

IDUN AND HER GOLDEN APPLES

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Anyone lucky enough to go to Asgard, where the Norse gods live, would see at once that all of them, with the exception of Odin, are young, beautiful and handsome. Odin is the exception as he does have such a long beard, and he would look much younger if he shaved it off. But no-one shaves in Asgard, and now I am thinking about it, this may be because the other male gods look too young to grow a beard... How do they manage this? You might well ask, given that they've been up in Asgard for quite a while. The answer lies in Idun, and her Golden Apples.

One day Odin and Loki left Asgard to see what was going on in Midgard, the Land of Men. You may know that Odin is the father of the Norse gods, Loki is the god of fire and mischief. Anyway, these two gods had been trekking all day in the mountains, and come nightfall, they were definitely hungry. They saw some cows grazing, and they decided to kill one and have a few steaks. Odin jointed the beef, while Loki got the fire going. This was the work of a moment for him as he was the god of fire, even though the wood was wet, it would have taken you or me a lot longer.

Soon the meat was cooking over the fire. But there was a problem: the fire was hot, the meat was there - but for some reason, it would not cook. Try as they would - and the two of them did try - their dinner remained raw.

“Hmph,” said Odin. “There’s trouble about.”

In the light of the fire, they saw a shadow of a huge bird. They looked up and saw an eagle perched on a branch, silhouetted against the night sky. “That’s no eagle,” said Odin. The bird laughed, “No, I am no eagle and your meat will not cook unless you agree to give me whatever I want.” The gods were tired, cold and hungry so they agreed without inquiring as to the demands of the strange creature.

At once the meat began to sizzle. How good it smelled! But just as they were about to help themselves, the creature in the shape of an eagle, swooped down and grabbed the best bit with his beak. He gulped it down – no chewing for him – and took another piece. “No, you don’t,” said Loki, and he shoved a great log at the bird, trying to beat him off. But instead, the eagle grabbed the log and Loki found himself stuck fast on the other end of it. He could not let go! Now the eagle flew low, so that Loki was dragged behind and terribly bashed and bounced about by rocks and branches as they flew over the ground. At last the eagle put him down. “I am the Giant Thjasse,” he said, “and you’re not the only one who can change shape. You will never be free unless you agree to get me Idun’s golden apples. Do you?”

Loki hesitated. Thjasse wasn’t really asking for apples, he was asking for what Asgard prized above all - eternal youth and beauty. What would his punishment be if he stole that? But he was tired of being bruised and dragged about, so he agreed. Thjasse flew off screeching, “Keep your word or you’ll have me to deal with!” and Loki, who didn’t want that, brushed himself down thoughtfully. Then he rejoined Odin who was already tucking into him steak, and began to eat himself.

This expedition to Midgard had not been very successful and soon the two gods returned to Asgard. Loki did intend to keep his word, and he began by making friends with Idun, keeper of the Golden Apples. This wasn’t hard, as Idun was as sweet and good-natured as her lovely apples! Loki made a good start by telling her about his travels: he had plenty of funny and interesting tales to tell. Every time he went to get his own apple – for all the gods ate them once a week – he took the chance to tell Idun something or make her laugh. One day, he said, “You know, Idun, these are wonderful apples, but they’re second best. I have seen better.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t believe me? Come and see for yourself.”

“I think I will,” said Idun.

Why don’t you bring your own apples?” said the crafty Loki. “Then you could really compare them.”

Idun went to fetch her wondrous apples. She kept them in the sort of basket they deserved: it was made of purest gold, just the right size, and the handle was studded with rubies. It was so pretty!

Loki and Idun made for the gates of Asgard. Loki looked up. He saw a huge shadow in the sky – he knew what that meant. All of a sudden, Idun shivered. “I’m not sure I want to go,” she said. “I’ll come another day.”

“A walk outside will do you good,” said Loki, and he took her by the arm and they went through the gate.

Idun screamed, and no wonder. The eagle, Thjasse, swooped down for his prize, Idun and her apples. Poor Idun was flying through the air, with Thjasse’s huge claws closed tightly around her waist without scratching her. “Careful with those apples,” he screeched, and poor Idun screamed again. She was fated to be held prisoner in Thjasse’s cold and gloomy castle.

Meanwhile, at first no one in Asgard noticed she had gone. Then things changed: The goddesses complained to each other of one or two grey hairs. Odin, who must have been the oldest if he was the father of the gods, got backache. And one or two little wrinkles, crow’s feet, smile lines - that sort of thing, began to appear on the faces of the gods. They were not happy about it: if they were gods, they had to be immortal. Besides who doesn’t want to look young and beautiful?

They held an assembly of the gods. The number one suspect in the Case of the Missing Apples was Loki, for suspicion always falls on him when there is mischief afoot. It was an uproarious meeting with all the gods demanding that Loki tell the truth, and all sorts of threats and divine curses were banded about.

“Alright, alright. I did it,” Loki, finally admitted. “I was forced into it.”

Then Thor, the strongest of the gods, seized hold of Loki and shook him terribly so that he was in fear for his life.

“Stop, stop,” cried Loki, "I'll get the apples back. If you kill me, you will never eat those apples again, and you can all suffer the aches and pains of old age.”

When things had calmed down, the gods helped Loki turn into the shape of a falcon.

He flew and flew until he reached Thjasse’s castle. Idun was walking on the ramparts, with her jewelled basket. Quickly, Loki turned her into a nut, clutched it tight with his claws, and soared high towards Asgard. It was lucky he had a good start, for soon Thjasse came home. How he roared when he saw that Idun and her apples were gone! He guessed what had happened, changed at once into an eagle, and flew off, spurred on by anger and fury. Loki flew as quickly as he could, and falcons fly very fast, but it is the eagle that rules the skies, and little by little Thjasse gained on him.

Everyone in Asgard was watching, fearfully. Would Loki get back in time? The gods rushed off and laid great fires on the walls. Near fainting with exhaustion, the falcon flew over the wall and fell to the ground exhausted. In an instant the flames leapt into the sky, and Thjasse was burned. He fell, and died. Idun and her golden apples were safely back home. Youth and beauty returned to Asgard forevermore!

And that was the story of Idun and the Golden Apples, adapted for storynory by Charlotte Seabag-Montefiore. We do hope you enjoyed it, and look out for more Norse stories on Storynory.com.