

The Beginning of Things

The oldest stories of every race of people tell about the Beginning of Things. But the various folk who first told them were so very different, the tales are so very old, and have changed so greatly in the telling from one generation to another, that there are almost as many accounts of the way in which the world began as there are nations upon the earth. So it is not strange that the people of the North have a legend of the Beginning quite different from that of the Southern, Eastern, and Western folk.

This book is made of the stories told by the Northern folk—the people who live in the land of the midnight sun, where summer is green and pleasant, but winter is a terrible time of cold and gloom; where rocky mountains tower like huge giants, over whose heads the thunder rolls and crashes, and under whose feet are mines of precious metals. Therefore you will find the tales full of giants and dwarfs—spirits of the cold mountains and dark caverns.

You will find the hero to be Thor, with his thunderbolt hammer, who dwells in the happy heaven of Asgard, where All-Father Odin is king, and where Balder the beautiful makes springtime with his smile. In the north countries, winter, cold, and frost are very

real and terrible enemies; while spring, sunshine, and warmth are near and dear friends. So the story of the Beginning of Things is a story of cold and heat, of the wicked giants who loved the cold, and of the good Aesir, who basked in pleasant warmth.

In the very beginning of things, the stories say, there were two worlds, one of burning heat and one of icy cold. The cold world was in the north, and from it flowed Elivagar, a river of poisonous water which hardened into ice and piled up into great mountains, filling the space which had no bottom. The other world in the south was on fire with bright flame, a place of heat most terrible. And in those days through all space there was nothing beside these two worlds of heat and cold.

But then began a fierce combat. Heat and cold met and strove to destroy each other, as they have tried to do ever since. Flaming sparks from the hot world fell upon the ice river which flowed from the place of cold. And though the bright sparks were quenched, in dying they wrought mischief as they do today; for they melted the ice, which dripped and dripped, like tears from the suffering world of cold. And then, wonderful to say, these chilly drops became alive;

became a huge, breathing mass, a Frost-Giant with a wicked heart of ice. And he was the ancestor of all the giants who came afterwards, a bad and cruel race.

At that time there was no earth nor sea nor heaven, nothing but the icy abyss without bottom, whence Ymir the giant had sprung. And there he lived, nourished by the milk of a cow which the heat had formed. Now the cow had nothing for her food but the snow and ice of Elivagar, and that was cold victuals indeed! One day she was licking the icy rocks, which tasted salty to her, when Ymir noticed that the mass was taking a strange shape. The more the cow licked it, the plainer became the outline of the shape. And when evening came Ymir saw thrusting itself through the icy rock a head of hair. The next day the cow went on with her meal, and at nighttime a man's head appeared above the rock. On the third day the cow licked away the ice until forth stepped a man, tall and powerful and handsome. This was no evil giant, for he was good; and, strangely, though he came from the ice his heart was warm. He was the ancestor of the kind Aesir; for All-Father Odin and his brothers Vili and Ve, the first of the gods, were his grandsons, and as soon as they were born they became the enemies of the race of giants.

Now after a few giant years, ages and ages of time as we reckon it, there was a great battle, for Odin and his brothers wished to destroy all the evil in the world and to leave only good. They attacked the wicked

giant Ymir, first of all his race, and after hard fighting slew him. Ymir was so huge that when he died a mighty river of blood flowed from the wounds which Odin had given him; a stream so large that it flooded all space, and the frost-giants, his children and grandchildren, were drowned, except one who escaped with his wife in a chest. And but for the saving of these two, that would have been the end of the race of giants.

All-Father and his brothers now had work to do. Painfully they dragged the great bulk of Ymir into the bottomless space of ice, and from it they built the earth, the sea, and the heavens. Not an atom of his body went to waste. His blood made the great ocean, the rivers, lakes, and springs. His mighty bones became mountains. His teeth and broken bones made sand and pebbles. From his skull they fashioned the arching heaven, which they set up over the earth and sea. His brain became the heavy clouds. His hair sprouted into trees, grass, plants, and flowers. And last of all, the Aesir set his bristling eyebrows as a high fence around the earth, to keep the giants away from the race of men whom they had planned to create for this pleasant globe.

So the earth was made. And next the gods brought light for the heavens. They caught the sparks and cinders blown from the world of heat, and set them here and there, above and below, as sun and moon and stars. To each they gave its name and told what its duties were to be, and how it must perform them, day after day, and year after

year, and century after century, till the ending of all things; so that the children of men might reckon time without mistake.

Sol and Mani, who drove the bright chariots of the sun and moon across the sky, were a fair sister and brother whose father named them Sun and Moon because they were so beautiful. So Odin gave them each a pair of swift, bright horses to drive, and set them in the sky forever. Once upon a time—but that was many, many years later—Mani, the Man in the Moon, stole two children from the earth. Hiuki and Bil were going to a well to draw a pail of water. The little boy and girl carried a pole and a bucket across their shoulders, and looked so pretty that Mani thrust down a long arm and snatched them up to his moon. And there they are to this day, as you can see on any moonlight night—two little black shadows on the moon's bright face, the boy and the girl, with the bucket between them.

The gods also made Day and Night. Day was fair, bright, and beautiful, for he was of the warm-hearted Aesir race. But Night was dark and gloomy, because she was one of the cold giant-folk. Day and Night had each a chariot drawn by a swift horse, and each in turn drove about the world in a twenty-four hours' journey. Night rode first behind her dark horse, Hrimfaxi, who scattered dew from his bit upon the sleeping earth. After her came Day with his beautiful horse, Glad, whose shining mane shot rays of light through the sky.

All these wonders the kind gods wrought that they might make a pleasant world for men to call their home. And now the gods, or Aesir as they were called, must choose a place for their own dwelling, for there were many of them, a glorious family. Outside of everything, beyond the great ocean which surrounded the world, was Jotunheim, the cold country where the giants lived. The green earth was made for men. The gods therefore decided to build their city above men in the heavens, where they could watch the doings of their favorites and protect them from the wicked giants. Asgard was to be their city, and from Asgard to Midgard, the home of men, stretched a wonderful bridge, a bridge of many colors. For it was the rainbow that we know and love. Up and down the rainbow bridge the Aesir could travel to the earth, and thus keep close to the doings of men.

Next, from the remnants of Ymir's body the gods made the race of little dwarfs, a wise folk and skillful, but in nature more like the giants than like the good Aesir; for they were spiteful and often wicked, and they loved the dark and the cold better than light and warmth. They lived deep down below the ground in caves and rocky dens, and it was their business to dig the precious metals and glittering gems that were hidden in the rocks, and to make wonderful things from the treasures of the under-world. Pouf! Pouf! went their little bellows. Tink-tank! went their little hammers on their little anvils all

day and all night. Sometimes they were friendly to the giants, and sometimes they did kindly deeds for the Aesir. But always after men came upon the earth they hated these new folk, who eagerly sought for the gold and the jewels which the dwarfs kept hidden in the ground. The dwarfs lost no chance of doing evil to the race of men.

Now the gods were ready for the making of men. They longed to have a race of creatures whom they could love and protect and bless with all kinds of pleasures. So Odin, with his brothers Hoenir and Loki, crossed the rainbow bridge and came down to the earth. They were walking along the seashore when they found two trees, an ash and an

elm. These would do as well as anything for their purpose. Odin took the two trees and warmly breathed upon them; and lo! they were alive, a man and a woman. Hoenir then gently touched their foreheads, and they became wise. Lastly Loki softly stroked their faces; their skin grew pink with ruddy color, and they received the gifts of speech, hearing, and sight. Ask and Embla were their names, and the ash and the elm became the father and mother of the whole human race whose dwelling was Midgard, under the eyes of the Aesir who had made them.

This is the story of the Beginning of Things.