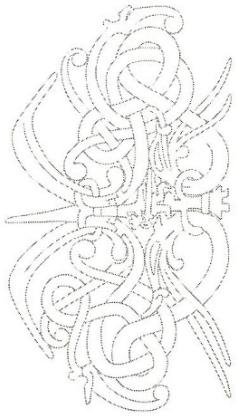


THE MASTER
BILL DELL



Thor had gone to the east to fight trolls. Asgard was more peaceful without him, but it was also unprotected. This was in the early days, shortly after the treaty between the Aesir and the Vanir, when the gods were still making a home for themselves and Asgard was undefended.

"We cannot always rely on Thor," said Odin. "We need protection. Giants will come. Trolls will come."

"What do you propose?" asked Heimdall, the watchman of the gods.

"A wall," said Odin. "High enough to keep out frost giants. Thick enough that not even the strongest troll could batter its way through."

"Building such a wall," said Loki, "so high and so thick, would take us many years."

Odin nodded his agreement. "But still," he said, "we need a wall."

The next day a newcomer arrived in Asgard. He was a big man, dressed as a smith, and behind him trudged a horse—a stallion, huge and gray, with a broad back.

"They say you need a wall built," said the stranger.

"Go on," said Odin.

"I can build you a wall," said the stranger. "Build it so high that the tallest giant could not climb it, so thick that the strongest troll could not batter through it. I can build it so well, by placing stone upon stone, that not an ant could find space enough to crawl through it. I will build you a wall that will last for a thousand thousand years."

"Such a wall would take a very long time to build," said Loki.

"Not at all," said the stranger. "I can build it in three seasons. Tomorrow is the first day of winter. It would only take me a winter, a summer, and another winter to build."

"And if you could do this," said Odin, "what would you ask in return?"

"I need little enough payment for what I am offering," said the man. "Only three things. First, I would like the beautiful goddess Freya's hand in marriage."

"That is not a little thing," said Odin. "And it would not surprise me if Freya had her own opinions about the matter. What are the other two things?"

The stranger grinned a cocky grin. "If I build your wall," he said, "I want the hand of Freya, and I also want the sun that shines in the sky by day, and I want the moon that gives us light at night. These three things are what the gods will give me if I build your wall."

The gods looked at Freya. She said nothing, but her lips were pressed together and her face was white with

anger. Around her neck was the necklace of the Brisings, which shone like the northern lights as it brushed her skin, and her hair was banded in gold, which was almost as bright as the hair itself.

"Go and wait outside," said Odin to the stranger. The man walked away, not before asking where he could find food and water for his stallion, which was called Svadilfari, which means "one who makes an unlucky journey."

Odin rubbed his forehead. Then he turned and looked at all the gods.

"Well?" asked Odin.

The gods began to talk.

"Quiet!" shouted Odin. "One at a time!"

Each of the gods and the goddesses had an opinion, and every one of them was of the same opinion: that Freya, the sun, and the moon were all too important and too valuable to be given to a stranger, even if he could build them the wall they needed in three seasons.

Freya had an additional opinion. She felt that the man should be beaten for his impertinence, then thrown out of Asgard and sent on his way.

"So," said Odin the all-father, "we are decided. We say no."

There was a dry cough from a corner of the hall. It was the kind of cough intended to attract attention, and the gods turned to see who had coughed. They found themselves looking at Loki, who stared back at them, and who

smiled and held up a finger as if he had something important to divulge.

"It is worth my pointing out," he said, "that you are ignoring something huge."

"I do not think we have overlooked a single thing, troublemaker of the gods," said Freya tartly.

"You are all overlooking," he said, "that what this stranger is proposing to do is, to make no bones about it, quite impossible. There is no-one alive who could build a wall so high and so thick as the one he described and have it finished in eighteen months. Not a giant or a god could do this, let alone a mortal man. I would stake my skin on it."

At this the gods all nodded and grunted and looked impressed. All of them except for Freya, and she looked angry. "You are fools," she said. "Especially you, Loki, because you think yourself clever."

"What he says he can do," said Loki, "is an impossible task. So I suggest this: we agree to his demands and to his price, but we set him stiff conditions—he may have no help building his wall, and instead of three seasons to build his wall, he has but one. If on the first day of summer any of the wall is unfinished—and it will be—then we pay him nothing at all."

"Why would he agree to that?" asked Heimdall.

"And what advantage would that give us over not having a wall at all?" asked Frey, Freya's brother.

Loki tried to suppress his impatience. *Were all the gods fools?* He began to explain, as if he were explaining

ing to a small child. "The smith will begin to build his wall. He will not finish it. He will work for six months, unpaid, on a fool's errand. At the end of six months we will drive him away—we might even beat him for his presumption—and then we can use whatever he has done so far as the foundations of the wall that we will complete in the years to come. There is no risk to us of losing Freya, let alone the sun or moon."

"Why would he say yes to building it in a season?" asked Tyr, god of war.

"He may not say yes," said Loki. "But he seems arrogant and sure of himself, and not the kind to refuse a challenge."

All the gods grunted, and clapped Loki on the back, and told him that he was a very crafty fellow and it was a good thing that he was crafty and on their side, and now they would get their foundations built for nothing, and they congratulated each other on their intelligence and their bargaining ability.

Freya said nothing. She fingered her necklace of light, the gift of the Brisings. This was the same necklace that had been stolen from her by Loki in the form of a seal, when she was bathing, and that Heimdall had fought in seal form with Loki to return to her. She did not trust Loki. She did not care for the way this conversation had gone.

The gods called the builder into their hall.
He looked around at the gods. They all seemed in good

humor, grinning and nudging each other and smiling. Freya, however, did not smile.

"Well?" asked the builder.

"You asked for three seasons," said Loki. "We will give you one season, and one season only. Tomorrow is the first day of winter. If you are not finished on the first day of summer, you leave here, unpaid. But if you have finished building the wall, as high and as thick and as impregnable as we have agreed, then you will be given everything you have asked for: the moon, the sun, and the beautiful Freya. You may have no help in building your wall from anyone; you must build this wall alone."

The stranger said nothing for some moments. He stared away into the distance and seemed to be weighing Loki's words and conditions. Then he looked at the gods, and he shrugged. "You have said I may have no outside help. I would like my horse, Svadillfari, to help me haul the stones here, the stones I will use to build the wall. I do not believe this to be an unreasonable request."

"It is not unreasonable," agreed Odin, and the other gods nodded and told each other that horses were good for hauling heavy stones.

They swore oaths then, the mightiest of oaths, the gods and the stranger, that neither side could betray the other. They swore on their weapons, and they swore on Draupnir, Odin's golden arm-ring, and they swore on Gungnir, Odin's spear, and an oath sworn on Gungnir was unbreakable.

The next morning, as the sun rose, the gods stood to watch the man work. He spat on his hands and he began to dig the trench into which the first stones would go.

"He digs deep," said Heimdall.

"He digs fast," said Frey, Freya's brother.

"Well, yes, obviously he is a mighty digger of ditches and trenches," said Loki grudgingly. "But imagine how many stones he will have to haul here from the mountains. It is one thing to dig a trench. It is another to haul stones many miles, unaided, and then to place them, one stone upon the next, so tightly fitted that not an ant could crawl between them, higher than the tallest giant, to make a wall."

Freya looked at Loki with disgust, but she said nothing. When the sun set, the builder mounted his horse and set off for the mountains to gather his first rocks. The horse dragged an empty stone-boat behind it, a low sled that it pulled across the soft earth. The gods watched them leave. The moon was high and pale in the early winter sky.

"He will be back in a week," said Loki. "I am curious to see how many rocks that horse can haul. It looks strong."

The gods went to their feast hall then, and there was much merriment and laughter, but Freya did not laugh.

It snowed before dawn, a light dusting of snowflakes, a presentiment of the deep snows that would come further into the winter.

Heimdall, who saw everything approaching Asgard and who missed nothing, woke the gods in the darkness. They gathered by the trench the stranger had dug the previous day. In the gathering dawn they watched the builder, walking beside his horse, coming toward them. The horse was steadily dragging a score of blocks of granite, so heavy that the sled made deep ruts in the black earth.

When the man saw the gods he waved and called good morning cheerfully. He pointed to the rising sun, and he winked at the gods. Then he unhitched his horse from the rocks and let it graze while he began to manhandle the first of the granite blocks into the trench he had already dug to receive it.

"The horse is indeed strong," said Balder, most beautiful of all the Aesir. "No normal horse should be able to drag rocks that heavy."

"It is stronger than we imagined," said Kvasir the wise.

"Ah," said Loki. "The horse will soon tire. This was its first day on the job. It will not be able to haul that many stones every night. And winter is coming. The snows will be deep and thick, the blizzards will be blinding, and the way to the mountain will be difficult. There is nothing to worry about. This is all going according to plan."

"I hate you so much," said Freya, who stood unsmiling beside Loki. She walked back to Asgard in the dawn and did not stay to watch the stranger build the foundations of his wall.

Each night the builder and the horse and the empty stone-boat left for the mountain. Each morning they returned, with the horse dragging another twenty blocks of granite, every block larger than the tallest man. Each day the wall grew, and by evening it was bigger and more imposing than it had been before.

Odin called the gods to him.

"The wall is growing apace," he said. "And we swore an unbreakable oath, a ring-oath and a weapon-oath, that if he finishes building his wall in time, we will give him the sun and the moon and the hand in marriage of Freya, the beautiful."

Kvasir the wise said, "No man can do what this master builder is doing. I suspect that he must be something other than a man."

"A giant," said Odin. "Perhaps."

"If only Thor were here," sighed Balder.

"Thor is hammering trolls, away in the east," said Odin. "And even if he were to return, our oaths are mighty and binding."

Loki tried to reassure them. "We are like old women, getting ourselves all worried about nothing. The builder cannot finish the wall before the first day of summer, even if he is the most powerful giant in the land. It is impossible."

"I wish Thor were here," said Heimdall. "He would know what to do."

The snows fell, but the deep snow did not stop the wall-builder, and it did not slow Svaldfari, his horse. The gray

stallion pulled his sled, piled high with rocks, through snowdrifts and through blizzards, up steep hills and down again, through icy gorges.

The days began to get longer.

Dawn came earlier each morning. The snows began to melt, and the wet mud that was exposed was thick and heavy, the kind of mud that clings to your boots and drags you down.

"The horse will never be able to haul those rocks through the mud," said Loki. "They will sink, and he will lose his footing."

But Svadilfari was sure-footed and implacable, even in the thickest, wettest mud, and he hauled the rocks to Asgard, although the stone-boat was so heavy it cut deep gashes into the sides of the hills. Now the builder was hauling the rocks up hundreds of feet and manhandling each rock into place.

The mud dried and the spring flowers came out: yellow coltsfoot, and white wood anemones in profusion—and the wall being built around Asgard was a glorious, impregnable thing. When it was finished it would be impregnable: no giant, no troll, no dwarf, no mortal would be able to breach that wall. And the stranger continued to build it with relentless good humor. He did not seem to care if it rained or it snowed, and neither did his horse. Each morning they would bring the rocks from the mountains; each day the builder would lay the granite blocks upon the previous layer.

Now it was the last day of winter, and the wall was all but completed.

The gods sat on their thrones in Asgard, and they spoke.

"The sun," said Balder. "We have given away the sun."

"We placed the moon in the sky in order to mark off the days and the weeks of the year," said Bragi, god of poetry, moodily. "Now there will be no moon."

"And Freya, what would we do without Freya?" asked Tyr.

"If this builder is actually a giant," said Freya, with ice in her voice, "then I will marry him and follow him back to Jotunheim, and it will be interesting to see whom I hate more, him for taking me away or all of you for giving me to him."

"Now, don't be like that," began Loki, but Freya interrupted him and said, "If this giant does take me, and the sun and the moon, then I ask only one thing from the gods of Asgard."

"Name it," said Odin all-father, who had said nothing until now.

"I would like to see whoever caused this calamity killed before I go," said Freya. "I think it only fair. If I am to go into the land of the frost giants, if the moon and the sun are to be plucked from the sky and the world plunged into eternal darkness, then the life of the one who got us to this point should be forfeit."

"Ah," said Loki. "The apportioning of blame is so difficult. Who remembers exactly who suggested what? As

I recall, all the gods share equally in this unfortunate mistake. We all suggested it, we all agreed to it—

"*You suggested it,*" said Freya. "You talked these idiots into it. And I will see you dead before I leave Asgard."

"We all—" began Loki, but he saw the expressions on the faces of all the gods in that hall, and he fell silent.

"Loki son of Laufey," said Odin, "this is the result of your poor counsel."

"And it was as bad as all your other advice," said Balder. Loki shot him a resentful glance.

"We need the builder to lose his wager," said Odin. "Without violating the oath. He must fail."

"I don't know what you expect me to do about it," said Loki.

"I do not expect anything from you," said Odin. "But if this builder succeeds in finishing his wall by the end of tomorrow, then your death will be painful, and long, and a bad and shameful death at that."

Loki looked from one god to the next, and in each of their faces he saw his death, saw anger and resentment. He did not see mercy or forgiveness.

It would be a bad death indeed. But what were the alternatives? What could he do? He did not dare to attack the builder. On the other hand . . .

Loki nodded. "Leave it to me."

He walked from the hall, and none of the gods tried to stop him.

The builder finished placing his load of stones on the

wall. Tomorrow, on the first day of summer, as the sun was setting, he would finish his wall, and then he would leave Asgard with his wages. Only twenty more granite blocks to go. He clambered down the rough wooden scaffolding and whistled for his horse.

Svadilfari was grazing, as he normally was, in the long grass at the edge of the forest, almost half a mile from the wall, but he always came when his master whistled.

The builder grabbed the ropes that attached to the empty stone-boat and prepared to hitch it to his great gray horse. The sun was low in the sky, but it would not set for several hours, and the disk of the moon was pale, but it was there, high in the heavens, as well. Soon both of them would be his, the greater light and the lesser, and Freya the lady, who was more beautiful than either the sun or the moon. But the builder would not count his winnings before they were in his hands. He had worked so hard, and so long, for all the winter . . .

He whistled for the horse again. Odd—he had never needed to whistle twice. He could see Svadilfari now, shaking his head and almost prancing in the wildflowers of the spring meadow. The horse would take a step forward and then a step back, as if he could scent something enticing in the warm air of the spring evening but could not tell what the scent was.

"Svadilfari!" called the builder, and the stallion pricked his ears up and moved into a swift canter across the meadow, heading for the builder.

The builder watched his horse head toward him, and he felt satisfied. The hoofbeats pounded across the meadow, doubling and redoubling with the echoes that bounced from the high gray granite wall, so for one moment the builder imagined that a whole herd of horses was coming toward him.

No, thought the builder, just one horse.
He shook his head and realized his mistake. Not one horse. Not one set of hoofbeats. *Two . . .*

The other horse was a chestnut mare. The builder knew she was a mare immediately—he did not have to look between her legs. Every line of her, every inch of her, everything about the chestnut was female. Svdillfari wheeled as he ran across the meadow, then he slowed, and reared, and neighed loudly.

The chestnut mare ignored him. She stopped running, as if he were not there, and she put her head down and seemed to be cropping the grass as Svdillfari approached her, but when he was within a dozen yards she began to run from him, a canter that became a gallop, and the gray stallion ran behind her, trying to catch her, always a length or two behind, nipping at her rump and tail with his teeth, yet always missing.

They ran across the meadow together in the creamy golden light of the end of the day, the gray horse and the brown, sweat glistening on their flanks. It was almost a dance.

The builder clapped his hands loudly, and whistled,

and called Svdillfari's name, but the stallion ignored him.

The builder ran out, intending to catch the horse and bring him back to his senses, but the chestnut mare seemed almost to know what he intended, for she slowed and rubbed her ears and mane against the side of the stallion's head, and then ran, as if wolves were after her, toward the edge of the forest. Svdillfari ran after her, and in moments they both vanished into the shadows of the wood.

The builder cursed, and spat, and waited for his horse to reappear. The shadows lengthened, and Svdillfari did not return.

The builder returned to his stone-boat. He looked into the woods. Then he spat on his hands, took hold of the ropes, and began to haul the stone-boat across the meadow of grasses and spring flowers, toward the mountain quarry.

He did not return at dawn. The sun was already high in the sky by the time the builder returned to Asgard, hauling the stone-boat behind him.

He had ten stone blocks on the stone-boat, all he could manage, and he was hauling and heaving the stone-boat and cursing the stones, but with each heave he got closer to the wall.

Beautiful Freya stood at the gateway, watching him.
"You have only ten stone blocks with you," she told

him. "You will need twice that many bricks to finish our wall."

The builder said nothing. He carried on hauling his blocks toward the unfinished gateway, his face a mask. There were no smiles, no winks—not any longer.

"Thor is returning from the east," Freya told him. "He will be with us soon."

The gods of Asgard came out to watch the builder as he hauled the rocks toward the wall. They joined Freya, stood about her protectively.

They watched, silently at first, and then they began to smile and to chuckle, and to call out questions.

"Hey!" shouted Balder. "You only get the sun if you finish that wall. Do you think you will be taking the sun home with you?"

"And the moon," said Bragi. "Such a pity you do not have your horse with you. He could have carried all the rocks you need."

And the gods laughed.

The builder let go of the stone-boat then. He faced the gods. "You cheated!" he said, and his face was scarlet with exertion and with anger.

"We have not cheated," said Odin. "No more than you have cheated. Do you think we would have let you build our wall if we had known you were a giant?"

The builder picked up a rock one-handed and smashed it against another, breaking the granite block into two. He turned to the gods, half of the rock in each hand, and

now he was twenty, thirty, fifty feet tall. His face twisted; he no longer looked like the stranger who had arrived in Asgard a season before, placid and even-tempered. Now his face looked like the granite face of a cliff, twisted and sculpted by anger and hatred.

"I am a mountain giant," he said. "And you gods are nothing but cheats and vile oath-breakers. If I still had my horse, I would be finishing your wall now. I would be taking the lovely Freya and the sun and the moon for my wages. And I would be leaving you here in the darkness and the cold, without even beauty to cheer you."

"No oath was broken," said Odin. "But no oath can protect you from us now."

The mountain giant roared with anger and ran toward the gods, a huge lump of granite in each hand as a club. The gods stood aside, and only now the giant saw who was standing behind them. A huge god, red-bearded and muscular, wearing iron gauntlets and holding an iron hammer, which he swung, once. He let go of the hammer when it was pointing at the giant.

There was a flash of lightning from the clear skies, followed by the dull boom of thunder as the hammer left Thor's hand.

The mountain giant saw the hammer getting rapidly bigger as it came hurtling toward him, and then he saw nothing else, not ever again.

The gods finished building the wall themselves, although it took them many more weeks to cut and haul

the last ten blocks from the quarries high in the mountains and drag them all the way back to Asgard and place them in position at the top of the gateway. They were not as well shaped or as well fitted as the blocks the master builder had shaped and placed himself.

There were those of the gods who felt that they should have let the giant get even closer to finishing the wall before Thor killed him. Thor said that he appreciated the gods having some fun ready for him, when he got home from the east.

Strangely, for it was most unlike him, Loki was not around to be praised for his part in luring away the horse Svadilfari. Nobody knew where he was, although there were those who spoke of a magnificent chestnut mare seen on the meadows beneath Asgard. Loki stayed away for the best part of a year, and when he showed up again, he was accompanied by a gray foal.

It was a beautiful foal, although it had eight legs instead of the usual four, and it followed Loki wherever he went, and nuzzled him, and treated Loki as if he were its mother. Which, of course, was the case.

The foal grew into a horse called Sleipnir, a huge gray stallion, the fastest and the strongest horse that ever there had been or ever there would be, a horse that could outrun the wind.

Loki presented Sleipnir to Odin as a gift, the best horse among gods and men.

Many people would admire Odin's horse, but only a

brave man would ever mention its parentage in Loki's presence, and nobody ever dared to allude to it twice. Loki would go out of his way to make your life unpleasant if he heard you talking about how he lured Svadilfari away from its master and how he rescued the gods from his own bad idea. Loki nursed his resentments. And that is the story of how the gods got their wall.