

Ygdrasil

Edited by Mara Pratt

At the base of Mt. Ida stood Ygdrasil, the wonderful tree of Life. Never before nor since was there another such a tree. It had never had a beginning; it had never been young.

Not even the oldest man, not even the gods themselves could say, "I remember when this great tree was a tender sapling, I remember when it sent forth its first tiny leaves, and how it rocked, and swayed, and shivered, and bent its timid head as the cold ice king swept over it."

For there had never been a time since the beginning of the world when Ygdrasil had not stood there, tall and strong, one great root reaching down, down through the earth to the home of the dead, another stretching away, no one could tell how far, till it reached the home of the terrible giants, so fierce and cruel, so strong, and withal so wise, that even the gods themselves dreaded them and stood ever in terror of their approach.

And its branches? So broad, so far reaching, so numerous were these, that they spread themselves protectingly over the whole earth, their top-most leaves rustling and whispering together above the golden palace of the gods, far up on the summit of the cloud-hidden Ida.

Nor was this all. Hidden among the dense leaves lived a great white eagle. No one knew whence he came; no one had ever looked upon him; but there he sat, ages upon ages, singing forever the story of the creator of the earth and the wonderful deeds of the gods who dwell in the shining city of Asgard. The leaves of the tree sang sunset songs, and whispered to each other secrets, sometimes sad, sometimes gay, which even the gods, with all their wisdom, could not understand.

At the foot of the tree, away down at the end even of the deepest, farthest root, lay the Well of Wisdom. Its waters were black. Sometimes they were very bitter, and few there were who had the courage and the perseverance to search out the hiding-place of this wonderful spring. Then, too, it was guarded by a grim old giant, Memory, who so loved this well, and so dreaded the approach of man or god to its waters, that he would not allow them even to touch their lips to it, until they had sworn to surrender to him whatever thing was dearest in life to them.

This was a heavy price to pay for wisdom, and few there were who cared to pay it. "Will you give me your children?" "Will you give me your freedom?" "Will you give me your health?" "Will you give me your tongue, your ears, your eyes?" the old giant would ask of the mortals who came to drink of the waters of the Well of Wisdom.

And always, when the mortals heard these questions, they grew pale and trembled with fear. "Go back to your homes," the old giant would thunder, "you desire wisdom it is true; but you are not willing to pay the price for it." Then the mortals would hurry away, their hearts beating with fear, their ears ringing with the thunderous tones of the terrible giant, who, since the earth was made, had sat at the foot of Ygdrasil guarding the secrets from all the world.

The Darkness That Fell on Asgard

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The gods had avenged themselves upon the cruel Peace-destroyer, and he lay suffering the tortures they had put upon him.

But even this could not bring back the sunny god, the happy, cheerful, life-giving Baldur. Brage had gone, and there was no sound of music in Asgard; Idun had gone, and signs of age were again creeping over the faces of the gods; now Baldur was gone, and with him the long light and warm softness of the summer time.

“He may come back,” Frigg would say; and every morning she strained her eyes to see if he had risen from behind the far-off hills with the soft light she had learned to know so well. “Baldur is late,” she would say, as the days rolled on.

But all this time, from the cold north land, the Frost giants, triumphant, were drawing near. Their chill breath was in the air. The days grew short; the nights grew long. The rivers were locked in ice. Great drifts of snow were everywhere. The sky was gray; and there were no stars. The sun shone pale and white through the dull clouds and the blinding drifts of snow. It grew bitter, bitter cold.

“The Fimbul-winter!” whispered the earth-people. “Has the Fimbul-winter come?” And Odin answered, “Yes; it is true. The Fimbul-winter, foretold by the Norns, even from the beginning of time, has come. Soon the great wolf will spring forth from the under world, and he will seize upon the sun and devour it. Then dense darkness will fall upon us; and Ragnarok—the end of all things—will be upon us.”

And it came to pass as Odin said. One day there was heard a mighty rumbling. This time it was not the thunder from the mighty hammer of great Thor. His hands were frozen; nor had he heart to try to wield his hammer.

The thunder and the rumble came this time from within the earth. The great earth trembled and shook. Great gaping mouths opened and swallowed up the children; the mountains crumbled and fell; the great serpent lashed the sea; the great rocks rocked and swayed and tore themselves apart. Loke and the Fenris-wolf, freed from their fetters, sprang forth, burning with hate and wild for vengeance. The Frost giants already were upon the rainbow bridge. A terrible battle followed.

The gods fell, one by one: Thor by the deadly flood of poison from the Midgard serpent; Tyre in the great jaws of the Fenris-wolf, who, ages before, had torn from him his strong right hand.

And now the battle was over. The gods lay dead—even Odin. The shining city of Asgard was a blackened, smoking ruin; the rainbow bridge was gone. The giants sent forth their cold winds, howling with cruel glee. Loke’s evil heart was glad; the great serpent lashed the waters mountain high; and the earth-people perished in the flood. The Fenris-wolf stretched its great jaw from heaven to earth and shook the skies.

There was a strange hush! A great ball of fire had fallen upon the battle field. There was a sudden rush of air! A great wave of heat spread out across all space! A burst of thunder! A crackling as

of fire! Then one hiss, and the whole earth was one great scorching blaze.

One second—a fierce red tongue of flame had shot up the trunk of Ygdrasil, and it fell, a mass of blackened ashes. The sea hissed and steamed. The earth melted. The Frost giants, Loke, the serpent, the Fenris-wolf, all, all were wrapped in flame. A second more, and there was no living thing in all the earth. For Ragnarok, the Reign of Fire, had come; and with it came an end to Life—and end alike to gods and giants; an end to all creatures of the land and sea; an end even to the great earth itself.

Sources:

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