



The Stealing of Iduna

Foster & Cummings

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16 min read

Odin, the wise father of the gods, started off one day on a journey through Midgard, the world of men, to see how his people were getting on, and to give them help. He took with him his brother Hönir, the light-giver, and Loki, the fire-god. Loki, you know, was always ready to go wherever he could have any fun or do any mischief.

All the morning they went about among the homes of Midgard, and whenever Odin found busy, faithful workers, he was sure to leave behind some little thing which would hardly be noticed, a straw in the farmer's barn, or a kernel of grain in the furrow by the plow, or a bit of iron at the blacksmith's forge; but always happiness and plenty followed his little gift.

At noontime Loki was so hungry that he begged Odin to stop for dinner; so when they came to a shady spot by the bank of a river, the three gods chose it for their resting-place.

Odin threw himself down under a tree and began to read his little book of runes, or wise sayings, but Loki began to make a fire and get ready for the feast. Then he started off to a farmhouse near by, leaving Hönir to cook the meat which they had brought.

As Loki came near the farmhouse, he thought to himself, "I will change myself into a cat, and then I can have a better chance to spy about." So he changed himself into a black cat, and jumping upon the kitchen window-sill, he saw the farmer's wife taking some cakes out of the oven. They smelled so good and looked so tempting that

Loki said to himself, "What a prize those cakes would be for our dinner!"

Just then the woman turned back to the oven to get more cakes, and Loki snatched those which she had laid on the table. The good housewife soon missed her cakes; she looked all about, and could not think what had become of them, but just as she was taking the last lot from the oven, she turned quickly around, and saw the tail of a cat whisking out of the window.

"There!" cried she, "that wicked black cat has stolen my nice cakes. I will go after him with my broom!" But by the time she reached the door all she could see was a cow walking in her garden, and when she came there to drive her away, nothing was to be seen except a big raven and six little ones flying overhead.

Then the mischievous Loki went back to the river bank, where he had left his two friends, and showed them the six cakes, boasting of the good joke he had played upon the poor woman. But Odin did not think it was a joke. He scolded Loki for stealing, and said, "It is a shame for one of the Æsir to be a thief! Go back to the farmhouse, and put these three black stones on the kitchen table."

Loki knew that the stones meant something good for the poor woman, and he did not wish to go back to the house; but he had to do as the Allfather told him. As he went along he heard his friends the foxes, who put their heads out of their holes and laughed at his tricks, for the foxes thought Loki was the biggest thief of them all.

Changing himself into an owl, Loki flew in at the kitchen window, and dropped from his beak the three stones, which, when they fell upon the white table, seemed to be three black stains.

The next time the good woman came into her kitchen, she was surprised to find that the dinner was all cooked. And so the wonderful stones that Odin had sent brought good luck; the housewife always found her food ready cooked, and all her jars and boxes filled with good things to eat, and never again was in need.

The other women all said she was the best housekeeper in the village, but one thing always troubled her, and that was the table with the three black stains. She scrubbed, and scrubbed, but could never make it white again.

And now we must go back to Loki. He was very hungry by this time, and hoped that Hönir would have the meat nicely cooked when he came back to the river bank, but when they took it out of the kettle, they found it was not cooked at all. So Odin went on reading his book of runes, not thinking about food, while Hönir and Loki

watched the fire, and at the end of an hour they looked again at the meat.

“Now, it will surely be done this time!” said Loki, but again they were disappointed, for the meat in the kettle was still raw. Then they began to look about to see what magic might be at work, and at last spied a big eagle sitting on a tree near the fire. All at once the bird spoke, and said, “If you will promise to give me all the meat I can eat, it shall be cooked in a few minutes.”

The three friends agreed to this, and in a short time, as the bird had promised, the meat was well done, Loki was so hungry he could hardly wait to get it out of the kettle, but suddenly the eagle pounced down upon it, and seized more than half, which made Loki so angry that he took up a stick to beat the bird, and what do you think happened? Why, the stick, as soon as it touched the bird’s back, stuck fast there, and Loki found he could not let go his end of it. Then away flew the eagle, carrying Loki with him, over the fields and over the tree-tops, until it seemed as though his arms would be torn from his body. He begged for mercy, but the bird flew on and on. At last Loki said, “I will give you anything you ask, if you will only let me go!”

Now the eagle was really the cruel storm giant Thiassi, and he said, “I will never let you go until you promise to get for me, from Asgard, the lovely goddess Iduna, and her precious apples!”

When Odin and Hönir saw Loki whisked off through the air, they knew that the eagle must be one of their giant enemies, so they hurried home to Asgard to defend their sacred city. Just as they came to Bifröst, the rainbow bridge, Loki joined them; but he took care not to tell them how the eagle came to let him go.

Odin felt sure that Loki had been doing something wrong, but knowing very well that Loki would not tell him the truth, he made up his mind not to ask any questions.

II.

The goddess Iduna, whom Loki was to tempt away out of Asgard, was the dearest of them all. She was the fair goddess of spring and of youth, and all the Æsir loved her. Her garden was the loveliest spot, with all sorts of bright, sweet flowers, birds singing by day and night, little chattering brooks under the great trees, and everything happy and fresh. The gods loved to go and sit with Iduna, and rest in her beautiful garden, within the walls of Asgard.

There was another delightful thing in the garden, and that was Iduna's casket. This was a magic box filled with big, golden-red apples, which she always gave her friends to taste. These wonderful apples were not only delicious to eat, but whoever tasted them, no matter how tired or feeble he might be, would feel young and strong again. So the dwellers in Asgard ate often of this wonderful fruit, which kept them fresh and young, fit to help the people in the world of Midgard. The casket in which Iduna kept her apples was always filled, for whenever she took out one, another came in its place; but no one knew where it came from, and only the goddess of youth, herself, could take the apples from the box, for if any one else tried, the fruit grew smaller and smaller, as the hand came nearer, until at last it vanished away.

A few days after Loki's bargain with the giant Thiassi, Iduna was in her bright garden one morning, watering the flowers, when her husband, Bragi, came to say good-bye to her, because he must go on a journey.

Loki watched him start off, and thought, "Now, here is my chance to tempt Iduna away from Asgard." After a while he went to the garden, and found the lovely goddess sitting among her flowers and birds. She looked up at Loki with such a sweet smile, as he came near, that he felt almost ashamed of his cruel plan; but he sat down on a grassy bank, and asked Iduna for one of her magic apples.

After tasting it, he smacked his lips, saying, "Do you know, fair Iduna, as I was coming home toward Asgard one day, I saw a tree full of apples which were really larger and more beautiful than yours; I do wish you would go with me and see them."

"Why, how can that be?" said Iduna, "for Father Odin has often told me that my apples were the largest and finest he ever saw. I should so like to see those others, and I think I will go with you now, to compare them with mine."

"Come on, then!" said Loki; "and you'd better take along your own apples, so that we can try them with the others."

Now Bragi had often told Iduna that she must never wander away from home, but, thinking it would do no harm to go such a little way, just this once, she took the casket of apples in her hand and went with Loki. They had hardly passed through the garden gate, when she began to wish herself back again, but Loki, taking her by the hand, hurried along to the rainbow bridge.

They had no sooner crossed over Bifröst than Iduna saw a big eagle flying toward them. Nearer and nearer he came, until at last he swooped down and seized poor Iduna with his sharp talons, and flew away with her to his cold, barren home. There she stayed shut up for many long dreary months, always longing to get back to Asgard, to see Bragi and her lovely garden.

The giant Thiassi had long been planning that if he could only once get the fair goddess of youth in his power, he would eat her magic apples, and so get strength enough to conquer the Æsir; but now, after all, she would not give him even one of them, and when he put his hand into the casket, the apples grew smaller and smaller, until at last they vanished, so that he could not get even a taste.

This cruel storm giant kept poor Iduna closely shut up in a little rock chamber, hoping that some day he could force her to give him what he wanted. All day long she heard the sea beating on the rocks below her gloomy cell, but she could not look out, for the only window was a narrow opening in the rock, high up above her head. She saw no one but the giant, and his serving-women, who waited upon her.

When these women first came to her, Iduna was surprised to see that they were not ugly or stern-looking, and, when she looked at their fair, smiling faces, she hoped they would be friendly and pitiful to her in her trouble. She begged them to help her, and, with many tears, told them her sad story; but still they kept on smiling, and when they turned their backs, Iduna saw that they were hollow. These were the Ellevomen, who had no hearts, and so could never be sorry for any one. When one is in trouble, it is very hard to be with Ellevomen.

Every day the giant came to ask Iduna, in his terrible voice, if she had made up her mind to give him the apples. Iduna was frightened, but she always had courage enough to say "No," for she knew it would be false and cowardly to give to a wicked giant these precious gifts which were meant for the high gods. Although it was hard to be a prisoner, and to see no one but the cold, fair Ellevomen who kept on smiling at her tears, she knew it was far better to belong to the bright Æsir, even in prison, than to be a giant, or an Ellevoman, no

matter how free or smiling they might be.

III.

All this while the dwellers in Asgard were sad and lonely without their dear Iduna. At first they went to her garden, as before, but they missed the bright goddess, and soon the garden itself grew dreary. The fresh green leaves turned brown and fell, the flowers faded, no new buds opened. No bird-songs were heard, and the saddest thing of all was that now the gods had no more of the wonderful apples to keep them fresh and strong, while two strangers, named Age and Pain, walked about the city of Asgard, and the Æsir felt themselves growing tired and feeble.

Every day they watched for Iduna's return; at last, when day after day had passed, and still she did not come, a meeting of all the gods and goddesses was called to talk over what they should do, and where they should search for their lost sister.

Loki, you may be sure, took care not to show himself at the meeting; but when it was found out that Iduna had last been seen walking with him, Bragi went after him, and brought him in before all the Æsir.

Then Father Odin, who sat on his high throne, looking very tired and sad, said: "Oh, Loki, what is this that you have done? You have broken your promise of brotherhood, and brought sorrow upon Asgard! Fail not to bring home again our sister, or else come not yourself within our gates!"

Loki knew well that this command must be obeyed, and besides, even he was beginning to wish for Iduna again; so, borrowing the cloak of falcon feathers which belonged to the goddess Freyja, he put it on and set out for Utgard and the castle of the giant Thiassi, which was a gloomy cave in a high rock by the sea, and there he found poor Iduna shut up in prison.

By good luck, the giant was away fishing when Loki arrived, so he was able to fly in, without being seen, through the narrow opening in Iduna's rock cell. You would have taken him to be just a falcon bird, but Iduna knew it was really Loki, and was filled with joy to see him. Without stopping to talk, Loki quickly changed her into a nut, which he held fast in his falcon claws, and flew swiftly northward, over the sea, toward Asgard. He had not gone far when he heard a rushing noise behind them, and he knew it must be the eagle. Faster and faster flew the falcon with his precious nut; but the fierce eagle flew still faster after them.

Meanwhile, for five days, the dwellers in Asgard gathered together on the city walls, gazing southward, to watch for the coming of the birds, while Loki and Iduna, chased by Thiassi, the eagle, flew over the wide sea separating Utgard, the land of the giants, from Asgard. Each night the eagle was nearer his prey, and the watchers in the city were filled with fear lest he should overtake their friends.

At last they thought of a plan to help Iduna: gathering a great pile of wood by the city walls, they set fire to it. When Loki reached the place he flew safely through the thick smoke and flame, for you know he was the god of fire, and dropped down into the city with his little nut held fast in his falcon claws. But when the heavy eagle came rushing on after them, he could not rise above the heat of the fire, and, smothered by the smoke, fell down and was burned to death.

There was great joy in Asgard at having the dear Iduna back again; her friends gathered around her, and she invited them all into her garden, where the withered trees and flowers began to sprout and blossom; the gay birds came back, singing and building their nests, and the happy little brooks went dancing under the trees.

Iduna sat with Bragi among her friends, and they all feasted upon her golden apples; she was so thankful to be free, and at home in her garden again. Once more the Æsir became young and strong, and the two dark strangers went away, for happiness and peace had come back to Asgard.

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