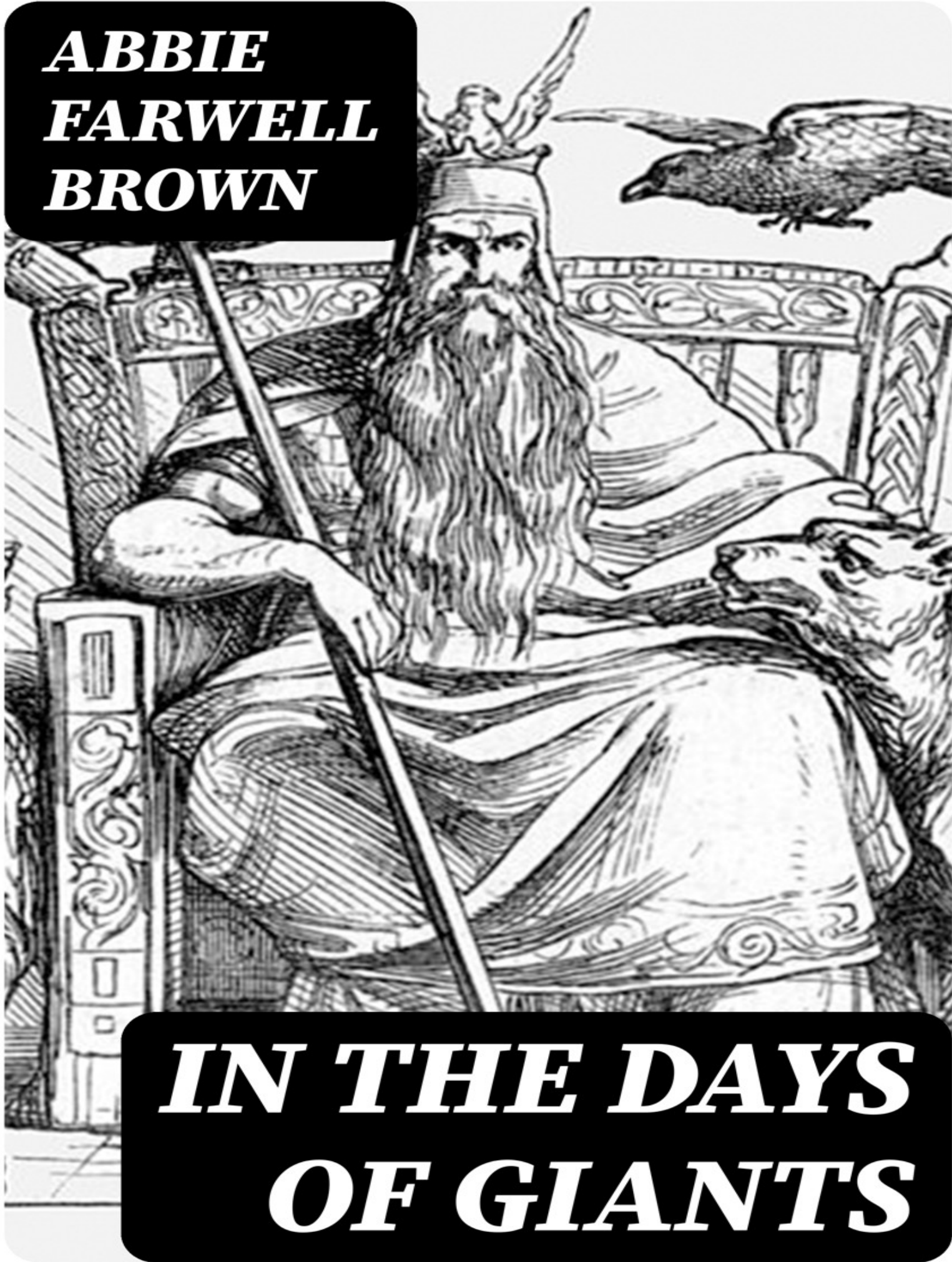


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***IN THE DAYS
OF GIANTS***

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In the Days of Giants

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"I AM THE GIANT SKRYMIR"

The Beginning of Things

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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 Æsir, 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 Elivâgar, 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 to-day; 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 Elivâgar, 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 night-time 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 Æsir; 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 Æsir 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.

Sôl and Mâni, 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,—Mâni, 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 Mâni 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 Æsir 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, Hrîmfaxi, 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 Æsir 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 Æsir 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 Æsir; 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 Æsir. 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 Hœnir 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. Hœnir 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 Æsir who had made them.

This is the story of the Beginning of Things.

How Odin Lost His Eye

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In the beginning of things, before there was any world or sun, moon, and stars, there were the giants; for these were the oldest creatures that ever breathed. They lived in Jotunheim, the land of frost and darkness, and their hearts were evil. Next came the gods, the good Æsir, who made earth and sky and sea, and who dwelt in Asgard, above the heavens. Then were created the queer little dwarfs, who lived underground in the caverns of the mountains, working at their mines of metal and precious stones. Last of all, the gods made men to dwell in Midgard, the good world that we know, between which and the glorious home of the Æsir stretched Bifröst, the bridge of rainbows.

In those days, folk say, there was a mighty ash-tree named Yggdrasil, so vast that its branches shaded the whole earth and stretched up into heaven where the Æsir dwelt, while its roots sank far down below the lowest depth. In the branches of the big ash-tree lived a queer family of creatures. First, there was a great eagle, who was wiser than any bird that ever lived—except the two ravens, Thought and Memory, who sat upon Father Odin's shoulders and told him the secrets which they learned in their flight over the wide world. Near the great eagle perched a hawk, and four antlered deer browsed among the buds of Yggdrasil. At the foot of the tree coiled a huge serpent, who was always gnawing hungrily at its roots, with a whole colony of little snakes to keep him company,—so many that they could never be counted. The eagle at the top of the tree and the serpent at its foot were enemies, always saying hard things of each other. Between the two skipped up and down a little squirrel, a tale-bearer and a gossip, who repeated each

unkind remark and, like the malicious neighbor that he was, kept their quarrel ever fresh and green.

In one place at the roots of Yggdrasil was a fair fountain called the Urdar-well, where the three Norn-maidens, who knew the past, present, and future, dwelt with their pets, the two white swans. This was magic water in the fountain, which the Norns sprinkled every day upon the giant tree to keep it green,—water so sacred that everything which entered it became white as the film of an eggshell. Close beside this sacred well the Æsir had their council hall, to which they galloped every morning over the rainbow bridge.

But Father Odin, the king of all the Æsir, knew of another fountain more wonderful still; the two ravens whom he sent forth to bring him news had told him. This also was below the roots of Yggdrasil, in the spot where the sky and ocean met. Here for centuries and centuries the giant Mimer had sat keeping guard over his hidden well, in the bottom of which lay such a treasure of wisdom as was to be found nowhere else in the world. Every morning Mimer dipped his glittering horn Giöll into the fountain and drew out a draught of the wondrous water, which he drank to make him wise. Every day he grew wiser and wiser; and as this had been going on ever since the beginning of things, you can scarcely imagine how wise Mimer was.

Now it did not seem right to Father Odin that a giant should have all this wisdom to himself; for the giants were the enemies of the Æsir, and the wisdom which they had been hoarding for ages before the gods were made was generally used for evil purposes. Moreover, Odin longed and longed to become the wisest being in the world. So he resolved to win a draught from Mimer's well, if in any way that could be done.

One night, when the sun had set behind the mountains of Midgard, Odin put on his broad-brimmed hat and his striped cloak, and taking his famous staff in his hand, trudged down the long bridge to where it ended by Mimer's secret grotto.

"Good-day, Mimer," said Odin, entering; "I have come for a drink from your well."

The giant was sitting with his knees drawn up to his chin, his long white beard falling over his folded arms, and his head nodding; for Mimer was very old, and he often fell asleep while watching over his precious spring. He woke with a frown at Odin's words. "You want a drink from my well, do you?" he growled. "Hey! I let no one drink from my well."

"Nevertheless, you must let me have a draught from your glittering horn," insisted Odin, "and I will pay you for it."

"Oho, you will pay me for it, will you?" echoed Mimer, eyeing his visitor keenly. For now that he was wide awake, his wisdom taught him that this was no ordinary stranger. "What will you pay for a drink from my well, and why do you wish it so much?"

"I can see with my eyes all that goes on in heaven and upon earth," said Odin, "but I cannot see into the depths of ocean. I lack the hidden wisdom of the deep,—the wit that lies at the bottom of your fountain. My ravens tell me many secrets; but I would know all. And as for payment, ask what you will, and I will pledge anything in return for the draught of wisdom."

Then Mimer's keen glance grew keener. "You are Odin, of the race of gods," he cried. "We giants are centuries older than you, and our wisdom which we have treasured during these ages, when we were the only creatures in all space, is a precious thing. If I grant you a draught from my well, you will become as one of us, a wise and dangerous enemy. It is a goodly price, Odin, which I shall demand for a boon so great."

Now Odin was growing impatient for the sparkling water. "Ask your price," he frowned. "I have promised that I will pay."

"What say you, then, to leaving one of those far-seeing eyes of yours at the bottom of my well?" asked Mimer,

hoping that he would refuse the bargain. "This is the only payment I will take."

Odin hesitated. It was indeed a heavy price, and one that he could ill afford, for he was proud of his noble beauty. But he glanced at the magic fountain bubbling mysteriously in the shadow, and he knew that he must have the draught.

"Give me the glittering horn," he answered. "I pledge you my eye for a draught to the brim."

Very unwillingly Mimer filled the horn from the fountain of wisdom and handed it to Odin. "Drink, then," he said; "drink and grow wise. This hour is the beginning of trouble between your race and mine." And wise Mimer foretold the truth.

Odin thought merely of the wisdom which was to be his. He seized the horn eagerly, and emptied it without delay. From that moment he became wiser than any one else in the world except Mimer himself.

Now he had the price to pay, which was not so pleasant. When he went away from the grotto, he left at the bottom of the dark pool one of his fiery eyes, which twinkled and winked up through the magic depths like the reflection of a star. This is how Odin lost his eye, and why from that day he was careful to pull his gray hat low over his face when he wanted to pass unnoticed. For by this oddity folk could easily recognize the wise lord of Asgard.

In the bright morning, when the sun rose over the mountains of Midgard, old Mimer drank from his bubbly well a draught of the wise water that flowed over Odin's pledge. Doing so, from his underground grotto he saw all that befell in heaven and on earth. So that he also was wiser by the bargain. Mimer seemed to have secured rather the best of it; for he lost nothing that he could not spare, while Odin lost what no man can well part with,—one of the good windows wherethrough his heart looks out upon the world. But there was a sequel to these doings which made the balance swing down in Odin's favor.

Not long after this, the Æsir quarreled with the Vanir, wild enemies of theirs, and there was a terrible battle. But in the end the two sides made peace; and to prove that they meant never to quarrel again, they exchanged hostages. The Vanir gave to the Æsir old Niörd the rich, the lord of the sea and the ocean wind, with his two children, Frey and Freia. This was indeed a gracious gift; for Freia was the most beautiful maid in the world, and her twin brother was almost as fair. To the Vanir in return Father Odin gave his own brother Hœnir. And with Hœnir he sent Mimer the wise, whom he took from his lonely well.

Now the Vanir made Hœnir their chief, thinking that he must be very wise because he was the brother of great Odin, who had lately become famous for his wisdom. They did not know the secret of Mimer's well, how the hoary old giant was far more wise than any one who had not quaffed of the magic water. It is true that in the assemblies of the Vanir Hœnir gave excellent counsel. But this was because Mimer whispered in Hœnir's ear all the wisdom that he uttered. Witless Hœnir was quite helpless without his aid, and did not know what to do or say. Whenever Mimer was absent he would look nervous and frightened, and if folk questioned him he always answered:—

"Yes, ah yes! Now go and consult some one else."

Of course the Vanir soon grew very angry at such silly answers from their chief, and presently they began to suspect the truth. "Odin has deceived us," they said. "He has sent us his foolish brother with a witch to tell him what to say. Ha! We will show him that we understand the trick." So they cut off poor old Mimer's head and sent it to Odin as a present.

The tales do not say what Odin thought of the gift. Perhaps he was glad that now there was no one in the whole world who could be called so wise as himself. Perhaps he was sorry for the danger into which he had thrust a poor old giant who had never done him any wrong, except to be a

giant of the race which the Æsir hated. Perhaps he was a little ashamed of the trick which he had played the Vanir. Odin's new wisdom showed him how to prepare Mimer's head with herbs and charms, so that it stood up by itself quite naturally and seemed not dead. Thenceforth Odin kept it near him, and learned from it many useful secrets which it had not forgotten.

So in the end Odin fared better than the unhappy Mimer, whose worst fault was that he knew more than most folk. That is a dangerous fault, as others have found; though it is not one for which many of us need fear being punished.