

The Lay of Fafnir

Sigurd went home to Hjalprek. Then Regin goaded him to kill Fafnir. Sigurd and Regin went up to Gnitheath and followed the trail along which Fafnir slithered toward the water. Then Sigurd dug a great ditch in the path, and got into it. When Fafnir crawled away from his hoard, venom spurted from his mouth and flowed from above onto Sigurd's head. When Fafnir passed over the pit, Sigurd drove his sword into the serpent's heart. Fafnir thrashed about, striking his head and tail on the ground. Sigurd leaped out of the pit, and they confronted each other. Fafnir said:

"A boy, just a boy! What mother gave you birth?
Who says you are his son?
A bright blade is red with Fafnir's blood;
your sword stands in my heart."

Sigurd concealed his name because it was believed in ancient times that the words of a man about to die had great power if he cursed his enemy by name. He said:

"A wanderer named for a noble beast,
the son of no mother,
I had no father as other men do;
always I go alone."

Fafnir said:
"If you had no father as other men do,
what wonder begot you?"

Sigurd said:
"I tell you, my family has no fame,
any more than I myself;
I am called Sigurd, my father Sigmund,
and by my sword you were slain."

Fafnir said:
"Who drove you to it? What made you decide
to try to take my life?
I see how your eyes flash— bold was the father
whose son attacks unafraid."

Sigurd said:
"My heart drove me to it, helped by my hand
and the keen blade I carry;
few will be heroes when their hair is white
if childhood saw them craven."

Fafnir said:
"If you could have grown up close to your kin,
you would be bold in battle,
but you were caught and kept in bonds;
a man not free is afraid."

Sigurd said:
"You mock me, Fafnir, because I'm far away
from family and home;
maybe I was caught, but I'm no captive—
you felt my freedom to your cost."

Fafnir said:
"You think you are hearing words of hate,
but what I tell you is true:
the rings of gold, the fire-red treasure
will drag you down to your doom."

Sigurd said:
"Every warrior enjoys his wealth

until one destined day;
sooner or later each man surrenders
all that he has to Hel."

Fafnir said:

"You are destined by the Norns' decree
to find a fool's fate;
row in the wind and you'll drown in water:
all is danger to the doomed."

Sigurd said:

"Tell me, Fafnir, famed for your wisdom—
I know you've learned much lore,
what Norns will help women in their need
before they give birth?"

Fafnir said:

"The Norns descend from different races,
they have no common kin,
some from the gods, some from the elves,
some are Dvalin's daughters."

Sigurd said:

"Tell me, Fafnir, famed for your wisdom—
I know you've learned much lore,
what is the island where blood will flow
when gods and the fire-giant fight?"

Fafnir said:

"It's called Ill-Fated, for the time to come
when the gods will go to war;
the Rainbow Bridge will break as they ride,
their horses swim in the stream.

"The Helm of Terror I held over men
as I lay guarding the gold;
I found no one I had to fear,
few were worth a fight."

Sigurd said:

"Don't trust your Helm of Terror
when strong men meet in battle;
if he fights enough, a warrior will find
that no one's courage conquers all."

Fafnir said:

"I blew out poison as I lay protecting
my father's treasure."

Sigurd said:

"Yes, fiery serpent, fiercely you hissed
and held to your hoard;
but men meet their foes with greater fury
if they have that Helm."

Fafnir said:

"Listen to me, Sigurd, and heed what I say—
ride home from here in haste!
The fire-red treasure, the rings of gold,
my hoard will be your bane.

"Regin betrayed me, he will betray you,
my brother will destroy us both;
Fafnir must leave his life behind,
and you have proved your power."

Sigurd said:

"You were betrayed, but I'll make my own
what's hidden in the heath,
while Fafnir lies here and fights with death
until Hel holds him!"

Regin kept out of the way while Sigurd was slaying Fafnir. Sigurd was wiping the blood from his sword when Regin came back and said:

"Hail to the hero! Well have you won
the fight with Fafnir!
Sigurd, of all men under the sun,
not one was born so brave."

Sigurd said:

"When war-gods meet to match their might,
who can tell the bravest born?
Many a hero never made a hole
in another man's breast."

Regin said:

"You are happy, Sigurd, your heart is light
as you dry Gram with grass;
but it's my brother whose blood you shed,
and I bear some of the blame."

Sigurd said:

"By your will only I rode this way
over the highlands here;
long would the serpent lie on his hoard,
but you dared me to the deed."

Regin went to Fafnir and cut out his heart with the sword called
Ridil, and then he drank from the wound. Regin said:

"Sit down now, Sigurd; wait while I sleep,
and roast Fafnir's heart in the fire!
I have a mind to eat this meat
since I swallowed this blood."

Sigurd said:

"You were far away when Fafnir's blood
reddened my sharp sword;
I set my strength against the serpent
while you hid in the heather."

Regin said:

"You would have let the old giant lie
for a long time yet in his lair
had not my skill forged you your sword,
that bright blade you carry."

Sigurd said:

"Spirit is better than the keenest sword
when there's a real foe to fight;
I've seen a brave man swiftly win a battle
though his blade was blunt.

"Courage is better than cowardice
for winning games of war;
gladness is always better than gloom,
whatever deeds must be done."

Sigurd took Fafnir's heart and roasted it on a spit. When he
thought that it had cooked enough and the blood frothed out, he
touched it to find out whether it was done. It burned him and he
put his finger in his mouth. Then Fafnir's heartblood touched his
tongue, and he understood the speech of the birds. He heard the
nuthatches crying in the wood. One of them said:

"There sits Sigurd stained with blood;
Fafnir's heart he roasts in the fire.
I would call the prince wise and prudent
if he himself ate that gleaming heart."

Another said:

"There lies Regin plotting revenge—
he wants to trick the boy who trusts him.
The evil smith speaks in crooked words,
blaming Sigurd for his brother's death."

A third said:

“Cut off his head! Send that hoary wizard
straight down to Hel!
Why should Sigurd share the treasure
Fafnir left in his lair?”

A fourth said:

“He would understand how to act wisely,
if he could have your counsel, sisters,
to watch out for himself and rejoice the raven—
I expect the wolf when I see his ears.”

A fifth said:

“He is not so wise, this mighty warrior—
he doesn't look like a war-lord to me
if he lets Regin leave this place
when he has been Fafnir's bane.”

The sixth said:

“He will be stupid if he spares
so foul a foe;
Regin lies here longing to destroy him—
what makes Sigurd so blind!”

The seventh said:

“Shorter by a head send the frost-hearted giant
far from his red-gold rings!
Sigurd would have the hoard of Fafnir,
possess that prize all alone.”

Sigurd said:

“Fate will not rule that by Regin's hand
I lose my life.
It won't be long before both brothers
leave here for Hel.”

Sigurd cut off Regin's head, and then he ate Fafnir's heart and drank the blood of both Regin and Fafnir. Then he heard the birds saying:

“Pack on your saddle the red rings, Sigurd—
few things worry a worthy king;
I can find you the fairest of maidens,
much wealth you'll have if you can win her.

“Green roads lead to Gjuki's domain—
good fortune follows a fearless man—
there the great ruler rears a daughter;
he would give her for Sigurd's gold.

“There is a hall on Hindarfell
fenced around by a wall of flame;
wise men built it there on the mountain
out of bright gold gleaned from rivers.

“There is a shield-maid asleep on the mountain,
fierce flames rise in a wall around her.
Odin struck her with a sleep-thorn:
she had slain warriors he wanted to win.

“Sigurd! You can see the warrior maiden
where Vingskornir bore her out of the battle;
prince, you might summon Sigdrifa from sleep,
but that depends on the Norns' decree.”

Sigurd followed Fafnir's trail to his lair and found it open. The doors and door-frames were of iron; iron also were all the beams of the house which was set into the earth.

There Sigurd found a great amount of gold and filled two chests with it. He took the Helm of Terror, the gold byrnie, the sword Hrotti, and many treasures, and loaded them onto Grani. But the horse would not move forward until Sigurd was on his back too.

NOTES

Sigurd hides his identity from Fafnir, but stanza 7 seems to refer to episodes related in "The Death of Sinfjotli" and the *Volsunga Saga* concerning his early life. Sigurd was born shortly after the death of his father, and raised in the court of Hjalprek whose son Sigurd's mother later married. But although Sigurd, as Fafnir says, did not grow up "close to his kin," there is no indication that he was mistreated.

The translation follows Boer's arrangement of stanzas and prose passages. Certain stanzas, particularly 30 and 31, which sound like "Sayings of the High One," may be interpolations.

Among the uncertainties of the text, it might be mentioned that the birds are variously numbered and identified. They recommend to Sigurd both Gudrun and Sigrdrifa, and seem to envision a sequence rather than a choice.

The Lay of Sigrdrifa

Sigurd rode up to the top of Hindarfell and from there went south to the land of the Franks. He saw a great light on a mountain, as if a fire were burning there; the flames reached to the heavens. When he came close, he saw a shield-wall and over it a banner. Sigurd went through the shield-wall and saw a man lying there asleep in full armor. First he took off the warrior's helmet. Then he saw that it was a woman. Her byrnie was so tight it seemed to be her very skin. He cut it with Gram, from the neckpiece all the way down and through both sleeves. When he took the byrnie off her, she awakened and sat up. She saw Sigurd and said:

"What broke the byrnie? Who summons me from sleep?

How was I saved from the ghostly spells?"

He said:

"Sigmund's son and Sigurd's sword,
which just gave the ravens reason to rejoice."

She said:

"Long I slept, long did I slumber
long are woes in the world;
it's Odin's fault that I found no way
to break the slumber-spells.

"Hail to the day, hail to the sons of day,
hail to night and its daughter!
Gaze on us gently, grant us sitting here
your blessing on our battles.

"Hail to the gods, hail to the goddesses,
hail to the all-giving earth!

Wisdom and lore, as long as we live,
grant us, and healing hands!"

Sigurd sat down and asked her name. She was called Sigdrifa, and she was a valkyrie. She told him that there had been a battle between two kings, and Odin had promised the victory to Hjalms-Gunnar, who was old and the greatest of warriors, but

Agnar was the other, Auda's brother.
He had never asked help from anyone.

Sigdrifa felled Hjalms-Gunnar in the battle, but Odin pricked her with a sleep-thorn in revenge for this and said that never again would she be victorious in battle and that she would be given in marriage. "But I told him that I solemnly vowed for my part never to marry any man who knew what fear was."

Sigurd asked her to teach him wisdom if she had knowledge of all the worlds. Then she took a horn full of mead and gave him a drink which would make him remember.

Sigdrifa said:

"First I will bring beer to the warrior—
might brewed it, mingled with it fame—
full of spells and potent songs,
rich in charms and runes of joy.

"I shall teach you the runes of triumph
to have on the hilt of your sword—
some on the blade, some on the guard;
then call twice on Tyr.

"Ale-runes you will want if another man's wife
tries to betray your trust;

scratch them on your drinking-horn, the back of your hand,
and the need-rune on your nail.

"With this sign your horn can never harm you;
dip a leek in your drink;
then I know you will never find
death mixed into your mead.