



NORSE STORIES - retold from the Eddas

Hamilton Wright Mabie

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An excerpt from the beginning of the first story:

THE MAKING OF THE WORLD.

EIGHT hundred years ago, when the galleys of the bold Norsemen were scudding through storm and mist far into the unknown western seas, or, in the soft summer of the Mediterranean, riding at anchor in the ports of Italy and Northern Africa, the old stories of the battles of the gods and the giants that had been repeated for hundreds of years by Norse firesides in the long winter evenings were brought together by Saemund the Wise in Iceland, and were known henceforth as the Elder Edda; and a hundred years later Snorre Sturleson retold the same old stories, with others equally marvellous, in the Younger Edda. These ancient books, which a brave and noble race carried in its heart through all its wide wanderings and conquests, take one back to the beginning of time, and tell of the birth of the worlds and the coming of the gods to rule over them.

Norway faces the sea with a line of cliffs so massive that their foundations seem everlasting. Islands without number rise out of the tossing waves; the deep, tranquil waters of the fjords, overhung with fir-covered mountains, and bright at night with the quenchless splendor of the stars, flow through narrow channels to the outer ocean; and against the sky great mountains stand vast and immovable, as if from eternity to eternity. No Norseman, steering his adventurous galley along these rocky shores, seeing, perhaps, the mighty rush of the polar seas against the North Cape, and hearing the long reverberation of Thor's hammer roll from mountain peak to mountain peak, would have believed that these things had not been as he saw them from the very beginning, if the Eddas, wiser than any wisdom of man, had not told him of a time when even the gods had not begun to live, and in the vast space where no worlds hung and no heavens shone there was

nothing but the unseen spirit of the great All-father, solitary and silent in the depths.

Not even the Eddas are able to reveal his thoughts or to describe his life in the awful solitariness of a silent universe; they can only declare that in his own good time he began to build the worlds, and far in the north Niflheim rose out of the depths, the land of eternal winter wrapped in fogs and mists, and far in the south Muspelheim, the land of quenchless fire, glowing with unspeakable heat and overhung with clouds and fiery sparks, in the midst of whose blinding heat and light sat Surt, guarding the kingdom of fire with a flaming sword. Between the land of ice and the land of fire yawned the bottomless abyss, Ginungagap, black and fathomless, and into it the rivers of Niflheim poured with soundless fury, and as the icy streams fell into the darkness they congealed and hung in great masses from the northern edges of the abyss; and over the awful chasm and the silent cataracts icy fogs gathered and bitter winds swept.

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