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Odin Wins the Mead of Poetry

by

S.R. Hardy

Odin set out, from Asgard he fared.
He waded across a wide river;
to Jotunheim he hastened at once.
He had one goal: to get Suttung's mead.

He met nine slaves scything ripe hay;
Odin could tell their tools were dull.
He offered to turn their tools to sharpness;
the slaves agreed and gladly so.

Odin used a stone, he angled it well;
the scythes then shone, sharp and bright.
The slaves began to scythe still more;
they wondered at the whetstone of Odin.

The slaves then bid to buy the stone.
Odin agreed, but asked a fee:
only so much as was right.
The slaves agreed and granted his wish.

Odin then flung, far into the sky,
the wondrous whetstone wanted by the slaves.
The slaves scrambled, scythes in hand;
they caught the stone but cut their throats.

Odin then fared, farther still.
He came upon a cold dark house,
high and wide, the home of a giant.
Baugi was his name, brother of Suttung.

Baugi was vexed, vilely he swore.
He told his guest his tale of woe:
all nine of his slaves had slit their throats.
His fields lay empty, yet full of hay.
Odin spoke:

“Perhaps I can help by handling your fields.
I am Baleworker, best of farmers.
I offer to bale all of your hay,
to fill the shoes of your fallen slaves.

“I ask for my fee just one small thing:
a single drink of Suttung’s mead.
I have long heard heady tales;
the fame of this mead goes far and wide.”

Baugi spoke:

“You must be warned, wandering one.
Suttung is wary; he wards the mead.
He greets few guests, with glad hailings;
he shies from hosting, sharing with none.

“But I agree to grant your wish;
I will bring you to my brother’s hall.
We’ll see if we can cadge a drink;
my hay will not hoop itself.”

Baleworker agreed to begin his work.
Best of farmers, to the fields he went,
day after day, dripping with sweat.
Baugi had no need of nine dead men.

At summer’s end, all was done;
the harvest was in, the hay was baled.
Baleworker asked of Baugi one thing:
he wanted his drink of wisdom’s mead.

Baugi agreed, so they began to trek,
far to the east, faring long.
They came at last, looking for shelter,
to Hnitbjörg, home of Suttung.

Baugi was greeted, Baleworker also;
Suttung was cross, seldom did he host.
Baugi then told his tale of woe;
he hoped his brother would heed his words.

Baugi spoke:

“Keeper of the mead, mighty brother,

I come to you with yearning need.
This summer I hired a hand for my fields;
he stands before you, the strongest of men.

“When I met him, I made an oath;
an oath I wish was otherwise sworn.
His fee would be a boon in truth:
a single drink of Suttung’s mead.

“Now I must ask, awesome brother,
if you would grant my greatest wish:
to give my friend, faithful Baleworker,
from your sweet mead, the merest drink.”

Suttung was still; he stared at Baugi.
His head was thick, heavy with drink.
He was not used to any guests;
he did not like letting them speak.

Suttung spoke:

“Now I can see your nasty thoughts;
you schemed alone, long did you plot.
Long have you sought Suttung’s mead.
It shall not be owed, oath or no.”

Baugi left his brother; Baleworker followed.
They did not know what next would come.
Outside the hall they sat together;
they talked of naught but needing the mead.

Baleworker spoke:

“I know it seems bleak, brother of Suttung,
but we must try to win the mead.
Two oaths were made; mine is fulfilled.
Yours must follow, or fate in its stead.

“If kinship won’t win Kvasir’s blood,
then we must try what tricks we can.
I have in my sack a helper of men:
Rati my friend, fastest of drills.

“Take this drill and turn it with speed;
the shortest of times should be needed.
Suttung’s great hall safe in the mountain,

shall soon be opened or I am a liar.”

Baugi began to bore a hole;
he turned the drill, with dread in his heart.
He bored away, bending to the task,
until he had made a tiny shaft.

Baugi spoke:

“Baleworker my friend, your fee is paid;
I have now drilled a deep shaft.
Your way is clear to crawl inside;
the mead is yours if you can take it.”

Baleworker bent and blew into the hole.
Dust blew back out; his eyes were stung.
Baleworker was angry; the borehole was short.
He hated tricks when tried on him.

Baleworker spoke:

“I thought you a friend; a fiend you became.
You think to trick me, try as you might.
I am no fool, friend or no.
Bore yet further, Baugi Gillingsson.”

Baugi once again bent to the drill;
he pumped his arms up and down.
Rati was sharp; shards flew all over.
Baugi stepped back, the borehole was done.

Baleworker bent and blew into the hole.
No dust blew back out; his eyes were not stung.
Baleworker knew the borehole was good;
his way was clear to climb inside.

He othered himself; a snake he was.
He slithered his way inside the mountain,
to a dim cavern dripping and wet;
the light was soft but he saw things well.

He met a girl, a grinning lass;
a giant maiden but meet nonetheless.
On seeing the snake she swooned and cried;
long had she lain, lonely in the mountain.

Gunnlod spoke:

“What snake is this that slides within,
silent and quick, quite by stealth?
I do not know by name or sight,
what type of fiend before me lies.”

Baleworker spoke:

“I did not hope to haggle with you,
Lady Gunnlod, beloved of Suttung;
a giant’s daughter I deem you to be,
but comely as an Aesir maid.”

Gunnlod spoke:

“You speak with fair and flowery words,
words that tell me no tale of you.
You know my clan, the kin of Suttung,
but you are a rune; I can read you not.”

Baleworker spoke:

“Surely you can guess, smart as you are,
what name I carry when called aright?
I have but one eye to see,
and when aroused my wrath is hard.”

Gunnlod spoke:

“Now I know you; never will I doubt.
Why have you come to my cave tonight?
I am still just a giant maiden.
What does One-Eye want with me?”

Baleworker spoke:

“I am owed a drink, oathed by Baugi,
of Suttung’s mead, the mead of poetry.
It must be drawn this draught of mead:
your uncle’s debt is due for payment.”

Gunnlod spoke:

“What do I get if I grant your wish?”

I know what I want, now that I think.
The drink will be yours, but you must be mine;
three draughts you can have, a drink for each night.”

Baleworker slid boldly forward.
He lay with Gunnlod, gaining her trust.
Three nights long they lay together;
long did they lay, in lust entwined.

As the fourth day’s dawn was breaking,
Gunnlod then filled, full to the brim,
a bowl of mead for Baleworker;

Baleworker tipped back the draught;
he drank with glee, gulping the mead.
In one long drink he drained the bowl.
Bliss filled his body; he bore no hurt.

Gunnlod then gave to grateful Baleworker,
a second draught of sacred mead,
this time in a cup; it was called Boden.
Baleworker drained this draught with glee.

Baleworker felt good; bliss filled his mind.
Gunnlod was worried; she wanted to please.
She knew his thirst was not yet sated;
she knew she owed another draught.

Gunnlod then gave to grateful Baleworker,
a third draught of thirst-quenching mead.
He drained the cup; she called it Son.
His fearsome thirst was fully quenched.

Gunnlod spoke:

“You have now drunk three draughts of mead;
it is all gone, every drop.
My father will be wroth, ready to fight.
You must now flee far away.”

Baleworker wormed away from the cave;
he fled back out, onto the mountain.
He othered himself, an eagle he was;
all then knew him: Odin Borsson.

Odin leapt up, an eagle in flight;

he flew with haste, heading for Asgard.
He knew he must make it home;
his belly was bursting with Baugi's folly.

Suttung was wroth, bereft of his mead.
He saw the eagle: Odin he knew.
He othered himself: an eagle he was.
He flew in haste, following Odin.

The eagles flew far above ground.
The Aesir looked from Asgard's walls;
they threw down cups three in number,
to catch the mead carried by Odin.

As Odin flew over the walls,
he spit the mead, his mouth agape.
Odin was able to aim the mead;
three cups were filled overfull with mead.

A few small drops, driven by the wind,
went outside the walls of Asgard.
They lay on the ground, the lot of skalds,
the last few sips of Suttung's mead.

Once he was safe inside the walls,
Odin then stored the strongest of meads.
He gave the mead, the gift of Odin,
to the Aesir, Allfather's kin.