

Odin Wins for Men the Magic

Mead

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Nordic

Easy

13 min read

It was the Dwarfs who brewed the Magic Mead, and it was the Giants who hid it away. But it was Odin who brought it from the place where it was hidden and gave it to the sons of men. Those who drank of the Magic Mead became very wise, and not only that but they could put their wisdom into such beautiful words that every one who heard would love and remember it.

The Dwarfs brewed the Magic Mead through cruelty and villainy. They made it out of the blood of a man. The man was Kvasir the Poet. He had wisdom, and he had such beautiful words with it, that what he said was loved and remembered by all. The Dwarfs brought Kvasir down into their caverns and they killed him there. “Now,” they said, “we have Kvasir’s blood and Kvasir’s wisdom. No one else will have his wisdom but us.” They poured the blood into three jars and they mixed it with honey, and from it they brewed the Magic Mead.

Having killed a man the Dwarfs became more and more bold. They came out of their caverns and went up and down through Midgard, the World of Men. They went into Jötunheim, and began to play their evil tricks on the most harmless of the Giants.

They came upon one Giant who was very simple. Gilling was his name. They persuaded Gilling to row them out to sea in a boat. Then the two most cunning of the Dwarfs, Galar and Fialar, steered the boat on to a rock. The

boat split. Gilling, who could not swim, was drowned. The Dwarfs clambered up on pieces of the boat and came safely ashore. They were so delighted with their evil tricks that they wanted to play some more of them.

Galar and Fialar then thought of a new piece of mischief they might do. They led their band of Dwarfs to Gilling's house and screamed out to his wife that Gilling was dead. The Giant's wife began to weep and lament. At last she rushed out of the house weeping and clapping her hands. Now Galar and Fialar had clambered up on the lintel of the house, and as she came running out they cast a millstone on her head. It struck her and Gilling's wife fell down dead. More and more the Dwarfs were delighted at the destruction they were making.

They were so insolent now that they made up songs and sang them, songs that were all a boast of how they had killed Kvasir the Poet, and Gilling the Giant, and Gilling's wife. They stayed around Jötunheim, tormenting all whom they were able to torment, and flattering themselves that they were great and strong. They stayed too long, however. Suttung, Gilling's brother, tracked them down and captured them.

Suttung was not harmless and simple like Gilling, his brother. He was cunning and he was covetous. Once they were in his hands the Dwarfs had no chance of making an escape. He took them and left them on a rock in the sea, a rock that the tide would cover.

The Giant stood up in the water taller than the rock, and the tide as it came in did not rise above his knees. He stood there watching the Dwarfs as the water rose up round them and they became more and more terrified.

"Oh, take us off the rock, good Suttung," they cried out to him. "Take us off the rock and we will give you gold and jewels. Take us off the rock and we will give you a necklace as beautiful as Brisिंगamen." So they cried out to him, but the Giant Suttung only laughed at them. He had no need of gold or jewels.

Then Fialar and Galar cried out: "Take us off the rock and we will give you the jars of the Magic Mead we have brewed."

"The Magic Mead," said Suttung. "This is something that no one else has. It would be well to get it, for it might help us in the battle against the Gods. Yes, I will get the Magic Mead from them."

He took the band of Dwarfs off the rock, but he held Galar and Fialar, their chiefs, while the others went into their caverns and brought up the jars of the Magic Mead. Suttung took the Mead and brought it to a cavern in a mountain near his dwelling. And thus it happened that the Magic Mead, brewed by the Dwarfs through cruelty and villainy, came into the hands of the Giants. And the story now tells how Odin, the Eldest of the Gods, at

that time in the world as Vegtam the Wanderer, took the Magic Mead out of Suttung's possession and brought it into the world of men.

Now, Suttung had a daughter named Gunnlöd, and she by her goodness and her beauty was like Gerda and Skadi, the Giant maids whom the Dwellers in Asgard favored. Suttung, that he might have a guardian for the Magic Mead, enchanted Gunnlöd, turning her from a beautiful Giant maiden into a witch with long teeth and sharp nails. He shut her into the cavern where the jars of the Magic Mead were hidden.

Odin heard of the death of Kvasir whom he honored above all men. The Dwarfs who slew him he had closed up in their caverns so that they were never again able to come out into the World of Men. And then he set out to get the Magic Mead that he might give it to men, so that, tasting it, they would have wisdom, and words would be at their command that would make wisdom loved and remembered.

How Odin won the Magic Mead out of the rock-covered cavern where Suttung had hidden it, and how he broke the enchantment that lay upon Gunnlöd, Suttung's daughter, is a story often told around the hearths of men.

Nine strong thralls were mowing in a field as a Wanderer went by clad in a dark blue cloak and carrying a wanderer's staff in his hand. One of the thralls spoke to the Wanderer: "Tell them in the house of Baugi up yonder that I can mow no more until a whetstone to sharpen my scythe is sent to me." "Here is a whetstone," said the Wanderer, and he took one from his belt. The thrall who had spoken whetted his scythe with it and began to mow. The grass went down before his scythe as if the wind had cut it. "Give us the whetstone, give us the whetstone," cried the other thralls. The Wanderer threw the whetstone amongst them, leaving them quarreling over it, and went on his way.

The Wanderer came to the house of Baugi, the brother of Suttung. He rested in Baugi's house, and at supper time he was given food at the great table. And while he was eating with the Giant a Messenger from the field came in.

"Baugi," said the Messenger, "your nine thralls are all dead. They killed each other with their scythes, fighting in the field about a whetstone. There are no thralls now to do your work."

"What shall I do, what shall I do?" said Baugi the Giant. "My fields will not be mown now, and I shall have no hay to feed my cattle and my horses in the winter."

“I might work for you,” said the Wanderer.

“One man’s work is no use to me,” said the Giant, “I must have the work of nine men.”

“I shall do the work of nine men,” said the Wanderer, “give me a trial, and see.”

The next day Vegtam the Wanderer went into Baugi’s field. He did as much work as the nine thralls had done in a day.

“Stay with me for the season,” said Baugi, “and I shall give you a full reward.”

So Vegtam stayed at the Giant’s house and worked in the Giant’s fields, and when all the work of the season was done Baugi said to him:

“Speak now and tell me what reward I am to give you.”

“The only reward I shall ask of you,” said Vegtam, “is a draught of the Magic Mead.”

“The Magic Mead?” said Baugi. “I do not know where it is nor how to get it.”

“Your brother Suttung has it. Go to him and claim a draught of the Magic Mead for me.”

Baugi went to Suttung. But when he heard what he had come for, the Giant Suttung turned on his brother in a rage.

“A draught of the Magic Mead?” he said. “To no one will I give a draught of the Magic Mead. Have I not enchanted my daughter Gunnlöd, so that she may watch over it? And you tell me that a Wanderer who has done the work of nine men for you asks a draught of the Magic Mead for his fee! O Giant as foolish as Gilling! O oaf of a Giant! Who could have done such work for you, and who would demand such a fee from you, but one of our enemies, the Æsir? Go from me now and never come to me again with talk of the Magic Mead.”

Baugi went back to his house and told the Wanderer that Suttung would yield none of the Magic Mead. “I hold you to your bargain,” said Vegtam the Wanderer, “and you will have to get me the fee I asked. Come with me now and help me to get it.”

He made Baugi bring him to the place where the Magic Mead was hidden. The place was a cavern in the mountain. In front of that cavern was a great mass of stone.

“We cannot move that stone nor get through it,” said Baugi. “I cannot help you to your fee.”

The Wanderer drew an auger from his belt. “This will bore through the rock if there is strength behind it. You have the strength, Giant. Begin now and bore.”

Baugi took the auger in his hands and bored with all his strength, and the Wanderer stood by leaning on his staff, calm and majestic in his cloak of blue.

“I have made a deep, deep hole. It goes through the rock,” Baugi said, at last.

The Wanderer went to the hole and blew into it. The dust of the rock flew back into their faces.

“So that is your boasted strength, Giant,” he said. “You have not bored half-way through the rock. Work again.”

Then Baugi took the auger again and he bored deeper and deeper into the rock. And he blew into it, and lo! His breath went through. Then he looked at the Wanderer to see what he would do; his eyes had become fierce and he held the auger in his hand as if it were a stabbing knife.

“Look up to the head of the rock,” said the Wanderer. As Baugi looked up the Wanderer changed himself into a snake and glided into the hole in the rock. And Baugi struck at him with the auger, hoping to kill him, but the snake slipped through.

Behind the mighty rock there was a hollow place all lighted up by the shining crystals in the rock. And within the hollow place there was an ill-looking witch, with long teeth and sharp nails. But she sat there rocking herself and letting tears fall from her eyes. “O youth and beauty,” she sang, “O sight of men and women, sad, sad for me it is that you are shut away, and that I have only this closed-in cavern and this horrible form.”

A snake glided across the floor. “Oh, that you were deadly and that you might slay me,” cried the witch. The snake glided past her. Then she heard a voice speak softly: “Gunnlöd, Gunnlöd!” She looked round, and there standing behind her was a majestic man, clad in a cloak of dark blue, Odin, the Eldest of the Gods.

“You have come to take the Magic Mead that my father has set me here to guard,” she cried. “You shall not have it. Rather shall I spill it out on the thirsty earth of the cavern.”

“Gunnlöd,” he said, and he came to her. She looked at him and she felt the red blood of youth come back into her cheeks. She put her hands with their sharp nails over her breast, and she felt the nails drive into her flesh. “Save me from all this ugliness,” she cried.

“I will save you,” Odin said. He went to her. He took her hands and held them. He kissed her on the mouth. All the marks of ill favor went from her. She was no longer bent, but tall and shapely. Her eyes became wide and deep blue. Her mouth became red and her hands soft and beautiful. She became as fair as Gerda, the Giant maid whom Frey had wed.

They stayed looking at each other, then they sat down side by side and talked softly to each other, Odin, the Eldest of the Gods, and Gunnlöd, the beautiful Giant maiden.

She gave him the three jars of the Magic Mead and she told him she would go out of the cavern with him. Three days passed and still they were together. Then Odin by his wisdom found hidden paths and passages that led out of the cavern and he brought Gunnlöd out into the light of the day.

And he brought with him the jars of the Magic Mead, the Mead whose taste gives wisdom, and wisdom in such beautiful words that all love and remember it. And Gunnlöd, who had tasted a little of the Magic Mead, wandered through the world singing of the beauty and the might of Odin, and of her love for him.

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