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GOLDEN THREADS
FROM
AN ANCIENT LOOM

Das Nibelungenlied

ILLUSTRATED BY

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DEATH OF SIEGFRIED.

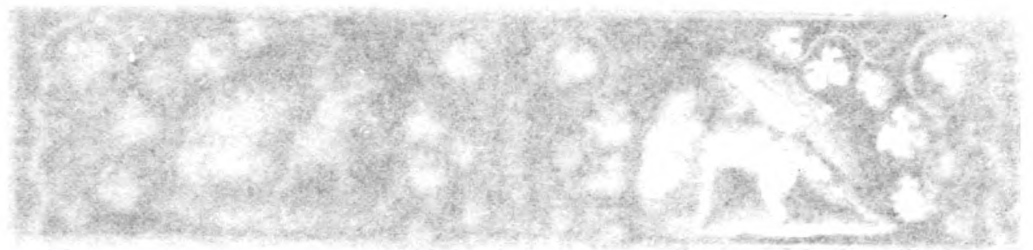
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GOLDEN THREADS
FROM AN ANCIENT LOOM.

Das Nibelungenlied,

ADAPTED TO THE USE OF YOUNG READERS.

BY

LYDIA HANDS.

WITH FOURTEEN WOOD ENGRAVINGS,

BY JULIUS SCHNORR, OF CARLSFELD.



GRIFFITH AND FARRAN,
SUCCESSORS TO NEWBERY AND HARRIS,
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Dedicated


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TO

THOMAS CARLYLE, ESQ.



P R E F A C E.

HE following pages are an attempt to bring the main features of the Nibelungen Lay before the notice of the younger portion of the British public.

A story so popular amongst our Teutonic cousins, ought not to be altogether unfamiliar to the youth on this side the German Ocean.

This poem, which the Germans regard as their national epic, first appeared in the twelfth century. The name of the author is unknown, although Schlegel incorrectly attributes it to Heinrich of Ofterdingen, who, however, has as little claim to the honour as Kürnberger, to whom it was subsequently ascribed, both men being, indeed, simply the collectors and arrangers of what must have been written at a much earlier date.

It has always been a labour of love amongst German writers to spend some pains in setting forth the beauties of this treasury of mediæval poetry.

I have to acknowledge my own debt of gratitude to Mr.

Carlyle, whose beautiful essay first drew my attention to the poem ; and also to the late Professor Karl Simrock, whose edition of it in modernized German enabled me to study it in the original.

I must ask the indulgence of critics for occasional departures from the strict letter of the text ; in its abridged prose form it seemed absolutely necessary to give some supplementary matter as connecting links in the chain of events.

My object has simply been to collect some of the golden threads of beauty that lay scattered through the poem, and to braid them together in such a form as might be acceptable to the dear young friends for whom the story was written.

June 4th, 1879.



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GOLDEN THREADS

FROM AN ANCIENT LOOM.

CHAPTER I.

CRIEMHILD'S DREAM.

“The heart is a garden and youth is its Spring, and Hope is its sunshine, and Love is a thorny plant, that springs up, and bears one bright blossom that has nothing like it in all the world.”



THE Lay of the Nibelungen princes! What is it?

A strange, wild story, full of weird beauty and god-like heroism, like the gleams of light in a Salvator landscape, with a background of storm and darkness.

The old, old story of woman's passionate love, and impulsive forgetfulness of consequences; of man's protecting tenderness and chivalrous daring; but true knight and queenly woman alike falling victims to the bad man, with the indomitable will, who comes before us as a grotesque mockery of humanity, endowed with all subtlety of intellect, but having a fossilized heart.

A very mocking devil, wearing indeed the outward semblance of a man, but destitute of the divine gift of pity.

But let us look at the story and find out its meaning for ourselves.

Far, far back in the olden times, in the famous city of Worms, in the kingdom of Burgundy, there lived a maiden, named Criemhild. She was sister to Gunther, the king of the country, who with his two brothers, Gernot and Geiselher, all three stalwart knights, watched tenderly over their beautiful and fatherless sister.

Fair, very fair, was the maiden, none in all the land so beautiful as she.

Many a noble knight sighed for her love, but she cared for none of them, and laughed a sweet laugh of merry scorn, when they sought to woo her.

Once Criemhild had a strange dream. She thought herself within the walls of the beautiful rose garden that surrounded the palace.

A favorite falcon hovered near her; it was a bird she loved very dearly, for she had tamed it, and fed it day by day with her own fair hands. Now, as she looked upon her favorite, behold! two eagles, from their eyrie in the neighbouring mountains, pounced upon it, and in spite of Criemhild's tears and complaints, tore it in pieces before her eyes.

With a startled cry she woke from her slumber.

A sense of sorrow was at her heart such as she had never known before, and with a strange foreboding of coming evil, she went to her mother to ask what it might portend.

Then Ute, the Queen-mother told her that by the falcon was meant a noble husband, to whom before long she would be wedded, but whose life would be taken by cruel foes, unless protected by God's especial grace.

"Ah, sweet mother," said Criemhild, "why speak to me of a husband! A maid will I live, and a maid will I die. Love has pains, love has griefs, and I will have none of them."

"Speak not so rashly, dear child," said her mother, "for if thou would'st know real joy of heart, learn that it can come to thee only through a true man's love."


"Not so, mother mine," answered the maiden; "many an old tale have I heard, but the burden was always the same, much love must be paid for with much sorrow, and so yet again I say that I will be free."


And the wise Queen-mother held her peace, and calmly smiled on her child, for she knew that such vows are like words written upon the sand, and that when the appointed time came, Criemhild's fair fingers would pluck the glowing blossom of Love's fair flower, even though the cruel thorns pierced and tore the tender flesh.




CHAPTER II.

THE HERO SIEGFRIED, AND HIS FIGHT WITH THE DRAGON.

——
“A heart unspotted is not easily daunted.”—HENRY VI. 2, iii., i.—*Shakespeare*.

——

OW it happened, some twenty years before Criemhild's dream, that there reigned in the country of the Netherlands a good king named Siegmund, with his wife Siegelinde.

They had one only child, a boy named Siegfried, but he was such a beauty that he was worth seven common children.

For a long time things went well with the king, but at last misfortune came in the shape of a long and cruel war, and Siegmund's great dread was lest the doughty king who was his enemy should do as he had threatened, and seize the young heir of the kingdom as a hostage.

As for the poor queen, she was almost distracted at the thought of her bonny wee baby falling into the hands of their cruel foe; so she and her husband took counsel together, and resolved to send their trusty chamberlain Fridolin with the child to a distant part of the country, where dwelt a man named Mimer, a blacksmith by trade, that so the little one might be brought up with him as his son, and in that low estate might escape all suspicion of being the heir of King Siegmund, till

such time as it would be safe for his parents to have him again at their own court.

But the war proved a long and tedious one, lasting through many years, and many weary days and nights did the poor queen-mother spend, weeping for her princely boy, thus growing up separated from his royal parents, unconscious of his high destiny, and knowing nothing of the deep tenderness and yearning love that was welling up for him in the royal halls of Santen.

And so the boy lived with Mimer as his son, and he became hardy and strong, expert at all games, running, wrestling, throwing the quoit, and such like feats of strength.

Furthermore, he was of a noble stature and goodly countenance. Skilful, too, was he in the business of a smith.

None like Siegfried could sharpen a coultter, or wield such blows upon the anvil. In truth, by the time he was eighteen, he had far outstripped his master Mimer in the blacksmith's art.

Now Mimer was not the true man that Siegmund and his wife had supposed him to be when they entrusted their child to his care. The large treasure that Fridolin had brought as payment for bringing up the king's son, had long ere this been wasted in riotous living, and Mimer reckoned that as the war still continued, he might perhaps never receive a second; so he began to think it might be as well to get rid of the stalwart youth who had become more than a match for him.

Yet he feared to tell Siegfried what was working in his mind, but being a mean villain he plotted secretly for his destruction.

Now it happened that at certain times in the year, the neighbouring forest was infested by a terrible dragon, and dreadful was the fate of any luckless wight whom accident or want of caution led across the monster's path.

Now here was the very opportunity for Mimer to get rid of his unwelcome guest. But as the wicked generally cloak their malicious designs beneath soft words, so did he; and Siegfried who, in the uprightness and honesty of his young heart, doubted no man till he had proved him false, would as soon have distrusted his own integrity as that of Mimer.

But a day came when the boy found that he whom he had looked upon as a friend was a cruel foe; he, on whose fidelity he would have staked his soul, was an arrant traitor, unworthy to breathe the breath of life.

And thus it fell out. There had been a heavy day of work in the smithy, and the furnace needed fresh fuel.

Then Mimer cried to Siegfried, "Go, my lad, into the forest, and bring us charcoal from thence."

And Siegfried, ever anxious to do his master's will, went forth readily and with light heart to do his errand.

But he had only gone a few steps in the forest when a strange thing happened to him.

It seemed as if he were stepping into a mist, soft and balmy

as the breath of a summer's eve, and a voice, melodious as the whisper of an *Æolian* harp, sounded in his ears :

“ Siegfried be strong, quit thyself like a man ; endure to the end, and honour and glory shall be thine.”

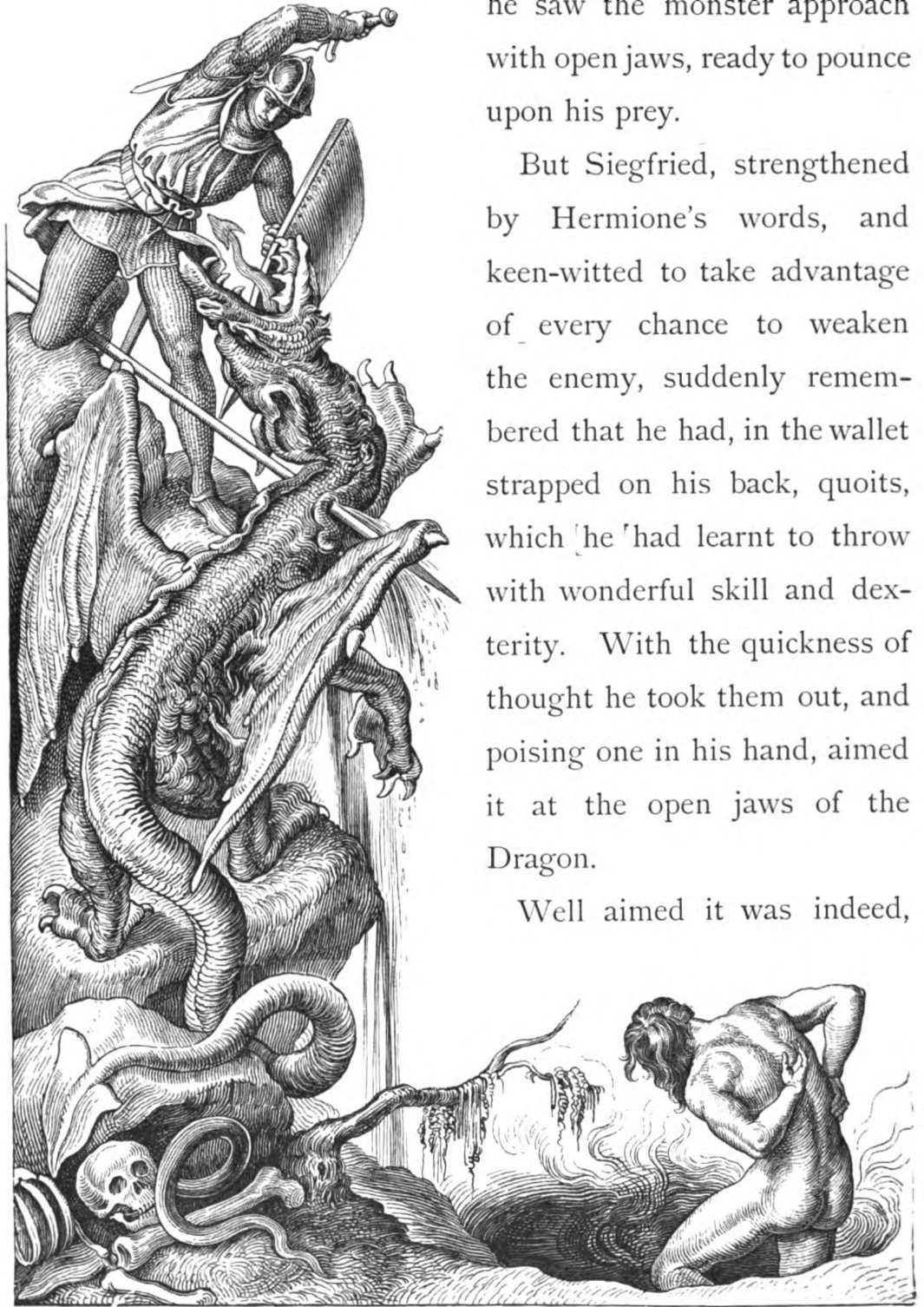
Then the mist seemed to clear away, and a woman, beautiful as the Sun, calm as the Moon, stood before him, and while Siegfried trembled for awe at the lovely apparition, she breathed upon him, and immediately a calm, divine and god-like, seemed to penetrate into his veins, and he stood in the dignity of firm and noble manhood to listen to her words.

Then she told him that she was *Hermione*, one of those beneficent genii who delight to watch over the children of men, helping them to exploits of high daring or heroic self-sacrifice.

She told him, moreover, of the malevolence of *Mimer*, how he had laid a plan to betray him into the jaws of the Dragon ; but she bade him go onward to meet the monster, nothing fearing, for that in the end he should prove victorious.

As *Hermione* uttered the last words, a soft, silvery vapour overspread her fair features, and the mist deepened, and deepened around her, till at last it caught the crimson glory of the setting sun, when it floated upwards, and was lost to Siegfried's view, merged in the all-glorious radiance of the sunset-heaven.

For awhile Siegfried stood overwhelmed with surprise at what he had seen and heard ; but suddenly a roar, deep and terrible, sounded in his ears, and through a glade in the forest



he saw the monster approach with open jaws, ready to pounce upon his prey.

But Siegfried, strengthened by Hermione's words, and keen-witted to take advantage of every chance to weaken the enemy, suddenly remembered that he had, in the wallet strapped on his back, quoits, which he had learnt to throw with wonderful skill and dexterity. With the quickness of thought he took them out, and poising one in his hand, aimed it at the open jaws of the Dragon.

Well aimed it was indeed,

SIEGFRIED'S COMBAT WITH THE DRAGON.

for with a roar of agony the monster sank with its huge carcass to the earth.

A second and a third brazen circlet whizzed through the air, piercing the tough hide in the under part of the breast, which Siegfried knew was the monster's most vulnerable part.

With a yell, that seemed like the crack of doom, the Dragon rolled on its side, the glassy film of Death gathered over the closing eye, and Siegfried's first great achievement was won, and the land was free of the terror that had so long desolated it.

Then Siegfried lay down to rest, and soon he slept a calm, untroubled sleep; yet ere the morning dawned he had a dream of strange import.

Hermione again seemed to stand before him, bidding him, so soon as he awoke, kindle a great fire, and set thereon a huge caldron, which he would find in a glade of the forest, where a beech and mountain ash intermingled their branches. This caldron he was to fill with water from the neighbouring spring, and then to seethe therein the cut-up portions of the Dragon's carcass; after which he was carefully to bury them in the bowels of the earth, and then he himself was to bathe in this Dragon's broth.

"Do this," said Hermione, "and no weapon shall hereafter have power to harm you."

When Siegfried woke, he hastened to obey the bidding of the beneficent spirit.

Everything he found as Hermione had announced to him;

and his ready ingenuity and youthful vigour brought all to a successful issue.

One flaw indeed there was, but it seemed so slight, that Siegfried troubled himself little about it.

As he bathed himself in the mighty caldron, a lime leaf, floating in the summer breeze, fell between his shoulder-blades, and, resting there, formed just one point of rosy flesh untouched by the seething liquid.

It was but a point, yet that little point was one that the lovers of Siegfried had to rue for many and many a long day.

In that one spot he was vulnerable as any common man.

But Siegfried, young and joyous, saw only a bright and gladsome future; but first he must go back to the smithy, and upbraid Mimer for his falsity.

He meant not to do more than this, for he could not forget that he had once regarded Mimer as a father.

But even Siegfried's forbearance came to an end, when he found that Mimer, on the first night of his return, had sought to drug him with a poison-draught, and so rid himself of a rival whom he feared.

Then the just vengeance of Siegfried broke forth; seizing a bar of iron that lay in the smithy, he rushed upon his cowardly foe, and with one blow cleft his head asunder.



CHAPTER III.

THE NIBELUNGEN HOARD.

“Gold! gold! gold! gold!
Bright and yellow, hard and cold,
Price of many a crime untold;
Gold! gold! gold! gold:
Good or bad a thousand-fold!”

THOMAS HOOD.



WHEN Siegfried went out into the world, ready for any adventure, either of love or war.

On he wandered, and fate led him to Isenland, where reigned a famous queen, named Brunhild.

Very fair was this queen to look upon, and Siegfried's heart at first inclined towards her in love, but full soon he found that though the casket was fair, the jewel within was not worth the having; so he left Isenland and its proud queen, vowing that she should be no wife to him.

Then he wandered on to the banks of the flowing Rhine, to Nibelungenland, and there another adventure befell him, for as he rode along on his good horse, Gana, which he had won in

Isenland, he passed by a mountain side, where he saw two youths, sons of King Nibelung, who had lately died, leaving behind him a hoard of priceless treasures.

Now this hoard had been hidden in a cave of the mountain, and the two sons, as Siegfried passed by, were in great perplexity as to the division of it.

Now besides gold beyond reckoning, there were jewels in this hoard so numberless, that twelve waggons in four days and nights, each going three journeys, could not carry them away; nay, however much was taken from it, it suffered no diminution.

Besides all this, there was a sword, Balmung, of great potency, a divining-rod, which gave the owner of it power over every one; also a cloak of darkness, or *Tarn-kappe*, which not only rendered the wearer invisible, but gave him likewise the strength of twelve men.

Now the two sons of King Nibelung sat and took counsel with their twelve giants (who in spite of their large bodies had very little brains) as to the division of the hoard; but not being able to come to any amicable decision, and seeing Siegfried ride by so opportunely, they requested him to be arbiter, offering him the sword Balmung for his trouble.

Siegfried did his best to content them, but without effect; nay, he came into difficulty himself, for the two princes being of passionate dispositions, at last got into a rage with him, whereupon he, provoked, fell upon them, and with the sword Balmung slew them, as well as their twelve giants.

Thus did the whole hoard come into the hands of Siegfried, for having slain the two princes and their champions, what was there to oppose him ?

True it was that the dwarf, Alberich, who was special keeper of the hoard, made some attempt at resistance with a dwarf army which he had under him.

He and his pigmy crew were ignominiously driven back into the cave, plundered of the *Tarn-kappe*, and of the divining-rod, and from that hour Siegfried was triumphant.

Alberich and all his myrmidons were obliged to swear fealty to the conqueror.

Then Siegfried, leaving Alberich to be guardian of the hoard, and taking with him the *Tarn-kappe*, the divining-rod, and the sword Balmung, once more mounted his good steed, Gana, and rode away to the Netherlands, and he got there at a happy time, for the war which had been raging for so many years had come to an end, the usurping king had been killed in battle, and the whole nation was rejoicing at having their good Siegmund and Siegelinde restored to the throne.

And a still deeper joy came to the father's and the mother's heart, for Siegfried, their son, was restored to them, and their age would be gladdened with the young vigorous life that he would bring around them.

So there was feasting, and jousting, and minstrelsy for many a day at the court of Santen ; and Siegmund would fain have resigned his crown to his well-beloved son.

But Siegfried had other thoughts kindling within his heart, gentle murmurs of love, like the first soft tremblings of harp-strings, or like the first flutterings of young birds in their nest, were urging him to some fresh deed of renown ; for he would fain win a fair maiden for his bride, and bring her home to have his father's and mother's blessing, and share with him their love.

Now she to whom Siegfried's thoughts had flown was the right noble maiden, Criemhild of Worms, and thither must he go, to see if report had spoken truly in praising her for her wondrous beauty.

Now Siegmund and Siegelinde would fain have had their son tarry at home, for there were fair maidens in the Netherlands who would gladly have mated with him ; and, besides, his parents feared for him the perils of the enterprise, for the pride of the Burgundian princes, Gunther and Gernot, and the fierce temper of her uncle, Hagen, were well known.

Siegfried, however, would not be dissuaded ; he must see and judge of Criemhild for himself.

So to Worms he went, refusing even his father's offer of an army, and taking with him only twelve knights.

And the good King Siegmund, and his wife, Siegelinde, wept sore as they parted from their son, for they feared lest mischief should happen to him, and their aged eyes should never again behold him.



CHAPTER IV.


CRIEMHILD AND BRUNHILD.

— — — — —
“ By Jupiter, an angel ! or if not,
An earthly paragon.”—CYMBELINE.

“ Her valiant courage and undaunted spirit
More than in woman commonly is seen.”

Shakespeare.—HENRY VI.

— — — — —

OR seven days did Siegfried and his little band of knights journey on. On the eighth day they came to the good city of Worms, and the people of the land rejoiced greatly when they saw what goodly persons Siegfried and his brave knights were.

And Gunther, the king, gave them a right hospitable reception.

So Siegfried remained at the Court, and became the king's chief intimate and friend ; yet, noble knight as he was, spake he never a word of Criemhild.

Day and night he thought of her, and longed to see the fair face which smiled upon him in his dreams ; but a whole

year passed away, and yet he had not been able to compass a meeting.

But fortune at last favoured him. Gunther, Criemhild's brother, had provoked the enmity of the two neighbouring kings of Hussia and Denmark, and the fair land of Burgundy seemed on the point of being desolated by a terrible war, which might, indeed, prove a long and dangerous one, for the forces of the enemy far outnumbered those of Gunther.

Then did Siegfried do good service to the State, for he rode forth to battle by the side of Gunther, carrying his sword Balmung in his hand; and what was there that was too difficult for him to achieve, with his own heroic heart to guide him, and the *Tarn-kappe* and the divining-rod as the vassals of his hand?

And so, with glory and great renown, he went back to Worms, for through his high daring the war was at an end, the Danish king had been captured, and the Saxon one so utterly discomfited that he was glad to make peace upon any terms that his conqueror might choose to appoint.

Great was the rejoicing in Worms as the townsmen hailed the gallant knight who had done so much for them and for their king, and Siegfried's heart beat high with a noble triumph as he felt that now, at last, he might cast the trophies of his glory at the feet of the ladye of his love.

And there was joy in store for him, for though he knew it not, yet, for many a month past, Criemhild, from her lattice, had been gazing on the gallant knight, who day by day had ridden

forth at her brother's side ; and her gentle, maidenly admiration for the handsome stranger ripened into a feeling still warmer and tenderer when she found that the brave knight, with his six feet of stature, the eagle eye, and clustering locks of nut-brown hair, was the one who had saved her brother's throne, and her native country from the iron yoke of a usurper.

And soon a high festival was appointed at Worms in honour of the victor.

Kings and princes were to be there, and Criemhild herself was to be queen and star of the bright assembly.

So that Whitsun morning remained for evermore a glorious memory to Siegfried.

Brave knights, five thousand or more, with their war-horses glittering in trappings of silver and gold, rode down to the lists ; but brighter far than they, Criemhild, in the glory of her beauteous maidenhood, led by her mother, Ute, and followed by a bevy of fair girls, only less beautiful than herself, advanced to the canopied daïs prepared for them.

Behind the fair dames went a body-guard of a hundred knights, all sword in hand.

Loud huzzas resounded on all sides, and whispers ran through the crowd that surely Siegfried the valiant and Criemhild the peerless were a prince and princess made for each other.

And then Gernot, her brother, bade Criemhild salute Siegfried with a maiden's kiss, for, but for him, she might even then have been a captive in a stranger's land.

And upon that Criemhild leant forward, and, with her cheek red with rosy blushes, saluted him with a timid, winning friendliness; and as her balmy breath for a moment lingered upon his brow, it seemed to him as if a new and nobler life had been born within him.

He bent his knee before her with graceful reverence, but she raised him with her soft, white hand, and motioned him to the seat of honour beside her mother and herself.

And then joust and sport went on right merrily, with the sound of sweetest minstrelsy, but there were responsive chords in the heart of this young knight and fair maiden that made a music sweeter far than lute or psaltery, or song of summer birds.

And so, from that bright May morning, the heart of the prince and the princess were knit together in a bond that nothing could ever again unloose, and the two walked one with the other in love's paradise, where the trees are always green and the blossoms seem as though they would never fall.

But by-and-bye news came to King Gunther of the exceeding great beauty of Brunhild, queen of far distant Isenland, and he was at once seized with a great longing to have her for his wife.

It was in vain that Siegfried warned Gunther that he had been to Isenland, and that Brunhild, although of rare beauty, was yet of too fiery a nature to bring peace and content to a husband's home.

Gunther was not to be dissuaded from the enterprise, even though he knew that Brunhild was endowed with more than the strength of any mortal woman, and had the strangest and most wayward habits.

There was peril, too, in becoming a suitor for her hand, for to all such there was this brief condition :

To compete with her in three separate games of hurling the spear, leaping, and throwing the stone ; if victorious, the prize was the hand of the conquered queen ; but if vanquished, the suitor was to lose his own head ; and this issue, as Siegfried told Gunther (such was the wondrous strength of Brunhild), had been the fate of many a brave knight.

But men in love seldom listen to reason.

Gunther had the whim upon him, and go he would.

His uncle Hagen, who was prudent, wary, and shrewd in counsel, advised him, if it must be so, to take Siegfried with him ; and to this the latter agreed, but upon one condition only, that, should Gunther by his means prove victorious over Brunhild, Criemhild should be given him to wife as soon as he returned to Worms.

Gunther willingly made the required promise, and Siegfried immediately undertook the whole management of the enterprise.

And first there was to be no great retinue marching to Isenland, only two knights, Hagen and Daukwart, should accompany the king and himself to Brunhild's court.

And so Criemhild, her heart beating with a mixed feeling of

hope and sorrow, bade farewell to her hero,—sorrow to lose, even for a brief space, him who had become the joy of her life, and yet exultant hope, for she knew that her lover would return victorious, and that henceforth their two lives would be linked in a holy and indissoluble union.

So the little band departed ; Siegfried, as may be supposed, carried his magic treasures with him.

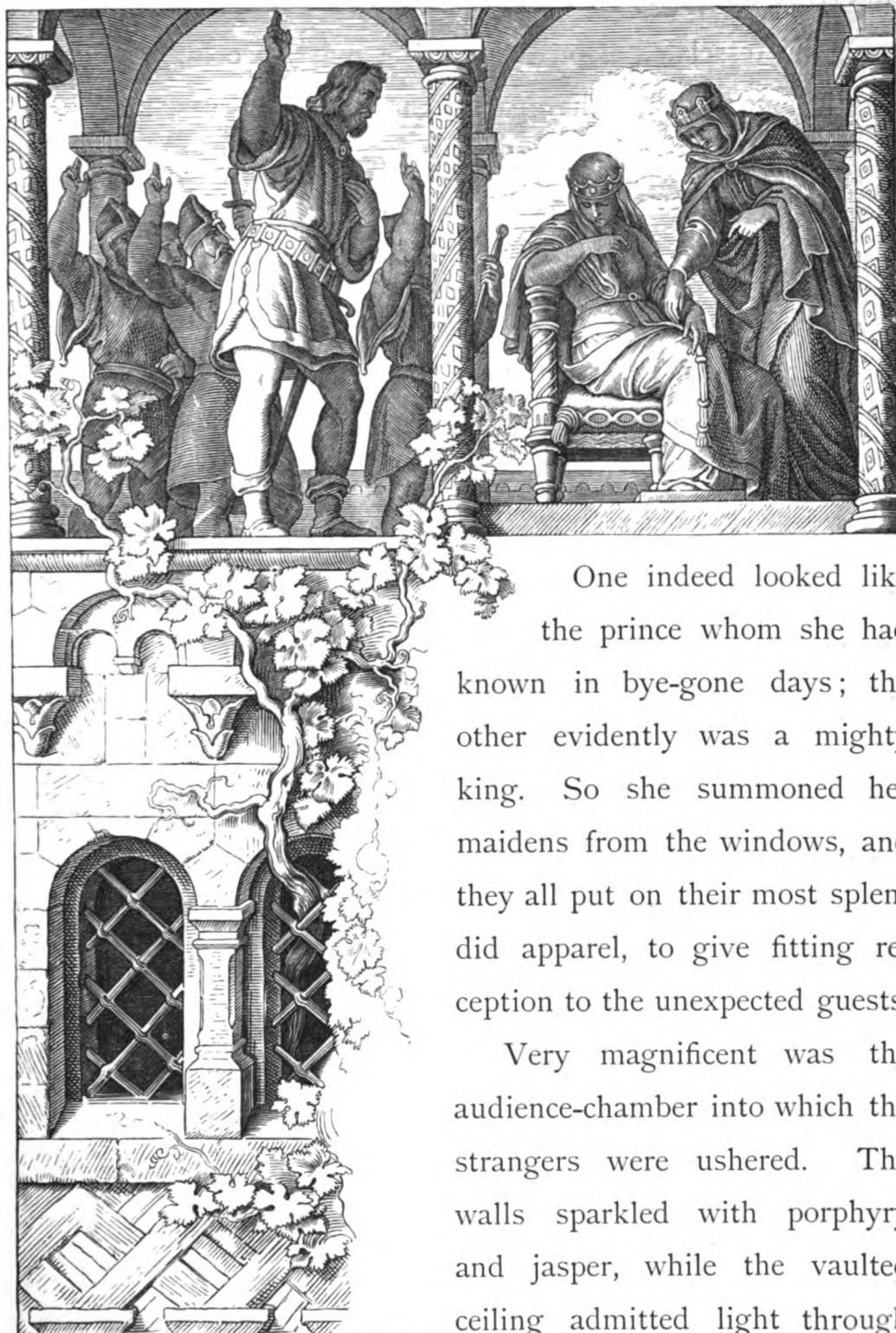
In twenty days the voyage to Isenland was accomplished, and the little bark which bore Siegfried and his companions across the Northern Sea, was safely brought to shore.

With light hearts the four men leapt upon the beach, and there right in front of them stood Brunhild's magnificent palace.

It was built of marble, green as grass, yet withal of a dazzling brilliancy, and from the windows of it, the princes could see fair women looking down upon them with curious eyes ; and one, in a snow-white robe, who seemed to Gunther the stateliest of them all, he heard from Siegfried was none other than Brunhild herself.

Now Siegfried, for reasons very clear to himself, had made an agreement with Gunther that, though a free prince and heir to the kingdom of the Netherlands, yet during the time of his stay in Isenland he should appear only as the vassal of the Burgundian monarch, and as such he held the stirrup for him as he mounted his horse on the beach to ride up to the palace gate.

Now Brunhild felt very curious to know who the strangers were.



One indeed looked like the prince whom she had known in bye-gone days; the other evidently was a mighty king. So she summoned her maidens from the windows, and they all put on their most splendid apparel, to give fitting reception to the unexpected guests.

Very magnificent was the audience-chamber into which the strangers were ushered. The walls sparkled with porphyry and jasper, while the vaulted ceiling admitted light through

cut crystals, that, diamond-like, sent a flood of rainbow-coloring upon the tessellated floor, from which massive columns of green marble ascended till they parted in graceful curves, and at last merged in the vaulted crystals of the roof.

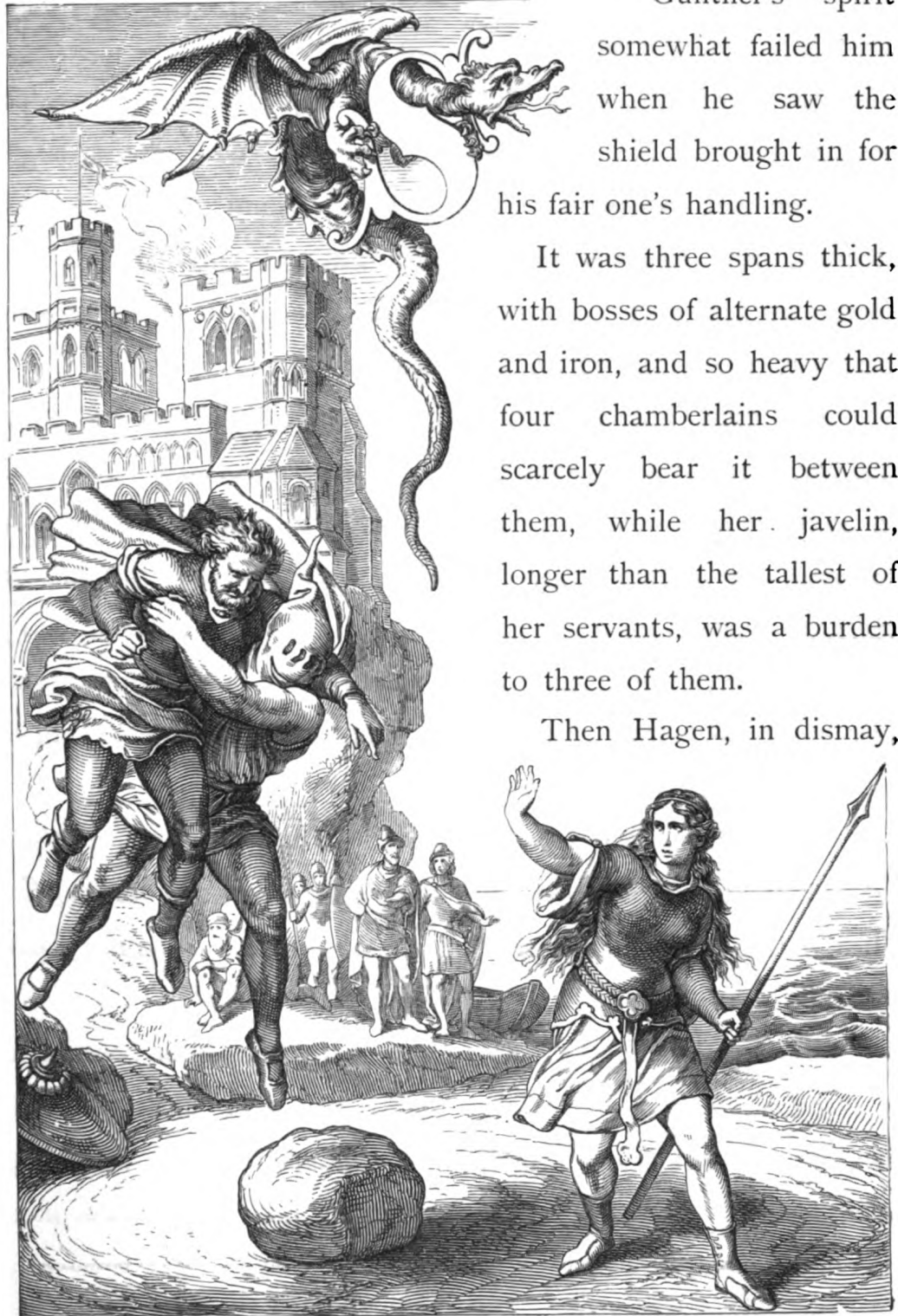
But Gunther had eyes only for Brunhild ; she, however, took but scant note of him. Her gaze turned with a sharp enquiring eagerness on Siegfried, as she demanded why he should appear a second time at her court, when he had found so little to please him on his first visit.

Then Siegfried, with polished courtesy, bent his knee before the Queen, and with the ready utterance of an eloquent tongue he told her how he was but the vassal and servant of his master, the renowned King Gunther of Worms, who had made that long and toilsome journey to sue for her fair hand, which, if she would bestow upon him, would make him the happiest of mortals.

Hagen also, with his crafty face, and keen, restless glance, echoed the words of Siegfried.

Then Brunhild, who was always prompt in her actions, at once repeated to Gunther the conditions of her acceptance : her hand, if he proved the victor in the before-mentioned combat, but the loss of his own head if the reverse.

Bowing low before her, love-sick Gunther accepted the challenge, and Brunhild, who looked on him with a glance that had in it a world of covert scorn, bade her attendants at once to clear the ground, while she went to equip herself for the conflict.



Gunther's spirit somewhat failed him when he saw the shield brought in for his fair one's handling.

It was three spans thick, with bosses of alternate gold and iron, and so heavy that four chamberlains could scarcely bear it between them, while her javelin, longer than the tallest of her servants, was a burden to three of them.

Then Hagen, in dismay,

BRUNHILD CONTENDING WITH GUNTHER.

called out that they were all undone, that Brunhild was the Devil's wife, and that there was no hope for them.

But Siegfried, who had put on his *Tarn-kappe*, which, besides making him invisible, endued him with the strength of twelve men, whispered to his royal friend to be of good comfort, only to obey him in all things; and so with his sword Balmung in his hand, he took his place by the side of Gunther, and prepared for the conflict.

And then, indeed, Brunhild performed prodigies of spear-hurling, leaping and stone pitching; but, nevertheless, Gunther in seeming was victorious in all, though in truth it was only in seeming, for it was really Siegfried, who, sheltered by his invisibility, gave such good aid to his friend, truly and effectually doing the work for him, while Gunther only acted the gestures; and so at last, with surprise and shame, Brunhild was obliged to own that she was fairly won.

But though thus won to consent to the marriage, she was yet full of strange caprices, and flatly refused to sail for Worms till she had assembled a fitting train of warriors to be her escort thither.

Now as Gunther had no retinue with him, this seemed as if Brunhild when so protected might still draw back from her promise; therefore the princes held counsel together, and Siegfried, with all prudence and promptitude, laid his plans to meet this new difficulty.

Putting on his *Tarn-kappe*, and taking the opportunity while

Brunhild and her maidens were wandering on the beach, he got into the bark that had been moored against the shore, and having loosed the cable, he seized the rudder, and steered away into the open sea.

To those on shore, it seemed as if a violent gust had caught the little vessel and drifted it out of port.

Meanwhile Siegfried sailed on, wind and waves all in his favour.

By the second day he had gained the Nibelungenland, and the mountain where the dwarf Alberich and his giant sentinels were keeping watch over the treasure.

These soon raised up, at Siegfried's command, thirty thousand Nibelungen knights, of whom he chose one thousand of the choicest and best, had them splendidly equipped, and put on board three fair galleys, each with two benches of oars. Everything on these galleys was rare and costly. The prows were of burnished gold, the oars silver; the masts were of cedar-wood, overlaid with pure gold, while aloft, floating on the breeze, banners of purple and gold glittered in the sunshine.

Thus prepared, Siegfried returned to Isenland, and it was given out that this gallant little fleet was Gunther's body-guard, which had been delayed by stress of weather from reaching the country at the same time as its royal master.

After this, Brunhild could find no pretext for any longer delay, so, with a goodly retinue of gallant knights and fair dames, she went on board, with Gunther in high triumph by her side.

In seven days, with fair winds and a prosperous voyage, they reached the Rhineland and the good city of Worms.

Then was there great joy throughout the whole land of Burgundy, for there was to be a high tide of joustings and tournaments, and great festivity at the double marriage of King Gunther with Brunhild, and Siegfried with Criemhild.

But in the midst of the general rejoicing there was one heart tuned to another key ; one face which, in spite of its beauty, was darkened with the shadow of some envious or revengeful passion.

Brunhild looked upon Siegfried with an evil eye. It might have been that she had some reason of her own for hating him ; but this she did not scruple to avow, that she thought it foul scorn that her bridegroom's sister should wed her brother's vassal, and that Gunther, landlord of the Rhine, was grievously to blame for allowing her thus to demean herself.

It was in vain that Gunther assured her that Siegfried was a true prince, and heir to the whole country of the Netherlands. She was full of spleen against him, and nothing could remove it.

But for this cloud, the bridal would have passed like a June day, without a single fleck on its blue sky.

But Siegfried and Criemhild were so happy in themselves that they heeded it not, nor remembered that a cloud no bigger than a man's hand is oftentimes the precursor of a tempest that roots up the giant oaks, and brings desolation and misery to many a homestead.

But the bridal day, with its feasting and minstrelsy, came to an end ; and on the following morning Siegfried, radiant with the joy of a happy bridegroom, was walking through the rose garden of the palace to cull a nosegay as an offering for his bride, when he met Gunther, wearing such a shame-faced, woe-begone aspect, that he was fain to stop and ask him what had befallen him that he looked so sad.

Then Gunther, with many a long-drawn sigh, told Siegfried that he verily believed he had, in full truth, as Hagen had said, brought home as his bride the very Devil's wife ; for surely no mortal woman could have acted as Brunhild had.

Then Gunther went on to relate how that yesternight, when the guests had left the bridal pair alone, Brunhild had taunted and mocked him beyond all endurance, and then forced him to a wrestling-match with her, in which she proved herself to be the most athletic and untameable of women, for she had overcome him wholly and entirely ; nay, as crown and finish to the indignity, she had bound him fast, hand and foot, with her girdle, and hung him up on one of the tenter-hooks of her tapestried chamber ; nor would she release him from this vile durance till he had promised to act at all times according to her will, and this he had done, lest by refusal he should become henceforth the laughing-stock of all men.

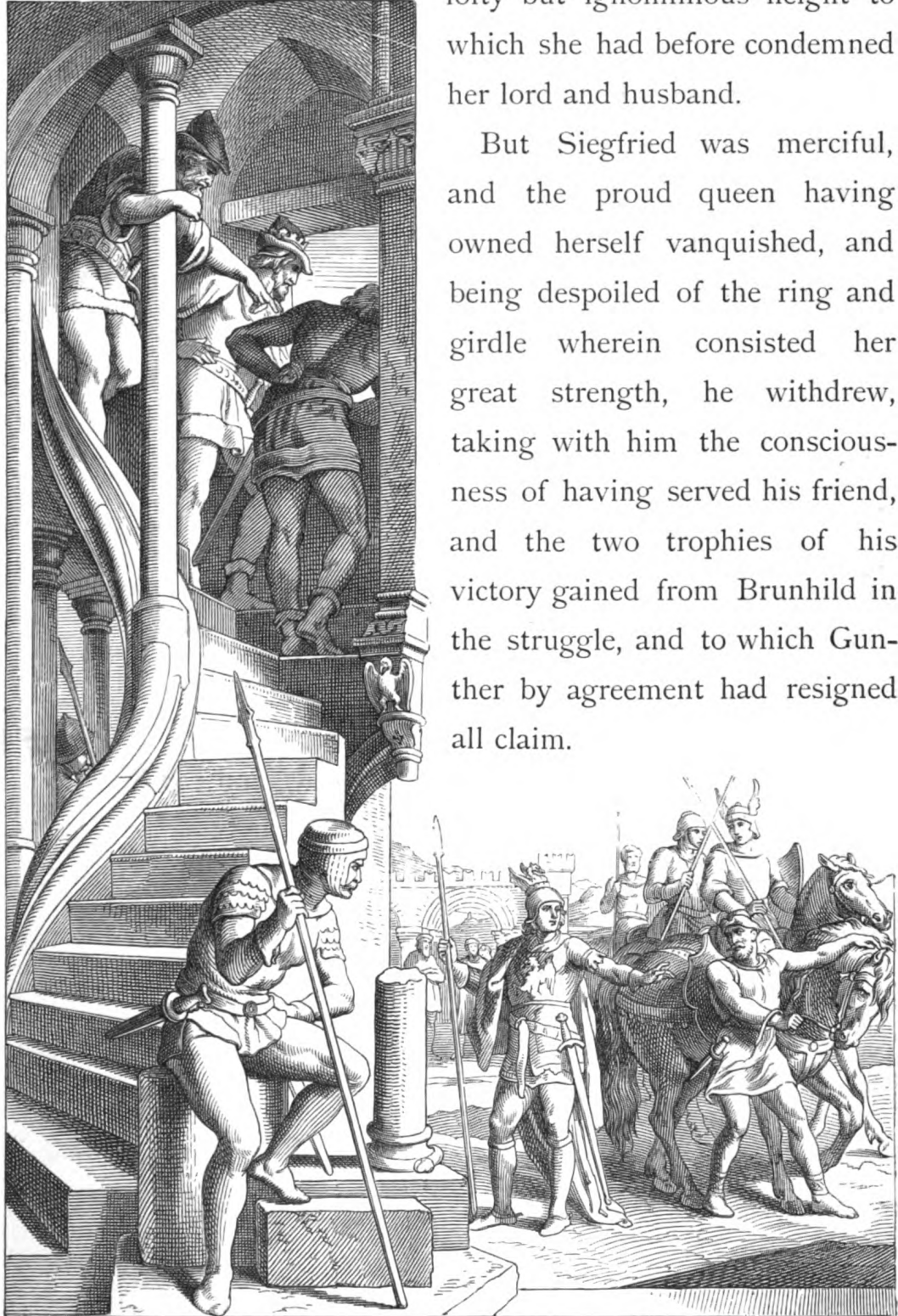
Now Siegfried, when he had heard the story, comforted his friend, telling him that for every evil under the sun there was a remedy. He told him also that Brunhild's preternatural strength

lay in the possession of a girdle, and a magic ring which she wore on her index finger. If despoiled of these, she would become weak as any other woman; and he at once engaged to win them from her, requiring only absolute and perpetual secrecy on the part of Gunther, to which, as may be supposed, the poor subdued king willingly agreed.

So the day passed on; Gunther, with an anxious, somewhat troubled air, received the congratulations of his liegemen; but at night, when the royal pair were supposed to be alone in the seclusion of their own chamber, Siegfried slipped on his *Tarn-kappe*, and endued with the strength of twelve men, stood beside Gunther, and calmly waited to see how matters would turn out.

Then Brunhild began as before, with jibes and jeers, to mock her bridegroom; but he, strengthened by the knowledge that Siegfried, his all-powerful ally, was by his side, departed somewhat from his promise of passive obedience to Brunhild's behests; whereupon his bride, thinking he would prove as easy to vanquish as on the previous night, commenced a sharp tussle with him, but this time with a very different result.

Gunther's wrestling was, indeed, but in outward gesture, for the victory was won wholly and entirely by Siegfried, who at last had the proud beauty so completely in his power that, had not his own feeling of knight-errantry, which forbade him use any unnecessary harshness to a woman, restrained him, Brunhild would have been bound hand and foot, and hung up on the same



lofty but ignominious height to which she had before condemned her lord and husband.

But Siegfried was merciful, and the proud queen having owned herself vanquished, and being despoiled of the ring and girdle wherein consisted her great strength, he withdrew, taking with him the consciousness of having served his friend, and the two trophies of his victory gained from Brunhild in the struggle, and to which Gunther by agreement had resigned all claim.

SIEGFRIED'S RETURN TO WORMS.

So from that day Brunhild's great strength was at an end ; true, her temper was still harsh and fiery, but it was the harshness and malevolence of a mere woman, and, woman-like, imagining herself overcome by Gunther, she henceforth felt a very wife-like respect for her conqueror.

And with Siegfried and Criemhild all was as the brightness of a June day. They had no wishes or thoughts apart from each other.

Siegfried, trusting implicitly to the prudence of his wife, had revealed to her the whole secret of his contests with Brunhild, as well as the mystery of the Nibelungen hoard ; nay, in the fulness of his love, he made over to his dear bride all the inexhaustible gold and gems of his treasure as a marriage dowry.

And then the high tide of festivity at Worms having passed, he bade farewell to his Burgundian friends, and returned to the Netherlands, to be welcomed there with infinite rejoicing.

The old king and queen received their son's bride with open arms, and Criemhild gladdened their home with a daughter's filial reverence and love.

Between the wedded pair all was sunshine, boundless love, and trusting confidence.

The fair, the high-minded Criemhild was fitly mated with the valiant, true-hearted Siegfried.

He, the sun ; she, the moon revolving round him, the centre of her life and joy.

And so they reigned together, and Criemhild bare Siegfried a son ; and to the hearts of Siegmund and Siegelinde came back the joy of their youth, as the patter of childish feet sounded upon their threshold and the sweet lispings of a baby voice cooed lovingly in their ears.

And thus did ten years of boundless content pass over the heads of Siegfried and Criemhild.

But who can be called happy till we know how the death-call shall come to them ?

There is no virtue that can shield its owner from the stinging arrows of malevolent spleen.


Queen Brunhild had continually fretted over the thought that Siegfried, whom she obstinately persisted in regarding as her husband's vassal and servant, had for many a long year paid him no liegeman's service, and she determined within herself that the servant should at length do full homage to his master.

Her first step towards this was to get Gunther to invite his sister and her husband to a high festival to be held at Worms, and they, unsuspecting of evil, readily accepted the offer, and after a ten years' absence, re-appeared at Gunther's court. With true gladness Gunther himself received them, and Brunhild wore the semblance of outward good-will and hospitality.


But the fire was only smouldering. Ere long it was to burst forth in a terrible flame, that caused desolation and ruin through the length and breadth of the land.

CHAPTER V.

THE QUARREL OF THE TWO QUEENS.

——
“ Never anger
Made good guard for itself.”

Shakespeare.—ANTHONY AND CLEOPATRA.
——

LEVEN days had passed away since the arrival of the illustrious guests, when it chanced that the two queens took to arguing about the merits of their respective husbands.

Criemhild, steeped through and through with wife-like love, expatiated upon the pre-eminence of her Siegfried, how he walked like the moon among the stars, a very prince of men.

This was more than Brunhild could endure. She reminded her sister-in-law that one man at least must be excepted; the mighty King Gunther, to whom Siegfried, by his own confession made long ago in Isenland, was but the vassal and servant.

But Criemhild would sooner admit that clay was above sunbeams than that Siegfried, her heart's love, should be reckoned her brother's second; so she bade Brunhild never again, as long as she lived, repeat the base calumny.

Then Brunhild's wrath waxed fierce, and a war of angry words burst forth between the two queens.

At last Criemhild parted from her opponent, and going hastily to the palace set apart by Gunther for his guests, arrayed herself in her queenly robes, put the regal diadem of Santen upon her brow, and bidding her forty maidens attire themselves in royal apparel, ordered out all her husband's knights, and so attended, walked foremost to the Minster, where Mass was to be said, thus practically asserting that she was not only a true queen, but also greater than she of Worms. Brunhild, utterly outdone, and enraged beyond all patience, overtook her at the door of the Minster, and putting herself in the way, peremptorily ordered Criemhild to stop, telling her that a vassal's wife should never go before his lord's.

Then Criemhild, urged almost to madness, and forgetting the wise saying that "if speech be silver, silence is gold," broke her promised word to Siegfried, and revealed that it was he who, instead of Gunther, had twice been victor in the conflict with Brunhild, despoiling her of both girdle and ring; and as proof thereof, Criemhild displayed the two trophies before the astonished eyes of Brunhild.

Overcome with rage and surprise, Brunhild retreated with hot haste to her palace, registering a vow of direst vengeance against Siegfried.

But with regard to the execution of it she set about it very warily, by a pretended acknowledgment that she was in the

wrong, and a promise that all unhappy bye-gones should be forgotten.

But secretly she took counsel with Hagen, for she knew that in his heart he had always cherished a secret envy of the mighty Siegfried, and she believed he would, therefore, prove a fitting instrument to execute her deadly vengeance.

And the first part of the plot agreed upon between them was that Hagen should worm himself into the confidence of Siegfried and Criemhild by treacherous professions of friendship, and anxiety for their welfare.

Now after the quarrel between the two queens, a great dread had fallen upon Criemhild, and she feared lest by her rash and angry words she should have brought danger upon her dear lord and husband ; and sorely did she repent, that in the heat of her passion she should have revealed to Brunhild that it was Siegfried who had won the mastery over her, for full well she felt in her heart that Brunhild, though she might bide her time, would yet full surely take vengeance for the affront.

Now as Criemhild cast in her mind how she might turn aside from her beloved the danger that threatened him through her own rash betrayal of his confidence, it chanced that the crafty Hagen came to her as she sat, with her needle embroidering with loving fingers a garment for her husband.

Sitting down beside her, with soft words he implored her to have faith in him, because he was near of kin to her, and was determined to befriend both her and her husband in the dangers



HAGEN'S PERFIDIOUS ADVICE.

that he foresaw likely to come upon them.

And Kriemhild's heart expanded with gratitude and gladness, as she heard his treacherous words, and looking up with a glow of trembling earnestness on her fair face, she told him of her daily and hourly dread, lest some foe, coming upon her dear lord from behind, should pierce him in the one fatal spot that had not been bathed in the dragon's blood.

Then Hagen, dissembling his joy at discovering the secret of the one weak point in the hitherto invincible Siegfried, appeared for a few seconds as if lost in thought, musing on the best means to secure his friend from the danger which Kriemhild dreaded.

At last he spoke, and pointing to the garment in her hands, said to her :

“ Dear niece, do but embroider upon his coat a small sign, so that I may know the exact spot, and all shall be well. I will continually watch behind him, so that no foe shall do him harm.”

Then was Criemhild right glad, and with her needle she embroidered with fine silk a red cross, exactly where the coat covered the fatal spot ; and with grateful, friendly words, she committed her husband to Hagen’s protection.



CHAPTER VI.


SIEGFRIED MURDERED.

“ This is the very top,
The height, the crest, or crest upon the crest
Of murder’s arms : this is the bloodiest shame,
The wildest savag’ry, the vilest stroke
That ever wall-eyed wrath, or staring rage,
Presented to the tears of soft remorse.

* * * *

Kneeling before this ruin of sweet life,
And breathing to this breathless excellence
The incense of a vow, a holy vow,
Never to taste the pleasures of the world,
Never to be infected with delight,
Nor conversant with ease and idleness,
Till I have set a glory to this hand
By giving it the worship of revenge.”

Shakespeare.—KING JOHN.

HEN the perfidious Hagen went away from Criemhild’s presence, like a cruel serpent that leaves its prey for a brief space, only that he may wind it at last more surely in his coils.

And first he went and revealed the secret of Siegfried’s

vulnerability to King Gunther, who forgetting all the good service he had had from him, and urged on by wicked Brunhild, now longed for nothing so much as that brave knight's death.

Then the two consulted together how they might compass this end, and it was agreed upon between them that a great hunting party should be arranged for the following day, for they knew that Siegfried loved the sport right well, and would be sure to ride forth with the king.

And so indeed it fell out.

In the sweet dewy fragrance of the early morning, the brave hero clasped his Criemhild for the last time to his true heart, and pressing sweet kisses upon her lips, laughed away the pleading fears by which she strove to hinder him from joining in the sport.

Then he rode forth at the right hand of Gunther ; but Hagen kept behind with the other knights of the king's retinue, and his wicked eyes brightened with a glare that was kindled in Hell's fire, as he saw the little red cross shining upon the white mantle of the Santen hero.

But on they rode, and rare good sport did they have, and many a noble boar and hart was struck down by Siegfried ; but at noon the hunters rested in a clearing of the forest, and great store of provisions did the servants of Gunther set before them ; but the heat had made them sore athirst, and by some mischance it fell out that the servants who had the care of the wine, had

mistaken their orders, and had ridden onward to a more distant part of the forest.

Then Hagen, the councillor, told them that they must be content to wait awhile till the wine-bearers should reach them, unless, indeed, they were willing to go on in the forest to a spot he knew of, where there was a fountain that yielded water that was sweeter and better than the choicest wine.

Now, to thirsty men, this was a rare temptation ; so Gunther and Siegfried at once started off on the way to the spring, Hagen being their guide, and the rest of the hunters gradually following in the rear.

Now on the way Hagen, as though by chance, suggested to Siegfried that if the report he had heard of his fleetness of foot were indeed true, it would be a right good pastime to run a race with himself and Gunther to the fountain, as they also had obtained much renown for the like skill.

To this Siegfried willingly agreed, declaring that he would arrive first at the fountain, although he should give his rivals a start of a hundred feet, and would, moreover, run in his heavy armour, whereas his competitors were free to make the race in their simple smocks and hose.

And so it fell out, for, fleet of foot as a young hind, Siegfried passed them, and reached the fountain with its sweet babbling waters glancing in the summer sun, a good space before they did.

Then the hot and thirsty man threw down the heavy armour wherewith he was girded, and taking a golden drinking horn

from his belt, stretched himself upon the green grass, and drank great draughts of the sweet refreshing water.

But suddenly Gunther and Hagen were on the spot, and while the weak and wicked king hid himself behind a stately beech tree, the bold, perfidious Hagen seized a lance, and taking sure aim at the little red cross on Siegfried's garment, plunged the weapon into his body.

With a cry of anguish the noble Siegfried fell prone to the ground, the red blood poured forth in torrents from the gaping wound, the green sward drank it up, and the flowers of the field were wetted with the red deluge.

But the hero's dying thoughts were for his wife ; he prayed Gunther to protect her.

As the films of death gathered over his glassy eye, Criemhild's name still trembled upon his lips.

And then his great soul went forth to join the spirits of the noble dead.

And Gunther's liegemen, who had followed their master and seen the cruel blow, and were ashamed and astounded at the treacherous deed, softly and tenderly took up the poor dead body, and bore it reverently back to the city, that it might have regal burial within the walls of the Minster.

And Gunther, who though not the absolute murderer, was yet a participator in the foul crime, by his sinful pandering to the vile enmity of Brunhild, went back to his sister, with hypocritical lies of condolence in his mouth.

Alas ! for poor friendless Criemhild ! Her grief was boundless as her love had been.

She was alone upon the earth, with this great perpetual wound racking at her heart.

Like a dove mourning over her wounded mate she sat by her husband's grave, pouring out the love and the sorrow that could have no end.

But her enemies had not yet done all they could ; they had yet another shaft in the quiver of their malicious envy. They robbed her of the Nibelungen hoard, and all Siegfried's treasure. This also was Hagen's doing, for he feared lest by the possession of it Criemhild might raise up a magic army, and avenge her own and her husband's wrongs.

So he told Gunther that no wise man would leave such boundless treasures in the hands of a weak woman ; and though the miserable king made a faint protest against this fresh crime, urging that he had vowed to the dying Siegfried to protect Criemhild's rights, he was soon over-ruled by the bold, bad Hagen, and the treasure was taken and placed in strong caves, entered only by double gates of iron, below the royal palace at Worms. The armour of the dead hero, and the good sword Balmung, Hagen took for his own share of the plunder.

But this last outrage brought no increase to Criemhild's pain.

Siegfried gone, her woe was uniform and the same.

Poverty or wealth was all one to her now ; he was no longer

by her side to enjoy the treasures which fate had granted them, and her enemies might take it all, so that they would but leave her in peace, with the few feet of earth where her hero lay buried.

So Gunther became lord of the Nibelungen hoard, and all the magic treasure.

And Criemhild lived on through days of sorrow, and nights of weeping ; but a lily broken is a lily still ; the dower of loveliness was still hers, and there was many a gallant prince who would have been proud to win and wed the widowed Criemhild.

But her heart was with the dead, and to one and all she turned a deaf ear.

But after a while an embassy came from a far-off monarch, Etzel, king of the Huns, soliciting her hand. She heard it like a woman of ice.

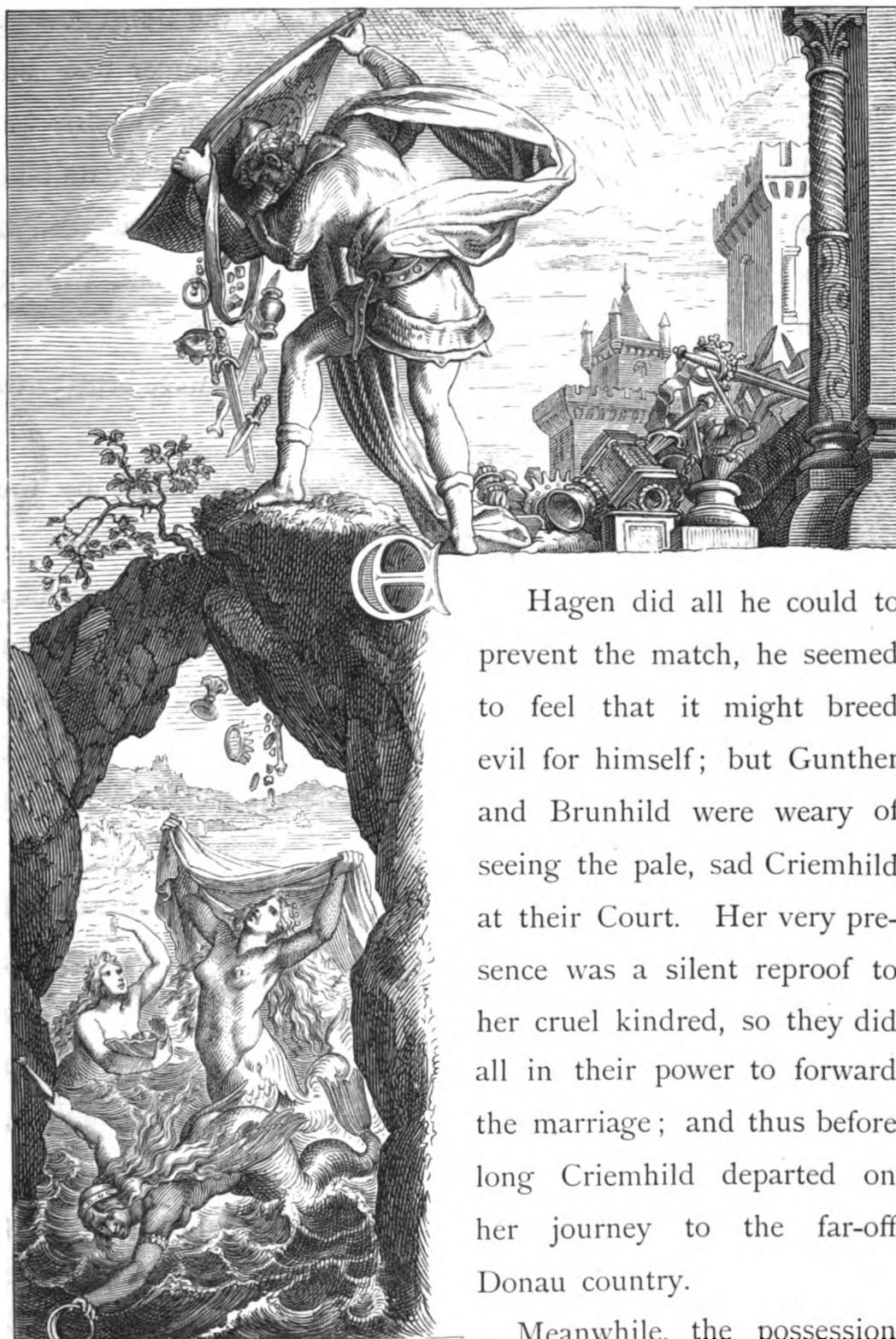
What had she to do any more with wedlock ?

It was in vain that the good Rudiger, Etzel's spokesman, pleaded that his king was the richest of all earthly monarchs, that he was so good and kind, that he had been so lonely since Queen Helke's death, that though a heathen he might one day be converted by so gracious a wife.

Each argument was in vain.

But at last Rudiger struck another key. He hinted at Etzel's power to avenge her injuries, and to punish Siegfried's murderer.

And then Criemhild began to listen, and at last gave her royal word to become Etzel's wife.



HAGEN CASTING THE NIBELUNGEN HOARD INTO THE RHINE.

Hagen did all he could to prevent the match, he seemed to feel that it might breed evil for himself; but Gunther and Brunhild were weary of seeing the pale, sad Criemhild at their Court. Her very presence was a silent reproof to her cruel kindred, so they did all in their power to forward the marriage; and thus before long Criemhild departed on her journey to the far-off Donau country.

Meanwhile, the possession

of the Nibelungen hoard had done no good to the Burgundians. Great discord arose respecting it between Gunther and his brothers Gernot and Geiselher, till at last Hagen, to settle the difficulty, sunk it in the Rhine, first making his nephews take oath that they would never reveal the hiding place; but though the treasure was sunk, the name clung to them, and with it the curse that seemed to belong to it.

Gunther, his brothers, and the fierce Hagen, were henceforth Nibelungen princes.

And Criemhild was far away in her new home by the Danube; but the fresh tie had not loosened the old love.

Her hand, and all wife-like reverence and duty she had given to Etzel, but her heart was still with the dead. And Etzel, a kind old man, but one who knew nothing of the deep harmonies by which one soul is attuned to another, was right well content with her, and knew not that there were depths of agony and love in her heart which he could never sound.

Criemhild never forgot the object for which she had united herself to him, but secretly toiled on to her destined aim, and being all powerful to obtain from the king any request she might ask, begged him to invite to a high festival that was to be held the second year after her marriage, her brother Gunther, with all his champions.

This Etzel did joyfully, and with right hospitable intent; but the invitation caused great discussion at Worms, for all the old and more prudent people, and Hagen more especially, pro-

tested vehemently against accepting it, until Gernot taunted his uncle with being afraid to venture into Criemhild's presence, on account of the foul treachery he had practised against the noble Siegfried.

Then the proud warrior, unable to brook the suspicion of fear, at once gave in to the wish of the younger knights, and an embassy was despatched to Etzel, announcing Gunther's acceptance of the invitation.




CHAPTER VII.

THE JOURNEY, AND THE MERMAIDS' PROPHECY.

“ I pass like night from land to land,
I have strange power of speech ;
So soon as e'er his face I see,
I know the man that must hear me,
To him my tale I teach.”

Coleridge.—THE ANCIENT MARINER.

 O the three brothers, Gunther, Geiselher and Gernot with one thousand and sixty champions of the noblest in the realm, besides nine thousand fighting men, prepared to march into Hungary.

Throughout all the fair Burgundian land there was mourning and lamentation, maids and wives weeping bitterly for the brave knights who might never again return to them, for the prudent dreaded lest *Criemhild* should revenge herself upon *Hagen* and the Burgundians for *Siegfried's* murder.

But in spite of omens and dreams to dissuade them against the enterprise, the Burgundians tore themselves away from weeping wives and daughters, and with the sound of flute and trumpet started on their way.

Hagen, who when a boy had been a hostage amongst the Huns, was their leader.

So on they went across the Rhine, then on to the Maine; and on and on, till on the twelfth morning after their departure from Worms, they reached the banks of the blue Danube.

And then came a great difficulty, for the river was swollen with sudden rains, and there was no ferry-boat to be seen.

So they took counsel, and Hagen was despatched to search along the shore, if perchance a boat might be found.

He searched, and searched, but found nothing, when suddenly he heard sounds like the murmur of a fountain, accompanied with the sweet babbling of Syren-like voices; and gliding through the bushes in the direction from whence the sounds came, he saw mermaids sporting in the limpid waters of a fountain, their golden hair glistening on their swan-like throats, and their white drapery floating behind them.

Then Hagen, always ready for evil or for mischief, seized one of them by her garment, and laughingly told her that she was his captive.

Whereat she, fain to be released, promised him if he would set her free, that she would reveal to him what should be the fate of himself and his brave companions in their present enterprise.

And Hagen, feeling a wondrous longing spring up within him to know his destiny, at once loosened his hold; and Hadberg, for thus was she named, rewarded him by telling him



that he and his companions should win boundless glory in Etzel's land, and that heroic deeds should be performed by them of which bards and minstrels should sing in ages to come.

So Hagen was right glad thereof, and would at once have gone on his way, had not another mermaid bade him stop to hear the end of his fortune, for as yet he knew but one-half of it.

Then she warned him that Death was waiting for him on the other side of the river, that of all the goodly host of warriors who

HAGEN AND THE MERMAIDS.

had left Worms but twelve days before, not one should come back to his Father-land. All should perish by the sword in the strangers' land; only one man, and he a man of peace, to wit, the Chaplain, should return in safety.

Now though Hagen's heart sank somewhat within him, he made light of the warning, and only begged the mermaidens to direct him how to cross the river.

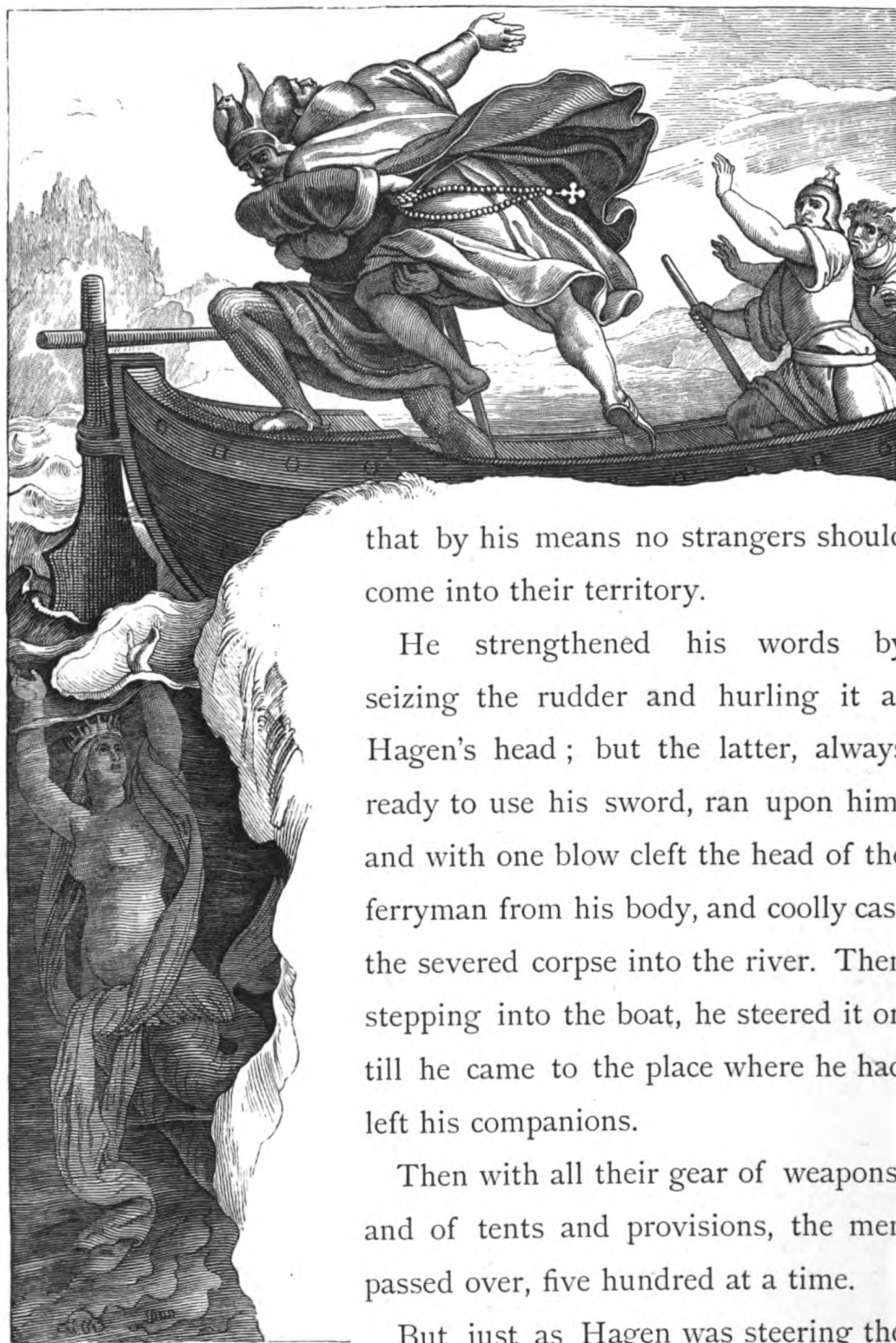
Then they told him that if he would go a little farther up, he would find the ferryman; and if, as was often the case, he should refuse to take the Burgundians over, Hagen must call himself Amelrich, a name which would be all potent to make him do his bidding.

And it all turned out as the Syren said, for Hagen went on and saw the man on the opposite side, and tried to make a bargain with him by offering him a rich clasp of gold if he would come across to him; but the man disdained the payment, and refused to stir.

Then Hagen shouted across the stream: "Man! how dost thou dare to refuse me, Amelrich, what I command thee?"

Whereupon the man at once seized the rudder, and came to him; but great was his anger when he saw that a stranger, and not Amelrich, had shouted to him. It was in vain that Hagen tried to bribe him to take himself and his companions across the river.

He flatly refused, saying that his masters, the lords of the land, had enough enemies on their own side of the river, and



HAGEN ATTEMPTS TO FALSIFY THE MERMAIDS' PROPHECY.

that by his means no strangers should come into their territory.

He strengthened his words by seizing the rudder and hurling it at Hagen's head ; but the latter, always ready to use his sword, ran upon him, and with one blow cleft the head of the ferryman from his body, and coolly cast the severed corpse into the river. Then stepping into the boat, he steered it on till he came to the place where he had left his companions.

Then with all their gear of weapons, and of tents and provisions, the men passed over, five hundred at a time.

But just as Hagen was steering the

last detachment across, he saw the Chaplain at the end of the boat, standing by his pyxes and sacred furniture, and remembering the mermaid's prophecy, that this man should be the only one who should return in safety to his Father-land, he thought he would belie this part of the presage, and thus bring the whole into discredit. So he went straightway up to the holy man, and seizing him in his powerful grasp, threw him overboard. Great was the indignation of the Burgundian princes at this sacrilegious act; but Hagen heeded not their reproaches, only his rage waxed fiercer as he discovered that his wicked deed had been in vain, for the Chaplain, instead of sinking, swam vigorously to the German side of the river, for God helped him in his struggle with the swollen waters; and Hagen, as he watched him at last land safely on the other shore, knew that the mermaid's prophecy was true, and that grim Death was indeed waiting for him on the other side. So the Chaplain journeyed back on foot to Rhineland, thanking God for his deliverance from the wicked Hagen; and the Burgundians went on their way, and after escaping many dangers, came at last in safety to Etzel's country.

Now when the king knew that his guests had arrived, he sent one of his noblest knights, Dietrich of Berne, with a goodly retinue to meet them, and give them courteous reception into his land.

Then the Burgundian princes enquired of Dietrich how it fared with their sister Criemhild; but when he told them that morning by morning, as he passed through the ante-room that

separated the queen's apartments from the king's audience chamber, he heard her make her plaint to God on account of Siegfried's death, praying Him to avenge the foul deed, they were sore afraid, more especially when they knew that Criemhild's wrongs had kindled wrath and indignation amongst the Huns, and that Hagen's name had become amongst them a bye-word of reproach and horror.

But Hagen, having the daring devilry of a bad man, laughed to scorn the fears of his companions; and when they looked at him with his broad shoulders and huge stature, and remembered the potency of the sword Balmung, which he had taken from the dead Siegfried, and now held in his hand, they took courage, and went forth to take possession of the dwellings which Etzel had prepared for their reception.

And soon Criemhild herself, with a goodly retinue of knights and maidens, came to greet them.

With kind and courteous mien she saluted her brothers Gunther and Gernot, but Geiselher, the youngest, who was wholly guiltless of any share in Siegfried's murder, she kissed with a sister's tenderness.

Thus she gave them all welcome into her husband's kingdom. But when Hagen saw that Criemhild had made a distinction between Geiselher and the others, his heart foreboded evil, and he pressed his iron helmet deeper over his brow. Then the queen enquired of her brothers whether they had brought with them from Worms the Nibelungen treasures which Siegfried had given her.

Whereupon Hagen advanced haughtily in front of Criemhild, telling her that at his bidding her brothers had cast the whole treasure into the Rhine, defying her to go forth and do her worst, for that he was prepared for her wiles.

Then he and Dietrich of Berne joined hands together, and made a league of defence against Hagen's enemies.

And the queen, being sore discomfited, went back troubled to her palace; and Hagen considered within himself how he should prepare for coming danger.

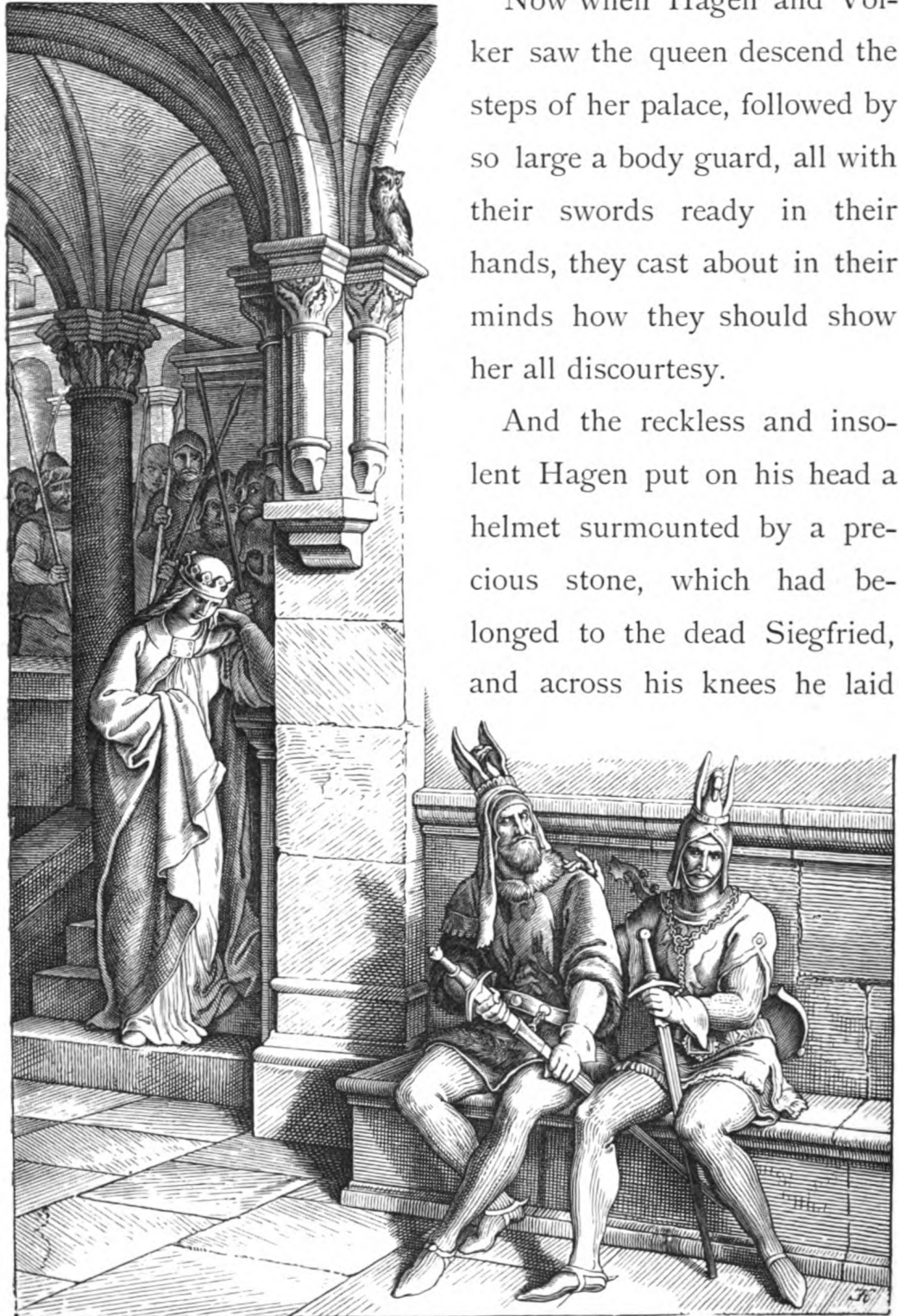
Now amongst those who had come in Gunther's retinue, there was one Volker, a most skilful fiddler, renowned also as a mighty man of war; he was, besides, the sworn ally of Hagen. These two, therefore, resolved to sit down as sentinels before Criemhild's hall, so that at the first appearance of danger they might be ready for the attack.

Now there were amongst the Huns sixty warriors, who for love and reverence of their queen were ready to go forth at once, and slay both Hagen and Volker; but Criemhild began to weep, telling them that they were too few in number to attack these terrible enemies, for that each one was in himself equal to a host of common men.

Then quickly four hundred knights started up, and bound themselves to do her bidding, and to avenge her wrongs; and she told them to come with her to confront her enemy, and if he did not deny the crimes of which she accused him they could decide whether or no he deserved death.

Now when Hagen and Volker saw the queen descend the steps of her palace, followed by so large a body guard, all with their swords ready in their hands, they cast about in their minds how they should show her all discourtesy.

And the reckless and insolent Hagen put on his head a helmet surmounted by a precious stone, which had belonged to the dead Siegfried, and across his knees he laid



CRIEMHILD AND HER KNIGHTS DISCOMFORTED BY HAGEN AND VOLKER

the sword Balmung, with its jasper hilt, a weapon which had become his by so foul a crime.

And so he sat waiting the queen's approach, bidding his companion sit also, that by these studied marks of disrespect he might add the sting of humiliation to all the great wrongs he had done her.

Then Criemhild, when she saw these relics of her beloved Siegfried in the possession of his cruel murderer, began to weep, and for awhile grief checked the words of reproach that were upon her lips.

But at last she spoke, accusing Hagen of the death of him for whom she must ever mourn.

Whereupon Hagen, full of insolent assurance, boldly confessed himself the murderer, daring any one who would to avenge it on him.

Then the warriors who had come with Criemhild began to grow faint-hearted, and to whisper one with the other that they had better let things take their chance, or at any rate delay the attack till they could come upon them unawares.

So these four hundred and sixty men turned their backs upon the braggart Hagen, hearing the stout words of that wicked but valiant man.

No wonder that Criemhild, as she went weeping to her palace, complained in the bitterness of her indignation, "that they were but craven knights, more fit to hold the distaff than the sword."

Now Etzel the king knew little of what had been going on. All his life long he had taken things very easily, and the great facts of love and hatred, revenge and despair were mysteries which his nature could never fathom.

So now, while all this heart-burning was going on before his very eyes, he only thought of a sumptuous feast wherewith to honour his Burgundian guests.

Boundless was the wealth lavished by the hospitable old man upon this festive occasion, and great was the courtesy shown by him to the brothers of his fair queen, as well as to all their princely retinue; and when night brought the banquet to an end, the guests were conducted to a magnificent hostel which Etzel had had prepared for them.

Gorgeous tapestries hung upon the walls, while upon beds of softest down that wooed the weary to rest, silken coverlets from far-off India sparkled with threads of gold.

But, in spite of the magnificence of their lodgment, there was many an anxious heart amongst the Burgundians, for they feared a sudden surprise that might come upon them from their enemies while they slept.

But Hagen and Volker bade them go to their rest fearlessly, for that they would keep guard and watch for them.

So they two went outside the hall, and Volker sat him down on a stone, and taking out his fiddle drew forth such chords of ravishing sweetness, that it seemed to the warriors like a mother's lullaby; and each weary man sank to softest sleep, and forgot

for awhile all the cares that were about his daily path. Poor men! they might well sleep on, lulled by softest music, for it was destined to be their last slumber.

When Volker saw that they were thus all locked in deep repose, he put by his instrument, and taking his shield in his hand, went out into the open night, and stood sentry before the door.

Long time he waited, and nought stirred upon the midnight air; but all at once, as the dawn was beginning to break, he caught sight of a glittering helmet, and saw that one of Criemhild's knights was seeking to surprise them.

Then Volker called out lustily to Hagen, and the Hun, finding that he was discovered, slunk back again, for he had hoped to find Hagen sleeping, and thus to have slain him, for Criemhild had given him strict charge to attack none but her husband's murderer.

Now when the morning came there was a great talking amongst the Burgundians, for they felt that the last struggle was approaching, and they resolved to fight manfully for their lives.

But first they would go to the Minster and hear Mass, that so their souls might be strengthened for the trial and sore conflict that would soon come upon them.




CHAPTER VIII.

THE CONFLICT.


Hotspur—"Let each man do his best. And here draw I
A sword, whose temper I intend to stain
With the best blood that I can meet withal."

Shakespeare.—KING HENRY IV.


OW, as they were equipping themselves, Hagen bade them instead of silken tunics to put on steel hauberks, and for plumed bonnets stout helmets.

And in this martial attire they went forth to the Minster, which they reached just as Etzel and his queen were entering. And it grieved the hospitable old king when he saw his guests thus clad in the garments of war, for it seemed as if they distrusted his honour, and he gently reproached them for it; but Hagen, who was ever spokesman for the rest, excused it as being a Burgundian custom; and as he said this, he and Volker pushed rudely beside the queen, whereat the king's chamberlain, together with all the Huns, waxed exceeding wrath; but so urgent was the king's command that they should avoid all occasion of

quarrel with his guests, that they were obliged to dissemble their anger.

After the return from the Minster, a great joust, with trials of strength and of skill, went on amongst the princes, Etzel and his queen looking on and giving prizes to the victors.

This was followed by a second banquet, at which the king was again grieved by seeing his guests in all their trappings of war.

Now such of the knights as were banqueting in the hostel had not been seated long, before a quarrel arose between Blödel, one of Criemhild's knights, and Dankwart, Hagen's brother, who, being reproached by him on account of Siegfried's murder, drew his sword and went at him with such a lusty thrust, that his helmeted head was severed from his body, and rolled down at Dankwart's feet, who, with a coarse jest, wiped his sword, and prepared himself for fresh warfare, for at the sight of Blödel's corpse the rage of the Huns became ungovernable.

They rushed upon the Burgundians, and a terrible slaughter followed.

Soon the ground was covered with five hundred dead or dying bodies, and the infuriated combatants fought steeped up to the knees in the blood of the slain, and soon the numbers were increased to nine hundred; and Dankwart, furious as a wild boar that has just tasted blood, rushed from the outer hall, where the combat had taken place, into the inner palace where Etzel and Criemhild were sitting with their more illustrious guests.

Then Dankwart cried aloud to Hagen, telling him how there had been sore conflict in the hostel because Blödel had sought to avenge Criemhild's wrongs ; and Hagen full of fury at hearing this, and seeing Ortleben, the young son of Etzel and Criemhild in the chamberlain's arms, rushed madly at him, and severed the child's head with so ruthless a blow that he made it bound into the mother's lap.

Then was there such a mighty wail of anguish and terror resounding through the palace, that it must have pierced to the very courts of heaven.

And then began a slaughter, more fearful by far than that which had taken place in the hostel.

Hun rushed upon Burgundian, Burgundian upon Hun, with wildest fury ; and above the sound of clashing sword and spear came the shriek of women's voices, mingled with the piteous moan of the dying.

Then Dietrich of Berne, who had been the ally of Hagen, but whose heart had revolted from him, seeing his relentless cruelty to the innocent babe, called out in voice of thunder, that resounded through the vaulted hall, for a pause in the red slaughter, demanding that he might withdraw with the king and queen.

And permission having been granted, he put one strong arm round the fainting Criemhild, and leading Etzel with the other, passed with them through the blood-stained hall, and through subterranean passages, into what was called the Winter Palace,



THE SLAUGHTER IN THE BANQUET HALL.

lying on the other side of the great square. And then the carnage went on with redoubled fury.

The ruthless Hagen and his companions, standing upon the dead bodies of the slain, took their helmets, and dipping them in the red gore that filled the hall, quenched their fiery thirst in these horrible draughts.

And on and on the dreadful warfare continued, and the living were become but as a handful to the hundreds and thousands that were lying choking up the chamber.




CHAPTER IX.

REVENGE, AND ITS FRUITS.


“Revenge, that thirsty dropsy of our souls,
Which makes us covet that which hurts us most.”

MASSINGER.


UT at last the Burgundians became weary of the sickening conflict, and they sought to have a parley with Etzel, to the intent that they might have his permission to depart out of his land.

But the heart of the kind old man had become embittered within him by the cruel slaughter of his child, and his answer was—

“My child and my friends ye have killed, and would ye have peace with me now? While my heart beats I will make no peace with you, dastardly slayers of babes as ye are.”

And yet once again the Burgundians offered to lay down their arms, so that they might escape with their lives; and then Criemhild, hearing of the conference that was going on between her husband and brothers, rushed wildly into the hall, where

they were holding parley. Her golden hair hung dishevelled upon her shoulders, and a fire as of madness glittered in her eye.

“Would ye have peace? Would ye have peace?” cried she, in a voice of such shrill and piercing agony that it vibrated through every corner of the vaulted hall. “Ye shall have peace, ye shall have leave to depart, but it shall be only upon one condition. We are children of one mother, therefore get you gone; but leave Hagen, the foul murderer, a hostage in my hands.”

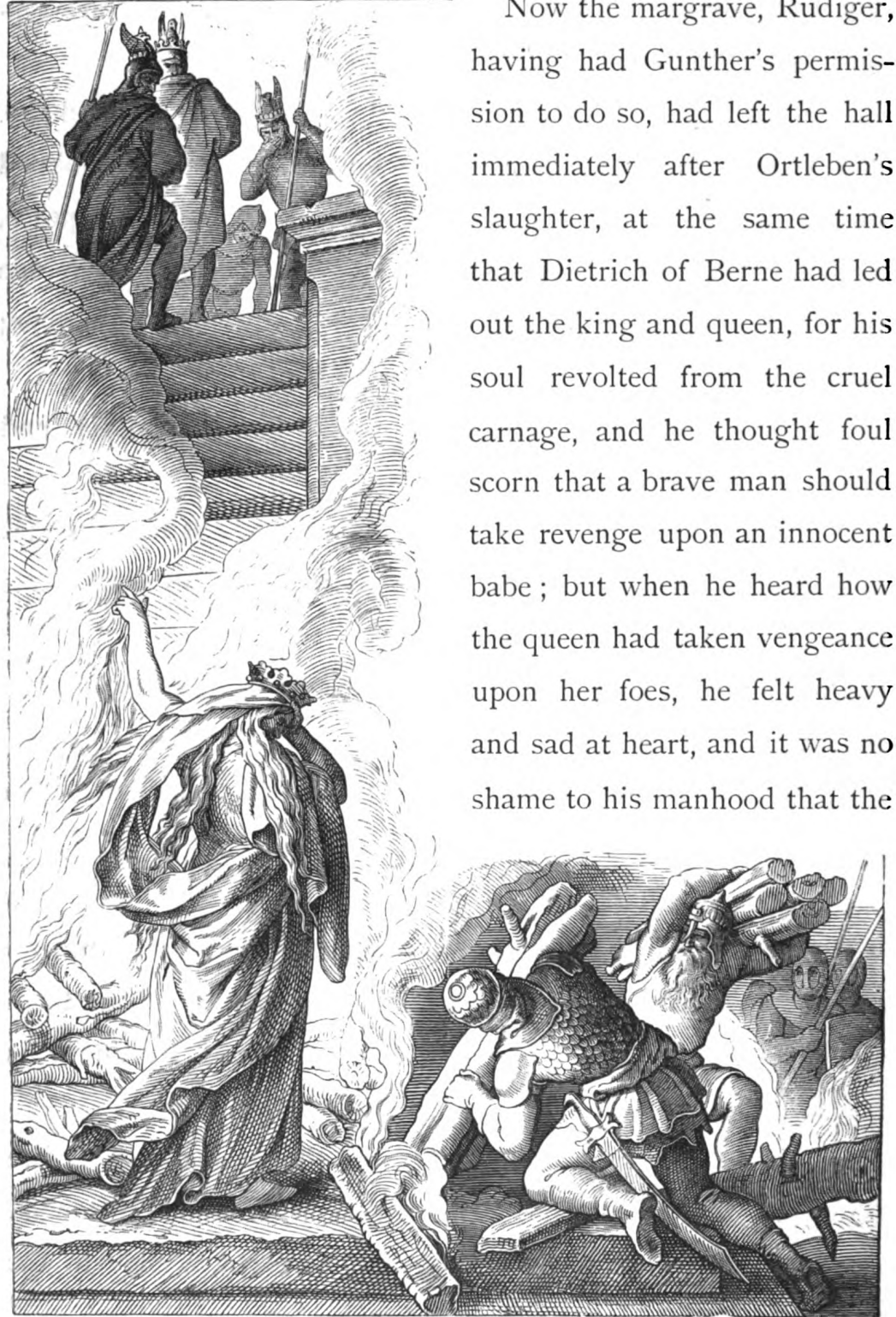
Then the three princes looked darkly one at another, and Gernot made answer:—

“Royal sister, that cannot be. Never shall it be said that a Burgundian, to purchase his own safety, gave up one of his friends into the hands of a foeman.”

“Your blood then be upon your own heads,” cried the queen; and she and Etzel left the chamber, while the three princes returned back to their comrades, and the red slaughter began again.

But a frenzy, as of madness, possessed Criemhild; her enemy should not escape, even though her own life should be the penalty; so she called her husband's liegemen, and bade them set fire to the great hall in which the Huns and Burgundians were fighting.

Horrible and more horrible became the scene; and, before the morning dawned, many a mother's son, who had managed to escape the sword of the enemy, fell to earth, a prey to the devouring flames.



Now the margrave, Rudiger, having had Gunther's permission to do so, had left the hall immediately after Ortleben's slaughter, at the same time that Dietrich of Berne had led out the king and queen, for his soul revolted from the cruel carnage, and he thought foul scorn that a brave man should take revenge upon an innocent babe ; but when he heard how the queen had taken vengeance upon her foes, he felt heavy and sad at heart, and it was no shame to his manhood that the

THE HOSTEL IN FLAMES.

big tears dropped from his eyes, as the wail of the dying came borne to him on the morning breeze.

And as he thus stood weeping before the burning hall, a Hun pointed him out to Criemhild as being but a chicken-hearted knight, though clad in a coat of mail, else would he have fought good blows in the queen's quarrel.

Then Rudiger, stung to the quick at hearing these words, doubled his fist, and rushing upon his slanderer, struck him such a mighty blow that he fell dead to the ground.

The dead man had not known that the margrave had been the envoy sent by Etzel to invite the Burgundian princes to his court, and that he was, moreover, father-in-law to Geiselher, having given his fair daughter to him to wife; and for both these reasons the brave, good man had besought Gunther that he might be allowed to keep well out of the contest.

But now as he stood in the presence of the king and queen, Criemhild besought him, by the oath of allegiance that he had sworn to her husband and herself, that he would take up his sword and strike yet another blow in her cause. Then Rudiger besought the king to absolve him from his oath, and let him depart an exile from the land, rather than lay such a burden upon him, as to bid him stretch forth his hand against the men whom he had welcomed as friends under his own roof-tree.

But no! Death, death to the last. Revenge upon Hagen and his allies was the one wish of Etzel and the queen.

They threw themselves at Rudiger's feet, imploring him to strike but once again and rid them of their enemies.

So Rudiger had no choice but to go forth and throw himself into the deadly struggle.

And as he entered the vaulted chamber where the Nibelungen princes, and such of their knights as had escaped from the fiery death were assembled, he bade them take back the troth he had once pledged to them; for though sorely against his will, yet for the sake of the oath he had sworn to Etzel, he must needs fight against them even to the death.

And the three princes answered him with courteous words, for they saw the trouble of his soul, and they knew that in such a case a brave man could have no choice.

So they stood ready to begin again the deadly struggle.

But Hagen cried out: "Wait awhile, my lords, for I am in a great strait; the Huns have cleft my shield to pieces, and I know not how I shall protect myself in this new conflict without it."

Then the noble Rudiger cried out: "Here is mine, take that, and God be praised that it is mine to give thee."

Now when the Nibelungen princes and knights heard the generous words of Rudiger, rough men as they were, the salt tears washed their grimy cheeks; and even Hagen vowed that the earth could never bring forth a nobler rival than he, and that however the affair might go on, his hand at least should never touch him.

After that the struggle began in right earnest. Like a war-horse scenting the battle, Rudiger threw himself wildly into the combat; with flashing sword he cut a pathway through the Burgundians, and Gernot and he at last closed in mortal conflict. Conquerors and conquered, each fell by the hand of the other.

And soon the sad news spread to the Winter Palace, and Etzel and Criemhild, with the Huns who were with them, heard that the brave Rudiger was slain.

Now Dietrich of Berne was sorely grieved for the death of his noble friend, so summoning his band of trusty followers, he rushed to the place of combat, determined at once and for ever to put an end to the contest, and to avenge his loss.

And this at last he did; for though the Burgundians fought like wild panthers at bay, they were now too few to resist.

One after another they were stricken down, till only Hagen and Gunther remained; and the former, too, was so sorely wounded, that Dietrich considered that it was little glory to kill him then, whereas he would be a rare prize to carry captive to the queen, so he let his shield fall to the ground, and throwing his arms round his weakened opponent, carried him into Criemhild's presence, while Gunther, who was also wounded followed in sullen despair.

With feverish joy Criemhild greeted Dietrich as she beheld him bringing her foe captive to her feet, telling him that now indeed he had brought her balm to relieve her woe.

And the noble Dietrich replied: "Great queen, grant him

but his life, it may be that he will render you such good service as may atone for all the grief he has caused you.”

Then Criemhild had Hagen carried to a dungeon, where he was guarded with bolts and bars, and then she turned to Gunther. Alas! that a thirst for revenge should have warped Criemhild's once tender heart. She forgot that Gunther and she were children of one mother,—forgot everything but that he had been the friend and ally of her foe Hagen.

With bitter irony in her voice, she bade him welcome, and the king answered :—

“ Noble sister, it were indeed both duty and pleasure to thank you for your greeting, had it been offered in sincerity ; but I know your mood, O queen, and that it is but in mockery you thus salute me.”

Then Dietrich of Berne spoke :—

“ Royal lady, never have mine eyes beheld so noble a hostage as I give into your hands ; but remember, gracious queen, that he is an exile from his Father-land, and for my sake treat him well.”

And Criemhild answered :—

“ He shall indeed be treated well according to his merit.”

Slowly and sadly Dietrich went out of the queen's presence ; brave knight as he was he wept for the two soldiers whom though conquered by his own prowess he yet pitied as men who were doomed to die far from home and native land.

Then Criemhild took the vengeance for which she had so thirsted.

She caused her servants to put Gunther in safe durance, and she herself went to Hagen to hold parley with him.

And she told him that if he would give back to her the treasures of which he had despoiled her, she would ensure that he and Gunther should be conveyed back in safety to their own land.

But the reply of the sullen Hagen was only this :—

“ You do but waste your words upon me, O queen! I have sworn that so long as one of your brothers, my royal lieges, remains upon earth, so long shall the hoard never be given up.”

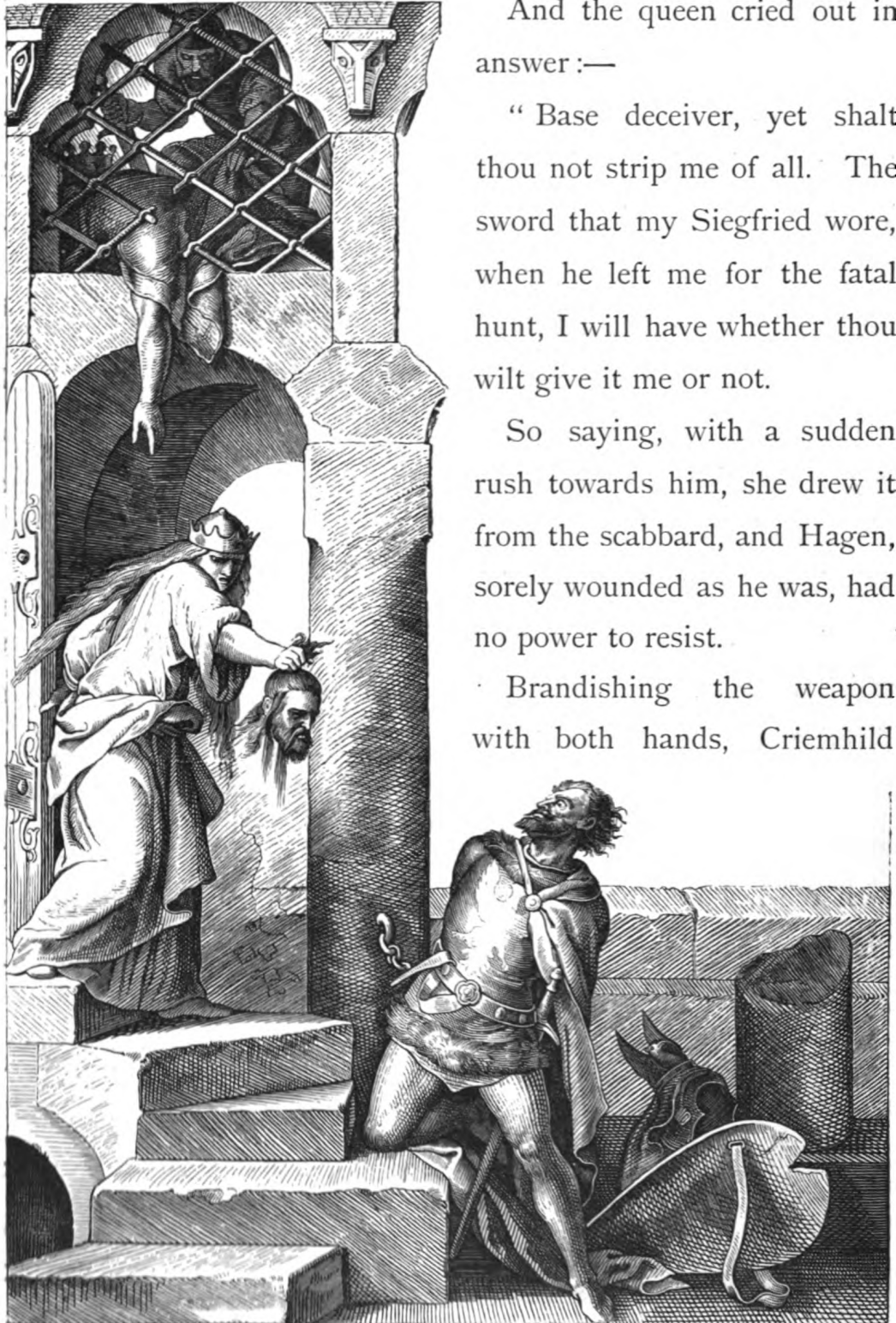
And the queen answered :—

“ So let it be ;” and went straightway from Hagen’s presence, and caused her servants to go at once to Gunther’s prison chamber and cut off his head.

Then seizing it by the long hair which betokened his royal lineage, she re-entered Hagen’s dungeon. Her eye glittering with the light of madness, and holding the ghastly thing before him, she bade him at once reveal where the Nibelungen hoard lay hid, for fate had now absolved him from his oath.

Then the once all-powerful Hagen, trembling with impotent rage, but with unabated pride, cried out :—

“ That indeed thou shalt never learn, devil’s wife as thou art. None but heaven and myself know the spot where it lies, and sooner should my tongue be torn from my mouth, than that thou shouldst wrest my secret from me.”



And the queen cried out in answer :—

“ Base deceiver, yet shalt thou not strip me of all. The sword that my Siegfried wore, when he left me for the fatal hunt, I will have whether thou wilt give it me or not.

So saying, with a sudden rush towards him, she drew it from the scabbard, and Hagen, sorely wounded as he was, had no power to resist.

Brandishing the weapon with both hands, Criemhild

CRIEMHILD'S FRENZY.

aimed a blow at Hagen. A good aim in truth it was, for his gory head fell at her feet, and Siegfried's murder was avenged.

But the men who stood by uttered an angry wail, for shame to think that a soldier should fall thus stricken by a weak woman's hand.

And Hildebrand, one of the servants of Dietrich, cried out:—

“ Now, though I die for it, I will avenge the Trongian Hagen.”

And forthwith he sprang towards Criemhild, and with his dagger struck her to the heart.

And so ends the story ; kings and warriors, and fair queen, all cut down in the bloom of their beauty and their strength, to accomplish the law of an inexorable fate.

Criemhild had plucked the deadly blossom of revenge, but its poisonous juices had shrivelled up the hand that grasped it, and the noxious odour from its fœtid berries had impregnated the air with a wide-spread miasma of death and desolation.





And now the tale is done,—the sin
and shame are o'er,
And the slain lie low, on the blue
Danubian shore ;
And my heart is attuned to pain,—
and tears down flow,
While here the story ends of the
Nibelungen Woe.

DEATH OF CRIEMHILD.

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