

have roused a special malignity in him. There was a sort of pre-sentiment that the great ornament of Asgard was too good to be let live, and his mother set about getting everything in nature separately exorcised and pledged not to be the instrument of Balder's death.* This was supposed to have been so completely effected, that it was one of the amusements of Asgard to make a target of Balder, and pitch all sorts of deadly weapons against him, to see how they would recoil. Loki, by a diligent search, found a twig that had not been exorcised, owing to its insignificance. To aggravate his offence, he handed it to the brother of Balder, who threw it at him, and so slew him.

Loki confined his tricks to the gods. There were other powers to work evil upon mankind. Chief of these was the Neck, whence comes our Old Nick, and perhaps the Nick Niven, who is a chief among the Scots witches, holding something like the place that Shakespeare gives to Hecate. Among the most seafaring people in the world, the great bulk of calamities come of shipwreck and other disasters by water; and Neck's operations came to be almost entirely limited to that element. In later times he was in the northern nations a mischievous imp of the stream, like the water-kelpie in Scotland.

The Nornir—or Fates, as they are called, to make their nature intelligible—are not properly malignant beings. They are so associated, however, with scenes of slaughter, that naturally enough, they are spoken of with a shudder. They are choosers of the slain, and it is the function of the youngest, Skuld, who deals with the future (the eldest, Urd, having charge of the past, as the second, Verdandi, has of the present), to watch over battle-fields and send off the illustrious dead to Valhalla. This is a holy function, yet, as a right of choice or promotion, has not been exercised without the suspicion of partiality that accompanies such powers; and somehow the function of choosing the slain becomes mixed up with the power of arranging who are to be slain and who to be spared.

* "Of all the Gods," Balder, "the fair, the just, the good, is the most attractive, and the most likely to pass over into the counterpart of Christ." "In fact, in the early middle age things called after this son of Woden were re-named usually after Christ or St. John. And this silent melting of the mythical Balder into the historical Christ took place all over the north. The oldest Scandinavian poems offer many instances."—Stephens, *The Old Northern Runic Monuments*, 431.