

The Dragon's Blood

Padraic Colum

Nordic

Easy

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Sigurd went to war: with the men that King Alv gave him he marched into the country that was ruled over by the slayer of his father. The war that he waged was short and the battles that he won were not perilous. Old was King Lygni now, and feeble was his grasp upon his people. Sigurd slew him and took away his treasure and added his lands to the lands of King Alv.

But Sigurd was not content with the victory he had gained. He had dreamt of stark battles and of renown that would be hardily won. What was the war he had waged to the wars that Sigmund his father, and Volsung his father's father, had waged in their days? Not content was Sigurd. He led his men back by the hills from the crests of which he could look upon the Dragon's haunts. And having come as far as those hills he bade his men return to King Alv's hall with the spoils he had won.

They went, and Sigurd stayed upon the hills and looked across Gnita Heath to where Fafnir the Dragon had his lair. All blasted and wasted was the Heath with the fiery breath of the Dragon. And he saw the cave where Fafnir abode, and he saw the track that his comings and goings made. For every day the Dragon left his cave in the cliffs, crossing the Heath to come to the River at which he drank.

For the length of a day Sigurd watched from the hills the haunt of the Dragon. In the evening he saw him lengthening himself out of the cave, and coming on his track across the Heath, in seeming like a ship that travels swiftly because of its many oars.

Then to Regin in his smithy he came. To that cunning man Sigurd said:

“Tell me all thou dost know of Fafnir the Dragon.”

Regin began to talk, but his speech was old and strange and filled with runes. When he had spoken it all Sigurd said, “All thou hast told me thou wilt have to say over again in a speech that is known to men of our day.”

Then said Regin: “Of a hoard I spoke. The Dwarf Andvari guarded it from the first days of the world. But one of the Æsir forced Andvari to give the hoard to him, masses of gold and heaps of jewels, and the Æsir gave it to Hreidmar, who was my father.

“For the slaying of his son Otter the Æsir gave the hoard to Hreidmar, the greatest hoard that had ever been seen in the world. But not long was it left to Hreidmar to gloat over. For a son slew a father that he might possess that hoard. Fafnir, that son was Fafnir, my brother.

“Then Fafnir, that no one might disturb his possession of the hoard, turned himself into a Dragon, a Dragon so fearful that none dare come nigh him. And I, Regin, was stricken with covetousness of the hoard. I did not change myself into another being, but, by the magic my father knew, I made my life longer than the generations of men, hoping that I would see Fafnir slain and then have the mighty hoard under my hands.

“Now, son of the Volsungs, thou dost know all that has to do with Fafnir the Dragon, and the great hoard that he guards.”

“Little do I care about the hoard he guards,” Sigurd said. “I care only that he has made the King’s good lands into a waste and that he is an evil thing to men. I would have the renown of slaying Fafnir the Dragon.”

“With Gram, the sword thou hast, thou couldst slay Fafnir,” Regin cried, his body shaken with his passion for the hoard. “Thou couldst slay him with the sword thou hast. Harken now and I will tell thee how thou mightst give him the deathly stroke through the coils of his mail. Harken, for I have thought of it all.

“The track of the Dragon to the River is broad, for he takes ever the one track. Dig a pit in the middle of that

track, and when Fafnir comes over it strike up into his coils of mail with Gram, thy great sword. Gram only may pierce that mail. Then will Fafnir be slain and the hoard will be left guardless.”

“What thou sayst is wise, Regin,” Sigurd answered. “We will make this pit and I will strike Fafnir in the way thou sayst.”

Then Sigurd went and he rode upon Grani, his proud horse, and he showed himself to King Alv and to Hiordis, his mother. Afterwards he went with Regin to the Heath that was the haunt of the Dragon, and in his track they dug a pit for the slaying of Fafnir.

And, lest his horse should scream aloud at the coming of the Dragon, Sigurd had Grani sent back to a cave in the hills. It was Regin that brought Grani away. “I am fearful and can do nothing to help thee, son of the Volsungs,” he said. “I will go away and await the slaying of Fafnir.”

He went, and Sigurd lay down in the pit they had made and practiced thrusting upward with his sword. He lay with his face upward and with his two hands he thrust the mighty sword upward.

But as he lay there he bethought of a dread thing that might happen; namely, that the blood and the venom of the Dragon might pour over him as he lay there, and waste him flesh and bone. When he thought of this Sigurd hastened out of the pit, and he dug other pits near by, and he made a passage for himself from one pit to the other that he might escape from the flow of the Dragon’s envenomed blood.

As he lay down again in the pit he heard the treading of the Dragon and he heard the Dragon’s strange and mournful cry. Mightily the Dragon came on and he heard his breathing. His shape came over the pit. Then the Dragon held his head and looked down on Sigurd.

It was the instant for him to make stroke with Gram. He did not let the instant pass. He struck mightily under the shoulder and toward the heart of the beast. The sword went through the hard and glittering scales that were the creature’s mail. Sigurd pulled out the sword and drew himself through the passage and out into the second pit as Fafnir’s envenomed blood drenched where he had been.

Drawing himself up out of the second pit he saw the huge shape of Fafnir heaving and lashing. He came to him and thrust his sword right through the Dragon’s neck. The Dragon reared up as though to fling himself down on Sigurd with all his crushing bulk and dread talons, with his fiery breath and his envenomed blood. But Sigurd leaped aside and ran far off. Then did Fafnir scream his death scream. After he had torn up rocks with

his talons he lay prone on the ground, his head in the pit that was filled with his envenomed blood.

Then did Regin, hearing the scream that let him know that Fafnir was slain, come down to where the battle had been fought. When he saw that Sigurd was alive and unharmed he uttered a cry of fury. For his plan had been to have Sigurd drowned and burnt in the pit with the stream of Fafnir's envenomed blood.

But he mastered his fury and showed a pleased countenance to Sigurd. "Now thou wilt have renown," he cried. "Forever wilt thou be called Sigurd, Fafnir's Bane. More renown than ever any of thy fathers had wilt thou have, O Prince of the Volsungs."

So he spoke, saying fair words to him, for now that he was left alive there was something he would have Sigurd do.

"Fafnir is slain," Sigurd said, "and the triumph over him was not lightly won. Now may I show myself to King Alv and to my mother, and the gold from Fafnir's hoard will make me a great spoil."

"Wait," said Regin cunningly. "Wait. Thou hast yet to do something for me. With the sword thou hast, cut through the Dragon and take out his heart for me. When thou hast taken it out, roast it that I may eat of it and become wiser than I am. Do this for me who showed thee how to slay Fafnir."

Sigurd did what Regin would have him do. He cut out the heart of the Dragon and he hung it from stakes to roast. Regin drew away and left him. As Sigurd stood before the fire putting sticks upon it there was a great silence in the forest.

He put his hand down to turn an ashen branch into the heart of the fire. As he did a drop from the roasting Dragon-heart fell upon his hand. The drop burnt into him. He put his hand to his mouth to ease the smart, and his tongue tasted the burning blood of the Dragon.

He went to gather wood for the fire. In a clearing that he came to there were birds; he saw four on a branch together. They spoke to each other in birds' notes, and Sigurd heard and knew what they were saying.

Said the first bird: "How simple is he who has come into this dell! He has no thought of an enemy, and yet he who was with him but a while ago has gone away that he may bring a spear to slay him."

"For the sake of the gold that is in the Dragon's cave he would slay him," said the second bird.

And the third bird said: "If he would eat the Dragon's heart himself he would know all wisdom."

But the fourth bird said: "He has tasted a drop of the Dragon's blood and he knows what we are saying."

The four birds did not fly away nor cease from speaking. Instead they began to tell of a marvelous abode that was known to them.

Deep in the forest, the birds sang, there was a Hall that was called the House of Flame. Its ten walls were Uni, Iri, Barri, Ori, Varns, Vegdrasil, Derri, Uri, Dellinger, Atvarder, and each wall was built by the Dwarf whose name it bore. All round the Hall there was a circle of fire through which none might pass. And within the Hall a maiden slept, and she was the wisest and the bravest and the most beautiful maiden in the world.

Sigurd stood like a man enchanted listening to what the birds sang.

But suddenly they changed the flow of their discourse, and their notes became sharp and piercing.

"Look, look!" cried one. "He is coming against the youth."

"He is coming against the youth with a spear," cried another.

"Now will the youth be slain unless he is swift," cried a third.

Sigurd turned round and he saw Regin treading the way toward him, grim and silent, with a spear in his hands. The spear would have gone through Sigurd had he stayed one instant longer in the place where he had been listening to the speech of the birds. As he turned he had his sword in his hand, and he flung it, and Gram struck Regin on the breast.

Then Regin cried out: "I die—I die without having laid my hands on the hoard that Fafnir guarded. Ah, a curse was upon the hoard, for Hreidmar and Fafnir and I have perished because of it. May the curse of the gold now fall on the one who is my slayer."

Then did Regin breathe out his life. Sigurd took the body and cast it into the pit that was alongside the dead Fafnir. Then, that he might eat the Dragon's heart and become the wisest of men, he went to where he had left it roasting. And he thought that when he had eaten the heart he would go into the Dragon's cave and carry away the treasure that was there, and bring it as spoil of his battle to King Alv and to his mother. Then he would go through the forest and find the House of Flame where slept the maiden who was the wisest and

bravest and most beautiful in the world.

But Sigurd did not eat the Dragon's heart. When he came to where he had left it roasting he found that the fire had burnt it utterly.

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