

THE STORY OF BALDER THE BEAUTIFUL

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FAIR beyond all the sons of Odin was Balder the Beautiful, Balder of the snow-white brow and golden locks, and he was well beloved not only by the Asa folk, but also by the men of the earth below.

"Of all the twelve round Odin's throne,
Balder, the Beautiful, alone,
The Sun god, good and pure and bright,
Was loved by all, as all love light."

Balder had a twin brother named Hoder, who was born blind. Gloomy and silent was he, but none the less he loved his bright sun-brother best of all in heaven or earth.

The home of Balder was a palace with silver roof and pillars of gold, and nothing unclean or impure was allowed to come inside its doors.

Very wise in all magic charms was this radiant young god; and for all others save himself he could read the future; but "to keep his own life safe and see the sun" was not granted to him.

Now there came a time when Balder's bright face grew sad and downcast; and when his father Odin and his mother Frigga perceived this they implored him to tell them the cause of his grief. Then Balder told them that he had been troubled by strange dreams; and, since in those days men believed that dreams were sent as a warning of what was about to happen, he had gone heavily since these visions had come to him.

First he had dreamt that a dark cloud had arisen which came before the sun and shut out all brightness from the land.

The next night he dreamt that Asgard lay in darkness and that her bright flowers and radiant trees were withered and lifeless, and that the Asa folk, dull and withered also, were sorrowing as though from some great calamity.

The third night he dreamt yet again that Asgard was dark and lifeless and that from out of the gloom one sad voice cried:

"Woe! Woe! Woe! For Balder the Beautiful is dead-is dead!"

Odin listened to the recital of this story with heavy heart, and at its conclusion he mounted his coal-black horse and rode over many a hard and toilsome road till he came to the dark abode of Hela. And there he saw, to his surprise, that a great banquet was being prepared in the gloomy hall. Dishes of gold were set upon the table and all the couches were covered with the richest silken tapestry, as though some honored guest were expected. But a throne that stood at the head of the table was empty.

Very thoughtfully Odin rode on through those dim halls, till he came to one where dwelt an ancient prophetess whose voice no man had heard for many a long year.

Silent he stood before her until she asked in a voice that sounded as though it came from far away: "Who art thou, and from whence dost thou come to trouble my long rest?"

Now Odin was fearful that she would not answer him did he give his real name, so he told her that he was the son of Valtam, and asked anxiously for whom the grim goddess of death was preparing her banquet.

Then, to his great grief, the hollow voice of the prophetess replied that Balder was the expected guest, and he would shortly be sent thither, slain by the hand of Hoder, the blind god of darkness.

"Who then," asked Odin, in sorrowful tones, "shall avenge the death of Balder?"

And she answered that the son of the Earth goddess, Vali by name, should neither

"Comb his raven hair
Nor wash his visage in the stream,
Nor see the sun's departing beam,
Till He on Hoder's corse shall smile
Flaming on the funeral pile."

And learning thus of the fate of his two favorite sons, All-Father Odin went sadly back to Asgard.

Meantime Mother Frigga had not been idle. Filled with anxiety for her darling son, she decided to send her servants throughout the earth, bidding them exact a promise from all things-not only living creatures, but plants, stones, and metals, fire, water, trees and diseases of all kinds-that they would do harm in no way to Balder the Beautiful.

Theirs was an easy task, for all things loved the bright Sun-god and readily agreed to give the pledge. Nothing was overlooked, save only the mistletoe growing upon the oak tree that shaded the entrance of Valhalla. It seemed so insignificant that no one thought it worth while to ask this plant to take the oath.

The servants returned to Frigga with all the vows and compacts that had been made; and the Mother of Gods and Men went back with heart at ease to her spinning wheel.

The Asa folk, too, were reassured, and, casting aside the burden of care that had fallen upon them, they resumed their favorite game upon the plains of Idavold, where they were wont to contend with one another in the throwing of golden disks.

And when it became known among them that nothing would hurt Balder the Beautiful they invented a new game.

Placing the young Sun-god in their midst they would throw stones at him, or thrust at him with their knives, or strike with their wooden staves; and the wood or the knife or the stone would glance off from Balder and leave him quite unhurt.

This new game delighted both Balder and the Asa folk, and so loud was their laughter that Loki, who was some distance away pursuing one of his schemes in the disguise of an old woman, shook with rage at the sound. For Loki was jealous of Balder and, as is usual with people who make themselves disliked, nothing gave him such displeasure as to see a group of the Asas on such happy terms with each other.

Presently in his wanderings Loki passed by the house of Fensalir in the doorway of which sat Frigga, at her spinning wheel. She did not recognize Red Loki but greeted him kindly and asked:

"Old woman, dost thou know why the gods are so merry this evening?"

And Loki answered: "They are casting stones and throwing sharp knives and great clubs at Balder the Beautiful, who stands smiling in their midst daring them to hurt him."

Then Frigga smiled tranquilly and turned again to her wheel, saying: "Let them play on, for no harm will come to him whom all things in heaven and earth have sworn not to hurt."

"Art thou sure, good mother, that all things in heaven and earth have taken this vow?"

"Ay, indeed," replied Frigga, "all save a harmless little plant, the mistletoe, which grows on the oak by Valhalla, and this is far too small and weak to be feared."

And to this Loki replied in musing voice, nodding his head as he spoke: "Yea, thou art right, great Mother of Gods and Men."

But the wicked Asa had learnt what he desired to know. The instrument by which he might bring harm to Balder the Beautiful was now awaiting him, and he determined to use it to the dire sorrow of Asgard.

Hastening to the western gate of Valhalla, he pulled a clump of the mistletoe from the oak, and fashioned therefrom a little wand, or stick, and with this in his hand he returned to the plain of Idavold. He was far too cunning, however, to attempt to carry out his wicked design himself. His malicious heart was too well known to the Asa folk. But he soon found an innocent tool. Leaning against a tree and taking no part in the game was Hoder, the blind god, the twin brother of Balder, and to him he began:

"Hark to the Asas-how they laugh! Do you take no share in the game, good Hoder?"

"Not I," said Hoder gloomily, "for I am blind, and know not, where to throw."

"I could show you that," said Loki, assuming a pleasant tone; "'tis no hard matter, Hoder, and methinks the Asas will call you proud and haughty if you take no share in the fun."

"But I have nothing to throw," said poor blind Hoder.

Then Loki said: "Here, at least, is a small shaft, 'twill serve your purpose," and leading innocent Hoder into the ring he cunningly guided his aim. Hoder, well pleased to be able to share in a game with his beloved brother, boldly sped the shaft, expecting to hear the usual shouts of joyous laughter which greeted all such attempts. There fell instead dead silence on his ear, and immediately on this followed a wail of bitter agony. For Balder the Beautiful had fallen dead without a groan, his heart transfixed by the little dart of mistletoe.

"So on the floor lay Balder dead; and round
Lay thickly strewn swords, axes, darts, and spears,
Which all the gods in sport had idly thrown
At Balder, whom no weapon pierced or clove;
But in his breast stood fixed the fatal bough
Of mistletoe, which Loki the Accuser gave
To Hoder, and unwitting Hoder threw-
'Gainst that alone had Balder's life no charm."

Dreading he knew not what, Hoder stood in doubt for some moments. But soon the meaning of that bitter wail was borne in upon him, piercing the cloud of darkness in which he always moved. He opened wide his arms as though to clasp the beloved form, and then with: "I have slain thee, my brother," despair seized him and he fell prostrate in utter grief.

Meantime, the Asa folk crowded round the silent form of Balder, weeping and wailing; but, alas! their moans and tears could not bring Balder back. At length, All-Father Odin, whose grief was too deep for lamentations, bade them be silent and prepare to bear the body of the dead Asa to the seashore.

The unhappy Hoder, unable to take part in these last offices, made his way sadly through Asgard, beyond the walls and along the seashore until he came to the house Fensalir.

Frigga was seated upon her seat of honor before the fire against the inner wall, and standing before her with bent head and woeful sightless gaze Hoder told her of the dread mishap that had befallen "Tell me, O Mother," he cried in ending, and his voice sounded like the wail of the wind on stormy nights, "tell me, is there aught I can do to bring my brother back? Or can I make agreement with the dread mother of the Underworld, giving my life in exchange for his?"

Woe crowded upon woe in the heart of Frigga as she listened to the story. The doom was wrought that she had tried so vainly to avert, and not even her mother's love had availed to safeguard the son so dearly cherished.

"On Balder Death hath laid her hand, not thee, my son," she said; "yet though we fail in the end, there is much that may be tried before all hope is lost." Then she told Hoder of a road by which the abode of Hela could be reached, one which had been traveled by none living save Odin himself:

"Who goes that way must take no other horse
To ride, but Sleipnir, Odin's horse, alone.
Nor must he choose that common path of gods
Which every day they come and go in heaven,
O'er the bridge Bifrost, where is Heimdall's watch

But he must tread a dark untraveled road
Which branches from the north of heaven, and ride
Nine days, nine nights, toward the northern ice,
Through valleys deep engulfed, with roaring streams,
And he will reach on the tenth morn a bridge
Which spans with golden arches Gioll's stream.
Then he will journey through no lighted land,
Nor see the sun arise, nor see it set;

And he must fare across the dismal ice
Northward, until he meets a stretching wall
Barring his way, and in the wall a grate,
But then he must dismount and on the ice
Tighten the girths of Sleipnir, Odin's horse,
And make him leap the grate, and come within."

There in that cheerless abode dead Balder was enthroned, but, said Frigga, he who braves that dread journey must take no heed of him, nor of the sad ghosts flitting to and fro like eddying leaves. First he must accost their gloomy queen and entreat her with prayers:

"Telling her all that grief they have in heaven
For Balder, whom she holds by right below."

A bitter groan of anguish escaped from Hoder when Frigga had finished her recital of the trials which must be undergone:

"Mother, a dreadful way is this thou showest;
No journey for a sightless god to go."

And she replied:

"... Thyself thou shalt not go, my son;
But he whom first thou meetest when thou com'st
To Asgard and declar'st this hidden way,
Shall go; and I will be his guide unseen."

Meantime the Asa folk had felled trees and had carried to the seashore outside the walls of Asgard a great pile of fuel, which they laid upon the deck of Balder's great ship, Ringhorn, as it lay stranded high up on the beach.

"Seventy ells and four extended
On the grass the vessel's keel;
High above it, gilt and splendid,
Rose the figurehead ferocious
With its crest of steel."

Then they adorned the funeral pyre with garlands of flowers, with golden vessels and rings, with finely wrought weapons and rich necklets and armlets; and when this was done they carried out the fair body of Balder the Beautiful, and bearing it reverently upon their shields they laid it upon the pyre.

Then they tried to launch the good ship, but so heavily laden was she that they could not stir her an inch.

The Mountain Giants, from their heights afar, had watched the tragedy with eyes that were not un pitying, for even they had no ill will for Balder, and they sent and told of a giantess called Hyrroken, who was so strong that she could launch any vessel whatever its weight might be.

So the Asas sent to fetch her from Giantland, and she soon came, riding a wolf for steed and twisted serpents for reins.

When she alighted, Odin ordered four of his mightiest warriors to hold the wolf, but he was so strong that they could do nothing until the giantess had thrown him down and bound him fast.

Then with a few enormous strides, Hyrroken reached the great vessel, and set her shoulder against the prow, sending the ship rolling into the deep. The earth shook with the force of the movement as though with an earthquake, and the Asa folk collided with one another like pine trees during a storm. The ship, too, with its precious weight, was well-nigh lost. At this Thor was wroth and, seizing his hammer, would have slain the giantess had not the other Asas held him back, bidding him not forget the last duty to the dead god. So Thor hallowed the pyre with a touch of his sacred hammer and kindled it with a thorn twig, which is the emblem of sleep.

Last of all, before the pyre blazed up, All-Father Odin added to the pile of offerings his magic ring, from which fell eight new rings every ninth night, and bending he whispered in Balder's ear.

But none to this day know the words that Odin spake thus in the ear of his dead son.

Then the flames from the pyre rose high and the great ship drifted out to sea, and the wind caught the sails and fanned the flames till it seemed as though sky and sea were wrapped in golden flame.

"And while they gazed, the sun went lurid down
Into the smoke-wrapt sea, and night came on.
But through the dark they watched the burning ship
Still carried o'er the distant waters....
But fainter, as the stars rose high, it flared;
And as, in a decaying winter fire,
A charr'd log, falling, makes a shower of sparks-
So, with a shower of sparks, the pile fell in,
Reddening the sea around; and all was dark."

And thus did Balder the Beautiful pass from the peaceful steads of Asgard, as passes the sun when he paints the evening clouds with the glory of his setting.