

Part IV.—Legend and Lay.

THE OLD GODS.



IN the north of Europe there lived long ago that race of people whom we know as the Norsemen—tall, fair-haired men, strong and warlike, and as much at home on sea as on land. They came to Britain in great numbers at different times, and many of them settled there. We read of them sometimes as Vikings, sometimes as Danes, and sometimes as Normans. The Saxon settlers of a still earlier time were of the same kindred. We have already told the story of their settlement in Orkney, and of the earldom which they established there. Everything that we can find out about this wonderful race of sea-rovers and warriors is of interest to us; for while most of the lowland dwellers of Scotland and England have some Norse blood in their veins, we who live in these northern islands regard ourselves as the lineal descendants of those Vikings.

Before the Norsemen became Christians, they believed in many gods and goddesses. They had gods of the sky and of the sea, of spring and of summer, of thunder and lightning, of frost and of storm.

Many a strange tale they told of the doings of their gods, and most of those tales are really pictures of the processes that take place in nature—of the wars between wind and sea, between light and darkness, and between sun and frost.

In the beginning, they believed, there was the great Spirit, the Creator. Of him they have no tales to tell. Then the world was made—or rather the worlds, for the Norsemen thought that besides this world of men there were a world of the gods, a world of the giants, and other worlds. Between Asgard, the home of the gods, and Midgard, the world of men, a beautiful bridge was built, which we call the rainbow.

Odin was the highest of the gods. He was the god of wisdom and of victory, and the friend of heroes. Men spoke of him as tall and strong, with long, flowing hair and beard, and wearing a wide blue mantle flecked with white, as the blue sky is flecked with fleecy clouds. On his shoulders sat two ravens, Thought and Memory. They roamed over the world every day, and came back at night to whisper in his ear all they had seen and heard. At his feet crouched two wolves, which he fed with his own hand.

Odin had three palaces in Asgard. One of these was Valhalla, the home of heroes; and hither came at their death all the brave men Odin loved so well. He sent forth beautiful maidens to hover over every field of battle, and to carry home to Valhalla those who fell in the fight. In Valhalla the brave lived for ever. They spent their days in fighting, as they had loved to do on earth; but every evening the warriors returned to the hall of feasting, unhurt, and the best of friends. Such was the Norsemen's idea of a heaven for heroes.

Odin gave men wisdom as well as courage. Only through suffering, however, did he become the god of wisdom. It happened on this wise. Far below the world of the giants was a crystal spring which watered the roots of the tree of life—a great tree reaching up to heaven. This well was the fountain of wisdom, and whoever drank of it became wise. It was guarded by a giant called Mimir, or Memory. Mimir was older than the gods, and wiser than they, for he remembered all things. Odin went down below the world of the giants one day, and he said to Mimir, "Give me a drink of the clear water of your well."

"Ah," said Mimir, "this water is never given to any except at a great price. You must be willing to give up the most precious thing you possess before you can drink at Mimir's fountain."

"Be it so," replied Odin; "I will give whatever you ask."

Mimir looked at him, admiring his courage, and at length replied, "If you would drink, you must leave with me one of your eyes."

This was a great price to pay, but Odin did not flinch. He drank of the fountain, and came back to Asgard with only one eye, but he had won the wisdom he desired.

Thor was the god of thunder; he was the champion of the gods, and defended Asgard against the giants. His was the largest palace in Asgard; it had five hundred and forty halls and many great doors, and was called by a name which means Lightning. Thor wore a crown of stars upon his head, and rode in a chariot drawn by two goats, from whose hoofs and teeth flashed sparks of fire. To Thor belonged three

very precious things. The first was his mighty hammer, with which he fought the frost giants. The second was his belt of strength: when he girded himself with this his strength was doubled. The third was his iron gauntlet: with this he grasped his famous hammer, which he made red-hot when he fought the giants.

Loki was the spirit of evil and mischief. Having been banished from Asgard for his wickedness, he lived many years in giant-land, rejoicing in his evil deeds. He had three children, each as full of evil as himself. So much mischief did they work that Odin looked down from Asgard with a grave countenance. "This must not be," he said; "Loki's children will fill the world with evil." So Odin fared forth to giant-land. One of the evil brood he sent to the under world of darkness, and one he threw into the sea. The third, Fenris the wolf, was so strong that Odin spared him. "If he were to live with the gods," he said, "his strength might be turned to good instead of ill." So he took Fenris the wolf up to Asgard, to see whether he would learn goodness with his strength.

Who among the gods would care for the wolf-spirit? Brave Tyr was ready with the answer. "Father Odin," he cried, "I delight in strength. Let me have the charge of this fierce fellow; I care not if the task be hard and dull." So Fenris became his charge. He fed him with sheep and oxen, and took him with him upon his journeys. But Fenris did not learn the ways of the gods. His muscles were like iron, and his teeth stronger than steel, but his heart remained savage and cruel.

One night Odin called the gods together. "Sons,"

he said, "I have looked upon Fenris, and seen his cruel strength. There is no love in his eyes, and no thought of good in his heart. Day by day he becomes stronger for evil. We must bind him, or he will destroy us." They listened, and saw that the counsel of Odin was good. "Come with me," said Thor the mighty; "I will forge a chain that will hold him fast." All night long the gods watched Thor toiling at his anvil, dealing great blows upon the glowing iron, and sending sparks like shooting-stars through the darkness. When morning came the massive chain was finished.

"Come, Fenris," called Thor, "you are strong; let us see you break this chain which I have made." Fenris allowed them to bind him with the heavy links: when they had done so, he stretched his huge limbs, and the thick iron snapped like a thread of silk. The gods kept silence as Fenris walked away.

Again Thor led them to his forge; again he toiled all night, hammering and shaping great bars of steel. When morning came, another chain was ready, ten times stronger than the first. But this chain also snapped like a spider's thread before the might of Fenris.

The gods once more sat in council, and Odin's face was grave. "Great indeed is the power of evil," said the All-wise, "but the power of good must be greater still. Sons, let us call to our aid the skill of the dwarfs. Tyr shall tell them of our need, and they will help us to bind the enemy." Like an arrow from the bow, Tyr sped from Asgard to the cave of the dwarfs, the skilful workers in gold and gems, and gladly they lent their aid to Father Odin. Three nights they

toiled in the darkness, and then they brought to Tyr a delicate chain which might have been spun from a cobweb. "Here is thy chain, O Tyr," they said. "Fierce Fenris cannot escape from its bands."

When Tyr came back to Asgard, Fenris was called once more to test his strength. He looked on the delicate thread, and he trembled; yet he would not seem to be afraid. "If one of you will place his hand in my mouth, so that there may be fair play, I will let you bind me," he replied. The gods looked in one another's faces. Who would dare the power of the wolf?

Brave Tyr stepped forward and put his arm between the wolf's jaws. The tiny chain was wound round Fenris. He rose to stretch himself and shake it off, but it held him fast. With a wild howl he gnashed his teeth together, and Tyr stood before the gods without his strong right arm. Then a great shout arose in Asgard, "Hail to Tyr! he has given his right hand to save the world from evil." It was echoed from the hills, and rang through the caves of the dwarfs. "The chain of the dwarfs is mighty," they said, "but stronger is the brave heart of Tyr." So wisdom and goodness together were more than a match for strength and evil.

Baldur was the god of light. He was the fairest of all that dwelt in Asgard, the best beloved of gods and men. Wherever he went he carried with him that kindness and love which is to the heart of man what light is to the sky. Every one loved him but Loki; the spirit of evil hated the goodness that was in Baldur. Baldur's palace was the home of all that was bright and pure. It was built of the blue of the sky and the clear crystal of running water. Here he

lived in peace, for no evil thing could enter. But Baldur became sad and troubled, for he dreamed that his life was in danger.

Then his mother went abroad over the whole world, and made everything promise not to hurt Baldur. Who would harm the beautiful god? Earth, air, and water, beasts and birds, and plants and flowers—all things promised never to hurt him. So his mother returned to Asgard with joy, but still Baldur was sad. Then the gods invented a kind of game to cheer his heart. They made him stand in the midst while they threw at him weapons and all hurtful things, to show that nothing could do him harm; and thus they amused themselves many days.

In the meantime Loki disguised himself as an old woman, and went to Baldur's mother. He said he marvelled that Baldur was not hurt, and then the mother told him of the promise which all things had made never to harm her son.

"What! have all things promised this?" asked Loki.

"Yes," was the reply; "all things have promised except one weak little plant, the mistletoe, which grows far away, and which I did not think it worth while to ask."

Loki rejoiced in his evil heart when he heard this. He hurried to the place where the mistletoe grew, and plucked a twig of it, which by his magic he made into a spear. Then he came back to Asgard, where the gods were playing their game of throwing spears at Baldur.

"Why do you not join in the game?" he asked one of the gods.

"Because I am blind," he replied.

"For the honour of Baldur you should throw a spear at him," Loki went on.

'I have no spear to throw," answered the blind god.

Then Loki put into his hand the mistletoe spear, and helped him to aim it. The spear pierced Baldur through the heart, and he fell dead. Then there were grief and anger in Asgard; weeping and mourning were heard for the first time among the gods.

Odin sent a message to the daughter of Loki, who ruled over the world of the dead, and asked her to set Baldur free. She replied that he would be set free if every living thing would weep for him; but if a single creature refused to weep, he could not return.

Then the gods went through all the earth, and prayed all things living to weep for Baldur. One old woman alone refused, and so Baldur could not be set free. The old woman was no other than Loki, who had taken this form in order to hide himself.

After the death of Baldur came a gloomy time in Asgard. The gods had fierce wars with the frost-giants, and were defeated. This time is called "the twilight of the gods." But even then they looked forward to a better time which was to come, when Baldur should return, and all should be light and joy and peace.

Thus the old Norsemen gave us the beautiful tale of Baldur, the sun-god. When the days are short in winter, the time of the mistletoe, Baldur is dead; but when spring returns, the war with the frost-giants is over, and Baldur returns with light and joy to the northern lands.