

Balder

(Time – 8:28)

[A story told by the Viking people of Scandinavia]

Balder, they believed, was a son of Odin, the Old Father, King of the gods. His mother was a goddess called Frigg. Balder was the most beautiful of all the gods. Wherever he went he filled the space about himself with a clear golden light, like the dawn of a Spring morning but more beautiful still. And then he began to have dreams – terrible dreams, dreams that filled him with dread. He would wake in the night with a cold sweat on his forehead and a pounding in his heart. At first he took no notice but night after night the dreams returned and so he went to his father Odin and asked him if the dreams carried any meaning.

‘I don’t know, my son, but I will find out.’ Odin leapt onto the back of his great eight-legged horse Sleipnir and galloped down from Asgard, the kingdom of the gods, down through the nine worlds until he reached the land of the dead.

Balder’s mother Frigg had heard the conversation between father and son. ‘Sweet Balder, I will make sure that you come to no harm.’ She summoned her servants and she told them to ride across all nine worlds. She told them to order all of creation to make a solemn promise not to harm Balder. And so the messengers rode forth and everything made the promise – men, dwarves, giants, plants, animals, fishes, birds, insects, weapons, rocks, metals, diseases, earth, water, fire. There was nothing that did not promise, except a little mistletoe plant, growing high above the branches of an apple tree. It had seemed so tiny, so weak, so close to death that the messengers had taken pity on it and left it in peace. When the servants returned, the word spread amongst the gods and the goddesses and it became a great sport for them to gather and hurl things at Balder and marvel at how he was left unscratched. Spears, arrows, stones would glance away from him without grazing his skin.

It was while they were gathered, hurling and marvelling, that Odin returned from his great journey. He jumped from his horse’s back and stood before Balder: ‘Stop! In the palace of the dead a room has been prepared for Balder. At the table of the dead a place has been set for my son Balder.’ But when he heard of the solemn promises that had been made, and when he saw the sport, he too became convinced that his son was safe from all harm.

But the story of Balder had reached the ears of Loki, the trickster. He disguised himself as an old woman and paid a visit to Balder’s mother. ‘Frigg, I’ve been hearing wonders about your son. Is it true that nothing in the world will harm Balder?’

‘It is true. All creation has promised.’

‘Nothing at all?’

‘Well, there was a little mistletoe plant that did not make the promise. But by now it is almost certainly dead.’

The old woman hobbled away, but as soon as he was out of sight Loki flung away his disguise and he searched all nine worlds until he found the mistletoe. And there was life in it still. He nursed it and tended it and rubbed magic potions into its bark. Soon it was growing strong. He cut it with his knife and fashioned an arrow from it. Then he made his way to Asgard, the palaces of the gods. All the gods, even Odin, were joining in the sport. Balder was standing with his back to a wall and not one of the weapons they attacked him with would touch him. All the gods were joining in except for one. Balder had a twin brother called Hoder and he was blind. He stood apart, jealous of their view into a world that he could only hear and smell and touch.

Loki approached Hoder. ‘Why are you not joining in?’

‘Loki, you know why not. I cannot see Balder to throw things at him, nor watch and marvel at how stones and arrows leave him unharmed.’

‘Hoder, listen: I’ll help you loose an arrow and I’ll tell you what happens and it’ll be as though you have two eyes in your own head.’

Hoder took the bow that Loki offered him. He took the arrow that Loki placed between his fingers.

‘Now: draw back the bowstring. Let it fly!’

The mistletoe arrow flew through the air and struck Balder in the heart. With a groan he fell to the ground. ‘Tell me what happened Loki – what did it look like?’

‘It looks as though you’ve killed your own brother.’ Loki melted into the shadows and the gods ran forwards. There was no breath, no pulse. Balder was dead.

Frigg buried her head in her hands. ‘Balder cannot be dead. What will the world be without his bright beauty? We must bring him back.’

Once again Odin leapt onto his horse’s back and rode through the nine worlds to the world of the dead. He crossed a river of blood, a river of tears, an orchard sweet with the sickly stench of decay. At last he came to the high hall of Hell, the queen of the dead. Behind her throne he could see the pale face of Balder, staring from the shadows. He dismounted and bowed.

‘Balder must be returned to the land of the living.’

Hell shook her head. ‘Balder is dead. The dead stay here with me.’

‘The whole world weeps for Balder. Give him back.’

The Queen of the dead smiled. ‘Balder is dead. But if what you said was the truth, if the whole world, if all of creation were truly to weep for Balder *then* I would return him, for that would be music to my ears.’

Odin galloped back to Asgard and told all what he had seen and heard and once again Frigg summoned her servants and ordered them to ride through all of the worlds and this time to tell the whole of creation to weep for Balder.

And so it was the all nine worlds wept; all men, dwarves, giants, plants, animals, fishes, birds, insects, weapons, rocks, metals. You’ve seen how metals weep when they’re brought from the cold into the warmth? So it was they wept for Balder. All diseases, earth, water, fire, everything wept. But when the servants were returning to Asgard, weeping themselves and with all creation weeping around them, they encountered an old woman and her eyes were dry as bones.

‘Old woman, you too must weep for Balder.’

‘Balder is dead. The Queen of the shadows can keep her prey. For Balder I weep dry tears.’ From the old woman’s mouth came the voice of Loki.

‘Loki, you can undo your evil deed with your tears.’

‘For Balder I weep dry tears.’ And no word would persuade Loki to shed one single tear for Balder. And so Balder stayed in the shadow land, the land of the dead, and with the death of Balder a beautiful golden light was extinguished from the world, a light that would never be seen again.