

# HOW LOKI WAS PUNISHED AT LAST

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WHEN the Asas knew that it was Loki, disguised as Thok, the giant woman, who had refused to shed the tears that would have won Balder's release, they determined to bear with his presence in Asgard no longer.

So with many a hard word and ugly look they drove him forth, bidding him never enter those gates again.

But the Asa folk were still sad and heavy of heart: for at every moment the gloom that lay over the city reminded them of the loss of their bright young Balder.

Egir, god of the sea, saw their forlorn condition, and he prepared a great banquet in the caves of coral that lie underneath the sea, and bade all the Asas attend it as his guests.

"That though for Balder every guest  
Was grieving yet,  
He might forget  
Awhile his woe in friendly feast."

The invitation was pleasing to the gods, and on the day appointed they came attired in their richest cloaks of silk and satin, green and blue and yellow and purple, by a path through the waters whereby they reached the coral caves of the Sea god. Very beautiful were these caves. The walls and ceilings were carved with the most delicate fretwork of pink and cream and white, and a faint green light shone into them from the ocean without.

The floor was covered with the finest silver sand, encrusted with beautiful sea shells, and the flowers with which the tables were adorned with feathery seaweeds and glowing sea anemones. In the midst of the floor was a mass of gold so bright that it lighted up the whole place as though with fire.

The dishes upon the table were filled with the most delicious fish of every kind and variety, and the gods sat down to the feast well pleased, regretting only the absence of the well-loved Balder, and the fact that Thor had been detained by a tempest which kept him busy in the regions of the dwarfs, from whence he hoped to travel to the sea caves directly his work was done.

Merrily went the banquet, for all the Asas were filled with good will toward one another and toward their burly host, who sat at the head of the board with his long gray beard sweeping his broad chest.

Suddenly into the midst of this cheerful scene fell a black shadow from the entrance to the cave; and there, red and gaunt, and evil of countenance, stood Loki, glowering upon them all.

At first the Asas sat in silence, their anger too deep for words. Then Odin arose and sternly bade the intruder begone.

This was the signal for a storm of hatred in words so evil that they poisoned the air. For a time the Asas pretended not to heed, but went on quietly with the meal. One of them even tried to drown his speech by talking loudly to old AEGir in praise of the servant who waited so deftly upon them all. But at the word Loki sprang forward, knife in hand, and killed the unfortunate serving-man before their eyes.

Then the Asa folk arose and cast out Loki with violence, threatening dire punishment should he appear in their presence again.

Resuming their seats at the interrupted feast, they made brave efforts to appear gay and cheerful; but scarcely had they begun to eat when Loki came creeping in again disguised as a sea serpent. Once in, he resumed his proper form and began as before to revile the gods, taunting them one after another with the mistakes which each had made, and telling his malicious stories, so that the gods were filled with dismay and with suspicion each of his neighbor.

Louder and louder grew the voice of Loki, the Asas all the time sitting as if turned to stone, and now he began to heap abuse on the head of Sif, the fair-haired wife of Thor.

Suddenly there was heard outside the noise of goats' feet clattering over the rocks, and in another moment the Thunderer entered, brandishing his hammer about his head and crying:

"Silence, thou wicked wretch, or my mighty hammer shall put a stop to thy prating. At one blow will I strike thy head from thy neck, and then will thy evil tongue be silenced once for all!"

But Loki did not wait for Thor to strike. Quick as light he dashed out of the cave and disappeared. He well knew that now at length he had indeed lost all hope of forgiveness. Wandering in dismal wise about the earth, fear seized him lest Odin or the Thunderer should find and slay him in order to prevent further annoyance.

So he made his way to the mountains of the North, and there he built for himself a hut with four doors, open to every quarter of the earth, that if need arose he might be able to escape quickly.

He built this hut, moreover, close to a mountain side, down which rushed a mighty cataract of water. For he intended, if the Asas found him, to spring into the stream, change himself into a salmon, and so make good his escape.

But when, sitting within his cold and draughty hut, he began to consider the matter afresh, he remembered that even if he carried out this plan he would not yet be quite safe.

For though he could easily avoid any hook that ever was made, he would find it very difficult to evade capture if the gods should think of making a net like that which the Sea goddess, Ran, spreads for unwary men when they are fishing or bathing in the sea, and all the time she is lurking near in some cavern on the shore, or enmeshed in the dark folds of a giant seaweed in the ocean depths.

So much and so long did Loki brood over the thought of Ran's fishing net, that at length he began to wonder if such a thing could really be made, and then to try to weave one out of twine as much like it as possible. He had not quite finished his curious task when upon the mountain, just above the hut, he suddenly perceived the two mighty figures of his dreaded foes. Knowing that their intention must be to enter his hut and make him prisoner, Loki hastily threw the half-made net upon the fire, and rushing forth he flung himself into the waterfall, where he quickly changed himself into a salmon and lurked unseen among the stones in the torrent's bed. Meantime, the two Asas had entered the hut.

"Ho! ho!" said Odin, as he noted the silence of the place, "our bird has flown."

"What fresh mischief doth he plan?" muttered Thor, looking closely about him.

"Let us look farther afield," urged Odin; but Thor kicked over the logs on the hearth and picked out the half-burned net

Now Odin well knew the net of Ran, and the half-burned strands suggested to him the truth. So he set to work and, with Thor's assistance, quickly mended the net, and they proceeded to drag the mountain stream with it.

At their first attempt sly Loki hid between two stones at the bottom of the river, laughing in scorn as the net passed over his head.

Then the Asas weighted the net with stones and tried again; but Loki gave a great leap over the net and dashed up stream.

A third time they made the attempt, and now Loki, grown reckless, leaped out of the water. But this time Thor caught him by his tail, and held it fast in spite of its slipperiness.

Then the gods forced him to resume his usual shape, and they carried him off to an underground cavern far below the earth, and there they bound him fast to a rock with iron fetters.

Most things in heaven and earth rejoiced at the downfall of wicked Red Loki, but above all rejoiced Skadi the giantess. Her home was in the cold mountain stream which Loki had invaded, and he had done her many an ill turn in bygone days.

This Skadi now took a poisonous serpent and fastened it above his head, so that the venom of the reptile falling, drop by drop, upon his face, would cause the most terrible pain. But Sigyn, Loki's loyal wife, the only person in heaven or earth who cared what became of him, took a cup and held it up to catch the burning drops as they fell, and she only left his side when the cup was full and she had to empty it.

In these brief periods, the fettered god howled with rage and pain, in tones which echoed through the dismal caverns of earth like mighty peals of thunder, and his writhing shook the earth to its foundations, bringing the Northmen from their dwellings in terror of what they thought to be violent earthquakes. But his efforts can avail nothing until the day of Ragnarok. Then shall his bonds be loosed, and he shall fight his last battle and fall, never to rise again.