



Tales from the Prose of Edda -

IV: The death of Baldur

Folk-Lore And Legends: Scandinavia

Scandinavian

Intermediate
7 min read

Baldur the Good had dreams which forewarned him that his life was in danger, and he told the gods of them. The gods took counsel together what should be done, and it was agreed that they should conjure away all danger that might threaten him. Frigga took an oath of fire, water, iron, and all other metals, stones, earth, trees, sicknesses, beasts, birds, poisons, and worms, that these would none of them hurt Baldur. When this had been done the gods used to divert themselves, Baldur standing up in the assembly, and all the others throwing at him, hewing at him, and smiting him with stones, for, do all they would, he received no hurt, and in this sport all enjoyed themselves.

Loki, however, looked on with envy when he saw that Baldur was not hurt. So he assumed the form of a woman, and set out to Fensalir to Frigga. Frigga asked if the stranger knew what the gods did when they met. He answered that they all shot at Baldur and he was not hurt.

“No weapon, nor tree may hurt Baldur,” answers Frigga, “I have taken an oath of them all not to do so.”

“What,” said the pretended woman, “have all things then sworn to spare Baldur?”

“There is only one little twig which grows to the east of Valhalla, which is called the mistletoe. Of that I took no oath, for it seemed to me too young and feeble to do any hurt.”

Then the strange woman departed, and Loki having found the mistletoe, cut it off, and went to the assembly. There he found Hodur standing apart by himself, for he was blind. Then said Loki to him—

“Why do you not throw at Baldur?”

“Because,” said he, “I am blind and cannot see him, and besides I have nothing to throw.”

“Do as the others,” said Loki, “and honour Baldur as the rest do. I will direct your aim. Throw this shaft at him.”

Hodur took the mistletoe and, Loki directing him, aimed at Baldur. The aim was good. The shaft pierced him through, and Baldur fell dead upon the earth. Surely never was there a greater misfortune either among gods or men.

When the gods saw that Baldur was dead then they were silent, aghast, and stood motionless. They looked on one another, and were all agreed as to what he deserved who had done the deed, but out of respect to the place none dared avenge Baldur's death. They broke the silence at length with wailing, words failing them with which to express their sorrow. Odin, as was right, was more sorrowful than any of the others, for he best knew what a loss the gods had sustained.

At last when the gods had recovered themselves, Frigga asked—

“Who is there among the gods who will win my love and good-will? That shall he have if he will ride to Hel, and seek Baldur, and offer Hela a reward if she will let Baldur come home to Asgard.”

Hermod the nimble, Odin's lad, said he would make the journey. So he mounted Odin's horse, Sleipner, and went his way.

The gods took Baldur's body down to the sea-shore, where stood Hringhorn, Baldur's vessel, the biggest in the world. When the gods tried to launch it into the water, in order to make on it a funeral fire for Baldur, the ship

would not stir. Then they despatched one to Jotunheim for the sorceress called Hyrrokin, who came riding on a wolf with twisted serpents by way of reins. Odin called for four Berserkir to hold the horse, but they could not secure it till they had thrown it to the ground. Then Hyrrokin went to the stem of the ship, and set it afloat with a single touch, the vessel going so fast that fire sprang from the rollers, and the earth trembled. Then Thor was so angry that he took his hammer and wanted to cast it at the woman's head, but the gods pleaded for her and appeased him. The body of Baldur being placed on the ship, Nanna, the daughter of Nep, Baldur's wife, seeing it, died of a broken heart, so she was borne to the pile and thrown into the fire.

Thor stood up and consecrated the pile with Mjolnir. A little dwarf, called Litur, ran before his feet, and Thor gave him a push, and threw him into the fire, and he was burnt. Many kinds of people came to this ceremony. With Odin came Frigga and the Valkyrjor with his ravens. Frey drove in a car drawn by the boar, Gullinbursti or Slidrugtanni. Heimdall rode the horse Gulltopp, and Freyja drove her cats. There were also many of the forest-giants and mountain-giants there. On the pile Odin laid the gold ring called Draupnir, giving it the property that every ninth night it produces eight rings of equal weight. In the same pile was also consumed Baldur's horse.

For nine nights and days Hermod rode through deep valleys, so dark that he could see nothing. Then he came to the river Gjöll which he crossed by the bridge which is covered with shining gold. The maid who keeps the bridge is called Modgudur. She asked Hermod his name and family, and told him that on the former day there had ridden over the bridge five bands of dead men.

"They did not make my bridge ring as you do, and you have not the hue of the dead. Why ride you thus on the way to Hel?"

He said—

"I ride to Hel to find Baldur. Have you seen him on his way to that place?"

"Baldur," answered she, "has passed over the bridge, but the way to Hel is below to the north."

Hermod rode on till he came to the entrance of Hel, which was guarded by a grate. He dismounted, looked to the girths of his saddle, mounted, and clapping his spurs into the horse, cleared the grate easily. Then he rode on to the hall and, dismounting, entered it. There he saw his brother, Baldur, seated in the first place, and

there Hermod stopped the night.

In the morning he saw Hela, and begged her to let Baldur ride home with him, telling her how much the gods had sorrowed over his death. Hela told him she would test whether it were true that Baldur was so much loved.

“If,” said she, “all things weep for him, then he shall return to the gods, but if any speak against him or refuse to weep, then he shall remain in Hel.”

Then Hermod rose to go, and Baldur, leading him out of the hall, gave him the ring, Draupnir, which he wished Odin to have as a keepsake. Nanna also sent Frigga a present, and a ring to Fulla.

Hermod rode back, and coming to Asgard related all he had seen and heard. Then the gods sent messengers over all the world seeking to get Baldur brought back again by weeping. All wept, men and living things, earth, stones, trees, and metals, all weeping as they do when they are subjected to heat after frost. Then the messengers came back again, thinking they had done their errand well. On their way they came to a cave wherein sat a hag named Thaukt. The messengers prayed her to assist in weeping Baldur out of Hel.

“I will weep dry tears,” answered she, “over Baldur’s pyre. What gain I by the son of man, be he live or dead? Let Hela hold what she has.”

It was thought that this must have been Loki, Laufey’s son, he who has ever wrought such harm to the gods.

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