

Ye ought to have had mine helping—that debt will never be paid!
We were friends close-knit by troth-plight—to my troth am I renegade!”
Then sorely aghast at his saying were the warriors hard-bestead.
Their joy for his coming withered, and hope at the birth fell dead.
This friend must battle against them, he whom they loved was their foe!
From their enemies had they suffered travail and hurt enow.

“Now God in Heaven forbid it,” Gunther the knightly cried,
“That this thy friendship to usward so utterly be belied,
And the trust wherewith we trusted in our own familiar friend!
Nay, but I will not believe it, that all this so shall end!”
“For me there is no returning,” the valiant warrior spake.
“With you I must needs do battle, even for mine oath’s sake.
Now stand on your guard, brave heroes, by all your love of life!
From mine oath will she not release me, this King Etzel’s wife.”

“Too late,” the King made answer, “thy love dost thou forswear.
Now God on high reward thee, thou noble Rüdiger,
For the faith and the lovingkindness that thou hast shown us still,
So thou to the end maintain it, and all thy pledge fulfil.
Unto thee will we aye be beholden for the gifts that thou didst give,
Even I and my friends, so thou leave us unharmed of thee to live,
For the sake of the gifts most princely whereby our trust was won
When to Etzel’s land thou didst bring us. O Rüdiger, think thereon!”
“How gladly this would I grant you,” the good thane Rüdiger said,
“How gladly lavish upon you the gifts of my bountihead,
So much as my soul desireth—how gladly do all this,
And no serpent-tongue of slander against my name should hiss!”

“Ah Rüdiger, refrain thee!” Prince Gernot pleaded yet.
“Never a host before thee with kindlier welcome met
Guests, nor with mien so gracious, as we were greeted of thee;
And for this, if we win hence living, requited shalt thou be.”

"Would God, O noble Gernot," in anguish Rüdiger said,
"That ye were again in Rhineland, and that I were lying dead
With mine honour still unsullied, since I cannot but fall on thee!
Never were heroes entreated of friends so evilly!"
"Lord Rüdiger, God reward thee," again did Gernot reply,
"For the gifts of thy princely bounty! Distressed for thy death am I,
In that all that chivalrous spirit should be doomed to perish with thee.
Lo here that sword which thou gavest, O noble thane, unto me.
Not once this steel hath failed me through this distressful tide;
Beneath its undulled edges hath many a hero died:
A lordly blade and a goodly, stubborn it is and bright.
Of a truth, such royal bounty was never bestowed of knight.
Yet, if thou wilt nowise refrain thee, but wilt raise against us thine hand,
If thou slaughter these my kinsmen which here beside me stand,
Then with thine own good war-glaive I needs must take thy life.
Wherefore for thee I sorrow, and for thy noble wife."
"May God vouchsafe it, Gernot, and may it so befall,
That in all things as thou desirest, so may it be, yea, in all,
And that thou and all thy kinsfolk in life may long endure!
In you should the trust of the widow and my fatherless child be sure."

Spake Giselher, son of Uta, the Prince of Burgundy:

"How canst thou so, Lord Margrave? These which have come with me,
Unto thee are they all love-bounden. An ill deed dost thou essay!
Thy daughter by thee shall be widowed, who scarce is a bride this day.
If thou and thy battle-helpers beset me now in fight,
What treason unto friendship should this be in all men's sight,
For that beyond all other in thee did I confide
In the hour wherein I won me thy daughter to be my bride!"
"Ah, think thou on thy troth-pledge!" spake Rüdiger answering;
"And if God shall bring you safely forth hence, O noble king,
Requite not thou on my daughter the sin of Rüdiger.
By all thy princely honour, be gracious unto her!"

"It were meet that I held to the troth-plight," young Giselher replied;
"Yet, if mine high-born kinsmen who stand in the hall at my side,
If these by thy deed shall perish, snapped is the twofold chain,
The love 'twixt me and thy daughter, and the friendship 'twixt us twain."

"Then God have mercy upon us!" so did the hero groan.
Then his men uplifted their bucklers, and now were at point to set on
Against those guests, to grapple in fight in Kriemhild's hall:—
But suddenly from the stair-head aloud did Hagen call:
"For a little space yet tarry, O Rüdiger, noble heart!"
Said Hagen; "once more commune we, ere the links of friendship part,
With thee, even I and my masters, in our sore extremity.
What profit is this unto Etzel, that here the homeless die?
Myself am in grievous trouble," furthermore Hagen spake:
"The shield that the Lady Gotlind gave me to bear for her sake,
Even this in the strife with the Hunfolk was in fragments hewn from mine hand;
A memorial of thy kindness I brought it to Etzel's land.
Now would that God in Heaven would grant to me this one prayer,
That such a trusty buckler even I might also bear
As that which is on thy shoulder, O Rüdiger, noble knight!
Then, though I had not a hauberk, I were fenced in the storm of the fight."
"How gladly to thee would I render my shield for thy battle-screen,
If I dared unto thine hand give it in presence of Kriemhild the Queen!—
Yet take it, O take it, Hagen, and grip it thou with thine hand.
Ah, that thou mightest but bear it back to Burgundia-land!"

When that warrior noble-hearted so freely gave his shield,
Red grew the eyes of heroes many, with hot tears filled.
That was his last gift—never again, till time shall end,
Will Rüdiger of Bechlaren give aught to guest or friend.
How stern soever was Hagen, and unused to the melting mood,
Yet thrilled with ruth was his spirit for the gift which the hero who stood
Now on the very grave-brink so freely gave unto him.
Mourned many a high-born warrior, and their eyes with tears were dim.

“Now God in Heaven reward thee, Rüdiger, noblest of men!
In all the earth thy fellow shall never be seen again,
Who givest to friendless warriors the best of all thy store.
May God vouchsafe that the glory of thy goodness live evermore!
Woe’s me for the word thou bringest!” Hagen cried again:
“Already we bear a burden too heavy of grief and pain.
God pity us, if battle we must with a friend like this!”
Answered the Lord of the Marches, “As thine my heart’s grief is.”
“Now, Rüdiger noble-hearted, thee for thy gift I requite:
Whatsoever in battle betide thee from any prince or knight,
Not against thee uplifted in anger shall be mine hand,
Though thou slay till thou leave none living of the men of Burgundia-land.’
Bowed unto him in silence that noble-hearted thane;
And all men brake into weeping. That nought might make them refrain
From such sorrow-fraught contention, it was sore calamity.
In Rüdiger perished the father of all true chivalry!

Then Volker the viol-minstrel cried from the stairway’s height:
“Forasmuch as my comrade Hagen his peace unto thee doth plight,
That same shall be moreover assured thee from mine hand.
Of a surety well didst thou earn it at our coming into this land.
Take thou, O noble Margrave, the message I leave with thee:
These ruddy golden armlets Dame Gotlind gave unto me
To wear them at this great high-tide, a memorial of her love,
I do it, thyself beholdest: be thou my witness thereof.”
“Now would to God in Heaven,” earnestly Rüdiger cried,
“That the Margravine might give thee as many more beside!
Unto my wife, my belovèd, full fain will I tell the tale,
If so be that I live to behold her: doubt not my word shall fail.”

Soon as the promise was given, a shield the knight up-caught:
No whit more there would he linger: unto madness of fury wrought
He leapt on the guests Burgundian like a knightly battle-lord.
Fast, fast the strokes down-lightened from the mighty Margrave’s sword.

Twain, even Volker and Hagen, aside from his path withdrew,
According as these two champions erewhile had pledged them to do.
Yet dauntless foes so many by the gate-tower fronted him
That the Margrave in that first onset knew well that his peril was grim.
Gunther and Gernot, for slaughter athirst, let him win his way
Into the hall: like heroes eager they were for the fray.
But Giselher shrank from his coming, for his heart was wrung with pain;
And he would not face him in battle, being loth to slay or be slain.

Now the men of Rüdiger's war-band swarm up to meet their foes
After their lord undaunted; in the grapple of fight they close;
Keen armour-sundering weapons in mighty hands they wield;
Many a helmet cleave they, they hack through many a shield.
Then also the battle-weary flashed many a lightning stroke
Down on the men of Bechlaren: the unswerving edges broke
Deep through the strong-linked hauberks, yea, to the heart they won.
Of these in the storm of battle was many a marvel done.

Now in the hall were gathered all Rüdiger's gallant array.
No longer hung back Volker and Hagen; they plunged mid the fray;
They thrust, and they spared not any, save one only man;
They smote, and from riven helmets the blood in torrents ran.
Wildly and sternly the clangour of the hailing sword-strokes rang:
Steel buckler-bands were shattered, the loosened shield-plates sprang:
The precious stones of their blazons to the blood-pools flashed like rain.
Never shall such grim battle be fought in the world again!

To right and to left death's highway the Lord of Bechlaren hewed;
Sank roaring surges of battle before his fury subdued.
By deeds was approved the prowess that day of Rüdiger,
A lord of the ringing battle, without reproach or fear.
Unflinching there stood Gunther and Gernot side by side:
They lashed at the reeling war-ranks, and many a hero died.

Smote Giselher and Dankwart, and of life and limb recked nought;
Many a stalwart champion to his latest day they brought.

Of his giant strength the Margrave gave tokens all too true:
Dreadless and mighty-weaponed, how many a foe he slew!
That saw a Prince Burgundian, and his grief and wrath 'gan swell:—
Then, then death's imminent shadow o'er the noble Rüdiger fell:—
It was Gernot the strong; to the hero he shouted across the hall,
To the Margrave crying: "So many of my people before thee fall,
Thou wilt leave, O Rüdiger, living no man of my vassal-train!
I am stung into wrath above measure; from vengeance no more I refrain!
Now shall the gift thou gavest be turned into scathe for thee,
Since thou of my nearest and dearest hast left so many from me.
Hitherward turn thee, face me, thou noble and dreadless man!
For thy gift will I give full payment, the uttermost that I can."

Ere, cleaving the war-waves, the Margrave might win unto where he stood,
Bright rings of many a hauberk were crimson-sullied with blood;
But at last those glory-cravers in the deadly grapple clashed;
And they smote, and the death swift-leaping with the buckler aside they dashed.
Yet nought might withstand the keenness of their swords all-sundering;
And Rüdiger the Hero smote mightily Gernot the King,
Smote through the flint-hard helmet, that the blood rushed down the blade:
But swiftly the good knight dreadless that deadly stroke repaid.
In his hand was the gift of the Margrave; he swung on high that steel:
Though unto death he was wounded, yet one grim stroke did he deal:
It crashed through the hard-knit buckler, it shore through the helmet-band—
Alas, the doom went with it of the lord of the open hand!

Ah me! such rich gifts never so ill requited were.
Down fell they dead together, Gernot and Rüdiger.
In the war-storm each by other smitten on one doom came;
And Hagen saw, and his anger burst into sudden flame,

And shouted the Hero of Troneg: "Evil hath come upon us!
Such grievous hurt have we suffered by these who have perished thus,
That for two lands and two peoples nor amends nor atonement there is.
To the homeless shall Rüdiger's heroes now pay forfeit for this!"

C No mercy they showed thereafter, no foeman would they spare.
Many a man down-beaten not sorely hurt fell there,
Who might of his wounds have recovered, but overwhelmed by the flood
Of war, 'neath the trampling of fighters he was drowned in a lake of blood.
"Ah, woe is me for my brother," cried Giselher, "here laid low!
Woe for the tale of sorrow that hour by hour doth grow!
Yea, for my young bride's father for ever must I lament.
The bitter scathe is twofold, and the grief that mine heart hath rent."
Giselher looked on the father of his bride, where dead he lay;
Then turned he from him to his vengeance on the last of the foes' array.
Death stalked through the hall aye searching for the men of the Margrave slain,
Till of all Bechlaren's vassals alive did none remain.

Thereafter Gunther and Hagen and Giselher the young,
And Dankwart and Volker the minstrel, the knights of fame far-sung,
Unto that place went together where those dead twain were found,
And sorely wept and lamented those heroes song-renowned.
"Evilly death hath robbed us!" cried the young Prince Giselher:
"Yet now refrain your weeping: let us forth to the outer air;
Let us cool these reeking hauberks, O battle-weary thanes.
Unto us, I ween, God willeth that but little of life remains."

Sitting was one, one leaning against the stairway-wall;
But again their hands were idle, for Rüdiger's liegemen all
Lay dead within: the tumult of war had fallen asleep.
Then Etzel's heart misgave him, so long was the hush and so deep.
"Woe's me for this treacherous service!" in anger cried the Queen:
"Too long be they holding parley! Our enemies therewithin

Are like to be wholly scatheless of our champion Rüdiger's hand!
He is plotting to send them safely back to Burgundia-land!
What boots it, O King Etzel, that on this man we have heaped
All wealth he desired soever? A foul return have we reaped!
He that was pledged to avenge us, a truce with our foes will he make!"
Unto her made answer Volker, and the knightly minstrel spake:
"Not so, alas, is the story, O Queen exalted high;
And—dared I unto such high-born lady to give the lie—
Thou dost lie in thy throat most foully of Rüdiger's trust betrayed.
A sorry truce with the homeless he and his knights have made!
With such good will he accomplished the hest of the King his lord,
That he and all his liegemen be lying slain with the sword.
Look round thee now, Queen Kriemhild, for another whom thou mayst send,
For truly hath Rüdiger served thee unto the bitter end.
If haply thou wilt not believe me, let thine eyes bear witness to thee."
Then, to her heart's deep anguish, they gave proof plain to see;
For they brought that mangled hero unto where of the King was he seen.
Never the knights of Etzel knew grief so bitter-keen.

When they saw the corpse of the Margrave held forth in their sight, ah then
Utterly it passeth the power of tongue or pen
To tell of the wild lamentation that from women and men wailed high,
The voice of a people's anguish, an exceeding bitter cry.
So passing great was the sorrow of Etzel the mighty King,
That, as when a wounded lion maketh the forest ring
With his roar, so loud he lamented, and the Queen shrieked forth her pain.
So wailed they in measureless dolour for noble Rüdiger slain.

XXXVIII

HOW DIETRICH'S MEN WERE ALL SLAIN

So measureless-wide the wailing swelled in that dolorous hour,
That with cries of lamentation re-echoed palace and tower;
And the tumult was heard by a warrior of Bern, who was Dietrich's man,
And bearing the heavy tidings to his lord in haste he ran.
He spake to the princely hero: "Lord Dietrich, hearken my tale:
Through all the years of my life-tide such agony of wail
Never I heard upshrieking, as that I have hearkened but now.
The King himself, even Etzel, hath come unto scathe, I trow.
For what cause else should the people with one voice all make dole?
Of the twain one, Etzel or Kriemhild, is no more a living soul.
By the wrath of the dauntless strangers have they slept the iron sleep,
And countless knightly heroes in measureless anguish weep."
But the Lord of Bern made answer: "True liegemen mine, beware
Lest in judging ye be o'er-hasty: what desperate deed soe'er
Hath been done by the homeless heroes, sore need constraineth their will.
My peace with them I plighted—let this advantage them still."

Then out spake Wolfhart the dreadless: "Lo, I will hence to the hall:
I will ask of sorrow her story, what woe hath chanced to befall,
And to thee will I bring the tidings, O well-belovèd chief,
So soon as I learn what meaneth that voice of a people's grief."
Spake Dietrich the noble: "When heroes in each face look for a foe,
And one cometh with rough sharp questions, where a word is like a blow,
Then all too quickly enkindled their smouldering anger is:
Therefore I will not, Wolfhart, that thou question touching this."
Then he commanded Helfric to go swift-hastening,
And he bade him ask of the matter from the folk of Etzel the King,

Or, as it might be, from the strangers, what hap had befallen there;
For never had such lamentation of a multitude thrilled the air.

So the messenger came, and he questioned: "What thing hath chanced this day?"

And a woeful voice made answer: "All joy hath fled away,
Yea, the last that was yet remaining to the Hunfolk's stricken land!
Here lieth Rüdiger, slaughtered by some Burgundian hand;
Not one of his liegemen liveth, that with him went into the fight."
Never could woefuller tidings on the ears of Helfrich smite;
Never so loth in spirit a tale to his lord he bore;
And he came back unto Dietrich weeping and mourning sore.
"What hast thou learnt?—thy tidings?" Dietrich spake forthright.
"Why weepst thou so sorely, O Helfrich, my good knight?"
"Good cause have I for lamenting," answered the noble thane:
"The good Lord Rüdiger lieth by hands Burgundian slain!"
Cried the Hero of Bern: "Forbid it, God, that this should be!
This were a ghastly vengeance, 'twere the Fiend's arch-mockery!
Rüdiger?—how should he ever such evil requital have earned?
True friend to the homeless strangers was he, long since I learned."
Cried Wolfhart the lion-hearted: "If the righteous blood they have shed,
All these shall dearly abyte it! Their lives be forfeited!
If we should endure such outrage, our shame and reproach it were!
How oft hath it rendered us service, the hand of Rüdiger!"

The Prince of the Amal people bade them inquire yet more.
He sat him down at a casement: heavy his heart was and sore.
Old Hildebrand he commanded to the warrior guests to speed,
And to hear from their lips the story of this most evil deed.
The good knight battle-fearless, old Master Hildebrand,
Took neither sword nor buckler; all weaponless was his hand:
He purposed to go to the strangers in knightly courtesy;
Thereat the son of his sister chode with him angerly.

Spake the grim warrior Wolfhart: "And goest thou fenceless there?
Then flout and scoff for answer, be sure, they will not spare;
And so, like a hound well beaten, with shame wilt thou turn again!
But go, like a man, war-harnessed, and their malapert tongues will they rein."

Thereat did the old knight arm him, after the young man's rede;
And, or ever Hildebrand knew it, stood all in battle-weed
The eager warriors of Dietrich: sword in hand stood they.
And the hero was grieved, and had turned them, an he might, from their
purposed way.

"Whither away?" he asked them. "Thither will we with thee;
And haply Hagen of Troneg less eager then shall be
With jeering speech to mock thee, as his cruel wont is still."
And the hero hearkened and answered, "Be it then as ye will."

Then looked forth Volker the valiant, and the knights of Bern he saw,
The liegemen of Lord Dietrich, full-harnessed thitherward draw,
Girded about with war-glaives, with bucklers gripped in hand;
And he told it unto his masters, the Lords of Burgundia-land;
And spake the viol-minstrel: "Yonder I see draw near
The vassal-throng of Dietrich, like foes in battle-gear
Harnessed, and under helmet, as who would beset us in fight.
I ween we homeless heroes shall now be in evil plight."

Even as he spake his warning, thither came Hildebrand;
And there, with his great shield planted on the earth at his feet, did he stand;
And cried to the men of Gunther that sorrow-stricken one:
"Ah, noble knights, what evil unto you had Rüdiger done?
Me hath my good lord Dietrich unto you sent hitherward
To wot if a hand Burgundian it was that slew with the sword
The noble Lord of the Marches, as the tale unto us was told;
For then should our weeping be endless, our grief aye unconsoled."
Made answer Hagen of Troneg: "That tale is all too true.
Right glad were I had the teller thereof but lied unto you

For Rüdiger's sake, that the hero might live to gladden our eyes—
He for whom wailing of women and men evermore shall rise.”

When they heard those heavy tidings that their friend was dead in truth,
Loud mourned the loyal-hearted, the good knights wept for ruth;
The tears ran down the faces of Dietrich's valiant men,
And the drops on the beards of them glistened: sore grief was their portion then.
Siegstab the Bernese war-duke lamented over his friend:
“Woe's me for the lovingkindness that here hath found an end,
The kindness that Rüdiger showed us in the days of our exile-pain!
The comfort of all the homeless lieth by you knights slain!”
Then did a man of the Amals, the war-thane Wolfwein, cry:
“Though I saw my very father here dead before me lie,
I were not more sorrow-stricken than for Rüdiger laid low.
Alas! who now shall comfort the Margravine in her woe?”
In wrathful indignation Wolfhart the dauntless cried:
“Who now shall lead the heroes, on the war-path when they ride,
As our knights have been led of the Margrave many a time ere now?
Woe, Rüdiger most noble, lost unto us art thou!”
Wolfbrand the strong and Helfrich, and Helmnot the thane withal,
With all their friends and kinsmen, wept for Rüdiger's fall.

No further could Hildebrand question for sighing, but spake one word:
“Now grant to us that, O heroes, for the which we were sent of our lord.
Give forth of the hall the body unto us of the noble dead,
In whom is our sunny joyance into night of mourning fled.
Let our last sad service requite him for all that to us he hath done
In kindness passing loyal, and to many a homeless one.
We be here in a strange land strangers like Rüdiger the knight...
Why keep ye us here waiting? Let us bear him hence forthright,
And render the perished hero such honour as we may,
Such as we gladly had rendered, were he alive this day.”
Answered and spake King Gunther: “No service is worthier praise
Than that to a dead friend rendered by his friends of the olden days;

Yea, when in your power it lieth, that call I friendship true.
It is meet ye should do him service for the love he hath shown unto you."

"Words, words!—how long must we pray you?" cried Wolfhart with passionate breath.

"There lieth our chiefest comfort, by your hands done to death!
And we to our sorrow no longer may have our friend in our sight.
Let us bear him hence from his slayers, and lay in the grave forthright!"
Volker flung back his answer: "None giveth him up at thine hest!
He is here—e'en take him from us! The noblest knight and the best
Lieth amidst of a blood-pool with death-wounds stricken down.
Unto Rüdiger do this service: it shall be your friendship's crown!"

Made answer Wolfhart the dreadless: "God knows, thou master of song,
Thou hast little to do to provoke us! Ye have done us enow of wrong!
But that awe of my lord constrains me, thou wert in sorry plight!
But now must we brook thine insults, since he hath forbidden the fight."
Then sneered the viol-minstrel: "Who goeth in timorous doubt
Lest he haply transgress a commandment, shall brook full many a flout.
Small share of the spirit of heroes I find in a mood so mild!"
At the biting speech of his comrade Hagen grimly smiled.

"Thou shalt lack not proof of my spirit!" hotly Wolfhart cried.
"I will jangle thy viol-music so, that if ever thou ride
Homeward hence to the Rhineland, thou shalt croak a new song there!
Thy malapert tongue, thou scorner, with honour I may not bear!"
Answered the viol-minstrel: "An thou mar one faintest tone
Of the strings of my good viol, the sheen of thy morion
Shall be grievously dimmed and sullied with thy blood by my right hand,
Howsoever it fall with my riding back to Burgundia-land."

Then Wolfhart had leapt on the minstrel, but in mid rush was he held,
By the giant strength of his uncle, old Hildebrand, compelled.

"I see thou wouldst play the madman in thy foolish wrath!" did he cry.
"The favour of our Lord Dietrich thou wilt forfeit utterly!"
"Let loose thy lion, O keeper, so fiercely he chafes at the chain!
But and if to mine hands he cometh," cried Volker the mighty thane,
"Although his wondrous prowess had smitten the whole world dead,
I will slay him: no more hot answers from that mad tongue shall be sped!"

In the eyes of the Bernese warriors blazed the onset's light:
Upswung his buckler Wolfhart, that battle-eager knight:
With the leap of a desert lion against that taunter he leapt:
Like a torrent up to the stairway his friends behind him swept.
But with what great leaps soever to the door of the hall he sped,
Old Hildebrand before him sprang to the stairway-head:
He would suffer none to outpace him, nor to plunge mid the war-surge first
Ready the stern guests waited to quench their battle-thirst.
Full upon Hagen rushed he, old Master Hildebrand.
Loud rang the swords fierce-smiting in either hero's hand.
The crash of their mighty meeting spake out their fury afar.
Flashed from their clashing war-glaives a fire-red wind of war.
Then suddenly were they Sundered by the sweep of the tide of fight,
By the inrushing charge of the Bern-folk afire with fury and might.
And as Hildebrand from Hagen on the tempest of battle was whirled,
Wolfhart the strong in that moment against bold Volker hurled.
On the helm of the viol-minstrel so mightily clashed his glaive,
That the steel's resistless keenness through the bands of the morion clave:
That stroke did the aweless minstrel so fiercely, so swiftly repay,
That the sword-smitten harness of Wolfhart was a fountain of fiery spray.
From the hauberks, as they hewed them, did the lightning-flashes flare:
Grim was the hate these foemen each unto other bare!
Yet these twain Wolfwein parted, and he fronted Volker alone:
Had he not been a very hero, such deed he had never done!

Gunther the valiant war-king, with never-resting hand
Faced the far-famous heroes, the knights of Amelung-land;

And Giselher, princely champion, lashed at the helmets bright
Till crimson they showed and dripping with blood in the storm of fight.
Dankwart the brother of Hagen exceeding grimly fought;
All knightly deeds that in battle he theretofore had wrought
Against the knights of Etzel, as an idle wind seemed all:
Then first did the battle-frenzy on the son of Aldrian fall.
Right well did Ritschart and Gerbart, Helfrich and Wichart, in strife;
In many a battle-tempest had they spared nor limb nor life,
And they proved their ancient prowess on Gunther's men that day.
There gallantly Wolfbrand breasted the surges of the fray.
There fought like a very madman the old knight Hildebrand;
There many a thane Burgundian 'neath stalwart Wolfhart's hand,
His soul from his limbs sword-sundered, amidst the blood sank down.
So avenged were Rüdiger's death-wounds by those warriors of renown!

There fought the war-duke Siegstab by the wind of his wrath swept on.
Ha, what strong-welded helmets by Dietrich's sister's son,
As he burst through the reeling war-ranks, were cleft on the heads of foes!
Never in battle-tempest did man deal knightlier blows.
Then drew nigh Volker the stalwart, and an evil sight he beheld,
Saw from cleft rings of hauberks how blood in torrents welled
'Neath the smiting of valiant Siegstab, and the hero's wrath rose high,
And he leapt upon that slayer—and ended suddenly
By the hand of the viol-minstrel were the days of Siegstab the brave.
Such proof of his battle-cunning Volker the terrible gave
That his life from the sword-edge fleeted, and dead he lay in his blood
But hard by fury-kindled the avenger Hildebrand stood.

"Woe for my lord, my beloved," cried Master Hildebrand,
"He who to our sorrow lieth here slain by Volker's hand!
Now surely this viol-minstrel hath stricken his own death-stroke!"
In Hildebrand the dreadless never grimlier wrath awoke.
So mightily smote he Volker, that he cleft his helm-band through:
Afar to the walls of the feast-hall the shards on all sides flew

From his shivered helm and his buckler, as the fearless lord of song
Reeled earthward—so to his ending at last came Volker the strong.

Then the men of Dietrich's war-band into the conflict hurled:
They smote, and the splintered mail-rings flashing afar were whirled,
And shards of the lashing war-glaives went flying high overhead:
Hot from the rifted helmets the torrent blood they shed.

Then marked grim Hagen of Troneg how Volker the knight lay slain.
That was in all this high-tide the deepest-piercing pain
That of any mischance unto kinsman or vassal or friend he had proved.
How sternly did Hagen set him to avenge his best-beloved!
"For this shall he not go scatheless, yon greybeard Hildebrand!
Low lieth my battle-helper, slain by the hero's hand,
The truest and best war-fellow that ever stood by my side."
He swung up his shield: fierce-hewing on the vengeance-quest he hied.
Then dealt Helfrich the stalwart unto Dankwart a deadly blow:
Unto Giselher and Gunther 'twas a grievous sight enow
When there they beheld him fallen in death's strong agony;
Yet his own hands had avenged him, and not alone did he lie.

C For all that so many thousands had gathered from many a land,
With their princes mighty-armoured, against that little band,
Yet, had not the Christian warriors at the last against them fought,
Deliverance from the heathen their prowess, I trow, had wrought.

Wolfhart the while went cleaving a blood-path to and fro;
He lashed at the liegemen of Gunther, he laid their bravest low:
For the third time now was he hewing a death-way round the hall;
Before his mighty hand-strokes did many a good knight fall.
Then cried aloud unto Wolfhart the stalwart Giselher:
"Alas for me, who have gotten so grim a foeman there!
O valiant knight and noble, hither to meward turn!
I will end it—no more the destroying flame of thy wrath shall burn."

Then unto Giselher turned him Wolfhart amidst of the fight.
Many a wound wide-gaping did strong knight deal unto knight.
To meet the Prince with fury so eager Wolfhart flashed,
That over his head from the blood-pools by his feet were the red drops dashed.

With stern strokes swift as the lightning did the son of Uta the fair
Unto Wolfhart the dauntless champion give terrible welcome there.
How stark soe'er was the hero, death on his foe's sword hung.
Never more dreadless valour was found in a prince so young!
He smote, and through Wolfhart's hauberk that gallant heart he found,
So that forth of the wound outrushing his life-blood streamed to the ground;
Yea, unto death was stricken Dietrich's vassal-knight:—
None save a battle-champion had wrought such a deed of might!
Wolfhart knew it his death-wound, but the hero undismayed
Cast from his arm his buckler; his adamant-tempered blade,
His sword of the edge all-cleaving, in both hands high did he swing,
And he smote the son of Uta through helm and through hauberk-ring.
Death-stricken each by other down fell they side by side;
By one grim doom that liegeman of Dietrich and Giselher died.
Hildebrand, that grey warrior, saw Wolfhart overthrown:
Of a truth, through all his life-days such pain had he never known.

By this were Gunther's liegemen one and all laid low,
And all the men of Dietrich. Then did Hildebrand go
Unto where lay Wolfhart dying amidst of a pool of blood,
And in loving arms he clasped him, that gallant knight and good.
Forth of the hall to bear him he would fain have uplifted him;
But he needs must leave him lying, so huge he was of limb.
And the dying eyes of the hero from the blood looked up in his face,
And he knew how fain would his uncle have helped him forth that place.
"Nay, uncle well-belovèd," the deadly-wounded saith,
"Nought may thine help avail me: it is the hour of death.
Nay, guard thee rather from Hagen—this rede, I wot, is good—
For in his heart he beareth a fell and murderous mood.

And if friends and kinsmen be minded Wolfhart's death to lament,
Unto my nearest and dearest this message by thee be sent:—
Let there be for my sake no weeping, forasmuch as need is none.
At the hands of a king in battle a glorious death I won.
Such vengeance withal have I taken for my death, in this hall who die,
That many wives of warriors shall wail with bitter cry.
And if any would know the story of my last fight, fearlessly say
That mine own hand, unholpen, did five-score foemen slay."

Then on the viol-minstrel, his dead friend, Hagen thought,
Whose death by the grey-haired hero Hildebrand had been wrought;
And he cried to the old man dauntless: "Thou for my grief shalt pay!
Of valiant knights too many hast thou robbed us in this fray!"
Then upon Hildebrand rushed he, and smote, and the hall rang wide
With the clang of the great sword Balmung, the blade that from Siegfried's side
Hagen the grim had taken, when he murdered the Hero of old.
But the grey-haired warded him deftly, the old knight fearless-bold.
With a battle-glaive broad-bladed Dietrich's liegeman lashed
At Hagen the Lord of Troneg, and the edge through the mail-rings crashed;
Yet to wound the vassal of Gunther his strength might not prevail;
And again did Hagen smite him, and he shore through his strong-knit mail.
Now when that grey-haired champion the bite of the sword-edge felt,
He feared lest scathe yet greater by Hagen's hand should be dealt.
Straightway the liegeman of Dietrich his shield on his back hath cast,
And the hero sorely wounded from Hagen's face fled fast.
By this of the knights Burgundian was no man left unslain
Save only Gunther and Hagen, those noble warriors twain.

All blood-bedabbled hasted Hildebrand the old,
And he came to the presence of Dietrich, and his woeful story told.
There saw he his master sitting with dark forebodings stirred;
But tidings of bitterer sorrow that princely hero heard
When he saw his liegeman standing in crimson-clotted mail;
And with sudden fear heart-stricken he bade him tell his tale:

“Ha, Master Hildebrand, tell me, how cometh this?—thou art wet
With thine own life-blood streaming! Of whom hast thou been beset?
I ween, with the guests Burgundian in yonder hall thou hast fought—
The thing I forbade so straitly! Thou hast set mine hest at nought!”
Spake Hildebrand to his liege-lord: “Hagen’s was this deed:
In yonder hall he dealt me the wounds wherefrom I bleed.
When before the mighty warrior I turned me from the strife,
Hardly from that fiend’s fury escaped I with my life.”
But the Prince of Bern made answer: “Rightly served art thou!
Unto yonder guests in thine hearing I spake my friendship’s vow;
And lo, that peace thou hast broken which I sware unto them that day!
Were it not for the shame undying¹, thy life for this should pay!”
“Let not thine anger against me, Lord Dietrich, be over-hot,
Seeing mischief all too grievous unto me and my friends hath been wrought.
Forth of the hall the body of Rüdiger fain would we bear,
And yonder vassals of Gunther would hearken not to our prayer.”

“Woe for these sorrowful tidings! Is Rüdiger verily slain?
This shall to me be anguish beyond all former pain.
The noble Lady Gotlind is mine own dear cousin’s child!
Alas for the hapless orphans in Bechlaren’s halls exiled!”
With sorrow of heart and pity for that death wrung was his breast.
Then brake he forth into weeping, for the hero was sore distress:
“Alas for the loyal helper that in him is lost unto me!
O good knight of King Etzel, evermore must I mourn for thee!
Canst, Master Hildebrand, tell me how died he, and cause me to know
How named was the knight Burgundian who dealt him that death-blow?”
He said: “By the battle-prowess of Gernot the strong was it done,
And death in the selfsame moment of Rüdiger’s hands he won.”

Unto Hildebrand spake Dietrich: “Say to my liegemen thou
To array them in armour straightway. Myself will go forth now.

¹ Because Hildebrand had been Dietrich’s foster-father.

Let them bring me my shining harness withal: do thou so command.
Myself am minded to question the knights of Burgundia-land."
But Master Hildebrand answered: "Who shall go forth with thee?
Thine only living liegeman in thy presence now dost thou see,
Even me, and there is none other. The rest, they be all dead men."
Dismayed was he at the tidings—well might he be anguished then,
For in all the wide world never on him did such blow fall.
He cried: "What, all my liegemen?—and have they perished all?
So then—oh hapless Dietrich!—my God hath forgotten me!
And erewhile a king most mighty I reigned in majesty!"

But again in amaze spake Dietrich: "How could it so betide
That they, those goodly heroes, should one and all have died
Slain by men battle-weary and in sore extremity?
Mine evil star hath done it, else death must have passed them by!
Since then mine evil fortune hath spared me not this stroke,
Answer me—live yet any of those Burgundian folk?"
And Master Hildebrand answered: "God knoweth, there is none
Save Gunther the king high-hearted and Hagen—these alone."
"Woe's me, beloved Wolfhart! Of thee am I left forlorn?
Well may I now repent me that ever I was born!
And Siegstab and Wolfwein have fallen, and dead is the good Wolfbrand!
Who then shall be mine helpers of the sons of Amelung-land?
Helfrich the valiant also, by death from me is he torn?
Perished have Gerbert and Wichart—when shall I cease to mourn?
This is of all the joyance of life my latest day!
Alas that the anguish-stricken sheer sorrow may not slay!"

XXXIX

HOW GUNTHER, HAGEN, AND KRIEMHILD WERE SLAIN

Now for his battle-harness Lord Dietrich's self hath gone,
And Hildebrand the grey-haired helped him to gird it on.
So loud was the voice of the wailing of that most mighty man,
That through all the shuddering palace the shivering echoes ran.
But at last he refrained him, and hardened his hero-heart again,
And in sternest wrath he armed him, that good and gallant thane;
And a shield of the steel tough-welded he took in his sinewy hand,
And forth of the palace he hied him with Master Hildebrand.

Then out spake Hagen of Troneg: "I see draw nigh to the hall
Dietrich the great war-captain. Surely on us will he fall
To avenge the grievous evil that we unto him have done.
We will see of us two warriors which is the mightier one.
Ay, what though yonder champion, Dietrich the Lord of Bern,
Account him never so stalwart, a foeman never so stern,
If he think upon us to avenge him for that hath befallen him,
Even I am he shall withstand him." Thus spake Hagen the grim.

That saying was heard of Dietrich and of Master Hildebrand,
As they came and beheld the heroes, the two yet living, stand
Without, and for weariness leaning on the stairway-parapet.
Then afront of his feet did Dietrich his goodly buckler set.
Then lifted his voice the hero, a voice of heart-sick woe:
"Wherefore hast thou, Lord Gunther, evil-entreated me so,
A homeless man? What evil have I ever done unto thee,
That thus of all life's comfort wholly bereaved I should be?
That grievous hurt that ye did us, sufficed it not unto you,
That ye to our sorrow the hero Rüdiger smote and slew,

But that therewithal ye must rob me of all my vassal-throng?
Of a truth unto you, O heroes, had I never wrought such wrong!
Of your own ill plight bethink you, and of all your grief and pain,
Of the death of your friends and kinsmen, of the travail of battle-strain—
Good knights, were your hearts not smitten with ruth by reason of this?
Ah me! unto me how bitter the death of Rüdiger is!
Such cruel wrong unto no man ever on earth was wrought!
Little enow on mine anguish and your own hard strait ye thought!
Whatsoever was mine of joyance, by you slain lieth here.
Never shall end my mourning for these I have held so dear!"

"Not wholly are we so guilty," Hagen made reply;
"For against us to this hallway all thy thanes drew nigh,
Full-harnessed all as for battle, an exceeding great array.
Not truly, I trow, the story hath been told unto thee this day."
"Not truly?—was this not true then, that was told of Hildebrand,
That of you my men petitioned, my knights of Amelung-land,
To give them forth of the feast-hall the body of Rüdiger,
And ye rendered them for answer nought but mock and jeer?"
Answered the Lord of Rhineland: "They fain would bear away
The body of Rüdiger, said they: thereunto I answered nay,
Not as to flout thy people, but to do unto Etzel despite.
Thereat brake forth into railing Wolfhart the haughty knight."
The Hero of Bern made answer: "The finger of fate is here.
By thy knightly honour I pray thee, O Gunther, royal peer,
Requite thou me for the heart-pain that thou upon me didst wreak.
O brave knight, make the atonement: no further revenge will I seek.
Unto me do thou render thee captive, with Hagen thy vassal-thane;
And so to mine uttermost power will I defend you twain
From all despiteful usage that the Huns would do unto you.
Ye shall prove herein mine honour, ye shall find me faithful and true."
"Forefend it, God in Heaven," cried Hagen scornfully,
"That two such battle-champions should render them captive to thee,

Who yet are strong to face thee with shield and helm and brand,
Who yet with limbs unfettered before all foes may stand!"

"Ill should ye do to deny me," said Dietrich thereunto,
"King Gunther and thou Hagen; ye have done unto me, ye two,
Yea, to my heart and my spirit, such passing bitter despite,
That if now ye will make me atonement, it shall be but just and right.
I pledge unto you mine honour and the faith of my right hand,
That with you will I ride, your safeguard, back to your own home-land.
As befitteth kings and heroes will I lead you—else will I die;
And for your sakes all mine anguish in forgetfulness buried shall lie."
"Require this thing no further!" his answer Hagen flung.
"Good sooth, 'twere a seemly story to be told of the mocker's tongue
That two so valiant war-lords had yielded them unto thine hand!
What, man?—none standeth beside thee save only Hildebrand!"

But Master Hildebrand answered: "Lord Hagen, God doth know—
This peace, which my Lord Dietrich now offereth to bestow,
The hour may come upon you, ay, and perchance full soon,
When gladly ye would accept it, but may not grasp the boon."
"So low as to such atonement would I stoop," did Hagen cry,
"Ere I in such craven fashion forth of a hall would fly
As thou didst, O good Master, but a little while ago!
I weened that thou couldst bear thee more bravely before a foe!"
Then Master Hildebrand answered: "For that thing me dost thou mock?
Who was it that sat all deedless on his shield by the Wasken-rock,
When so many of his own kinsmen were killed by Walter of Spain?
Of a truth, upon thine own honour there lieth many a stain!"

"Peace!" cried the noble Dietrich, "such knights doth it misbeseem
With words to rail on each other, as when old shrews scold and scream
Hildebrand, I forbid it: speak thou here no more.
A homeless knight, with sorrow enow mine heart is sore!

Answer me, Hero Hagen," said Dietrich yet again;
"What spake ye knights together, ye battle-eager twain,
When a little agone in mine harness ye saw me hard at hand?
Thou saidst that alone in battle against me thou wouldst stand."
"Ay, no man shall gainsay it!" cried Hagen the void of fear:
"I will prove it by mighty handstrokes upon thy body here,
If so be that the Sword of the Nibelungs unshivered fail not me.
I am wroth that thou darest require us to yield us captive to thee!"

Forthright, when Dietrich heard it, the mind of Hagen the grim,
That battle-eager champion caught his shield unto him.
How swiftly adown that stairway to meet him Hagen sprang!
Loudly on Dietrich's armour the sword of the Nibelungs rang.
Full well in that hour knew Dietrich that his lion-hearted foe
Was passing grim of spirit: from many a deadly blow
With cunning of fence did he ward him, that noble Lord of Bern.
He proved what a knight was Hagen, to his mortal foe how stern.
He had need to beware of Balmung, stark sword renowned afar;
And but now and again smote Dietrich, with cunningest craft of war,
Till at last in a grapple of giants he wore down Hagen the strong,
And a grievous wound he dealt him, a gash both deep and long.

Then bethought him Dietrich the noble: "Long travail hath sapped thy might:
Small honour should it bring me, if the death-stroke now I should smite.
Nay, rather will I make trial if yet I may constrain
Even thee to become my captive." With peril he did it and pain.
Mighty of thews was Dietrich: his shield from his arm he slipped;
He sprang upon Hagen of Troneg, and with sinewy hands he gripped.
And so at the last overmastered was the warrior aweless-bold;
And Gunther the noble beheld it exceeding sorrowful-souled.

Then Dietrich bound Sir Hagen, and he led that battle-thrall
Unto where was the high-born Kriemhild; and the bravest knight of all

That ever with sword were girded, to her hands he rendered up.
She had drunken the dregs of affliction; at last joy brimmed her cup.
How glad was the wife of Etzel! Low to the thane did she bow:
"Blessèd in soul and in body evermore be thou!
For all my sore tribulation now hast thou recompensed me.
Except death's coming prevent me, I will ever be bounden to thee!"
Made answer Dietrich the noble: "Let him live, and in no wise slay,
O noble Daughter of Princes! It may come to pass one day
That his good deeds may requite thee for the wrongs thou hast had at his
hands.
Visit it not upon him that in bonds in thy presence he stands."
Then to a dungeon-chamber she bade lead Hagen away
Where no man's eye beheld him, and there close-barred he lay.

Then Gunther the noble uplifted his voice, and aloud he cried:
"The Hero of Bern hath wronged me!—from my vengeance where doth he
hide?"

Hasted to meet him Dietrich the Lord of Bern forthright;
But Gunther's battle-prowess was worthy of such a knight:
Not for his coming he tarried, but adown the stairway sprang.
Clashed their meeting war-glaives with a passing-deadly clang.
How proved soever was Dietrich in prowess of olden fame,
Such madness of battle-fury now upon Gunther came,
Unto such fell hate of his foeman was he stung by grief and pain,
That men yet count it a marvel that Dietrich escaped unslain.
So stalwart were these, so thrilled them the battle-spirit's power,
That loud from their thunderous smiting re-echoed palace and tower.
Hewing the hard steel helmets did the great swords whirl and swing.
Ha, with right royal courage did he bear him, Gunther the King!
But at last by the might of Dietrich he too was overborne:
Men saw his blood fast flowing through the mail-rings shattered and shorn
By the all-resistless keenness of the blade that Dietrich bare.
Well had he warded him, Gunther, how weary he was soe'er!

Then by the hand of Dietrich were the limbs of Gunther bound—
Though never should king with dishonour of bonds be compassed round;
Yet he weened, if he left unshackled Gunther and Hagen the knight,
They would verily slay all Hunfolk on whomsoe'er they should light.
The Prince of Bern, Lord Dietrich, hath grasped him by the hand:
In bonds to the hall hath he haled him where waiting doth Kriemhild stand.
At sight of his affliction light grew the load on her heart;
And she cried: "O King Burgundian, welcome to me thou art!"
"For thy greeting," he said, "might I thank thee, O noble sister mine,
If aught of lovingkindness lurked in that welcome of thine.
But I know, O Queen, thine hatred and thy wrath-enkindled mood,
And how little to me and to Hagen thy greeting bode of good."

But the Prince of Bern, the Hero, spake: "O noble Queen,
Never such peerless heroes made captive hath any seen,
As thou, O Daughter of Princes, from mine hand now dost take.
Deal gently with these, the homeless, for my lovingkindness' sake."
She answered: "That will I gladly." So turned with weeping eyes
Dietrich away from the heroes, famed lords of high emprise.
But thereafter was ghastly vengeance taken by Etzel's wife:
By her from the chosen heroes ruthlessly reft was the life.
She gave command, and to dungeons apart those twain they bore;
And these two friends were beholden of each other never more,
Until she bare unto Hagen the head of her brother slain.
Grim was the vengeance that Kriemhild wreaked upon these twain!

Then went the Queen unto Hagen, and she looked on him, and she spake—
And all the hoarded hatred of years in her voice outbrake:—
"If thou restore me the treasure that thy robber hand hath ta'en,
Peradventure thou mayest living see Burgundy-land again."
Made answer the grim knight Hagen: "The word is wasted in air,
O noble Daughter of Princes. A certain oath I swear
To reveal the Hoard unto no man:—so long as liveth but one
Of the Princes Three, my masters, it is rendered up unto none."

“Of the oath will I make swift ending!” that high-born woman said.
To her brother she sent her servants, and she bade them smite him dead.
And they hewed his head from his body: she held it on high by the hair
In sight of the Hero of Troneg. With grief beyond compare
And with indignation of spirit he saw the head of his lord.
Grimly he turned on Kriemhild, and spake his latest word:
“Thou hast indeed made ending according to thy will.
Even as I had foreseen it, so now doth fate fulfil.
Dead now is the noble Gunther, the King of Burgundy,
Young Giselher, Lord Gernot—yea, dead be the Princes Three.
Now, now of the Hoard none knoweth save God and I alone—
Never, thou Child of the Devil, unto thee shall its place be known!”

She answered: “An evil requital hast thou rendered into mine hand!
This hold I at least in possession, Siegfried’s battle-brand.
He bare it, mine own, my beloved, when I saw him for that last time,
Ere thou, to my grief everlasting, wroughtest that foul crime!”
She flashed it out of the scabbard—her hand he could not stay—
For now from the knight she purposed to rend the life away:
On high in her hands she swung it, from his body his head did she smite;
And King Etzel saw, and he deemed it an evil and bitter sight.
“Woe’s me!” cried the King in anguish; “how is he stricken down,—
Stricken by hands of a woman!—the hero of chiefest renown
That ever in battle’s forefront fighting his buckler bore!
Were he never so much my foeman, mine heart is for him full sore!’

Then Master Hildebrand shouted: “This thing shall profit her not
That she dared to slay him! What cometh to me I care no jot!—
Yea, though he brought me also into mortal peril and pain,
I will take in any wise vengeance for valiant Hagen slain!”
In wrathful indignation on Kriemhild Hildebrand leapt,
And the head of that Daughter of Princes from her shoulders his brand hath
swept.

With horror she saw him before her like the Spirit of Vengeance rise.
What availed her shriek of anguish as the death-flame flashed in her eyes?

Dead all round were they lying, the men foredoomed death's prey:
Hewn in twain in the midmost of all a dead Queen lay!
Dietrich and King Etzel into sudden weeping broke,
And a bitter voice of wailing went up from all the folk.
There was the might and the glory of heroes in death laid low;
And the people had for their portion lamentation and mourning and woe.
This was the dolorous ending of a great king's festival!
So ever is sorrow begotten of joy at the end of all.

What things befell thereafter in the land no minstrel hath sung¹,
Save that ever the voice of weeping from Christian and Heathen rung,
Weeping of knights and ladies, and of many a maiden fair:
Whelmed in abysses of sorrow for the loved and the lost they were.
c Ah no, no more can I tell you of a people's misery.
There are the mighty fallen—in silence let them lie.
I can bring not from years forgotten that nation's after-fate.
The Lay is ended—the Story of the Nibelungs' Bitter Strait.

¹ Simrock's arrangement is adopted in the last two strophes.

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