



The Story of Siegfried

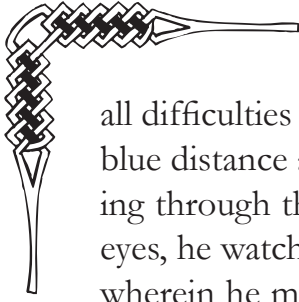
Adventure 7: In Nibelungen Land

by James Baldwin

Every one in the castle of Isenstein, from the princess to the kitchen-maid, felt grateful to the young hero for what he had done. The best rooms were fitted up for his use, and a score of serving men and maidens were set apart to do his bidding, and ordered to be mindful of his slightest wish. And all the earl-folk and brave men, and all the fair ladies, and Brunhild, fairest of them all, besought him to make his home there, nor ever think of going back to Rhineland. Siegfried yielded to their persuasions, and for six months he tarried in the enchanted land in one long round of merry-making and gay enjoyment. But his thoughts were ever turned toward his father's home in the Lowlands across the sea, and he longed to behold again his gentle mother Sigelind. Then he grew tired of his life of idleness and ease, and he wished that he might go out again into the busy world of manly action and worthy deeds. And day by day this feeling grew stronger, and filled him with unrest. One morning, as he sat alone by the seashore, and watched the lazy tide come creeping up the sands, two ravens lighted near him. Glad was he to see them, for he knew them to be Hugin and Munin, the sacred birds of Odin, and he felt sure that they brought him words of cheer from the All-Father. Then Hugin flapped his wings, and said, "In idleness the stings of death lie hidden, but in busy action are the springs of life. For a hundred years fair Brunhild slept, but why should Siegfried sleep? The world awaits him, but it waits too long."

Then Munin flapped his wings also, but he said nothing. And busy memory carried Siegfried back to his boyhood days; and he called to mind the wise words of his father Siegmund, and the fond hopes of his gentle mother, and he thought, too, of the noble deeds of his kinsfolk of the earlier days. And he rose in haste, and cried, "Life of ease, farewell! I go where duty leads. To him who wills to do, the great All-Father will send strength and help." While he spoke, his eyes were dazzled with a flash of light. He looked; and the beaming Greyfell, his long mane sparkling like a thousand sunbeams, dashed up the beach, and stood beside him. As the noble steed in all his strength and beauty stood before him, the youth felt fresh courage; for, in the presence of the shining hope which the All-Father had given him, all hinderances seemed to vanish, and

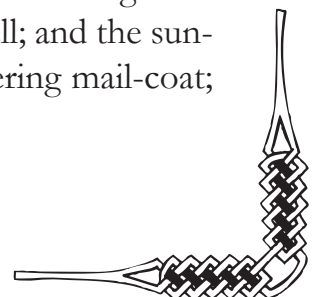


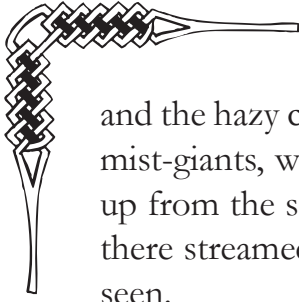


all difficulties to be already overcome. He looked toward the sea again, and saw in the blue distance a white-sailed ship drawing swiftly near, its golden dragon-stem ploughing through the waves like some great bird of the deep. And as with straining, eager eyes, he watched its coming, he felt that Odin had sent it, and that the time had come wherein he must be up and doing. The hour for thriving action comes to us once: if not seized upon and used, it may never come again.

The ship drew near the shore. The sailors rested on their oars. Siegfried and the steed Greyfell sprang upon the deck; then the sailors silently bent again to their rowing. The flapping sails were filled and tightened by the strong west wind; and the light vessel leaped from wave to wave like a thing of life, until Isenstein, with its tall towers and its green marble halls, sank from sight in the distance and the mist. And Siegfried and his noble steed seemed to be the only living beings on board; for the sailors who plied the oars were so silent and phantom-like, that they appeared to be nought but the ghosts of the summer sea-breezes. As the ship sped swiftly on its way, all the creatures in the sea paused to behold the sight. The mermen rested from their weary search for hidden treasures, and the mermaids forgot to comb their long tresses, as the radiant vessel and its hero-freight glided past. And even old King Aegir left his brewing-kettle in his great hall, and bade his daughters, the white-veiled Waves, cease playing until the vessel should safely reach its haven.

When, at length, the day had passed, and the evening twilight had come, Siegfried saw that the ship was nearing land; but it was a strange land. Like a fleecy cloud it appeared to rest above the waves, midway between the earth and the sky; a dark mist hung upon it, and it seemed a land of dreams and shadows. The ship drew nearer and nearer to the mysterious shore, and as it touched the beach the sailors rested from their rowing. Then Siegfried and the horse Greyfell leaped ashore; but, when they looked back, the fair vessel that had carried them was nowhere to be seen. Whether it had suddenly been clutched by the greedy fingers of the Sea-queen Ran, and dragged down into her deep sea-caverns, or whether, like the wondrous ship Skidbladner, it had been folded up, and made invisible to the eyes of men, Siegfried never knew. The thick mists and the darkness of night closed over and around both hero and horse; and they dared not stir, but stood long hours in the silent gloom, waiting for the coming of the dawn. At length the morning came, but the light was not strong enough to scatter the fogs and thick vapors that rested upon the land. Then Siegfried mounted Greyfell; and the sunbeams began to flash from the horse's mane and from the hero's glittering mail-coat;





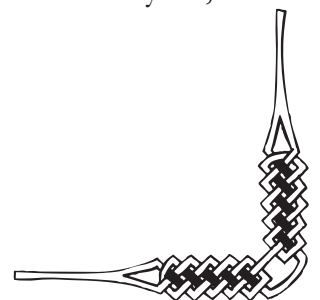
and the hazy clouds fled upward and away, until they were caught and held fast by great mist-giants, who stood like sentinels on the mountain-tops. As the shining pair came up from the sea, and passed through the woods and valleys of the Nibelungen Land, there streamed over all that region such a flood of sunlight as had never before been seen.

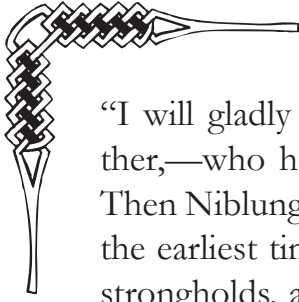
In every leafy tree, and behind every blade of grass, elves and fairies were hidden; and under every rock and in every crevice lurked cunning dwarfs. But Siegfried rode straight forward until he came to the steep side of a shadowy mountain. There, at the mouth of a cavern, a strange sight met his eyes. Two young men, dressed in princes' clothing, sat upon the ground: their features were all haggard and gaunt, and pinched with hunger, and their eyes wild with wakefulness and fear; and all around them were heaps of gold and precious stones,—more than a hundred wagons could carry away. And neither of the two princes would leave the shining hoard for food, nor close his eyes in sleep, lest the other might seize and hide some part of the treasure. And thus they had watched and hungered through many long days and sleepless nights, each hoping that the other would die, and that the whole inheritance might be his own. When they saw Siegfried riding near, they called out to him, and said, “Noble stranger, stop a moment! Come and help us divide this treasure.”

“Who are you?” asked Siegfried; “and what treasure is it that lies there?”

“We are the sons of Niblung, who until lately was king of this Mist Land. Our names are Schilbung and the young Niblung,” faintly answered the princes. “And what are you doing here with this gold and these glittering stones?”

“This is the great Nibelungen Hoard, which our father not long ago brought from the South-land. It is not clear just how he obtained it. Some say that he got it unjustly from his brother, whose vassals had dugged it from the earth. Others say that he found it lying on the Glittering Heath, where Fafnir the Dragon had guarded it zealously for ages past, until he was slain by a hero who cared nought for his gold. But, be this as it may, our father is now dead, and we have brought the hoard out of the cavern where he had hidden it, in order that we may share it between us equally. But we cannot agree, and we pray you to help us divide it.” Then Siegfried dismounted from the horse Greyfell, and came near the two princes.





“I will gladly do as you ask,” said he; “but first I must know more about your father,—who he was, and whether this is really the Hoard of the Glittering Heath.” Then Niblung answered, as well as his feeble voice would allow, “Our father was, from the earliest times, the ruler of this land, and the lord of the fog and the mist. Many strongholds, and many noble halls, had he in this land; and ten thousand brave warriors were ever ready to do his bidding. The trolls, and the swarthy elves of the mountains, and the giants of the cloudy peaks, were his vassals. But he did more than rule over the Nibelungen Land. Twice every year he crossed the sea and rambled through the Rhine valleys, or loitered in the moist Lowlands; and now and then he brought rich trophies back to his island home. The last time, he brought this treasure with him; but, as we have said, it is not clear how he obtained it. We have heard men say that it was the Hoard of Andvari, and that when Fafnir, the dragon who watched it, was slain, the hero who slew him left it to be taken again by the swarthy elves who had gathered it; but because of a curse which Andvari had placed upon it, no one would touch it, until some man would assume its ownership, and take upon himself the risk of incurring the curse. This thing, it is said, our father did. And the dwarf Alberich undertook to keep it for him; and he, with the help of the ten thousand elves who live in these caverns, and the twelve giants whom you see standing on the mountain-peaks around, guarded it faithfully so long as our father lived. But, when he died, we and our thralls fetched it forth from the cavern, and spread it here on the ground. And, lo! for many days we have watched and tried to divide it equally. But we cannot agree.”

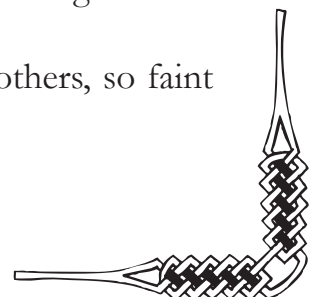
“What hire will you give me if I divide it for you?” asked Siegfried.

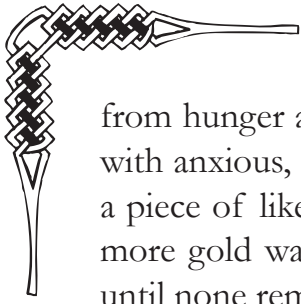
“Name what you will have,” answered the princes. “Give me the sword which lies before you on the glittering heap.”

Then Niblung handed him the sword, and said, “Right gladly will we give it. It is a worthless blade that our father brought from the South-land. They say that he found it also on the Glittering Heath, in the trench where Fafnir was slain. And some will have it that it was forged by Regin, Fafnir’s own brother. But how that is, I do not know. At any rate, it is of no use to us; for it turns against us whenever we try to use it.”

Siegfried took the sword. It was his own Balmung, that had been lost so long.

Forthwith he began the task of dividing the treasure; and the two brothers, so faint

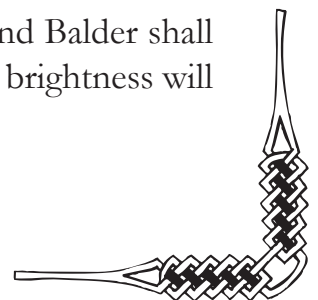


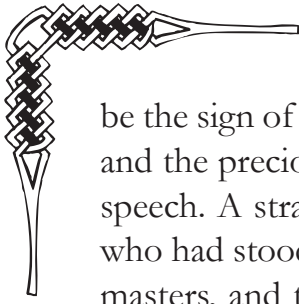


from hunger and want of sleep that they could scarcely lift their heads, watched him with anxious, greedy eyes. First he placed a piece of gold by Niblung's side, and then a piece of like value he gave to Schilbung. And this he did again and again, until no more gold was left. Then, in the same manner, he divided the precious gem-stones until none remained. And the brothers were much pleased; and they hugged their glittering treasures, and thanked Siegfried for his kindness, and for the fairness with which he had given to each his own. But one thing was left which had not fallen to the lot of either brother. It was a ring of curious workmanship,—a serpent coiled, with its tail in its mouth, and with ruby eyes glistening and cold.

“What shall I do with this ring?” asked Siegfried. “Give it to me!” cried Niblung. “Give it to me!” cried Schilbung. And both tried to snatch it from Siegfried's hand. But the effort was too great for them. Their arms fell helpless at their sides, their feet slipped beneath them, their limbs failed: they sank fainting, each upon his pile of treasures.

“O my dear, dear gold!” murmured Niblung, trying to clasp it all in his arms,—”my dear, dear gold! Thou art mine, mine only. No one shall take thee from me. Here thou art, here thou shalt rest. O my dear, dear gold!” And then, calling up the last spark of life left in his famished body, he cried out to Siegfried, “Give me the ring!—the ring, I say!” He hugged his cherished gold nearer to his bosom; he ran his thin fingers deep down into the shining yellow heap; he pressed his pale lips to the cold and senseless metal; he whispered faintly, “My dear, dear gold!” and then he died. “O precious, precious gem-stones,” faltered Schilbung, “how beautiful you are! And you are mine, all mine. I will keep you safe. Come, come, my bright-eyed beauties! No one but me shall touch you. You are mine, mine, mine!” And he chattered and laughed as only madmen laugh. And he kissed the hard stones, and sought to hide them in his bosom. But his hands trembled and failed, dark mists swam before his eyes; he fancied that he heard the black dwarfs clamoring for his treasure; he sprang up quickly, he shrieked—and then fell lifeless upon his hoard of sparkling gems. A strange, sad sight it was,—boundless wealth, and miserable death; two piles of yellow gold and sun-bright diamonds, and two thin, starved corpses stretched upon them. Some stories relate that the brothers were slain by Siegfried, because their foolish strife and greediness had angered him. But I like not to think so. It was the gold, and not Siegfried, that slew them. “O gold, gold!” cried the hero sorrowfully, “truly thou art the mid-world's curse; thou art man's bane. But when the bright spring-time of the new world shall come, and Balder shall reign in his glory, then will the curse be taken from thee, and thy yellow brightness will

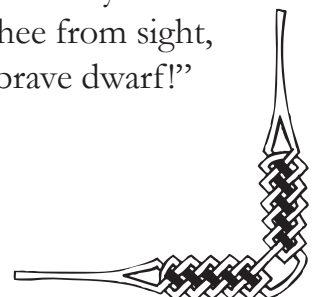


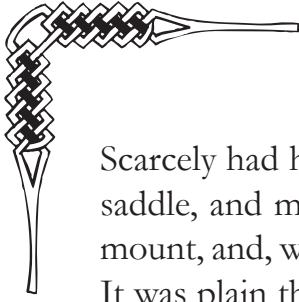


be the sign of purity and enduring worth; and then thou wilt be a blessing to mankind, and the precious plaything of the gods.” But Siegfried had little time for thought and speech. A strange sound was heard upon the mountain-side. The twelve great giants who had stood as watchmen upon the peaks above were rushing down to avenge their masters, and to drive the intruder out of Nibelungen Land. Siegfried waited not for their onset; but he mounted the noble horse Greyfell, and, with the sword Balmung in his hand, he rode forth to meet his foes, who, with fearful threats and hideous roars, came striding toward him. The sunbeams flashed from Greyfell’s mane, and dazzled the dull eyes of the giants, unused as they were to the full light of day. Doubtful, they paused, and then again came forward. But they mistook every tree in their way for an enemy, and every rock they thought a foe; and in their fear they fancied a great host to be before them. Did you ever see the dark and threatening storm-clouds on a summer’s day scattered and put to flight by the bright beams of the sun? It was thus that Siegfried’s giant foes were routed. One and all, they dropped their heavy clubs, and stood ashamed and trembling, not knowing what to do. And Siegfried made each one swear to serve him faithfully; and then he sent them back to the snow-covered mountain-peaks to stand again as watchmen at their posts.

And now another danger appeared. Alberich the dwarf, the master of the swarthy elves who guarded the Nibelungen Hoard, had come out from his cavern, and seen the two princes lying dead beside their treasures, and he thought that they had been murdered by Siegfried; and, when he beheld the giants driven back to the mountain-tops, he lifted a little silver horn to his lips, and blew a shrill bugle-call. And the little brown elves came trooping forth by thousands: from under every rock, from the nooks and crannies and crevices in the mountain-side, from the deep cavern and the narrow gorge, they came at the call of their chief. Then, at Alberich’s word, they formed in line of battle, and stood in order around the hoard and the bodies of their late masters. Their little golden shields and their sharp-pointed spears were thick as the blades of grass in a Rhine meadow. And Siegfried, when he saw them, was pleased and surprised; for never before had such a host of pygmy warriors stood before him.

While he paused and looked, the elves became suddenly silent, and Siegfried noticed that Alberich stood no longer at their head, but had strangely vanished from sight. “Ah, Alberich!” cried the hero. “Thou art indeed cunning. I have heard of thy tricks. Thou hast donned the Tarnkappe, the cloak of darkness, which hides thee from sight, and makes thee as strong as twelve common men. But come on, thou brave dwarf!”





Scarcely had he spoken, when he felt a shock which almost sent him reeling from his saddle, and made Greyfell plunge about with fright. Quickly, then, did Siegfried dismount, and, with every sense alert, he waited for the second onset of the unseen dwarf. It was plain that Alberich wished to strike him unawares, for many minutes passed in utter silence. Then a brisk breath of wind passed by Siegfried's face, and he felt another blow; but, by a quick downward movement of his hand, he caught the plucky elf-king, and tore off the magic Tarnkappe, and then, with firm grasp, he held him, struggling in vain to get free. "Ah, Alberich!" he cried, "now I know thou art cunning. But the Tarnkappe I must have for my own. What wilt thou give for thy freedom?"

"Worthy prince," answered Alberich humbly, "you have fairly overcome me in fight, and made me your prisoner. I and all mine, as well as this treasure, rightfully belong to you. We are yours, and you we shall obey." "Swear it!" said Siegfried. "Swear it, and thou shalt live, and be the keeper of my treasures." And Alberich made a sign to his elfin host, and every spear was turned point downwards, and every tiny shield was thrown to the ground, and the ten thousand little warriors kneeled, as did also their chief, and acknowledged Siegfried to be their rightful master, and the lord of the Nibelungen Land, and the owner of the Hoard of Andvari.

Then, by Alberich's orders, the elves carried the Hoard back into the cavern, and there kept faithful watch and ward over it. And they buried the starved bodies of the two princes on the top of the mist-veiled mountain; and heralds were sent to all the strongholds in Nibelungen Land, proclaiming that Siegfried, through his wisdom and might, had become the true lord and king of the land. Afterwards the prince, riding on the beaming Greyfell, went from place to place, scattering sunshine and smiles where shadows and frowns had been before. And the Nibelungen folk welcomed him everywhere with glad shouts and music and dancing; and ten thousand warriors, and many noble earl-folk, came to meet him, and plighted their faith to him. And the pure brightness of his hero-soul, and the gleaming sunbeams from Greyfell's mane,—the light of hope and faith,—lifted the curtain of mists and fogs that had so long darkened the land, and let in the glorious glad light of day and the genial warmth of summer.

