

CHAPTER IX.

REVENGE, AND ITS FRUITS.

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

MASSINGER.

BUT 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 foetid berries had impregnated the air with a wide-spread miasma of death and desolation.

