

Odin's Visit to King Geirroð

I.

What time man's race hath stretched all 'cross the earth
Like wild wheat blown by wind – 'cross champaigns wide,
'Cross heaths and meads, pastoral tracts and groves,
'Cross shaws and bogs, to sharpest, harshest climes –
What time Kon's sons have spread, and all who trace
Their fathers back through ages unto Ask,
To Midgard's limn, in farthest hinterlands
Having now settled: Then gods turn their minds,
Those lofty beings half-mortal, and their thralls,
Their demi-servants, heralds, couriers,
Their floating flunkies, magic ministers,
And all such crews so numerous, upon
The intrigues and the loves of middle-world,
On feuds much hanging, marriages, affairs,
Intrigues, much marveling o'er hearty deeds
While kingdoms wax or minish, rivals plot,
Lovers break faith, or brother-bonds are cut,
Blood spouts and spatters, crowns pass brow to brow,
A noble's swift made prince, but falls again,
And nations rage, and halls are burnt and fall
To soil, which is the ashes of all things:
Such stuff to gods is food for gossiping,
Palaver of the idle deities
Lounging on sunlit settees in the clouds
Or leaning wrists on Valhall's window-ledge,
Pointing to battles, wag'ring who shall win
In games of iron or heart; and destined men
Disparpled 'mongst the nations and the years
Whose threads the Norns have spun so long and gold,
Most specially draw ears and eyes divine
To listen to their speeches, witness feats

Of sword and wooing on the Midgard-stage –
Of ill wyrms skewered, noble lines begot,
And tumults wild aroused.

From lofty throne,
Set o'er all greenish vagueness like a guard
Or caretaker, the northern Jove oft deigns
To follow with his ruth as well as sight
Some downcast one who strives but fails, beset
By dismal circumstance and nemesis
Knitted for him ere Jord first sprawled in bloom:
That man who falls 'midst strikes and perfidies
Carved in the tree of fate long ere his day –
Oh valiant one, condemned! – yet, god as well
With thund'rous exultation and dread roar
Of storm's acclaim, will conquerer celebrate
At his ascension o'er the princely pack,
Who gathers utmost crown by weapon-edge,
Gath'ring the war-wracked realms: Then doth sky-plain
Of raging and mist-passion of the storms
Affright all but the hero, who below
With fiend-grim brow, and face still flecked with red,
Stern-recognizes Odin's hail and cheer.

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Wakes pristine morning, pure and naked-skied,
When Frigg spins not her wheel for a spell,
But sitteth with her husband at their tower
Like female eagle by her lordly mate
O'erwatching lands from eyrie in the rocks,
And all things 'cross the crystal air discerns
With eye disdainful... though some sparkle, fond,
In dewy orb blinks sometimes o'er a wight
Or gentle creature, tender on the tufts
Of much-nooked dells, by streams the nixies weep,

The gentle hills and dales, easeful, flowered,
Soft beds where soft heads drowse: For child or fawn,
For lonely rabbit, lamb with family
Her eye might wet, or stern lips smile a bit,
Ere to the darker lengths her view return –
To stones which hold cold hints of ill in them
O'er miles of grayness yonder, shunned by light:
Unnerving tracts, abysses man ne'er glimpsed
Where wind holds forth alone – lands never known
To mortals, and but dimly glimpsed by gods,
So far they're off.

Yet 'mongst the nearer cliffs
Of margin-world, Frigg spies in cavern's craw
One scene intriguing, fixing fast her sight:
A man clapped in she-giant's fat embrace,
Her collops pillowing him, her wanton flesh
Bulging around his nakedness, whilst bairns
Crawl o'er her sweaty meat as deep she breathes,
Kneading their jotun-mother 'midst the dust,
Jostling for suck and warmth.

Noting wife's gaze,
All-Father squints upon the mingled pair
All squished beneath their kids, snoring through hours
While babes do pule and groan, and gloats to Frigg:
"How fares thy Agnar, joined to giant-wife,
Smushed by half-breed brats – cast off so far
From realm that might have been his heritage
As eldest son of Hrauthung? Dost recall,
Oh Frigg, season of old, when boys we found,
Bewildered, weeping in their grounded skiff
At riverbank, blown by an autumn storm
And carried by the rising of the rains
While they'd been fishing – and we each took one
By hand, disguised as peasant man and wife,

To keep them 'gainst wolf-winter's sharp-fanged bite?"

To which doth Scandinavia's Hera speak:
"Indeed; and all those scenes live in my mind
When we as foster parents wisdom taught
To protégés in various arts of life –
To Agnar, ten years old – and two years shy
Of him, thy Geirrod. And no less do I
Remember how thou spakest in his ear,
The younger one, thy special charge, just ere,
In spring's warmth once the river's ice did thaw,
We watched them take to fishing-boat again
To paddle back to Hrauthung... And I view
How now the elder, and my favorite, bides
A thousand leagues from where he ought have reigned
After his father's death, whilst in his stead
His younger brother o'er their hall holds sway
Full undisputed; and the years proceed
Deep into manhood, robbing one of crown
And lending other what he ought not wear.
Somewhat I wonder what thou mightst have said
To fosterling of thine by river's side,
Oh husband."

"Thou hast cause to wonder it,"

Odin replies, "for nothing innocent
Were whispered words of mine. Having grown far
In fatherly affection, partial much
To one I saw as vastly worthier than
Thine own, this thing I bade my charge perform:
That when, upstream, the river's bank they reached
Of father's realm, that Geirrod ought to leap
On land ere brother did, their only oar
Tossing on shore – and then, with sudden heave
Push off that skiff, poor Agnar still within,
So vig'rously, to downstream send him swift

'Mongst gurgles spinning surly, flowing quick
With steerage none toward creeks distant and strange:
A willow-world, all whirls of wheezing air
Beneath the dank shade and the drooping boughs,
Until to realm so far-flung might he wash
And desolate, none might his language hear –
Or if some did, not understand his tongue.

“From this same seat, oh Queen and love of mine,
Such deed watched I, my boy’s boldness well proved,
And saw how Agnar, stranded on a beach
Well nigh the river’s end, society
Did seek amongst the jötnar, making wife
One of their fleshy women, and did sire
Prodigious scores of whelps in caverns wet –
A breed of mouths, a bawling chorus-brood
Wailing like pups all daylight hours for meat
And most the night... Like animal he squats
And scratches, and roams hunting on the heaths
With beastly roving eye, alert for prey,
Clubbing the stag and chasing nimble hare
To feed his cave of maws.”

“What thoughts remain
Of tragic childhood in his skull?” Frigg saith,
Wounded and wond’ring, weeping, worried much.
“What human feelings still his heart might touch?
What memories of father and old hall,
Of foster parents’ winter-care – and how
His brother him delivered to the wild
Caprice of stream and current? Do they wane,
Shrivel and waste, soft sentiments of prince,
Wither in wilderness, all sweet heart-bits
What made the noble boy? Agnar I sat
On lap so many evenings, teaching him
The ways of regal virtue, thinking he

Should Hrauthung sure surpass in temper's test
And trials of trust when back to realm he rowed
And father failed of fettle... But thy trick
Wastes all, and younger son takes what's not his:
The fealty of knights lies at his feet
And vassals wear his rings. Unworthy much,
That one corrupted by thy urged ill deed:
Usurping ruler! And, added to crime
Of boyhood, many cruel deeds as a man –
For it is told me by my messengers
Of earth-roads, that the king of Hrauthung's hall
To visitors is vicious! – passing fierce,
His guests trussing and setting 'twixt two fires
To sweat in pain for days and nights – for he
Distrusts all strangers who approach his door,
Thinking them beggars, parasites, and thieves –
And so them murders 'tween the roaring flames,
Betraying far his duty of king's grace –
And more, with fare is stingy, sparing cup,
Withholding all he hath, cheating his lords,
Staining his father's fame! How better far
Had Agnar mine ascended, for that soul
Who feeds an offspring-multitude would treat
His vassals with no mean and chary hand,
Nor punish one who sought his mead hall's warmth,
But lavish much on known and unknown man,
Thus honoring those who raised him!"

To which words

All-Father saith: "Such news was spoken thee
By sycophants, I trow, and those who seek
Thy favors, speaking black things of my charge,
The one who won, and ruled, and's ruling still,
No injury on brother visiting,
But merely grasping what a younger's owed
If he is keener, crafty, and through ways

Much clouded, hampered, views the gloried shine
Waiting in upper heights, those seats and tiers
Celestial, of gods, and worthy men
Plucked up to Valhall! How's audacity
Not switcher of birth order? How's it not
Priority: annuler of short years
Delaying the true first-born? Geirrod I
Only impelled to walk what Norns had deemed
Should be his path – and Agnar only fell
In fosse was waiting for him, miles wide,
Unnethe to be avoided. Do not grieve,
Oh wife, for Agnar lives as much a king
As brother, in his own palace and realm:
His hinterland of wolves, witches, and pits
'Midst black-rose glow of lands at edge of all,
With demi-trolls for subjects, imps and elves –
A kingdom vaster, and more awful, grand,
Than little home what Hrauthung owned.”

To this

Replies foreknowing goddess: “If thou sitt'st
So sure in Geirrod's kindness to his guest
And greater virtue than the one he spoiled
Of rightful seat – then put it to the test:
Don wanted broad-brimmed hat of wandering ways
And robe and staff, and put off all such pow'rs
No human hath – stride down, be just a man,
As weak as Midgard's denizens, and walk
To see what welcome favored king imparts
To poor stream-journeyer, dangler of lines,
A rustic paddler, puffed by sudden gasp
Of strong wind – washed up, grounded on a bank
He's never been before. If kingly cheer
And place at table greet thee, then return,
And king whom thou didst raise shall know my grace
Of favor, well as thine – but if thou meet'st

What's rather different, bondage and the flame,
With not one water drop on tongue for weeks,
Such suffering shall be thy chastisement,
And Geirrod sure thy curse shall then deserve,
To be enacted once thy force resume,
And godly power work vengeance."

"We shall learn
What faithfulness holds sway in Hrauthung's hall,"
All-Father saith, "toward humble man, a wight
As far removed from gods as looks suggest;
And if – unlikely! – Geirrod hath turned vile
In hospitality, my anguish on
A fire's verge shall serve for penitence.
Look thou from here on what transpires below,
And we shall know if I did right or ill."
And from that high place Odin takes his leave
With stately slowness – sometime afterward
Doth Frigga follow, but to Fensalir
Her course is bent, not Valhall: in her manse
Built o'er cool marish tracts and hot spring fields
She Fulla greets, her loyal chambermaid
With golden band in topknot gathering
Wild amber hair; and at her lady's boots
That girl is scrubbing.

"Oh maid Bountiful,"
The mistress speaks, "I've special task for thee,
To be dispatched directly – idle not
Upon thy way once I've informed thee where
Thy horse shall, bounding, bear thee." And she leans
Down to her servant, breathes the words in ear;
And smiling, handmaid nods to brief command,
Then from that room is quick, and to her steed
Hastes with mischievous heart.

Down avenues

Of sunlight and the vaporous welkin's shine
She spurs her fearer of the whip, whilst from
Cloud-tufts and apertures in castle walls
Angels and valkyries watch steep descent,
So rare in speed, through spaces rich and warm
With Sol's bright passions, sparkling urgency
Impelling servant-goddess down toward hills
Through voids of cold air, down toward forest zones
And roads to Geirrod's kingdom.

Harried, pale,

And haggard cast of face she lends herself
As hall she neareth, dropping heaven-shine
From self and horse, that none might know from where
She haileth, or who is. To warder placed
Outside the door, she speaks with gentle breath:
"A message to thy king – bear it within:
I am a village girl by family sent
To warn of one who neareth hall e'en now:
With broad-brimmed hat and swishing robe of gray,
With staff and beard, and look of centuries
Glinting in's eyes, a mystic mien and air,
He seemeth sure some worker of weird deeds,
Strange sorcerer, magician! Weal or grief
He bringeth, none might tell... but family mine,
Mother and father, say they've heard of one
Who traveleth much, alone, all 'cross this world
In just such guise, dark exploits practicing
Behind the backs of lords who lend their trust
And take him in their councils. Treason's stab
Of dagger comes with him – but he'll be known,
Past doubt, by one sure sign: No hound there lives
Who'll bark at him, though he a stranger be,
For something in a dog's nose scents his ill
And power to hex the one who crosses him!

To lord of thine speak this – his stride comes quick,
That man who stalks upon this very door!
Beware – and may the gods fend Geirrod’s head!”

II.

Some dreadful atmosphere sits with the murk
Of misty midday – sits on countenance
Of guard who doorway opes, who to the grim
Firelit and smoke-choked room of royal scowl
Admits the traveler.

“Greetings, Geirrod, King!”

Saith man so wizard-whiskered, hoary, bent.
“Hail to Hrauthung’s son – and vassals, hail,
Ye worthy court, this top seat of the blessed:
Tall point of majesty midst Midgard’s green!
I am poor fisherman – my boat is wrecked.
How many days without roof’s second hat
Have roamed poor I, whilst Gimle’s water drops
Soaked through these weeds as often as the steed
Of beams shone down to dry them! Sleep would I
This evening here, in alcove or in room,
Disturbing none, I promise, cloaked with coat,
Content with scraps in stomach, ere I go
In early morning... By thy leave, oh King,
This humble trav’ler (Grimnir is my name)
Asks space to stay, and fare for just this eve.”

And sovereign stern, set ’midst array of knights,
Retainers, lords, notes well what silence keep
His hunting hounds – how cowed, quiet, subdued
They hunch against a corner, not one howl
Or growl emerging from them, when their wont’s
To sing and gruff when strange one’s in their midst,

Stillling their throats only at master's word.
How doubtful now all ring-wearers trade looks,
Frowning on him who surely soon shall rue
His passing through the door!

“Guards – bind that man!”

Hollers the ruler. “Tight, and double tight!
My dogs he's hushed with evil threat'ning spell,
This caster low, malign! And raise two fires
To either side where fellow here shall writhe,
Bound to a stake, to sweat, and choke of thirst,
Slow-perishing so near the seething coals!”

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And so nine days, nine nights of anguish spend
Repenting god, Grimnir the fisherman,
Betwixt two blazes ever heaped and fed,
Bonfires for torment! Self-shorn of all strength
To loose his bindings, Odin yet endures,
His tongue thirst-wracked, his stomach groaning sore,
By mortal pains oppressed, though safe from death
(His one reserved god-virtue).

Fire-crumbs eat

The fringes of his fur cloak. Deep in soul
All-Father moans, but outwardly he keeps
His fortress-face firm-guarded. “Frigga, thou
Didst judge aright my Geirrod as cruel king!
Somehow thou saw'st his evil – I did not,
Believing boy I reared endured still,
Too confident Time might not rot his heart
Or blow his soul's boat far from where I taught
His hand to steer it! Now corruption's crime
Doth wrong what once he was: his viciousness –
That I urged on? – turns rancid all his love;

And now the beads pour off my brow like rain,
And torture is the debt I pay to wife
Before her curse upon king's joined by mine,
The foster father's wrath!"

And that ninth night,
Into the hall so empty, soft intrudes
Inquiring boy: the realm's prince, Agnar hight,
Named for his uncle, whom the anxious king
Knew not whether was living, nor knows now –
And toward the singèd man such innocence
Of all the world's suffering doth sneak,
Moved by remorse, for father's deed he thinks
His own, and feels great guiltiness like heat
Swelling around him.

Oh Delight of Frigg,
Might young one succor thee? Look how he bears
A horn in hands... With gratitude and greed
And gasps, the god gulps down the water poured
In's mouth, and pants with vast relief, and speaks
(For now he might, his throat no longer parched):
"Walk back, oh boy – I would not see thee singèd
For sake of me, ling'ring so near the flames!
But tell – why dost thou risk thy father's ire
In aiding me, when nothing mightst thou gain
From saving one poor beggar?"

Agnar saith:
"I doubt much, sir, thou art what thou dost say –
Mere humble wight, some dangler of the line
In streams and pools thou find'st, who seeks his roof
But on occasion, in some hall or home
When falls the welkin's water-burden hard.
Nay, nor magician, as my father weens –
For magic ought have rent these meager bonds

With simple snap... and every wretch by now
Whom father's cruelly tormented by fire
Hath perished in thy place well ere ninth night!
They say – wise women, or the village fool,
The vala, or a skald much mead-inspired –
That sometimes (not too oft) an Asgard-being
Might semblance take of woman or of man
And 'mongst us mortals roam, to test or trick,
Impel, or rapture one of chosen soul
To play some part in stories of high feats:
Fightings and fracasés and fearsome frays,
Flubs, stunts, or victories, or dire defeats:
Some part within a tale divine and wild,
Touching bright spirits' mantels. Who thou art
I'll not make bold to guess... but hint in eye,
Like glint far deep in cavern, winks at me
That thou know'st secrets ne'er to men divulged.
Somewhat I'll ask thee only gods should wit;
And if thy answers spring like geyser-font,
I'll slash thy bindings.”

Grimnir grunts: “Say on,
And thou shalt learn what soul is stowed herein.”

So Agnar asks: “When rooster's call awakes
The Aesir in their homes on gloried plains
To hear the dooms proclaimed at well of Urd
By fateful Nornies three, of beings bright
And humble-dull alike – what steeds ride they,
That family of Asgard to great tree
Embracing space unending? Tell their names,
Each one – and stutter not, nor hesitate!”

And swiftly Grimnir saith: “Joyous is one,
And Gleaming, Golden, Shining are three more
The Aesir whip and spur on morning ride

To list to fate-words told by troll-maids three.
And now the rest I'll tell: Light-Feet, Gold-Topped,
Swift-Going, Silver-Topped, and Hollow-Hoofed,
And Sinewy are names of mounts gods keep
For journey from their hall to sacred trunk."

And Agnar smiles, and without pause proceeds:
"Thou answerest well – two questions more I'll say
To learn how far profound thy knowledge sounds:
Those shield-maidens who All-Father serve
Mead at Valhalla's table – tell who are!"

And man long fire-tortured speaks to boy:
"Those maidens are the twelve names that I'll say:
Randgrith and Skeggjold, Skogul, Hrist and Mist,
Hild, Gol, and Hlok, Herfjotur, Geironul,
And Thruth, and Reginleif: These women wait
On god at sumptuous table 'midst his force
Of light and lightning, past the rainbow's top,
Filling his goblet with a godly drink."

And Agnar beams, well pleased with words he's heard
From burnèd wise one, and last question puts,
Assured of answer: "Now – what rivers wind
Like thurse's veins across those awesome fields
Set far above us, hid in cloud-blast world
Of stormy rumbling indescribable?
What are those streams of Asgard?"

Grimnir opes

His mouth in triumph: "Great creeks seventeen
Do wet the wilderness that gods have tamed:
One Wine is called, in which dip horns and cups
All fellows who'd be happy in sky-realm,
Supping those purple billows capped with foam,
Carousing oft on ships that stream conveys!"

Way-Swift's another, which a boat might send
Like sleigh downhill o'er snow, from source to mouth
In flit of briefest day-dream... People-Thief
Doth surge, and drown the swimmer, gath'ring bones
At hungry graveyard-bottom, while Fish-Rich
E'er teems with grayling, trout, the pike and char
Like living flow of fins and slipp'ry scales,
So crammed it is; while Knife with weapons seethes,
A current carrying blades, daggers, and swords.
Burly is big, wide-shouldered as a man;
And Billow blows with waves as tall as wheat;
Stern tells no secrets on its placid face,
No ripple letting slip; while Storm runs fierce,
Maddened like ocean riled, tempest-beset;
And Gulp all crafts doth swallow! Sea-Wolf splits
In many rivulets, like milk beast gives
To sucking young ones; Wide doth hide its shore
From sight of soul who on the other stands –
But Wanting needs much rain to fill its ditch!
If stream there flows more cruel in any world
Than Bad, I know it not... Sea-Shore hath salt,
And guides the briny whale-road creatures in't;
While Clangor sounds like sword-strokes on a targe
As o'er harsh rocks it grinds – and lastly, Flash,
Its cousin-current, pokes the eye with pain
At every sun-glint! Now each stream I've told
Sliding through paradise – still mightst thou deem
I have not lived since nigh the world's birth?"

"No, lord," saith Agnar, "and I'm sure I guess
What majesty thou shalt disclose once cords
Lie at thy feet!" So, breathless, speaks the boy,
Then rips at ropes with flashing hunting knife
'Til Grimnir struggles free to leap away
From fires – and lands like one newborn to life!
And Agnar gapes to view revealed lord,

No more a dull gray bloke, but sparkling being –
The King of Asgard.

Geirrod on his throne
Appears to son of sudden, and to god
Who throws a radiant grandeur – and king stares
In trepidation as Ygg turns to speak:

“Betrayer of thy guest: Dost recognize
Thy guardian of one year’s winter-stretch,
Obscured by guise ’til now? Thou’st done great harm
To one not likely to forgive these flames –
And now his malediction joins his wife’s:
For Agnar looks to take throne, at the end!”

And wrathful, swift king rises, draws his sword,
And makes for bladeless Grimnir standing bright –
But throne-steps flummox feet, and sword he drops
Hilt down – he stumbles! – on the point so keen
His tunic’s pierced, and weight-pull runs him through...
And ’midst his blood now wallows dying lord
Whilst glares All-Father on such awful scene;
And Agnar gasps to watch such dire event
Shall lift him early to his kingdom’s seat.

