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The Cauldron: A Meditation on Norse Mythology

The Cauldron: A Meditation on Norse Mythology

By

Justin D. Lyons

The tale is told that one night in deep winter a man came over the ice floes to the fortress of Skeergard. Inside the great hall fires were burning amidst the furious revelry of the Northmen. Haunches of meat filled the air with their savor. The drinking horns were passed while stories were told—of battles, of conquest, and of glory. They pounded on the tables as each shaggy warrior boasted of his deeds and shouted as they tested their strength against one another.

They had much to celebrate and the many long hours of winter night in which to do it. The summer's raiding had been good, and they had ended the season by sacking the hall of an ancient foe. There had been untold wealth, riches beyond count, things of gold and artistry such as their wild hearts loved.

The greatest of the treasures was a mighty cauldron covered with beaten gold that now stood at the head of one of the long wooden tables. The vessel was so huge that it took four men to lift it, and it was covered from rim to base in fabulous scroll work chased with silver. On it were depicted all of the nine worlds swirled about with the branches of the great ash tree. So marvelous was the workmanship the bard proclaimed that it must be the creation of the dark dwarfs of the underworld, that it was dangerously magical. Surely he knew that it possessed a magic more powerful than his own. The cauldron became the glowing center of that tumultuous scene, seeming itself to revel in the grim merriment of these warriors of the northern wastes, drawing in to itself their strength, their savage vitality. It was made to inhabit such a hall as this, where pillars fantastically carved with serpents and heroes grew upwards to a vaulted roof swirling with flame-tossed shadows, where warriors drank deep from the spring of life while hoping for a good death.

The cauldron was shrouded in fire-lit sorcery like the pulsing heat of a furnace-hammered blade. In that glow, the intricate engravings seemed to move and take on life. Around the leafy bowl the squirrel Ratatosk scurried among the branches, though etched

in unmoving gold. The spring of Hvergelmir flowed at the base in misty Niflheim where the dragon turned from gnawing the corpses of the dead to wound the root of the tree. In broad Midgard, men took the mixture of good and bad allotted to them by the fates. They went their ways, drinking mead in their halls, sailing on the stretching seas, battling in the mountains and on the plains. Giants built fortresses tall and deep in Jotunheim, biding their time until the final battle. Around it all circled the mighty serpent Jormungand, Thor's bane, whose eyes glittered in jeweled malice. The rainbow bridge stretched to divine Asgard around the brim where the gods feasted and schemed, themselves subject to the laws of fate. The silver-armored Valkyries cast their strange light as they carried the chosen slain to ghostly halls across the gilded sky, and in the broad bowl the echoes of Heimdall's horn rang faintly.

Into the midst of the revelry came a man colored with the pallor of death. How he had passed the guards no one knew, nor could anyone say how long he had been among them when once they had marked him standing there before the doors of the long hall. Where there had been violent celebration and riotous song, there now descended the silence of the tomb, broken only when a serving maid in her terror let fall and clatter a vessel of mead. A thrill of supernatural dread clutched at the heart of the assembled warriors at the sudden appearance of this unearthly figure in their midst, and their eyes stole nervously to hilt of sword and haft of axe hanging on the shadow-haunted walls. The stranger walked forward, slow and stately, between their staring ranks to the head of the hall and the seat of their war chief.

Gorm the Ringwinner feared no man upon earth. He had faced the strongest of warriors and left them on blood-streaked snows with beards of red and gold tilted upwards as if in final supplication to the grim war gods of the North. His dragon prow was feared on many coasts as a portent of ruin and death; his war band waded from foam like the wrath of the wind-driven sea. But Gorm did fear the otherworldly. Dark

omens that had plagued his mind were for a time relieved by his most recent victory, but they were now renewed by the apparition before his seat.

As the stranger walked toward him, Gorm's eyes dimmed and reeled with visions of ghostly companies marching forth from their barrows to dance among the standing stones. Inwardly his spirit stumbled under the weight of dark awe. His mind traveled spectral landscapes of whispered stories. Yet he showed no outward signs of fear. His hands clutched at the arms of his chair; that was all. But it was some time before he spoke in a quiet voice: "What are you that comes thus unbidden to my hall? Be you mortal man or wandering spirit that haunts crypt and cairn?"

At the words the stranger started, as if he had been jolted from a walking sleep. He now looked about the hall as if seeing it for the first time. "I am no spirit," he responded. "I have traveled far over the endless snows without food or rest. I have come to ask for these things."

The strange terror that had held them in thrall snapped and was snatched away like a sail torn loose by the wind. They saw him now as but a man—cold, exhausted, and starving. His feet were wrapped in rags and his cloak was patched and threadbare.

Gorm let out his breath. Here was no threat, no messenger of gods or dark powers beneath the hollow hills. "Bring bread, broth, and mead!" he roared, his strength now restored. He glared about the hall as if daring anyone to suggest that he had felt fear. The serving maids hastened to obey him.

"May your death be worthy of song!" gasped the man in gratitude. The warriors, reassured by this noble sentiment, were content to turn back to their feasting. They laughed at each other and became even more boisterous, though they all turned wondering eyes on the stranger from time to time as he consumed his meal.

Next to Gorm's high seat, the bard read his master's countenance. He knew Gorm harbored anger in his heart that this pathetic figure had caused him to fear. Thus he formed the thought to make sport of the stranger to win his master's favor. When the

stranger had finished a lengthy repast, the bard called out to him: "Hail, noble guest! You must pay for your meal. Tell us how you come to this plight, begging for food and fire. But perhaps you jest with us. You may be a god in disguise or a king from some distant land. Or maybe you reign over the snow and ice, and the winter winds are your retinue. Your rags must be a royal robe to shield you from the loyalty of your subjects. Hark! They call for you. I hear them whistling outside the hall and whining over the gables. You have abandoned them for warmth and a full belly.

'Come back to us!' they cry. 'Forsake the fire and the fellowship of men. Come, feast on frost. Make your wine the glacier's milk.' Tell us stranger, don't you wish to return to your kingdom?"

This prodding roused the stranger's anger. "My kingdom is greater than any you have seen, and my subjects know not to mock a guest of their lord."

"Do you jest?" asked the bard. "Surely someone in your condition should show more humility. A wanderer on the snows who begs gifts of others and has nothing to offer in return ought to remember his place."

"My place! While it may not appear so to you, I do hold authority in my own place," said the stranger. "I wander by choice. I will return home when I have recovered what has been taken from me."

"And what has been taken from you?" asked the bard.

"The work of my hands," said the stranger. "I am a smith. I have made weapons the gods themselves would not be ashamed to bear. In the working of silver and gold I have never been surpassed. Some things I make for the sheer joy of making. I shape the elements to echo the wonder and workings of the cosmos." As he spoke, his eyes burned with love of wrought gold and his countenance was lit as with forge fire. All present had an image of the stranger, now altered, wreathed in the smoke and flame of subterranean grottos.

"It is one of these I have come to seek."

At this the eyes of all touched on the cauldron.

"You seek this?" the bard asked, pointing at the cauldron.

"Yes. It was yet unfinished when it was stolen from me. You can see the bare gold beneath the rim. A piece of the universe is missing, and the work must be completed."

Gorm's eyes narrowed and he shifted in his seat. He was again unnerved by presentiments of the otherworldly, and wondered at the nature of his guest. But he was determined not to show the fear that would cast doubt on his leadership over his warriors.

"If you come to take treasure which is mine by right, then you should have come with an army at your back," he growled.

"Yours by right? You mean by the strength of your arm and the edge of your axe."

"What else would I mean?" asked Gorm.

"The cauldron is mine. It bears the marks of my labor."

"Your labors will soon be at an end," said Gorm, lifting his axe and rising to his feet. He moved forward slowly, his eyes rolling and teeth gnashing in a manner that had terrified so many before, causing

them to fall to their knees and beg for mercy they never received. He loomed over the stranger now like a ragged sea cliff.

“Come, mighty Gorm,” said the bard, stepping between them, “the gods watch over the wayfarer. We have shared our hall with him. Father Odin’s one eye will gleam with wrath if the laws of hospitality are thus broken. Let you both enter into a contest or wager of your own free will. The winner will claim the cauldron.”

“And why should I risk my greatest treasure?” asked Gorm.

“Because if I lose, I swear that I will remain here as your servant, shaping such treasures for you as will arouse the envy of the very gods,” replied the stranger.

Gorm’s eyes shone with greed at the thought of such wealth and renown, but he was cautious for more than he seemed. He hesitated, but he dared not do so for long for the eyes of every warrior were upon him now. To show fear was to endanger his reputation, his position of command, and his life. “Surely it cannot be a trial of strength,” he said at last, lifting the stranger’s arm. His warriors roared with laughter.

“Or a trial of wits,” said the bard, though it was not clear who he meant to insult.

“Let it be a trial of fear,” said the stranger. “If Gorm the mighty keeps his hold upon his treasure no matter what he hears or sees until the sun rises, he shall keep it and I shall be his servant for a year and a day.

“And if he loses?” pressed the bard.

“If Gorm releases the cauldron, he will surrender it to me—and anything else I need to complete the work.”

“Agreed,” said Gorm after a time.

“Swear it, for you and your warriors” insisted the stranger.

“By my axe, I swear it.”

“It is good,” said the stranger. “Your axe cuts both ways.”

With all eyes fixed upon them, they stepped over to the cauldron and each took of one of the great handles in his hand. They stood thus facing each other in the now complete silence of the hall. The warriors stood with their backs against the walls, many of them gripping weapons in dread of what was to come.

Gorm stood with his feet braced wide and his jaw clenched. When nothing happened, he laughed nervously and drank off a horn of mead. “Well, little man, what do you have to show me? Do you carry terror in your pockets? Or perhaps you think that your grim visage will be enough to frighten Gorm the Ringwinner. Do wish to tell me a story, such as are

told to scare children on dark nights?”

The stranger stood with closed eyes as if meditating and then spoke quietly: “I summon all those whose spirits were sent shrieking down to dark Niflheim by the axe of this man, all who dwell in Hel’s kingdom.”

As the warriors watched in terror, a thick mist began to seep from the walls and floor like a foul miasma of the grave. The chill vapor curled like sinewy wraiths about their limbs and robbed them of breath until, as if driven by an unfelt wind, it settled into a swirling pool in the center of the hall. Out of it arose human figures. Gaping and gasping, their hollow eyes staring, they shambled forward with arms outstretched toward Gorm. The lord of the hall had stood unmoving, his face pale but set and grim. The shapes of the dead now clawed at him with insubstantial fingers as if to drag him down to the underworld.

Gorm scoffed as he swung a massive fist through the vapor. “You summon shadows, shades of the forgotten dead! They could not harm me in life. Why should I tremble at them now?”

“Death comes to us all,” said the stranger. “It will come for you too.”

“Hah! I shall not be as these. I am a warrior! The Valkyries will carry me to Odin’s hall and, at the end of days, I will fight alongside the gods themselves!”

As he said this, the shapes of the dead receded into the mist which, lit with a cold light, now formed a column which towered over Gorm. It took on the shape of Nidhogg, the great dragon of the netherworld. It lunged for Gorm with slaving jaws. He threw up his arm in protection, but did not let go of the cauldron. The stranger spoke a word, and the dragon dissolved into falling mist.

Gorm said nothing. Despite his boasting, his struggle with terror was written on his features.

“Do you care for the gods?” the stranger asked after a time.

“Care for the gods?” Gorm asked with genuine puzzlement. “The gods do not command us to care for them—only that we be strong. They despise the weak. Besides, whatever you are, you do not have the power to summon the gods.”

“You are right about the gods,” replied the stranger. They do not command your devotion, nor even desire it. They will look after themselves until doom falls upon all. But as for what I am and the power I wield, I shall show you!” he thundered.

Sheets of flame leapt from the floor to enshroud him. Gorm raised his free hand against them, though he felt no heat. Even so, the blaze melted the stranger’s humanity from him. His form shortened and

broadened. A wild mane and beard of jet black hair floated upon the air. His eyes flickered like dark fire from out a visage that was never born of woman. Finally, at a motion of his hand, the flames died. His rags were transformed into rich garments that shone like obsidian scales, and his shadow engulfed the hall.

The warriors gasped in fear, and Gorm himself trembled, but he did not loosen his grip on the cauldron.

“I am Andvari, King of the Dwarfs of the Underworld. You hold what is mine. I will have it back. Release it or I shall summon an army of my kin to take it.”

At this, Gorm raised himself to his full height and bellowed a great roar of mirthless laughter, his fear forgotten. Here was a threat he could understand. He welcomed the prospect of a flesh and blood battle to clear his head of supernatural terror. “Let them come! I would see the color of their blood.” Bending forward, he added “Even if I have I have to fight on my knees.”

Andvari smiled at that.

“But,” Gorm added after a moment, “you will not call them, will you? You would not have entered our bargain if you could do this.”

“You are right, mighty Gorm. I will not call them. I am bound by my word—and I have no need to resort to such methods. I have magic, Gorm, and I have made a thing of magic. Even now I call it forth. You will release the cauldron. If you do not, it will consume your life.”

Gorm stood with clouded brow but said nothing.

“You will not die. You will wither. You will have no glorious death in battle. No one will sing your deeds. The Valkyries will not choose you for Valhalla. You will shuffle uselessly about the hall of some other chief, hugging the fire and fighting dogs for scraps until your own sons, overcome by the shame of it, send you down to the nameless dead.”

“Shadows and imaginings,” said Gorm, “that is all you have shown me. As if I were some lisping babe to be frightened by the prattle of old women. I do not believe you have this power.”

“Look at your hand that grips the cauldron,” said Andvari.

Gorm gasped to see his hand shrivel. Like the working of poison, grey tendrils spread up his arm, wasting his flesh. As he watched in horror, his heavily muscled arm became emaciated and weak.”

“There is still time, Gorm. Release my treasure.”

Gorm replied only with an inarticulate howl of fear and rage. As his gaze passed over the cauldron, he caught a dim reflection of his face in its golden surface. The shock was too much for him. With a great cry he brought both of his hands to cover his eyes and stumbled backward.

“Rise Gorm,” said Andvari. “You are unharmed.”

Gorm examined his hands and arms and touched his face. Slowly he rose to his feet with as much dignity as he could muster. He cast his gaze over the warriors who were pressed against the walls of the hall. “You have won our bargain,” he said finally. “I have been defeated by your tricks. Take the cauldron and go.”

“Ah, but our bargain was that you would also supply what I need to finish the work,” said Andvari.

“You have already taken my greatest treasure. Will you strip me of my gold and silver as well?”

“On the contrary,” said Andvari, “I will give you a great gift. You will complete the cauldron. All that is missing is a depiction of the soul of the Northman—your soul. You are terrible in battle, thirsty for fame, and the only thing you really fear is an inglorious death.”

“You wish to carve my likeness into the cauldron?” asked Gorm skeptically.

“Not exactly, but I will give you and your men immortality.” As he said this, he raised his hands and spoke in an arcane tongue. There was a great rumbling in the earth, a rushing wind, and a rolling clap of thunder. When all was over, Andvari stood alone next to the cauldron. There was only an empty plain where the fortress had stood. He ran his hands lovingly over the gold, smiling to see Gorm reigning forever there over his hall. The dwarf hoisted the cauldron easily upon his shoulder and quickly disappeared into the falling snow.