

Hymir's Kettle

What song is next for ye, oh goodly folk?
I'll tell of merry night in Aegir's manse,
Whose roof's the undulating waves that soak
The undersides of ships, that wet expanse
O'er which the porpoises oft leap and dance;
And in this hall the gods their thirst now douse
With mead poured by a pike, or carp, perchance:
The cup-bearers and servants are sea-trout;
A sturgeon is the steward of that house.

From conch-shells drink so sweet the gods imbibe,
And wipe their lips with sea-weed; but too soon
The honey-wine's all supped up! Groans and cries
Assail the host's ear; Lord of the Lagoons
Holds up his hands: "Dear friends, do not impugn
My hospitality! A meady lake
Would not fill ye! As much I might, I've brewed!
My kettle's not near big enough to make
Enough drink for your endless thirst to slake!"

Sea-vegetables assail the pleading god,
'Til Tyr the battle-hardened stills the guests:
"Ungrateful deities! No more do lob
Sea-cucumbers at him of hosts the best!
I know a kettle grander than the rest,
So spacious, could hold brew enough for meals
That end only with sun-up! To possess
Such cauldron, from a giant we must steal –
Hymir's the wealthy jotun from whom we'll

"Procure that sea-vast pot, famed far and wide.
To quell the rancor of this house, I mean
Beyond the river Ifing now to hie,
Great brewing-bowl to grab by crafty deed...
Whom might I have as stalwart company?"

And no time's lost before Warder of Men
With thunderous speech replies: "It shall be me!
I'll crack that fellow's hill of hair, and then
Be off with kettle – this shall make an end

"To thirsty throats in Aegir's drinking-hall!"
Now parch-mouthed Aesir cheer the Hurler's zest;
So with the next ascent of fiery ball
On its long voyage towards the slumbrous west,
Those gods set on their cookware-seeking quest
In wagon pulled by Hammer-Tosser's goats.
With icy mantle is the landscape dressed:
December wraps the world in shiv'ry coat,
As white as fur of snowy-season stoat.

Wee furry creatures in their burrows sleep,
And icicles like jaws of teeth do hang
From evergreen limbs and the houses' eaves;
And deep in holts where birds of summer sang
All's silence now, save when a frosty fang
Drops off and shatters with a tinkling sound,
Like glass cup breaking... In the Hurler's wain
The two gods listen to the hush around,
As softly rumble wheels o'er gelid ground.

The moon his sparkling face reveals thrice,
Each time hiding his flesh a little more,
As deities across Midgard do drive,
Through tunnels passing, crossing bridge and ford,
Through snowflake flurries, and the squalls that roar;
And three times Dag as well his course doth chase,
Ere charioteers pull up to massive door:
'Tis strengthly Hymir's stout, colossal place,
Where no god's ever dared to show his face.

The knocker Thunder Master clacks and clacks;
And grumbling and a fumbling's heard within.
Again at portal Maul-Lord whacks and whacks –

And now appears with snarly, twisted grin
Hymir, as tall as ever giant's been;
And at such sight poor Storm-Prince slightly quails,
For little now doth he expect to win
Against such size – e'en Mjollnir sure would fail
To split a skull so thick – his hammer frail

Would shatter certes 'pon anvil like that!
“What would ye, paltry wights? About to dine
Was I – my supper cools!” the jotun snaps.
Thor brushes from his lips the hoary rime
And speaks: “We travelers two are fain to find
Some hearth-fire or some furnace us to heat,
And soft beds where the dream-sprite gently sighs
Into one's brain mild words of calm and ease:
These things we ask – your hospitalities.”

Almost the surly jotun shuns request,
But to his mind there's suddenly revealed
A nasty plan for these two trusting guests:
*I'll fatten them up with a lardy meal;
Then on this night when Mani's missed I'll steal
Into their room to seize them – and a pot
Of boiling broth's the final thing they'll feel!
A midnight stew of poachèd wights: there's naught
Can warm me so well as that dainty hot!*

With welcome, shown inside are Tyr and Thor;
And furnace-heat soon bleeds hoar-frost from clothes.
The table's spread with roasted ox and boar:
That cooking scent's as sweet as any rose.
All ruddy glares rich hall with aura thrown
From hardy hearth-fire raging in a nook.
In kitchen, pots and creusets gaily glow –
Now keenly cauldron-searching gods do look
Where brass-bright pans and kettles hang from hooks.

A hundred-headed hag! Gods' eyes now bulge

Upon the sight of Hymir's hideous wife!
Grim greasy locks dangle from hundred skulls;
Two hundred eyes gleam hell-red, strange and bright –
But in her mitts she bears, as though 'twere light,
That kettle could contain the ocean's girth:
Drips it, and sloshes like the typhoon-tide
That sea of mead she's cooked, simmered, and stirred –
That happy brew what leaves the memory blurred.

All four drink deep; from glassy chalice sip
The troll-dame's hundred mouths by turns strong drink.
Dozens of eyes at Tyr so coyly flit;
At times they leer, at others shyly wink.
Embarrassed god's not knowing what to think,
But stuffs his snout much deeper in his mug:
From twice times hundred glaring orbs he shrinks,
And to forget discomfort, gulps and chugs
“Til brain is swimming with that liquid drug.

Now cousins and relations crowd the house,
All Hymir's kin, who love a winter's feast –
With mickle mead for many, soon they're soused.
All hands and lips and flagons shine with grease;
Thor gobbles more than's share of roasted beast,
And slurps the tide of honey-wine right low –
Now gutter cresset-fires; gorging must cease:
To giant beds in side-room gods are shown,
And in the silent dark they're left alone.

“We wait,” saith Tyr, “ ’til all the mansion snores,
And then we'll heft the pot out to your wain,
To wheel off slyly!” All impatient's Thor
That prize wondrous for booze-ups to have gained –
Soon midnight comes, and every care is ta'en
No noise to make as into hall gods step...
But what's this? Both stop short – it's awfully plain
Some troll intends to eat them! Table's set,
Hearth flickers, water's boiling! “Let us get

“Great kettle, and be off!” those two agree.
So each a handle of the cauldron grips,
And with great effort, up huge heft they heeze,
Then scoot towards doorway, careful not to trip
O’er benches, or on mead-puddle to slip;
But soon loud lumb’ring footfalls filchers hear:
Someone returns! The crucible they flip,
And hide beneath – now into hall Hymir
With spoon and spices comes, in merry cheer,

When o’er the pot he stumbles! All are sprawled
Across the floor; and loud commotion’s drawn
All sleepers to the middle of the hall
Where Thor and Hymir yearn to test their brawn
In wrathful contest – but on Tyr there dawns
Peaceful proposal: “Jotun, as a dish
You’d have us; while we two itch to abscond
With kettle: Now, to see who has their wish,
Let’s stage a contest catching blubb’ry fish!

“Who hauls the greatest whale-heap shall win;
And either I and Lightning-Lord shall go
Into a stew – or our most godly kin
With endless gulps of honey-wine shall glow
In cheek and brow. What say ye? Shall we row
Tomorrow morn upon the bobbing main?”
With wicked grin Hymir assents: He trows
None might surpass him at the casting game,
Or hence escape the cauldron-heating flame.

* * *

On morn as misty as the storm-cloud’s midst
From pebbly shore push off Thor and the troll
A fishing-skiff, then in rough waters dip
Broad paddles – towards the deep sea fishers row,
Where swell of gray wave bounces, jounces, rolls,

And whales and scaled things wiggle miles beneath.
Tyr's not aboard: one hand a fishing pole
Grasps not with surety – so to keep from grief
Of boiling pot is Thor's task. Past the reefs

And skerries journeys boat, 'til land's not seen.
Before the sun expand two fields of blue:
The day-smoothed hyaline and wide serene.
Hymir puts up his oar: "Who shall accrue
More salty sea-spume spitters: I or you?
Bait barb, and drag up all that ye might catch!"
An ox's head Thor jabs his sharp hook through;
And each hoping to snare the greater batch,
The god and giant start their fishing-match.

Soon pile high two heaps of leviathans,
Pressing the vessel low; and equally
The game stands: Whale for whale's been dragged up, when
The angling god feels something in the sea
Pull on his line with strength of such degree
That soon the boat's drawn like a sleigh across
Those wandering waves, as on a jaunt carefree.
Within the skimming skiff those two are tossed;
And promptly 'pon the ocean's breadth they're lost.

The prow is down, the stern bobs high in air;
And sheets of spray as high as castle walls
Sheer off to left and right where boat's nose tears
The fabric of the sea; poor Hymir wrawls
To see how speed augments, and is appalled
To think his load of whales might bounce off
Were craft to hit a comber that's too tall –
But slipp'ry, squirming beasts cannot be caught
In's arms, as skiff whips over crest and trough.

More rapid flies the craft, and Thor proclaims:
"Must be the world-serpent has my line
Tangled 'round teeth! Towards pole we dash amain,

Northwards proceeding, towards a frosty clime...
Around the Midgard-island do we slide
O'er sheets of water! Now southwards again
We're pulled with vigor: Down the other side
Into the warmth of mid-zone do we wend,
Towards southern ice, antarctic pole; and then

Rounding the isle, we're back where we began!"
Twice more such circuit of the ocean's made,
As wrym rotates with rush much swifter than
The sun's hotfooting 'long the course of day.
At last fierce dragging slackens, dies the spray,
When from the sea-depths bursts grim dragon-head
That's so long bubbles snored in coral glade –
The tail-tip just inside the gullet fed,
Its brain brewing with dreams of wrath and dread.

Midgardsorm! The line's pulled through the clouds;
But Thor holds tight, then drags that creature's face
With struggle down towards boat: Those two foes proud
Now eye to eye glimpse! But another race
Starts off at once – with jolt renews apace
Wet wrym his mad career. "Oh snip the thread,"
Poor jotun bellows. " 'Twill be no disgrace;
You'll say from ye thrice 'round the world he fled,
That snake bathysmal! Oh, our water-sled

Will surely come undone if this chase lasts!"
Indeed, so firm in bracing feet is Thor
As serpent tugs, that planks begin to crack,
'Til suddenly his legs punch through boat's floor!
Hymir *enfin* decides he'll have no more,
And with a knife, at fishing-wire does slash –
The tension snapped, now pell-mell vessel soars
End over end, and with tremendous crash,
Boat, giant, whales, and god 'pon waves are dashed!

The sea-snake swift and blubb'ry beasts do flee,

And flound'ring fishing-foes are left to curse,
Fists shaking, one at other in cold sea,
Each certain he'd put other to the worse
At contest were not boat wrecked: To rehearse
All that abuse would take an extra poem,
And fill a dozen bookshelves with cruel verse;
So let's just skip to when, where wavelets comb
The frosty strand, those two wash with sea-foam

Onto the beach, then glare with look could slay
At one another all the long way back
To giant's hall. "Who won? Who won?" all say.
"Where are your hauls? Why do ye whales lack?"
Dispute's renewed, and mutual blame is cast
'Til she of hundred heads, that croaking crowd,
Proposes: "Let gods try to break my glass,
My sturdy goblet: That's the method how
This wager's settled," chorus all her mouths.

"With magic was this robust chalice wrought;
And only one way can it broken be:
If gods discover this, they'll have their pot –
If not, we'll sup on boiled deities."
To this the parties readily agree,
And now strong Asa-Thor spits in his hands,
Rubs them, pulls out his hammer, and then he
With force that rumbles mead-hall, sea, and land,
Strikes glass, believing 'twill be ground to sand.

Oh Thor – thy bolt hath light, but naught of fire,
For flagon's whole! It winks so cheekily,
Flashing in Thund'rer's eyes, which cloud with ire,
And naught but ruddy, bloody rage can see.
The glass at massive pillar does he heave:
Not chipped nor cracked, it bounces off the post.
Now Mallet-Prince tests cup between his teeth –
The giants gibe: "Break glass, or with our host
We'll eat you up in gobbets on our toast!"

By fist and foot Thor strains the cup to crush,
And two gods' hearts drop towards a horrid fear,
When Hymir's wife to Tyr speaks in a hush:
One of her hundred mouths whispers in ear
Something that brightens battle-god with cheer;
And of half-brother chalice doth he strip.
He squints one eye, at Hymir keenly peers –
Now here's the wind-up, and now here's the pitch:
'Gainst giant's brow the glass shatters to bits.

With joy the Aesir hoist their kettle up,
Sing vict'ry song, and quick are out the door.
All trolls are mazed by smashing of that cup –
Hymir still staggers, fumbling to the floor;
But soon recovering, hollers: "Kin, to war!
We'll have our pot – god-soup for supper, too!"
Out mead-hall now the raving crowd doth pour
And spots Thor's cart as into wintry gloom
Of gloaming, hies it glen and meadow through.

So back 'cross Midgard rumbles Aesir's wain,
But this time pressed by raging mob at rear!
The fords and bridges speed they o'er again;
Their goats gnash teeth and pant with panicked fear.
Gods glimpse those trolls bedecked in battle-gear
Leap o'er the stones, and thrash through thickets' growth,
Not hindered in their rage; ever more near
That holl'ring horde gets, as the gods must slow
While driving through thick drifts of deepest snow.

At last the road to Aegir's hall is reached:
A wat'ry way beneath the tossing tide
That leads long fathoms down from secret beach;
And so Thor's cart into the waves now drives.
The maddened troll-gang to that shore arrives,
And sees their foes plunge into frigid surf –
Without a thought, they follow towards the brine...

Oh reckless creatures! Ought ye stay to turf,
For wit ye not who reigns where ends the earth

And salty slosh begins: Sea-giant stirs
From hearth, to welcome Aesir from their ride –
But soon he of pursuing party learns,
And gathers waves from all the waters wide.
At ocean's marge, trolls halt: To every side
Vast billows loom. Now darkens all the swell,
As Aegir's wrath upon the surface glides:
Awed troll-folk gasp to see a surge so fell,
And quickly beat retreat with yelps and yells.

Too late! With drenching violence all are thrown,
Washed back to land with many a dismal cry –
Heaved into trees, or knocked amongst the stones:
No head's not dazed, no strand of hair's left dry.
In disarray the giants homeward hie,
Dripping and drooping. Hymir's sorely sour:
At loss of kettle bitterly he sighs,
At lack of Aesir-stew he's deeply dour
While giants homeward trek in cheerless hour.

But Tyr and Thor with plaudits and acclaim
Are feted as through Aegir's manse they pace
While hefty brewing-kettle they display –
All gods and servants rant and chant with praise.
The fishy thralls do gifts and guerdons lay
At feet of heroes who've brought pot can hold
Enough mead for a feast of several days:
A cauldron huge, a wonder to behold,
Much huger than this poet's fairly told.

So song concludes – giants are put to paid,
And revelry long lives for Buri's race.
But still there slumbers, lolling 'neath the waves,
That scaly nemesis, that sleeping snake
Who from the lightning-god's line did escape...

And ever bides he in a darksome vale,
Sea's lowest trench – waiting when his shape
Once more towards upper air might twist and flail
To crush the worlds beneath his lashing tail.