

THOR GOES A-FISHING

by Hamilton Wright Mabie

From Norse Stories by Hamilton Wright Mabie. Rand-McNally & Co., Chicago, 1902. Copyright, 1900, 1901, by Dodd, Mead & Co.

Midway between Niflheim and Muspelheim lay Midgard, the home of men, its round disk everywhere encircled by the ocean, which perpetually rushed upon it, gently in still summer afternoons, but with a terrible uproar in winter. Ages ago, when the Midgard-serpent had grown so vast that even the gods were afraid of him, Odin cast him into the sea, and he lay flat at the bottom of the ocean, grown to such monstrous size that his scaly length encircled the whole world. Holding the end of his tail in his mouth, he sometimes lay motionless for weeks at a time, and looking across the water no one would have dreamed that such a monster was asleep in its depths. But when the Midgard-serpent was aroused his wrath was terrible to behold. He lashed the ocean into great sheets of foam, he piled the waves mountain high, he dashed the spray into the very heavens, and woe to the galleys that were sailing homeward.

It happened once that the gods were feasting with AEger, the sea-god, and the ale gave out, and AEger had no kettle in which to brew a new supply.

"Thor," said. AEger, after he had thought a moment, "will you get me a kettle?"

Thor was always ready for any hard or dangerous thing.

"Of course I will," was his quick reply, "only tell me where to get one."

That, however, was no easy thing to do. Kettles big enough to brew ale for Asgard were not to be picked up at a moment's notice. Everybody wanted more ale, but nobody could tell Thor where to find a kettle, until Tyr, the god of courage, spoke up: "East of the river Elivagar lives my father, Hymer, who has a kettle marvelously strong and one mile deep."

That was large enough even for the gods.

"Do you think we can get it?" asked Thor, who always wanted to succeed in his undertakings.

"If we cannot get it by force, we can by stratagem," answered Tyr, and they started off at once, Thor taking the disguise of a young man. The goats drew them swiftly to Egil, with whom Thor left them while he and Tyr pushed on to finish the journey afoot. It was rough and perilous traveling, but they reached Hymer's hall without accident, and there Tyr found his grandmother, a frightfully ugly giantess, and his mother, a wonderfully beautiful woman, with fair hair, and a face so radiant that the sun seemed to be always shining upon it. The latter advised them to hide under the great kettles in the hall, because when Hymer came home in bad temper he was sometimes cruel to strangers.

Late in the evening Hymer came home from his fishing. A cold wind swept through the hall as he entered, his eyes were piercing as the stars on a winter's night, and his beard was white with frost.

"I welcome you home," said Tyr's beautiful mother; "our son, for whom we have been looking so long, has come home, bringing with him the enemy of giants and the protector of Asgard. See how they hide themselves behind that pillar yonder."

She pointed to a pillar at the farther end of the hall. Hymer turned, and looked at it with his piercing, icy glance, and in an instant it snapped into a thousand pieces; the beam overhead broke, and eight kettles fell with a crash on the stone floor. Only one out of the eight remained unbroken, and from it Thor and Tyr came forth. Hymer was not glad to see Thor standing there under his own roof, but he could not turn him out, so he made the best of it and ordered three oxen to be served for supper. Thor had traveled a long distance and was very hungry, and ate two of the oxen before he was satisfied.

"If you eat like that," said Hymer, "we will have to live on fish tomorrow."

Early the next morning, before the sun was up, Thor heard Hymer getting ready for a day of fishing. He dressed himself quickly and went out to the giant. "Good morning, Hymer," he said pleasantly. "I am fond of fishing; let me row out to sea with you."

"Oho," answered the giant scornfully, not at all pleased with the idea of having his powerful enemy in the boat with him, "such a puny young fellow can be of no use to me, and if I go as far out to sea as I generally do, and stay as long, you will catch a cold that will be the death of you."

Thor was so angry at this insult that he wanted to let his hammer ring on the giant's head, but he wisely kept his temper.

"I will row as far from the land as you care to go," was his answer, "and it is by no means certain that I shall be the first to want to put in again. What do you bait with?"

"Find a bait for yourself," was the giant's surly reply.

Thor ran up to a herd of Hymer's cattle, seized the largest bull, wrung off its head without any trouble, and put it in the boat. Then they both pushed off and were soon rowing seaward. Hymer could pull a strong oar, but he had never seen such a stroke as Thor's before. The boat fairly trembled under the force of it. In a few moments they reached Hymer's fishing-ground, and he called out to Thor to stop.

"Oh, no, not yet," said Thor, bending steadily over his oars; "we must go a good distance beyond this."

Thor pulled with such tremendous power that they were soon far out to sea, and Hymer began to be frightened. "If you don't stop," he called out, "we shall be over the Midgard-serpent."

Thor paid no attention, but rowed on until they were far out of sight of land and about where he thought the great snake was coiled in the bottom of the sea; then he laid down the oars, as fresh and strong apparently as when he got into the boat. It was the strangest fishing party the world ever saw, and the most wonderful fishing. No sooner had Hymer's bait touched the water than it was seized by two whales. Thor smiled quietly at the giant's luck, took out a fishing-line, made with wonderful skill, and so strong that it could not be broken, fastened the bull's head upon the hook and cast it into the sea. The Midgard-serpent instantly seized it, and in a second the hook was fast in its palate. Then came a furious struggle between the strong god and the terrible monster which was the dread of the whole earth.

Stung by the pain, the serpent writhed and pulled so hard that Thor had to brace himself against the side of the boat. When he found that the snake had taken his hook his wrath rose, and his divine strength came upon him. He pulled the line with such tremendous force that his feet went straight through the bottom of the boat, and he stood on the bed of the ocean while he drew the snake up to the side of the boat. The monster, convulsed with pain, reared its terrible head out of the water, its glittering eyes flashing, its whole vast body writhing and churning the ocean into a whirlpool of eddying foam. Thor's eyes blazed with wrath, and he held the serpent in a grasp like a vise. The uproar was like a terrible storm, and the boat, the fishers, and the snake were hidden by columns of foam that rose in the air. No one can tell what the end would have been if Hymer, trembling with fright and seeing the boat about to sink, had not sprung forward and cut the line just as Thor was raising his hammer to crush the serpent's head. The snake sank at once to the bottom of the sea, and Thor, turning upon the giant, struck him such a blow under the ear that he fell headlong into the water. The giant got back to the boat, however, and they rowed to land, taking the two whales with them.

When they reached shore Thor was still filled with rage at the meddlesome giant, because he had lost him the serpent, but he quietly picked up the boat and carried it home, Hymer taking the whales. Once more under his own roof, the giant's courage returned, and he challenged Thor to show his strength by breaking his drinking-cup. Thor sat down and, taking the cup, hurled it against a pillar. It flew through the air, crashed against the stone, bounded back, and was picked up as whole and perfect as when it came into Thor's hands. He was puzzled, but Tyr's beautiful fair-haired mother whispered to him, "Throw it at Hymer's forehead; it is harder than any drinking-cup."

Thor drew in all his godlike strength and dashed the cup with a terrific effort at Hymer. The forehead was unharmed, but the cup was scattered in a thousand pieces over the floor. Hymer had lost a great treasure by the experiment, but he only said, "That drink was too hot. Perhaps you will take the kettle off now," he added with a sneer.

Tyr immediately laid hands on the kettle, but he could not move it an inch. Then Thor took the great pot in his hands and drew it up with such a mighty effort that his feet went through the stone floor of the hall, but he lifted it and, placing it on his head like a mighty helmet, walked off, the rings of the kettle clanging about his feet. The two gods walked swiftly away from the hall where so many troubles and labors had awaited them, and it was a long time before Thor turned to look back. When he did, it was not a moment too soon, for Hymer was close behind, with a multitude of many-headed giants, in hot pursuit.

In one minute Thor had lifted the kettle off his head and put it on the ground, in another he was swinging the hammer among the giants, and in another, when the lightnings had gone out and the thunder had died in awful echoes among the hills, Tyr and Thor were alone on the field.

They went on to Egil, mounted the chariot and drove the goats swiftly on to AEger's, where the gods were impatiently waiting for the kettle. There was straightway a mighty brewing of ale, Thor told the story of his adventures in search of the kettle, and the feast went merrily on.