

Viktor Rydberg's **The Saga of the Sword** (*Sagan om Svärdet*)¹

Translated by William P. Reaves © 2010

The First Section

-1-

The Sons of Bor raised the Earth's disc out of the Sea of Chaos. In conference, the Aesir and the Vanir had set courses of the sun and moon, as well as named Night and her kin. Midgard lay green between mountains and wide waters. The creation, as the gods intended it, was complete, although no human beings existed yet. The world would be settled by Aesir, Vanir and elves, and by the new giant-race, whose progenitor the Aesir mercifully allowed to escape from the billows of Ymir's blood. Amongst all races of beings, peace prevailed. The peace seemed inviolate, founded as it was on strong agreements, promises and oaths.

The Aesir met on Idavöll. They built an altar and a temple and proved themselves in the arts which the humans, their protégés, would later try their strength. They set up hearths, forged tongs. They made useful handicrafts and valuables of gold to please the eye. There were runes to aid them in their search for wisdom, written by him for which they had built the *hörgr* and *hof* (altar and temple). Among other things, as a pastime, they kept a golden board game. They had gold in abundance.

The elves were as keen to master the arts as the Aesir, and thus there soon came a time when the gods, who of course have so much else to tend to, acknowledged them to be the premier artisans. The elf-powers weave the earth's spring and summer attire. In the first age, they performed truly amazing wonders at the smith's hearth.

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One day, Odin walked the earth with two other mighty and loving Aesir. They came to the seashore and there made a discovery that awoke new thoughts. They saw two trees, perhaps sprigs from the great World-Ash, cast up on their path by the surf. The trees may have had a peculiar shape and in appearance resembled the form of the Aesir and elves to some degree, since the exalted wanderers had the

¹ The title *Sagan om Svärdet* is the publisher's, who has found it in accordance with the author's intention. Since Rydberg called his other versions *Fädernas Gudasaga* and *Segersvärdet*, it is apparent that the author understood these narratives as a connected story and that he chose to give the master smith Völund's sword a leading role.

notion to give them spirit, intelligence, sense, beauty, and a purpose to live. Before the eyes of the gods, they stood there now as the first human pair, Ask and Embla, naked and ashamed. Then Odin removed his splendid clothes to cover the new creations. Scarcely had they seen themselves adorned with a portion of the divine garb, before shyness gave way to vanity. Such was the dawn of man.

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It was a notion with important consequences that none of the Aesir expected. Before human beings were created, the gods had no one to protect, no weak and no needy beings to love and defend. It is true, both elves and giants were subordinate to the gods, and the elves willingly acknowledged their inferiority in birth and power. Yet, they did not require special care and, as far as the giants were concerned, they themselves were enough. Now the Aesir had acquired protégés and thereby too a purpose in life that they previously lacked, and cherished concerns that they previously knew nothing about. The carefree life of youth on the Ida plains was thereby brought to an end.

The creation of man, like the order of the world in its entirety, was not decided by all holy powers in solemn conference. Perhaps the entire court was not united behind the agreement, which until then had kept peace in the world. Therefore, the Aesir had brought heavy responsibility upon themselves. But nevertheless, this creation was the work of one will. When Ask and Embla were brought into the Aesir's path, the three norns, Urd and her sisters, had revealed their arrival from an unknown distance in Jötunheim. A power called Fate had made itself known.

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Odin saw mysteries around himself and became a philosopher. No one can say that he did not seek wisdom in order to solve them. Whether, he could not interpret the runes that in the beginning came down to the Ida plains, or they seemed to him to contain only childish wisdom – eager to learn, he now searched the world in all directions after increased knowledge.

What he soon found was that the creation, which may be called his great feat, was merely part of a greater whole, hanging like a bird's nest on the branches of the world-tree, rising out of roots that he knew not.

The exalted Asa-philosopher climbed into the world-tree's crown. The wind-swept ash bore him as a horse its rider, through nine nights. There he sat, wounded with a spear, given to Odin, given to himself, and peered down searching toward the secrets of the depths. He saw the roots of the ash, and, by two of them, he saw holy springs that give the tree its nourishment and have as guardians beings of a strange kind.

They are not assigned to the gods or the elves, rather to giants, since they were produced from Ymir's limbs, and grew up with the primeval giants. But they had a more noble birth than the other offspring of Ymir. The multi-headed progenitor of the giants, was begotten by the chaos-giant's feet. The guardians of the

holy springs were born, swain and maid, between his chest and arm. So arose Nari and Norn; Nari as the servant of the world's maintenance and Norn as that of the world's regulation. When the sea of blood drowned all the primeval-giants except Bergelmir, its waves went high above Nari and Norn's freehold, without finding a way down there.² Under the depth of more than one great flood, Norn is said to have sat safely by the ash's root; over the depth of more than one great flood she is said to have floated with her sisters, well-knowing her way through the gloomy atmosphere. Just as Norn and Nari's birthplace was the most secret in Chaos, their dwellings are also the best concealed in the world. However, Norn's spring with its white water in which swans swim, is closer to the realm above than Nari's is. As the oldest beings in the world, older than Odin and all the gods worshipped with him, Norn and Nari have the oldest memories and the deepest secrets in their possession.

The ash has a third root that goes to the chaos-well. There Odin saw Nidhög, the servant of world-corruption in the shape of a gnawing serpent.

These beings were not alone. Nari has sons and daughters that serve him. Norn has sisters, and Nidhög a spawn, who works in the service of destruction.

Odin prayed down into the depths for the keys to the mysteries. From Norn, he got no answer: her time to speak had not come. But from Nari he received runes in friendly songs. Friendship was thus knit between the father of the Aesir and the guardian of the well of wisdom. Never was that friendship broken and never did Nari speak anything other than true words to Odin. But each time, not much was given to him by the cautious and wise advisor, and he had to pay dearly for increased knowledge, for Nari collects treasures and lays valuables, row by row, in the protection of the Ash's shadow. Therefore human beings call him Treasure-Mimir. To the younger generations, he is best known by the name Mimir. Norn is called Urd by mortal children.

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Ask and Embla lived in Midgard under the gods' protection and begot sons and daughters. Their descendants multiplied and settled ever wider regions. Then it could not be avoided that disputes over ownership arose with the giants that had previously taken up residence in Midgard, and the disputes were almost always settled by the Aesir in favor of their protégés. It is no wonder then that bitterness and hate towards the Aesir took root in the giants' nature. But no collective opposition against the intruders and their powerful patrons came about because they were not united by common communal bonds and had little solidarity. Each lived in his stone-gard and was self-sufficient. When one of them was driven away from his dwelling, the others, to whom it would also happen, watched with sly and grumbling passivity. So the region of the Midgard-giants was ever more restricted; they were driven northward toward the Elivogar on the other side of which their bolder kinsmen, the Frost-giants, have their undisputed properties, and eastward toward the ghastly marsh-filled Ironwood. Many remained however in Midgard's

² This would seem to imply that Rydberg has not yet discovered the World-Mill. Also notice there is no mention of Heimdall coming among man to teach them.

wilder mountain-tracts or in the deep wood; some of them became landwights and pose no threat to human beings. The giants vary in both form and character. Fair giants exist, like Loki who was adopted into Asgard, and lovely heart-winning thurs-women are not uncommon. Therefore, in time's morning, one than one happy and productive bond of love was formed between gods and giant maids, as well as between elves and mountain-daughters; the birth of Tyr and Vidar, Modi and Magni are proof of this, so too the Sons of Ivaldi, the celebrated elven heroes. But among the giants also exist monsters with many heads and many arms, and beings that have nothing reminiscent of human form. The most dangerous of this kind, the Fenris Wolf and the Midgard Serpent, however, were not yet born. Nor did anyone then suspect, except Urd and Mimir, that he who shall finally gather all the giants and monsters and convey them to battle against the Aesir, then lived as a prankster among the gods.

There were wise giants, mainly among the elders, whose wisdom consisted of far reaching rote memory. There were also giants who, although coarse in manners and slow in thought, had good and cheerful dispositions, and who, when well received, repaid it with loyal gratitude. But most are violent and indecent, nor are those that have a mean and deceitful temperament few. It is evident that these shall gain ever more power over the others, as more giants are embittered by the trespass that was done to them and the favor the high powers exhibited in their judgments between Bergelmir's and Ask's descendants.

The most malicious beings in the world are the giantesses known as the three-times born. Of the harm she brought upon gods and humans, there is much to tell going forward.

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The Aesir taught the first humans useful arts and gave them good instruction in the rules of life's way. Live so that you win an honored name and an approving judgment on those that die, since the doom over the dead is one carved by the gods with everlasting runes! Cultivate your sense, be honest and chaste, generous and hospitable! Holy is the bond between husband and wife, between parents and children, between siblings and siblings' children, such relatives will help one another in every need and avenge one another in death! Maintain proven friends! But you ought to be careful with those that are unproven! Keep your promise and oaths unbroken! To lie is shameful, although you may punish a lie with a lie, as you may reward a blow with a blow, and may use deceit in battle with deception. Revere the gods and sacrifice to them with a willing mind! Never be afraid! Keep the temperament keen! Guard yourself against arrogance, but go happy and cheerfully meet your fate, all the way to the grave!

Such advice Odin gave Embla's children. And so that they would listen with more enjoyment and hold it better in memory, he united his artistic admonishing words with meter, rhythm, and alliterative letters. Thus humans learned the poetic art. However, the poetry practiced in time's morning among the gods, elves, and humans was not the same as that which was prevalent once Odin acquired Fjalar's

blood-blended intoxicating skaldic mead. Mild and harmless was the older drink of inspiration, and from children's hands it came into the gods' possession.

One night when the moon shone, the lad Hjuki and his sister Bil were on their way home from a forest-spring, from which they had fetched water on their stepmother's command. The spring is called Byrgir, the quenching and refreshing; it is located in Alfheim, but nobody has ever seen it again, after what occurred then. The children carried the water in a pail. Hjuki was eager and wanted to rush forward, but the cautious girl walked at a measured pace so that the water would not splash over. Joined by the pole laid upon their shoulders, sprightliness and cautiousness had to keep an even pace. While they walked thus, no different than the poetic art itself in which sprightliness is moderated by measure and rhythm, the moon-elf and wind-watcher Nep, Nanna's father, saw them and took them and their burden up into his silver-ship, floating on its holy path. Thus the primeval skaldic mead collected from Byrgir came to be kept in the moon's ship. Within, Bragi the skald-god, tasted Fjalars drink; he came often to Nep's ship and refreshed himself with the innocent, living mead that the children poured from the forest-spring. Nep did the children a kind deed when he adopted them. Their home was certainly one of the foremost in the elf-kingdom, since Vidfinn-Ivaldi, their father, was one of the elves' princes. But Hjuki and two of his younger brothers were born to a giantess, and they were not treated well at home, once Vidfinn-Ivaldi provided them a stepmother of high elven birth, the proud and strong Hild. Nep was a kind foster father to the children and prepared a bright future for them. Under his care, they grew up as the playmates of Nanna and were foster-siblings of Baldur and Hödur, the noble sons of Odin. Bil was adopted among the Asynjur. Of Hjuki, we will speak again.

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While Odin cultivated the sense and manners of the young human race, Thor, no less than his strongest son, was fixed on another course, concerned with their welfare. Now the relationship between the gods and giants was already tense and reluctant, but agreements and oaths were not openly broken, and it had not yet come to cuts and blows. The gods' right to rule over Midgard at will was undisputed, although for its ancient tenants it was difficult to be overtaken by notice after notice. And many who fled did what they could do, without violating the agreements, so that a human settler would feel awful taking up residence in his abandoned site. The forests in which a settler had to open a clearing for meadows and fields could be gloomy enough, were made more so by the magic sounds and sights with which the giant-arts filled them. Territories to which one came in the evening that were elevated and arable, were found under swamp-water and quagmires in the morning. Islands with verdant beaches that invited sailors to settle them sunk beneath the sea at sunrise, only to rise from the waves at sundown. Therefore it was hard to dwell on the outskirts of Midgard's districts and even worse to colonize the region's frontiers. It would probably not succeed without Thor's help. He was seldom far away when his presence was required. Lead by his team of goats, he made frequent journeys to the border districts, lifting the settler's spirits and, by hook or by crook, set what was wrong right. He still did not possess

the terrifying lightning-hammer Mjöllnir, but his strength was known and discussed even in as far as the thurs-giants' land, and the older hammer he bore was not something to play with.

On one such trip, Thor came one evening to the dwelling of a settler in the stony outlands, with whom he entrusted his goats and took refuge over night. Loki was with him. Thor's draught-animals are also his travel-fare. They are slaughtered in the evening and, with a hallowing hammer-strike, rise up whole in the morning. The peasant and his charges were invited to take part in the evening meal. They were told to be cautious with the bones and condyles and throw them on the goatskins. But in the morning, it was discovered that one of the goats limped. The cause was that the peasant's young son, Thjalfi, tricked by Loki, had split open one of the goat's leg-bones in order to get access to the marrow. Who is surprised that Thor was angry? But he proved how good he essentially is. With the peasant's alarm and prayers to forgive his son, Thor grew calm again but demanded as payment that Thjalfi and his sister Röska would serve him, and in this request lay nothing but goodwill. He took them along on his journeys, accustomed them to look giants in the eye and taught them how to fix newly-captured territory by kindling and carrying friction-fire, so that it could not sink again. He made them beneficent human beings and good examples in all things for settlers.

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As everything certainly shows, it was the gods' intent that the humans live pious, just, and even happy lives. Like the gods themselves, their protégés were subject to toil and pain, fate and death. But this should not stop them from seeing life brightly, when their dispositions become like Odin would have it: desirous of activity, fit and undaunted, and when they received a poetic art to comfort misfortune. Long ago the Aesir and Vanir realized that they were not omnipotent. They noticed that it was Norn who laid down laws and chose life's lot for mortal children, and they suspected that they themselves were transient. Acknowledging their dependence on fate, they placed their judiciary ring with their holy seats of power in proximity to Urd's well, in hope that inspiration from there would guide their judgments. They had much to confer about, because the thrice-born had now let her activities be known.

Perhaps she has had as many fathers as moments of birth. It is certain that Hrimnir was the origin of one of her births, and another was probably Vidolf—Vidolf, who is called the progenitor of all giant-völvas, and his character, which shall be mentioned later, made him worthy of such a daughter. During her three lifetimes, she was called by many names: Heid, Gullveig, Aurboda, Angrboda.

Spiteful toward the gods, she left Jötunheim and came to Midgard to awake what evil slept in the mortal being's hearts. Previously, humans had learned to revere the gods as children did their parents and follow their orders in a childlike manner, that is to say, willingly and sincerely, although not without mistakes and lapses. Previously they had sought knowledge in the runes that Odin had given them; but in difficult cases they craved a special revelation, then they looked for

signs, whose foreboding qualities were disclosed to them by gods, or listened to words of inspiration on the lips of noble and pure women.

But Heid now went into the countryside, carrying with her mind-misleading *gander*.³ She enticed Midgard's inhabitants to desire evil things and for desire's fulfillment to turn to the unspeakably dark powers which, originating in Chaos, brood in the innermost souls of evil giants and give power to such magic arts as she practiced and mastered. From her seid-stool she sang the bewitching language⁴ with which evil humans have ever since understood (how) to lay waste to otherwise useful things, to acquire another's gold, to strike distraught with mental confusion, disability, sickness and death. So, where an evil will was found to encourage, she gave it power to secretly injure and destroy. Mistrust and fear, squabbling and strife, hate and a thirst for revenge, theft and plunder sprung up behind her, wherever she roamed about.

The gold, which glittered beautifully in the gods' eyes, shone even more seductively in those of human beings. In the degree that Ask and Embla's descendents spread, this ore became more precious, because the dispossessed Midgard-giants had taken with what they could gather to adorn their women, to plait in their horse's manes and to mount on the horns of their herd; the dwarves, shy in their temperament and now all the more suspicious, hid what they had in their mountain-halls and the elves themselves, driven by a desire for glitz and splendor, gathered their stores of gold in well-protected and guarded treasure-chambers. In Midgard, there arose a raging thirst for gold that the gods would not know how to quench, even if they stripped the golden-groves on Idavellir of all their leaves.

The family of man was not yet divided into different peoples with different languages, when Gunnar, the first warrior, was born into the world, and when Rodi, the first robber, unsurpassed in cruelty, began to commit atrocities on the eastern frontier of the inhabited Midgard.

The gods could not eradicate the evil that Heid had brought upon Midgard. But they did not leave its author unpunished. They seized Heid and sentenced her to death by fire. She was burnt.

But the world was not liberated of her. She lived anew to burn anew, still she lives on and shall live until Ragnarök, whose flames are the only thing capable of annihilating her, and with her all evil, for all time.

In the giant Hrimnir's estate, a *gyg*⁵ was born. It was Heid in another form. For a long time, the gods knew nothing of her birth, but what they saw was that from the north, from the rime-thurs' land on the other side of the Elivagor, came colder winds than before and that year after year these were more protracted and more agonizing for the vegetation in Midgard. Human beings began to complain about their worsening lots in life. In two senses, ruin was perceived in the air. The winds breathed a sharper cold, and humans breathed despair and ill intent.

³ Old Norse *gandr*, magic object or spirit.

⁴ *Trollspråk*, troll-language, magic language

⁵ Old Norse *gygr*, ogress, giantess,

Mimir who cared for the world-tree and guarded wisdom's well watched with alarm how badly creation developed. For he who had drunk deeply of the well's water it was not concealed, that the Aesir's world lay under the layers of corruption. He had probably also fathomed that the fimbul-winter, that now seemed to threaten, was not the one that shall begin Ragnarök. But at the end of it, there shall nevertheless come a new world, a child of the Aesir's creation shall arise, and this new world, shall receive no seeds of infected creatures from its forerunner, but fresh seed for sowing. Therefore, it held true for Mimir to hurry with what he intended to do, while such seed was yet to be found.

In earth's interior spread the kingdom that was called Helheim and whose darkest districts were ruled by Loki's daughter. But that which is now told took place long before Loki's daughter was born. At this time, the kingdom of death was watched only by Mimir and his kinswoman Madgun⁶ and it had few inhabitants, because the species was in its childhood and human beings long-lived. Least populated were its torment-chambers, although now, after Heid's appearance, they expected many guests daily. Separated from the kingdom of death by the river Strife and high walls, Mimir built a pleasure-garden⁷ whose loveliness can scarcely be described. Here the industrious collector of wealth carried and here sowed the most robust seeds of Mimir's best tree and herbs in order to sprout up into imperishable greenery. Here had he salvaged the seed-corn, which on the future fields of Midgard shall provide crop after crop, without requiring plowing or sowing. And most importantly of all: he had searched among mankind's children and found a lad and a maid, utterly beautiful and unspoiled. He adopted them so that they shall live equally innocent through all the centuries the Aesir's creation can come to be. After Ragnarök, this pair shall become the parents of a new human family.

From the world-tree, early in the morning, the sap that is called honeydew falls. The great Ash has therefore of old born the name the mead-tree. The source of solace, from which Bil and Hjúki poured antiquity's skaldic mead, had this syrup blended in its waters. The boy and the girl in Mimir's garden lived on this honeydew. The skalds called the girl Life and the boy Lust-for-life. They called the garden Nari's meadow,⁸ Treasure-Mimir's Holt, Glittering plains, and the Acre-of-Immortality,⁹ because sickness and death never come within its fence.

In the garden, Mimir built a splendid hall with a high-seat for certain guests. When these were expected, the walls shall be polished and the benches strewn with many of the valuables that Mimir collected by the Ash's root. Still, only he and Urd knew who these guests would be. Odin himself does not get to know it until Fate's decree has been fulfilled.

⁶ *Móðguðr*, the guardian at the golden bridge in Hel who greets Hermod on his way to find Baldur in the underworld (*Gylfaginning* 49).

⁷ *lustgård*, pleasure-garden, a term usually used of Eden: Edens lustgård.

⁸ *vång*: Old Norse *vangr*, Anglo-Saxon *wang*, from *neorxena-wong*, *neorxnawong* a word for paradise in *Cædmon* 11, 6. 13, 26. 14, 12. 115, 23 [Grimm's DM, Stalleybrass tr, pp. 421, 821]

⁹ These are Swedish renditions and translations of the Old Norse terms *Hoddmimis holt*, *Glæssirvellir*, and *Odainsakur*.

A subterranean sun shines over Treasure-Mimir's holt. But how did that sun come into Mimir's possession The days and phases of the moon no longer succeeded one another without increasing the burden of anxiety and worry on Val-father's mind. His distress and his desire for wisdom, together drove him time and time again to turn to Mimir with questions. But, Mimir lifted no more of the future's veil than what Fate allowed. And, as mentioned, all information Odin received he paid for dearly or pried loose with pledges, that better served or caused less danger in Mimir's keeping than in Odin's. So it happened one day that for a drink from wisdom's well, Odin pledged his own eye, sacrificing the brilliance of his own Asa-beauty for wisdom. Perhaps the eye he pledged gives us a reasonable explanation of the origin of the sun that shines over Treasure-Mimir's grove.

Another time, and later still, when the contract between the powers was openly broken, Odin had to submit another pledge. Asgard, then more than ever, required a wall and a warden, and for this reason, in the high workshop was forged the Gjallarhorn, in order to be laid in Heimdall's, the white god's, faithful hand. But Mimir knew the decree that Urd had read over the Gjallarhorn: when it is sounded for battle, Ragnarök has come.

Mutually awaiting the battle that approached between the gods and fearing that Odin would precipitate the event, Mimir demanded the Gjallarhorn in pledge and concealed it within the Ash. And because he suspected that he would fall victim to the unrest in the world long before Ragnarök came, he took oaths from his sons, that if they ever sensed that the Ash trembled and that in the trembling the horn rang from within, then they would quickly bring it to Heimdall, because then it is Fate's will, he let it sound over the world.