

Iduna and Her Apples: How Loki Put the Gods in Danger

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In Asgard there was a garden, and in that garden there grew a tree, and on that tree there grew shining apples. Thou knowst, O well-loved one, that every day that passes makes us older and brings us to that day when we will be bent and feeble, gray-headed and weak-eyed. But those shining apples that grew in Asgard—they who ate of them every day grew never a day older, for the eating of the apples kept old age away.



“Iduna, the Goddess, tended the tree on which the shining apples grew.” Illustration by Willy Pogany, published in *Children of Odin* by Padraic Colum (1920), MacMillan.

Iduna, the Goddess, tended the tree on which the shining apples grew. None would grow on the tree unless she was there to tend it. No one but Iduna might pluck the shining apples. Each morning she plucked them and left them in her basket and every day the Gods and Goddesses came to her garden that they might eat the shining apples and so stay for ever young.

Iduna never went from her garden. All day and every day she stayed in the garden or in her golden house beside it, and all day and every day she listened to Bragi, her husband, tell a story that never had an end. Ah, but a time came when Iduna and her apples were lost to Asgard, and the Gods and Goddesses felt old age approach them. How all that happened shall be told thee, O well beloved.

Odin, the Father of the Gods, often went into the land of men to watch over their doings. Once he took Loki with him, Loki, the doer of good and the doer of evil. For a long time they went traveling through the world of men. At last they came near Jötunheim, the realm of the Giants.

It was a bleak and empty region. There were no growing things there, not even trees with berries. There were no birds, there were no animals. As Odin, the Father of the Gods, and Loki, the doer of good and the doer of evil, went through this region hunger came upon them. But in all the land around they saw nothing that they could eat.

Loki, running here and running there, came at last upon a herd of wild cattle. Creeping up on them, he caught hold of a young bull and killed him. Then he cut up the flesh into strips of meat. He lighted a fire and put the meat on spits to roast. While the meat was being cooked, Odin, the Father of the Gods, a little way off, sat thinking on the things he had seen in the world of men.

Loki made himself busy putting more and more logs on the fire. At last he called to Odin, and the Father of the Gods came and sat down near the fire to eat the meal.

But when the meat was taken off the cooking-spits and when Odin went to cut it, he found that it was still raw. He smiled at Loki for thinking the meat was cooked, and Loki, troubled that he had made a mistake, put the meat back, and put more logs upon the fire. Again Loki took the meat off the cooking-spits and called Odin to the meal.

Odin, when he took the meat that Loki brought him, found that it was as raw as if it had never been put upon the fire. "Is this a trick of yours, Loki?" he said.

Loki was so angry at the meat being uncooked that Odin saw he was playing no tricks. In his hunger he raged at the meat and he raged at the fire. Again he put the meat on the cooking-spits and put more logs on the fire. Every hour he would take up the meat, sure that it was now cooked, and every time he took it off Odin would find that the meat was as raw as the first time they took it off the fire.

Now Odin knew that the meat must be under some enchantment by the Giants. He stood up and went on his way, hungry but strong. Loki, however, would not leave the meat that he had put back on the fire. He would make it be cooked, he declared, and he would not leave that place hungry.

The dawn came and he took up the meat again. As he was lifting it off the fire he heard a whirr of wings above his head. Looking up, he saw a mighty eagle, the largest eagle that ever appeared in the sky. The eagle circled round and round and came above Loki's head. "Canst thou not cook thy food?" the eagle screamed to him.

"I cannot cook it," said Loki.

"I will cook it for thee, if thou wilt give me a share," screamed the eagle.

"Come, then, and cook it for me," said Loki.

The eagle circled round until he was above the fire. Then flapping his great wings over it, he made the fire blaze and blaze. A heat that Loki had never felt before came from the burning logs. In a minute he drew the meat from the spits and found it was well cooked.

"My share, my share, give me my share," the eagle screamed at him. He flew down, and seizing on a large piece of meat instantly devoured it. He seized on another piece. Piece after piece he devoured until it looked as if Loki would be left with no meat for his meal.

As the eagle seized on the last piece Loki became angry indeed. Taking up the spit on which the meat had been cooked, he struck at the eagle. There was a clang as if he had struck some metal. The wood of the spit did not come away. It stuck to the breast of the eagle. But Loki did not let go his hold on the spit. Suddenly the eagle rose up in the air. Loki, who held to the spit that was fastened to the eagle's breast, was drawn up with him.

Before he knew what had happened Loki was miles and miles up in the air and the eagle was flying with him toward Jötunheim, the Realm of the Giants. And the eagle was screaming out, "Loki, friend Loki, I have thee at last. It was thou who didst cheat my brother of his reward for building the wall round Asgard. But, Loki, I have thee at last. Know now that Thiassi the Giant has captured thee, O Loki, most cunning of the dwellers in Asgard."

Thus the eagle screamed as he went flying with Loki toward Jötunheim, the Realm of the Giants. They passed over the river that divides Jötunheim from Midgard, the World of Men. And now Loki saw a terrible place beneath him, a land of ice and rock. Great mountains were there: they were lighted by neither sun nor moon, but by columns of fire thrown up now and again through cracks in the earth or out of the peaks of the mountains.

Over a great iceberg the eagle hovered. Suddenly he shook the spit from his breast and Loki fell down on the ice. The eagle screamed out to him, "Thou art in my power at last, O thou most cunning of all the Dwellers in Asgard." The eagle left Loki there and flew within a crack in the mountain.

Miserable indeed was Loki upon that iceberg. The cold was deadly. He could not die there, for he was one of the Dwellers in Asgard and death might not come to him that way. He might not die, but he felt bound to that iceberg with chains of cold.

After a day his captor came to him, not as an eagle this time, but in his own form, Thiassi the Giant.

"Wouldst thou leave thine iceberg, Loki," he said, "and return to thy pleasant place in Asgard? Thou dost delight in Asgard, although only by one-half dost thou belong to the Gods. Thy father, Loki, was the Wind Giant."

"O that I might leave this iceberg," Loki said, with the tears freezing on his face.

"Thou mayst leave it when thou showest thyself ready to pay thy ransom to me," said Thiassi. "Thou wilt have to

get me the shining apples that Iduna keeps in her basket.”

“I cannot get Iduna’s apples for thee, Thiassi,” said Loki.

“Then stay upon the iceberg,” said Thiassi the Giant. He went away and left Loki there with the terrible winds buffeting him as with blows of a hammer.

When Thiassi came again and spoke to him about his ransom, Loki said, “There is no way of getting the shining apples from Iduna.”

“There must be some way, O cunning Loki,” said the Giant.

“Iduna, although she guards well the shining apples, is simple-minded,” said Loki. “It may be that I shall be able to get her to go outside the wall of Asgard. If she goes she will bring her shining apples with her, for she never lets them go out of her hand except when she gives them to the Gods and Goddesses to eat.”

“Make it so that she will go beyond the wall of Asgard,” said the Giant. “If she goes outside of the wall I shall get the apples from her. Swear by the World-Tree that thou wilt lure Iduna beyond the wall of Asgard. Swear it, Loki, and I shall let thee go.”

“I swear it by Ygdrasil, the World-Tree, that I will lure Iduna beyond the wall of Asgard if thou wilt take me off this iceberg,” said Loki.

Then Thiassi changed himself into a mighty eagle, and taking Loki in his talons, he flew with him over the stream that divides Jötunheim, the Realm of the Giants, from Midgard, the World of Men. He left Loki on the ground of Midgard, and Loki then went on his way to Asgard.

Now Odin had already returned and he had told the Dwellers in Asgard of Loki’s attempt to cook the enchanted meat. All laughed to think that Loki had been left hungry for all his cunning. Then when he came into Asgard looking so famished, they thought it was because Loki had had nothing to eat. They laughed at him more and more. But they brought him into the Feast Hall and they gave him the best of food with wine out of Odin’s wine cup. When the feast was over the Dwellers in Asgard went to Iduna’s garden as was their wont.

There sat Iduna in the golden house that opened on her garden. Had she been in the world of men, every one who saw her would have remembered their own innocence, seeing one who was so fair and good. She had eyes blue as the blue sky, and she smiled as if she were remembering lovely things she had seen or heard. The basket

of shining apples was beside her.

To each God and Goddess Iduna gave a shining apple. Each one ate the apple given, rejoicing to think that they would never become a day older. Then Odin, the Father of the Gods, said the runes that were always said in praise of Iduna, and the Dwellers in Asgard went out of Iduna's garden, each one going to his or her own shining house.

All went except Loki, the doer of good and the doer of evil. Loki sat in the garden, watching fair and simple Iduna. After a while she spoke to him and said, "Why dost thou still stay here, wise Loki?"

"To look well on thine apples," Loki said. "I am wondering if the apples I saw yesterday are really as shining as the apples that are in thy basket."

"There are no apples in the world as shining as mine," said Iduna.

"The apples I saw were more shining," said Loki. "Aye, and they smelled better, Iduna."

Iduna was troubled at what Loki, whom she deemed so wise, told her. Her eyes filled with tears that there might be more shining apples in the world than hers. "O Loki," she said, "it cannot be. No apples are more shining, and none smell so sweet, as the apples I pluck off the tree in my garden."

"Go, then, and see," said Loki. "Just outside Asgard is the tree that has the apples I saw. Thou, Iduna, dost never leave thy garden, and so thou dost not know what grows in the world. Go outside of Asgard and see."

"I will go, Loki," said Iduna, the fair and simple.

Iduna went outside the wall of Asgard. She went to the place Loki had told her that the apples grew in. But as she looked this way and that way, Iduna heard a whirr of wings above her. Looking up, she saw a mighty eagle, the largest eagle that had ever appeared in the sky.

She drew back toward the gate of Asgard. Then the great eagle swooped down; Iduna felt herself lifted up, and then she was being carried away from Asgard, away, away; away over Midgard where men lived, away toward the rocks and snows of Jötunheim. Across the river that flows between the World of Men and the Realm of the Giants Iduna was borne. Then the eagle flew into a cleft in a mountain and Iduna was left in a cavernous hall lighted up by columns of fire that burst up from the earth.

The eagle loosened his grip on Iduna and she sank down on the ground of the cavern. The wings and the feathers fell from him and she saw her captor as a terrible Giant.

“Oh, why have you carried me off from Asgard and brought me to this place?” Iduna cried.

“That I might eat your shining apples, Iduna,” said Thiassi the Giant.

“That will never be, for I will not give them to you,” said Iduna.

“Give me the apples to eat, and I shall carry you back to Asgard.”

“No, no, that cannot be. I have been trusted with the shining apples that I might give them to the Gods only.”

“Then I shall take the apples from you,” said Thiassi the Giant.

He took the basket out of her hands and opened it. But when he touched the apples they shriveled under his hands. He left them in the basket and he set the basket down, for he knew now that the apples would be no good to him unless Iduna gave them to him with her own hands.

“You must stay with me here until you give me the shining apples,” he said to her.

Then was poor Iduna frightened: she was frightened of the strange cave and frightened of the fire that kept bursting up out of the earth and she was frightened of the terrible Giant. But above all she was frightened to think of the evil that would fall upon the Dwellers in Asgard if she were not there to give them the shining apples to eat.

The Giant came to her again. But still Iduna would not give him the shining apples. And there in the cave she stayed, the Giant troubling her every day. And she grew more and more fearful as she saw in her dreams the Dwellers in Asgard go to her garden—go there, and not being given the shining apples, feel and see a change coming over themselves and over each other.

It was as Iduna saw it in her dreams. Every day the Dwellers in Asgard went to her garden—Odin and Thor, Hödur and Baldur, Tyr and Heimdall, Vidar and Vali, with Frigga, Freya, Nanna, and Sif. There was no one to pluck the apples of their tree. And a change began to come over the Gods and Goddesses.

They no longer walked lightly; their shoulders became bent; their eyes no longer were as bright as dewdrops.

And when they looked upon one another they saw the change. Age was coming upon the Dwellers in Asgard. They knew that the time would come when Frigga would be gray and old; when Sif's golden hair would fade; when Odin would no longer have his clear wisdom, and when Thor would not have strength enough to raise and fling his thunderbolts. And the Dwellers in Asgard were saddened by this knowledge, and it seemed to them that all brightness had gone from their shining City.

Where was Iduna whose apples would give back youth and strength and beauty to the Dwellers in Asgard? The Gods had searched for her through the World of Men. No trace of her did they find. But now Odin, searching through his wisdom, saw a means to get knowledge of where Iduna was hidden.

He summoned his two ravens, Hugin and Munin, his two ravens that flew through the earth and through the Realm of the Giants and that knew all things that were past and all things that were to come. He summoned Hugin and Munin and they came, and one sat on his right shoulder and one sat on his left shoulder and they told him deep secrets: they told him of Thiassi and of his desire for the shining apples that the Dwellers in Asgard ate, and of Loki's deception of Iduna, the fair and simple.

What Odin learnt from his ravens was told in the Council of the Gods. Then Thor the Strong went to Loki and laid hands upon him. When Loki found himself in the grip of the strong God, he said, "What wouldst thou with me, O Thor?"

"I would hurl thee into a chasm in the ground and strike thee with my thunder," said the strong God. "It was thou who didst bring it about that Iduna went from Asgard."

"O Thor," said Loki, "do not crush me with thy thunder. Let me stay in Asgard. I will strive to win Iduna back."

"The judgment of the Gods," said Thor, "is that thou, the cunning one, shouldst go to Jötunheim, and by thy craft win Iduna back from the Giants. Go or else I shall hurl thee into a chasm and crush thee with my thunder."

"I will go," said Loki.

From Frigga, the wife of Odin, Loki borrowed the dress of falcon feathers that she owned. He clad himself in it, and flew to Jötunheim in the form of a falcon.

He searched through Jötunheim until he found Thiassi's daughter, Skadi. He flew before Skadi and he let the Giant maid catch him and hold him as a pet. One day the Giant maid carried him into the cave where Iduna,

the fair and simple, was held.

When Loki saw Iduna there he knew that part of his quest was ended. Now he had to get Iduna out of Jötunheim and away to Asgard. He stayed no more with the Giant maid, but flew up into the high rocks of the cave. Skadi wept for the flight of her pet, but she ceased to search and to call and went away from the cave.

Then Loki, the doer of good and the doer of evil, flew to where Iduna was sitting and spoke to her. Iduna, when she knew that one of the Dwellers in Asgard was near, wept with joy.

Loki told her what she was to do. By the power of a spell that was given him he was able to change her into the form of a sparrow. But before she did this she took the shining apples out of her basket and flung them into places where the Giant would never find them.

Skadi, coming back to the cave, saw the falcon fly out with the sparrow beside him. She cried out to her father and the Giant knew that the falcon was Loki and the sparrow was Iduna. He changed himself into the form of a mighty eagle. By this time sparrow and falcon were out of sight, but Thiassi, knowing that he could make better flight than they, flew toward Asgard.

Soon he saw them. They flew with all the power they had, but the great wings of the eagle brought him nearer and nearer to them. The Dwellers in Asgard, standing on the wall, saw the falcon and the sparrow with the great eagle pursuing them. They knew who they were—Loki and Iduna with Thiassi in pursuit.

As they watched the eagle winging nearer and nearer, the Dwellers in Asgard were fearful that the falcon and the sparrow would be caught upon and that Iduna would be taken again by Thiassi. They lighted great fires upon the wall, knowing that Loki would find a way through the fires, bringing Iduna with him, but that Thiassi would not find a way.

The falcon and the sparrow flew toward the fires. Loki went between the flames and brought Iduna with him. And Thiassi, coming up to the fires and finding no way through, beat his wings against the flames. He fell down from the wall and the death that came to him afterwards was laid to Loki.

Thus Iduna was brought back to Asgard. Once again she sat in the golden house that opened to her garden, once again she plucked the shining apples off the tree she tended, and once again she gave them to the Dwellers in Asgard. And the Dwellers in Asgard walked lightly again, and brightness came into their eyes and into their cheeks; age no more approached them; youth came back; light and joy were again in Asgard.

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