



The Story of Siegfried

adventure 12: The War with the North-Kings

by James Baldwin

So swiftly and so pleasantly the days went by, that weeks lengthened into months, and the spring-time passed, and the summer came, and still Siegfried lingered in Burgundy with his kind friends. The time was spent in all manner of joyance,—in hunting the deer in the deep oak-woods, in riding over the daisied meadows or among the fields of corn, in manly games and sports, in music and dancing, in feasting and in pleasant talk. And of all the noble folk who had ever sat at Gunther's table, or hunted in the Burgundian woods, none were so worthy or so fair as the proud young lord of the Nibelungens.

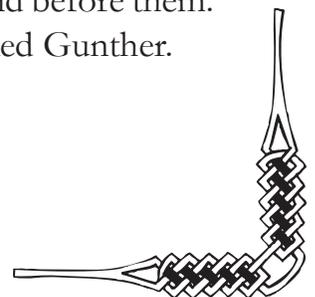
One day in early autumn a party of strange knights rode up to the castle, and asked to speak with the Burgundian kings. They were led straightway into the great hall; and Gunther and his brothers welcomed them, as was their wont, right heartily, and asked them from what country they had come, and what was their errand.

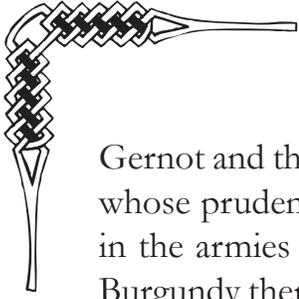
“We come,” they answered, “from the North country; and we bring word from our lords and kings, Leudiger and Leudigast.”

“And what would our kingly neighbors say to us?” asked Gunther.

Then the strangers said that their lords had become very angry with the Burgundian kings, and that they meant, within twelve weeks from that day, to come with a great army, and lay the country waste, and besiege their city and castle. All this they had sworn to do unless the Burgundians would make peace with them upon such terms as Leudiger and Leudigast should please to grant.

When Gunther and his brothers heard this, they were struck with dismay. But they ordered the messengers to be well cared for and handsomely entertained within the palace until the morrow, at which time they should have the Burgundians' answer. All the noblest knights and earl-folk were called together, and the matter was laid before them. “What answer shall we send to our rude neighbors of the North?” asked Gunther.





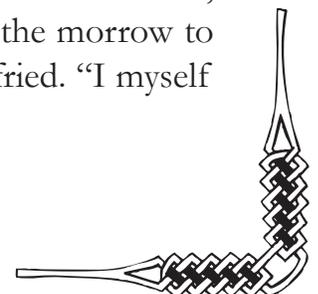
Gernot and the young Giselher declared at once for war. Old Hagen and other knights, whose prudence was at least equal to their bravery, said but little. It was known, that, in the armies of the North-kings, there were at least forty thousand soldiers; but in Burgundy there were not more than thirty thousand fighting-men, all told. The North-kings' forces were already equipped, and ready to march; but the Burgundians could by no means raise and arm any considerable body of men in the short space of twelve weeks. It would be the part of wisdom to delay, and to see what terms could best be made with their enemies. Such were the prudent counsels of the older knights, but Gernot and the young chief Volker would not listen to such words. "The Burgundians are not cowards," said they. "We have never been foiled in battle; never have we been the vassals of a stranger. Why, then, shall we cringe and cower before such men as Leudiger and Leudigast?"

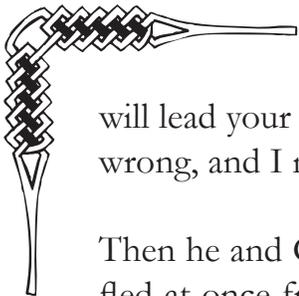
Then Hagen answered, "Let us ask our friend and guest Siegfried. Let us learn what he thinks about this business. Everybody knows that he is as wise in council as he is brave in the field. We will abide by what he says." But Gunther and Gernot and the young Giselher were unwilling to do this; for it was not their custom to annoy their guests with questions which should be allowed to trouble themselves alone. And the kings and their counsellors went out of the council-chamber, each to ponder in silence upon the troublesome question.

As Gunther, with downcast head and troubled brow, walked thoughtfully through the great hall, he unexpectedly met Siegfried.

"What evil tidings have you heard?" asked the prince, surprised at the strange mien of the king. "What has gone amiss, that should cause such looks of dark perplexity?" "That is a matter which I can tell only to friends long tried and true," answered Gunther. Siegfried was surprised and hurt by these words; and he cried out,—

"What more would Gunther ask of me that I might prove my friendship? Surely I have tried to merit his esteem and trust. Tell me what troubles you, and I will further show myself to be your friend both tried and true." Then Gunther was ashamed of the words he had spoken to his guest; and he took Siegfried into his own chamber, and told him all; and he asked him what answer they should send on the morrow to the overbearing North-kings. "Tell them we will fight," answered Siegfried. "I myself



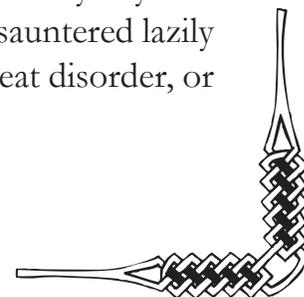


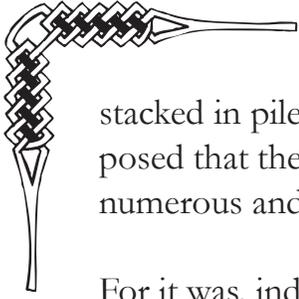
will lead your warriors to the fray. Never shall it be said that my friends have suffered wrong, and I not tried to help them.”

Then he and Gunther talked over the plans which they would follow. And the clouds fled at once from the brow of the king, and he was no longer troubled or doubtful; for he believed in Siegfried.

The next morning the heralds of the North-kings were brought again before Gunther and his brothers; and they were told to carry this word to their masters,— “The Burgundians will fight. They will make no terms with their enemies, save such as they make of their own free-will.”

Then the heralds were loaded with costly presents, and a company of knights and warriors went with them to the border-line of Burgundy; and, filled with wonder at what they had seen, they hastened back to their liege lords, and told all that had happened to them. And Leudiger and Leudigast were very wroth when they heard the answer which the Burgundians had sent to them; but, when they learned that the noble Siegfried was at Gunther’s castle, they shook their heads, and seemed to feel more doubtful of success. Many and busy were the preparations for war, and in a very few days all things were in readiness for the march northwards. It was settled that Siegfried with his twelve Nibelungen chiefs, and a thousand picked men, should go forth to battle against their boastful enemies. The dark-browed Hagen, as he had always done, rode at the head of the company, and by his side was Siegfried on the noble horse Greyfell. Next came Gernot and the bold chief Volker, bearing the standard, upon which a golden dragon was engraved; then followed Dankwart and Ortwin, and the twelve worthy comrades of Siegfried; and then the thousand warriors, the bravest in all Rhineland, mounted on impatient steeds, and clad in bright steel armor, with broad shields, and plumed helmets, and burnished swords, and sharp-pointed spears. And all rode proudly out through the great castle-gate. And Gunther and the young Giselher and all the fair ladies of the court bade them God-speed. The little army passed through the forest, and went northwards, until, on the fifth day, they reached the boundaries of Saxon Land. And Siegfried gave spur to his horse Greyfell, and, leaving the little army behind him, hastened forwards to see where the enemy was encamped. As he reached the top of a high hill, he saw the armies of the North-kings resting carelessly in the valley beyond. Knights, mounted on their horses, rode hither and thither: the soldiers sauntered lazily among the trees, or slept upon the grass; arms were thrown about in great disorder, or



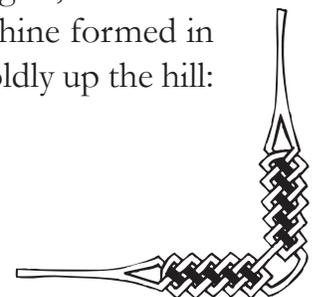


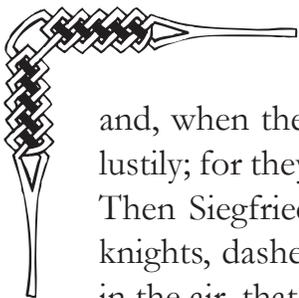
stacked in piles near the smoking camp-fires. No one dreamed of danger; but all supposed that the Burgundians were still at home, and would never dare to attack a foe so numerous and so strong.

For it was, indeed, a mighty army which Siegfried saw before him. Full forty thousand men were there; and they not only filled the valley, but spread over the hills beyond, and far to the right and left.

While he stood at the top of the hill, and gazed upon this sight, a warrior, who had spied him from below, rode up, and paused before him. Like two black thunder-clouds, with lightning flashing between, the two knights stood facing each other, and casting wrathful glances from beneath their visors. Then each spurred his horse, and charged with fury upon the other; and the heavy lances of both were broken in shivers upon the opposing shields. Then, quick as thought, they turned and drew their swords, and hand to hand they fought. But soon Siegfried, by an unlooked-for stroke, sent his enemy's sword flying from him, broken in a dozen pieces, and by a sudden movement he threw him from his horse. The heavy shield of the fallen knight was no hinderance to the quick strokes of Siegfried's sword; and his glittering armor, soiled by the mud into which he had been thrown, held him down. He threw up his hands, and begged for mercy. "I am Leudigast the king!" he cried. "Spare my life. I am your prisoner."

Siegfried heard the prayer of the discomfited king; and, lifting him from the ground, he helped him to remount his charger. But, while he was doing this, thirty warriors, who had seen the combat from below, came dashing up the hill to the rescue of their liege-lord. Siegfried faced about with his horse Greyfell, and quietly waited for their onset. But, as they drew near, they were so awed by the noble bearing and grand proportions of the hero, and so astonished at sight of the sunbeam mane of Greyfell, and the cold glitter of the blade Balmung, that in sudden fright they stopped, then turned, and fled in dismay down the sloping hillside, nor paused until they were safe among their friends. In the mean while Leudiger, the other king, seeing what was going on at the top of the hill, had caused an alarm to be sounded; and all his hosts had hastily arranged themselves in battle-array. At the same time Hagen and Gernot, and their little army of heroes, hove in sight, and came quickly to Siegfried's help, and the dragon-banner was planted upon the crest of the hill. The captive king, Leudigast, was taken to the rear, and a guard was placed over him. The champions of the Rhine formed in line, and faced their foes. The great army of the North-kings moved boldly up the hill:





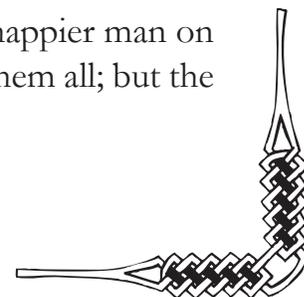
and, when they saw how few were the Burgundians, they laughed and cheered most lustily; for they felt that the odds was in their favor—and forty to one is no small odds. Then Siegfried and his twelve comrades, and Hagen and the thousand Burgundian knights, dashed upon them with the fury of the whirlwind. The lances flew so thick in the air, that they hid the sun from sight; swords flashed on every side; the sound of clashing steel, and horses' hoofs, and soldiers' shouts, filled earth and sky with a horrid din. And soon the boastful foes of the Burgundians were everywhere worsted, and thrown into disorder. Siegfried dashed hither and thither, from one part of the field to another, in search of King Leudiger. Thrice he cut his way through the ranks, and at last he met face to face the one for whom he sought.

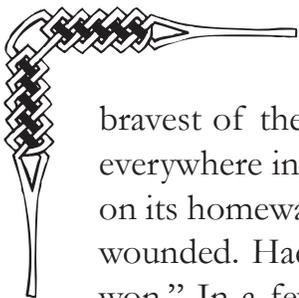
King Leudiger saw the flashing sunbeams that glanced from Greyfell's mane, he saw the painted crown upon the hero's broad shield, and then he felt the fearful stroke of the sword Balmung, as it clashed against his own, and cut it clean in halves. He dropped his weapons, raised his visor, and gave himself up as a prisoner.

“Give up the fight, my brave fellows,” he cried. “This is Siegfried the brave, the Prince of the Lowlands, and the Lord of Nibelungen Land. It were foolishness to fight against him. Save yourselves as best you can.” This was the signal for a frightful panic. All turned and fled. Each thought of nothing but his own safety; and knights and warriors, horsemen and foot-soldiers, in one confused mass, throwing shields and weapons here and there, rushed wildly down the hill, and through the valley and ravines, and sought, as best they could, their way homeward. The Burgundian heroes were the masters of the field, and on the morrow they turned their faces joyfully towards Rhineland. And all joined in saying that to Siegfried was due the praise for this wonderful victory which they had gained.

Heralds had been sent on the fleetest horses to carry the glad news to Burgundy; and when, one morning, they dashed into the court-yard of the castle, great was the anxiety to know what tidings they brought. And King Gunther, and the young Giselher, and the peerless Kriemhild, came out to welcome them, and eagerly to inquire what had befallen the heroes. With breathless haste the heralds told the story of all that had happened.

“And how fares our brother Gernot?” asked Kriemhild. “There is no happier man on earth,” answered the herald. “In truth, there was not a coward among them all; but the

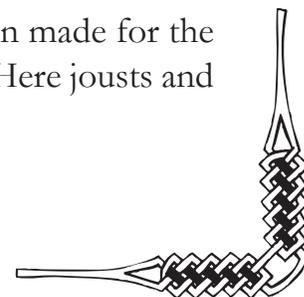




bravest of the brave was Siegfried. He it was who took the two kings prisoners; and everywhere in the thickest of the fight there was Siegfried. And now our little army is on its homeward march, with a thousand prisoners, and large numbers of the enemy's wounded. Had it not been for the brave Siegfried, no such victory could have been won." In a few days the Rhine champions reached their home. And gayly were the castle and all the houses in the city decked in honor of them. And all those who had been left behind went out to meet them as they came down from the forest-road, and drew near to the castle. And the young girls strewed flowers in their path, and hung garlands upon their horses; and music and song followed the heroes into the city, and through the castle-gate.

When they reached the palace, the two prisoner kings, Leudiger and Leudigast, were loosed from their bonds, and handsomely entertained at Gunther's table. And the Burgundian kings assured them that they should be treated as honored guests, and have the freedom of the court and castle, if they would pledge themselves not to try to escape from Burgundy until terms of peace should be agreed upon. This pledge they gladly gave, and rich apartments in the palace were assigned for their use. Like favors were shown to all the prisoners, according to their rank; and the wounded were kindly cared for. And the Burgundians made ready for a gay high-tide,—a glad festival of rejoicing, to be held at the next full moon.

When the day drew near which had been set for this high-tide, the folk from all parts of Rhineland began to flock towards the city. They came in companies, with music and laughter, and the glad songs of the spring-time. And all the knights were mounted on gallant horses caparisoned with gold-red saddles, from which hung numbers of tinkling silver bells. As they rode up the sands towards the castle-gate, with their dazzling shields upon their saddle-bows, and their gay and many-colored banners floating in the air, King Gernot and the young Giselher, with the noblest knights of the fortress, went courteously out to meet them; and the friendly greetings which were offered by the two young kings won the hearts of all. Thirty and two princes and more than five thousand warriors came as bidden guests. The city and castle were decked in holiday attire, and all the people in the land gave themselves up to enjoyment. The sick and the wounded, who until now had thought themselves at death's door, forgot their ailments and their pains as they heard the shouts of joy and the peals of music in the streets. In a green field outside of the city walls, arrangements had been made for the games, and galleries and high stages had been built for the lookers-on. Here jousts and





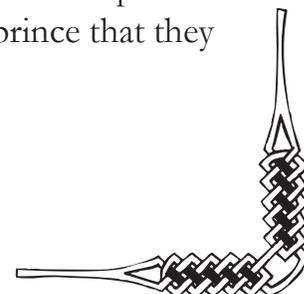
tournaments were held, and the knights and warriors engaged in trials of strength and skill. When King Gunther saw with what keen enjoyment both his own people and his guests looked upon these games, and took part in the gay festivities, he asked of those around him,—

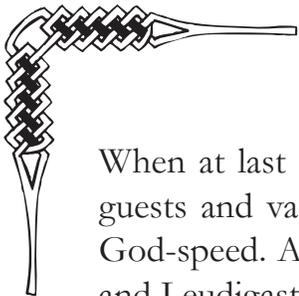
“What more can we do to heighten the pleasures of the day?” And one of his counsellors answered,— “My lord, the ladies of the court, and the little children, pine in silence in the sunless rooms of the palace, while we enjoy the free air and light of heaven, the music, and the gay scenes before us. There is nothing wanting to make this day’s joy complete, save the presence of our dear ones to share these pleasures with us.”

Gunther was delighted to hear these words; and he sent a herald to the palace, and invited all the ladies of the court and all the children to come out and view the games, and join in the general gladness.

When Dame Ute heard the message which the herald brought from her kingly son, she hastened to make ready rich dresses and costly jewels wherewith to adorn the dames and damsels of the court. And, when all were in readiness, the peerless Kriemhild, with her mother at her side, went forth from the castle; and a hundred knights, all sword in hand, went with her as a body-guard, and a great number of noble ladies dressed in rich attire followed her. As the red dawn peers forth from behind gray clouds, and drives the mists and shadows away from earth, so came the lovely one. As the bright full moon in radiant splendor moves in queen-like beauty before her train of attendant stars, and outshines them all, so was Kriemhild the most glorious among all the noble ladies there. And the thousand knights and warriors paused in their games, and greeted the peerless princess as was due to one so noble and fair. Upon the highest platform, under a rich canopy of cloth-of-gold, seats were made ready for the maiden and her mother and the fair ladies in their train; and all the most worthy princes in Rhineland sat around, and the games were begun again.

For twelve days the gay high-tide lasted, and nought was left undone whereby the joy might be increased. And of all the heroes and princes who jousted in the tournament, or took part in the games, none could equal the unassuming Siegfried; and his praises were heard on every hand, and all agreed that he was the most worthy prince that they had ever seen.





When at last the festal days came to an end, Gunther and his brothers called their guests and vassals around them, and loaded them with costly gifts, and bade them God-speed. And tears stood in the eyes of all at parting. The captive kings, Leudiger and Leudigast, were not forgotten.

“What will ye give me for your freedom?” asked King Gunther, half in jest.

They answered,—

“If you will allow us without further hinderance to go back to our people, we pledge our lives and our honor that we will straightway send you gold, as much as half a thousand horses can carry.”

Then Gunther turned to Siegfried, and said,— “What think you, friend Siegfried, of such princely ransom?” “Noble lord,” said Siegfried, “I think you are in need of no such ransom. Friendship is worth much more than gold. If your kingly captives will promise, on their honor, never more to come towards Burgundy as enemies, let them go. We have no need of gold.”

“Tis well said,” cried Gunther highly pleased. And Leudiger and Leudigast, with tears of thankfulness, gladly made the asked-for promise, and on the morrow, with light hearts and costly gifts, they set out on their journey homewards.

When all the guests had gone, and the daily routine of idle palace-life set in again, Siegfried began to talk of going back to Nibelungen Land. But young Giselher, and the peerless Kriemhild, and King Gunther, besought him to stay yet a little longer. And he yielded to their kind wishes. And autumn passed away with its fruits and its vintage, and grim old winter came howling down from the north, and Siegfried was still in Burgundy. And then old Hoder, the king of the winter months, came blustering through the Rhine valley; and with him were the Reifriesen,—the thieves that steal the daylight from the earth and the warmth from the sun. And they nipped the flowers, and withered the grass, and stripped the trees, and sealed up the rivers, and covered the earth with a white mantle of sorrow. But within King Gunther’s wide halls there was joy and good cheer. And the season of the Yule-feast came, and still Siegfried tarried in Burgundy-land.

