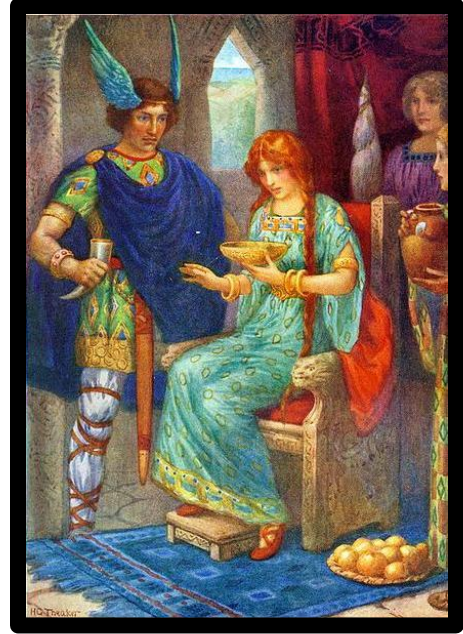


THE WOOING OF GERDA

Frey, the golden god of agriculture and fertility, had plenty to keep him busy during the spring and summertime: watching over the sowing, growing, and harvesting of crops. But when grim wintertime came on, Frey found himself idle day in and day out. On one of the days of this long, dull season, Frey found himself wandering in the hall of Odin. There he noticed that the Lord of the Gods' throne, Hlidskjalf, sat empty. From that throne a god could see into any of the Nine Worlds, yet no god dared to sit there except Odin himself. But when a person has nothing to do, it is easy to do wrong. Frey wandered about a little longer and then boldly mounted the steps and sat down on the might throne.



From that sea what wonders he saw! There lay Asgard beautiful in the morning light. There was the world with its steep mountains and tossing seas. And there was Jotunheim, the home of the giants, gloomy and forbidding—great black cliffs standing along the coast like grim sentinels. Here the giants, the enemies of the gods lived, hating the sunshine and the summer and always plotting to bring back winter and barrenness to the earth.

As Frey looked into Jotunheim, he saw a massive house standing alone amid the hills. Dark shadows lay across the gloomy landscape, cold winds swept over the stony valleys, and not one bright or beautiful thing was visible in all the country around. In a moment, however, a figure moved out of the shadows, and a maiden walked slowly to the desolate house, mounted the steps, paused a moment at the door, and then raised her arms to loosen the latch. Straightway a wonderful warmth and light stole over the hills. The earth and air were flooded with her loveliness. When she opened the door and closed it behind her, the shadows deepened among the hills, and Frey's heart was lost among the rocks of Jotunheim. He had been punished for sitting in the seat of Odin.

For days Frey neither ate, slept, nor spoke. He wandered about, silent and gloomy as a cloud, and no one dared ask him why he was so sorrowful. Freya, Frey's sister, saw her brother's sadness and summoned one of his servants, Skirner, to find the cause of all this sadness. Skirner was wily and mischievous and somewhat irresponsible, but Freya needed to know the cause of her brother's gloominess. So she entrusted Skirner with the task of getting to the root of the mystery. Skirner came upon Frey walking about with folded arms and eyes cast gloomily upon the ground.

"Why do you stay here all day alone?" Skirner asked. "Where are the light and joy that have always been yours?"

"The sun shines every day, but not for me," answered Frey.

"You are my master, and your happiness is my happiness. Tell me your sorrow."

And Frey told him how he climbed into the seat of Odin and looked upon Jotunheim and had seen the beautiful giant-maiden like a sunbeam among shadows. Frey said he could never be happy again until he had won her for himself.

"If that is all, it is easily managed," said Skirner flippantly when he had heard the story. "Give me your swiftest horse that can ride through fire and flame, and I will go to Jotunheim for you."

Frey said, "Would you really?"

"Of course," said Skirner without concern. "But I will also require the use of your magic sword."

"But my sword is the greatest sword in the world," Frey protested. "It is what I use to keep the enemies of the gods at bay."

"I know, master, but I must have something in return for risking my life in Jotunheim. I'll use it to keep myself safe."

"What would *you* do with such a treasure," Frey asked. "You would lose it or trade it in some worthless manner."

"But it would be mine to do with whatever I wished. That would be the deal."

"I love the maiden that I saw from afar, but I cannot give up my magic sword," said Frey thoughtfully. "I will need it on the day of Ragnarok to fight alongside the Æsir."

"Then I guess you will just be alone until then, master."

But Frey's aching heart would give him no rest. He knew he could not go to Jotunheim himself, or it would mean war. So finally he gave into Skirner's request.

Frey presented Skirner with his horse and his sword. The servant was soon mounted and riding like the wind on his dreary journey. All night the hard hooves rang out on the stony way, scattering showers of sparks at every step. Faster and faster, the daring rider drove the faithful horse until his flight was like the flash and roar of the thunderbolt.

"Rush on, brave horse!" shouted Skirner.

At last the long journey was over, and the gloomy house was reached. It was the home of the frost-giant Gymer, and the beautiful maiden who stood at the door when Frey was on Odin's throne was Gerda, the giant's daughter. Fierce dogs were chained about the gate and rushed savagely upon Skirner, barking furiously as if they would tear him limb from limb. Skirner's voice rang clear and strong above the howling of the dogs, and Gerda in her chamber heard the brave words.

"What noise is that?" she called to her maidens. "The very earth shakes and the foundations tremble."

One of the maidens looked out and saw Skirner.

"A warrior stands outside the wall," she answered.

"Bid him enter at once!" said Gerda.

Skirner needed no second invitation, and, quickly springing to the ground, walked through the stony halls and stood before the beautiful Gerda. She looked keenly at him for a moment and knew from his brightness and beauty that he was from Asgard.

"Are you a god or an elf?" she asked. "Why have you come through night and flame to visit Gymer's halls?"

"I am neither elf nor god," said Skirner. "And yet I have come to your home through night and flame. Frey, handsome among the gods, has seen your beauty and can never be happy again until he has won you for himself. I bring you eleven beautiful apples if you will go back with me."

"I will not go," was Gerda's quick answer.

"Then," said Skirner casting aside his gentleness, "look at this flashing sword! If you will not return I will strike your fair head from your body."

Gerda drew herself up to her full height and answered with flashing eyes, "I will never be won by force." She was too cold to be won by gifts and too proud to be moved by threats.

Skirner's smiled slyly drew out a magic wand, waved it over her, and chanted an awful mystic curse. There was breathless silence in the room while Skirner breathed over her the direful incantation: "If you refuse, may you sit in everlasting darkness on some dreary mountain top. May terrors crowd round you in awful shapes and tears never cease to fall from your eyes. Hated of gods and men, may you pass your life in solitude and desolation!"

Skirner stopped, and an awful stillness followed. Gerda, trembling under the terrible curse, stood quivering with bowed head and clasped hands. Her pride could not yield, but something told her that to live with a god was better than to stay in the home of a frost-giant. A gentle warmth seemed to steal through and melt her icy coldness. She raised her face, and it was so softened that they hardly knew her.

"I hear your request," Gerda said, "but I did not think that I should ever love a god."

When Skirner pressed her to go back with him, she promised to meet Frey nine days hence and become his bride. Skirner was soon mounted and riding homeward as fast as his horse could carry him. He was so happy in the thought of Frey's happiness that the distance seemed short, and as he drew near he saw Frey standing before his father's halls, looking anxiously for his coming.

"She is yours!" he shouted, urging his horse into swifter flight.

"When?" said Frey eagerly.

"Nine days hence, in the groves of Bar-isle," joyfully replied Skirner, who expected to be loaded with thanks.

Frey, however, was so eager that he forgot what night and flame his servant had ridden through for love of him. "Nine days? How can I wait that long?"

Finally, the ninth day came. Never sun shone so brightly or south wind blew so musically as on the morning when at Bar-isle, under the branches of the great trees, Frey found the beautiful Gerda waiting for his coming, far lovelier than when she stood before her father's door. And the whole earth was happy in them, for while they stood with clasped hands the skies grew soft, the trees put on a tender green, the flowers blossomed along the mountain side, the ripening grain swayed in the fields, and summer lay warm and fragrant over the land.

Frey had found love, but no one could forget the sword that he had sacrificed to gain it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Is Frey foolish to sacrifice his sword for love? Is he romantic or irresponsible? Explain.
2. How is Skirner characterized? Is he a friend or an enemy to the gods? Explain.