

THE APPLES OF YOUTH

By E. M. WILMOT-BUXTON

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SWEETEST of all the Asa folk was Idun, the fair young goddess of Springtime and Youth, and dearly loved was she by the other Asas, both for herself and for her magic apples.

Fast locked in a golden casket were her apples, ripe and sweet and rosy. And each day, at dawn, Idun came to the table where the gods sat and feasted together, and gave those who wished a taste of the fruit.

And it came to pass that everyone who ate the magic fruit grew fresh and young again, however old and weary he had been before. For even the gods of Asgard grew old and weary sometimes; and then nothing would make them young again but the Apples of Youth. So Idun treasured the fruit with the greatest care, and never let it out of her charge for a moment. And however many she took out of her casket wherewith to feed the gods, there always remained just the same number as before.

"Bright Iduna, maid immortal!
Standing at Valhalla's portal,
In her casket has rich store
Of rare apples, gilded o'er;
Those rare apples, not of earth,
To ageing Asas gave new birth."

It was only to be expected, of course, that the fame of this magic fruit should spread, and as nobody liked to grow old, many of the giants, as well as the little dwarf people, used to come to the gates of Asgard and beg that Idun would give them a taste of her apples. But this, though they offered her the richest gifts they could think of, she never would do.

Now one day it so fell out that Odin grew weary of watching his heroes feast and fight in Valhalla, and determined to go forth and seek an adventure elsewhere.

So he called for his brother Hoenir, the clear-eyed Asa who first gave hope to the heart of man, and Loki, the mischievous fellow who yet by reason of his fun and gayety was no bad traveling companion, and bade them accompany him on a journey.

Speeding over the Rainbow Bridge, they came down to the World below and presently found themselves in a desolate region of mountain and moorland, through which they wandered for a long, long time, without coming across any kind of human habitation.

At length, grown weary and very hungry, they began to look about for food, and presently saw to their great joy a herd of oxen feeding upon the mountain-side. It took no long time to kill a fine bull and to kindle an immense fire; after which the Asas hung up the animal to roast and sat down to wait till it was done.

But though the fire flamed bravely over the logs, it made no difference whatever to the meat, which remained raw and cold.

Heaping on fresh fuel, the three Asas put the carcass still nearer the flame and waited hungrily. All in vain; the meat remained uneatable.

Looking at each other in dismay, the Asas exclaimed:

"There is some magic spell at work here."

And at that very moment they heard the loud croak of a bird in the tree above them.

Hastily searching the branches, the Asas soon found an immense eagle perched there and looking down upon them with an evil expression.

"Ho!" cried Odin, "is it you who has bewitched our food?"

The eagle nodded and croaked maliciously again.

"Then come at once and remove the spell," cried the famished Hoenir.

"If I do so, will you give me as much as I want to eat?" asked the eagle.

At this Odin hesitated, for he feared a trick, but Loki's mouth was watering and he called out: "Yes, yes, anything you like if you will only let the meat be cooked."

Then the great bird swooped down and began to fan the flame with his huge wings, and behold! in a very few minutes the gravy began to run, a delicious smell of roast beef filled the air, and there was the meat done to a turn.

Just as the three Asas were putting out hungry hands to seize their portions, however, the eagle, which had been hovering overhead, swooped down and seized more than three-quarters of the animal, leaving barely enough for one of the famished gods.

This was too much for Loki. With a roar of rage like that of an angry lion, he seized a great stake that stood near and struck with all his might at the greedy bird.

The eagle shook himself after the blow, but instead of dropping his booty he rose slowly into the air. And then, to Loki's dismay, he found that one end of the pole had stuck fast to the body of the bird, the other to his own hands.

Try as he would he could not let go, and so found himself being dragged along over stones and bushes and briers, while his arms were almost torn out of their sockets.

In vain he begged and implored the eagle to let him go; it took no notice of him whatever, but flew on and on just a little way above the earth, until at length Loki, feeling he could endure no longer, promised him anything he asked if he would only release him.

Then at last the eagle spoke, telling him that he would set him free on one condition only, and that was that he should manage by some trick to tempt Idun out of Asgard, in order that he could obtain possession of her and of the magic fruit. He told Loki, more-over, that he was the Storm Giant Thiassi in disguise, and bade him beware of the consequences if he broke his solemn promise to one of giant race.

By this time Loki was ready to promise anything to save his life, and so at length he found himself free.

Bruised and torn he made his way back to Odin and Hoenir, by whom he was closely questioned concerning his adventures.

But Loki never hesitated to depart from the truth, and, knowing that it would not do to tell what he had promised, he answered glibly that the eagle had captured him in mistake for someone else, and that when he found out it was Red Loki himself, he had set him free, with many expressions of sorrow for his error.

So the three Asas returned to Asgard, and from that moment Loki did not cease to plot and plan the means by which he could entice Idun outside the gates.

And indeed this was no easy matter, for the Apples of Youth were so precious to the gods that Idun was well guarded by night and day. Sometimes, however, even the Asas were off their guard, and that was the opportunity for Loki.

Strolling one day through the groves of Asgard, Loki found the beautiful maiden all alone in a sunny corner playing at ball with her golden fruit.

"Aha!" cried he, approaching gently so as not to startle her, "what a fair game thou playest here, maiden!" But Idun only smiled at him happily and went on tossing her apples.

Then Loki pulled a long face and came nearer, and said:

"Till this day, fair Idun, I had said that nowhere in the wide world grew apples like thine. But now have I found a tree whereon the fruit is of finer gold, and of greater size than these, and a taste of it needs not to be renewed again, but makes one young forever-more."

Then Idun stopped playing and her blue eyes grew dark and stormy, for she could not bear to think that her apples would no longer be the joy and delight of the Asas.

But then she remembered Loki's deceitful ways and said: "I believe thee not. This is one of thy tricks, Red Loki."

"Ho, you think so, do you ?" said the crafty one. "Then come and see them for yourself, and bring your own to compare with them."

"Are they near by?" said Idun, rising doubtfully to her feet and still holding fast to the casket of fruit.

"Only just a little way off," replied Loki, and taking hold of her hand he drew her outside the thicket.

On and on they went, and when she asked where they were going he always replied that the grove where the apples grew was just a little farther than he had thought.

At length, without noticing that she had passed the boundaries, Idun stood outside the walls of Asgard on a dreary region of barren heath and then she at last began to suspect mischief.

"Where am I?" she cried, "and where, O Loki, are the golden apples?"

But she only heard the jeering "Ha! Ha! Ha!" of the Asa as he returned to Asgard, and that was soon lost in the whirr-r-r of wings as a mighty eagle, swooping down upon her, fixed his talons in her girdle and rose with her into the air

And this of course was Thiassi, the Storm Giant, who had been on the watch for her all the time, and who now carried her off, casket and all, to the bleak and desolate abode over which he ruled. Well had it been said that Loki was at the bottom of all the misfortunes that ever befell in Asgard. And never until the End of All Things would he work so dire a mischief again.

Poor Idun grew pale and thin and sad in her captivity, but she would not purchase freedom with a taste of the Apples of Youth, although the Storm Giant coaxed and begged and threatened by turns.

For a time the Asas took little notice of her absence, for they thought she was amusing herself somewhere in the sunny groves of Asgard and had forgotten her daily visit. Then they began to feel old and weary, and at first scarcely knew what was wrong.

Glancing at each other they saw, with startled eyes, wrinkles and lines and gray hairs where these things were not wont to be. Their youth and beauty were disappearing, and then they suddenly awoke to the need of a thorough search for the missing Idun.

And when she could nowhere be found, All-Father Odin, mindful of former tricks, sent for Red Loki and began very closely to question him. Others had seen Idun in his company on that eventful day when she had been carried away, and so, finding it impossible to keep the matter hidden, Loki confessed with a mocking laugh that he had betrayed her into the power of the Storm Giant.

Then all the Asas arose in hot wrath and threatened Loki with death or torture if he did not at once restore the beautiful Goddess of Youth with her magic fruit. And at length, being fairly frightened, he undertook to bring her back if Freya would lend him her falcon plumes that he might disguise himself as a bird.

Thus equipped, Loki flew off to Giantland, and arrived, fortunately for him, just as Thiassi had gone out a-fishing.

High up at the window of a great stone castle fair Idun looked with tearful eyes upon the stormy sea, and, as she thought of the sunny groves of Asgard, suddenly the plumage of a great falcon almost brushed against her face. Drawing back in alarm, she saw the cunning red eyes of Loki looking at her from the bird's head.

"See how kind am I!" he jeered. "I am come to take thee back to Asgard."

Then Idun almost wept for joy, till she remembered that she was a prisoner, and so cried pitifully.

"I cannot win forth from this cold stone tower, O Loki, and even if I could, thou canst never carry me and my casket back to Asgard. And lo! I cannot outrun the wicked Storm Giant, and though the fruit be heavy I will not leave it behind."

Then Loki soothed her and by his magic arts he changed her into a nut, which he took up in one talon, while the casket he carried with the other, and so set off to fly back to Asgard.

Now Thiassi, the Storm Giant, was ill at ease that day, for he felt the pangs and pains of old age upon him as he went a-fishing. So he determined to return earlier than usual in order to try once more to get the magic fruit from Idun.

Judge then of his dismay when he found his prisoner flown!

Hastily transforming himself into an eagle, Thiassi began to scour the regions of the air, looking everywhere for the maiden, and before long he noted the steady flight of a falcon toward the walls of Asgard.

Sweeping toward him through the air, the keen eyes of the eagle saw the gleam of a golden casket in his talons, and he knew that it was an Asa who had come to the rescue of Idun.

And now it seemed that Loki would be hard put to it to reach Asgard before he was overtaken; for the eagle swept through the air with his great wings much faster than the falcon could fly, and the Asas, who had assembled on the battlements of the city to watch the race, trembled for its issue.

Then some of them remembered how once before they had played a trick upon the pursuer in a similar conflict, and they collected pine shavings in great abundance and piled them on the walls, and stood ready to fire them when the moment came.

On, on flew Loki, hard beset; and close behind him came, with steady rush, the mighty eagle Thiassi. He was almost upon his prey as they neared the walls, but Loki made a last violent effort which was successful, and he fell exhausted into the midst of the Asas

At the same moment the pile of fuel was lighted, and Thiassi blinded with smoke and singed with flame, dropped over the battlements and thus fell an easy prey to his waiting enemies. In admiration of his good race, however, the Asas placed his eyes as stars the heavens, and there they shine to this day.

So the Apples of Youth returned to Asgard, and all the Asas hastened to eat of them and became young and beautiful again. And fair Idun once more resumed her shape, and never again was tricked by wicked Loki but played with her magic fruit in the golden groves of Asgard till the End of All Things.

And this is how the Apples of Youth were once very nearly lost to Asgard.