

# HOW ALL-FATHER ODIN BECAME WISE

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ON the highest hill of Asgard, upon a great chair, sat All-Father Odin watching from thence all that was happening on and above and under the earth.

The Father of Asas and of men had long gray locks and thick curling beard, and he wore a great blue coat flecked with gray like unto the sky when the fleecy clouds scud across it.

In his hand he carried a spear so sacred that, if anyone swore an oath upon its point, that oath could never be broken.

On his head he wore, when sitting upon his watchtower throne, a helmet shaped like an eagle; but when he wandered as he loved to do about the earth, he wore a large broad-brimmed hat drawn low over his forehead.

Perched on his broad shoulders sat two inky-black ravens, Hugin and Munin, whom every morning he sent to wing their flight about the world to see what was going on. Every evening when they returned, they whispered all that they had seen and heard in his ears.

At Odin's feet crouched two great wolves whom he fed from the meat set before him; for he himself cared not to eat flesh food, and preferred rather to drink the sacred mead provided by the goat who fed upon the leaves of the Tree of Life.

Sometimes Odin left his watchtower throne for the great Council Hall where the twelve Asas sat and took counsel together; but his favorite seat of all was in his own palace of Valhalla, or the Hall of the Chosen Slain.

This palace stood in the midst of a wonderful grove of trees, whose leaves were all of red gold, rustling and shimmering in the breeze. Five and forty doors opened into it, each wide enough to allow eight hundred warriors to enter abreast, and over the chief entrance was a boar's head and a great eagle, whose keen gaze looked forth over all the world. The walls of the palace were built of spears of polished steel so bright that they lighted the whole building; and the roof was made of golden shields.

"And wondrous gleamed Valhalla on the heights-  
Her walls shone bright as rows of glittering spears;  
The roof resplendent like great golden shields;  
Hundreds of open gates and welcoming doors  
For myriad warriors from the fields of earth-  
The chosen heroes of the future years,  
To be great Odin's mighty bodyguard  
Against the awful prophecies of doom."

From end to end of the great hall stood long tables and benches loaded with armor, ready prepared for the fortunate guests. And this was the manner of their selection. Whenever a great battle was about to be fought on the earth, Odin sent forth the nine Valkyrs, or Battle Maidens, his especial attendants, to watch the progress of the fight and to choose from the fallen warriors half of their number. These the Battle Maidens carried on their swift steeds over the Rainbow Bridge into the great hall of Valhalla, where they were welcomed by the sons of Odin and taken to the All-Father's throne to receive his greeting. But if one had shown himself especially heroic in the fight, Odin would descend from his throne and advance to the door to bid him welcome.

And now, seated at the long tables loaded with great beakers of mead and dishes of boar flesh, the warriors feasted merrily, tended by the fair Battle Maidens,

"The blazing roof resounds  
The genial uproar of those shades who fall  
In desperate fight, or by some brave attempt."

When they had eaten all they could, the warriors would call for their weapons, ride out into the great courtyard, and there wage desperate fights in the course of which many a man would be sorely wounded. But this mattered little, for at the sound of the dinner horn all wounds were healed.

"And all day long they there are hacked and hewn  
'Mid dust, and groans, and limbs lopped off, and blood,  
But all at night return to Odin's hall  
Woundless and fresh; such lot is theirs in heaven."

These warriors were Odin's special joy and delight, and he was never weary of watching them at feast or in the combat. Sometimes, indeed, when some battle on earth was impending, he would appear riding upon his eight-footed gray horse and with white shield on arm would fling his glittering spear into the ranks of the warriors as signal for the fight to begin, and would rush into the fray with his war cry, "Odin has you all!"

Now, though all this shows very clearly that All-Father Odin was a warlike Asa and delighted in battles, there was another side to his character, for beyond all the other Asas he cared for wisdom.

Very early in the morn of time All-Father Odin discovered that beneath the roots of the Tree of Life, just where sky and ocean met, there was a marvelous spring of water, "the fountain of all wit and wisdom." Looking into its crystal depths, all that was going to happen in the future was revealed, and anyone drinking of it received the gifts of wisdom, knowledge, and right judgment about all things. Now this spring was guarded by the Giant Mimir, who prided himself upon being wiser than any other giants or Asas could be, for he alone had the right to draw water from the well; and every morning, dipping his glittering horn therein, he drank a long draught, and with every draught he grew wiser, till he knew everything that was past and present and is to come.

When Odin became aware of the marvelous properties of the spring, he was eager to drink of it, "for," said he, "it is not fitting that a giant should know more than the Father of Asas and men."

So early one morn he entered a dark grove of trees, where amidst great arching roots fantastically intertwined bubbled the spring; and keeping watch beside it sat Giant Mimir, his long gray beard sweeping over his knees and his great piercing eyes shining with fierce light as the newcomer approached.

"What do you want here?" he demanded, in a voice that sounded like the muttering of thunder before a storm.

"I want a drink of yon water from your glittering horn, good Mimir," said Odin.

But Giant Mimir sunk his great head upon his chest, and looking from under his shaggy eyebrows, growled again:

"Begone, I tell you. I give no man drink from my well."

Then Odin drew himself up to his full height, and in a voice that was more thunderous than that of the giant himself, cried:

"No man am I, O Mimir, but Odin, Father of Asas and men. Refuse not to me the gift of wisdom; for though I can see all things that happen in heaven and earth, I cannot see what lies beneath the deep nor can I see what shall happen in the future. Give, me, therefore, the draught of wisdom and I will pay you whatsoever you demand."

But Mimir still refused. "We giants are of elder race than ye Asas be," he said, "and all the wisdom in the world is in our hands. If I give you to drink of this water you will become wise even as we are, and an enemy more dangerous than ever."

"Nevertheless," replied Odin firmly, "you must give me the water, and I will pay you whatsoever you may ask."

Then Mimir, feeling sure that such a payment would be refused, said, "I will give you the magic draught in return for one of your eyes."

But to his amazement, for the god was very proud of his keen vision, Odin at once plucked forth an eye and handed it to him, saying: "No price is too high to pay for wisdom."

So Mimir was obliged to hand him the horn filled with precious water, and Odin drank a full draught, caring not at all that hence forth he was to have but one eye, for he knew that he had gained the precious gift of wisdom beyond any in the world save Mimir himself.

Meantime, Mimir dropped the eye of the Asa into the well, where it shines bright as the moon reflected in still waters; and he bade Odin depart, saying heavily, "This day is the beginning of trouble betwixt your race and mine."