

THE NORNIR AND VALKYRIAS. CHAPTER XXIV

from

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The shapino, of man's future at his birth -- The three Nornir -- Their dwellingplace -- Their kin -- Good and Evil Nornir -- They water the ash Yggdrasil - The maids of Odin -- They determine the issue of battle -- Choose the warriors for Yallialla -- Figurative names -- The ride through the air -Their appearance -- The help warriors in battle -- Their sojourn among men -- The first and second songs of Helgi.

IT was believed by the Northmen that the future life of all men was shaped at their birth by genii called *Nornir*, who preordained the fates of men and all that happened in the world. The gods themselves seem to have been under their control.

There were three Nornir, called *Urd*, the past; *Verdandi*, the present; and *Skuld*, the future, they dwelt by Urd's well, situated at the foot of the ash Yggdrasil, whose roots they watered with their wisdom and the experience of the past: ¹ they spun the threads of fate at the birth of every child, and measured the boundaries of his doings, and the days of his life. ²

The names of these three Nornir were to those men of old the embodiment and philosophy of life. They could not have existed without their fathers before them, hence Urd was the symbol of the great past.

Verdandi, the present, symbolised the present life itself, consequently was closely connected with Urd. Skuld, the future, represented the growth, the shooting forward, and was an inseparable part of the triad.

"There stands a fine hall under the ash, near the well, and from that hall come three maidens, who are named Urd, Verdandi, and Skuld. These forecast the lives of men, and are called Nornir.

In Vafthúdnismal, Odin asks Vafthrúdnir --

Much have I travelled,
Much have I tried,
Many powers have I known;

Who are the maidens
That soar over the sea;
The wise-minded ones travel.

In Voluspa, Heid the sybil, in her vision --

Thence come three maidens, ³
Knowing many things,

Out of the hall
Which stands under the tree;
One was called Urd,
Another Verdandi,
The third Skuld;
They carved on wood tablets,
They chose lives,
They laid down laws
For the children of men,
They chose the fates of men.
They disturbed the peace of the
golden age of the gods.

The Asar met,
Who raised on the Idavöll ⁴
Altars and high temples;
They laid hearths,
They wrought wealth,
They shaped tongs,
And made tools.

They played chess on the grass-plot;
They were cheerful;
They did not lack
Anything of gold
Until three
Very mighty
Thurs maidens came
From Jötunbeim.

"But there are other Nornir who come to every one that is born, to shape his life. Some are of the kindred of the gods, others of Alfar kin, and some of Dvergar kin" (Gylfaginning, c. 15).

Vafthrúdnir.

Three great rivers
Fall over the field

Of the maidens of *Mögthrasir*.
They are the only destinies
That are in the world,
Though they dwell with Jötnar.

In time the number of Nornir seems to have increased.

In Fafnismál, Sigurd asks the following question of Fafnir: --

Sigurd.

Tell me, Fafnir,
As thou art said to be wise
And know many things well,
Who are the maidens
That are helping in need
And deliver mothers of children?

Fafnir

Very different born
I think the Nornir are;
They own not kin together,
Some are Asar-born,
Others are Alfar-born,
Others are daughters of Dvalin. ⁵

(Fafnismál.)

Atli says to his wife, Gudrún: --

The Nornir have just
Roused me
With forebodings of evil;
I want thee to read them.
Methought that thou,
Grudrun, Gjúki's daughter,
Didst thrust me through
With a poisoned sword.

Gudrún.

It forebodes fire
When one dreams of iron;
The anger of woman
Means pride and sorrow;
I shall have to burn thee ⁶
Against sickness,
Heal thee and help thee,
Though I hate thee.

(Gudrúnarkvida, 11.)

" Gangleri said: 'If the Nornir rule the fates of men, they deal them out very unevenly, for some have a happy and rich life, while others have little property or praise -- some a long life, some a short one.' Hár replied: 'Good Nornir, and of good kindred, forecast a happy life; but when men have evil fates, the evil Nornir cause it' " (Gylfaginning, c. 15).

The water with which the Nornir watered the ash Yggdrasil was considered holy.

"Further it is told that the Nornir who live at Urd's well take water out of it every day, and also the clay which lies round it, and pour it over the ash-tree that the branches may not dry up or grow rotten. This water is so holy that everything which comes into the well grows white like the film called *skjall* which lies next to the eggshell. The dew which falls thence on the earth is called honey-dew, and the bees feed on it. Two birds live in Urd's well, called swans, and from them has sprung the kin of birds with this name" (Gylfaginning, c. 16).

The Valkyrias were the maids of Odin, and were sent by him to determine the issue of battle, and choose those who were to fall and dwell with him in Valhalla. The belief in Valkyrias appears to have been of very great antiquity, and is one of the most striking, poetical, and

grand features of the Asa faith. In no record of the religions that have come down to us do we find anything that would make us suppose that such belief ever existed in other parts of the world, and it was well adapted to the creed of a people among whom war and the conquest of other lands were leading features.

Heid in Voluspa gives the names of the Valkyrias and in her version we learn that

She saw Valkyrias
Come from far off,
Ready to ride
To Goth-thjód. ⁷
Skuld held a shield,
Skögul was next,

Gunn, Hild, Göndul,
And Geirskögul;
Now are numbered
The maidens of Herjan, ⁸
The Valkyrias ready
To ride over the ground.

So we see that originally the number of Valkyrias belonging to Odin was only six, afterwards their number increased. Sometimes they appear nine together, at others treble that number.

Others are mentioned in Grimnismal. Odin, speaking to Geirrod, says --

I want Hrist and Mist
To carry the horn to me;
Skeggjöld and Skögul,
Hild and Thrúd,
Hlökk and Herfjötur,

Göll and Geirahöd,
Randgrid and Rádgrid,
And Reginleif,
They carry ale to the Einherjar." ⁹

" Hjörvard and Sigrlin had a large and handsome son. He was silent, and no name had been fastened to him. ¹⁰ He sat on a mound, and saw nine Valkyrjas riding, and one of them seemed the foremost -- she sang: --

Late wilt thou, Helgi,
Rule over rings ¹¹

On the Rodulsvellir, ¹²
If thou art, ever silent."

"The daughter of King Eylimi was Svava; she was a Valkyrja and rode over air and sea; she gave this name to Helgi, and often afterwards sheltered him in battles" (Helga Kvida Hjörvardssonar).

The following among other poetical and figurative names are given to the Valkyrias: -- The maidens of victory, the goddesses of the fight, the graspers of spears, the witches of the shield, the maidens of the slain, the exultant ones, the strong one, the entangling one, the silent one, the stormraisers. They are mentioned as riding through the air, over the sea, and

amid the lightning, helmet-clad, with bloody brynjas, and glittering spears; the spear which carried death and victory being the emblem of Odin. When their horses shake their manes, the froth which comes from their bitted mouths drops as dew into the valleys, and hail falls from their nostrils into the woods.

The slain were called *Val* (chosen), and belonged to Odin. From the word *Val* are derived the names of Valkyrias, Valfödr (the father of the slain), Valhalla (the hall of the slain), Valól (field of battle, field of the slain), and probably also of those birds of prey which after the battle visited the field of action.

Skuld, the youngest of the three Nornir, who personified the future, followed the Valkyrias, probably in order to witness the decrees of fate given to men at their birth.

"There are others that have to serve in Valhöll, carry drink and take care of the table-dressing and the beer cups. These are called Valkyrias; Odin sends them to every battle; they choose death for men and rule victory. Gunn and Róta and the youngest Norn, Skuld, always ride to choose the slain and rule *man-slayings*" (Gylfaginning, ch. 36).

It was believed that during a battle warriors sometimes saw Valkyrias coming to their help: how grand and beautiful must have been the vision created in their mind by their faith in them, as they thought they saw them riding on their fiery steeds, and sweeping over the battle-field, by land or by sea. It is hard to realise a grander picture for a warrior to behold.

Helgi saw: --

Three times nine maidens, But one rode foremost A white maiden under helmet; Their horses trembled, From their manes fell

Dew into the deep dales, Hail on the lofty woods; Thence come good seasons among men, All that I saw was loathsome to me.

[Helga Kvida Hjörvardssonar.]

Sometimes the Valkyrias came to earth and remained among men.

" Nidud was a king in Sweden. He had two sons and one daughter, whose name was Bödvild. There were three brothers, sons of the Finna-king, one Slagfinn, the other Egil, and the third Völund; they ran on snow-shoes, and hunted wild beasts. They came to the Ulfdal, where there is a lake called Ulfsjár (Wolf's lake), and there made themselves a house. Early one morning they found at the shore of the lake three women who were spinning flax, near them lay their swan-skins; they were Valkyrias. Two of them were daughters of King Hlödver (Louis), Hladgunn Svanhvít (Swan-white), and Hervör Alvit (All-wise); and the third Ölrún, daughter of Kjar of Valland. The brothers took them to their house. Egil got Ölrún; Slagfinn, Swan-white; and Völund, All-wise. There they dwelt for seven winters; after which the women went to visit battle-fields, and did not return. Then Egil went on snowshoes to look for Ölrún, and Slagfinn for Swan-white, while Völund remained in Ulfdal. He was the most skilled smith that is spoken of in ancient Sagas. King Nidud had him captured, as is told in the song" (Völundar Kvida).

Helga Kvida gives an account of how Sigrun, a Valkyria, betrothed herself to Helgi, and of how she comes with other Valkyrias to protect him. Their appearance is thus described: --

Then gleams flashed From Logafjöll, ¹³
And from those gleams
Came lightning;
The high ones ¹⁴ rode helmet-clad
Down on the Himinvangar;
Their brynjas were
Blood-bespattered,
And from their spears
Sprang rays of light.

Early (in the day) asked
From the wolf-lair
The *dögling* (the king) about this

The southern disir ¹⁵
If they would home
With hildings ¹⁶
That night go;
There had been clang of bowstrings.

But from the horse
The daughter of Högni (Sigrun)
Hushed the clatter of shields;
She said to the king,
I think we have
Other work to do
Than drink beer
with the ring-breaker (Helgi)

In the second song of this poem we learn the mode of thought, the religious ideas and customs of the people of the North, and glean some new facts; that men and women were sometimes thought to be born again; that Helgi derived his name from Helgi Hjörvardson, and that he was brought up by Hagal. His foes, and not the sons of Hunding, search for him, but he escapes by dressing himself in the garb of a bondwoman. This episode of his life and the following fights must have taken place after those of the first song. The connection between the two poems is somewhat obscure.

" Granmar was a powerful king who lived, at Svarinshaug; he had many sons, among them Hödbrod, Gudmund, and Starkad. Hödbrod was at an appointed meeting ¹⁷ of kings; he betrothed himself to Sigrun, ¹⁸ daughter of Högni. When she heard this she rode with Valkyrias over the sea and air to search for Helgi. He was then at Logafjöll (Fire-mountains), and had fought against the sons of Hunding; there he slew Alf and Eyjolf, Hjorvard and Hervard; he was very weary of the fight, and sat down at Arastein (Eagle's stone); where Sigrun found him, threw her arms about his neck and kissed him, and told him of her errand, as is related in the old Völsunga-kvida: -- ¹⁹

Sigrun sought
The glad king, ²⁰
She took Helgi's
Hand in hers;

She kissed and greeted
The king under his helmet;

Then did his mind
Turn to the maiden.

She said she loved
With all her mind
The son of Sigmund
Ere she had seen him.

I was to Höjdbrod
In the host betrothed,
But another chief
I wanted to have.

Yet I fear, chief,
The anger of my kinsmen;
I have broken
The *mind-warriage* of my father. ²¹

The maiden of Högni
Spoke not against her mind;
She said she would
Have the love of Helgi.

Helgi.

Do not care for
The wrath of Högni,
Nor for the ill-will
Of thy kin;
Thou wilt, young maiden,
Live with me;
Thou, good maiden, hast kinsmen
Whom I do not fear.

" Helgi then gathered a large fleet, and sailed to Frekastein (Wolfs stone). At sea they met with a dangerous tempest, and lightning flashed down on the ships. They saw nine Valkyrias riding in the air, and recognised Sigrun; then the storm abated, and they came safely to the land. The sons of Granmar sat on a rock when the ships sailed towards the shore.

" Gudmund rode home with news of war; then the sons of Granmar gathered a host. Many kings came there. There were Högni, the father of Sigrun, and his sons Bragi and Dag. There was a great battle, and the sons of Granmar fell, with all their chiefs, except Dag, son of Högni, whose life was spared, and who promised on oath to follow the Völsungs. Sigrun went among the slain, and found Höjdbrod near death's door. She sang: --

Sigrun of Seva fjöll ²²
Will not,
King Höjdbrod,
Fall into thy arms;

Gone is the life
Of Granmar's sons;
The grey steeds ²³ of jötun-women
Many corpses tear.

She met Helgi, who answered: --

All is not given to thee,
Mighty wight; ²⁴
For I say the Nornir
Wield some power.

This morning fell
At Frehastein
Bragi and Högni;
I was their slayer.

" Helgi married Sigrun, and they had sons; but Helgi did not live long. Högni's son Dag sacrificed to Odin for revenge on his father, and Odin lent him his spear. Dag met his brother-in-law Helgi at Fjoturlund; he thrust the spear through him, Helgi fell, and Dag rode to Sevafjoll and told Sigrun the tidings: --

Loth am I, sister,
To tell thee the sorrow,
For unwilling have I
Made my sister weep;
This morning fell
At Fjoturlund
The Budlung ²⁵ who was
The best in the world,

And stood on
The neck of hildings. ²⁶

Sigrun.

Thee shall all
Oaths harm ²⁷
Which thou to Helgi
Hast sworn
At the bright
Waters of Leiptr ²⁸
And at the rain-cold
Rock of the sea.
The ship shall not move
Which should carry thee,
Though a fair wind to thy wish
Blows on it.
The horse shall not run
Which is to run with thee,
Though thou hast to
Escape from thy foes.

The sword shall not bite
Which thou drawest,
Except when it sings

About thy own head;
Then were the death
Of Helgi avenged,
If thou wert an outlaw
Out, in the forest,
Lacking property
And all enjoyment,

And hadst not food
Unless thou tearest corpses.

Dag.

Mad art thou, sister,
And out of thy wits
As thou invokest curses
On thy brother;
Odin alone
Causes all the ills,
For between kinsmen
Runes of strife he bore.

Thy brother offers thee
Red rings, ²⁹
All Vandilsve ³⁰
And Viodalir; ³¹
Take half of my lands
As indemnity for sorrow,
Thou ring-adorned maiden
And thy sons.

" Sigrun was short-lived from grief and sorrow. It was the belief in olden times that men were reborn, but now it is called an old woman's story. It is said that Helgi and Sigrun were born again; he was then named Helgi Haddingjaskati, and she. Kara, ³² Hálfðán's daughter, 'as is sung in the lay of Kara, ³³ and she was a Valkyria.' " [Helgi Hundingsbani II.]

Notes

¹Cf. also Sigdrifumál, 17; Helgi Hundingsbani; Norna Gest; Flateyjarbók; Fornaldar Sögur, i. Later Edda; Orkneyingm; Egil's Saga; Hávamál; Atlakvida.

²Helgakvida Hundingsbana.

³These three maidens came from Jötunheim, the home of the Jötnar; here they are no doubt meant to designate the three Norrir, who came and disturbed the peace of the golden age by establishing past, present, and future, i.e., change, fluctuation, development, and growth.

⁴Ídavöll, ida, movement; voll, plain. This stanza tells of the golden age when the Asars were happy and lacked nothing.

⁵Grimnismál, gives a somewhat similar account.

⁶Burn a spot on the skin as a cure.

⁷Thjóð nation, nation of the Goths.

⁸Odin.

⁹Warriors.

¹⁰See pp. 31, 32.

¹¹Wealth.

¹²Sun Plains.

¹³Fire-mountain. Here the text is corrupted, but I follow Bugge in the suggestion that this is a place-name, the battle taking place on the plain beneath the Logafjöll, from which the Valkyrias come down to take the slain.

¹⁴The Valkyrias.

¹⁵Valkyrias are here called disir, guardian spirits, and seem to come from the South, the ancient home of the Asar.

¹⁶Chiefs. Helgi invited them to come home with him and his chiefs that night, and they would not.

¹⁷We find that kings sometimes had meetings among themselves.

¹⁸Probably she was betrothed by her father, not being present herself.

¹⁹From this we see that this beautiful story is derived from the lost Völsungakvida (a great loss), and from which Völsunga itself is probably mostly taken.

²⁰Glad because of victory.

²¹The marriage which her father had set his mind upon.

²²Sigrun speaks to the dying Hödbröd on the battle-field.

²³Wolves.

²⁴Meaning: "Everything is not in thy power, as the Nornir have great power also over the fates of men." The death of Helgi was against Sigrun's will.

²⁵King.

²⁶A custom found in the Old Testament (Joshua), of putting the foot on the subdued king's neck.

²⁷Dag broke his oath, as we have seen before; and Sigrun cursed him for having done so.

²⁸Leiptr=flash of lightning. Probably this was a swift river, or waterfall.

²⁹Here we see the custom of wergild, so often described in the Sagas.

³⁰The temple of Vandil.

³¹Valleys of fight.

³²Cf. also Helga Kvida Hjörvardsonar.

³³The song of Kara is lost. Svafa in the first song, Sigrun in the second, is Svafa reborn; and Kara in the third and lost song, is Sigrun reborn.