



The Story of Siegfried

adventure 14: How Gunther Outwitted Brunhild

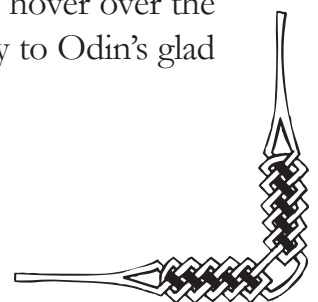
by James Baldwin

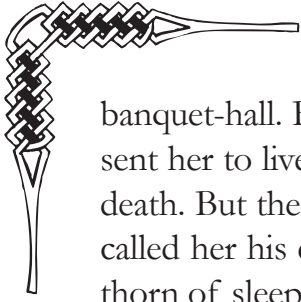
While still the festivities were at their height, an old man of noble mien, and with snow-white beard and hair, came into the great hall, and sang for the gay company. And some whispered that this must be Bragi, for surely such rare music could not be made by any other. But he sang not of spring, as Bragi does, nor yet of youth nor of beauty, nor like one whose home is with the song-birds, and who lives beside the babbling brooks and the leaping waterfalls. His song was a sorrowful one,—of dying flowers, and falling leaves, and the wailing winds of autumn, of forgotten joys, of blasted hopes, of a crushed ambition, of gray hairs, of uttering footsteps, of old age, of a lonely grave. And, as he sang, all were moved to tears by the mournful melody and the sad, sad words.

“Good friend,” said Siegfried, “thy music agrees not well with this time and place; for, where nothing but mirth and joy are welcome, thou hast brought sorrowful thoughts and gloomy forebodings. Come, now, and undo the harm thou hast done, by singing a song which shall tell only of mirth and gladness.”

The old man shook his head, and answered, “Were I Bragi; as some think I am, or were I even a strolling harper, I might do as you ask. But I am neither, and I know no gladsome songs. Men have called me a messenger of ill omen; and such, indeed, I have sometimes been, although through no wish of my own. I come as a herald from a far-off land, and I bear a message to all the kings and the noblest chiefs of Rhineland. If King Gunther will allow me, I will now make that message known.”

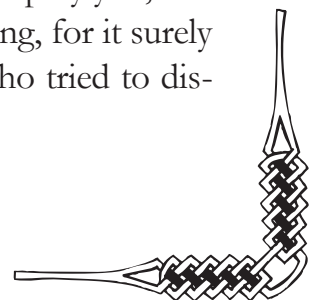
“Let the herald speak on,” said Gunther graciously. “Far over the sea,” said the herald, “there lies a dreamy land called Isenland; and in that land there is a glorious castle, with six and eighty towers, built of purest marble, green as grass. In that castle there lives the fairest of all Earth’s daughters, Brunhild, the maiden of the spring-time. In the early days she was one of Odin’s Valkyrien; and with other heavenly maidens it was her duty to follow, unseen, in the wake of armies, and when they met in battle to hover over the field, and with kisses to waken the dead heroes, and lead their souls away to Odin’s glad

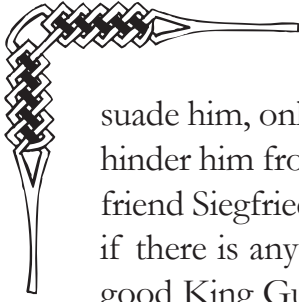




banquet-hall. But upon a day she failed to do the All-Father's bidding, and he, in anger, sent her to live among men, and like them to be short-lived, and subject to old age and death. But the childless old king of Isenland took pity upon the friendless maiden, and called her his daughter, and made her his heir. Then Odin, still more angered, sent the thorn of sleep to wound the princess. And sleep seized upon every creature in Isenland, and silence reigned in the halls of the marble palace. For Odin said, "Thus shall they all sleep until the hero comes, who will ride through fire, and awaken Brunhild with a kiss." "At last the hero so long waited for came. He passed the fiery barrier safe, and awoke the slumbering maiden; and all the castle sprang suddenly into life again. And Brunhild became known once more as the most glorious princess in this mid-world. But the sun-bright hero who freed her from her prison of sleep vanished from Isenland, and no one knew where he went; but men say that he rides through the noble world, the fairest and the best of kings. And Brunhild has sought for him in many lands; and, although all folk have heard of his deeds, none know where he dwells. And so, as a last resort, she has sent heralds into every land to challenge every king to match his skill with hers in three games of strength,—in casting the spear, in hurling the heavy stone, and in leaping. The one who can equal her in these feats shall be king of Isenland, and share with her the throne of Isenstein. And by this means she hopes to find the long-absent hero; for she believes that there is no other prince on earth whose strength and skill are equal to her own. Many men have already risked their lives in this adventure, and all have failed.

"And now, King Gunther," continued the herald, "I have come by her orders into Rhineland, and I deliver the challenge to you. If you accept, and are beaten, your life is forfeited. If you succeed, the fairest kingdom and the most beautiful queen in the world are yours; for you will have proved that you are at least the equal of the hero whom she seeks. What reply shall I carry back to Isenland?" King Gunther answered hastily, and as one dazed and in a dream, "Say that I accept the challenge, and that when the spring-time comes again, and the waters in the river are unlocked, I shall go to Isenland, and match my skill and strength with that of the fair and mighty Brunhild." All who stood around were greatly astonished at Gunther's reply; for, although his mind was somewhat weak, he was not given to rash and hazardous undertakings. And Siegfried, who was at his side, whispered, "Think twice, friend Gunther, ere you decide. You do not know the strength of this mighty but lovely warrior-maiden. Were your strength four times what it is, you could not hope to excel her in those feats. Give up this hasty plan, I pray you, and recall your answer to the challenge. Think no more of such an undertaking, for it surely will cost you your life." But these warnings, and the words of others who tried to dis-





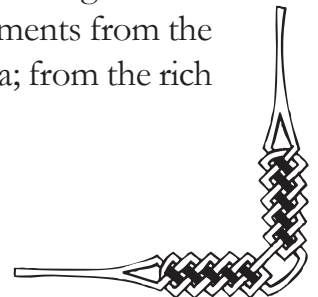
suade him, only made Gunther the more determined; and he vowed that nothing should hinder him from undertaking the adventure. Then the dark-browed Hagen said,—“Our friend Siegfried seems to know much about Isenland and its maiden-queen. And indeed, if there is any truth in hearsay, he has had the best of means for learning. Now, if our good King Gunther has set his mind on going upon this dangerous enterprise, mayhap Siegfried would be willing to bear him company.”

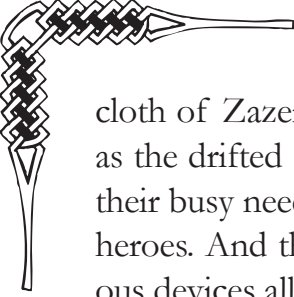
Gunther was pleased with Hagen’s words; and he said to Siegfried, “My best of friends, go with me to Isenland, and help me. If we do well in our undertaking, ask of me any reward you wish, and I will give it you, so far as in my power lies.”

“You know, kind Gunther,” answered Siegfried, “that for myself I have no fear; and yet again I would warn you to shun the unknown dangers with which this enterprise is fraught. But if, after all, your heart is set upon it, make ready to start as soon as the warm winds shall have melted the ice from the river. I will go with you.” The king grasped Siegfried’s hand, and thanked him heartily. “We must build a fleet,” said he. “A thousand fighting-men shall go with us, and we will land in Isenland with a retinue such as no other prince has had. A number of stanch vessels shall be built at once, and in the early spring they shall be launched upon the Rhine.” Siegfried was amused at Gunther’s earnestness, and he answered, “Do not think of taking such a following. You would waste twelve months in building and victualling such a fleet. You would take from Burgundy its only safeguard against foes from without; and, after you should reach Isenland, you would find such a large force to be altogether useless. Take my advice: have one small vessel built and rigged and victualled for the long and dangerous voyage; and, when the time shall come, you and I, and your kinsmen Hagen and Dankwart,—we four only,—will undertake the voyage and the emprise you have decided upon.” Gunther knew that his friend’s judgment in this matter was better than his own, and he agreed readily to all of Siegfried’s plans.

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When, at length, the winter months began to wane, many hands were busy making ready for the voyage. The peerless Kriemhild called together thirty of her maidens, the most skilful seamstresses in Burgundyland, and began the making of rich clothing for her brother and his friends.[EN#24] With her own fair hands she cut out garments from the rarest stuffs,—from the silky skins brought from the sunny lands of Lybia; from the rich





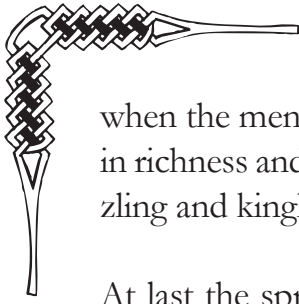
cloth of Zazemang, green as clover; from the silk that traders bring from Araby, white as the drifted snow. For seven weeks the clever maidens and their gentle mistress plied their busy needles, and twelve suits of wondrous beauty they made for each of the four heroes. And the princely garments were covered with fine needle-work, and with curious devices all studded with rare and costly jewels; and all were wrought with threads of gold.



Many carpenters and ship-builders were busy with axes and hammers, and flaming forges, working day and night to make ready a vessel new and stanch, to carry the adventurers over the sea. And great stores of food, and of all things needful to their safety or comfort, were brought together and put on board.

Neither were the heroes themselves idle; for when not busy in giving directions to the workmen, or in overseeing the preparations that were elsewhere going on, they spent the time in polishing their armor (now long unused), in looking after their weapons, or in providing for the management of their business while away. And Siegfried forgot not his trusty sword Balmung, nor his cloak of darkness the priceless Tarnkappe, which he had captured from the dwarf Alberich in the Nibelungen Land.

Then the twelve suits of garments which fair fingers had wrought were brought. And



when the men tried them on, so faultless was the fit, so rare and perfect was every piece in richness and beauty, that even the wearers were amazed, and all declared that such dazzling and kingly raiment had never before been seen.

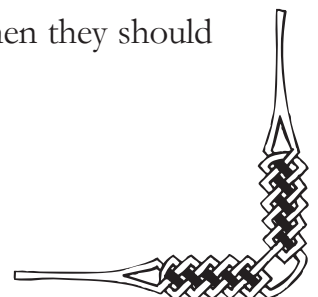
At last the spring months had fairly vanquished all the forces of the cold North-land. The warm breezes had melted the snow and ice, and unlocked the river; and the time had come for Gunther and his comrades to embark. The little ship, well victualled, and made stanch and stout in every part, had been launched upon the Rhine; and she waited with flying streamers and impatient sails the coming of her crew. Down the sands at length they came, riding upon their steeds; and behind them followed a train of vassals bearing their kingly garments and their gold-red shields. And on the banks stood many of the noblest folk of Burgundy,—Gernot and the young Giselher, and Ute the queen-mother, and Kriemhild the peerless, and a number of earl-folk, and warriors, and fair dames, and blushing damsels. And the heroes bade farewell to their weeping friends, and went upon the waiting vessel, taking their steeds with them. And Siegfried seized an oar, and pushed the bark off from the shore.

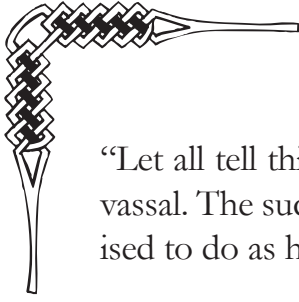
“I myself will be the steersman, for I know the way,” he said.

And the sails were unfurled to the brisk south wind, and the vessel sped swiftly toward the sea; and many fair eyes were filled tears as they watched it until it could be seen no more. And with sighs and gloomy forebodings the good people went back to their homes, and but few hoped ever again to see their king and his brave comrades.

Driven by favorable winds, the trusty little vessel sailed gayly down the Rhine, and, ere many days had passed, was out in the boundless sea. For a long time the heroes sailed and rowed through Old AEGir’s watery kingdom. But they kept good cheer, and their hearts rose higher and higher; for each day they drew nearer the end of their voyage and the goal of their hopes. At length they came in sight of a far-reaching coast and a lovely land; and not far from the shore they saw a noble fortress, with a number of tall towers pointing toward the sky.

“What land is that?” asked the king. And Siegfried answered that it was Isenland, and that the fortress which they saw was the Castle of Isenstein and the green marble hall of the Princess Brunhild. But he warned his friends to be very wary when they should arrive at the hall.





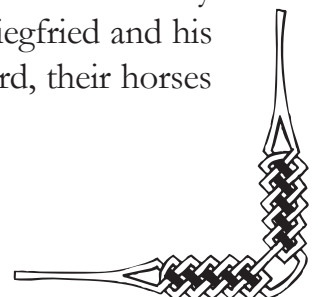
“Let all tell this story,” said he: “say that Gunther is the king, and that I am his faithful vassal. The success of our undertaking depends on this.” And his three comrades promised to do as he advised.

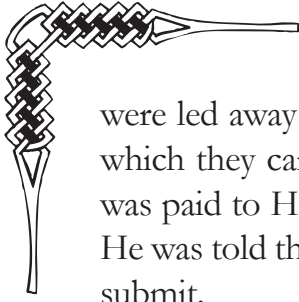
As the vessel neared the shore, the whole castle seemed to be alive. From every tower and turret-window, from every door and balcony, lords and ladies, fighting-men and serving-men, looked out to see what strangers these were who came thus unheralded to Isenland. The heroes went on shore with their steeds, leaving the vessel moored to the bank; and then they rode slowly up the beach, and across the narrow plain, and came to the drawbridge and the great gateway, where they paused.

The matchless Brunhild in her chamber had been told of the coming of the strangers; and she asked the maidens who stood around,—

“Who, think you, are the unknown warriors who thus come boldly to Isenstein without asking leave? What is their bearing? Do they seem to be worthy of our notice? or are they some straggling beggars who have lost their way?” And one of the maidens, looking through the casement, answered, “The first is a king, I know, from his noble mien and the respect which his fellows pay to him. But the second bears himself with a prouder grace, and seems the noblest of them all. He reminds me much of the brave young Siegfried of former days. Indeed, it must be Siegfried; for he rides a steed with sunbeam mane, which can be none other than Greyfell. The third is a dark and gloomy man: he wears a sullen frown upon his brow, and his eyes seem to shoot quick glances around. How nervously he grasps his sword-hilt, as if ever guarding against surprise! I think his temper must be grim and fiery, and his heart a heart of flint. The fourth and last of the company is young and fair, and of gentle port. Little business has he with rude warriors; and many tears, methinks, would be shed for him at home should harm overtake him. Never before have I seen so noble a company of strangers in Isenland. Their garments are of dazzling lustre; their saddles are covered with gem-stones; their weapons are of unequalled brightness. Surely they are worthy of your notice.”

When Brunhild heard that Siegfried was one of the company, she was highly pleased, and she hastened to make ready to meet them in the great hall. And she sent ten worthy lords to open the gate, and to welcome the heroes to Isenland. When Siegfried and his comrades passed through the great gateway, and came into the castle-yard, their horses

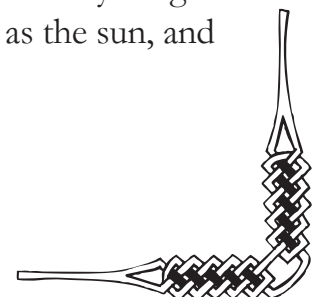


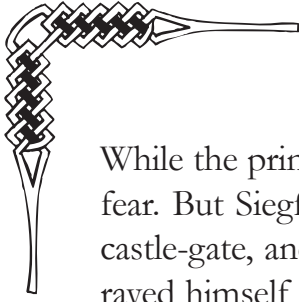


were led away to the stables, and the clanging armor and the broad shields and swords which they carried were taken from them, and placed in the castle armory. Little heed was paid to Hagen's surly complaint at thus having every means of defense taken away. He was told that such had always been the rule at Isenstein, and that he, like others, must submit.

After a short delay the heroes were shown into the great hall, where the matchless Brunhild already was awaiting them. Clad in richest raiment, from every fold of which rare jewels gleamed, and wearing a coronet of pearls and gold, the warrior-maiden sat on a throne of snow-white ivory. Five hundred earl-folk and warriors, the bravest in Isenland, stood around her with drawn swords, and fierce, determined looks. Surely men of mettle less heroic than that of the four knights from Rhineland would have quaked with fear in such a presence.

King Gunther and his comrades went forward to salute the queen. With a winning smile she kindly greeted them, and then said to Siegfried, "Gladly do we welcome you back to our land, friend Siegfried, We have ever remembered you as our best friend. May we ask what is your will, and who are these warriors whom you have with you?" "Most noble queen," answered he, "right thankful am I that you have not forgotten me, and that you should deign to notice me while in the presence of this my liege lord," and he pointed towards King Gunther. "The king of all Burgundy-land, whose humble vassal I am, has heard the challenge you have sent into different lands, and he has come to match his strength with yours." "Does he know the conditions?" asked Brunhild. "He does," was the answer. "In case of success, the fairest of women for his queen: in case of failure, death." "Yet scores of worthy men have made trial, and all have failed," said she. "I warn your liege lord to pause, and weigh well the chances ere he runs so great a risk." Then Gunther stepped forward and spoke:—"The chances, fairest queen, have all been weighed, and nothing can change our mind. Make your own terms, arrange every thing as pleases you best. We accept your challenge, and ask to make a trial of our strength." The warrior-maiden, without more words, bade her servants help her to make ready at once for the contest. She donned a rich war-coat, brought long ago from the far-off Lybian shores,—an armor which, it was said, no sword could dint, and upon which the heaviest stroke of spear fell harmless. Her hemlet was edged with golden lace, and sparkled all over with rich gem-stones. Her lance, of wondrous length, a heavy weight for three stout men, was brought. Her shield was as broad and as bright as the sun, and three spans thick with steel and gold.





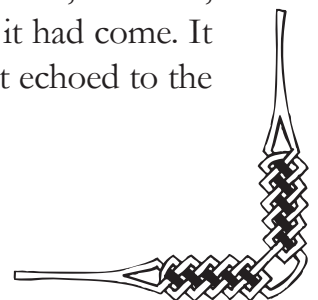
While the princess was thus arming herself, the heroes looked on with amazement and fear. But Siegfried, unnoticed, hastened quietly out of the hall, and through the open castle-gate, and sped like the wind to the seashore and to their little ship. There he arrayed himself in the Tarnkappe, and then, silent and unseen, he ran back to his friends in the great hall.

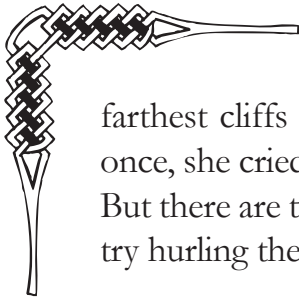
“Be of good cheer,” he whispered in the ears of the trembling Gunther.

But the king could not see who it was that spoke to him, so well was the hero hidden in the cloak of darkness. Yet he knew that it must be Siegfried and he felt greatly encouraged.

Hagen’s frowning face grew darker, and the uneasy glances which shot from beneath his shaggy eyebrows were not those of fear, but of anger and deep anxiety. Dankwart gave up all as lost, and loudly bewailed their folly. “Must we, unarmed, stand still and see our liege lord slain for a woman’s whim?” he cried. “Had we only our good swords, we might defy this maiden-queen and all her Isenland.” Brunhild overheard his words. Scornfully she called to her servants, “Bring to these boasters their armor, and let them have their keen-edged swords. Brunhild has no fear of such men, whether they be armed or unarmed.” When Hagen and Dankwart felt their limbs again enclosed in steel, and when they held their trusty swords in hand, their uneasiness vanished, and hope returned.

In the castle-yard a space was cleared, and Brunhild’s five hundred warriors stood around as umpires. The unseen Siegfried kept close by Gunther’s side. “Fear not,” he said. “Do my bidding, and you are safe. Let me take your shield. When the time comes, make you the movements, and trust me to do the work.” Then Brunhild threw her spear at Gunther’s shield. The mighty weapon sped through the air with the swiftness of lightning; and, when it struck the shield, both Gunther and the unseen Siegfried fell to the ground, borne down by its weight and the force with which it was thrown. Blood gushed from the nostrils of both; and sad would have been their fate if the friendly Tarnkappe had not hidden Siegfried from sight, and given him the strength of twelve giants. Quickly they rose. And Gunther seemed to pick up the heavy shaft, but it was really Siegfried who raised it from the ground. For one moment he poised the great beam in the air, and then, turning the blunt end foremost, he sent it flying back more swiftly than it had come. It struck the huge shield which Brunhild held before her, with a sound that echoed to the





farthest cliffs of Isenland. The warrior-maiden was dashed to the earth; but, rising at once, she cried,— “That was a noble blow, Sir Gunther. I confess myself fairly outdone. But there are two chances yet, and you will do well if you equal me in those. We will now try hurling the stone, and jumping.”

Twelve men came forward, carrying a huge rough stone in weight a ton or more. And Brunhild raised this mass of rock in her white arms, and held it high above her head; then she swung it backwards once, and threw it a dozen fathoms across the castle-yard. Scarcely had it reached the ground when the mighty maiden leaped after, and landed just beside it. And the thousand lookers-on shouted in admiration. But old Hagen bit his unshorn lip, and cursed the day that had brought them to Isenland.

Gunther and the unseen Siegfried, not at all disheartened, picked up the heavy stone, which was half buried in the ground, and, lifting it with seeming ease, threw it swiftly forward. Not twelve, but twenty, fathoms it flew; and Siegfried, snatching up Gunther in his arms, leaped after, and landed close to the castle-wall. And Brunhild believed that Gunther alone had done these great feats through his own strength and skill; and she at once acknowledged herself beaten in the games, and bade her vassals do homage to Gunther as their rightful liege lord.

Alas that the noblest of men-folk should have stooped to such deed of base deception! The punishment, although long delayed, came surely at last; for not even the highest are exempt from obedience to Heaven’s behests and the laws of right.

When the contest was ended, the unseen Siegfried ran quickly back to the little ship, and hastily doffed the magic Tarnkappe. Then, in his own form, he returned to the castle, and leisurely entered the castle-yard. When he met his pleased comrades and the vanquished maiden-queen, he asked in careless tones when the games would begin. All who heard his question laughed; and Brunhild said,— “Surely, Sir Siegfried, the old sleep-thorn of Isenstein must have caught you, and held you in your ship. The games are over, and Gunther, your liege lord, is the winner.” At this news Siegfried seemed much delighted, as indeed he was. And all went together to the great banquet-hall, where a rich feast was served to our heroes and to the worthy earl-folk and warriors of Isenland.

