



The Story of Siegfried

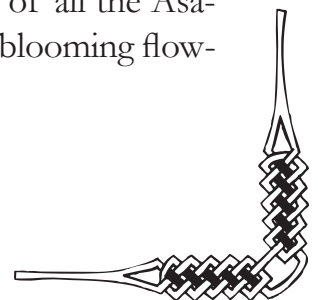
Adventure 13: The Story of Balder

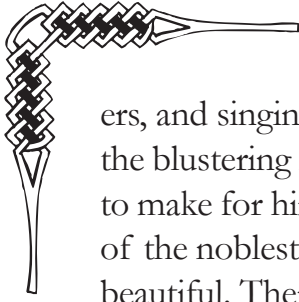
by James Baldwin

There was mirth in King Gunther's dwelling, for the time of the Yule-feast had come. The broad banquet hall was gayly decked with cedar and spruce and sprigs of the mistle-toe; and the fires roared in the great chimneys, throwing warmth and a ruddy glow of light into every corner of the room. The long table fairly groaned under its weight of good cheer. At its head sat the kings and the earl-folk; and before them, on a silver platter of rare workmanship, was the head of a huge wild boar,—the festal offering to the good Frey, in honor of whom the Yule-feast was held. For now the sun, which had been driven by the Frost-giants far away towards the South-land, had begun to return, and Frey was on his way once more to scatter peace and plenty over the land. The harp and the was-sail-bowl went round; and each one of the company sang a song, or told a story, or in some way did his part to add to the evening's enjoyment. And a young sea-king who sat at Siegfried's side told most bewitching tales of other lands which lie beyond Old Ægir's kingdom. Then, when the harp came to him, he sang the wondrous song of the shaping of the earth. And all who heard were charmed with the sweet sound and with the pleasant words. He sang of the sunlight and the south winds and the summer-time, of the storms and the snow and the sombre shadows of the North-land. And he sang of the dead Ymir, the giant whose flesh had made the solid earth, and whose blood the sea, and whose bones the mountains, whose teeth the cliffs and crags, and whose skull the heavens. And he sang of Odin, the earth's preserver, the Giver of life, the Father of all; and of the Asa-folk who dwell in Asgard; and of the ghostly heroes in Valhal. Then he sang of the heaven-tower of the thunder-god, and of the shimmering Asa-bridge, or rainbow, all afire; and, lastly, of the four dwarfs who hold the blue sky-dome above them, and of the elves of the mountains, and of the wood-sprites and the fairies. Then he laid aside his harp, and told the old but ever-beautiful story of the death of Balder the Good.

The Story:

Balder, as you know, was Odin's son; and he was the brightest and best of all the Asa-folk. Wherever he went, there were gladness and light-hearted mirth, and blooming flow-





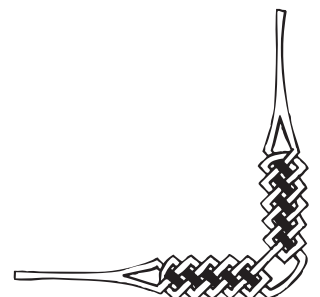
ers, and singing birds, and murmuring waterfalls. Balder, too, was a hero, but not one of the blustering kind, like Thor. He slew no giants; he never went into battle; he never tried to make for himself a name among the dwellers of the mid-world; and yet he was a hero of the noblest type. He dared to do right, and to stand up for the good, the true, and the beautiful. There are still some such heroes, but the world does not always hear of them.

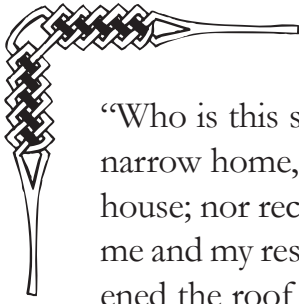
Hoder, the blind king of the winter months, was Balder's brother, and as unlike him as darkness is unlike daylight. While one rejoiced, and was merry and cheerful, the other was low-spirited and sad. While one scattered sunshine and blessings everywhere, the other carried with him a sense of cheerlessness and gloom. Yet the brothers loved each other dearly.

One night Balder dreamed a strange dream, and when he awoke he could not forget it. All day long he was thoughtful and sad, and he was not his own bright, happy self. His mother, the Asa-queen, saw that something troubled him; and she asked,—

“Whence comes that cloud upon your brow? Will you suffer it to chase away all your sunshine? And will you become, like your brother Hoder, all frowns and sighs and tears?” Then Balder told her what he had dreamed; and she, too, was sorely troubled, for it was a frightful dream, and foreboded dire disasters. Then both she and Balder went to Odin, and to him they told the cause of their uneasiness. And the All-Father also was distressed; for he knew that such dreams, dreamed by Asa-folk, were the forewarnings of evil. So he saddled his eight-footed steed Sleipner; and, without telling any one where he was going, he rode with the speed of the winds down into the Valley of Death. The dog that guards the gateway to that dark and doleful land came out to meet him. Blood was on the fierce beast's breast, and he barked loudly and angrily at the All-Father and his wondrous horse. But Odin sang sweet magic songs as he drew near; and the dog was charmed with the sound, and Sleipner and his rider went onward in safety. And they passed the dark halls of the pale-faced queen, and came to the east gate of the valley. There stood the low hut of a witch who lived in darkness, and, like the Norns, spun the thread of fate for gods and men.

Odin stood before the hut, and sang a wondrous song of witchery and enchantment; and he laid a spell upon the weird woman, and forced her to come out of her dark dwelling, and to answer his questions.





“Who is this stranger?” asked the witch. “Who is this unknown who calls me from my narrow home, and sets an irksome task for me? Long have I been left alone in my quiet house; nor reckoned I that the snow sometimes covered with its cold white mantle both me and my resting-place, or that the pattering rain and the gently falling dew often moistened the roof of my dwelling. Long have I rested quietly, and I do not wish now to be aroused.”

“I am Valtam’s son,” said Odin; “and I come to learn of thee. Tell me, I pray, for whom are the soft couches prepared that I saw in the broad halls of Death? For whom are the jewels, and the rings, and the rich clothing, and the shining shield?”

“All are for Balder, Odin’s son,” she answered. “And the mead which has been brewed for him is hidden beneath the shining shield.”

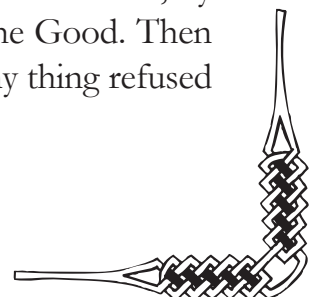
Then Odin asked who would be the slayer of Balder, and she answered that Hoder was the one who would send the shining Asa to the halls of Death.

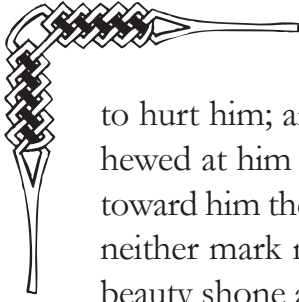
“Who will avenge Balder, and bring distress upon his slayer?” asked Odin.

“A son of Earth but one day old shall be Balder’s avenger. Go thou now home, Odin; for I know thou art not Valtam’s son. Go home; and none shall again awaken me, nor disturb me at my task, until the new day shall dawn, and Balder shall rule over the young world in its purity, and there shall be no more Death.”

Then Odin rode sorrowfully homeward; but he told no one of his journey to the Dark Valley, nor of what the weird witch had said to him.

Balder’s mother, the Asa-queen, could not rest because of the ill-omened dream that her son had had; and in her distress she called all the Asa-folk together to consider what should be done. But they were speechless with sorrow and alarm; and none could offer advice, nor set her mind at ease. Then she sought out every living creature, and every lifeless thing, upon the earth, and asked each one to swear that it would not on any account hurt Balder, nor touch him to do him harm. And this oath was willingly made by fire and water, earth and air, by all beasts and creeping things and birds and fishes, by the rocks and by the trees and all metals; for every thing loved Balder the Good. Then the Asa-folk thought that great honor was shown to Balder each time any thing refused





to hurt him; and to show their love for him, as well as to amuse themselves, they often hewed at him with their battle-axes, or struck at him with their sharp swords, or hurled toward him their heavy lances. For every weapon turned aside from its course, and would neither mark nor bruise the shining target at which it was aimed; and Balder's princely beauty shone as bright and as pure as ever.

When Loki the Mischief-maker saw how all things loved and honored Balder, his heart was filled with jealous hate, and he sought all over the earth for some beast or bird or tree or lifeless thing, that had not taken the oath. But he could find not one. Then, disguised as a fair maiden, he went to Fensal Hall, where dwelt Balder's mother. The fair Asa-queen was busy at her distaff, with her golden spindles, spinning flax to be woven into fine linen for the gods. And her maid-servant, Fulla of the flowing hair, sat on a stool beside her. When the queen saw Loki, she asked,— “Whence come you, fair stranger, and what favor would you ask of Odin's wife?”

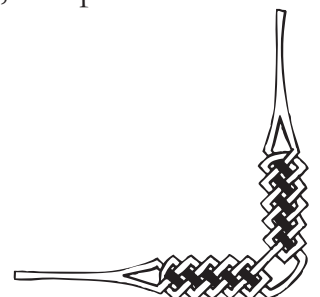
“I come,” answered the disguised Loki, “from the plains of Ida, where the gods meet for pleasant pastime, as well as to talk of the weightier matters of their kingdom.”

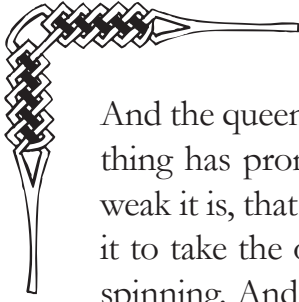
“And how do they while away their time to-day?” asked the queen.

“They have a pleasant game which they call Balder's Honor,” was the answer. “The shining hero stands before them as a target, and each one tries his skill at hurling some weapon toward him. First Odin throws at him the spear Gungner, which never before was known to miss its mark; but it passes harmlessly over Balder's head. Then Thor takes up a huge rock, and hurls it full at Balder's breast; but it turns in its course, and will not smite the sun-bright target. Then Tyr seizes a battle-axe, and strikes at Balder as though he would hew him down; but the keen edge refuses to touch him: and in this way the Asa-folk show honor to the best of their number.”

The Asa-queen smiled in the glad pride of her mother-heart, and said, “Yes, every thing shows honor to the best of Odin's sons; for neither metal nor wood nor stone nor fire nor water will touch Balder to do him harm.”

“Is it true, then,” asked Loki, “that every thing has made an oath to you, and promised not to hurt your son?”





And the queen, not thinking what harm an unguarded word might do, answered, “Every thing has promised, save a little feeble sprig that men call the mistletoe. So small and weak it is, that I knew it could never harm any one; and so I passed it by, and did not ask it to take the oath.” Then Loki went out of Fensal Hall, and left the Asa-queen at her spinning. And he walked briskly away, and paused not until he came to the eastern side of Valhal, where, on the branches of an old oak, the mistletoe grew. Rudely he tore the plant from its supporting branch, and hid it under his cloak. Then he walked leisurely back to the place where the Asa-folk were wont to meet in council.

The next day the Asas went out, as usual, to engage in pleasant pastimes on the plains of Ida. When they had tired of leaping and foot-racing and tilting, they placed Balder before them as a target again; and, as each threw his weapon toward the shining mark, they laughed to see the missile turn aside from its course, and refuse to strike the honored one. But blind Hoder stood sorrowfully away from the others, and did not join in any of their sports. Loki, seeing this, went to him and said,—

“Brother of the gloomy brow, why do you not take part with us in our games?”

“I am blind,” answered Hoder. “I can neither leap, nor run, nor throw the lance.”

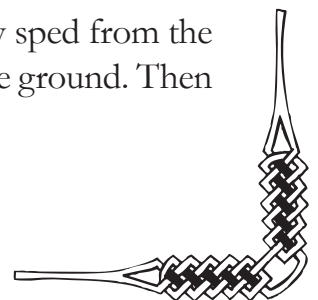
“But you can shoot arrows from your bow,” said Loki.

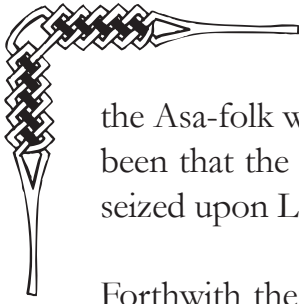
“Alas!” said Hoder, “that I can do only as some one shall direct my aim, for I can see no target.”

“Do you hear that laughter?” asked Loki.

“Thor has hurled the straight trunk of a pine-tree at your brother; and, rather than touch such a glorious mark; it has turned aside, and been shivered to pieces upon the rocks over there. It is thus that the Asa-folk, and all things living and lifeless, honor Balder. Hoder is the only one who hangs his head, and fears to do his part. Come, now, let me fit this little arrow in your bow, and then, as I point it, do you shoot. When you hear the gods laugh, you will know that your arrow has shown honor to the hero by refusing to hit him.”

And Hoder, thinking no harm, did as Loki wished. And the deadly arrow sped from the bow, and pierced the heart of shining Balder, and he sank lifeless upon the ground. Then





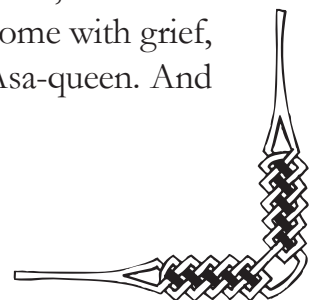
the Asa-folk who saw it were struck speechless with sorrow and dismay; and, had it not been that the Ida plains where they then stood were sacred to peace, they would have seized upon Loki, and put him to death.

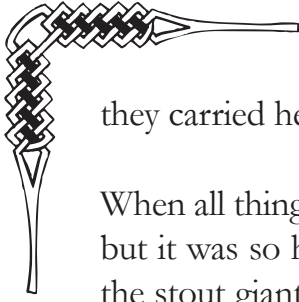
Forthwith the world was draped in mourning for Balder the Good; the birds stopped singing, and flew with drooping wings to the far South-land; the beasts sought to hide themselves in their lairs and in the holes of the ground; the trees shivered and sighed until their leaves fell withered to the earth; the flowers closed their eyes, and died; the rivers stopped flowing, and dark and threatening billows veiled the sea; even the sun shrouded his face, and withdrew silently towards the south.

When Balder's good mother heard the sad news, she left her golden spindle in Fensal Hall, and with her maidens hastened to the Ida-plains, where the body of her son still lay. Nanna, the faithful wife of Balder, was already there; and wild was her grief at sight of the lifeless loved one. And all the Asa-folk—save guilty Loki, who had fled for his life—stood about them in dumb amazement. But Odin was the most sorrowful of all; for he knew, that, with Balder, the world had lost its most gladsome life.

They lifted the body, and carried it down to the sea, where the great ship “Ringhorn,” which Balder himself had built, lay ready to be launched. And a great company followed, and stood upon the beach, and bewailed the untimely death of the hero. First came Odin, with his grief-stricken queen, and then his troop of handmaidens, the Valkyrien, followed by his ravens Hugin and Munin. Then came Thor in his goat-drawn car, and Heimdal on his horse Goldtop; then Frey, in his wagon, behind the boar Gullinbruste of the golden bristles. Then Freyja, in her chariot drawn by cats, came weeping tears of gold. Lastly, poor blind Hoder, overcome with grief, was carried thither on the back of one of the Frost-giants. And Old Ægir, the Ocean king, raised his dripping head above the water, and gazed with dewy eyes upon the scene; and the waves, as if affrighted, left off their playing, and were still.

High on the deck they built the funeral-pile; and they placed the body upon it, and covered it with costly garments, and with woods of the finest scent; and the noble horse which had been Balder's they slew, and placed beside him, that he might not have to walk to the halls of Death. And Odin took from his finger the ring Draupner, the earth's enricher, and laid it on the pile. Then Nanna, the faithful wife, was overcome with grief, and her gentle heart was broken, and she fell lifeless at the feet of the Asa-queen. And





they carried her upon the ship, and laid her by her husband's side.

When all things were in readiness to set fire to the pile, the gods tried to launch the ship; but it was so heavy that they could not move it. So they sent in haste to Jotunheim for the stout giantess Hyrroken; and she came with the speed of the whirlwind, and riding on a wolf, which she guided with a bridle of writhing snakes.

“What will you have me do?” she asked.

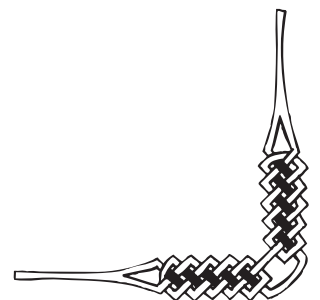
“We would have you launch the great ship ‘Ring horn,’” answered Odin.

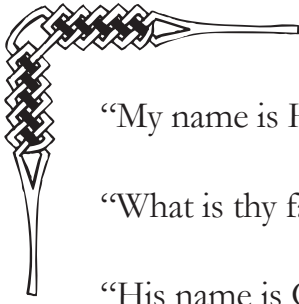
“That I will do!” roared the grim giantess. And, giving the vessel a single push, she sent it sliding with speed into the deep waters of the bay. Then she gave the word to her grisly steed, and she flew onwards and away, no one knew whither.

The “Ringhorn” floated nobly upon the water,—a worthy bier for the body which it bore. The fire was set to the funeral-pile, and the red flames shot upwards to the sky; but their light was but a flickering beam when matched with the sun-bright beauty of Balder, whose body they consumed. Then the sorrowing folk turned away, and went back to their homes: a cheerless gloom rested heavily where light gladness had ruled before. And, when they reached the high halls of Asgard, the Asa-queen spoke, and said,— “Who now, for the love of Balder and his stricken mother, will undertake an errand? Who will go down into the Valley of Death, and seek for Balder, and ransom him, and bring him back to Asgard and the mid-world?” Then Hermod the Nimble, the brother of Balder, answered, “I will go. I will find him, and, with Hela's leave, will bring him back.”

And he mounted Sleipner, the eight-footed steed, and galloped swiftly away. Nine days and nine nights he rode through strange valleys and mountain gorges, where the sun's light had never been, and through gloomy darkness and fearful silence, until he came to the black river, and the glittering, golden bridge which crosses it. Over the bridge his strong horse carried him; although it shook and swayed and threatened to throw him into the raging, inky flood below. On the other side a maiden keeps the gate, and Hermod stopped to pay the toll.

“What is thy name?” she asked.





“My name is Hermod, and I am called the Nimble,” he answered.

“What is thy father’s name?”

“His name is Odin. Mayhap you have heard of him.”

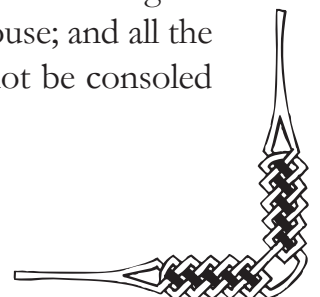
“Why ridest thou with such thunderous speed? Five kingdoms of dead men passed over this bridge yesterday, and it shook not with their weight as it did with thee and thy strange steed. Thou art not of the pale multitude that are wont to pass this gate. What is thy errand, and why ridest thou to the domains of the dead?”

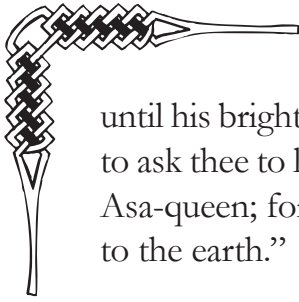
“I go to find my brother Balder,” answered Hermod. “It is but a short time since he unwillingly came down into these shades.”

“Three days ago,” said the maiden, “Balder passed this way, and by his side rode the faithful Nanna. So bright was his presence, even here, that the whole valley was lighted up as it had never before been lighted. The black river glittered like a gem; the frowning mountains smiled for once; and Hela herself, the queen of these regions, slunk far away into her most distant halls. But Balder went on his way, and even now he sups with Nanna in the dark castle over yonder.”

Then Hermod rode forward till he came to the castle walls. These were built of black marble; and the iron gate was barred and bolted, and none who went in had ever yet come out. Hermod called loudly to the porter to open the gate and let him in; but no one seemed to hear nor heed him, for the words of the living are unknown in that place. Then he drew the saddle-girths more tightly around the horse Sleipner, and urged him forward. High up, the great horse leaped; and he sprang clear over the gates, and landed at the open door of the great hall. Leaving his steed, Hermod went boldly in; and there he found his brother Balder and the faithful Nanna seated at the festal board, and honored as the most worthy of all the guests. With Balder, Hermod staid until the night had passed; and many were the pleasant words they spoke. When morning came, Hermod went into the presence of Hela, and said,—

“O mighty queen! I come to ask a boon of thee. Balder the Good, whom both gods and men loved, has been sent to dwell with thee here in thy darksome house; and all the world weeps for him, and has donned the garb of mourning, and cannot be consoled





until his bright light shall shine upon them again. And the gods have sent me, his brother, to ask thee to let Balder ride back with me to Asgard, to his noble, sorrowing mother, the Asa-queen; for then will hope live again in the hearts of men, and happiness will return to the earth.”

The Death-queen was silent for a moment; and then she said in a sad voice, “Hardly can I believe that any being is so greatly loved by things living and lifeless; for surely Balder is not more the friend of earth than I am, and yet men love me not. But go thou back to Asgard; and, if every thing shall weep for Balder, then I will send him to you. But, if any thing shall refuse to weep, then I will keep him in my halls.”

So Hermod made ready to return home; and Balder gave him the ring Draupner to carry to his father as a keepsake; and Nanna sent to the queen-mother a rich carpet of purest green. Then the nimble messenger mounted his horse, and rode swiftly back over the dark river, and through the frowning valleys, until he at last reached Odin’s halls. When the Asa-folk learned upon what terms they might have Balder again with them, they sent heralds all over the world to beseech every thing to mourn for him. And men and beasts, and creeping things, and birds and fishes, and trees and stones, and air and water,—all things, living and lifeless, joined in weeping for the lost Balder.

But, as the heralds were on their way back to Asgard, they met a giantess named Thok, and they asked her to join in the universal grief. And she answered, “What good thing did Balder ever do for Thok? What gladness did he ever bring her? If she should weep for him, it would be with dry tears. Let Hela keep him in her halls.”

“And yet the day shall come,” added the story-teller, “when the words of the weird woman to Odin shall prove true; and Balder shall come again to rule over a newborn world in which there shall be no wrong-doing and no more death.”

