

HOW HERMOD MADE A JOURNEY TO THE UNDERWORLD

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OF all the Asa folk most fleet of foot was Hermod, but on that sad eve when Balder was laid upon the funeral pyre his step was lagging and slow as he went to his home by the city wall.

As he approached, there met him in the gloom a vague figure that walked with outstretched hands and faltering steps like one that is blind. And Hermod knew it to be the form of Hoder of the sightless eyes, brother to Balder and to him.

But when he would have spoken Hoder brushed past, murmuring in his ear:

"Take Sleipnir, Hermod, and set forth with dawn
To Hela's kingdom, to ask Balder back;
And they shall be thy guides who have the power."

Hermod bowed his head and passed on; but poor blind Hoder, heartbroken, went his way to his own house and shut the door upon his grief.

When the first rosy fingers of dawn touched the clouds of morning Hermod led out Sleipnir, the steed of Odin, from Valhalla, and rode away. Sleipnir was not wont to permit any to mount him, or even to touch his mane, save the All-Father himself; but he stood meekly as Hermod mounted; for he knew upon what errand they were bound.

Nine long days and nine long nights rode Hermod toward the realms of ice and snow; and on the tenth morn he drew near to the golden bridge which spanned Gioll, the greatest river in the world. A maiden of pale and downcast mien kept this bridge with unsleeping vigilance and she now challenged Hermod as he approached:

"Who art thou on thy black and fiery horse,
Under whose hoofs the bridge o'er Gioll's stream
Rumbles and shakes? Tell me thy race and home.
But yestermorn, five troops of dead passed by,
Bound on their way below to Hela's realm,
Nor shook the bridge so much as thou alone.
And thou hast flesh and color on thy cheeks,
Like men who live, and draw the vital air;
Nor look'st thou pale and wan, like men deceased,
Souls bound below, my daily passers here."

Then Hermod told his name and whence he came, and asked eagerly if Balder had already crossed that bridge. And the maiden told him that Balder had indeed passed that way along the road to Hela's kingdom.

So Hermod galloped over the golden bridge, and resumed his way through a darksome tract of frozen country, and over fields of ice unlighted save by dim stars that shone uncertainly through the mist.

At length farther passage was barred by a high wall in which was a gate. Without hesitation Hermod put Sleipnir to this obstacle; he surmounted it with the ease and grace of a fawn, and they found themselves in Hela's realm.

On passed Hermod, all unheeding the murmuring shades that flocked around, and he did not draw rein until, coming to Hela's hall, he saw there Balder, his brother, and, nearby, the awful goddess.

Leaping from Sleipnir, the young Asa knelt before Hela and besought her that Balder might ride home with him, that the heavy hearts of all in Asgard might be comforted.

But dark Hela shook her head, reminding him how Odin had cast her out with her two brothers, the Serpent and the Fenris Wolf; why should she grant the Asa folk this boon?

Then Hermod laid his hands upon her knees. "All things in heaven and earth grieve for Balder, therefore restore him, good mother, and darken not our lives for evermore," he answered.

The appeal in his mournful eyes, as well as in his words, somewhat moved Hela, though her heart was still hardened against Odin, and she said: "Come now, let us see if all things love Balder as you say:

"Show me through all the world the signs of grief!
Fails but one thing to grieve, here Balder stops!
Let all that lives and moves upon the earth
Weep him, and all that is without life weep:
Let gods, men, brutes, bewEEP him; plants and stones.
So shall I know the lost was dear indeed,
And bend my heart, and give him back to heaven."

Then Hermod was given permission to greet his brother, and Balder answered him with faint voice. They spoke of Asgard, the beloved land of living gods and heroes, and at parting Balder charged his brother to carry the magic ring, Draupnir, back to Odin, and a kerchief and other gifts to Frigga, as tokens of his love. And Hermod rode sadly back along the weary road to Asgard.

All-Father Odin from his high seat saw his son returning, and he hastened forth to receive him.

"And Hermod came, and leapt from Sleipnir down,
And in his father's hand put Sleipnir's rein
And greeted Odin and the gods."

Then all the Asa folk assembled in the Council Hall, at the root of the Tree of Life, to hear the message that Hermod had brought from the joyous realms; and he told them of Hela's reply to his request, saying:

"... To your prayer she sends you this reply:
Show her through all the world the signs of grief!
Fails but one thing to grieve, there Balder stops!
Let gods, men, brutes, bewEEP him; plants and stones;
So shall she know your loss was dear indeed,
And bend her heart, and give you Balder back."

When Hermod had ceased speaking, All-Father Odin arose, and leaning on his great staff he looked slowly around and commanded: "Go ye quickly forth through all the world and pray all living and unliving things to weep for Balder dead."

Then the gods arose willingly and went their way through all the world, Thor in his goat chariot, and Freya in her carriage drawn by white cats, but most of the others on swift horses. North, South, East, and West they rode, entreating all things to weep for Balder's death.

"And all that lived, and all without life, wept."

Just as at the end of winter, before the springtime, when a warm southwest wind blows over the land and melts the ice and snow,

"A dripping sound is heard
In all the forests....
And, in fields sloping to the south, dark plots
Of grass peep out amid surrounding snow,
And widen, and the peasant's heart is glad"-

so through the whole world was now heard the sound of falling tears, as all things living and dead wept for Balder's sake.

Hermod rode with the Storm god, Niord, who knew all the creeks and hidden bays of the coastline of the earth; and when the sea creatures and those that live on the borders of the ocean heard the message, they all added their tribute of tears to the common cause.

Now, as the Asas rode home together they came to a great wood upon the borders of Giantland, where all the trees are of iron. And in the midst of this wood was a cave, at the mouth of which sat an ancient giantess gnashing her teeth at all who passed by.

This seeming giantess was none other but wicked Loki in disguise, but this Hermod did not know.

As the Asas came near, she greeted them with shrill laughter and asked them if it was dull in Asgard that they came thither to her iron wood. But they answered that they came not for gibes but for tears, that Balder might be saved. Then she laughed louder and cried:

"Is Balder dead? And do ye come for tears?
Weep him all other things, if weep they will:
I weep him not! Let Hela keep her prey."

And with these mocking words she fled to the dark recesses of the cave, repeating again and again:

"Neither in life, nor yet in death,
Gave he me gladness.
Let Hela keep her prey."

Heavy were the steps with which Hermod returned to Asgard, and when they had heard the news of how one creature had refused her tears the eager faces of the Asa folk grew dark with woe, for they knew that never more would they see Balder-Balder the Beautiful.

But the future days brought peace to the tormented soul of Hoder, the innocent cause of all their grief.

For there was born to Odin a child who grew to his full size within a few short hours. And on the first day that he arrived in Asgard he fared forth with bow and arrow, and one of his shafts found mark in the heart of Hoder.

And so, from henceforth, the blind god and his twin brother are together in the realms of Hela.