

FAMOUS MEN OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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Introduction

The Gods of the Teutons

In the little volume called *The Famous Men of Rome* you have read about the great empire which the Romans established. Now we come to a time when the power of Rome was broken and tribes of barbarians who lived north of the Danube and the Rhine took possession of lands that had been part of the Roman Empire. These tribes were the Goths, Vandals, Huns, Franks and Anglo-Saxons. From them have come the greatest nations of modern times. All except the Huns belonged to the same race and are known as Teutons. They were war-like, savage and cruel. They spoke the same language--though in different dialects--and worshiped the same gods. Like the old Greeks and Romans they had many gods.

Woden, who was also called Odin, was the greatest of all. His name means "mighty warrior," and he was king of all the gods. He rode through the air mounted on Sleipnir, an eightfooted horse fleetier than the eagle. When the tempest roared the Teutons said it was the snorting of Sleipnir. When their ships came safely into port they said it was Woden's breath that had filled their sails and wafted their vessels over the blue waters.

Thor, a son of Woden, ranked next to him among the gods. He rode through the air in a chariot drawn by goats. The Germans called him Donar and Thunar, words which are like our word thunder. From this we can see that he was the thunder god. In his hand he carried a wonderful hammer which always came back to his hand when he threw it. Its head was so bright that as it flew through the air it made the lightning. When it struck the vast ice mountains they reeled and splintered into fragments, and thus Thor's hammer made thunder.

Another great god of our ancestors was Tiew. He was a son of Woden and was the god of battle. He was armed with a sword which flashed like lightning when he brandished it. A savage chief named Attila routed the armies of the Romans and so terrified all the world that he was called "The Scourge of God." His people believed that he gained his victories because he had the sword of Tiew, which a herdsman chanced to find where the god had allowed it to fall. The Teutons prayed to Tiew when they went into battle.

Frija (free' ya) was the wife of Woden and the queen of the gods. She ruled the bright clouds that gleam in the summer sky, and caused them to pour their showers on meadow and forest and mountain.

Four of the days of the week are named after these gods. Tuesday means the day of Tiew; Wednesday, the day of Woden; Thursday, the day of Thor; and Friday, the day of Frija.

Frija's son was Baldur; who was the favorite of all the gods. Only Loki, the spirit of evil, hated him. Baldur's face was as bright as sunshine. His hair gleamed like burnished gold. Wherever he went night was turned into day.

One morning when he looked toward earth from his father Woden's palace black clouds covered the sky, but he saw a splendid rainbow reaching down from the clouds to the earth. Baldur walked upon this rainbow from the home of the gods to the dwellings of men. The rainbow was a bridge upon which the gods used to come to earth.

When Baldur stepped from the rainbow-bridge to the earth he saw a king's daughter so beautiful that he fell in love with her.

But an earthly prince had also fallen in love with her. So he and Baldur fought for her hand. Baldur was a god and hence was very much stronger than the prince. But some of Baldur's magic food was given to the prince and it made him as strong as Baldur.

Frija heard about this and feared that Baldur was doomed to be killed. So she went to every beast on the land and every fish of the sea and every bird of the air and to every tree of the wood and every plant of the field and made each promise not to hurt Baldur.

But she forgot the mistletoe. So Loki, who always tried to do mischief, made an arrow of mistletoe, and gave it to the prince who shot and killed Baldur with it.

Then all the gods wept, the summer breeze wailed, the leaves fell from the sorrowing trees, the flowers faded and died from grief, and the earth grew stiff and cold. Bruin, the bear, and his neighbors, the hedgehogs and squirrels, crept into holes and refused to eat for weeks and weeks.

The pleasure of all living things in Baldur's presence means the happiness that the sunlight brings. The sorrow of all living things at his death means the gloom of northern countries when winter comes.

The Valkyries were beautiful female warriors. They had some of Woden's own strength and were armed with helmet and shield and spear. Like Woden, they rode unseen through the air and their horses were almost as swift as Sleipnir himself. They swiftly carried Woden's favorite warriors to Valhalla, the hall of the slain. The walls of Valhalla were hung with shields; its ceiling glittered with polished spearheads. From its five hundred and forty gates, each wide enough for eight hundred men abreast to march through, the warriors rushed every morning to fight a battle that lasted till nightfall and began again at the break of each day. When the heroes returned to Valhalla the Valkyries served them with goblets of mead such as Woden drank himself.

The Teutons believed that before there were any gods or any world there was a great empty space where the world now is. It was called by the curious name Ginnungagap, which means a yawning abyss.

To the north of Ginnungagap it was bitterly cold. Nothing was there but fields of snow and mountains of ice. To the south of Ginnungagap was a region where frost and snow were never seen. It was always bright, and was the home of light and heat. The sunshine from the South melted the ice mountains of the North so that they toppled over and fell into Ginnungagap. There they were changed into a frost giant whose name was Ymir

(e'mir). He had three sons. They and their father were so strong that the gods were afraid of them.

So Woden and his brothers killed Ymir. They broke his body in pieces and made the world of them. His bones and teeth became mountains and rocks; his hair became leaves for trees and plants; out of his skull was made the sky.

But Ymir was colder than ice, and the earth that was made of his body was so cold that nothing could live or grow upon it. So the gods took sparks from the home of light and set them in the sky. Two big ones were the sun and moon and the little ones were the stars. Then the earth became warm. Trees grew and flowers bloomed, so that the world was a beautiful home for men.

Of all the trees the most wonderful was a great ash tree, sometimes called the "world tree." Its branches covered the earth and reached beyond the sky till they almost touched the stars. Its roots ran in three directions, to heaven, to the frost giants' home and to the under-world, beneath the earth.

Near the roots in the dark under-world sat the Norns, or fates. Each held a bowl with which she dipped water out of a sacred spring and poured it upon the roots of the ash tree. This was the reason why this wonderful tree was always growing, and why it grew as high as the sky.

When Woden killed Ymir he tried to kill all Ymir's children too; but one escaped, and ever after he and his family, the frost giants, tried to do mischief, and fought against gods and men.

According to the belief of the Teutons these wicked giants will some day destroy the beautiful world. Even the gods themselves will be killed in a dreadful battle with them. First of all will come three terrible winters without any spring or summer. The sun and moon will cease to shine and the bright stars will fall from the sky. The earth will be shaken as when there is a great earthquake; the waves of the sea will roar and the highest mountains will totter and fall. The trees will be torn up by the roots, and even the "world tree" will tremble from its roots to its topmost boughs. At last the quivering earth will sink beneath the waters of the sea.

Then Loki, the spirit of evil, will break loose from the fetters with which the gods have bound him. The frost giants will join him. They will try to make a secret attack on the gods. But Heimdall, the sentry of heaven, will be on guard at the end of the rainbow-bridge. He needs no more sleep than a bird and can see for a hundred miles either by day or night. He only can sound the horn whose blast can be heard through heaven and earth and the under-world. Loki and his army will be seen by him. His loud alarm will sound and bring the gods together. They will rush to meet the giants. Woden will wield his spear--Tiew his glittering sword--Thor his terrible hammer. These will all be in vain. The gods must die. But so must the giants and Loki.

And then a new earth will rise from the sea. The leaves of its forests will never fall; its fields will yield harvests unsown. And in a hall far brighter than Woden's Valhalla the brave and good will be gathered forever.

The Nibelungs

I

The time came when the people of Western Europe learned to believe in one God and were converted to Christianity, but the old stories about the gods and Valkyries and giants and heroes, who were half gods and half men, were not forgotten.

These stories were repeated from father to son for generations, and in the twelfth century a poet, whose name we do not know, wrote them in verse. He called his poem the Nibelungenlied (song of the Nibelungs). It is the great national poem of the Germans. The legends told in it are the basis of Wagner's operas.

"Nibelungs" was the name given to some northern dwarfs whose king had once possessed a great treasure of gold and precious stones but had lost it. Whoever got possession of this treasure was followed by a curse. The Nibelungenlied tells the adventures of those who possessed the treasure.

II

In the grand old city of Worms, in Burgundy, there lived long ago the princess Kriemhilda. Her eldest brother Gunther was king of Burgundy.

And in the far-away Netherlands, where the Rhine pours its waters into the sea, dwelt a prince named Siegfried, son of Siegmund, the king.

Ere long Sir Siegfried heard of the beauty of fair Kriemhilda. He said to his father, "Give me twelve knights and I will ride to King Gunther's land. I must win the heart of Kriemhilda."

After seven days' journey the prince and his company drew near to the gates of Worms. All wondered who the strangers were and whence they came. Hagen, Kriemhilda's uncle, guessed. He said, "I never have seen the famed hero of Netherlands, yet I am sure that yonder knight is none but Sir Siegfried."

"And who," asked the wondering people, "may Siegfried be?"

"Siegfried," answered Sir Hagen, "is a truly wonderful knight. Once when riding all alone, he came to a mountain where lay the treasure of the king of the Nibelungs. The king's two sons had brought it out from the cave in which it had been hidden, to divide it between them. But they did not agree about the division. So when Seigfied drew near both princes said, 'Divide for us, Sir Siegfried, our father's hoard.' There were so many jewels that one hundred wagons could not carry them, and of ruddy gold there was even more. Seigfied made the fairest division he could, and as a reward the princes gave him their father's sword called Balmung. But although Siegfried had done his best to satisfy them with his division, they soon fell to quarreling and fighting, and when he tried to

separate them they made an attack on him. To save his own life he slew them both. Alberich, a mountain dwarf, who had long been guardian of the Nibelung hoard, rushed to avenge his masters; but Siegfried vanquished him and took from him his cap of darkness which made its wearer invisible and gave him the strength of twelve men. The hero then ordered Alberich to place the treasure again in the mountain cave and guard it for him."

Hagen then told another story of Siegfried:

"Once he slew a fierce dragon and bathed himself in its blood, and this turned the hero's skin to horn, so that no sword or spear can wound him."

When Hagen had told these tales he advised King Gunther and the people of Burgundy to receive Siegfried with all honor.

So, as the fashion was in those times, games were held in the courtyard of the palace in honor of Siegfried, and Kriemhilda watched the sport from her window.

For a full year Siegfried stayed at the court of King Gunther, but never in all that time told why he had come and never once saw Kriemhilda.

At the end of the year sudden tidings came that the Saxons and Danes, as was their habit, were pillaging the lands of Burgundy. At the head of a thousand Burgundian knights Siegfried conquered both Saxons and Danes. The king of the Danes was taken prisoner and the Saxon king surrendered.

The victorious warriors returned to Worms and the air was filled with glad shouts of welcome. King Gunther asked Kriemhilda to welcome Siegfried and offer him the thanks of all the land of Burgundy.

Siegfried stood before her, and she said, "Welcome, Sir Siegfried, welcome; we thank you one and all." He bent before her and she kissed him.

III

Far over the sea from sunny Burgundy lived Brunhilda, queen of Iceland. Fair was she of face and strong beyond compare. If a knight would woo and win her he must surpass her in three contests: leaping, hurling the spear and pitching the stone. If he failed in even one, he must forfeit his life.

King Gunther resolved to wed this strange princess and Siegfried promised to help him. "But," said Siegfried, "if we succeed, I must have as my wife thy sister Kriemhilda." To this Gunther agreed, and the voyage to Iceland began.

When Gunther and his companions neared Brunhilda's palace the gates were opened and the strangers were welcomed.

Siegfried thanked the queen for her kindness and told how Gunther had come to Iceland in hope of winning her hand.

"If in three contests he gain the mastery," she said, "I will become his wife. If not, both he and you who are with him must lose your lives."

Brunhilda prepared for the contests. Her shield was so thick and heavy that four strong men were needed to bear it. Three could scarcely carry her spear and the stone that she hurled could just be lifted by twelve.

Siegfried now helped Gunther in a wonderful way. He put on his cap of darkness, so that no one could see him. Then he stood by Gunther's side and did the fighting. Brunhilda threw her spear against the king's bright shield and sparks flew from the steel. But the unseen knight dealt Brunhilda such blows that she confessed herself conquered.

In the second and third contests she fared no better, and so she had to become King Gunther's bride. But she said that before she would leave Iceland she must tell all her kinsmen. Daily her kinsfolk came riding to the castle, and soon an army had assembled.

Then Gunther and his friends feared unfair play. So Siegfried put on his cap of darkness, stepped into a boat, and went to the Nibelung land where Alberich the dwarf was guarding the wonderful Nibelung treasure.

"Bring me here," he cried to the dwarf, "a thousand Nibelung knights." At the call of the dwarf the warriors gathered around Sir Siegfried. Then they sailed with him to Brunhilda's isle and the queen and her kinsmen, fearing such warriors, welcomed them instead of fighting. Soon after their arrival King Gunther and his men, Siegfried and his Nibelungs, and Queen Brunhilda, with two thousand of her kinsmen set sail for King Gunther's land.

As soon as they reached Worms the marriage of Gunther and Brunhilda took place. Siegfried and Kriemhilda also were married, and after their marriage went to Siegfried's Netherlands castle. There they lived more happily than I can tell.

IV

Now comes the sad part of the Nibelung tale.

Brunhilda and Gunther invited Siegfried and Kriemhilda to visit them at Worms. During the visit the two queens quarreled and Brunhilda made Gunther angry with Siegfried. Hagen, too, began to hate Siegfried and wished to kill him.

But Siegfried could not be wounded except in one spot on which a falling leaf had rested when he bathed himself in the dragon's blood. Only Kriemhilda knew where this spot was. Hagen told her to sew a little silk cross upon Siegfried's dress to mark the spot, so that he might defend Siegfried in a fight.

No battle was fought, but Siegfried went hunting with Gunther and Hagen one day and they challenged him to race with them. He easily won, but after running he was hot and thirsty and knelt to drink at a spring. Then Hagen seized a spear and plunged it through the cross into the hero's body. Thus the treasure of the Nibelungs brought disaster to Siegfried.

Gunther and Hagen told Kriemhilda that robbers in the wood had slain her husband, but she could not be deceived.

Kriemhilda determined to take vengeance on the murderers of Siegfried, and so she would not leave Worms. There, too, stayed one thousand knights who had followed Siegfried from the Nibelung land.

Soon after Siegfried's death Kriemhilda begged her younger brother to bring the Nibelung treasure from the mountain cave to Worms.

When it arrived Kriemhilda gave gold and jewels to rich and poor in Burgundy, and Hagen feared that soon she would win the love of all the people and turn them against him. So, one day, he took the treasure and hid it in the Rhine. He hoped some day to enjoy it himself.

As Hagen now possessed the Nibelung treasure the name "Nibelungs" was given to him and his companions.

V

Etzel, or as we call him, Attila, king of the Huns, heard of the beauty of Kriemhilda and sent one of his knights to ask the queen to become his wife.

At first she refused. However, when she remembered that Etzel carried the sword of Tiew, she changed her mind, because, if she became his wife, she might persuade him to take vengeance upon Gunther and Hagen.

And so it came to pass.

Shortly after their marriage Etzel and Kriemhilda invited Gunther and all his court to a grand midsummer festival in the land of the Huns.

Hagen was afraid to go, for he felt sure that Kriemhilda had not forgiven the murder of Siegfried. However, it was decided that the invitation should be accepted, but that ten thousand knights should go with Gunther as a body-guard.

Shortly after Gunther and his followers arrived at Attila's court a banquet was prepared. Nine thousand Burgundians were seated at the board when Attila's brother came into the banquet hall with a thousand well-armed knights. A quarrel arose and a fight followed.

Thousands of the Burgundians were slain. The struggle continued for days. At last, of all the knights of Burgundy, Gunther and Hagen alone were left alive. Then one of

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