In Norse mythology the king of the gods was Odin. Unlike Zeus, his Greek counterpart, Odin took seriously his role as protector of the human race. Zeus punished Prometheus for giving fire to man. Odin suffered great pain in order to gain knowledge that would enrich man’s life.

In the days of old, the well of wisdom was guarded by the old giant Mimir, whose name means Memory. It is to this well that Odin journeys.

And so Odin, no longer riding on Sleipnir, his eight-legged steed, no longer wearing his golden armour and his eagle-helmet, and without his spear in his hand, travelled through Midgard, the World of Men, and made his way towards Jötunheim, the Realm of the Giants.

No longer was he called Odin All-Father, but Vegtam the Wanderer. He wore a cloak of dark blue and he carried a traveller’s staff in his hands. And now, as he went towards Mimir’s Well, which was near to Jötunheim, he came upon a Giant riding on a great Stag.

Odin seemed a man to men and a giant to giants. He went beside the Giant on the great Stag and the two talked together. “Who art thou, O brother?” Odin asked the Giant.

“I am Vafthrudner, the wisest of the Giants,” said the one who was riding on the Stag. Odin knew him then. Vafthrudner was indeed the wisest of the giants, and many went to strive to gain wisdom from him. But those who went to him had to answer the riddles Vafthrudner asked, and if they failed to answer the Giant took their heads off.

“I am Vegtam the Wanderer,” Odin said, “and I know who thou art, O Vafthrudner. I would strive to learn something from thee.”

The Giant laughed, showing his teeth. “Ho, ho,” he said, “I am ready for a game with thee. Dost thou know the stakes? My head to thee if I cannot answer any question thou wilt ask. And if thou canst not answer any question that I may ask, then thy head goes to me. And now let us begin.”

“I am ready,” Odin said.

“Then tell me,” said Vafthrudner, “tell me the name of the river that divides Asgard from Jötunheim?”

“Ifling is the name of that river,” said Odin. “Ifling that is dead cold, yet never frozen.”

“You hast answered rightly, O Wanderer,” said the Giant. “But thou hast still to answer other questions. What are the names of the horses that Day and Night drive across the sky?”

“Skinfaxe and Hrimfaxe,” Odin answered.

Vafthrudner was startled to hear one say the names that were known only to the Gods and to the wisest of the Giants. There was only one question now that he might ask before it came to the stranger’s turn to ask him questions.

“Tell me,” said Vafthrudner, “what is the name of the plain on which the last battle will be fought?”

“The Plain of Vigard,” said Odin, “the plain that is a hundred miles long and a hundred miles across.”

It was now Odin’s turn to ask Vafthrudner questions. “What will be the last words that Odin will whisper into the ear of Baldur, his dear son?” he asked.

Very startled was the Giant Vafthrudner at that question. He sprang to the ground and looked at the stranger keenly.

“Only Odin nows what his last words to Baldur will be,” he said, “and only Odin would have asked that question. Thou art Odin, O Wanderer, and thy question I cannot answer.

“Then,” said Odin, “if thou wouldst keep thy head, answer me this: what price will Mimir ask for a draught from the Well of Wisdom that he guards?”

“He will ask thy right eye as a price, O Odin,” said Vafthrudner.

“Will he ask no less a price than that?” said Odin.

“He will ask no less a price. Many have come to him for a draught from the Well of Wisdom, but no one yet has given the price Mimir asks. I have answered thy question, O Odin. Now give up thy