child did it seem strange that they were not weary.

Through a dark and ghostly land they passed, where, out of the swirling grey mist, loomed suddenly mighty rocks that startled the children by their likeness to evil giants.

The night came down on them in the midst of a thick wood; there Thor stopped.

"Enough for to-day," he said; "we must sleep as best we can among these rocks."

"Nay," said Loki, who had, as was his wont, been flitting hither and thither beside the path. "Nay; I have found a great open house, doorless and windowless. There we shall at least be sheltered from the night blasts."

Cautiously they crept into a hall that they knew must be vast, from the echoes roused by their whispers. There they lay down and slept, but not for long. Ere midnight a great shuddering earthquake made them start up in sore dismay.

"What is that?" Loki whispered, with chatter-

ing jaws. "This is enchanted land, and we must flee."

"Not so," said Thor, "I felt that there was a small chamber here at my right hand. Go you in and sleep and I will stay on guard."

With Miölnir across his knees, the god sat open-eyed until the cold and cheerless dawn stole in to wake them all.

"Could you sleep?" he asked smiling, "with the snoring that I heard all night?"

"Naught did we hear," Loki answered. "Whence came the noise?"

"See thou," and Thor pointed to a mighty heap outside the entrance. They hurried out to look, and there lay a giant so great that, as he lay, Thor could not reach up the height of his breadth.

"And they call me the giant of Asgard!" quoth Thor, with a laugh so loud that it woke the sleeper, who sat up yawning and rubbing his eyes.

"Give me thy name, good mountain," said the god.

The giant blinked and grinned.

"Skrymnir am I called, wee man. Thee I know to be Thor, from thy boldness. Hast seen my glove? Ha! there it is. Slept you well in my thumb?" And he picked up the house where they had spent the night and crammed it in his pouch.

"Break your fast," he went on, "then, if you so will, we will join company."

When they had eaten, Skrymnir tied both wallets together and slung them over his shoulder. All day they journeyed, beguiling the time with quips

and jests, and at evening the giant dropped the bundle on the ground.

"Sleep is more to me than food," he said. "Eat of my store if you will."

In a moment he was snoring hard, while the four wayfarers struggled to loose the knots of his wallet. At length, enraged at his ill-success, Thor caught up Miölnir and aimed it full at Skrymnir's head.

"Was that a leaf?" the giant asked sleepily, as he turned over.

Thor made no answer, but lay down under an oak-tree, where he got no sleep for the noise of Skrymnir's snoring. Again he seized Miölnir and hurled it straight at the sleeper's head.

"Too much dust here," he growled. "Why dost thou not sleep, Thor?"

"Who can sleep with thy snoring?" Thor asked sulkily, and sat up, resolved to have one last crack at that thick skull.

This he did, and Miölnir, hitting the giant's cheek, sank in almost the length of the handle.

"The birds are awake betimes," muttered Skrymnir. "Surely that was a feather that fell upon my cheek."

Then Thor gave over and sat watching for the dawn.

As the sun rose Skrymnir looked up, leaning on his elbow.

"See here, wee man," he said. "I have heard ye whisper that I am big, but, mind thou, Ase Thor—for I knew thee from the first—in the city whither thou art bound there are men so great

that I am but a child beside them. I warn thee, be humble, leave boasting to those who have earned a right to it. There lies thy way eastward, mine is to the north. Fare ye well."

Soon after this they came to a palace so high that they could scarce see the full height of the walls. The gate was shut, but this was a small matter, since they could slip between the bars and thus make their way to the great hall, where sat the Giant King with his giant warriors around him.

As they bent respectfully, he burst into a rolling laugh that shook the rafters.

"And is this small thing the great god, Thor, of whom we hear so much? Surely thy deeds must be greater than thy size, to make all this talk. What can thy company do?"

"I," said Loki, slipping forward—for the rage of Thor choked him so that he could not speak, "I can eat more than any man."

"Good," said the king. "Come hither, Loge, and try thy skill as trencherman against Loki."

A giant rose from a far bench and sat him down opposite to Loki, while a long wooden dish filled with meat was placed between them.

Each fell to at his end and devoured the food until their hands met in the middle. Then they leant back, tired and satisfied.

The king came down from his high seat and shook his head.

"Loki has eaten the meat, truly," he said, "but my Loge has eaten the bones also. Thou art beaten. Can no one of you do better than this?"

Young Thialfi was burning at this scorn of his lord and he stood forth.

"I, O King, am the fleetest runner on skates in Midgard. Try me against thy man."

The king beckoned to a thin man near.

"Come, Hugin," he said, "let us go to the ice-plain and see what will betide."

But here also the gods were beaten, for ere Thialfi reached the turning post he met Hugin skimming goalwards. Three times they ran and each time was Thialfi beaten.

"And thou, Ase Thor? Is there naught that thou canst do?" the king asked.

"I can drink with the best," Thor said, gruffly.

"Bring my horn," ordered the king, and they brought in a long thin vessel. "See, a good drinker can empty this at one draught, most take two, only the poor and weak need three."

Thor smiled, for, long as it was, it seemed but a narrow horn. Drawing breath, he pulled long and deep but there was no difference in the height of the liquor. Again he drank and still it was full. In anger he tried once more, then handed back the brimming horn. The king laughed.

"Even the tallest and strongest of the gods is a poor thing beside us giants."

Then Thor put aside his ill-humour and laughed also.

"Such a draught as I have drunk is reckoned great with us of Asgard. Try me with strength, O King."

As he spoke a large iron-coloured cat sprang into the middle of the hall.

"Lift my cat," said the king.

Ving-Thor went forward and, putting his hands under the cat, strove to raise it. The beast's back arched and it spat and growled, but only one paw left the ground. Thor drew back tired and breathless, while the king laughed again and shook his head.

"Little Thor, little Thor, thou art indeed small!"

"I can wrestle," said Thor grimly, "try me at that."

The giant looked round.

"There is none here small enough to close with thee. Call my nurse, Hel."

The crowd parted to let pass an old crone, tottering and toothless.

"For shame," said Thor, drawing back, "I cannot touch an aged woman."

"Try her. She hath floored many a better man than thou."

The fight was long and stubborn, but in the end Thor was laid low, and the king held up his hand.

"Enough," he said, "let us hear no more of the foolish boast that the Æsir are equal to the giants. Go rest thee, Thor, and to-morrow we will set thee on thy way."

Next day the king went with the travellers to the bounds of the city, and as they parted he said:

"How now, Ving-Thor, art thou dismayed at thy failures?"

"That am I," answered the Ase stoutly. "Never did I think to meet my match as I have here."

The giant laid his heavy hand on Thor's shoulder.

"Now," said he, "will I make all plain unto

thee and will own that, had I known thy strength, never shouldst thou have entered my city. All that has passed has been but magic. I am Skrymnir; the wallet thou couldst not loose was fastened with my magic chain; the three blows aimed at me fell upon a mighty rock that I had set between us, and thy last blow was so deep that it reached down to the home of the dwarfs.

"My man, Loge, was fire that devours all—meat and bones; Hugin is my thought, that is swifter than any skate-runner. Never saw I so deep a draught as thine, for the end of my horn reaches to the sea, and the cat thou couldst not lift is the Midgard Serpent. If thou hadst torn him loose great would have been the destruction. Lastly, my nurse, Hel, is Death, whom none can withstand. See now, Thor, that thou set foot here no more, for against my magic thou canst do nothing."

Enraged at his words, the Ase raised Miölnir to throw at the king, but behold! he and his companions stood alone in a desolate land of rocks and grey mountains.

But when they came down to the shore the sea had gone back many yards, and Thor laughed his great laugh.

"My draught has made its mark," he cried, well pleased, then added: "But the Midgard Serpent will I meet again."

And without more toil they reached the peasant's cottage, where they were welcomed joyfully.

CHAPTER XI

OF THOR AND JÖRMUNGAND

ALTHOUGH he made no move for a while, it is well to finish the tale of Ving-Thor and the giants here.

For long did he ponder over his besting by the giants and Jörmungand, the girdle of the world, and many were his talks with Odin as to the means whereby he should take vengeance on the Serpent.

"The giants will I leave till later," he said, "but the Serpent grows ever greater and ever more a dread to men and gods. Well would it be if I might slay him ere evil come."

Now Odin knew that Jörmungand could not be slain, since she had a part to play in the sunset of the gods, yet would he not gainsay Thor, since no harm could come of his journey.

"How wilt thou set about it, my son?"

"That do I not yet know," Thor answered; and it was not until the Æsir went to the first of their yearly feasts with old Œgir, the Sea God, that the chance came to him.

The mead had been brewed in Œgir's largest kettle, yet, as the gods took their places round the table, so great was the assembly that ere it came to the turn of Týr to drink, the vessel was empty.

The old god shook his head ruefully.

"A bad host am I," he murmured. "Would that I had the cauldron of Eymir; that alone is a fitting measure for my noble guests."

"And where is this cauldron?" asked Thor.

Œgir only smiled, but Týr leant forward and whispered:

"Far east of the Sleet Bays, at the end of heaven is the dwelling of Eymir, and therein is the mile-wide kettle."

"Wilt come with me to fetch it?" asked Thor.

"That will I!" and Týr sprang up and seized his sword and cloak.

Far into the land of cold and snow they journeyed together until they came to the ice-palace of Eymir.

At their knock the door was unbarred by a fair woman, golden-haired, who bade them welcome and refreshed them with cups of beer.

"I pray you take it not amiss, my noble guests," she said, as they rested by the hearth, "but my husband is oft-times ill to deal with after his hunting. Hide ye here behind the pillar, under the cross-beam where the cauldrons lie."

This they did, and ere long the door burst open and an icy blast rushed in with the great white giant.

His beard was hard-frozen, as was the game that he flung down and long icicles clattered on his furs as he strode up the hall.

"Strangers are here!" he roared, looking round.

"None that thou needst mind," said the golden wife. "Just two wee men of Midgard. See where I have set them behind the pillar, lest thy glance should shatter them."

Eymir turned to look and his piercing eye split the pillar in halves and crumpled up the beam,

so that the cauldrons clattered to the floor and all were broken but one.

Then the two gods stood forth.

"Thou art Thor!" the giant thundered, "Ving-Thor of Asgard, Hlorridi, the Fire-Rider; thou art he who makes widows of giantesses. Now shall thy wife be the widow."

"And why?" Thor asked boldly. "Two small men are we, asking but food and shelter. Shame on those who give it not."

The giant growled, but said no more as they took their place at meat. Three oxen had been cooked. Thor made such play with knife and fingers that two fell to his share alone.

Eymir watched him, frowning, then said:

"If all thy meals are of this size, mannikin, thou must provide thine own."

"That will I," said Thor cheerily. "In the morning we will go a-fishing."

For now he saw his way to strike at the Midgard Serpent.

At dawn Eymir made ready to start and Thor bustled forth to join him.

"Bide by the hearth, mannikin; I want not thy company," said the giant.

"Nay, I can help," Thor replied.

In scorn Eymir laughed so loud that it seemed as though thunder rolled around.

"What help could I get from thee, thou puny stripling? I fish the broad seas, where a giant-slayer such as thou would die of cold or be puling to be brought to shore."

"I am thinking," said Thor, "that it is not I

that shall be crying for land first. Where is thy bait? "

"Seek it thyself. Take what thou wilt."

Thor looked around and, near at hand among the herd of cattle, saw a coal-black ox. Wringing off its head, he carried it down to the boat in which the giant now sat.

He looked ruefully at the head.

"If that be thy work, I had liefer thou shouldst bide still," he said.

Thor took the oars and rowed so strongly that Eymir soon called out:

"Stay thy hand. It is here that I catch flat-fish."

"May be," said Thor, "but I would go farther yet."

He rowed on, while Eymir, with his baited hooks, drew up whales two at a time.

At last he turned in anger.

"Stay, I bid thee, or I batter in thy head. Here is perilous ground, since we are over the lair of the Midgard Serpent."

Then Thor chuckled and, shipping the oars, he baited his hook with the black ox-head and threw it overboard, while Eymir, busy with his whales, twitted him with idleness.

Suddenly the boat rocked, the sea was churned to white foam and, hand over hand, Thor brought in his line. As he worked, his hands were dashed from side to side of the boat until they bled, and Eymir, watching open-mouthed and dumb, sat holding tight until Thor sprang up. So much strength did he put forth that his feet went through

the planking of the boat and rested on the bottom of the sea.

Then, with a piercing scream of fury, the head of Jörmungand, spitting forth fire and venom and blood, appeared above the waters. Thus they glared, swaying, panting, to and fro, while Thor strove to loosen Miölnir from his belt. But just as he brought it down to crush in the serpent's skull, Eymir, recovering from his terror, leant forward and cut the line so that the blow lost part of its strength, and Jörmungand sank down to nurse her wounds with vengeful envenomed thoughts of the Æsir and the dark days to come.

Without a word the two rowed back to land, then Eymir spoke sullenly:

"Share the work. Either carry up the whales to the house or beach the boat."

Thor made no reply but, catching the boat by the prow, hoisted it upon his shoulder and bore it up to the beach house.

All through supper Eymir spoke to no one, but he muttered in his beard, with ugly glances at his guests. When they had eaten and drunk, he burst out:

"I take small account of the strength of any man that cannot break my cup."

"Give it here and let me try," said Thor, who was in high good humour since he had harmed the Midgard Serpent. Taking the cup, he hurled it with such force that it burst the pillar asunder but rolled unharmed along the ground.

Now the giant's golden-haired wife sat spinning by the hearth, and as she span she sang:

" Hard is the pillar
And harder the cup,
But hardest of all
Is Eymir's skull."

This she did again and yet again until Thor listened and understood. Gathering all his force, he hurled the beaker straight at Eymir's head so that it rebounded and came back to his hand cracked right across. He held up the two halves before Eymir, who whimpered and snivelled.

" My treasures all go; my glory has waned; to my cup I can no longer say: ' Cup, cup, brew thou the ale.' Yet one thing more shalt thou try. Carry forth my mead cauldron if thou canst, mannikin."

This pleased Thor well, since to fetch that same cauldron had he come, but first he called Týr.

" Try thou to lift it," he said.

Týr put forth all his strength, but in vain; he drew back laughing and shaking his head, while Thor, seizing the kettle by the rim, gave one mighty swing and flung it on to his head like a cap, so that the chains hung rattling round his shoulders.

Thus did he make his way back to the hall of Œgir, and ever afterwards were the gods well supplied with mead at their yearly feast with the Sea King at the time of flax-harvest.

One night, long after the bearing home of the cauldron, Thor awoke with a start. Something was amiss.

" What ails me? " he muttered, as he sat up in the dark. " Is Loki at his tricks once more? Is aught wrong with Sif? "

For since Loki's theft of Sif's beautiful hair Thor had ever suspected the Fire God of evil.

Knowing he should get no more sleep, Thor groped in the hole at the head of his bed-place for Miölnir, but behold! Miölnir was gone.

With a roar of anger, he sprang up, set alight a torch and searched the hall for his treasured weapon—but it was nowhere to be found. Filled with anger and foreboding, he set out to find Loki, for he knew that without Miölnir he was powerless to save gods and men from the ever-watchful giants. Loki was early astir; the angry god caught him on his hearth, and seizing him by the throat well-nigh choked out his life.

"First Sif's hair and now Miölnir! When will thy evil deeds be ended? Where is my mace?"

"Loose me," panted Loki, "else I cannot speak."

Thor did so.

"A thing unheard of in heaven and earth has come to pass," he cried, "Miölnir is gone!"

"And thou thinkest I have stolen it? Fool should I be to steal Miölnir, since useless is it without thy gloves and useless art thou, fool Thor, without it to defend us from the giants. Let me think."

And Loki sat himself down upon the ground, and buried his head in his hands.

After a while he looked up.

"To me," said he, "it seems that only the giants could want Miölnir, in order to rob thee of thy power. I will go spy in Jötunheim if Freyja will lend me her feather robe." [1]

[1] Freyja, as well as Frigga, owned a feather dress.

Together they went to the goddess to tell her of the loss and beg her aid.

"Lend me thy feather-fell, O Freyja, for Miölnir is gone," chanted Loki, hopping from one foot to the other with an evil smile.

"Is this a jest or is it the sad truth?" asked the fair goddess.

"It is indeed true," replied Thor.

"Then gladly shalt thou have it," said Freyja, "were it even of fine gold it should be thine, for Hlorridi, our champion."

Quickly she brought it out and helped to fasten it on Loki, who should be their messenger, they agreed, because of his cunning.

Far over the sea he flew until, in Jötunheim, he came to the castle of Thrym. Outside, upon a howe, sat the giant himself, plaiting golden leashes for his hounds and trimming the manes of his horses. He looked up as Loki alighted in front of him.

"How goes it with the gods and the elves?" he asked. "Why comest thou here alone?"

"It goes ill with gods and elves," replied Loki, "for thou hast taken the Fire-Rider's mace."

"That have I!" laughed Thrym; "eight miles deep in earth is it hidden."

"And how may we get it back?" asked Loki smoothly.

"Only by bringing Freyja as my bride."

"Freyja!" jeered Loki, "a likely tale that our Vana-goddess should wed with thee."

"Likely tale or not," said Thrym, plaiting away without looking up, "Freyja comes or I keep Miölnir."

Loki waited awhile, hopping from one feathered leg to the other, but Thrym made no sign, and at last he was fain to fly back to Asgard.

On the highest point of the wall stood anxious Thor.

"Shout me thy tidings from the sky," he cried, as soon as he sighted the great bird. "He that sits, stumbles in his speech."

"Good news have I in sooth," quoth Loki. "Thrym hath the hammer and will give it up in exchange for Freyja."

Thor's wrath was great, but there seemed naught to do but to seek the Vana.

"Take thy bridal veil, O Freyja, since a mate has been found for thee. We two must wend to Jötunheim," said jeering Loki.

The rage of Freyja was a thing to see. So great was it that the rafters of her hall trembled and creaked.

"Am I so anxious to wed that I should go seek a husband in Jötunheim?"[1] she cried; and, turning, she swept away to her bower.

Thor and Loki looked long at each other and Loki shook his head.

"Let us go straight to the council of the gods," he said and, as they passed the gate of Bifröst on their upward way, he turned to Heimdal who stood on guard:

"Come thou also, thou great white Van, thy foresight is greater than ours and thy council is needed."

[1] This must, in point of time, have taken place before the marriage of Freyja and Odr, although this is not indicated.

Heimdal followed them up to the fountain of Urd, where Loki told his tale to the listening circle. All looked grave for a while, then one after another began to speak; yet nothing served until the White God said:

"Let us put on Thor the bride's veil, let keys jangle at his girdle, let the woman's mantle fall to his knees and the hood be folded round his head."

"No niddering am I," shouted Thor, "to shroud me in a woman's coats. I will none of it."

"Nay, Thor," said Loki smoothly, for he knew the danger to the Æsir, and was minded to get Miölnir back, "Heimdal's rede is good, for else will the giants soon dwell in Asgard."

And he passed the word that none should smile or make a mock of Thor in his bridal clothes, lest he should be turned from their purpose.

And when he was clad Loki said:

"With thee will I go as bridesmaid. Harness up the goats."

Thialfi and Röskva came running with the chariot, and so swiftly did they drive that rocks were rent and the earth spouted flame as they reached Jötunheim.

And when Thrym beheld them approaching, he said:

"Rise up, my giants all, and strew the floors, for hither comes Freyja, the daughter of Niördr, to be my bride. Coal-black oxen, golden-horned kine, treasures and jewels of all kinds have I in store; now comes fair Freyja to crown them all."

They sat them down at table where drink was served and food of many sorts.

The son of Odin ate an ox, eight salmon, and a mountain of sweet pastry, and drank three casks of mead.

Thrym glowered and grumbled:

"Never saw I a maid so sharp set, nor a bride drink so deep."

And Loki, standing behind, stooped and whispered:

"So eager was Freyja to be in thy company that naught has she eaten these eight days."

Then Thrym bent to look beneath the veil, and the Ase's terrible eyes darted lightning flames so that he started back in horror; but Loki said:

"So eager was Freyja to be in thy company that for eight nights she hath had no sleep."

At this moment up came the aged sister of Thrym, whining:

"Give me a bride-fee, O Freyja; give me the red gold rings from thine arm if thou wouldst have my love."

But the seeming Freyja answered not.

Then cried Thrym:

"Bring in Miölnir and lay it in the lap of the bride, then join our hands in wedlock."

Loud laughed the heart of Thor as beloved Miölnir touched his hand. Seizing the gloves from his girdle, he drew them on and, springing to his feet, he launched his mace against the giant throng. In a trice Thrym and all his race lay dead about the hall, and the gods strode forth in triumph to bear Miölnir back to Asgard.

Thus did the son of Odin regain his weapon.

CHAPTER XII

OF BALDUR'S DOOM

A CLOUD lay over Asgard. Not in the sky, for the sun shone clear in the soft blue heaven; nor on the earth, for the flowers starred the meadows with their gay blossoms and birds sang in the whispering groves.

The gloom was in the hearts of the Æsir and Asynjar, for Baldur, their darling, the Shining God, was sad.

With clouded brow, bent head, and heavy step he paced the deepest paths of the forest, far from the light of day and, when the gods met in council, he sat apart in silence or lifted heavy eyes to them when they spoke, answering in fewest words.

"What ails him? What can it be?" they whispered to each other; but no reply came until Frigga, unable to bear more, drew rein beside him as they rode up Bifröst to the fountain of Urd.

"Son of my heart," she said softly, "must thy trouble be hidden even from thy mother? Surely, in the telling, some of thy heaviness will pass away?"

"I fear me not, mother mine," the god answered, shaking his head sadly, "the trouble is too deep, and yet it is but a dream."

"Tell it, my son."

But they rode far before Baldur spoke again.

"These seven nights have I dreamed a dream of Hel, dread mistress of the dead. Each night her awful figure—with face half-livid like a corpse, half-human—stands at the door and beckons me with bony hand to follow her to the grey Underworld. And, O mother, I must go—leaving our brilliant home, the cheerful earth where I guard the sons of men, you and my sweet wife, Nanna, to dwell with Hel in the realm of shades; since for me, as I die not in battle, there will be no Valhalla —I must leave you for evermore. Mother, tell me, is it more than a dream?"

Cold fear gripped the heart of Frigga, but she answered calmly:

"Dreams are of many kinds, my son; this will I tell to thy father, and his wisdom shall make all plain. Meanwhile be brave and bright, for surely Death would not touch my son."

Then Baldur, somewhat comforted, sped on to meet the Nornir.

But that night, when he had gone back with Nanna to Breidablik, the gods and goddesses sat in council with All-Father, and it was agreed that he should ride to Niflheim to ask the future of the dead Völva or Sibyl who lay buried there.

Saddling Sleipnir, Odin rode down the darksome way, through narrow defiles where daylight died and noisome shapes flitted and crawled, past misty wraiths that fled moaning and wringing their hands, past Garm, the baying hound of Hel; until, by the sharp echo of Sleipnir's hoofs, he knew that he stood by the eastern gate of the lofty hall, where was raised the barrow of the dead Spae-wife.

Rising in his stirrups, he chanted those mighty runes that bring the dead to life.

"Völva, arise! By the Nornir, by the spirit of Mimir, by all the mighty runes of heaven and earth, I bid thee rise and answer me!"

Then by the hissing lightning-flashes he beheld the barrow slowly yawn, and through the chasm came the Völva, wan and spent, dragged wearily forth, wringing her hands.

"Who art thou, unknown mortal," she wailed, "that hast called me on this long and toilsome journey? Chilled by snow, beaten by rain, soaked by night-dew have I lain here since the long-past days of my life. Why callest thou me, Unknown? What is thy name?"

"Vegtam am I—the Way-wise," Odin answered. "For thy tidings of Hel will I give thee word of Earth. For whom are her walls hung with painted shields and the feast-benches set?"

"For Baldur, son of Odin, is the golden mead brewed. A full cup shall he drink with Hel. I am aweary, I will speak no more."

"Speak on, O Sibyl, for I must know. Who shall be Baldur's bane? Who the slayer of Odin's son?"

"The fateful branch shall Hödr bear. Against my will have I spoken. I will speak no more."

"Speak on, O Sibyl, for I must know. Who will avenge the death of Baldur?"

"Vali, the day-old son of Odin. I am aweary, I will speak no more."

"Speak on, O Sibyl, for I must know. Who is it that alone rejoices in the death of Baldur?"

But now the Völva was angered.

"No Vegtam art thou! Odin, the Ancient of Days, must thou be, since none other could know that one being would joy in Baldur's death. Ride homeward and be proud, for none shall behold me again until Loki loose his bonds and the Darkness fall upon the gods. I am aweary, I will speak no more."

The barrow closed over her, the lightnings ceased and, heavy-hearted, All-Father took his way back. One thing had he learnt — that Loki should soon be bound and an end made to his wickedness.

In Asgard he sought Frigga and told her all. Thoughtfully she laid down her distaff.

"A branch," she murmured, "since it is a branch that may slay our son, I see a way to save him."

Wrapping herself in her veil, she passed through the worlds of Asgard and Midgard, taking from all things an oath that none would harm her beloved.

Trees, flowers, rocks and stones, the beasts of the fields, the woods and the seas, light elves and swart-elves and spirits of the air and water, gladly swore that none would harm the Shining God.

Then, weary but at peace, Frigga returned to her hall and told the Æsir what she had done.

Light at heart, as at the passing of a cloud, one cried:

"Let us go to the garth and make play with Baldur. Bring arrows, spears, and stones to aim at him and swords to cleave him through. Sport will it be to see him stand unharmed.

This they did and Baldur stood, calm and grave,

with a look of sadness in his blue eyes, as the arrows and spears fell thick around him and the sword-blows rained in vain, while the Æsir laughed and the Asynjar clapped their hands.

So great was their relief that all were merrier than they had been for many days past.

Only blind Hödr leant gloomily with folded arms against a wall in the shade, taking no part.

Now it chanced that Loki had been absent and knew naught of all that had passed. Seeing the crowd in the peace-garth he stole up to learn the cause, then crept away to a dark corner to think.

Were Baldur gone, the brightness of Asgard would be dimmed and the destruction of the gods brought a little nearer.

How could he work this play of the Æsir for his own wicked ends?

Hiding in the forest, he changed himself into the form of an old and tottering woman and, leaning on a stick, made his way to the door of Frigga's palace, where she sat smiling as she watched the gods at play.

"Sit thee down, mother," she said, "and drink a measure of milk during thy rest."

"What do they there," quavered the crone, "that they make so merry?"

"They make play with my son," Frigga answered, "for naught can injure him." And she told the tale of her journey.

"And did all things swear the oath?" asked the woman.

"All——" said Frigga proudly, then she stopped

suddenly. "Nay, one there was that I overlooked, but so small and weak is it that it is harmless."

"And that, great queen, is——?" the old woman spoke in feverish haste.

"Merely the mistletoe that grows on the great oak at Valhall's gate. A soft, thin twig it is."

"True," sneered the crone, "it is but a poor thing and of no account. And now, O Frigga, I thank thee for thy welcome and will go my way."

Loki limped off until he reached the wood, then, taking his own shape, he sped to the west gate of Valhalla. There among the spreading oak branches he found the green-grey twig and cut it.

Muttering runes over it, he laughed to see it grow and lengthen until it was as thick and firm as a spear-haft.

"Small and weak, forsooth!" he laughed, "thou wilt yet serve my turn."

He pointed one end with his sharp knife, then hurried off to join the Æsir in the peace-garth. Sidling up to Hödr, who still stood sadly by the wall, he asked:

"Why loiterest thou here alone, O Hödr? Thy strength should surely be put forth in Baldur's honour."

"In my everlasting night, what can I do in my brother's honour?" Hödr replied bitterly; "besides, no weapon have I."

"Take this," said Loki, giving him the mistletoe shaft, "and I will guide thy hand."

Hödr went forward into the ring and took aim, amid the heartening shouts of the Æsir. The spear clove the air and, in a second, the shouts were

stilled and blank dismay fell upon all, for Baldur, pierced and bleeding, fell dead upon the sward.

"What is it? Why are ye still?" blind Hödr asked. "What has befallen?"

"Thy brother is dead; slain by thy luckless hand, O Hödr. Woe the day for Asgard and the gods!"

Threats and curses arose, mingled with the clash of arms, for in their rage and grief they would have done Hödr to death, had not All-Father—grave and pale in his sorrow—appeared before them with uplifted warning hand.

He knew that the Völva's words must be fulfilled; this was the will of the Great Power above all, that had decreed the passing of the gods at Ragnarök. The bright days of Asgard were done, the Æsir must face their end with brave serenity.

"No strife must there be in the Peace-garth," he said solemnly. "Cease mourning, take up our beloved and bear him to his pyre."

"Not yet! not yet!" prayed Frigga, stilling her sobs; "there is yet one chance to save him. Husband, let me try!"

Odin bent his pitying glance upon her, for he knew it would be vain.

"As thou wilt, dear one; speak."

"Is there one here," she asked, "with courage to go down to Hel? Perchance the dread queen may hear our prayers and give us back the light of our eyes, the joy of our hearts. Who of ye all will venture?"

"That will I," said Hermodr, the messenger, stepping forward. "I fear not Hel and her

hounds, if I may have Sleipnir for my journey." And in a moment the fearless Ase was gone.

Slowly and reverently was Baldur borne to the shore, where Hringhorn, his ship, was drawn up. High was the wood piled for the funeral fire, the Shining God laid thereon with costly stuffs and precious spices spread around. All Asgard came in bitter grief—Valkyrjar, elves and spirits of wood and mountain; even the milder giants came trooping from their haunts, and the Nornir, leaving their toil, swept down to do honour to the darling of the world.

One more grief they had to bear. The gentle Nanna, Baldur's wife, leant on the arm of Frigga. As she beheld the cloth of gold laid over her husband's still face, hiding it for ever from the light of the sun, she gave one low soft wail and fell forward at the feet of Frigga.

The goddess stooped to lift her tenderly, but her heart was broken. She was dead. Stunned at this second blow, the gods stood silent until Odin spoke.

"Lay her to sleep by the side of him she loved. Give me the torch."

With his ravens fluttering round his head, amid the sobs of the watching crowd, All-Father bent over his son and laid the magic arm-ring, Draupnir, upon his breast. Then he whispered long into the dead ear and, with a deep sigh, set the torch to the pyre, while Nornir, Æsir, Valkyrjar, and men stood with bowed heads.

But when they would have launched Hringhorn the vessel would not move, no matter how mighty their efforts.

As they paused to rest, a mountain giant drew near.

"In all reverence," said he, "there is but Hyrrokkin the giantess with strength to move Hringhorn. Bid me fetch her."

"Go," said Odin, and the giant sped away, returning quickly with the giant maid, riding upon a wolf that she bridled with writhing serpents.

Jumping from her steed, she looked scornfully round at those she thought but weaklings, put her hand against the ship and, with one push, sent it gliding into the water.

Far out at sea the flames burnt bright as Hringhorn sailed on and, until the great column of fire was lost in the haze of night, the Æsir and their followers waited and watched.[1]

Then, when they could see no more for the aching of their eyes, Frigga turned to Odin and held out her hands, whispering piteously:

"He will return! He will return!"

But Odin shook his head and slowly led her back to desolate Asgard.

[1] One form of burial with the Norsemen was to build the funeral pyre upon the deck of a long-ship and send it, flaming, out to sea. Another was to lay the dead upon a headland over the sea and build over them a great barrow.

CHAPTER XIII

OF HERMODR'S JOURNEY

Now for nine weary days and nights, through the lands where no man lived and through the deserts of silence, Hermodr, riding Sleipnir, journeyed steadfastly on down to the Underworld until he came to the banks of the river, Gjöll, that marks the beginning of Hel's kingdom.

There he drew rein at a bridge of shining gold, that wise Sleipnir tested with two feet cautiously ere he would venture across, and the noise of his eight hoofs, falling rhythmically, was as the noise of thunder in an arched vault.

On the far side a giant maid rose up, barring their passage.

"Who art thou?" she asked. "What is thine errand? It was but yesternight that five troops of dead rode over, with far less sound than thou hast made. What seeks a living man in the kingdom of the dead?"

"I seek Baldur, my brother. If he has passed this way, I pray thee show me the road, that I may seek him in the realm of Hel."

"He is there," she answered, pointing to the north. "Eight days ago did he ride over."

On and on, still downward, Hermodr went until he reached the barred garth without Hel's palace. Round the outside he rode, but found neither gate nor opening.

"Thou and I must clear it, Sleipnir," he said.

Tightening the girths, he gave Sleipnir a free rein and the brave eight-footed one cleared the barrier in safety.

On they passed, threading their way among the crowded shades that melted away as they came near, until they rode through the wide doors into the high hall of Hel, the queen of the dead.

There on her high seat she sat, and at her right hand Baldur and Nanna.

As Hermodr stopped before her, she raised her livid ghost-like face and fixed him with her burning sunken eyes, her mouth set in a bitter smile, while Baldur and Nanna sat with clasped hands and downcast looks—an untasted cup of mead between them—making no sign. So pale were they and worn that the heart of brave Hermodr sank within him.

"Whom seekest thou, thou bold and living man?" asked Hel, in hollow tones.

"I seek my brother, who sits beside thee, O dread queen. The world mourns him as none was ever mourned before, and I have journeyed hither to pray thee give him back to us and—if thou wilt—to take me in his place."

For this was brave Hermodr minded to do, although to none had he spoken.

The queen sat silent, gazing at him moodily; at length she spoke.

"Hel gives not up her prey, nor would she have thee in the place of one she has gathered. Yet, since thou sayest that he is mourned, I will on one condition loose him—that all living things in

heaven and earth do weep for Baldur dead. Bide with him this night, then go thy way, and remember —should but one creature fail to shed a tear I hold him mine until the new world dawn."

Rising, she swept away while Hermodr laughed aloud, a strange sound in that dread place, and said:

"I have no fear, O queen. I give thee thanks."

That night he spent in low, grave talk with his brother and Nanna and, as they parted at the gate, Baldur drew off Odin's arm-ring and said:

"Brother, farewell, and lest we meet no more, bear back great Draupnir to our father. Useless is wealth in the kingdom of the dead."

Thus came Odin's ring back to earth, to be a source of sin and sorrow and death to men for all time.[1]

Swiftly Sleipnir flew back to Asgard with the tidings and, within an hour, Valkyjar, Vanir, and every whispering breeze were hurrying through the world with their message.

"Weep! weep for Baldur dead! Weep, that he may be restored. Weep, all that hath life, in order that our joy may come!"

And the sound of soft lament went up to the Farthest Blue and down to the darkness of Hel's palace and she smiled a bitter smile of triumph, for she knew that one there was who would not weep.

On flew the messengers over land and sea, and a strange new sound went up far into the Clear Blue, the sound of weeping from all the world, and the

[1] Draupnir was one of the Rhine-gold treasures.

Valkyrjar felt comforted and turned homeward, feeling that all was well.

But near the bounds of Helheim, they came upon a dark and loathsome cave and reined in their steeds.

"Surely there is nothing there," said one.

"May be," said the other, "yet is it safer to see."

Dismounting they peered within and, when their eyes became used to the gloom, beheld an aged and hideous woman sitting over the embers of a fire, muttering and mowing, as she spread out her claws to the sullen glow.

"Weep! Weep!" cried the fresh-voiced Valkyrjar. "All-Father bids thee weep for Baldur dead, that our beloved may return. What is thy name, good mother?"

"Thökt am I called," screeched the crone, "and why should I weep? What is Baldur to me? Let Hel keep what she has taken.

"Thökt weeps dry tears
For Baldur dead,"

she sang mockingly, and the war-maidens knew that her laugh was the laugh of Loki.

Then swiftly they urged their steeds back with the heavy tidings and a pall of black cloud—the shadow of doom—spread over Asgard, for the Æsir knew that Ragnarök was drawing near.

But ere that day they took vengeance on Loki for the evil he had wrought; since to him, in truth, was due the slaying of the Shining God.

And what of Hödr?

Alone he wandered through the darkest forests and the waste places of the earth at night—since light and dark were alike to him—fearing for his life, girt with a magic sword and carrying a magic shield given him by the wood demons by Loki's wish.

The Æsir, looking at Frigga's pale face and passing deserted Breidablik, murmured in vain of blood-fine, for they knew that to none of them would fall the high and proud lot of being the avenger.

The heavy days went by, until one day a child with a calm fearless face, broad shoulders, and firm footstep strode through the gate of Asgard to the door of Valhalla.

"None enters here with unwashen hands and unkempt hair," said the doorkeeper, barring the way.

The child raised one hand, put him gently aside and, passing into the presence of Æsir and Einherjar, stood still in view of all.

The face of Odin lighted up.

"Come hither, my child," he said; "art thou the Avenger come at last?"

"I am Vali, son of Odin and Rinda, of the giant-kin. To slay Hödr am I come," answered the boy.

"How is this possible?" said one, "that a child should conquer dark Hödr."

"One day old am I," said Vali, "yet am I the child of the Spring, and will slay him as spring slays winter."

Then he went forth.

And as Hödr crept slowly through the night a voice, young and fresh, cried to him:

"Hödr, beware! the avenger of Baldur is here."

There was the sharp hiss of an arrow through the air and, his magic weapons useless, Hödr fell—pierced through the heart.

CHAPTER XIV

OF LOKI AND HIS CHILDREN

In the early days of Asgard Loki the Fire God, although freakish and mischievous when not controlled by Odin, was not all evil—just as fire, though a good servant becomes a bad master.

So useful was he to the Æsir that, in any matter where cunning was needed, they turned to him for advice and help. Thus, each day, he grew more proud and boastful, less careful in his methods, and, in the end, perfidious and full of wickedness. Other reasons were there for this change, but those the gods did not then know.

Wroth at his growing misdeeds, All-Father called a council.

"Loki," said he to the assembled Æsir, "was ever full of pranks, but now see ye not that he has become treacherous, delighting only in cruelty and evil? Moreover, he is often for long months away from Asgard, and none know where he is hid. Whence comes this change? Where does he go?"

None answered, until Heimdal the Watcher spoke:

"To the Iron-wood, Jarnvid, in Jötunheim, does Loki go. There does he dwell with Angurbod the witch-giantess. Three children have they, each more terrible than the other."

Then Odin said:

"Come with me to Hlidskjalf, my children, and let us see."

Seating himself upon his throne, while the rest stood round him, they all looked towards Jarnvid, and there, in the garth of Angurbod's dark house, saw Loki, playing with his fearsome offspring—Fenris the Wolf, Jörmungand the Serpent, and—most terrible of all—Hel, the dread Death, with her awful face, on one side livid as a corpse, on the other dark as the grave.

In horror they all groaned and turned away, standing immovable while All-Father pondered.

These dread creatures must live, since they had their part to play in the—then—far-off day of Ragnarök; yet could they not be left at large, to work woe and destruction upon the world before the appointed time.

He called his sturdy, steadfast sons, Týr and Hermodr, "Go ye and fetch me here Loki and his children."

And the two gods sped away to Jarnvid, where Loki was still playing. At first he made pretence not to see them and, as they watched, their horror of the loathsome creatures grew until they could look no more.

"All-Father bids thee come before him with thy children, Loki," said Týr.

"I will not go," the Fire God answered sullenly; "too long have I toiled and thought for him and for the Æsir. Now will I live for my own pleasure."

"Thy talk is fool-talk, as thou well knowest," said Týr angrily. "Come, and that quickly, or I

shall see reason why. Call up thy band of monstrous shapes and walk before me."

Then Loki knew that he must obey and, without a word, he took the path to Asgard, leading Hel, while Fenris loped beside him and the serpent crept silently and swiftly on ahead.

Thus they came into the presence of All-Father, who looked Loki sternly in the face.

"Thy children must be curbed, O Loki," he said. "Too harmful are they to be left at large."

"Curbed till the day of Ragnarök," said Loki, with a sneering laugh. "Then shall my children and I work our wills."

"Not so," said All-Father solemnly, "not thy will, but the will of that High Power Who has decreed all things. And now I command that Jörmungand be cast into the depths of the ocean, there to lie hid. Hel shall, for nine days and nights, sink through the nine worlds of Niflheim until she reaches her palace among the shades—there shall she rule the kingdom of the dead. And thou, my Týr, lead Fenris-ulf to the outermost bounds of Asgard, there to dwell, and thine be the task of feeding him. For, my children, when the Doom of the Gods is near these monsters will be loosed to play their parts. Until that day dawns, Heimdal will watch for us, and ye must be on guard."

Thus was it done.

Lifting Jörmungand, struggling and spitting forth venom and fire, the Æsir cast her far out over the sea and she sank to the bottom, where she grew and grew until her length stretched round the

world and her tail met her mouth. Hel, dropped from the edge of the heavens, fell and fell for nine long nights through all the terrible sights and sounds of Niflheim, until she reached her darksome throne among the shades; while Fenris, fed by Tŷr, grew daily in strength and wickedness.

In the beginning, others of the gods would go with faithful Tŷr at feeding time, when he took good store of meat to the monster wolf; but as he grew fiercer Tŷr went alone and never made complaint. But the Asynjar were disturbed by the baying of Fenris, that was heard throughout all Asgard, and they came to All-Father and spoke:

"It would be well to slay this wolf, lest he bring evil upon us, since what hinders him from breaking out of the courtyard to fright us all?"

"It is written," Odin replied, "that Fenris shall not yet be slain, nevertheless he may be bound and so kept from chance of mischief. Go seek a strong chain that will hold him fast."

Then the Æsir forged a strong chain in their smithy behind Valhalla, and they called it Læthingr. They bore it to the court while Tŷr enticed Fenris to allow them to set the chain round his great neck.

This he did, standing quietly until they had finished; then did he give one yawn and stretched himself so that Læthingr fell into pieces—snapping as though it had been but grass. Back went they to their smithy and worked yet harder, forging the chain that they called Dromi. Thor laughed when it was finished, and stuck Miölnir into his belt, saying:

" No wolf of earth could withstand Dromi."

Fenris eyed the great chain askance, but still, having faith in his own strength, allowed himself to be bound.

" Break that if thou canst, O wolf," one cried. " Surely then wilt thou be the strongest wolf under bright heaven."

Fenris yawned and stretched, but Dromi held firm. Then he shook his great frame so that his fell stood out on end and the burst links of Dromi flew to the far edge of the court-yard.

The baffled gods went moodily away.

" Where," they asked each other, " should they find a chain to bind Fenris? since clear it was that bound he must be."

From Hermodr came the answer.

" Let us send to the swart-elves, who are cunning in magic and of skill in metal-work far beyond ourselves. Maybe they will give us their help. Skyrnir, go thou in haste and speak their king well."

Skyrnir sped off to the palace of the dwarf king and told the need of the gods.

" This is a hard thing," said the king, when he had heard the tale. " Yet it seemeth to me that something may be done, though but slowly. Three days will it take to fashion what I have in mind."

Skyrnir waited and, at the end of the third day, the king put into his hand a small thin chain, soft and supple as a silken cord.

" This is Gleipnir," he said. " Of six things is it fashioned — the sound of a cat's footfall, a

woman's beard, the roots of a mountain, the sinews of a bear, the spittle of a bird, and the breath of a fish."

Skyrnir thanked him and returned, exultant, to show the wondrous bond.

Then upon an afternoon, the Æsir went forth and said to Fenris: "Come with us to Lyngvi Island to make sport."

Fenris agreed and, bounding on ahead, came to the lake, swam over it and reached the island first.

"Let us play at chain-breaking," cried Thor and, taking sides, they strove to break Gleipnir, while the wolf looked on.

"Too strong is it for us," they said, as they stopped. "Fenris alone could break this little thread. Let us bind him and see."

"Small honour in breaking so small a fetter," said Fenris, "yet lest witchcraft lie therein never will I touch it."

And naught that they could say would move him.

"What hast thou to fear from us?" they asked. "Wert thou even bound we could free thee."

"Mayhap ye could, but I am minded that ye would not. Were I once fettered, long might I wait for my release. Yet, since ye are instant to see this thing, let one of you place his hand within my jaws; then shall I be sure that there is no guile."

Each looked at the others, but none would take the risk until Týr, with a steadfast look in his brave eyes, stepped forth and thrust his right hand within Fenris' jaws.

Straight and slender as a pine he stood, while the Æsir bound the monster fast—neck and feet—

—and he stretched and struggled and shook in vain.

Then, knowing that he was at last captive, with a snarl of rage he bit off Týr's right hand, and the hero fell back in silence, for he knew that he had given of his best in the service of his fellows.

Fastening Gleipnir to two great rocks fixed deep in the earth, the Æsir left the monster to howl and foam until the Day of Earthquake, when he should break loose to rage over the earth.

But wolf sons had he left behind in Jarnvid to be bred up in evil by a giantess, to take vengeance for their father's captivity at the destruction of the gods. For these were the wolves that at the Doom-Day should hunt and devour the weakening Sun and Moon.

CHAPTER XVI

THE FLYTING[1] OF LOKI

And now, although his children were powerless for harm, Loki was still at large, since Odin was loth to cast aside his blood-brother and one-time comrade, until the death of Baldur.

With the passing of the Shining God the evil of Loki became clearer, and the gods guessed rightly that Thökt, the witch of the cave, could be none but Loki. So great was their anger and so loud their cries for vengeance, that he knew that no longer could he show his face in Asgard.

Stealing away, he sought the dark places of the earth and was seen no more until the feast of the flax-harvest came round, when Æsir and Asynjar were wont to feast with old Œgir and his wife, Ran, in their marvellous palace of crystal and to drink sweet mead from the cauldron of Eymir the giant, that Thor had carried off.

The feast was set and all were in place at the high table, save Thor who was journeying. Odin in helm of gold and armour of silver; Frigga crowned with stars; Sif of the golden hair; Bragi and Idûn; Frey and Freyja with their spouses; even silent Vidr had left his forest home to do honour to the king of the sea and render thanksgiving for the gathered flax.

Now Loki loved above all things the sweet mead

[1] Mocking.

of Œgir and was fain to go to the feast. Creeping down by lonely ways, he drew near the palace.

"They will have forgotten, fools that they are! Baldur is dead and they have not sought me to slay me."

Softly as a cat he stole up to the door, trusting to slip in. But the doorkeeper knew him and barred the way.

"No place is there for thee in Œgir's hall," he said roughly. "Get thee gone to Angurbod's den and eat with her."

"That will I not!" cried Loki, aiming a blow at the man that felled him to the ground. Then he fled back to the wood until the noise and confusion were ended. After a time he slunk back once more, to find the door guarded by Eldi the cook.

"Tell me, Eldi," he asked, "of what do the Æsir speak?"

"Good things of all gods and men, save only of thee, O Loki."

"Then will I enter and give them bitter words for spice and cover all with shame and guilt."

Pushing Eldi aside, he slipped into the hall, but found no seat.

Dead silence fell upon the guests, and angry eyes were turned on the newcomer, but he made semblance to notice nothing and spoke in sprightly tones:

"Where is thy vaunted hospitality, O Œgir, that I, an Ase, journey-worn and athirst, should stand unwelcomed?"

"Unwelcomed wilt thou ever be," said Bragi

gravely. "No place more is thine among the Æsir, outlaw and villain!"

"Odin," said the Fire God, "hast thou forgotten our mingling of blood in brotherhood? Art thou perjured, forsworn? Where is thy vow that we should ever drink together?"

To be flyted with a broken oath could All-Father not brook.

"Vidr," he said, "make room. It shall not be said that Loki made a mock of us in Œgir's halls."

Then Loki sat him down and set to angering each in turn with insults; then turned upon the goddesses when they strove to bring peace. None did he spare until he came to Sif, who, for quiet's sake, had offered him a cup of mead.

As she stood, angry and blushing at his words, Thor, who had entered unnoticed, thundered out:

"Peace, thou vile one, lest Miölnir cut short thy ribald life!"

"Ha!" sneered Loki, "welcome to the big-talker! Wait until my wolf son meets thee, thou who didst crouch in the thumb of Skrymnir's glove."

Then Thor whirled Miölnir with such a threatening aspect that Loki edged to the door. There he spoke with a wicked chuckle:

"Farewell to thy last banquet, Œgir; never more shalt thou see the gods within thy halls. Ragnarök is at hand. Now I go hide me from the wrath of Ving-Thor."

And he vanished into the darkness.

Northward he fled in haste until he came to a high cliff above a foss, and there he made a dwelling

with four doors, one on every side; these he set wide open, keeping eternal watch for the enemies who sought his life, at times swimming in the river pools in the shape of a salmon.

And the Æsir sought him by sea and land, by flood and fell.

At last, looking out from Hlidskjalf over the nine worlds, Odin beheld the traitor climbing the cliff to his abode and knew that the day of punishment was at hand.

Loki sat twining grass and flax for a fishing net. So engrossed was he, that he thought not of his watch until the fire on the hearth, in the centre of his hall, shot up in a straight column, as though in warning and, looking up, he beheld the Æsir drawing near.

Throwing his net into the fire, he quickly hid himself in the foss in the form of a salmon, and the entering gods found but an empty house and, in a dying fire, the fragments of a net still unconsumed.

"See!" cried one, "a net is here; doubtless he has been fishing. It may even be that he himself is a fish. We will also make a net and try."

The net was quickly made and the gods went down to the foss. Thor stood on one side, holding an end, and all the Æsir held the other as they drew it through the water. But Loki, who had become a salmon, placed himself between two stones and the net passed over him. Then they weighted it with stones, but Loki sprang over it and the gods raised a mighty shout, for their prey was close to their hand. Then Thor sprang into the water and hunted the salmon up and down the pool until,

with one plunge, he caught it by the tail. Despite its struggles Hlorridi held fast until it was exhausted, and for this reason is it that salmon have still their thin tails.

Seeing that all was at an end Loki took back his shape and struggled, cursed, and fought until Thor held him down; then he lay panting while the gods prepared the bed of his punishment.

With bands as strong as iron they fastened him to three pointed rocks, one beneath his shoulders, another beneath his waist, and a third beneath his knees, and Skadi, in fulfilment of an ancient rhyme, brought a poisonous snake, which she hung above his head, so that its venom might drop upon his face unceasingly and keep him ever in burning torment.

Yet one there was who still felt pity for him. Sigyn, his deserted wife, hastened to the spot, forgiving all things. Holding aloft a cup, she sought to spare her husband's pain by catching the poison that dropped from the serpent's jaws.

Only when she turned to empty the brimming dish did it fall upon his face, and in his agony he writhed and trembled till the whole earth shook.

And thus it was that earthquakes came.

CHAPTER XVI

THE DOOM OF THE GODS

THE Doom-Day drew on apace.

Since the death of Baldur, the quenching of the Light of Asgard, the gods had grown old and weary, so that even the apples of Idûn no longer renewed their youth.

The shaking of the earth with Loki's struggles, the howls of agony of Fenris, the angry raging of the ocean when Jörmungand turned and writhed—all sapped their strength and spirit; with fate-filled eyes the Asynjar went about their daily tasks, with wistful thoughts of the new heaven and earth that would come when Surtur's work was done.

The sons of men, too, became more lawless; brother turned against brother, the lust of gold and power drove out love and duty, bloodshed and murder stained the land, and naught that the Æsir could do would bring back the peace and innocence of the golden days of long ago.

Each week the sun grew more misty, her heat less, although she still dragged her waning light across the sky; each week the moon grew whiter and smaller as he plodded drearily through the murky heavens.

Then came the Fimbul Winter—the monster winter of three years' length—a time of darkness and horror and fury, when trees shrivelled and all

fruits perished, when men died thickly of hunger and cold and violence from their fellows, that the gods were powerless to avert.

There came, at last, a day—when the heatless copper sun hung in a still, clammy mist—that the shepherd of the giantess in the Iron-wood, Jarnvid, came forth and sat upon a howe, striking his exultant harp.

Roused by the signal, Fjalar, the fire-red cock, set up an angry crowing that was answered by Gollin-kambi, the gold-combed cock of Asgard, and taken up, far away, by Soot-Red, crowing beneath the earth in the deep-down realm of Hel.

At the signal, the wolf-children of Fenris broke forth to hunt the Sun and Moon, and Garm, the hound of Hel, snapped his chain and bounded earthward with foaming jaws.

Darkness crept over earth and heaven and Heimdal, seizing the Gjöllar-horn, sounded a blast that caused the foundations of the earth to rock and sent the Æsir to arm in all speed.

Nidhöggr, the serpent, gnawed through the last root of suffering Yggdrasil, so that the ash-tree swayed to its fall; Jörmungand turned her great bulk and raised herself, so that a wave arose that swept far inland over the plains of Midgard till it spent itself against the hills. Fenris and Loki, bursting their bonds, and bent on vengeance, hurried forth to join the marshalling forces of dark Surtur in the south; Loki to steer Naglfar, the ship of death, that is built of the parings of dead men's nails.

The light-elves sobbed and hid beneath the

stones, the swart-elves moaned and yammered at the doors of their caves, all Jötunheim was astir, arming for the coming battle.

Calm and stern, with fewest words and bravest looks, the Æsir and Einherjar strode forth to battle. For the last time Odin donned his silver armour and Frigga clasped on his golden helm; the end was at hand and all would do their part in the slaying of the evil that was overwhelming the world.

For the last time the good steed, Sleipnir, proudly bore his master at the head of his great army; for the last time the Asynjar watched them depart, then went into the palace to await their doom.

To the great plain of Vigrid, that stretches a hundred miles each way, All-Father led his warriors. Behind them, in the north, the giant forces were approaching, but they looked towards the south.

There, with a crash more awful than any that had gone before, the sky was cleft by a sword of fire and, speeding over the heaving waters, came Naglfar, bearing Surtur and the children of Muspel, with fiery armour and flaming swords.

Landing, they vaulted on their horses and bore down upon the sons of Asgard.

Once more Gjöllar sounded; the Æsir looked farewell into each other's steadfast face and the thunder of battle rolled over the world.

Odin, knowing his own weird and followed by silent Vidr, bore down on Fenris-Ulf, who sprang at him with venom-foaming jaws. No word was spoken, no sound did they make throughout the long

struggle, but at last All-Father met his end, torn by the savage jaws. Then Vidr, stepping forward, thrust his sword down the monster's throat until it pierced his heart.

Thor, facing Jörmungand, hurled his mace and slew her; but, slipping in the flood of poisonous blood, the strong god was choked and so died.

Frey, leader of the Einherjar, put the hordes of Jötunheim to flight, then turned in single combat with Surtur.

But who can withstand the might of eternal fire?

Then, indeed, did Frey feel the need of the good sword he had given to Skyrnir. Well did he fight, but all in vain; soon he lay dead at Surtur's feet.

One-handed Týr strove with Garm, the baying hound of Hel, until each sank dead in the other's grip, as also did Heimdal and Loki. Gods, giants and heroes lay still upon the field.

In the awful silence Surtur stood alone. Growing taller and taller until he reached the heavens, he whirled the sword of flame around his head until, in every quarter, flames burst forth and Asgard, Midgard, Jötunheim and Niflheim were consumed to the uttermost parts and the mirk of black smoke spread over all. Then the unquiet waters of ocean rose and swelled, spreading and stealing higher and higher until all was chaos, as in the beginning before Asgard was.

Thus it lay for a myriad years until a small faint star—a pin-point in the gloom—shone out to break

the eternal night. With the passing of years it grew, to be joined in time by the rosy flush of a new dawn that gave promise of day.

Stronger and stronger grew the light, until it gave life to a new sun, the daughter of the old one, then the waters went down until a fresh young earth, fertile and beautiful, appeared, filled with the life of bird and beast; and through the fields and groves walked Lif and Lifthrasr, the gentle pair that All-Father, in his wisdom, had hidden far from the fiery torment in the depths of a mountain.

In joyous innocence they went through the bright young world, peopling it with children fair as themselves, who looked up in faith to the Clear Blue.

For now Gimle was near at hand. In the glorious plain of Ida were the gods once more assembled as in the early happy days of old. Baldur in converse with blind Hödr, Vidr and Vali in company; thither, also, the sons of Thor brought Miölnir, not for a weapon, but to bring fulness to the fields and bless the peasant with good crops. Peace was over all and with all, for in Gimle the Blest did that High One, Who is over all, make his home to watch and ward his children.

The voice of Har, the narrator, ceased and King Gylfi stood silent, pondering on all that he had heard. Ere he could frame a question there was a mighty rumbling, a terrible sound as of the crack of doom, with sudden darkness that filled all the place around him.

And when it passed the king gazed as though in a dream for, behold, he stood in a desolate place of rocks where no one dwelt. Then, full of these matters that he had learnt, he took his way back to his own land of Sweden, rejoicing in that he now knew the meaning of the song that he had heard from Gefiunn, the giant-maid.

PART II

NORSE HEROES

SIGURD THE VOLSUNG

CHAPTER I

OF KING VOLSUNG AND THE BRANSTOCK

In the long-past days, before the darkening of the Gods, when Odin, All-Father, came down from Asgard to mix with the men of Earth, there dwelt in Hunland a mighty king—descendant of Odin—called Rerir.

Much store had he of lands and wealth and fighting ships and brave followers, so that his name was honoured throughout the world, and all would have been well with him and his queen had they but had a son to reign after them.

Heavy of heart were they, but they prayed to the gods and offered due sacrifice, so that All-Father took council with Frigga, and, being moved by their faith, was minded to grant their prayer.

Taking an apple from Idûn's casket he bid his raven fly with it to the childless king and drop it into his hand for a sign. This the wise bird did, as Rerir sat sadly beneath an oak-tree.

"A sign, a sign!" cried the king, and springing up, he hurried to the queen with the precious fruit.

"It is the bird of All-Father," she said. "Now we know that our son will come."

And joyfully they ate the apple and set themselves to wait.

But it fell out that King Rerir must go to war for the keeping of his lands and, in an evil day, he was slain and the queen left solitary. Not long did she stay behind her lord; when her son was born she lived but long enough to kiss the babe and name him Volsung, then sighed and followed whither King Rerir had led the way.

But Volsung grew great and strong beyond all other men and ruled over Hunland, as his father had done. Good fortune had he, also, in all that he took in hand and likewise in his love-marriage with Liod of the giant race. Ten sons had they, of whom Sigmund was the eldest, and one daughter, Signy, who was twin with Sigmund. And these two were the fairest and noblest of all their race.

And Signy was wiser than any woman living, yet, because of her wisdom, was ever sadness in her blue eyes, for it was given to her to know all that should befall in the days to come, and she saw before her and her people sin and sorrow and death. Because of this was her twin brother dearer to her than aught besides, since she knew that for him the future held its worst, and yet through him would come the greatest glory to her people; so that, as long as the world should last, the Volsung name would endure in honour.

Now King Volsung built for himself a house after the fashion of those times, only larger and more spacious, and the making of it was this. Near the seashore, at the edge of the great forest, stood a mighty oak-tree. Around this did the king build his feasting-hall, so that the trunk of

the oak rose up in the midst and the branches came out through the roof to overshadow the house, and this tree was called Branstock. But some skalds say that it was no oak, but an apple-tree—having memory of the apple of King Rerir.

Inside, the hall was pillared with the trunks of trees, against which were stands for torches and hooks whereon each man put his weapons, so that each could seize them quickly should sudden alarm come upon them. At the upper end, facing the great south door, was the high table, and in the middle of it the seat of the king, while down either side ran other tables with benches for seats. And down the centre of the hall, between the tables, burned in winter time four fires, but in summer one only was ever alight.

Many doors opened out of the hall, some leading to the bed-places of the men, others to the rooms of the women, but the serving-men and thralls lived in other buildings around the courtyard, and only at meal-time did they come into the hall. And all around the steading was a high fence of wood in which was but one gateway, approached only by a crooked path between stakes, in order that all might be safe-warded from foes and from the beasts of the forests.

Now it chanced that in Gothland there dwelt a mighty king named Siggeir. To him came word of the beauty of Signy and of her wisdom and of her father's wealth, so that he bethought him that he would take her to wife. Fearing that King Volsung might say him nay, he made ready

a great train of warships and fighting men and sailed with a large company overseas to Hunland.

And when King Volsung saw that array of warships with fearsome painted figure-heads of dragons, of eagles, and of strange monsters of the deep, and beheld the long lines of painted shields—a shield to each fighting man—hanging along their sides, his heart misgave him, for he was old and feared the wrath of Siggeir, since never was it the custom to come thus armed in friendliness. Therefore, when the king of Gothland strode up the hall of the Branstock and made his demand, Volsung answered him with fair words.

"But one daughter have I," he said, "and loth am I to wed her overseas, even to so great a king. Give me, I pray thee, time in which to think of this thing."

Then Siggeir went forth and waited in the tent that had been set up for him, while Volsung and his sons took counsel together, whether this evil thing should be.

And all said yea, seeing that no other way there was out of this evil plight, except only Sigmund. He, knowing the future, as Signy did, saw all the woe that should come from this wedding.

"My father," he said, "nought but sorrow and grief can come of this bond. Better were it that we all should die fighting for the right than that Signy should be offered up. My life will I give most gladly in her cause."

The brethren murmured, for this was not to their mind, and, in the end, Volsung turned to Signy who, white and still, stood beside the

Branstock, leaning her golden head against the gnarled trunk.

"What says my daughter?" he asked. "Signy, what is thy will? Thy brethren and I fear that this mating must be."

Then the fairest Signy went to each of her brothers in turn and, looking straight into their eyes, saw there no hope of escape. But into the eyes of her father and Sigmund could she not look, since their hands were over them; and she answered:

"My father, rule me in this as in all else; yet is this Siggeir cruel and crafty, with no goodwill towards us, and I fear me that evil will fall upon the Volsungs by reason of this marriage."

Slowly and sadly, with head bent so that her golden plaits swept the floor, she passed from the great hall.

At midsummer there was a great feast made, and swift runners went throughout the land to summon the chiefs to the wedding of their king's one daughter. And King Siggeir sat on the high seat over against his host, King Volsung, and pledged him in the mead cup, passed across the central fire, as the custom of that time was—for one fire burned ever, day and night, in the hall of the Branstock. And—since it was the wont of those times to make great vows at marriage and midsummer feasts over the Cup of Bragi—Siggeir, in his treachery, made a vow that by him the Volsungs should come to their deaths; but he spoke it not aloud, as a brave man should, but drank it silently with lowered, furtive eyes.

Now, when the feasting was at its height, there strode into the hall a grey-bearded man of ruddy hue and mighty stature, who had but one eye. On his head was a hood that half covered his face, from his shoulders hung a cloak of blue-grey wool, and his feet were bare. In his hand he carried a great sword that glinted, steel-bright, in the torch-light, and none made so bold as to greet him as he strode noiselessly up the hall to the Branstock, although none guessed that this was Odin, All-Father, come to weave the fate of the Volsungs.

Amid the silence of that great company the Wanderer smote his sword deep into the trunk of the oak-tree, so that only the glittering hilt stood out. Then, turning, he said:

"There, O Volsungs, is a blade of the best. Never was a better forged. To him that can draw it forth I give it, to work the weal and woe of those that meet it. Valhalla hall is wide, welcome are the battle-slain heroes to feast therein. King Volsung, fare thee well, but not for long!"

And, without going forth from the door, that grey man vanished before the eyes of the feasters, and none knew whither he went nor did any dare to have speech of him.

Then each man, desiring to gain the sword, strove with his neighbour to be the first to touch the hilt until King Volsung said:

"Unseemly is this strife; let the noblest—our guest and son-in-law—try first, then each according to his rank and state. For it comes to me that the brand is a gift of Odin, and it will fall to him alone whom All-Father has chosen.

With an evil smile King Siggeir stepped from the high seat. Sure was he that he could draw forth that goodly weapon, but he strove and strove in vain and after him did also the chiefs of the Goths.

Then said King Volsung:

"Now stand forth, men of the Hunland, from the least upward to the highest. So shall I come last of all."

Again they tried, but none could stir the hilt by so much as an inch until, last but one, came Sigmund. And as he laid a quiet hand upon it, behold! the sword came forth without force.

Then a shout went up from all, for they saw that no blade like unto this had been forged since the dawn of the world. Silent and black was the wrath of Siggeir, but he smiled as he turned to Sigmund.

"Good brother," he said, "so great is thy valour that no need hast thou of such a sword. Much gold and treasure have I at home. A fair share of it shall be thine if thou wilt give me the brand, for I have a wish to keep the sword that has come at my wedding."

But Sigmund hated Siggeir too greatly to speak him fair and he answered roughly:

"What is gold to me, O king? Niddering should I be were I to part with the gift of the gods. Thy chance was better than mine to take it, since thou wert first in the trial. Why didst thou not do it? Never will I barter mine honour for gold."

Black grew the heart of Siggeir at this taunt and white was his face; but, being cunning, he

smiled his cruel pale smile and hid his anger so that only Signy—being a woman—saw. But, to be revenged, he would not stay for the accustomed seven days of feasting.

At dawn next day he sought King Volsung and said:

"The wind is fair, but methinks a change will come. It were well, therefore, that we sail homewards with all speed, lest storms arise to fright my bride. Yet that there may be no discourtesy, I pray thee, O Volsung, pledge me thy word that thou and thy sons and thy chieftains will finish this feast with me in Gothland."

"That will we gladly," said the king, "to that I pledge my word for myself and my house. Within three months will we come."

But Signy, warned by her foreknowledge, went secretly to her father and said:

"Dear father, this evil mating is done and naught will I say for myself, since I must dree my weird alone. But the Volsungs live yet to glory in the strength of days and I fear me of what will befall if they enter the halls of Siggeir. Therefore, I pray thee, come not to this tryst lest much sorrow come upon us all."

King Volsung answered tenderly:

"Sweet daughter, nay. My word is given that we would go."

"Then," said she, "gather a mighty host and go in all thy war-gear."

But the king shook his head.

"As guest and not foe did I pledge my word to Siggeir, and so must it be. Better that we should

suffer at his hands than that we should break a troth-word given."

Then the snow-white Signy sighed for the breaking of her heart, and without one backward glance at her home, sailed away to her life of ruth and sorrow.

CHAPTER II

OF THE SLAYING OF THE VOLSUNGS

Now when the time drew near for the journey to Gothland, King Volsung made ready three long-ships of the best, with painted sails and fresh gilded prows, then he called his sons and jarls around him and told them all the words of Signy's warning and Siggeir's envy of the sword, and he ended:

"How say ye? Shall we sail and chance this treachery? or shall we bide at home, forsworn and niddering?"

"We go, befall what may!" they cried, and the king, well pleased, set sail with a fair wind, so that in due time they cast anchor in the haven over against King Siggeir's hall.

Seeing the sails of her father's ships black against the sunset gold, Signy the queen stole down heavy-hearted, when night fell, to the beach; for she alone knew that this would be her last meeting with her kinsmen.

"It is even as I said, my father. In the Mirk Wood hath Siggeir gathered a numberless host; as yet he knows not of your coming; will ye not sail away ere it be too late, gather an army, and come again to take vengeance on his guile? His heart is black and evil towards thee," she went on, and the last tears that she would ever shed fell fast. "Naught can save thee but to sail away

this night from this dark and baleful land. Take me also, O father, take me back to our happy sunlit home."

But the old king answered quietly, as he laid his hand upon her bent head:

"My daughter, this may not be. If it be our fate to die in a strange land, then must we meet it; for never shall it be said that a Volsung turned his back on death. Wouldst thou have the maidens make a mock of thy brethren? We will finish our work as men and warriors should, that we may be sure of our welcome in Valhalla."

Then Signy wrung her hands and bade him farewell, and from that day forth did she neither weep nor smile, but, white and still, plotted ever how she might avenge her kinsfolk.

Now when morning broke, the Volsungs landed and went inland over sand-dune and bent-grass until they came to a little hill, from which they beheld the hosts of Siggeir, thick with spears as corn in a field; and, as they saw, they looked each other in the eyes and smiled until the rosy dawn made a glory of unearthly light in their faces, for they knew that this would be their last fight and their hearts were glad that soon the Valkyrjar, riding apace, would gather them in to feast with Odin in Asgard.

"Form ye the battle-wedge, my children, and break the peace strings," cried the king, and the still air was cut by the sharp snap of cord and the swish of steel on steel. Then rose the battle-cry, and down they dashed upon the waiting folk of Siggeir.

Many foemen were the Volsungs minded to take with them to death. Eight times did they mow and hew their way back and forth through the thickest of the throng, until King Volsung and all his men lay dead, save only the ten sons, who were left alive and carried bound before King Siggeir, for it is not meet to kill a foe at sundown.

And the king laughed aloud and said unto his chief jarl:

"At morn they shall die and the sword of the Branstock will be mine."

"Not so, O king," the chief answered. "A fair deed would it be to send them scatheless oversea back to their own land, so that men should praise thee."

But Siggeir laughed yet more evilly and said:

"That they might come up against me once more? I would have rest and the sword of Odin. Go."

Then came snow-white Signy with unbound golden hair, praying:

"Grant me their lives but for two days, O Siggeir, since SWEET TO EYE WHILE SEEN says the rede."

Again the king laughed and said:

"Be it as thou wilt; yet it seems to me that soon wilt thou come and pray for their death."

Now he willed that his wicked witch-mother should choose the manner of their death and he stole away to her and asked her counsel, saying:

"The men have I and the sword have I also; say, mother, what shall be the fate of these Volsungs?"

She thought for a while.

"Take these ten men, my son," she said at length, "chain them to a great log in the Mirk Wood. There shall the beasts of the forest deal with them and on thee will be no blood-guilt before thy wife."

When this thing was done Siggeir went unto Signy, and she asked him for tidings of father and brethren.

"Thy father died as Volsung should," he said; "thy brethren live and wait my pleasure, as I gave thee my word."

Then to Signy came a little hope, for she said:

"Surely I may find a means of deliverance," and she called unto her a faithful servant and bade him go at dawn and bring word of the Volsungs.

But in the night came a great grey she-wolf that fell upon one brother so that he died and she ate him and vanished into the Mirk Wood.

The Faithful One, coming at twilight dawn, found but the nine and carried that word to the queen. Yet naught could she do to save them, for the eyes of watchers were ever on her, by command of Siggeir, and thus it fell out nightly until nine of the Volsungs were gone and only Sigmund, her dearest, was left.

Then she took heart and bethought her to send the Faithful One with honey, wherewith he smeared the face of Sigmund, so that the wolf, smelling at it, stopped to lick it, and in this wise was Sigmund able to catch her unawares and tear her jaws asunder so that she died. Yet in her struggle was some service, since she broke the chain wherewith Sigmund was bound, so that he was loose from the beam.

Then he knew that this wolf was a skin-changer [1] and the mother of King Siggeir, and his heart was glad, in that he had been the bane of one of this wolf race.

But of all this Siggeir recked naught, since he held the sword of the Branstock, and in time was Signy able to take counsel with her brother and the Faithful One that he should find an abiding place in a cavern deep in the Mirk Wood, where the queen might provide him with all things needful. And King Siggeir knew not that the bravest and best of the Volsung race yet lived.

Thus passed the years until the elder son of Signy numbered ten years, and she sent him unto Sigmund, that he should prove the boy to see whether he would become a hero and the avenger of the Volsungs. And Sigmund looked upon the lad and asked his business.

"My mother sends me with this word—'Try thou my son, if he be fit for thy work."

And Sigmund said:

"Mix thou the bread for our evening meal, while I fetch wood."

But when he returned, the meal-bag lay upon the ground and the child sat, frighted, in a corner.

"Why is there no bread?" he asked.

"Something moveth in the meal-bag," said the boy, "therefore I durst not put in my hand. An evil worm it is, like to a dead twig."

"Hie thee back to thy mother for a niddering," said Sigmund, "but, since thou art a king's son,

[1] This is the earliest reference in Norse literature to the were-wolf, which became later on such a feature of the sagas.

beware that thou speak no word of me and my dwelling."

And the boy went, betraying him not.

Then Signy sent her second son, and with him it fell out as with the elder, and Signy, white and fierce and despairing, led both into the Mirk Wood to her brother, crying:

"Slay me these children of Siggeir, since no Volsungs are they. Woe is me for the weary years that I must wait!"

Then Sigmund slew the boys, and Signy waited in the hall of Siggeir with a flaming heart and a cold white face.

CHAPTER III

OF THE AVENGING OF THE VOLSUNG

THUS passed on ten slow years until the queen sent her third son, named Sinfjötli, unto her brother. He came upon Sigmund in the depths of the Mirk Wood and they two gazed at one another with silence between them. Then the ten years' old boy spoke:

"This is a wondrous thing. Here is the river and the great rock and the cavern as my mother told me, but thou art not the man who should be my foster-father, since she said that all must tremble who looked upon his face."

"And dost thou not quake, youngling?"

The boy laughed in scorn and picked up his shaft.

"Farther through the forest must I take my way. Farewell."

"Nay, thou shalt stay, for this is the token that thou art chosen, since thou hast looked on the face of the Volsung and smiled. What said thy mother?"

The lad dropped his spear.

"My mother sewed gloves upon my hands through skin and flesh, yet I made no sign; then did she peel them off so that the skin came with them, yet I cried not out. Then said she: 'Go tell Sigmund that I send a man to work his will,' and here am I."

Then Sigmund tried him with the meal-bag as he had done with the others, and when he came at evening the bread was ready.

"How comes this?" he said; "didst thou find aught in the meal-bag?"

"Ay, truly," answered Sinfjötli, "something alive there was in the meal, but I kneaded it quickly and baked it, and now the thing is alive no more." And he laughed.

The heart of Sigmund laughed also, for he knew that the avenger had come.

"No bread wilt thou have to-night," he said, "for a deadly worm hast thou baked therein."

But he might eat of the bread since venom within could not hurt him, while Sinfjötli could but bear venom without.

Then did they fare far and wide through the forest, taking vengeance on King Siggeir's men when they could, but keeping far from his hall, since Sigmund judged the lad yet too young for the plan he had in mind. Together they did mighty deeds, for Sinfjötli was wild and savage beyond other men, and Sigmund, looking on him, feared that, with the Volsung strength, he had gotten the evil heart of Siggeir; yet never were his deeds crooked, and he ever spoke the truth, since fear he had none.

Now it fell out that, seeking plunder, they one day came upon a hut where lay two men asleep. Upon their arms were great gold rings, whereby Sigmund knew them to be the sons of kings, and near their heads hung wolf-skins, for they were spell-bound skin-changers — like the mother of

Siggeir—but only every tenth day might they come forth as men.

Then Sigmund and Sinfjötli put on them the wolf skins, and, with them, the wolf nature, and no more could they come out of them, and Sinfjötli said:

"It seemeth to me that with the wolf skin, I take the way of wolves, for I know the voices of the Mirk Wood and much that was hidden heretofore."

"So it is," said Sigmund; "to me is thy speech plain, but to earthmen would it be but a wolf's howl. Now see. Each of us will take his way alone through the forest and seek out men. But because thou art still young and not come to thy full strength, this must thou do. If there be but seven men together, fight them; but if there be more than seven, then shalt thou call on me for help in this wise and I will come."

And Sigmund lifted up his head and howled, that the youth might know the cry, and thus they parted.

Then went Sinfjötli, and meeting eleven men, he slew them all after much fighting; but he was sorely wearied therewith and lay hidden to take rest. To him, softly padding through the wood, came Sigmund, and as he came he passed the eleven dead men.

"Why hast thou left me uncalled?" he asked, looking down on the panting wolf. And Sinfjötli laughed.

"What are eleven men?" quoth he.

Then came the wicked wolf nature upon Sig-

mund and he sprang at the youth and bit him in the throat so that he lay sore hurt—even unto death—then, seeing the wound, his manhood came again and he sorrowed grievously in that he had slain the boy, and he cursed those wolf-skins and their evil nature. Yet in no way could he mend it, so, with sore labour, he bore him back to the cave and sat by him to watch.

And as he sat, there came two weasels fighting, so that one slew the other; then the whole one, running into the thicket, returned bearing the leaf of a herb that it laid upon the dead weasel so that straightway it sprang up whole and sound. Then did Sigmund follow to see if, perchance, he also might find that wondrous herb, but, as he searched, there came to him a raven bearing a leaf in its beak. This he took and drew it across Sinfjötli's wound, back and forth; and as he did so, breath came back to the lips of the boy and light to his eyes, so that he arose in full life.

Then did Sigmund know that the raven was the bird of Odin and that Sinfjötli was chosen for the work he had in mind. With a glad heart he bore the ten days of their wolf-hood, and when they were ended, he and the youth made a great fire and burned those skins so that never again should any man don them to his hurt.

Then, on a day chosen of Sigmund, these two went forth from their earth-house and the Mirk Wood to the hall of Siggeir the king, and they hid themselves among the barrels of ale that stood in the porch, while the Faithful One went and told Signy that they had come.

Now two little children, the youngest born of Signy and Siggeir, played in the hall with a golden ball, and the ball rolled to the place where the two were hid. Thither came the children seeking it, and beheld the warriors sitting grim and still, and they ran to the king, as he sat on the high-seat, and told him, saying: "Behold the great kings who sit silent at the back of the porch, O father, in their golden helmets and shirts of glittering mail. Have they come at last, as our mother's stories said they would some day?"

And the king turned, glowering on Signy, but the queen's blue eyes flashed fire, and her head rose proudly, for she knew that her vengeance was nigh.

She looked not on her husband, but, taking a child in either hand, she stepped from the high-seat, and swept down the hall, while all men's eyes went after her, wondering. And, standing by the porch, she cried aloud:

"Come, brother, slay me these betrayers."

"Nay, sister," answered Sigmund, "though thy children betray me, I slay them no more."

But Sinfjötli picked up the children and cast them down dead.

Then Siggeir stood up and called to his men: "Slay me these men in the porch."

And the fighting men ran together in haste, and after much toil took Sigmund and Sinfjötli—for they were but two against many—and bound them. And because it was not fitting to kill captives at sundown, the cruel king bethought him what would be the hardest death for them to die,

and he bade the thralls dig a deep hole in the ground, and therein he set a big flat stone on its edge, so that the hole was divided into two parts, and he set Sigmund on one side of the stone and Sinfjötli on the other, that they might each hear the other's voice, and yet be parted.

And while the thralls were turfing over the hole, Signy came quickly and cast down a large bundle of straw to Sinfjötli. Then was the turfing finished, and the two buried in black night within the barrow. Then Sinfjötli cried:

"The queen has sent us meat here in the straw, and thrust in the meat is thy sword, for I know the touch of the hilt."

"Then let us saw the stone," said Sigmund, "for naught blunts my good sword."

So Sinfjötli drove the point of the sword hard through the stone, and Sigmund caught it and they sawed, as stonecutters do, until the stone fell asunder.

Then was it easy for them to cut a way out through wood and turf, and they piled faggots around the hall of Siggeir and set fire to it; and Siggeir from within cried:

"Who hath kindled this fire?"

"I, Sigmund the Volsung, that thou mayst know that a Volsung yet liveth."

Then he called above the roar of the flames:

"Signy! Signy! beloved sister, come forth. Thou hast dreed thy weird. Come forth and receive atonement for the sorrows of thy life in Gothland."

So Signy came forth; her blue eyes blazed in

the fierce firelight, but her golden hair was white with the sorrow of all the years.

She kissed her brother and her son, saying:

"Dear brother, through thee hath my vengeance come, and I care to live no more. Sadly did I wed King Siggeir, but gladly will I die with him. So fare ye well."

And with head held high, and no backward look, she swept straight into the flames, and so died with King Siggeir and his men.

CHAPTER IV

THE DEATH OF SINFJÖTLI AND OF SIGMUND

Now was there naught more to do in Gothland, and Sigmund gathered men and ships and sailed home to Hunland to live in the hall of the Branstock.

He was a great and wise king, but never did the sorrow of the Volsungs' ending die out of his heart. He took to wife a jarl's daughter called Borghild, who hated Sinfjötli, both for the love Sigmund bore him, and also because, in fair fight, he had slain her brother. She begged the king to send him away out of the land; but he would not, and gave her instead great stores of gold and amber and jewels as were-gild,[1] for in those days the price of a life was paid to the nearest of kin.

Now, in honour, Borghild, having taken the price of blood, should have been silent and have pardoned the slayer; but she thought only of vengeance, and made a mighty funeral feast, bidding thereunto all the great ones of the land.

When they were seated she carried horns of ale and mead to those whom she wished to honour, and amongst them, one to Sinfjötli, saying:

"Drink, fair kinsman."

Sinfjötli, looking into her eyes, beheld their guile, so he said:

[1] Blood-money.

"Nay, it is a witch-draught, and I drink not."

"Give it to me," said Sigmund, and he drained the horn, for no venom could harm him.

Then came the queen again to Sinfjötli, saying:

"Come, drink! Must other men drink for thee?"

He took the horn, and looking into it, he answered:

"It is a baleful drink."

And again did Sigmund take the horn and drain it, while the angry queen tossed her head. Yet a third time she came, saying:

"If thou hast the heart of a Volsung, and art no niddering, drink!"

Now, no true man can be called a niddering, even by an angry woman, so Sinfjötli took the horn and drained it, saying:

"Venom is in the drink," and as he spoke he fell dead, and so great was the shock of his fall that the Branstock swayed.

Sorrowing unto death, Sigmund rose up with his sister's son in his arms, and strode away through the forest until he reached a lonely fjord, where sat a man in a little boat, and the man had but one eye.

"Those who sent me told me that a king and the son of a king would come," said the man, "but, since the boat will hold but two, walk thou round by the shore."

And behold, as Sigmund turned, boat and steersman vanished away; so the aged king knew that this was Odin come to take a Volsung home.

The evil Borghild did he drive away and, after

wandering awhile, she died and left him free to wed again.

There lived, near by, a king who had a fair and wise daughter named Hjordis and a son Gripir, who had foreknowledge. She was sweet and full of love, and it seemed good to the aged Sigmund that he should pass the evening of his days in peace with this gentle maiden.

He, therefore, journeyed into her father's land, and so did also a younger king, Lynge, son of Hunding, who willed to wed her.

Fearing strife, her father said to her: "Hjordis, my word have I given that thou alone shouldst choose thy husband. Say, therefore, wise daughter of mine, which wilt thou take?"

"This is a hard thing," she replied. "Yet will I choose King Sigmund. Though he be old, still is he the greatest of heroes, and of the Volsung race."

So were Sigmund and Hjordis wed; but the young king, Lynge, went away with rage in his heart, and he and his brethren gathered a great army for the undoing of King Sigmund.

Then sailed they to Hunland, and Sigmund gathered his men by the sounding of King Volsung's horn, which in peace time hung on the Branstock.

And now began the most awesome fight that had been since the death of King Volsung; but ere it began, Hjordis, with her tire-maiden and much treasure, was hidden in the forest.

All day the fight went forward, and old though Sigmund was, none could prevail against him.

Naught could one see but the swift flash of the sword that no man might break, as he hewed his way through the throng, his arms red with blood.

Now, when the sun was at its setting, there came up against Sigmund a stranger in a blue-grey cloak; one-eyed and grey-bearded was he, and he carried a spear in his hand. And as the king's sword smote against the steel, behold the good sword split in two pieces and its fortune was gone.

Then the tide of battle turned, and the Volsung's men fell fast until all—even the father of Hjordis—were dead or sore wounded. But Sigmund, still living though stricken with death, lay upon the field. And through the darkness crept the gentle, hapless queen seeking her lord. Kneeling beside him and wiping the death-dews from his face, she asked: "Canst thou not be healed even now, my king?"

"Dear wife," he answered, "nay, and I would have it even as it is. I have lived long, and with my sword has my fortune left me. Nor does Odin will that I should live, for he himself it was who broke my sword; and to him shall I journey, riding straight to Valhalla gates. So to another must I leave it to avenge thy father—to a mightier than I. Thou shalt have a son; care for him well and save for him the two pieces of my sword; thereof shall a noble weapon be made that shall be called Gram, and Sigurd shall wield it. He shall be the last and noblest of our race, and while this earth lives shall the name of the *Golden Sigurd* be known. Now fare thee well, dear heart, for I

weary with my wounds and fain would feast with Odin."

Then Hjordis kissed him and laid his head upon her knees, and so sat, with her handmaiden beside her, until the daybreak; and, as the first light came, the great king looked up into her eyes and smiled and died.

But King Lynge sought through all the land for Hjordis and her treasure, and finding them not, he took the land and harried it.

CHAPTER V

THE LAND OF HJAALPREK THE HELPER, AND THE BIRTH OF SIGURD

Now the day was come, and Hjordis the queen arose wearily and, looking over the sea, saw many ships. Fearing another foe, she said unto her maiden: "I dread more strife and am here helpless with none to defend me; change thou, therefore, thy raiment with me that none may know me for a king's daughter." This they did as the seamen came up from the ships; at their head was Alv, son of Hjaalprek, King of Denmark, who inquired of the women what this slaughter meant. Then Hjordis answered and told of the great fight, and the Viking prince marvelled at her sweet low voice and clear words, which were not those of a bond-woman, and spoke her fair so that she believed in him and showed him where the Volsung treasure lay hidden from the foemen who sought it.

When all was gathered together and put upon the ships, and a barrow raised over the dead kings, the prince asked the bond-woman:

"Wilt thou, O Queen, with thy handmaiden wend back with me to Denmark?"

And the false queen looked to Hjordis to answer, and she said:

"If peace dwell in thy land, O prince, thither

will we gladly wend, for we are but weak women and are weary of strife."

Then they sailed away, taking Gripir also, and the prince took the helm of his ship and talked with the women as he steered; and every hour he wondered more that the maiden should be so much wiser than her lady.

After a fair voyage they came to the low shores of Denmark, where fir woods come down to the sands by the sea, and Alv led the maidens before his father, Hjaalprek, and his mother, who bade them welcome, and treated them with honour.

Then Alv spoke to his parents of his thought that Hjordis was no thrall's daughter, and the wise old king made a plot to catch them and to learn the truth.

As they sat together at eventide around the fire in the hall, Hjaalprek asked the maiden: "How knowest thou when dawn is nigh?"

"Whereas," she answered, "I milked the kine when I was young, now wake I ever at the self-same hour before the dawn."

Then Hjaalprek the king laughed a mighty laugh, being well pleased.

"Kings' daughters milk not kine," he cried, and turned him to Hjordis, and put to her the same question.

"I know," she answered heedlessly, "by the little gold ring given me by my father, which groweth ever cold at the dawn of day."

Then spoke Alv:

"No bond-maid art thou, but a princess; why hast thou dealt doubly with me? Hadst thou

spoken truly thou shouldst have been as my sister."

Hjordis felt shame for her deceit, and she knelt before the kind old king and queen and said:

"The wrong is mine, but pardon me, I pray. Bethink you! I, the widow of Sigmund the Volsung, was alone with this my maiden in the midst of my enemies, even my young brother lost for the time. I knew not but that your son was their helper; how could I tell how good a friend he would be to me?"

And the widowed queen turned and smiled upon Prince Alv, so that he loved her the more; and he stood forth in the midst of the hall, leading her by the hand, saying:

"For thy beauty and wisdom do I love thee, Hjordis, and when thy days of mourning for the great king are past, then shalt thou be my wife."

Before many weeks were over, the son of Sigmund and Hjordis was born; they carried the child upon a shield to King Hjaalprek, who rejoiced greatly over him and, calling for water, named him Sigurd, according to his father's will. Also, seeing the child's keen bright eyes, shining like stars, he foretold that throughout all the earth no man should be his equal.

Thus in the midst of peace, love, and honour, grew Sigurd. Brave and true-hearted, he scorned a lie, nor ever sought his own advantage. Yet withal, he was so gentle that little children ever ran to him and loved him. Yet could he fight, and was he ever foremost in warlike sports, bearing in mind that he must be the avenger of his father.

The wise old king chose for him a teacher to show him all those things that princes should know; so was he learned in all games of skill, in speech of many tongues, in metal work, in woodcraft and in shipcraft.

This teacher was Regin the master-smith, son of Hreidmar. A strange being was he, misshapen yet not a dwarf, silent and glowering unto all save only Sigurd; skilled in runes, in the lore of many lands and in metal work, so that the people whispered of his kinship to the underground folk, who have all metals in their keeping. But Hjaalprek knew not that he was full of guile, and that throughout the years of Sigurd's growth he plotted how he might use the lad for his own wicked ends, and be his undoing. Thus one day he said:

"It is shameful that thou hast no horse. These kings treat thee as their foot-boy. These kings, forsooth! in whose land is peace, and who go not out to fight."

"That is false," said Sigurd hotly, "and thou knowest it. If I need a horse I have but to ask. The kings are beloved of all and need not to fight. Yet if fighting were toward, father Alv would do his part."

And he went angrily out of the smithy. But after some months he went to King Alv and begged a horse of him, and the king said:

"Go choose thee one from the herd by Busil-water; they are the best, and all that is mine is thine, brave son."

Sigurd blithely thanked the king, and took his way to the meadow far up the woods, where the

Busil-water ran. On the way he met an aged man, with a long grey beard and one eye, who asked whither he fared.

"To choose me a horse, O Ancient One. If thou art a judge, come with me to help my choice."

And the old man journeyed with him, telling him of his father Sigmund, and his forefather Volsung, whom the Aged One had known. Then Sigurd knew that this must be one of the god-folk, to have lived so long.

As they talked, they came to the green meadow where the horses were, and the old man said:

"Now, will we drive the horses through the river of roaring water, and watch what will betide."

And the force of the water, rushing down from the mountains, frighted the horses, so that they turned and swam to land again, save one grey horse with a broad strong chest, who feared naught. He alone swam to the far side, and there landed, neighing and stamping in pride, then plunged into the torrent once more and swam back to the Ancient One and Sigurd.

"This one must I choose: is it not so?" asked the lad; and the old man answered: "Thou chooseth well, for he is of the race of Sleipnir, All-Father's horse, that never tires," and, as he spoke, he vanished away; and Sigurd knew that this must be Odin himself.

Then he took the horse, which he named Grane, and went back to the hall of the kings well pleased, and they and Hjordis rejoiced with him.

But after a time, crafty Regin went yet further

with his plan, and he asked: "Where is the treasure of thy father, the Volsung?"

"It is in the treasure-room of Queen Hjordis," Sigurd replied; "it is a fair treasure, but I have heard of greater, gathered by some kings."

"Why is it not thine?" asked Regin.

Sigurd laughed and said: "What should I, a boy, do with this treasure? It is naught to me, and there is no magic in it, else might I desire it."

"And wouldst thou have a magic treasure?" asked Regin keenly.

"I know not," the lad answered carelessly. "A great hero can I be without aid of magic. It was idle talk."

"But if I could help thee to great treasure and glory, wouldst thou refuse?"

"Why surely, nay," quoth Sigurd; "is it not for glory that the Volsungs live?"

"But a little way hence on the waste of Gnita Heath it lies, a treasure greater than has been seen in the world, and over it doth Fafnir keep watch and ward."

"Of this worm, Fafnir, have I heard," said Sigurd; "more evil and mighty is he than all other dragons."

"Nay," quoth Regin, "an over-great tale of it do men make; he is but like to other worms, and a small matter would thy forefathers have made of it. But little of the Volsung spirit has fallen to thy share!"

"Spirit have I," said Sigurd hotly, "but I am not yet come out of childish years. What is in thy mind that thou shouldst flout me thus unjustly?"

Regin answered not for a while, then he said:

"Come, then, and I will unfold to thee a tale that hitherto no man has known."

And the aged man and the stripling laid them down under a spreading oak in the greenwood, while Regin told this wondrous story.

CHAPTER VI

THE RHINE-GOLD

HREIDMAR, king of the dwarf-folk, was my father, and brothers had I two. Fafnir, the elder, was having and grim; ever would he take the best, and of the best all that he could, for he loved gold. Otter was the second, and his will was to be ever fishing, so that Hreidmar gave him the gift of changing into an otter, and thus he spent most of his life on the river rocks, landing only to bring fish to my father. I was the third son, a weak, misshapen thing, but with, as thou hast seen, the gift of runes, and cunning in all metal work.

It fell one day as Otter slumbered beside a half-eaten salmon, that Odin and Loki passed by. Now Loki, the wicked one, would ever be at evil, and he caught up a sharp stone and hit Otter, so that he died. Rejoicing, he flayed off Otter's furry skin, and, casting it over his shoulder, went on with Odin to Hreidmar's hall—a golden house of beauty that I had built for him. Hreidmar, knowing the skin for that of Otter, seized the gods and cried:

"By the beard of Odin, ye go not forth until ye pay me, in were-gild for my son, as much gold as will cover his skin inside and out."

"We have no gold," said Loki.

"The worse for thee," said Hreidmar, for he

was grim and hard, and angered that no more would Otter fish for him.

Loki the crafty thought awhile; then he said:

"If thou wilt give me leave I will go take Andvari's gold."

Now Andvari was a dwarf, who lived in Otter's river, under a waterfall that was called Andvari's Foss. He guarded a great treasure that he had stolen long years before from the Rhine maidens in the Southern land, but that history belongs not here. For the most part he took the shape of a pike, so that, with the greater comfort, he might guard his treasure.

Hreidmar gave leave, and Loki hurried down to Ran the sea-goddess, and begged her magic net. This she gave, and Loki, casting it under the foss, drew forth Andvari the pike.

"What ransom wilt thou, evil one?" cried Andvari in terror.

"All thy ill-gotten gold, O dwarf."

"That shalt thou never have."

So Loki hung the net of the goddess upon a tree, and sat down to watch the great pike struggling and gasping. At last Andvari said feebly:

"Put me back in the foss; thou shalt have my gold." And he brought it forth.

But Loki, as he gathered it up, espied a gold ring around his fin, and said:

"Thy red-gold ring must I have also."

Then Andvari shrieked with rage, and threw the ring at him, cursing him and the Rhine gold and all that should own it.

"To every man that owns it," said he, "shall it

be a bane and a woe, until it return to the Rhine daughters. To each holder of the ring shall come an evil death, and because of it the hearts of queens shall break, and the Twilight of the Gods shall come."

And he plunged into the foss and was seen no more.

Back went Loki to the House Beautiful and cast the gold at my father's feet; but the bane-ring gave he to Odin. Now this ring was that one that Odin had laid on the pyre of Baldur dead, and to it was given the gift of making, every ninth night, eight rings equal in weight to itself.

Then was the fur spread out and covered with gold, first on the one side, then on the other, till but one hair was uncovered. And Hreidmar spake:

"There is yet one hair showing."

The gods looked one upon another; then Odin drew the ring from his arm and cast it upon the skin, so that the hair was hidden. Then Loki mocked and sang:

"A great were-gild hast thou!
But thou and thy son
The bane shall it be of ye both."

And the gods departed.

Then Fafnir, looking covetously on the gold, slew our father for it, and me, being weak, he drove away; and, taking it to a secret place on Gnita Heath in the Desolate Land, he changed himself into an awful dragon, the better to guard it; and there is no worm like unto him, for he is made up of sin and evil. So I have no part in that

which is rightfully mine, and I would that thou shouldst win it for thyself, O Sigurd.

"But wherefore," asked Sigurd, "shouldst thou not fight and win it?"

"What chance hath a weakling against that great worm?" said Regin. "Besides, my doom is that I should be slain by a beardless youth."

Then up sprang Sigurd and cried:

"Forge thou me a sword of power, and when my father is avenged, even then will I go up with thee against thy brother and get thee the gold thou cravest."

And Regin rejoiced that his plan worked, and they went back to the hall of the kings, speaking of the sword that should be forged; but Regin told not Sigurd of the helmet of darkness and the mail coat of gold that were with the treasure of Andvari.

So after some days he put a sword into the hands of Sigurd, and the lad, looking at it, laughed in mirth.

"Why dost thou laugh?" asked the master.

"Because thy hand hath lost its skill. See!" and Sigurd smote the sword upon the anvil so that it flew in pieces.

Then Regin forged yet another, and said:

"Hard art thou to please. Mayhap this may be to thy mind."

And Sigurd looked at it, and smote it upon the anvil so that it split in half. Then he looked keenly upon Regin and frowned, saying:

"Mayhap thou also art a traitor like thy kin.

Is it thy will that Fafnir should slay me, that thou forgest me swords of wood? Canst thou do no better than that?"

And he turned from the smithy and went to his mother; but Regin was angered at his words and hated him.

Queen Hjordis sat in the women's room broidering with her maidens, when her son cast himself down by her side and, seeing that he spoke not, she said:

"What ails my son? Needs he aught that the kings and I can give him?"

"All love and much honour have I ever from thee, mother mine, and for this I owe thee all thanks and obedience. Yet one thing I lack. Have I heard aright that thou hast the sherds of the sword that my father, Sigmund, gave thee at his death?"

"It is true," Hjordis said, but her heart was sad, for she knew that their parting time had come.

"Fain would I have them, for with no sword but Gram can I do my life's work."

Then she led him to her treasure-chamber, and from its silken coverings in the old oak chest she drew the pieces of the sword, glittering and bright as in the day that the Wanderer smote it into the Branstock, and she gave them to Sigurd with a kiss.

Blithely went the lad forth, but Hjordis looked after him, wistful, yet rejoicing in that the prophecies of Sigmund and Hjaalprek were to be fulfilled, and that her son, with the eyes like stars, should be the hero of all the ages.

At the smithy door Regin met him, frowning.

"Will naught serve thee but Gram?" he asked in wrath.

"Naught but Gram!" Sigurd said, and laughed. "Gram shall slay the Serpent; take it and do thy best."

Regin took it and shut himself for many days into the smithy with his men and, after much labour, the sword was wrought; but the smiths told how, as Regin bore it forth from the forge, fire ran adown its edge. Regin looked at it and said:

"Well know I that I shall die by the sword of a youth, but, if it be by Gram, then am I content: for I am weary of the length of days that have dragged on since I forged this blade for Odin the Wanderer."

To Sigurd, waiting at the smithy door, he gave the sword, saying sullenly: "If this be not good, then is indeed my craft gone."

Then ran Sigurd joyfully down to the stream and cast therein a lock of wool and, as it floated down, it met the edge of Gram and the lock became two, and Sigurd laughed again.

Then said Regin: "Bethink thee, now thou hast a sword to thy mind, of thy promise to go up against Fafnir?"

"That will I gladly when I have avenged my father on the Hundings," said the lad.

Then the kings made ready many ships, and Sigurd was chief over them, and they sailed to the land of the Volsungs, and in a great battle slew King Lynge and the Hundings, and added that kingdom to the lands of Hjaalprek the Helper.

And ever in the thickest of the press gleamed Gram.

Now, when he was come home some time, Sigurd grew weary of quiet, and Gram rattled in its sheath under the peace-strings, as it hung on the wall over Sigurd's seat.

So he went to Regin, who sat wearily by the smithy fire; he turned not as Sigurd entered and, drawing up a stool, sat by him. After a while the lad spoke:

"To-morrow will I ride with thee to the Waste, Regin, if thou wilt; maybe I shall slay thy brother."

"Two shall go forth," said Regin gloomily, "but neither shall return."

"No matter," quoth Sigurd, "we will try our best for the hoard."

And that night he went unto his Uncle Gripir and learned from him all that should befall him in the future; though Gripir was sore troubled and scarce would speak at the outset, yet in the end he told unto Sigurd all that his life should bring.

CHAPTER VII

THE SLAYING OF THE WORM

ERE the dawn Sigurd arose and, going silently, he went to his mother and kissed her gently, for he knew from Gripir that he should see her no more; then, saddling Grane, he rode forth to the Lonesome Waste, with Regin at his side.

Ever inland and upward they rode as the days went by, leaving meadows, trees, and all green things behind. At last they came out upon the Waste beside a mountain torrent, where Fafnir was wont to drink, and Sigurd traced the broad band of slime that he made as he crawled back and forth.

"Surely," said he, "this dragon brother of thine is greater than all other ling-worms, from the breadth of his track?"

"Nay, not so," said Regin. "Dig thou but a pit in his path and sit therein, then canst thou stab him from beneath. As for me, since in naught can I help thee, I will get me to a place of safety," and he rode down the rocks.

Then Sigurd put Grane in shelter, and turned to cross Gnita Heath; and, as he went, there met him a grey-beard with one eye, who asked him whither he went and what to do, and Sigurd told him.

"That counsel is evil," said the Ancient One; "bide thou here and dig many pits, else into one

will the dragon's blood flow and drown thee as thou standest."

And ere the youth could answer he was gone.

So Sigurd spent the night in digging pits in the path of Fafnir; and at early dawn, as he sat in the largest, he felt the trembling of the earth, and knew that Fafnir was nigh.

Snorting and spitting venom as he went, the great Worm crept slowly on, fearing naught and, as he passed over the pit, Sigurd thrust up Gram with all his strength behind the dragon's left shoulder, and drew it forth black to the hilt; and Fafnir's blood gushed forth and covered Sigurd as he stood, save only in one spot between his shoulders where a dead leaf had lighted. Then he leaped from the pit and stood afar off, as the mighty Worm lashed out in the pain of his death-wound, crying, "Who art thou, and whence? thou that art the undoing of Fafnir."

But Sigurd, mindful that Fafnir might curse him if he told his name, answered: "Nameless am I, and born of nameless folk."

"Ah," cried Fafnir, "shame that I should be slain by a liar. He should be a hero that bringeth me doom, yet can a hero lie?"

Then was Sigurd shamed, for he ever told the truth, and he said:

"I am Sigurd, son of Sigmund the Volsung, and no liar. Tell me of the days that are to come to me."

For all men believed that to the dying was the future clear, and Sigurd willed to see if the words

of Gripir and Fafnir were the same. And Fafnir spoke:

"I see bane unto thee from the gold, Andvari's hoard, and from the fatal ring. Take thy horse and ride away and flee from the evil. Yet shall we meet and fight again in the day of the Destruction of the Gods, thou Golden Sigurd."

"Nay," quoth Sigurd, "for thy gold I came, and without it will I not go. Without gold cannot man live."

Then Fafnir poured forth words of ruth and wisdom; and as the sun went down he quivered and lay a chill grey heap upon the Waste, and the sunset light shone upon the bright hair of the Golden Sigurd as, sword in hand, he looked down on the fell mass.

Then came Regin, who had watched from afar, hastening to greet Sigurd.

"Hail, lord and conqueror!" he cried; "henceforth shalt thou be known throughout the ages as Fafnir's Bane."

"Small aid wert thou," laughed Sigurd, "hiding while I fought."

"Yet," said Regin grimly, "were it not for the sword I forged thou hadst now lain low before Fafnir. And, since he was my brother and thou hast slain him, for atonement shalt thou roast me his heart with fire, that I may eat it."

"That will I," said Sigurd, and he set to gather sticks in the gloaming while Regin slept and the birds gathered round, and he set Fafnir's heart upon a stick to roast.

When it should have been ready, Sigurd laid his

fingers upon it and the fat, hissing out, burnt them so that he put them in his mouth to cool; and behold, straightway he knew the words of the woodpeckers that chattered as they hopped around.

The first said:

"Thou foolish Sigurd to roast for Regin. Eat thou the heart and so become wisest of men."

The second said:

"Thou guileful Regin, that wouldst betray the trusting youth."

The third said:

"Smite thou the guileful one, Sigurd, and become thyself lord of the gold."

The fourth said:

"That is good counsel, to take the treasure and hie over Hindfell to sleeping Brynhild."

The fifth fluttered and said:

"Sigurd is a fool if he spare him whose brother he has just slain."

Then up sprang Sigurd, saying:

"Regin shall be no bane of me. He shall follow his brother."

And he smote Regin with Gram, so that his head rolled away.

Then the birds rejoiced and sang glad songs of Sigurd's journeyings, and of Brynhild over Hindfell, whom he should find, while Sigurd ate part of Fafnir's heart and saved the rest.

Then he leapt on Grane and rode by the dragon's slimy trail until he came to the great cavern; and, although it was now night, the cavern shone with a light as of day, by reason of the golden shine of the Hoard.

So he set Andvari's ring on his arm and dight upon his body the golden mail and upon his head the helmet of darkness, and, putting the Hoard into two chests, he fastened them upon the back of Grane, being minded to walk himself because of their weight. But Grane stirred not, and Sigurd was troubled what he should do, for even he dared not smite the horse. Then he looked into the eyes of Grane and knew what was in his mind, so he gathered up the reins and leaped upon his back, and the grey horse tossed his mane for joy and galloped over the Waste, turning southward, steady and untiring.

CHAPTER VIII

THE WAKING OF BRYNHILD

By stony ways rode Sigurd southward towards the Frankish land and, as he came over Hindfell, he saw before him a mountain whereon a great fire burned, and in the midst of the fire a castle with a floating banner, with shields around the towers.

And he climbed that mountain until he came close to the fire, and the crackling heat of it fanned his curls. Then he cried unto Grane, and the brave grey horse, with one mighty spring, leaped through the flame and stood at the castle gate and Sigurd, looking back, saw only a line of grey ashes where the fire had been.

The castle door stood wide and Sigurd, with Gram unsheathed, strode through the empty courts. Upon a rock in the inmost hall lay a man in full armour, his face covered by his visor. Then Sigurd cried aloud:

"Arise! I am Sigurd."

But the figure moved not; so, with the point of Gram, he loosed the mail coat and flung it off and the string of the helmet and cast it aside, and behold! there lay before him, in deep sleep, the fairest woman he had ever seen. Gold was her hair as the hoard of Andvari, white was her skin as the

froth of sea waves, and her opening eyes were blue as a mountain tarn.

"Who waketh me?" she asked, low and soft as in a dream. "Me, in whom Odin, All-Father, set the sleep-thorn because I did as he willed not. Is it thou, Sigurd, son of Sigmund, with Fafnir's Bane in thy hand, and Fafnir's helmet on thy head?"

"It is I," he answered; "tell me thy name."

"I am Brynhild, Valkyrja of Odin. Against his word did I give the victory to the man he would not; therefore did he strike me with his sleep-thorn and lay me within the fire-ring. And this doom is laid upon me, that never more shall I choose the slain; that now am I mortal and must suffer my tale of woe, even as the children of men; that I shall wed but a mortal and bear the bitter things of life. But this have I vowed—since I must wed—I will lay my hand only in that of a man who knows no fear."

"Surely," said Sigurd, "thou art both fair and wise. Tell me of wisdom and love during this day that I may spend with thee."

And Brynhild told him of the secret runes of the gods and of many things hidden from men. Through this and through his knowledge of bird-speech became Sigurd wise above all men.

Now when the day was ended the Volsung stood before the Valkyrja, and in that deep voice like unto the music of a mountain torrent said:

"I am he that knoweth no fear. I swear that thou, Brynhild, art near to my heart, and none will I wed but thee."

And by the two hands he held her, looking deep into her eyes, as she answered:

"Thee do I choose before all the sons of men, O Sigurd."

So they plighted their troth and drank of the love drink, and he set upon her arm the red-gold ring of Andvari. And thus began the Valkyrja's sorrow; yet, having the love of the best of the Volsungs, would she not change it for aught of mortal joy.

Now when the new day was come, Sigurd arose and clad him in the golden armour of the Hoard, whereon was drawn the image of that dragon which he slew, and upon his red-gold hair he set the helmet with its dragon crest.

"Fair love!" he said, kissing Brynhild between the eyes, "I must fare forth to do the deeds that await me and to meet the fate that is set. Yet ere long will I seek thee in thy sister's home at Hlymdal, and at my coming shall we have much joy."

But Brynhild sorrowed and answered low:

"Woe is me, my hero; for thee and me will be no bridal until our death-day join us. Thou wilt wed a daughter of the southland folk. We must dree our weird apart."

Then Sigurd laughed and kissed her, saying:

"Sweetheart, thou art sad at our parting. Thou, daughter of the gods, knowest full well that what will be must be, and naught can mortals change when the Nornir have spoken."

And again he kissed her and rode down through the valley—Golden Sigurd in the sunbeam glint—and Brynhild watched him till she could see him

no more. Then she turned and wept the tears of a mortal woman for the first time, and made her ready to go to Hlymdal.

Now in Hlymdal dwelt Heimar, a noble chief, who had wedded Beckhild, sister to Brynhild and Atli. Thither to his home came Brynhild to pass the time of her waiting for Sigurd to come.

One day as she sat in her tower there came, running, her maiden, who said:

"See! who cometh over the hills with this train of men and horses?"

And Brynhild looked forth and sighed heavily. "It is Gudrun, daughter of Gjuki, King of the Niblungs, and her coming brings me woe."

Then went she down to greet Gudrun, fairest maiden of Frankenland, and give her welcome. But Gudrun was sad and heavy of heart as they sat in the high-seat together, and Brynhild said:

"Canst thou not laugh and be merry as we used of old, O Gudrun?"

"That can I not for dreams that trouble me," answered Gudrun; "even for that am I come to thee, that thou mightest unravel all for me."

And Brynhild led her to her tower and set her in the high-seat, saying unto her, "Say on;" but she sat herself at Gudrun's feet with hidden face.

And Gudrun spoke:

"Thou and I, Brynhild, were with other women at the hunting of a golden stag; but I alone could come anigh it. Then didst thou shoot and kill it even at my knees, so that sorrow was my portion

and grief my fate for evermore. And in the stead of my golden stag gavest thou me a wolf-cub covered with my brother's blood."

And the Valkyrja answered gloomily:

"The rede of this is that thou shalt wed Sigurd, my betrothed, yet not by guile of thine. Guiltless shalt thou be, and he and I also. Yet this is our doom and naught can stay it, and great shall be the sorrow of us all. For he shall not live, though woe is me that I should be his death-dealer! and, with him dead, thou shalt be wife to my brother Atli. He shall slay thy brethren, and him shalt thou slay in turn. Thus the end of us all shall be woe and strife and the Twilight of the Gods."

"And is there no help?" asked Gudrun, with down-bent head.

"There is no help, since the Nornir have spoken," Brynhild replied; and, rising from the feet of Gudrun, she passed into her chamber, and all was sadness in the tower.

Then did Gudrun wend home to the Rhineland to wait for Sigurd and her fate; but Brynhild shut herself into her tower to work, in silks and gold, the Slaying of the Worm upon Sigurd's banner and, as the great coils grew and took shape under her fingers, so drew nearer the day of Sigurd's coming.

Then, after a winter in far lands, and the gaining of much fame, came the Golden Sigurd to Hlymdal to his betrothed. Sweet were the days of their love and life together, but all too few; for Brynhild, knowing the word of the Nornir, that soon he must pass to the land of the Franks even as

it was decreed, bade him go forth to do mighty deeds, to help those in need, and to bear his great name scatheless as it had ever been.

So went forth Sigurd to his doom, and Brynhild, in bitter sorrow, hied her back to dreary Hindfell, there to await the fate she must needs not hinder.

CHAPTER IX

GUDRUN

In the heart of the Rhineland lay the mighty city of Worms, home of the Niblung race. There in her rose-garden dwelt Gudrun, fair daughter of Gjuki, with her mother Grimhild, and her three brothers, Gunnar, the king, Guttorm, and Hogni.

Gunnar, the king, was powerful and rich, having hoards of gold and many brave warriors at his command; but chief of his treasures was his sister, Gudrun, the white-armed.

In quiet she walked one day, with her nurse, in the rose-garden beside the swirling river, when there came from the city a noise of great shouting.

"Go, nurse," she said, "and learn what this may mean. To me it seemeth a cry of joy."

The nurse went, and returned quickly saying: "It is Sigurd, Fafnir's Bane, the golden hero of the Volsungs. Thy brethren ride forth to greet him at the northern gate. Come, nursling, that I may braid thy brown hair, and array thee in the gold of the Niblungs, for there will be feasting and welcome in the high-hall this night."

But Gudrun tarried, wistful, under the service trees of her garden with a foreboding of fate to come and of the end of her childhood's life.

Then throughout the Rhineland flew the word: "The hero of the ages hath come;" and from

far and wide came folk to greet the dragon-slayer, master of Andvari's hoard, now returned once more to its Rhineland home.

In the high-hall, Gunnar, the king, held a feast, and near him sat his mother. Her bright witch-eyes looked upon Sigurd, and she pondered:

"If this man wed my daughter, naught should I have to fear for her from Atli and the wild kings of the East, any one of whom would wed her. He is troth-plighted to Brynhild, the Valkyrja, but that is naught. Have I not witch-lore to make him forget her? So also should we keep the golden hoard here in the Rhineland again."

So all that summer, while Sigurd hunted, played, rode, and waged war for the Niblungs did Grimhild wander among the mountains, brewing the magic draught of forgetfulness.

And the brethren loved Sigurd, and with all their lords was he in fellowship, save only with Hagen of Hunland, friend of Atli, whose deeds were evil, and who hated all that was brightest and best. So when the king prayed the hero to tarry throughout winter, he agreed, thinking: "In the spring will I fetch my Valkyrja maiden home."

But one autumn night, when all were weary with hunting and with the feast, came Grimhild bearing an ancient cup of gold to Sigurd, and, gazing with witch-eyes that faltered not, into the keenness of his eyes, said:

"In this cup I pledge thee, thou hero that shalt be my fourth son. Drink and see the desire of thy life."

And Sigurd looked straight at her with his

guileless glance and, taking the cup, drained it to the bottom.

Then fell a greyness upon his face, and all men were silent. He stood up and gazed around, unseeing; then, as one unmindful of his fellows, strode from the hall and was seen no more that night.

But Grimhild rejoiced, for she knew that her spell was strong.

In the morning, as Gudrun plucked service berries and late roses in her garden, there came to her the Volsung, as one in a dream. She was pale with the thought of his sorrow, though she knew not what had befallen him, and, letting fall her flowers, she held out to him her two white hands. Then he, seeing how fair she was, and Brynhild having passed from his mind, felt that with this maiden to love him, this strange nameless trouble of his mind would pass and all would be well; therefore took he her hands, saying:

"Gudrun, if troth may be plighted between us, here will I abide. But if, Daughter of the Niblungs, thou hast no love for me, then will I ride hence to-day. Say thou, shall I stay?"

And she, bending down her rose-flushed face, bade him stay, and he swore a mighty oath that never, while life was in him, would he forget her love.

So, hand in hand, they passed to the hall of the Niblungs, and a shout of joy went up from the chiefs of the land. And Gunnar swore blood-brotherhood with Sigurd, and they made haste to set forth the wedding feast; then did the crafty queen rejoice that all had fallen out according to

her plan, and that the stolen Rhine-gold was once more safe in the Rhineland.

So Gudrun and Sigurd dwelt together in love, and the hero gave her to eat of the heart of Fafnir, and she, being of great soul, became nobler and wiser than all living women, save only the lost Brynhild. And then was born to them a son, who was called Sigmund.

And now did Grimhild, the plotter, turn her thoughts to that sad Valkyrja sitting bereft in her lonely tower at Hlymdal, broidering the deeds of her lost hero, and she said to Gunnar:

"Who so fit a wife for thee, my son, as Brynhild, daughter of Budli and sister of Atli of Hunland?"

And Gunnar, being willing, made ready to ride to Hlymdal, and Sigurd with him. Yet, ere they left, the witch queen called them unto her and taught them how each might take the other's shape. This seemed a thing of sport to the Volsung and, laughing his great laugh, he cried:

"Good mother and queen, wherefore do we need this witch-work? They say this Brynhild is now but a mortal maiden and needs but a mortal wooing."

"Thou knowest not what may befall," said the queen, "therefore heed well my runes."

So they went forth, Sigurd wotting little that these runes would bring him nearer to his doom, and rode merrily to Hlymdal.

And Heimar greeted them gladly and bade them tell their errand. Then Gunnar spoke:

"For the asking of Brynhild am I come. Thinkest

thou, Heimar, that she would wed with me and become queen of the Rhineland?"

"That can I not answer," quoth Heimar, "for no longer is she here, but back to Hindfell hath she fared. Strange and sad hath she been of late, but she holdeth fast to the rune of Odin, that only with the fire-rider will she wed—since wed she must."

"No fire fear I!" cried Gunnar.

"But thy horse," asked Heimar, "will he face fire? since ride must thou, even as ye would ride to Odin in Valhalla."

"That shall we see," cried Gunnar, doubting naught.

CHAPTER X

THE WEDDING OF BRYNHILD

JOYOUSLY they rode over hill and dale until they came to the castle upon Hindfell, and round it still rose the quivering white flame.

For awhile they looked, then the mighty Gunnar, drawing his sword and shouting the war-cry of the Niblungs, rushed at the flame. But his horse, being afraid, swerved and turned and fled trembling back to the troop of men.

Then said Hogni the wise:

"Sigurd, lend thou me thy Grane, he feareth naught."

"That will I," said Sigurd, leaping to earth, "though I doubt me Grane will let none back him but myself."

And it was even so, for although King Gunnar mounted, no step would the grey horse stir. He stood like a rock in the pathway, save only that he turned his eyes to Sigurd as if to cry him shame in that he had let another back him.

Then Sigurd drew near and spoke low to the king:

"This must the queen, thy mother, have foreseen. So must I take thy shape and ride for thee, my brother in love, through the fire to woo thee Brynhild."

Then in the gloaming were the magic runes spoken, and Sigurd, in the likeness of Gunnar,

sprang swift through the circling fire; and the fire died into grey ashes, and throughout the cold night did Gunnar and Hogni wait and watch for the Volsung.

But Sigurd strode through the silent halls until he reached the inner one, wherein, on the high-seat, sat the swan-maiden waiting, on her head a crown of gold, and on her white dress her arms lying listless.

Only her eyes of burning blue looked straight into those of the seeming Gunnar, and on her sad face was the woe of the hapless waiting for Sigurd, who came not.

And the seeker spake not, for his heart was cold with the weight of her sorrow, only he stood and gazed for a space.

Then the Valkyrja cried:

"Who art thou who cometh through the fire to disquiet me in my weariness?"

"I am Gunnar, King of the Niblungs, come to hold thee to thine oath and woo thee."

"Art thou indeed the first and best of men?" she asked, and her eyes sought his, in her heart-hunger for Sigurd.

"I am he," he answered, with bent head, "and thou, Valkyrja, shalt never be forsworn. This night must we be wed."

Then the swan-maid arose in her beauty and greeted the king, saying:

"An thou be the first of men, thou shalt be my king. Sit thou in my seat and take my troth-plight with this ring."

And she drew off the ring of Andvari and set

it upon his arm. So came the Fate back to Sigurd.

And when morning was come they parted, the kings to ride homewards, and Brynhild to go to Heimar's hall until the day of her journey to Worms.

Then was a mighty feast made, and great was the joy of Grimhild that her children were now mated with the best and most beautiful that the world held.

Many days did the great feast last, and of a sudden, at its ending, the mist rolled back from the spirit of Sigurd and he remembered the vows that he sware unto the Valkyrja. And he fled from that company in sorrow of heart, and knew not where he stood until he came through Gudrun's rose-garden to the Rhine bank. Dark and swift and sullen flowed the river, and Sigurd stretched out his hands and cried:

"Forsworn, dishonoured, I the Volsung! Thou curse of the ring, thou bane of the gold! Will naught be well until thou lie again in the arms of the waiting Rhine daughters?"

And he cast himself down amidst the flowers by the swishing black water, and so lay until the dawn. But when he arose his face shone with the golden light of peace; he spake unto no man of these things, but ever loved Gudrun the more, since no fault of hers was this sorrow; and he dwelt in friendship with Brynhild as a brother might.

But three winters went by, and Brynhild hated Gudrun each year the more, and pondered through long months how she might be revenged for the

stealing of her love. No peace had she, but by night she wandered abroad calling on Sigurd, that should be her love for all the ages, and by day she sought, with bitter words and taunts, to humble Gudrun; but Gudrun, happy in the love of Sigurd, bore all and complained not.

Only her heart failed her in that she knew that Grimhild longed for the gold of Sigurd, and that Guttorm, her brother, joined her mother in this longing. Therefore kept she watch and ward lest hurt should come to her great husband, although she knew what was known to no other—that the blood of Fafnir, covering him, had made him safe from wounds, save only in the spot between his shoulders where had lodged the dead leaf; there alone might he be stricken.

Now, it chanced one day that the sister queens went to the bathing, and, as they went, Brynhild, well-nigh distraught with longing, flouted Gudrun even more than her wont, and the queen of the brown eyes grew wroth.

As she took place by Brynhild, the swan-queen cast on her a scornful glance and moved higher up the flood.

Then did Gudrun swim after her, asking: "Why shouldst thou shun me and move higher up?"

"Because thy place is below me," Brynhild cried, with a face of white wrath. "Thou, sister of Gunnar, as thou art—art but the wife of King Hjaalprek's thrall, a war-won slave. In days to come, when Gunnar and I sit with Odin in Valhalla, thou and thy slave husband shall wait

without the gates. Could thy Sigurd have ridden the flaming fire?"

"Peace!" cried Gudrun, rising glorious in her anger, "who art thou that thou shouldst scorn the slayer of Fafnir and Regin, and many kings who wrought evil! Moreover"—she went on, in low, deep tones—"my Sigurd was it who rode the flaming fire on Grane and claimed thee for Gunnar. To Sigurd didst thou give the ring of Andvari, and here is it yet, set upon my arm."

She stretched forth her fair arm whereon shone the red-gold ring, and Brynhild went grey as a drift cloud. She cast one look of hate upon the Niblung queen, and, throwing her garments around her, sped to the wild wood and was seen no more that day.

But in the Mirk Wood found she Hagen, the evil one—a Hun and friend to Atli, her brother—who had been setting cunning traps for the wild things that run, and he said:

"What ails our golden queen? Can aught that I may do aid her?"

Then Brynhild burst forth with her hatred of the Volsung, crying:

"Help me with my vengeance!"

Then Hagen saw that through the queen he might perchance work evil unto the hero, whom he hated (as all wicked things hate what is good and brave and strong), and perchance compass his death, so that Atli might have Gudrun, whom he wished for to wife, and Guttorm the Golden Hoard that he so coveted, whereof part also might come to Hagen; so he said slowly:

"This thing needs thought, but between us we may work it. Get thee home and show no anger at the tale."

But this Brynhild could not do. White and stony she rose up and lay down, speaking no word to the king nor to her maidens.

But after a while Hagen sent this message to her—that naught of her vengeance might be begun while she lay in her chamber alone, and he bade her come forth and be friends with Gudrun. So she came forth, heavy-eyed, and Gudrun met her with fair words, saying:

"Dear sister, let all be as if we had never striven by the Rhine. Flout no more, but let us dwell in peace."

So Brynhild, with the stone-cold heart and false lips, kissed the Volsung's wife and there was quiet.

But those two who hated Sigurd, and Guttorm who coveted his treasure, drew together and made a plot; but they told not Gunnar and Guttorm, for the kings were true to their oath of brotherhood, and would have slain the plotters rather than they should work Sigurd's woe.

CHAPTER XI

THE BETRAYING OF SIGURD

And so the dreary autumn days sped on, and over the hearts of all lay a dim foreboding of evil at hand, and Brynhild, waxing thin, went heavily through the castle, white and still, with deep fire burning in her eyes.

To none was the evil known, save only to Sigurd through the sayings of Gripir the Wise and the death-word of Fafnir. Oft talked he with sweet Gudrun, as they sat in their chamber, where she loved to comb his red-gold locks—striving to prepare her for the sorrowful days in store.

But, though her heart believed, her mind would not, and she repeated ever that naught could harm him, since he had bathed in the dragon's blood.

"Thou mindest not that one spot," said Sigurd gravely.

"But it is so small a spot, dear heart, and none knows of it but I," and she laid her finger on that place.

Then Sigurd took her into his arms to kiss her, saying: "I would, my sweet, that it might be so."

But they wist not that a maiden of Brynhild was hidden behind the hangings and had noted all.

One day it fell out that the queens sat in their bower together. Gudrun and her maidens were broidering a banner for Sigurd, and swiftly the awe-

some grey coils of the dragon took shape under their fingers, growing apace as they laid on the gleaming red gold. But Brynhild, too sick at heart to work, sat idly by, tangling the silken skeins as the maidens laid them down by Gudrun, and scattering the ivory needles with restless, fluttering fingers.

Raising suddenly her heavy lids, she flashed a look upon Gudrun and said:

"Thy thrall husband is in peril."

Gudrun flushed red as she looked up but, speaking low, she only said:

"This insult is unworthy of thee, my sister; hast thou forgotten?"

"Forgotten?" cried she wildly, "will the gnawing worm of love and shame at my heart ever die? I tell thee, Sigurd is bound to perish by the plots of evil men, unless thou show me that one spot where he may be struck. If thou wilt do this I will bid my trustiest man-at-arms keep watch and ward over him."

This she said being set on by Hagen the Hun, for none knew, save Gudrun, where this spot lay.

"Sigurd holdeth watch and ward for himself," said Gudrun proudly; "natheless, sister, I thank thee for thy care."

Thus Brynhild failed, and with slow, dragging steps, passed from the bower. But there stole after her her dark-browed maiden, sister to Hagen, who, touching her, said:

"I, O queen, can show thee this spot; for, being one day within hearing, Gudrun and Sigurd spoke of this spot."

"It is well," said the queen, "mark thou the

place on the shirt that he shall wear to-morrow at the great hunt."

And on the morrow when all were gathered joyously in the castle-yard for the hunting of the boar, a small red mark was set between the shoulders of Sigurd, and Hagen and Brynhild laughed grimly, for now they knew that the hero was delivered into their hands for his undoing. But Sigurd held Gudrun long in his arms and kissed her, saying:

"Farewell, thou brave, true heart; bear thee well through the sorrow of heavy years to come, for in naught may we gainsay the Nornir. Yet shall we meet at last in Asgard, and our sorrow have an end."

Then Gudrun knew that nevermore should she speak with her love, but, daughter of kings, she bore herself bravely, looking steadfastly into his eyes as he turned away.

The hunt set forth, and she went to her bower, chill at heart, but Brynhild mocked her, crying:

"Thy hero will see fine sport to-day."

All through the day the hunt went on in the wild wood, and Hagen kept at Sigurd's back, biding his time to strike. But Gunnar, feeling something amiss, kept ever by his side also.

Then it chanced that, heated with the chase, they came to a running stream, and Sigurd leaped to earth to drink. As he stooped Gunnar came up, being also athirst, and Sigurd drew back that the king should drink first.

"Nay, brother Sigurd," quoth the great king, "drink thou with me as brethren should."

So they stooped and drank together, and the evil Hagen, stealing up behind, with one fell stroke of his spear on the small red spot, laid low the glory of the world, the Golden Sigurd.

Then rang through the wood two wild and terrible cries; the cry of King Gunnar for his brother foully slain, and the cry of Hagen, whom Grane had seized and bitten so that he died.

And the hunters came together in grief and pain and, raising the body of their hero, they laid it on a bed of spears and bore it back in gloom to the city.

And as they passed along in silence, a chill wind moaned through the pine tops, the robin ceased its autumn song; the ruddy leaves fell swift and thick from the beech trees; winter came in one breath over the land, and all things living mourned Sigurd dead, even as they had mourned Baldur the Shining God.

But Hagen, the traitor, was left a prey to the beasts of the Mirk Wood.

At two windows of the castle waited and watched the two queens.

And as the dreary train came in sight and she saw the bent heads of all, and Grane, riderless, behind the bier, Gudrun gave one shuddering cry of "Sigurd!" and fell senseless to the ground. But Brynhild caught a torch from the wall, and going down to the courtyard gazed on the face of the dead Sigurd with a laugh of triumph.

Then Gunnar spoke in anger:

"Woe unto thee, thou evil woman; get thee to thy chamber, and joy not that the light of the earth is quenched."

But Brynhild spoke no word; she cast aside the torch, and, going to her chamber, laid herself with her face to the wall, and death was in that face.

And all through that night the Niblungs laboured and built a mighty pyre for the Volsung. By the will of Gudrun was it that it stood in the midst of her rose-garden, for she said: "What pleasure more shall I have, now that the light of my life is laid low?"

And at the dawn the bale was ready, and Gudrun kissed her love once more upon the mouth ere they lifted him thereon, and behold! at his side lay Grane dead. What use in life to Grane, wanting Sigurd? Could Sigurd ride to Valhalla wanting Grane? Him also did they lay with gentle hands upon the bale beside Gram, the gift of Odin, and at their feet two hawks.

Then, when all was lighted, forth came Brynhild, decked with gold and jewels, and bearing in her arms the body of young Sigmund, son of Sigurd and Gudrun, whom she had slain.

Terrible was she as she climbed upon the pyre and looked down on the face of the dead Sigurd in its peace and beauty. And with the weight of her weird her heart-strings snapped and she fell dead across the body of the hero she had loved and slain.

So passed Sigurd, hero of the ages, king of the true heart. But his name and his deeds passed not away, nor ever shall so long as the earth endures.

CHAPTER XII

OF GUDRUN'S WOE AND THE RETURN OF THE RHINE-GOLD

But the sorrow of woe-worn Gudrun ended not here.

Bereft of husband and son she sat alone in her bower and bemoaned her for her love.

"Oh, for the life of the long-past days when Sigurd, my hero, who was as far above all other men as gold is above iron, lived and loved! No more can I dwell in these halls where my brethren begrudged me his true heart!"

And, wrapping a dark veil around her, she fled into the Mirk Wood, seeking sweet death and forgetfulness at the jaws of the howling wolves that abode therein. But they let her pass unscathed, and after many days she came to the hall of Thora of Denmark and there met with great welcome.

But, in the passing of time, news of her refuge came to Grimhild and Gunnar, and Grimhild said:

"It is but fitting that thou shouldst atone unto thy sister for the sorrow that thou hast brought upon her in the death of son and husband. Let us go seek her in noble fashion, with gifts of gold and precious stuffs—for with thee must I go, since ye have no skill in runes and fair words."

Thus set forth a mighty train of king, queen, and

many chieftains, and they came to the hall of the King of Denmark.

But Gudrun would have none of their fair words, but looked on them with sombre eyes. Thus had Grimhild foreseen, and she mixed for her daughter a drink in which all the magic might of the earth was mingled and gave it to her in a horn cut with runes of utmost power, so that Gudrun forgot the wrong done her by her brethren and her heart turned once more toward her kin.

Then Grimhild said:

"See, daughter, here art thou alone. Atli of Hunland, brother to Brynhild, would fain wed thee —a mighty king is he above all others. This do and thou wilt be the greatest queen throughout the world."

But Gudrun would not.

"My heart," said she, "is even with Sigurd, my one love."

Grimhild was angered and would not take her nay; then came a look of foreseeing into Gudrun's eyes, and she said:

"If this thing come about, evil from him will fall upon all my kin. Vengeance and death shall be their portion and that of Atli also. Mother, take this my warning."

Still did they urge her, and at last, wearied, she gave way.

"Small matter is it that I should suffer more, since the worst is overpast. Do ye as ye will."

Then that great company set forth with much rejoicing, and for four days journeyed through the forest; then did they sail for four other days on

the Great River, and, lastly, ride for four days more ere they came to the high hall of King Atli, and there was the wedding set with much feasting.

But Gudrun smiled not upon Atli, but sat in chill silence.

Now after they had been some time wed, the king said to himself:

"Small comfort have I in this cold daughter of the Niblungs; more dower should I have had. The hoard of Sigurd should be mine, since its mistress is my wife. Yet never will those brethren give it up. I will bid them here and see what may befall."

Then he sent forth honourable messengers with Vingi, chief of his nobles, at the head. But Gudrun the queen, seeing much secret counsel, misdoubted her of their errand, and she knit round a gold ring a wolf's hair and cut upon a slip of wood runes of warning against Atli; these she gave into the hand of Vingi with word that he could give them unto Gunnar.

Now Vingi misdoubted him of those runes; he, therefore, carved over them others, changing their sense so that they read otherwise and bade Gunnar come to the hall of Atli.

Well received was Vingi by the king and, after feasting, he delivered his message. Then spoke Gunnar aside with Hogni, the Wise, concerning this venture, and Hogni said:

"My mind misgives me of this gold ring bound with wolf's hair. It can but be our sister's meaning that Atli is of wolf-mind towards us."

"Nay," said Gunnar, "that cannot be, else would she not have sent these runes, bidding us to come."

And he handed the stick to Kostbera, the wife of Hogni, who sat by—a lady both fair and wise above other women.

She, looking closely, discovered the guile of that message, and said to Hogni:

"Canst thou not yet read runes aright, O husband? Beneath these are cut other runes that have been dealt with falsely, bearing the warning of Gudrun."

"Evil-minded are ye women," cried Hogni, "thankful am I that I think not evil when none is meant."

"How knowest thou that?" asked Kostbera, sadly. "Natheless, if thou wilt prove it, go; I warn thee that no friendship for the Niblungs lies in Atli's heart."

This much misgiving did the foreboding of Kostbera put into the brethren that, for surety's sake, they were minded to hide the treasure of Sigurd, Andvari's Hoard.

Thus, alone and in secret, they went by night bearing the gold and sank it in a certain place in the Rhine that they and the Rhine maidens, who guarded it, alone knew.

At dawn a great company went with the kings down to the ships, and with words of farewell they parted—each to his own fate.

To Vingi the lady Kostbera spoke:

"To me it seems that much evil will come of thy visit; would that it had never been!"

And the false Vingi made answer:

"May the high gallows and all evil things take me, lady, if I have lied in aught of my story."

In due time they came to King Atli's burg, and since the gate was barred, King Gunnar broke it down and they rode through. This angered Vingi, and he said, with an evil look:

"Now will I seek thy gallows-tree! Softly have I spoken hitherto to lure ye here, but this was my intent—to cause your deaths."

Hogni laughed.

"No fear have we of gallows-tree nor yet of armed men," he said, "but swift punishment do we mete out to traitors."

So saying, he felled Vingi with his axe so that he died.

Passing on, the Niblungs found King Atli and his chieftains drawn up in battle array and he rode forward to have speech with them.

"Have ye come," he asked, "to deliver up the gold that is mine of right—since it is Gudrun's?"

"Nay," answered Gunnar, "never shalt thou have it."

"Long have I been minded to take that gold and, with it, vengeance on ye all for that deed of shame, the death of Sigurd, Fafnir's Bane."

Now, as they parleyed, came word to Gudrun of her brothers' coming and, running forth, she went to them and kissed them on the mouth saying:

"Why did ye not heed my runes? Yet to each must come his fate."

Then she drew back into her bower and the

battle set on. Twice rode Gunnar and Hogni through the hosts of Atli, driving them back with exceeding fierceness, as leaves drive before the autumn wind, until they reached even into the great hall. There was Gunnar overborne and laid in fetters, while Hogni of the Stout Heart felled twenty to his own hand ere he, too, was borne down and set in a place apart from his brother.

Then came Atli, as they lay bound, and said to Gunnar:

"If thou wouldst have life and breath, tell me the hiding-place of the gold."

For long did Gunnar ponder, then made answer:

"Show me first the bleeding heart of Hogni, my brother."

Now Atli was loth to slay Hogni in this wise and he bade them kill a thrall, a swine-keeper. This they did and, cutting out his heart, bore it to the king; but Gunnar said:

"Trembling heart, that trembled in life as it does in death—no heart of Hogni art thou."

Then they fell, by Atli's command, upon Hogni and truly took his brave heart to show to Gunnar.

The king looked fixedly upon it and said:

"The mighty heart of Hogni is it. Steadfastly does it beat in death as in life."

Then he laughed out a great laugh of scorn:

"Now, O Atli, I alone am left who know the dwelling of the gold. Never more shall any own it save the Rhine maidens from whom it came."

And again he laughed so that Atli, enraged,

bade men cast him into the serpent pit, and this was done. But the serpents made not an end of him, for Gudrun came secretly and cast in to him a harp, whereon he smote with such skill that the evil worms were soothed and slept—save one only that crept close and smote him to the heart so that he died.

Then, with woe for the loss of her brethren, became the heart of Gudrun all evil, yet she spoke fair words to Atli and prayed that a mighty funeral feast should be made for her kinsfolk and his. And this was done, though gloomy she sat and proud, through it all.

But that night, when Atli had drunk much and lay asleep upon his bed, she came into his chamber and thrust him through with a sword so that he died—but not until he had heard all her words of bitterness.

"False words hast thou spoken to me; false deeds hast thou done to my kin. Full of strife and battle has been my life in thy halls; gone is the peace that I had with Sigurd, my beloved. Better had I remained his widow for my life long than become the wife of hated Atli."

"Hate if thou wilt," said the dying king, "but see thou that I have a goodly funeral pyre."

Thus did Gudrun the queen, for casting fire into the great hall, she made the whole burg of Atli his burial fire, so that the flames soared to high heaven to cry out the death of Atli, the great lord of the Huns.

Thus ended the race of the Niblungs, lords of

the Burgundian land, and thus, once more, came the Golden Hoard back to rest in the arms of the Rhine maidens, its warders.

And even unto this day, at whiles, may be heard their sweet songs of joy, as they float at sundown, watching over the treasure of Sigurd the Volsung.

VÖLUND THE SMITH

ONCE, long ago, there lived in Finmark an elf king who had three sons, Völund, Slagfidr, and Egil, to whom sport and the chase were the best things in life. Skilful were they in wrestling, swimming, and running on their snow-shoes or skates of bone, which they named ice-legs. But most of all did they love the chase, and to the end that they might enjoy it more, they built themselves a hut in Ulfdale, on the shore of the Wolf's Water, and here did they dwell for the most part.

Now Völund, being somewhat lame, could not always go with his brethren on the longer winter chase; therefore, at times would he stay in the hut and fashion wondrous jewels of gold and bright stones, as he had been taught by the mountain dwarfs of Finmark, who, for his father's sake, held him in great friendship. And his skill was lauded in all the lands where the Norsemen sailed, and even down to Miklagard[1] on the shores of the Middle Sea. Yet would Völund never work for gold, but only for love of beautiful fashionings and for friendship, so that his much-sought work was hard to come by.

Now, it fell one day in the soft spring time, when the larch tassels tossed their red and green in the whispering breeze, and Baldur's-Eye crept out,

[1] Constantinople.

sweet-blue, to meet the sun, that Völund came back from many days' wanderings among the bare black mountains. Glad at heart was he, for the berg-trolls had sent him word of a marvellous jewel of green and blue and purple and wondrous burning fire that lay hidden in crevices of dull brown rock, and after much searching he had found it. In his leathern pouch it lay, pebbles like unto naught but the rainbow bridge of Asgard that is guarded by Heimdal of the golden teeth; and Völund's mind was full of thought of how he should use the stones. As he passed through the forest, near to Wolf's Water, he heard the voices of his brothers returning from the hunt, and together they made their way towards the hut, talking as they went. But as the path got clearer and the light showed through the edge-most trees, the brethren stayed their steps and looked one at another, for there was sound of voices and laughter from the water-side, and, walking stealthily, they peered forth and beheld three maidens sitting on the golden sand in the morning sunlight. They had bathed, for their feet were bare and their hair fell round them unbound, and beside them lay three dresses of swans' feathers of dazzling white.

Then the brethren knew that these must be the Valkyrjar, Odin's choosers of the slain, and princesses, and they went forth to speak with them. The maidens sat spinning flax and looked up, smiling, as the king's sons drew near.

"A fair morrow to ye, hunters," said the first, whose hair was black as Odin's ravens, "and good sport. I am Hladgrun, daughter of King Hlödvir,

and she with brown locks is my sister Alvit; we are the foster-sisters of golden-haired Olrun, who is the daughter of King Kar, our father's friend. From All-Father got we leave to fly to Wolf's Water, for the fame of its golden sand and deep blue water has travelled far, and here would we bide, at least for a while."

Then the brethren bade them welcome, and made them couches of their finest skins, and the maidens abode there until it fell out that Egil married Olrun, and Slagfidr Hladgrun, and Völund chose Alvit of the soft brown hair.

Great was their weal during many years, for the warrior women followed the chase with their husbands, and when Völund abode at home, Alvit stayed with him and helped in the welding of rings, joying in the blending of the marvellous stones.

Now, when seven years were forebye, there came a shadow over the homes by Wolf's Water. The Valkyrjar grew pale and still; in the eighth year drew they the swan-feather dresses forth from the great chests where they were hidden, and preened them on the yellow sands in the sun.

To Egil and Slagfidr this became a jest.

"Wives, will ye fly away as ye came?" they asked; "and shall we need to seek ye in Asgard?"

Only to Völund was it earnest, as he worked and thought; and he said one day, looking deep into Alvit's eyes:

"Wife of mine, is there aught in thy mind that thou hast not told me?"

And she answered, sighing:

"Völund, ever is it the Valkyrjar's weird that they must go when Odin calls."

"And wilt thou return no more? Wilt thou forget?"

"Never shall I forget; yet of my return I may not speak, since the future is hidden from me. But, Völund, All-Father is merciful and kind, and of a surety we may hope."

So Völund went about his work and made no sign, nor said he aught.

One winter's day, in the ninth year, when he and his brethren returned from hunting there was no answer to their call; the huts were empty and the swan-feather garments gone.

Then told he all unto the others:

"With Valkyrja were we wed, therefore must we suffer; for to Odin do they first owe fealty, and who are we that we should contend against the gods?"

"Odin has many choosers of the slain," said Egil gloomily; "we each had but our chosen one. Surely this is scant justice?"

"Justice or not," cried Slagfidr, "I go to seek Hladgrun, even to the foot of Odin's seat."

"And I with you," said Egil.

"Such journeyings as thine are not for me, my brethren, since I should but hinder ye in your going. Therefore, here will I abide, to keep the home and welcome them should they return. Here is gold for your plenishing and weapons of the best, that I have wrought. Go forth in peace, and come not back alone."

So the two did on their snow-shoes, and clad

themselves in their warmest skin-coats, to set forth on their long travels, but Völund stood by the hut door to watch, as Egil turned towards the east and Slagfidr towards the south; and he watched until the crisp noise of their footfalls on the snow died away in the forest; then he turned to his lonely work and sighed.

So he sat, always by the open door, making precious rings of gold for Alvit, always for Alvit; and when fifty were finished he strung them upon a thread of grass, until they numbered seven hundred in all, and no two were alike.

Now it came to pass that Nithudr of Sweden, a wicked king, who worked but evil in the land, heard of the fame of the Smith's gold work, and sent unto him saying:

"Give me of thy work, rings and a necklace and a beaker, and for these shalt thou have much gold."

But Völund sent back word:

"Gold have I in plenty; and the work of my brain and hand is not for thee."

Then was the king angered; but his evil wife, who desired these things greatly, said:

"Speak him fair, O Nithudr, so may we yet come at them."

And Nithudr sent again, saying:

"Choice furs have I, such as are sought after vainly even by the kings of the south. From my hoard shalt thou choose all that thou wilt, so that thou give me but my wish."

"Furs have I in greater store than Nithudr,"

said Völund, " both black and grey, and white and sable. With these can he not tempt me. Leave me in peace."

When the messengers brought back this word, Nithudr was so wroth that all trembled, and he bade armed men go to Wolf's Water and take Völund and his treasure and bring them before him.

At midday came the men to the hut, and found all still and the door wide open, as Völund was wont to leave it lest Alvit should return. And the light shone on their mail coats as they dismounted by the hall-gable and entered, and, seeing the rows of shining rings hanging by the wall on their threads of twisted grass, they took one, then hid in the forest until the Smith should return.

Woe unto Völund! no bergtroll came, friendly-wise, to warn him of the foe so close; no Valkyrja wife called to him out of the fleecy white clouds to shun the home-hut, and at eve came he back, dreaming of Alvit.

As always, after an absence, he counted his rings, and fast did his heart beat when he made the tale but six hundred and ninety-nine. Once and again he went through them, and he said:

" It must even be that Alvit is here; for sport hath she taken the ring and hidden herself."

In haste did he light a fire of crackling fir-cones, for the night was chill, that the ruddy gleam from the open door might lure her home; and oft did he stand without to pierce the gloom; but all was dark and silent, and to his cry of " Alvit! " came no answer.

Then set he bear's flesh to roast—a portion for two—and high blazed his faggots of wind-dried fir-wood. Then he sat him on the rug to count once more the rings; and as he sat heavy sleep came upon him, and he fell back dreaming of Alvit.

And the men of Sweden came creeping forth, their shields shining in the cold moonlight, and fear was in their hearts, for some said that Völund knew the magic of the runes, and could weave them as he would; and they took him sleeping, set his legs in iron fetters, so that when he came to himself he was prisoner, and was carried bound to Nithudr.

The wicked king rejoiced greatly that a man so dowered should be prisoner to his hand, and bade the men set Völund before him. Weary and heart-sick, the Smith sat upon the ground before the king's seat, for, by reason of the heavy fetters and his lameness, and the long journey from Wolf's Dale, could he no more keep upright.

And Nithudr taunted him with bitter words.

"Thief! have I got thee at last?" he cried. "How long have I borne that thou shouldst come unawares, under seeming of the chase, and steal my gold!"

But Völund sat with bent head, and made no sign.

Then shouted Nithudr:

"Whence didst thou filch those untold treasures? The gold is gone from Gnita Heath back to the Rhine and the hills of Rhine are far away, O Lord of the Elves!"

Still Völund answered not.

Once and again the king mocked him, and at length he spoke:

"Who art thou," he said, "that darest to fetter a king's son!"

"When a king's son is but a common robber he meets but a robber's fate," said Nithudr.

"By help of my troll-friends is my gold found," said Völund, "and none of it is gained in thy land, O king; therefore let me go back to Wolf-Dale."

"Never shalt thou win back until thou hast given me my desire. A ring I have, since my thralls brought it to me, thy sword shall I take now, since it is the work of Völund the Smith, and none there is like unto it; but I still lack the necklace and beaker. Give me these and thou goest free."

But Völund answered sullenly:

"Kill me if thou wilt, but my work is for my friends, and thou art my bitter enemy."

Then knew not Nithudr what to do, and he was minded to let Völund go, for he feared the King of Finmark and the bergtrolls, who loved Völund.

But the wicked queen would not, for above all she desired a necklace of the rainbow stones of which the fame had gone abroad, and she said:

"It is well for thee, Nithudr, for thou hast the Smith's mighty sword, and to Bodvild our daughter hast thou given the ring—but what have I? It seemeth to me that he is a man of craft, as are all forest-dwellers, and so long as thou hast his sword will there be no peace with him in our steading. Lame him still further, so that he can

never flee away, and put him on the Island of the Salt Farm, then can he work all that thou wilt."

And this shameful thing was done as she had said, and Völund was set upon the Island alone, with gold of the Swedish king; and, because of his loneliness and misery, he wrought for Nithudr many wondrous things, yet over all murmured he runes that ill should befall all who owned these treasures. At times there came upon him mighty wrath and despair, so that he smote upon his anvil with such force that it crumbled as if it had been clay; then must he weld another anvil ere he could work again, and as he welded he sang:

"Alack! for the sword, my companion,
Alack! for the steel I forged and ground;
Now it has passed to an alien,
My faithful friend hangs at Nithudr's belt.
Lost to me is its brightness,
Nevermore will the runes on its blade
Whisper to me of their magic!
Alack! for the ring of my fashioning,
Alack! for the glory of Alvit;
To an earth-maid hath it been given,
My Valkyr is lost, is lost as my life,
For no end is there now to my sorrow!"

So each day did he dream more of vengeance, and each day became he more gloomy and sullen, until, after many weeks, there came this hope of revenge, although for long was it delayed.

Two young sons had Nithudr, brethren of Bodvild, the princess, who were like to their parents for greed and cunning and hatred of all things good. And it fell out one day that the boys, looking out over the sea, spoke together of the Island and the prisoner thereon.

"Bodvild hath said that she weeps for him and

his dreary fate. She hath begged our father to let her go and visit him," said the younger.

"Aye," said the elder, "but she is a fool. Our mother saith that he is evil and good for naught but to make us jewels and swords. Could we not go over and seize his treasure ere it come to our father and mother? So should we be rich for ourselves and not beholden to the king and queen. For our mother saith he is a constant danger, and when she hath gathered enough treasure from him she will send thralls to slay him."

"And Bodvild crieth shame upon her, and our mother, being angry that Bodvild will not give up the ring of Alvit, hath put her away in the inmost room of the house."

"That matters naught to us," said the elder; "gold must we have if we would be powerful, and here is gold for the taking, and only a lame man's life between."

Whereby it will be seen that evil parents have evil children, and Bodvild alone was mild and merciful.

Then the youths sought cunningly how they might get a boat to cross to the Island of the Salt Farm, yet must they be very wary since Nithudr and the queen doubted of every man—as is the way of the wicked—and ever kept strict watch on the outgoings of all.

But they knew not that Egil, having wandered through the world seeking the Valkyrjar, had returned and made his way by night to the Island, where Völund received him gladly, and hid him every day at the coming of Nithudr. And first he asked:

"Comest thou, O brother, with news of my wife?"

"With news, O Völund, but naught of good. Alvit and Hladgrun and Olrun saw I, but it availed nothing, for Odin is wroth because of their long absence and hath said that, an they will to return and dwell with us, they shall become but mortal women, to dree the weird of mortals, in sorrow and suffering and death. And they have taken counsel together, and their word is that this they could not thole. Life to them is it to ride the clouds and bear the chosen to Valhalla, rather than to suffer the love of us mortal men, and die with us. Slagfidr have I seen and told, and he would that I should sail a-viking with him, but I could not, for thou wert alone and lame, so that I must seek thee according to my promise. He would that we should together seek him in Miklagard where thy gold-work would be much sought."

But Völund shook his head and said:

"With Alvit went the light of my life. If I leave here—and fain would I do it—back to Wolf's Dale shall I go, there to abide always. But first must I have vengeance on Nithudr and his wife, in that, by their act, nevermore can I hunt in the forest, and seek for precious stones in their hidden homes."

To this did Egil agree, but never could they compass a plan for the undoing of Nithudr. And Egil, for employment and seeing that nevermore might his brother win from the Island unless by flying, bestirred himself to gather swans' feathers wherewith he might weave a dress for Völund,

like unto those of the Valkyrjar. And the white swans, gathering round at eventide, brought him more feathers, and sang their sweet strange songs to hearten him at his work; and so two winters went by and the Smith was of good heart, for the king knew naught of Egil's presence, since by day he hid in a sand cave on the far side of the Island.

At the end of this time it befell that Bodvild, who dreamed ever of the lonely worker of the Salt Farm, broke the precious ring of Alvit, and, since none could mend it, and she dared not tell her father, she took four thralls and her two maidens at early dawn, while her parents slept, and rowed over to Völund.

And when Völund beheld the fair maiden drawing nigh alone, he went forth to meet her and give her greeting. "I am Bodvild, the king's daughter. O Smith, I come to beg that thou wilt mend my ring," and she showed the ring of Alvit, lying in two pieces in her hand, and Völund, thinking of his false Valkyrja, looked so long and hard upon the princess that her face flushed, and she dropped her bright head and waited. Then Völund spoke:

"Thy ring will I mend, O Bodvild, but only at the price of thy love."

"My love is thine," she answered simply, "and has been since the long-past day when, lame and despairing, thou wert brought before my father."

"And if I wed thee, will he be wroth?" asked Völund.

"So wroth that I doubt not he will kill me, because of my mother's hate of thee. But what matters it if I have thy love?"

"Spoken like a king's daughter," said Völund. "Call in thy maidens and thralls that we may plight our troth."

And he called unto Egil, his brother, that he also should witness; and there, before the seven in the dark smithy, were Völund and Bodvild wed. And he set upon her neck a great golden collar, set with glittering stones. "For," said he, "since rings were made for Alvit, thou shalt have none from me, but arm-rings and necklaces, and girdles and crowns—gold for thy golden hair—as many as thou wilt."

Then Bodvild kissed him on the mouth and went over the sea to her home, but oft at early morn thereafter she sped across to spend what time she might with her husband.

And now came it that Völund often laughed and sang runes over his work, so that Egil said:

"Hast thou a secret joy, O brother, that thou sittest no more in gloom and silence?"

"A joy have I," said Völund, "in that my vengeance draweth nigh. Is thy swan coat finished?"

"In three days will it be ready; but, brother, thou wouldst not hurt Bodvild?"

"Nay, she hath been the first part of my revenge, in that Nithudr would rather that she lay dead than that she should wed me. She is a gentle maid, and will dwell with me at Wolf's Water. Soon will come the viper's spawn, his sons, and my work will be done."

And so it fell out, for, by constant watching, the youths in the end made their way to the smithy

unseen by the king or the queen, and strode in upon Völund as he worked. His great chests stood open, and their greedy eyes beheld the jewels that lay heaped therein.

"Give us of your rings and gold," they cried roughly.

"Come hither alone to-morrow," said Völund, "and see to it that ye tell none of your errand—neither maidens nor hall-men. Then shall ye take and carry off all that ye will."

And he hammered the more grimly on his anvil.

Then the lads departed, saying low:

"And what shall hinder us from killing that lame man and taking all?"

While each in his heart thought:

"Then will I slay my brother so that the hoard may be mine."

Hustling each other in their haste and greed, they came next day ere the dawn, and running to the chest, struggled which should seize the most. But as they knelt and fought, their heads being within the chest, behold the iron lid came down upon them and cut off their heads.

Then was Völund's revenge fulfilled. He took the skulls of the king's sons and set them in silver as a gift for Nithudr; their eyes and teeth by his runes he changed to stone and set as jewels for the queen.

So came the youths home no more, and therefore had the wicked queen no rest: ever did she wander by the shore and in the birch-woods seeking her sons, who came not; while the king sat in his high-

seat waiting gloomily, and Bodvild kept her chamber, and so the days went by.

And one day his wife came to Nithudr and said:

"Wakest thou, Nithudr, King of Sweden?"

"I wake ever," he answered, "for joy hath fled and no more can I sleep by reason of the evil counsel that thou gavest me; for I fear me that by this it is that our young sons have come to their death. I would fain speak with Völund, for it is borne in upon me, that by reason of my cruelty to him has this sorrow come upon me."

"Völund is here," came a voice from above, and going to the door of the high-hall the king saw Völund, clad in the swan-feather dress and holding in his arms Bodvild the princess, high above him in the clouds.

Then the king called aloud:

"Tell me, thou master of runes, hast thou seen my sons?"

"Swear unto me first, by point of sword, by Sleipnir's mane, by ship of Odin, and by Urda's fountain, that thou wilt never harm my wife, no matter what her name, nor do hurt to child of mine."

And Nithudr swore by all these things.

"Then go to the smithy, the prison where thou didst set me, and under the dust in the pit beneath the bellows wilt thou find thy sons. From their skulls hast thou drunk thy mead, round thy queen's neck hang their teeth and eyes."

Then the queen shrieked aloud and tore from her neck the fated stones, and the king cried:

"Would that I could take vengeance on thee,

O Völund, and on my daughter, but for my oath's sake I cannot. Neither could aught, save Odin's ravens, tear thee down, nor could the most cunning archer reach thee in thy clouds. Go with Bodvild, and trouble me no more."

So Völund, laughing and bearing Bodvild, soared away across mountains and forests and tarns to his loved Wolf-Dale; and there they dwelt until their deaths, and they had a son named Vidrek, who became a great hero in after times in the southern lands. And ofttimes came Slagfidr and Egil to talk with them, and show them of their booty; and through their tales was it that the little Vidrek was minded to go forth in search of adventures.

His story is of a later time and cometh not into this place, but the fame of Völund the Smith went forth through all lands so that after many hundred years in far-off countries, even England, did folk still call upon him, when in straits, to do their smith-work.

RAGNAR LODBROG

CHAPTER I

THORA

In Viking days there dwelt in Gothland a mighty jarl who was called Hraud. No sons had he and no child save one daughter, who was so beautiful that seldom was she called by her given name, Thora, but was known to all as Borgar-hjort, which means Hind of the Castle. By her noble birth and lovely face was she fitted to be chosen by Odin for one of his Valkyrja; but she would not, for her nature was gentle, and she feared and hated strife.

Then, since her father must be oft away on Viking raids, and since he was much disquieted at leaving her alone, did Jarl Hraud give to his daughter a magic box wherein lay much gold, and upon the heap of gold a small dragon.

And Thora, opening the box, cried out in wonder at the strange worm:

"Why should I keep this laidly thing, my father? Surely it were better away in its haunts on the far inland wastes?"

"Nay, daughter mine, this is a witch-worm, and I give it thee as a guard. Since I must leave thee for so long, it is meet that thou shouldst have a better ward than thy faithful servants. This dragon will grow to be the fear of all the lands

around us, so shalt thou dwell in peace until I come again."

So Jarl Hraud hied him forth in the long days of spring, and Thora dwelt alone in her castle. But daily grew the gold, and with it grew the dragon, until he became too great to bide longer within the castle; and Thora took counsel with her nurse and the overman of the jarl what she should do, and the overman said:

"Since the worm is here to guard thee, Lady Thora, he must not be driven forth, else will thy father be angered. Were it not well that he should bide without the castle, and so fright all that come with ill-intent?"

And the nurse said:

"Even so might it be, O nurseling; I will go speak to the worm."

Then she spake fair words to the dragon, and he saw the reason of her speech, and dragged his slow length without the castle, until his coils encompassed it on all sides. And so he lay that none could go out or in without his knowledge and sufferance, and Thora was well guarded. But as time went on the worm grew evil and would let none pass save those who brought in food; each day became he greater in strength and venom, and when the short days came, and the jarl returned to winter quarters, he was kept without his house, while Thora lay within, and might no more come forth to greet her father.

Then was Hraud in great straits, and he went unto other jarls, his friends, to take counsel what should be done. And all said one thing:

"Kill the dragon."

"Easy is it to say," quoth Hraud, "but who shall do this deed? Too old am I to fight this monster; moreover, a witch-worm is he, and more to be feared than all worms save Fafnir, guard of Andvari's hoard."

"This do," said an aged jarl. "Cause it to be told throughout the north that whoso kills the dragon shall wed Borgar-hjort. So shall she have a worthy mate and be the fairest, best, and richest of the maidens of the land."

And all liked this counsel well, so Jarl Hraud sent abroad the word, and there was much talk and stir in many lands.

But most was there stir in the heart of Prince Ragnar, son of King Sigurd of Sweden. Oft had he heard of Thora, and his mind was filled with the thought of the fair maiden, dragon-warded. And he asked much of the messengers concerning the worm and his ways, and he caused to be made five cloaks of coarse wool and five pairs of breeches, and these he had boiled in pitch so that they were hard and like unto garments of thick leather, but some men say that they were but wild goat-skin. Be that as it may, from these breeches got he his name of Lodbrog, which means leathern breeches.

So Ragnar went up against the dragon, and after a mighty fight, wherein the great beast sought to poison him by biting through his clothes but was unable by reason of their thickness, he struck his spear so forcefully through the back of the dragon that he was unable to draw it forth, and the shaft

broke off and remained in his hand. And the dragon cried aloud in its death-pain:

"Ah, that I, the terror of the nations, the warder of Borgar-hjort, should be done to death by the guile of a stripling. Tell me, youth, how many winters hast thou?"

"But fifteen," answered Ragnar straightly.

"Thora! Thora!" cried the worm, "this fifteen years' boy hath ventured much for thee. Take him, love him well, for he will cherish thee greatly."

So died the dragon, and this is the true story, though some say that the dragon was but a chief named Orm, set over Thora's castle by Hraud, and who, on his return, would by no means give her up. But this is false, since no word is there at this time of a Jarl Orm in Gothland.

Then went Prince Ragnar unto the jarl, where he sat awaiting the issue of the fight.

"The worm is dead, O jarl," said Ragnar, "and in proof that I have slain him here is my spear shaft. The point is set in the worm's back where ye may find it. Now claim I thy Borgar-hjort for my bride, to love her ever for her goodness and her grace and her beauty."

"And blithely shalt thou have her," quoth the jarl, and led the youth into the castle, where Thora straightway loved him and plighted him her troth.

So they loved and lived in happiness many years, and two sons were theirs, Ragnvald and

Agnar, who went a-viking with their father, until it fell out that gentle Thora died and Ragnar thereafter could no longer suffer his home. Putting his realm into the hands of first one, then the other of his sons and of his wise counsellors, he, with the other son—each in turn—sailed a-raiding. It is told of him that he sailed east, even up the Vistula, and southward by the great rivers of Gardar, unto Miklagard,[1] to visit the Norse Varanger guard of the ruler there; on the Danube slew he eight chiefs and gathered much spoil; and it is written that he returned by the Middle Sea. In all lands was he known and feared, yet could he not always conquer, for, as time went on, first Ragnvald and then Agnar fell in battle, and Ragnar was indeed alone.

Then went he no more to Sweden, but sailed, ever plundering. Throughout Iceland, the Isles of the West, and the Fleming's land was he known and dreaded in the summer-time, and the winters passed he in the warm havens of the Middle Sea. But his men grew hungry to see their homes, and would fain return northward.

"Seven years have we followed thee unmurmuring, O Ragnar," they said, "now is it our turn that we should sight the shores of Sweden."

And Ragnar knew that they were right, and he said:

"Black were my locks when I came forth with ye all, grey are they now with my unending sorrow. But it is not meet that all should suffer for one, therefore, hoist thee the great sail and let us return

[1] Byzantium.

to our own land. It may be that so I may find comfort."

Then was great joy through all the long-ships, and their beaks were speedily turned northwards so that, with fair winds, they swiftly sped towards their home. But ere they came into Sweden much befell, whereof the tale must be told.

CHAPTER II

ASLAUG

Now it is told that Heimar of Hlymdal, brother to Brynhild the Valkyrja, had, at fostering, a beautiful woman-child, named Aslaug. None knew her race, but most thought her to be the child of Sigurd and Brynhild. Be that as it may, at the death of Sigurd, fearing the vengeance of Gudrun for her slain son, Sigmund (whom Brynhild had killed and laid upon the bale of Sigurd), Heimar caused to be made a great harp, with a golden stem, wherein he hid the maid, with rich treasure of gold and jewels, and onions for her to eat, since these give strength and sustain life long. And he dight upon him the clothes of a wandering skald, and, the golden harp upon his back, fared forth to seek safety for Aslaug. Through many lands went he, letting the child out from her hiding-place to run when they were hidden from the eyes of men, and playing on the harp to comfort her when she sorrowed for her home.

Now, it befell that late at eventide on a dreary day of rain, Heimar came to a lonely place in Norway, that was called Spangarhede, but now is it called Krakebeck, or Guldvig, because of the king's daughter, who lay hidden in the golden harp.

There dwelt an old man Aki, with his wife Grima, and Heimar, being wet and weary, smote hard upon their door. Now Aki was absent, and

Grima was long in opening, for she would first look well through a crack in her wall to know who this stranger might be.

And seeing this man of kingly height and noble face, with the golden harp upon his back, she unlatched the door, and asked:

"What wouldst thou in our poor house at night?"

"Shelter would I have from the rain, good mother," answered Heimar, "mayhap, fire to dry my clothes, and food, for I am wet and weary."

"Shelter canst thou have," said Grima, "but neither fire nor food. Few peats have I, and what I have must wait for my man, who journeys far to-day."

"Nay, but if I pay thee well canst thou not give me aught?" asked the king.

"Take then," said Grima, "there are peats; kindle fire thyself."

And as Heimar busied himself with the fire, the wicked hag sat glowering, and she noticed that as he stretched forth his arms to the blaze, there glinted under the fringe of his harper's frock, the shine of a great gold arm-ring, and she thought:

"None know that this stranger is here. Good were it if we could take his gold, for weary am I of being poor."

Then came a knocking at the door, and old Aki entered, bearing peats upon his back. Him did Heimar greet in friendliness, and together they ate of the rye-bread that Grima set before them, and talked as they ate:

"Always poor have I been," said Aki, "and

oft an hungered. Fain would I give over work and take mine ease."

"That perchance may come to thee soon, friend," said Heimar cheerily, as he laid him on the settle to sleep, and he thought to himself:

"Perchance when the old pair are quiet in the byre, may I draw forth Aslaug to sleep here by me."

But Aki and Grima slept not, and so long did they keep moving that Heimar fell into that sleep that was his last.

For Aki, set on by the wicked Grima, stole in and killed him as he lay. So died the noble Heimar for the sake of his sister's child.

Then through the mirk dark night they bore the body forth, and buried it deep in the sand-dunes, and set stones a-top, and, as the late dawn came, crept back to the lonely hut.

There Grima laid hold upon the harp, and the strings wailed mournfully, so that she pushed it from her in haste. In falling the pillar burst open, and there lay Aslaug, the maiden, smiling with the wondrous steel-blue eyes of Sigurd the Volsung. In terror the two fell upon the ground, and Grima, shuddering, cried:

"Kill her! kill her! O Aki! lest through her words our doom come upon us."

"No more killing will I do," said Aki gloomily. "Our doom is here and our own guilt will never die, since I slew a man by stealth and not in fair fight."

But Aslaug spoke never a word. She busied herself in gathering up the gold and jewels that

were scattered over the ground, and in folding the golden stuffs and laying them again within the harp pillar.

" Tell me thy name," said Grima at last.

But Aslaug shook her golden head and smiled once more; and still she said no word, so that the two believed her dumb.

Now it had fallen out in this wise:

When Heimar went forth from Hlymdal he feared greatly lest the child should babble and tell her name and parentage, therefore had he straightly bidden her to speak to none but himself, and that only when they were alone.

Now Heimar being gone, Aslaug spoke no more to any living being.

Then, since Aki would by no means kill the child, Grima took her and darkened her white skin with juices of the bracken, and hid her golden hair under a rude cap of wadmal, so that none might know in her the princess in silken garments, and sent her forth to tend swine in the forest and goats upon the seashore. These they had bought with a part of Heimar's treasure; the rest they hid in safe places, and the golden harp they destroyed. No longer Aslaug was she called, but Krake.

Dreary was her life and strange were the thoughts that came to her as she sat alone among the pine trees, whispering all the words she knew lest she should forget the speech of men. So many and far-reaching were these thoughts that she grew wiser than others of her kind, seeing that she—like Sigurd, her father—knew even the speech of birds.

At whiles, when storms raged on the sea, she

would sit upon the sand-dunes and sing. And so strong and beautiful was her voice that the sailors far out from shore said:

"Hearken, how the Valkyrja ride the storm."

One strange thing did she, nor ever knew the reason for the doing, since the birds told her not.

Upon the shore, among the dunes, was a lonely barrow with a few stones thereon, and Aslaug said to herself:

"Perchance a dead man lies here; a viking who should have been sent to sea in his burning ship. Be that as it may, a mighty barrow shall he have. Some man of power and might must it be, since by night the flame flickers ever thereon."[1]

And daily went she to the shore, bearing ten stones that she set upon the barrow.

And the old people, watching her, trembled and said one to the other:

"She knows that the harper lies therein."

But Aslaug never knew; and, as years went by, the barrow grew until it overtopped the sand-dunes. So went the time until fifteen winters had passed over her.

[1] It was a belief that flames hovered at night over the graves of the mighty dead.

CHAPTER III

RAGNAR AND ASLAUG

Now it fell one day that Ragnar, in his sailing, came nigh to Spangarhede[1] and, seeing there a sandy fjord with pine trees and a spring of fresh water, he sent men ashore to get the water and to bake bread. Then made they an oven of heated stones, and, having drawn forth the fire and set the dough in the oven to bake, they went into the forest. And as they went there came to them the sound of singing; so, treading warily, they followed the sound and reached at last a sunlit pool, where sat Aslaug. As she sang she combed her long hair, shaken loose from the wadmal cap; and, washed clean from stains, her skin shone white as silver in the sun.

Then came they forward and greeted her. And then, for the first time since Heimar went, Aslaug spoke with men.

"Who are ye?" she asked, in no wise afeared. "Whence come ye, and of what people?"

"We are the men of Ragnar of Sweden, and we go a-viking," they answered.

Then bade she them sit near to her while she questioned them of the far lands they had seen; merry was she withal, so that mighty was the sound of laughter in the forest; and it was not until

[1] A point of land in Norway is still called Krakebeck.

towards eventide that they bethought them of their bread.

So they bade farewell to Aslaug and betook them back to their oven, and behold! the bread was burnt black.

Then looked they upon one another, and one said:

"This comes of woman's wiles. Ever will there be trouble where woman is."

And another laughed and said:

"Herein is no blame to the woman, but to the foolish men who had no sense to remember duty when a woman spoke. Still, naught can we do now but bear back burnt bread to the ship."

So they shouldered the bread and bore it seawards to where Ragnar sat on the deck, looking at the sunset.

"Where is the bread?" quoth the forecastle man, "and why bear ye stones upon your shoulders?"

And shamefast they cast down the loaves and said:

"These be bread."

Then did the forecastle man rate them sorely, so that Ragnar came up to see what was to do.

"No man could think on bread with that maiden by," the men repeated; and so much did they tell of her wondrous fairness and wit, that Ragnar said:

"At morn shall ye go and fetch me this maid; and that I may know whether she hath such wit as ye say, bid her come unto me not alone nor yet in company; not clad nor yet unclothed; not fasting yet having eaten naught."

And the men went and, finding Aslaug waiting by the pool, gave the message of the king.

But Aslaug laughed and shook her head:

"How know I thy king's mind?" she asked, "mayhap he might take me and carry me overseas, an I would not. Go ye back and say that I trust no man, and go no whither unless he pledge me by the eye of Odin that I come back scatheless as I go."

Then took they this word unto Ragnar, and first he was wroth that a herd-maiden should doubt him; but in the end, since she would not come without, he sent his gold arm-ring as a pledge for his word.

Then, at red dawn, came a strange sight down the fjord to the long-ship.

Krake, since by this name did the men know her, had bathed in the pool until her skin was white as the winter moonlight; no clothes had she, but a red-brown fishing net was wrapped many times around her and over it, to her knees, showered her golden hair. Naught had she eaten, but she had set her white teeth in an onion, so fasted not. No person came with her, save her dog, so she was not alone.

And when Ragnar beheld her he said:

"Surely no woman had ever wit like unto this maiden's, even as none had ever beauty like unto hers."

And the more he talked with her, the more did he marvel, so that ere evening came he bade her sail away with him and be his wife. But she would not.

"Herd-maidens wed not with kings," she said.

"But here is Thora's robe," he answered; then he sang:

"Take thou, O sweet, this silver-wrought kirtle,
Borgar-hjort owned it, and she would rejoice,
Fain would she, living, have called thee sister,
Fain would she, dying, have known me in peace.
Faithful was she till the Nornir divided us,
Faithful wilt thou be until my life's end."

And Aslaug sang back:

"Ne'er may I take the silver-wrought kirtle,
Owned long years since by Thora thy queen;
Never can eagles mate with the ravens,
Krake my name is, and coal-black I go,
Ever in wadmal, herding the cattle,
Hard must I ever live, far from all wealth."

Since he might not prevail on her at that time to go with him, the king bound her by an oath that, when he had been ten months a-viking, if his mind should still be set upon her, he might return and she would wed him. Loth was the king to let her go, but, being bound by his word, he led her back to the forest and sailed away from Norway.

"In truth," quoth he, "never have I had so bright a day since Thora died."

CHAPTER IV

RAGNAR'S SONS

Now, when the ten months were overpast, came Ragnar, full of thoughts of Krake, to hold her to her word.

And as the long-ship's sails, striped blue and white, fell upon the deck, and the ship brought-to in the fjord, there on the bank stood Aslaug, fair and white and golden, in the sunlight to welcome them. So she sailed away to Ragnar's land, and there he wedded her, and they lived happily, so that he went no more a-viking.

Four sons had they and two daughters. Of the sons, Ivar, the first born, was strangely made, in that there was no bone in his legs, but only gristle; so that he must ever be borne to war upon a litter of spears. Yet was he wise above all other folks, save only his mother. Next came Björn, and he was a baresark; then Hvirtserk, and young Ragnvald,[1] so called after Ragnar's other son, who had been killed long years before.

Wiser each day grew Aslaug in runes and magic, and it was in her mind that some day might Ragnar, though now aged, wish again to go a-viking, since this had ever been his life's work. Therefore called she her daughters and said:

"Let us make for Ragnar a shirt, wherein I will weave magic and runes so that, old though he be, no steel nor venom shall ever hurt him."

[1] Some versions call him Sigurd.

And she took silk from the South lands, the fibres of herbs that she alone knew, and some of her hair and that of her daughters, and she taught them magic songs, so, as they wove, they sang, and the spells were worked back and forth through the shirt until they filled it throughout. Then did Aslaug lay it by until it should be needed.

Then did the daughters make a banner also, and sang runes over it; and upon it was worked a raven with great wings that should flap when it was carried to battle.

Now there came one day the King of Upsala to visit Ragnar, and in his mind was a certain plan. This was that Ragnar should put away Aslaug, and take to wife Osten, the king's child; for greatly did he desire a bond between himself and Ragnar, who was first and richest of the Northern kings. And it chanced that they sat together in the court-yard, beneath Aslaug's window, so that she heard all that passed, and how that the king taunted her as a peasant's daughter and no fit mate for the great Ragnar.

But Ragnar put him off with fair words, since he might not flout a guest, and said him neither yea nor nay.

Then was the heart of Aslaug bitter within her, and there came upon her the spirit of Brynhild, her mother, and she spoke no more to the King of Upsala, nor went into the high-hall until he had gone home.

And Ragnar asked:

"Fair wife, what is amiss?"

"Canst thou call her 'fair wife,' who is no jarl's daughter, but a low-born peasant from the forest?"

Then the king knew that she had heard somewhat and told her all; and also how he had put the king's word aside unanswered.

And Aslaug, being blithe that he had hidden nothing from her, told him her story.

"No Krake am I," said she, "but the child of Sigurd, Fafnir's Bane, and Brynhild. The last of the Volsung race am I also, since Swanhild is dead."

And she told all the story of Heimar, as it is here set forth, save that she knew not, even by her runes, how Heimar died, and she ended:

"For myself hast thou loved me, and for thy love ought I to have told thee this before. But I treasured the thought that thy love was given to Krake, and not to the last daughter of the Volsungs. Forgive!"

And Ragnar kissed her joyfully; and word of Aslaug's birth was spread abroad in the land, so that no more did the King of Upsala put forth his daughter, since none could vie with the Volsung race.

Now, during these years had the sons of Ragnar gone a-viking, and many were the deeds they did, and worthy of their sire.

It had befallen, during the life-time of Thora, that Ragnar had made prisoner the King of Northumbria, and forced him to pay scatt[1] yearly unto him. But when this king died, Ella, his son, being young and foolhardy, refused the scatt to Ragnar's jarl; and bade him tell the King of Sweden to come and gather it at point of sword.

[1] Tribute.

"Bring forth thy magic coat, good wife," cried Ragnar; "once more must I go fight."

And clad in the silken shirt, with the raven-banner floating overhead, did Ragnar Lodbrog sail westward to return no more.

For there were witch-wives in Northumbria, and they, hearing of his cunning, raised a great storm, so that the long-ships were broken in pieces on the rocks, and the king and his men came to shore with naught but their arms.

Then came up Ella with his soldiers against them, and bade them stand and fight; so did they, until all were killed, save the old king who stood alone unhurt amid the ring of dead.

Then said Ella:

"Who art thou that comest with warships against me?"

But Ragnar answered not.

"Nameless canst thou not be," said Ella. "Tell me thy name lest ill befall thee."

Still Ragnar spoke not.

"The worse shall it be for thee if thou wilt not speak," said Ella; but uneasy was he, for he knew that if this were Ragnar, great would be the vengeance of Ragnar's sons, should he be killed.

Yet, since days passed and still Ragnar made no sign, Ella gave word that he should be cast into the orme-gaard, which was a pit full of venomous snakes. "The serpents," said he, "will make him speak. Then, if he be Ragnar, draw him quickly forth."

But the snakes shrank back from the king's

magic shirt, and would in no wise touch him, and, seeing this, the watchers took from him his shirt so that he was bitten on all sides.

Then did Ragnar sing that Death Song that has made his name famous throughout the ages. He told of his battles—fifty-one; of his dead sons; of the kings he had conquered; and he ended:

"We fought with swords!
O, that Aslaug's sons
Knew of their parent's death!
Valiant is the heart they got
From their mother, daughter of Sigurd.

We fought with swords!
Now fades the world away.
Now comes the call of the gods;
To one who welcomed it
Death is a glorious time.

We fought with swords!
With joy I make an end.
Fast ride the Valkyrja
Bearing me to Odin,
To the halls of Valhalla.

With joy I make an end,
Soon shall I drink with gods.
Past are the hours of my life,
Laughing do I die."

So died Ragnar Lodbrog, greatest of vikings, first even before Rolf the Ganger; and mighty was the vengeance for his death.

Now, when Ella heard of the Death Song he feared greatly, and he sent messengers to the sons of Ragnar, charging them straightly that they should mark well what each son said and did when the news was told, and bring the word to him with all speed.

CHAPTER V

THE VENGEANCE OF IVAR

Now it chanced that the four brethren were together in the castle hall when there came a warder, running, to say that the messengers of Ella were without.

Then Björn, who stood fixing a spearhead to its handle, laughed:

"It is the scatt," cried he, "Ella hath heard of the setting forth of our father and is afeared."

"Not that, but something worse," said Ivar gravely, from his couch.

Hvirtserk and Sigurd, or Ragnvald his brother, were playing draughts.

And when the messengers were brought in, Ivar spoke them fair and asked their news; and the men told it bravely and without fear, and by no word did the brethren stay them. But when they told of the Death Song and the vengeance that the sons should take, Ivar became by turns pale and red, and his lips were blue; Björn gripped so hard his spear-shaft that his finger-marks were in the wood as long as it lasted; Hvirtserk pressed the draught-piece he held so tightly that blood spirted from his finger-ends; and Sigurd, who had taken up a knife to carve a stick, cut his finger to the bone and knew it not. And for a long space did no one speak when the tale was told.

Then, with an evil laugh, said Hvirtserk:

"Brethren, best were it to kill these men that Ella may know our will."

"Nay," said Ivar, "these men have borne themselves well in a perilous errand, and scatheless shall they return, the more so that I bid them carry this word:

"King of Northumbria, the death words of Ragnar sink deep into the heart of Ragnar's sons, but they bide their time."

So went the men forth with all honour, and carried the message unto Ella. And the king was troubled when he heard it, and said:

"From all Ragnar's sons fear I naught, save only from the still Ivar."

And he made haste to prepare his fighting men, and banded himself with the Kings of England, that he might withstand the onslaught of Lodbrog's sons.

The brethren also made ready ships to go over against Ella, although against the will of Ivar.

"Let be for awhile," said he, "until we know the strength of Ella," and he sent forth messengers to bring word of the doings in Northumbria.

But Aslaug, their mother, brooding fiercely over the death of Ragnar, gave them no peace. Ever sang she the Death Song in their ears as she span, and never passed a day that she did not taunt them, in that their father's death was unavenged.

Then saw Ivar that his brethren were set to go forth, therefore did he give but one warning more:

"Ye know naught of the power of the king," he said, "stay your hand until we gather more news

of him, for, I hear, that with him are the Kings of Mercia and Wessex, and, if this be so, we shall but suffer defeat for naught. Prepare well, ere ye go."

"Doth this mean that thou goest not with us?" asked Björn hotly.

"Nay, brother, Ragnar's sons have ever one cause. My men and treasure are yours, and with you I will sail, but I take no part in the fight since I know that ye will fail."

"That is fair speech, brother," said Björn, "with thee there will all go well."

"All will go ill, I tell thee, Björn; yet, if I be there, I may yet remedy it somewhat."

So they set forth in many ships, but as they landed, there came up Ella with a mighty host, and routed them, so that they must go back to their ships, yet not so sorely that they need feel aught but shame at being beaten by the English.

Now Ivar went not back but stayed on land, and sent two jarls unto Ella with this word:

"Were-gild must we have for our father's death, and since I cannot go a-viking with my brethren, I will that thou give me land on this thy shore, that I may dwell in peace."

"That were a fool's trick," quoth Ella, "to set Ragnar's son in the midst of my kingdom."

"Nay," said Ivar, "carry my word to Ella, that never will I bear arms against him, and with the word of Ivar Ragnarsson must he be content."

"And what will Ivar Ragnarsson and his brethren take for were-gild?" asked Ella; "since with Ivar's word, in sooth, I am content."

"Even as much land as he can enclose within an oxhide," the jarls replied.

Then Ella laughed, well-pleased, for he thought:

"This Ivar, of whom we hear great things, is a fool, and can in nowise harm me."

And he granted the were-gild.

But when Björn and his brethren heard of Ivar's doings they were sore angered, and went to Ivar to reproach him. But Ivar would say naught in his own defence.

"Leave me to my own way," he said, "is not our father as much to me as to you? Take from my store at home, each your share of the were-gild and send to me the rest, and"—here he looked narrowly upon each brother in turn—"*when ye get the crossed twig, banded with red, come ye, and your following, with all speed.*"

Then the brethren bade him farewell, knowing some crafty plan must be in Ivar's mind; and sailed away until he should have need of them.

But Ivar bid his men take an oxhide, the largest they could find, and steep it well until it grew lithe; then did he set them to cut it into fine strips, and sew these strips end to end, so that their length was very great. When this was done he sent unto Ella, saying:

"Ivar Ragnarsson desires that thou shouldst be present at the measuring of his land."

So the king came, and greatly was he pleased with the well-favoured face and courteous speech of Ivar, for he had a silvern tongue. And they went forth until they came to a great plain with a

fair hill set in the midst; and there Ivar bade them set down his litter.

"This hill would I fain have, O king!"

"Have it and welcome," laughed the king; "as much as thy oxhide will enclose."

Then the thralls brought forth the hide, and the king grew grave when he knew how Ivar had bested him. Yet he made no sign when the whole fair hill, and much land therewith, was compassed round about, for he said to himself:

"Even this is poor pay for the death of such a man as Ragnar Lodbrog."

So Ivar built him a stronghold on the hilltop, which was afterwards called Lincoln, and by reason of his wisdom and justice, there came many to dwell under its shelter, even his countrymen from the Norselands; and his fame as a man of peace went abroad throughout all England. Yet knew no man that Ivar, by his craft, had set the other kings, who were banded with Ella, at odds with him, so that in time the King of Northumbria could depend on none to take his side, save only his own people.

Then came a day when Ivar called the trustiest of his men to him and said:

"Take this, hand it to my brother, Björn, and say unto him, 'Ivar greets thee and his brethren.'"

"Naught but this?" said the man, in wonder, for Ivar had given him but a small stick marked with red.

"Naught but that," he answered, and the man went forth.

Then was great stir in the seaboard of Sweden and Norway, for the brethren had spent these years in making ready, since they trusted Ivar and they never forgot. And word of it came to Ella and troubled him greatly, so that he sent to Ivar, saying:

"An oath didst thou swear unto me, never to bear arms against me. What is this that I hear of thy brethren and their fighting men? If they come up against me, since thou hast thy part in my kingdom, thou must fight on my side."

"Against thee have I sworn not to fight, but against the children of Ragnar and Aslaug, my brethren, neither will I lift an hand."

Then the sons of Ragnar sailed ahead of their ships and came in secret to Ivar. And he told them of the trouble he had made between the kings; of the number of Ella's men; and of where they could best meet him for the furthering of their own ends.

So when their men were come ashore there was a sore fight that lasted throughout the day, and always, when the need was greatest, was Ivar found, borne in his litter, among the Norsemen; yet he held no weapon in his hand, naught but a small white staff.

And at eventide the men of Northumbria were all dead, or fled away, and only Ella remained, a prisoner in the hands of Ragnar's sons.

Then, remembering their father's cruel end, they took him forth next day and slew him, nor did Ivar say a word to stay their hands.

And this should not have been, and is a shame

unto Ivar's name, since he had asked and had been granted were-gild for his father's life.

Yet, in that his deeds were good, and his rule merciful and just, soon did folks forget the death of Ella, and Ivar lived to a great old age within his lands; nor did he ever return to his own country. But his brethren went a-viking, gathering thereby wealth, that Aslaug and their wives warded for them in Sweden, until all perished; but still were left their children to keep alive the name of Ragnar Lodbrog through all days to come.

NOTE ON THE DEATH OF SIGURD

Of the slaying of Sigurd there are several variants. That given in the text is the most beautiful, and has been used by Wagner, but the acknowledged first version is here given.

Now Brynhild, her heart turned to bitterness by the saying of Gudrun, sat her down in her bower and would speak to none, by reason of her hatred and despair.

To her came Gunnar, bringing comfort, but she looked gloomily upon him and said:

"Now shalt thou lose both me and my wealth, for home will I wend in sorrow, unless thou slay me Sigurd and his son—the son of Gudrun."

"That can I not do," said Gunnar, "since brotherhood have I sworn with him."

"Then go!" cried Brynhild. "Thou shalt see my face no more."

Thus was the king torn two ways, and in the end he thought:

"What to me are Sigurd and my oath when weighed against the love of Brynhild. Let him go."

And he called into council his brother, Hogni the Wise, but got no comfort thereby.

"Ill would it be," said he, "to break our oaths, for never should we find a kinsman like to Sigurd. I see well that Brynhild it is who hath stirred thee to this shame and no part will I take therein."

But Gunnar would not hearken, and said:

"See thou, Guttorm is young and has sworn no oath. Moreover, wise would he be to do the will of Brynhild."

"Ill rede, ill rede!" said Hogni, "a terrible reward shall we reap for the slaying of Sigurd."

"Sigurd must die or I must die," said Gunnar, and he sought out the youthful Guttorm, promising him much wealth and power and great store of land therewith.

Then by magic food—the flesh of wolf and juice of worm—he put into him a heart eager and wild for blood.

Grimhild, also, inflamed him the more by runic songs so that he swore to do this deed with all speed.

Quaffing a great cup of his mother's magic brew, Guttorm hasted at grey dawn to the chamber of Sigurd. But, as he stole towards the bed, he saw that the hero lay with wide-open eyes and he shrank back and fled.

But the waiting Grimhild taunted and mocked him, so that a second time did he venture; but so steel-bright gleamed the eyes of Sigurd that again he fled.

"Have I for a son a niddering?" asked Grimhild in scorn, and at that word of shame the youth turned back once more.

This time, behold, the eyes of Sigurd were veiled in sleep, and Guttorm thrust at him with his sword so that the point stuck fast in the bed beneath. But with that wound was the hero roused, and seizing Gram, the sword, he cast it after his slayer so that it caught Guttorm at the door and smote him asunder, so that his head and arms fell within the chamber and his body and legs into the hall-way without.

And now the hapless Gudrun awoke and wept and thus spoke Sigurd unto her:

"Weep not, dear heart, for me, but weep for thy brethren, since an ill turn have they done themselves this day. Sorely will they miss me when they ride to battle. Behold, this is Brynhild's work, yet never have I worked harm to her or Gunnar, but have held fast to the oath I sware with him. Now when they go forth to war will the Niblungs wish that Sigurd, Fafnir's Bane, were there, fighting with them shoulder to shoulder. Farewell, dear heart; for thee I foresee much woe. Would that I could stand by thee. Farewell!"

So died the Golden Sigurd.

And Gudrun moaned and drew a shuddering breath, then sat stone-still, while women came round her with cold comfort, telling of their griefs.

Stone-still sat she until Gullrond uncovered the face of dead Sigurd and, turning it towards her, bade her gaze upon it.

Once did she look, then sank back with a great weeping.

NOTE TO RAGNAR LODBROG

THE saga of Ragnar Lodbrog differs from the two that precede it in that, although largely mythical, it is in part historical and thus forms a meeting ground for legend and fact, Aslaug, the attributed daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild, being the link.

Ragnar himself, first of the great vikings, lived in either the eighth or ninth century and the traditions of his death at the hands of Ella of Northumbria and of the foundation of Lincoln by his son are fairly well established.

His famous Death Song—the Lodbrogr-Qvida—a long and stirring poem, is one of the finest examples of northern poetry, and must have been sung beside many an Icelandic hearth to spur on the hearers to deeds of valour.

It is an account of the farings of Lodbrog and his sons by land and sea, and each stanza begins with a refrain:

"We fought with swords"

or, more accurately, "We hewed with the brand," which is thought to have been chanted by the listeners as the skald told his story.

There is so much of local interest in the poem to Englishmen that a free translation is given of a part.

DEATH SONG OF RAGNAR LODBROG

We hewed with the brand!
Long since we went to Gothland for the slaying of the Worm,
There I won Thora and my name of Leathern-Breeches,
Since I pierced that serpent through, with my blade of inlaid steel.

We, etc.
Young was I when east of Œre-sound we made good breakfast for the wolves,
While our steels sang on the high-crested helms much food did they find,
Blood-stained the sea, the ravens waded through.

We, etc.
Ere twenty years passed o'er us, high-borne were our spears,
At Dvina's mouth in the far east eight jarls did we lay low,
Warriors died; the crimson death coloured the sea and ravens feasted.

We, etc.
The war-queen loved us when we sent the Helsinga to Odin's halls,
Keen bit the feathered arrow when our ships reached Iva's flood,[1]
Gay was the music of sword on breast-plate and cleft shield.

We, etc.
Great was our courage when fierce Herraudr, 'mid his winged steeds, died.
No jarl more fearless sent his framing coursers o'er the main;
His stout heart drove him, fearless, by the sea-fowls' haunt.

We, etc.
The brand bit sore at Scarpa-reef,[2] the sword flew from its sheath,

[1] East Baltic. [2] Scarborough.

Crimson the borders of our moon-shields when King Raven died;
Loud roared the spear on Ulla's field, as low lay Eystan the King.

(Here follow several similar verses).

We, etc.
O'er us was fated Herthiof to win a mighty victory,
There fell my son, bold Rognvald, before the host of spears.
His bow, unerring, shot in Sudorey [1] its last fatal bolt.

We, etc.
In Ireland King Marstan let not the she-wolf nor the eagle starve.
A sacrifice he made at Wetherford,[2] for the steel-thorn issuing from its sheath,
Pierced to the heart of Ragnar, fearless son of mine.

We, etc.
South we played at war with three kings, the blood of the Irish dyed the sea,
Then stormed we to the sword-play at the river-mouth of Anglesey,
No kissing of a girl was it to fight as we fought there.

We, etc.
Little did I wot that at the hands of Ella my death should come!
Yet what boots it? None can withstand his fate and well is it
To quaff the mead in skull-boughs [3] in the great hall of Odin.

We, etc.
Before cold death does no brave man quail; no thought of fear have I.
Soon will the battle wake when Aslaug's sons their bitter blades unsheath,
Soon will they learn the manner of my death, stout hearts of their brave mother!

[1] Hebrides. [2] Waterford. [3] Horns.

We, etc.
My life is well-nigh o'er; sharp is the pang that the serpent gives.
Goinn the Snake, nests deep in my heart. No more will my children rest;
Great wrath will be theirs at the undoing of their sire.

We, etc.
Full gladly do I go! See the Valkyrjar fresh from Odin's halls!
High-seated among heroes shall I quaff the yellow-mead.
The Æsir welcome me. Laughing gladly do I die!

GLOSSARY

ALV, Prince of Denmark, second husband of Hjordis.
ALVIT, a Valkyrja, wife of Völund.
ANDVARI, a dwarf, who robbed the Rhine-maidens of their gold.
ANGURBOD, a giantess, wife of Loki.
ASE, a god; *plural*, Æsir, *fem. plural*, Asynjar.
ASGARD, home of the gods. Gard=ward.
ASKE, the first man, made out of an ash-log.
ASLAUG, daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild, second wife of Ragnar Lodbrog.
ATLI, King of the Huns, second husband of Gudrun.

BALDUR the Sun-God, son of Odin.
BARROW, a mound raised over a grave. Many are found in Great Britain.
BAUGI, a giant, brother to Suttung.
BIFRÖST, the rainbow bridge of Asgard, leading to the fountain of the Nornir.
BILSKIRNIR, the palace of Thor, built of clouds.
BJÖRN, second son of Ragnar Lodbrog and Aslaug.
BODVILD, daughter of Nithudr, second wife of Völund.
BRAGI, the god of poetry, husband of Idûn.
BREIDABLIK, the palace of Baldur.
BREISINGA-MEN, the dwarf-wrought necklace of Freyja.
BRYNHILD, a Valkyrja, wife of Sigurd and of Gunnar.
BÜRE, the first hero, ancestor of Odin.

DAINN, DUNEYR, DURATHROR, and DVALINN, four harts that guarded sleep and dreams. They dwelt in the branches of Yggdrasil.
DRAUPNIR, the magic arm-ring of Odin.
DROMI, the second chain forged to bind Loki.

EGIL, brother of Völund, husband of Olrun.
EINHERJAR, heroes slain in battle and chosen by the Valkyrjar to feast with Odin in Valhalla.

ELLA, King of Northumbria, slayer of Ragnar Lodbrog.
EMBLA, the first woman, formed out of an alder log.

FAFNIR, the dragon warder of the Rhine gold, brother of Regin.
FARBAUTI, father of Loki.
FENRIS-ULF, the wolf son of Loki and Angurbod.
FENSALIR, the palace of Frigga.
FIMBUL-WINTER, the long winter that went before Ragnarök.
FJALAR, the dwarf who slew Kvasir.
FJALAR, the cock of Asgard who crowed at Ragnarök.
FJORD, an inlet of the sea.
FOSS, a water-fall.
FREK and GERI, the wolves of Odin.
FREY, a Van, son of Niördr; god of the Spring and the light-elves.
FREYJA, a Vana, daughter of Niördr.
FRIGGA, wife of Odin and chief of the goddesses.

GARM, the hound of Hel.
GARTH, or GARD, an enclosure near a home.
GEFIUNN, the minstrel giantess of Gylfi.
GERD, a giant-maiden, wife of Frey.
GIMLE, the Shining Heaven.
GINNUNGAGAP, the great chasm.
GJÖLLAR-HORN, the horn of Heimdal, to be blown at Ragnarök.
GLADSHEIM, the palace of Odin in which stood Valhalla.
GLEIPNIR, the fine chain that bound Loki.
GNIPA, a cave at the entrance to Helheim.
GNITA, a heath, the lair of Fafnir.
GRAM, the sword of Sigmund and Sigurd.
GRANE, the horse of Sigurd.
GRIMHILD, Queen of the Burgundians, mother of Gudrun.
GRIPIR, a seer, uncle of Sigurd.
GUDRUN, wife of Sigurd.
GULLINBURSTI, the gold-bristled hog, steed of Frey.
GULLTOPP, Gold-crest, the horse of Heimdal.
GUNGNIR, the spear of Odin.
GUNNAR, King of the Burgundians (Niblungs).

GUNNLÖD, daughter of Suttung, guardian of Odhrærir.
GYLFI, King of Sweden, and searcher after knowledge of the gods.

HAGEN OF HUNLAND, a lord at the Niblung court, slayer of Sigurd.
HAR, JAFNHAR, and THRIDI, the three questioned by Gylfi.
HEIMAR OF HLYMDAL, brother of Brynhild, guardian of Aslaug.
HEIMDAL, the Sleepless Watcher, warder of Bifröst.
HEL, daughter of Loki and Angurbod, Queen of Death.
HERMODR, son of Odin and his messenger.
HIMINBJÖRG, the palace of Heimdal.
HJAALPREK, King of Denmark.
HJORDIS, wife of Sigmund, mother of Sigurd.
HLADGRUN, a Valkyrja wedded to a brother of Völund.
HLIDSKJALF, the throne of Odin.
HÖDR, the blind god of darkness, who slew Baldur.
HOGNI the Wise, brother of Gunnar.
HRYMFAXI, the horse of Night.
HRYMIR, a frost giant, owner of the great mead kettle.
HVIRTSERK, third son of Ragnar Lodbrog and Aslaug.
HYRROKKIN, a giantess who launched the death-ship of Baldur.

IDÛN, daughter of Ivaldi, guardian of the apples of youth.
IVAR, eldest son of Ragnar Lodbrog and Aslaug.

JARL, an earl or chieftain.
JARNVID, the iron-wood where dwelt Angurbod.
JÖRMUNGAND, the serpent daughter of Loki.
JÖTUNHEIM, the northern land of ice and snow, home of the giants.

KÖRMT and ŒRMT, the mist rivers leading to Urd fountain.
KRAKE, the peasant-name of Aslaug.
KVASIR, the poet to whom Bragi gave the gift of song. Slain by the dwarfs.

LÆDING, the first chain of Fenris.
LANDVIDI, the palace of silent Vidr.

Laufey, mother of Loki.
Loki, the god of fire.
Lyngvi, an island where Fenris was chained.

Megingjardr, the belt of Thor.
Midgard, the world of men.
Mimir, the guardian of the well of wisdom, to whom Odin gave his eye.
Miölnir, the mace or hammer of Thor.
Muspelheim, the fiery land of Surtur.

Naglfar, the ship of doom, built of dead men's nails.
Nanna, wife of Baldur.
Niblungs, the royal race of Burgundy.
Nidhöggr, a serpent that gnaws unceasingly the root of Yggdrasil.
Niördr, King of the Vans, guardian of sailors and fishermen.
Nithudr, King of Sweden, enemy of Völund.
Noatûn, palace of Niördr.
Nornir, the three Fates who guard the fountain of Urd.

Odhrærir, a kettle that held the mead made from the blood of Kvasir.
Odin, first of the gods and father of men.
Odr, husband of Freyja.
Œdhumla, the cow of the creation of the world.
Œgir, a Van, god of the deep sea, husband of Ran.
Otter, a brother of Regin the Smith.

Ragnar Lodbrog, first of the great vikings.
Ragnarök, the day of destruction of the gods.
Ran, wife of Œgir.
Ratatösk, the mischievous squirrel of Yggdrasil.
Regin the Smith, teacher of Sigurd.
Rinda, a giantess, mother of Vali.
Röskva, the girl attendant of Thor.
Runes, secret or magic poetry or writing.

Sæhrimnir, the boar-food of the heroes in Valhalla.
Saga, a saying or story.
Sessrymnir, Freyja's hall.

SIF, wife of Thor.
SIGGEIR, King of Gothland, husband of Signy.
SIGMUND, eldest son of Volsung, father of Sigurd.
SIGNY, only daughter of Volsung, mother of Sinfjötli.
SIGURD, fourth son of Ragnar Lodbrog and Aslaug.
SIGURD, FAFNIR'S-BANE, husband of Brynhild and Gudrun.
SIGYN, wife of Loki.
SINFJÖTLI, son of Signy.
SKADI, giantess daughter of Thiassi, wife of Niördr.
SKIDBLADNIR, the ship of Frey.
SKIMFAXI, the horse of Day.
SKRYMNIR, the giant king who deceived Thor.
SKULD, or SKULDA, the Norn of the Future.
SKYRNIR, the messenger of Frey.
SLEIPNIR, the eight-legged horse of Odin.
SURTUR, the Flaming God of Muspelheim, who destroys the world.
SVARTHEIM, the black home of the dwarfs.

THIALFI, boy attendant of Thor, brother of Röskva.
THIASSI, the giant father of Skadi, who carried off Idûn.
THOR, son of Odin, god of the peasant.
THORA, first wife of Ragnar Lodbrog.
TŶR, god of war.

URD, the Norn of the Past, guardian of the sacred fountain.
UTGARD, the outer ward, land of the giants.

VALHALL, the feasting-hall of the Einherjar.
VALI, the child-avenger of Baldur; typical of the young spring that vanquishes dark winter.
VALKYRJAR, the warrior-maidens of Odin, choosers of the slain.
VEGTAM the Wanderer, a name used by Odin in disguise.
VERDANDI, the Norn of the Present.
VIDR, or VIDAR, the silent god, son of Odin, who slew Fenris at Ragnarök.
VINGI, the betrayer of the Niblungs.
VING-THOR, a name of Thor.
VOLSUNG, King of Hunland, father of Sigmund.

VÖLVA, or VALA, a prophetess whom Odin seeks in the realm of Hel.

YGGDRASIL, the sacred, three-rooted ash-tree that upheld the world.

YMIR, the first giant, slain by the sons of Büre.

It should be noted that the spelling of most Icelandic names varies, particularly with regard to vowels and terminations.

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