



The Story of Siegfried

adventure 11: How the Spring-Time Came

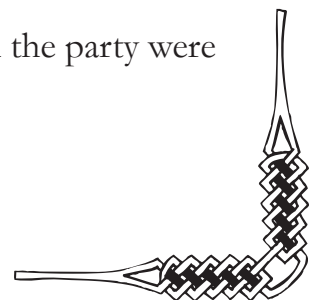
by James Baldwin

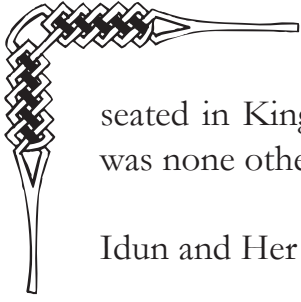
Siegfried, when he came to Gunther's castle, thought of staying there but a few days only. But the king and his brothers made every thing so pleasant for their honored guest, that weeks slipped by unnoticed, and still the hero remained in Burgundy.

Spring had fairly come, and the weeping April clouds had given place to the balmy skies of May. The young men and maidens, as was their wont, made ready for the May-day games; and Siegfried and his knights were asked to take part in the sport.

On the smooth greensward, which they called Nanna's carpet, beneath the shade of ash-trees and elms, he who played Old Winter's part lingered with his few attendants. These were clad in the dull gray garb which becomes the sober season of the year, and were decked with yellow straw, and dead, brown leaves. Out of the wood came the May-king and his followers, clad in the gayest raiment, and decked with evergreens and flowers. With staves and willow-withes they fell upon Old Winter's champions, and tried to drive them from the sward. In friendly fray they fought, and many mishaps fell to both parties. But at length the May-king won; and grave Winter, battered and bruised, was made prisoner, and his followers were driven from the field. Then, in merry sport, sentence was passed on the luckless wight, for he was found guilty of killing the flowers, and of covering the earth with hoar-frost; and he was doomed to a long banishment from music and the sunlight. The laughing party then set up a wooden likeness of the worsted winter-king, and pelted it with stones and turf; and when they were tired they threw it down, and put out its eyes, and cast it into the river. And then a pole, decked with wild-flowers and fresh green leaves, was planted in the midst of the sward, and all joined in merry dance around it. And they chose the most beautiful of all the maidens to be the Queen of May, and they crowned her with a wreath of violets and yellow buttercups; and for a whole day all yielded fealty to her, and did her bidding.

It was thus that May Day came in Burgundy. And in the evening, when the party were





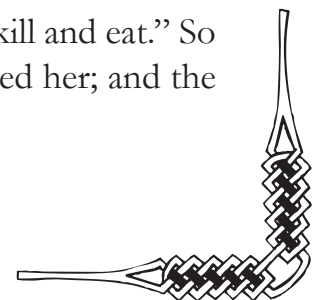
seated in King Gunther's hall, Siegfried, at the command of the May-queen,—who was none other than Kriemhild the peerless,—amused them by telling the story of

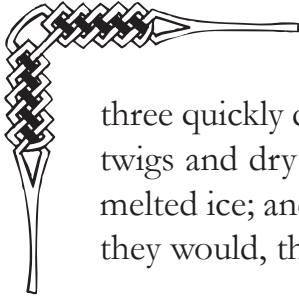
Idun and Her Apples.

It is a story that Bragi told while at the feast in AEGir's hall. Idun is Bragi's wife. Very handsome is she; but the beauty of her face is by no means greater than the goodness of her heart. Right attentive is she to every duty, and her words and thoughts are always worthy and wise. A long time ago the good Asa-folk who dwell in heaven-towering Asgard, knowing how trustworthy Idun was, gave into her keeping a treasure which they would not have placed in the hands of any other person. This treasure was a box of apples, and Idun kept the golden key safely fastened to her girdle. You ask me why the gods should prize a box of apples so highly? I will tell you.

Old age, you know, spares none, not even Odin and his Asa-folk. They all grow old and gray; and, if there were no cure for age, they would become feeble and toothless and blind, deaf, tottering, and weak minded. The apples which Idun guarded so carefully were the priceless boon of youth. Whenever the gods felt old age coming on, they went to her, and she gave them of her fruit; and, when they had tasted, they grew young and strong and handsome again. Once, however, they came near losing the apples,—or losing rather Idun and her golden key, without which no one could ever open the box.

In those early days Odin delighted to come down now and then from his high home above the clouds, and to wander, disguised, among the woods and mountains, and by the seashore, and in wild desert places. For nothing pleases him more than to commune with Nature as she is found in the loneliness of vast solitudes, or in the boisterous uproar of the elements. Once on a time he took with him his friends Hoenir and Loki; and they rambled many days among the icy cliffs, and along the barren shores, of the great frozen sea. In that country there was no game, and no fish was found in the cold waters; and the three wanderers, as they had brought no food with them, became very hungry. Late in the afternoon of the seventh day, they reached some pasturelands belonging to the giant Hymer, and saw a herd of the giant's cattle browsing upon the short grass which grew in the sheltered nooks among the hills. "Ah!" cried Loki: "after fasting for a week, we shall now have food in abundance. Let us kill and eat." So saying, he hurled a sharp stone at the fattest of Hymer's cows, and killed her; and the





three quickly dressed the choicest pieces of flesh for their supper. Then Loki gathered twigs and dry grass, and kindled a blazing fire; Hoenir filled the pot with water from melted ice; and Odin threw into it the bits of tender meat. But, make the fire as hot as they would, the water would not boil, and the flesh would not cook.

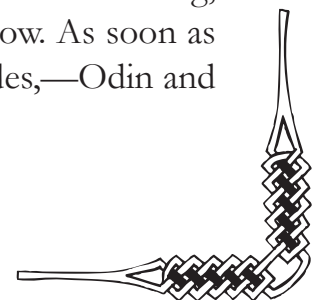
All night long the supperless three sat hungry around the fire; and, every time they peeped into the kettle, the meat was as raw and gustless as before. Morning came, but no breakfast. And all day Loki kept stirring the fire, and Odin and Hoenir waited hopefully but impatiently. When the sun again went down, the flesh was still uncooked, and their supper seemed no nearer ready than it was the night before. As they were about yielding to despair, they heard a noise overhead, and, looking up, they saw a huge gray eagle sitting on the dead branch of an oak.

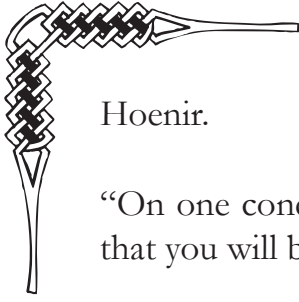
“Ha, ha!” cried the bird. “You are pretty fellows indeed! To sit hungry by the fire a night and a day, rather than eat raw flesh, becomes you well. Do but give me my share of it as it is, and I warrant you the rest shall boil, and you shall have a fat supper.”

“Agreed,” answered Loki eagerly. “Come down and get your share.”

The eagle waited for no second asking. Down he swooped right over the blazing fire, and snatched not only the eagle’s share, but also what the Lybians call the lion’s share; that is, he grasped in his strong talons the kettle, with all the meat in it, and, flapping his huge wings, slowly rose into the air, carrying his booty with him. The three gods were astonished. Loki was filled with anger. He seized a long pole, upon the end of which a sharp hook was fixed, and struck at the treacherous bird. The hook stuck fast in the eagle’s back, and Loki could not loose his hold of the other end of the pole. The great bird soared high above the tree-tops, and over the hills, and carried the astonished mischief-maker with him.

But it was no eagle. It was no bird that had thus outwitted the hungry gods: it was the giant Old Winter, clothed in his eagle-plumage. Over the lonely woods, and the snow-crowned mountains, and the frozen sea, he flew, dragging the helpless Loki through tree-tops, and over jagged rocks, scratching and bruising his body, and almost tearing his arms from his shoulders. At last he alighted on the craggy top of an iceberg, where the storm-winds shrieked, and the air was filled with driving snow. As soon as Loki could speak, he begged the giant to carry him back to his comrades,—Odin and





Hoenir.

“On one condition only will I carry you back,” answered Old Winter. “Swear to me that you will betray into my hands dame Idun and her golden key.”

Loki asked no questions, but gladly gave the oath; and the giant flew back with him across the sea, and dropped him, torn and bleeding and lame, by the side of the fire, where Odin and Hoenir still lingered. And the three made all haste to leave that cheerless place, and returned to Odin’s glad home in Asgard.

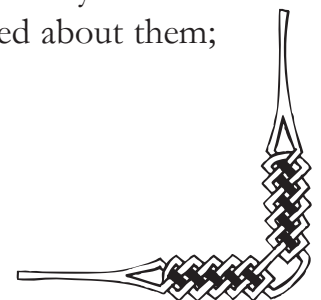
Some weeks after this, Loki, the Prince of Mischief-makers, went to Bragi’s house to see Idun. He found her busied with her household cares, not thinking of a visit from any of the gods.

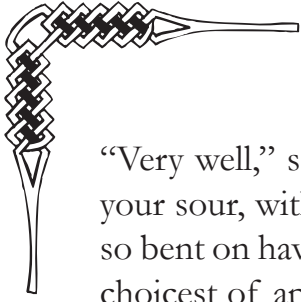
“I have come, good dame,” said he, “to taste your apples again; for I feel old age coming on apace.” Idun was astonished.

“You are not looking old,” she answered. “There is not a single gray hair upon your head, and not a wrinkle on your brow. If it were not for that scar upon your cheek, and the arm which you carry in a sling you would look as stout and as well as I have ever seen you. Besides, I remember that it was only a year ago when you last tasted of my fruit. Is it possible that a single winter should make you old?” “A single winter has made me very lame and feeble, at least,” said Loki. “I have been scarcely able to walk about since my return from the North. Another winter without a taste of your apples will be the death of me.” Then the kind-hearted Idun, when she saw that Loki was really lame, went to the box, and opened it with her golden key, and gave him one of the precious apples to taste. He took the fruit in his hand, bit it, and gave it back to the good dame. She put it in its place again, closed the lid, and locked it with her usual care.

“Your apples are not so good as they used to be,” said Loki, making a very wry face. “Why don’t you fill your box with fresh fruit?”

Idun was amazed. Her apples were supposed to be always fresh,—fresher by far than any that grow nowadays. None of the gods had ever before complained about them; and she told Loki so.

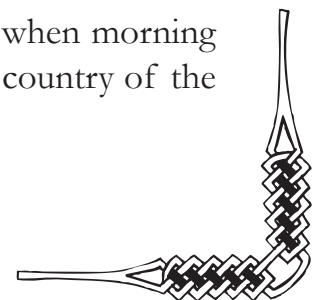


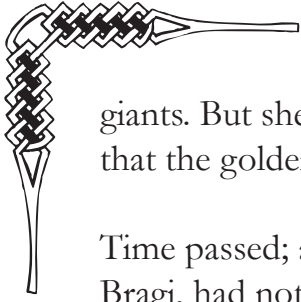


“Very well,” said he. “I see you do not believe me, and that you mean to feed us on your sour, withered apples, when we might as well have golden fruit. If you were not so bent on having your own way, I could tell you where you might fill your box with the choicest of apples, such as Odin loves. I saw them in the forest over yonder, hanging ripe on the trees. But women will always have their own way; and you must have yours, even though you do feed the gods on withered apples.”

So saying, and without waiting to hear an answer, he limped out at the door, and was soon gone from sight. Idun thought long and anxiously upon the words which Loki had spoken; and, the more she thought, the more she felt troubled. If her husband, the wise Bragi, had been at home, what would she not have given? He would have understood the mischief-maker’s cunning. But he had gone on a long journey to the South, singing in Nature’s choir, and painting Nature’s landscapes, and she would not see him again until the return of spring. At length she opened the box, and looked at the fruit. The apples were certainly fair and round: she could not see a wrinkle or a blemish on any of them; their color was the same golden-red,—like the sky at dawn of a summer’s day; yet she thought there must be something wrong about them. She took up one of the apples, and tasted it. She fancied that it really was sour, and she hastily put it back, and locked the box again. “He said that he had seen better apples than these growing in the woods,” said she to herself. “I half believe that he told the truth, although everybody knows that he is not always trustworthy. I think I shall go to the forest and see for myself, at any rate.”

So she donned her cloak and hood, and, with a basket on her arm, left the house, and walked rapidly away, along the road which led to the forest. It was much farther than she had thought, and the sun was almost down when she reached the edge of the wood. But no apple-trees were there. Tall oaks stretched their bare arms up towards the sky, as if praying for help. There were thorn-trees and brambles everywhere; but there was no fruit, neither were there any flowers, nor even green leaves. The Frost-giants had been there. Idun was about to turn her footsteps homewards, when she heard a wild shriek in the tree-tops over her head; and, before she could look up, she felt herself seized in the eagle-talons of Old Winter. Struggle as she would, she could not free herself. High up, over wood and stream, the giant carried her; and then he flew swiftly away with her, towards his home in the chill North-land; and, when morning came, poor Idun found herself in an ice-walled castle in the cheerless country of the

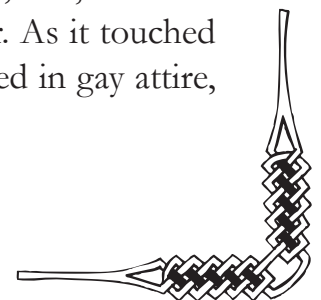


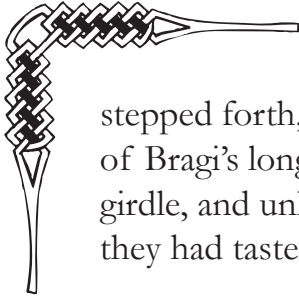


giants. But she was glad to know that the precious box was safely locked at home, and that the golden key was still at her girdle.

Time passed; and I fear that Idun would have been forgotten by all, save her husband Bragi, had not the gods begun to feel the need of her apples. Day after day they came to Idun's house, hoping to find the good dame and her golden key at home; and each day they went away some hours older than when they had come. Bragi was beside himself with grief, and his golden harp was unstrung and forgotten. No one had seen the missing Idun since the day when Loki had visited her, and none could guess what had become of her. The heads of all the folk grew white with age; deep furrows were ploughed in their faces; their eyes grew dim, and their hearing failed; their hands trembled; their limbs became palsied; their feet tottered; and all feared that Old Age would bring Death in his train.

Then Bragi and Thor questioned Loki very sharply; and when he felt that he, too, was growing odd and feeble, he regretted the mischief he had done, and told them how he had decoyed Idun into Old Winter's clutches. The gods were very angry; and Thor threatened to crush Loki with his hammer, if he did not at once bring Idun safe home again. So Loki borrowed the falcon-plumage of Freyja, the goddess of love, and with it flew to the country of the giants. When he reached Old Winter's castle, he found the good dame Idun shut up in the prison-tower, and bound with fetters of ice; but the giant himself was on the frozen sea, herding old Hymer's cows. And Loki quickly broke the bonds that held Idun, and led her out of her prison-house; and then he shut her up in a magic nut-shell which he held between his claws, and flew with the speed of the wind back towards the South-land and the home of the gods. But Old Winter coming home, and learning what had been done, donned his eagle-plumage and followed swiftly in pursuit. Bragi and Thor, anxiously gazing into the sky, saw Loki, in Freyja's falcon-plumage, speeding homewards, with the nut-shell in his talons, and Old Winter, in his eagle-plumage, dashing after in sharp pursuit. Quickly they gathered chips and slender twigs, and placed them high upon the castle-wall; and, when Loki with his precious burden had flown past, they touched fire to the dry heap, and the flames blazed up to the sky, and caught Old Winter's plumage, as, close behind the falcon, he blindly pressed. And his wings were scorched in the flames; and he fell helpless to the ground, and was slain within the castle-gates. Loki slackened his speed; and, when he reached Bragi's house, he dropped the nut-shell softly before the door. As it touched the ground, it gently opened, and Idun, radiant with smiles, and clothed in gay attire,





stepped forth, and greeted her husband and the waiting gods. And the heavenly music of Bragi's long-silent harp welcomed her home; and she took the golden key from her girdle, and unlocked the box, and gave of her apples to the aged company; and, when they had tasted, their youth was renewed.[EN#22]

It is thus with the seasons and their varied changes. The gifts of Spring are youth and jollity, and renewed strength; and the music of air and water and all things, living and lifeless, follow in her train. The desolating Winter plots to steal her from the earth, and the Summer-heat deserts and betrays her. Then the music of Nature is hushed, and all creatures pine in sorrow for her absence, and the world seems dying of white Old Age. But at length the Summer-heat repents, and frees her from her prison-house; and the icy fetters with which Old Winter bound her are melted in the beams of the returning sun, and the earth is young again.

