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WAGNER**

THE VALKYRIES

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The Valkyries

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Edward Frederic Benson

The Valkyries

PREFACE

In the following pages an attempt has been made to render as closely as possible into English narrative prose the libretto of Wagner's "Valkyrie". The story is one little known to English readers, and even those who are familiar with the gigantic music may find in the story something which, even when rendered into homely prose, will reveal to them some new greatness of the master-mind of its author. It is in this hope that I have attempted this version.

Whether I have attempted a task either absolutely impossible, or impossible to my capacity, I cannot tell, for so huge is the scale of the original, so big with passion, so set in the riot of storm-clouds and elemental forces, that perhaps it can only be conveyed to the mind as Wagner conveyed it, through such sonorous musical interpretations as he alone was capable of giving to it. Yet even because the theme is so great, rather than in spite of it, any interpretation, even that of halting prose, may be unable to miss certain of the force of the original.

The drama itself comes second in the tetralogy of the Ring, being preceded by the Rheingold. But this latter is more properly to be considered as the overture to a trilogy than as the first drama of a tetralogy. In it the stage is set, and Heaven above, rainbow-girt Walhalla, and the dark stir of the forces beneath the earth, Alberich and the Niebelungs, enter the arena waiting for the puny and momentous sons of men to assert their rightful lordship over the earth, at the arising of whom the gods grow grey and the everlasting foundations of Walhalla crumble. From the strange loves of Siegmund and Sieglinde, love not of mortal passion, but of primeval and elemental need, the drama starts; this is the first casting of the shuttle across the woof of destiny. From that point, through the present drama, through Siegfried, through the dusk of the gods the eternal grinding of the mills continues. Once set going the gods themselves are powerless to stop them, for the stream that turns them is stronger than the thunderings of Wotan, for the stream is "That which shall be."

In storm the drama begins, in storm of thunder and all the range of passion and of death it works its inevitable way, till for a moment there is calm, when on the mountain-top Brunnhilde sleeps, waiting for the coming of him whose she is, for the awakening to the joy of human life. And there till Siegfried leaps the barrier of flame we leave her.

E. F. BENSON.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION THE HOUSE OF HUNDING

Never before in the memory of man had spring been so late in coming, and into mid-May had lasted the hurricanes and tempests of winter. Not even yet was the armoury of its storms and squalls wholly spent, and men, as they huddled by the fire and heard night by night, and day by day the bugling of the wind, and the hiss of rain and the patter of the hailstones, wondered what this subversion and stay of the wholesome seasons should portend. For now for many years had strange omens and forebodings shadowed and oppressed the earth. Some said that the earth itself and Erda the spirit of earth were growing old; some even had seen the great mother, not as of old she had appeared from time to time, vigorous and young, clad in the fresh green of growing things, but old and heavy-eyed, and her mantle was frosted over with rime, for the chill of the unremitting years had fallen on her. Others again said that in Walhalla, which Wotan the father of gods and men had builded by the might of giants, all was not well; that shadows crowded in places where no shadows should be, and that their companies grew ever greater, and that dim voices of wailing and of warning sounded in the ears and in the high places of the gods. Others said that the gods themselves were growing old; that Wotan feared the spirits of the earth, and of the places beneath the earth, for he was no longer certain of his strength, and that age and the grey shadow of death itself looked over his shoulder when he sat alone, and when he slept with Fricka his wife visions of ill portent would trouble his dreams so that often he rose at dead of night from his couch, and would look from the walls of Walhalla over the still sleeping earth, wondering from which quarter danger would come, and from where he would first see the red light of war. Night by night he would commune with himself, wondering how it was that the strength and the merriment of old days had departed, wondering, yet in himself knowing. For he knew the Book of Fate and of that which should be, as a man still dreaming knows that he is in bed, and the night-hag rides him, and yet is powerless either to fully sleep or fully wake. Certain also it was that day by day he sent his daughters, whom he begat by Erda the spirit of the earth, to slay and bring into Walhalla heroes of the sons of men, into whom he breathed the spirit of eternal life so that for ever they should guard those walls that once he thought impregnable; and day by day did the eight Valkyries, led by Brunnhilde, the fairest and the strongest of them all, go on their quests. She it was in whom above all Wotan delighted, for so at one with him was the swift strength and fearless will of the maid; it was to her he told all his intentions and his purposes, and not to Fricka his wife, so that often when he talked with Brunnhilde he scarcely knew whether he spoke to her or whether his own soul but communed with itself. Yet though he thus guarded Walhalla, thinking to make it safe, he knew that there was one thing in the world which was stronger than he, and that was Fate. What Should Be, would be, and What Should Be recked of Wotan as lightly as it recked of the falling of a sparrow, or the passing of a spring shower.

Now these omens of gloom and fate which lay heavy on Walhalla, troubled also the minds of men. If death came to the gods, should not death come also to the earth and the children of the earth? When the Master fell should not the servant fall also? Yet because the race of men were yet but young on the earth, and vigorous, flourishing in stony places like a creeping plant that shall soon cover the desert with its stems, there were men, and those wise ones, who held that after the fall of the gods the kingdoms of the world and all the sovereignty of the earth should soon be given to the sons of men. And they looked for the coming of one who should challenge the gods themselves, before whom the everlasting foundations of Walhalla should crumble. He it was, they said, whom Wotan feared, he who was free and owed nothing to the lords of Walhalla, for Wotan knew that before him his own god-like strength would crumble as a dead leaf, and as a dead leaf be borne away on the winds. And in this long continuance of winter, when already spring should have awakened the earth with

its glad shout, they saw in figure the winter of the gods; and when winter should cease and spring come, even so would come in the fulness of time now nigh the upspringing of men, in which should be forgotten the winter of the gods. For the finger of fate pointed to the new time, when Walhalla should be shaken and fall, and men should be slaves no longer to the early outworn gods, but possess the earth in peace and plenty.

Yet still in mid-May the storms of winter were not spent; still the sap of growing things stayed and stirred not in the barren branches of the forest trees. And winter still froze and hardened in the heart of Sieglinde the wife of Hunding. Though she had been long his wife, yet she was still young, and her woman's heart hungered for love, and starved for a man she could love, but froze again ever into ice at the sight of her lord. Unwittingly and by compulsion of her kindred and his she had married him; hate blossomed in her heart where the flower of love should have made fragrance, and in all but deed she was unfaithful to him. Day by day she did the work of a wife; she made his food for him before he went out to the hunt, whether it was the deer he hunted to make venison, or man that he hunted for vengeance, for he was of the tribe of the Niedings, who wooed by sword and violence, and from the slaughter of her kindred had often borne away a maid to her wedding feast. Then after she had given him his food, she would give him his spear and sword and shield, a service which but earned her a curse or a blow, and watch him stride off into the forest, with bitter loathing in her heart. And truly if hate could kill, Hunding would have died by his wife's hand a hundred deaths a day.

But the hours when he was out were more tolerable, for after she had cleaned the house, and made all ready for his return, she would be free of the man she so hated till night came. Then, maybe, if suns were fair, she would sit outside, the house, listening to the sounds of the forest at noonday, little knowing how in the years that were coming, one, her first-born and only son, of a stranger union than ever gods or men had dreamed of, would listen in like manner to the murmurs of the forest, till the song of the bird spoke to him not with unintelligible twitterings, but with a voice as clear as the tones of a friend. Or she would let down her mane of golden hair, loving it because it was beautiful, and hating it because it was Hunding's, his to twine passionate hands in, his to cut off and throw on to the hearth if so he wished. Thus she both hated and loved her own beauty; loved it because she longed to give it to a man she loved, hated it because it belonged to a man she hated.

At other times she would walk down through the pine-trees to where the mountain brook fell into the black lake, that lay deeper, it was said, than line could plumb. Often she had sat there, wondering how it was that she of the Wolsung breed, daughter of the god Wotan, when in form of a man he wooed and won the forest maid who was her mother, yet lacked the courage to plunge in and be done with Hunding and her woe for ever. Yet had she known it, it was courage not cowardice that held her back from the leap, courage and that firm and strong belief that burned like a little flame, so clear, and yet so tiny within her, that there was something more written for her in the Book of Fate, to which even Wotan bowed, than that she should end all in one moment of unwomanly despair. Then, maybe, she would creep to the edge of the water, where the lake lay still and windless, and behold in that mirror the wonder and glory of her face, warm and red with the flow of her strong blood, with the great grey eyes all wildness and all fierce passion for the man she had never seen, whose coming her heart welcomed.

"Surely I bring him a gift which not many would despise," she would say to herself; "and O, when he comes, the love which is in my heart will make me more beautiful than ever!" Then, maybe, if the spring stirred in her blood, she would lie there imagining him. Dark men she hated, because Hunding was dark. Dark was he and swarthy, of great stature, but so broad of build that he seemed not tall. Dark eyes looked from out of the eaves of his overhanging brows, a cavern fringed with long growth of eyebrows, and dark and mirthless and cruel was his heart. Not so should her lover be; he, the man for whom fate had predestined her, for whose sake fate held her back from the lake that was as black as Hunding. No, he should be tall, but slight, strong with the strength of speed and lightness,

not strong with the knotted strength of the oak-tree. Hunding was black, so he should be fair, his hair of the colour of honey when it is drained fresh from the nest of the wild bee, and the sun strikes it.

"Yes, yes," she would say, "the colour, the colour;" and then a braid of her own hair would stray over her shoulder; "yes, that colour," she would say; and indeed it was beyond compare, for fresh honey was lustreless beside it. Grey should his eyes be, for Hunding was dark, grey with a reflected blueness lying deep therein, even as her own eyes were grey like thin skeins of cloud suffused with the inimitable blue of the heaven behind them. Then she would picture him, and lo! when the picture was complete, the man whom she desired, for whom her heart waited, was of the same glorious mould as herself, such a man as Wotan might have begotten by the forest maiden who bore Sieglinde herself.

Then when evening approached and the shadows of the pines began to lengthen across the lake, and the twittering of birds began to be hushed in the bushes, she would turn homewards again, and get ready the supper for her lord, and wait, his return. Sometimes even when she gazed into the lake, his image would cross her mind, and at that the reflection of her face froze and sickened. And every evening when she heard his step it froze and sickened, and her heart sickened also, and Sieglinde was Sieglinde no longer, but his wife, faithless in all but deed. Sometimes if the day and work had not gone well, he would speak no word to her, and again a curse or a blow might be her only traffic with him till next day he went forth again into the forest. But if the day had prospered with him, if he had slain much game, be it man or beast, he would be well pleased with her, and laugh to see her hatred of him, for that but seemed to kindle his love for her beauty. But Sieglinde was better pleased if he cursed her, for since he was hateful to her, his displeasure was almost sweet to her, but his pleasure made her sometimes hot with hatred against him, and she could have killed him, sometimes cold with hatred, when she could have killed herself. Nevertheless, between her and death stood ever the image of one who should come with outpouring of love, at sight of whom her own love long frozen and pent within her, nor even yet come to birth, should also be outpoured as the sap in a tree is called forth by the spring and the sun, and must follow that sweet bidding. But as yet it was winter with her and the world, and for sun the chill rain hissed on the roof-tree, and among the trees of the forest the winter wind sighed in the bitter air.

The house of Hunding, Sieglinde's house of hate, stood high in the forest, and all round it grew great trees of stately growth, where in this May-time the birds should have been already mated, the male with throatfuls of song to while his mate's hour of patient brooding, she busy with the cares of motherhood. But so long had winter lingered, that the branches and boughs were still scarcely green with the buds that, herald spring, and as yet their feathered citizens were silent. On the hill-side the pine forest came down to the borders of the stream which fed the lake into which Sieglinde used so often to look, and from year's end to year's end this was never wholly silent because of the breezes that even in the depth of summer made music in the pines, so high and open to the clear winds of heaven was the place set, and by night and day low moaning as of a distant sea sounded ever through the chambers of the house of Hunding. Four-square was the house; the door opened straight from the wood of beech and oak in which it stood, into the dwelling-place, and on one side was the open hearth with seats right and left of it. When sitting there Sieglinde could see through the smoke-hole the sky outside, and on clear nights would notice how the stars looked down through the curling wood-smoke, even as that which she knew would come to her shone steadfastly, though often obscured through the troubled clouds of her life. In front stood the table at which Hunding ate, and at which, when her lord had finished, she ate also. In the very centre of the hall grew a great tree, in the branches of which rested the beams of the roof. This was the work of Hunding, which he had prepared before ever he went on his violent wooing; and cunningly was it contrived, so that the strength and stability of the tree passed into the house itself, and not all the winds of heaven could move the house unless the tree itself was uprooted. Often did Sieglinde gaze at the mighty trunk, but not for pleasure at the workmanship of the house, but because in her day-dreams she ever saw her deliverance from the hated yoke of Hunding bound up with the tree. For on the day of her abhorred wedlock, when

the kith and kin of Hunding made merry at his marriage feast, while she, whom he had carried off, sat apart with downcast eyes, and heart in which hatred of her husband already had flowered, there strode into the hall one whom neither she nor Hunding, nor any of those who sat at meat with him, knew. But as he came into the hall, a hush fell on the din of merry-making, and none durst ask him who he was, or what his business there might be. First one and then another started up to ask him what he did there, for he came unbidden by any, but at the flash of his eye, each in turn fell back abashed, but Sieglinde met his gaze undismayed, and found there no tremor nor fear, but a sudden spring of hope. The stranger was clad in a long cloak of blue, and on his head was a hat of so wide a brim that one of his eyes only was seen. Yet that was enough to put fear into the hearts of all except Sieglinde; and she found there hope and the promise of delivery. Still in silence he drew the sword he wore, and with one movement buried it up to the hilt in the stem of the ash. Then said the stranger: "Whoso can pull out the sword, his shall it be," and without more words strode out as he had come. Then one after the other, beginning from Hunding, all tried to draw out the sword, yet none with his utmost might could stir it an inch from the place where the stranger had so lightly thrust it. But ever, since the stranger's glance had fallen on her, Sieglinde knew in her heart that the man who would draw it out would be her deliverer from the house of hate. And thus she often cast her eyes to where the hilt of the sword still gleamed against the dark trunk of the ash, and waited for one to come.

For the rest, curtains of woven wool, the work of Sieglinde's years of loveless marriage, hung on the walls, and on the floor were strewn bear-skins, the spoils of Hunding's hunting. Beside the hearth a stairway of few steps led to the store-house, and in the wall opposite was the door that led to the bed-chamber. Little recked Hunding when in the house of aught but his food and his sleep; and the table at which he ate, the stool on which he sat, and the bed in which he slept were furniture enough for him. And since to Sieglinde the house was a house of hate, she cared not to make it fair as women do whose heart is at home. Clean was the house and bare; the roof kept out the rain, and Hunding's hunting made a fat table.

CHAPTER II

THE COMING OF THE STRANGER

On a certain day then in this May month, when winter still held sway, Hunding, as his custom was, had left the house armed with his spear and sword and shield, as soon as the eyelids of the wind-swept morning opened in the skies, and all day Sieglinde had been alone. All day too a riotous storm had beset the place, so that she had stirred not from the house, but when her work was done sat and listened to the bugling blasts, half in fear, half in hope that this tempest and hurly-burly of the skies might prove too strong for the cunning handiwork of Hunding, and that the very house should fall upon her as she sat there, making an end of her hopes and her hate. So strong was the tempest that she feared Hunding might return before the day was over, but the hours passed on, and still he came not; and towards the sunset she went into the store-house, as her custom was, to make ready for his supper.

Shrill and loud blew the wind, so that the walls of the house trembled with its violence, and the sheets of rain were flung unceasingly against the building. For all that, it seemed to her that by now some change had come over the day; no longer were the blasts cold and piercing like those she had known now for months past, but there was something of warmth and softness in them. And for all the rain was so heavy, yet to her mind it was more like to the heavy and fruitful rain of spring than the volleyings of winter tempests. All this made within her a sort of eager restlessness; often during the day she had started on some errand in her work, and had left it with a sigh unfinished or had forgotten what she had intended; often too she had looked at the sword-hilt gleaming against the dark ash-stem, and thrills of unaccountable expectation had been hers suddenly and unconjecturably sweet. But as the day went on, the storm grew even fiercer, though it seemed to her that a warmth and languor was in the air, and tardily enough and with limbs unstrung she went about the time of sunset to the store-house. The bread she had made that morning was there, and the venison which Hunding had killed two days before. Then from the store she took honey to make mead for his drink, when suddenly she heard the house door bang, and hate surged bitterly into her throat, for she knew that it must be her husband come home. And whether it was the coming of spring that troubled her blood or not, she felt then for him such loathing as had never before been hers, and her hand so trembled that she stayed a little within, till he should call to her, or until she was more mistress of herself. But no sound came from the hall, and after a little while, leaving the meat and the bread and the honey there, she went to the door to see whether it was indeed Hunding who had returned, for she wondered that he had not called to her.

It was now dark, and only the gleam from the fire made a little brightness in the hall, and for a moment she thought that it must have been the wind only that had moved the door, for she saw none there, neither Hunding nor another, but only the firelight crouching on the hearth and leaping on the walls of the empty room, and gleaming very brightly on the hilt of the sword which the stranger had buried in the ash-stem on the day of her marriage. Then with a cry of surprise she saw that a man was stretched out on the bear-skin by the hearth, without movement, but lying like one dead. His face she could not see, for it was turned away from her towards the fire, but he was tall in stature, and his arm, bare to the shoulder, was strong and sinewy. His clothes were ragged and drenched with the rain, but the firelight shone on the hair that fell thickly to his shoulder, and it gleamed yellow in the firelight like the honey she had just now drawn for her husband's mead. And when she saw that she felt that for a moment a long-drawn breath hung suspended in her bosom. Then, for here was a man sick perhaps to death, and in need of help, the thought that had not yet been consciously hers died again, and she went nearer to him. But still the man did not move; only she saw that his tunic rose and fell with the rising and falling of his breath, and she knew that whoever he was he was not dead, but only fallen in sore faintness of exhaustion, and that his eyelids, which had fallen over his eyes, so

that the lashes swept his cheek, were not closed in the sleep of death. And as she thus looked at his face which was turned towards the firelight, again a breath hung suspended in her bosom, for he was fair, not dark like Hunding, and the short beard of early manhood which fringed his tip and covered his chin was yellow, even as the honey which she had drawn for her husband's mead.

Even as she looked, the man stirred, and though his eye did not open, his tongue moved in his mouth, and —

"Water, water!" he whispered, and his voice was low and deep and soft.

At that Sieglinde stayed not in idle surmise, but pity for a man distressed woke in her heart, pity and the woman's need to help, and she took up Hunding's drinking-horn which she had laid on the table for his supper, and hurried out of the house to where the well of water sprang bubbling out of the mossy bed beneath the hawthorn trees. The storm had altogether ceased, and in the heaven washed clean by the rain the stars burned large. The chill of the long winter had gone, and the balmy warmth of spring filled the air, and, even as she bent to fill the horn at the runnel of water, close above her head a nightingale burst into bubbling song. And she wondered, yet paused not to wonder, but hurried back into the house with the horn brimful of the fresh spring water.

So with the horn in her hand she returned, and found the stranger still lying as she had left him, and into his nerveless hand she put the horn.

"Water," she said, "thou didst ask for water;" and he drank till the horn was empty, yet still raised not his eyes.

"Water, water," he said; "thou hast given me water, and I give thee thanks. Already —"

And he paused, and the bear-skin stood away from the braced arm. "Already I am my own master again. That was all I needed."

Yet that was not all, for he sank back again to his elbow in the bear-skins, and he gazed at her.

"Lady, I thank thee," said he. "Thou hast wakened me, thou hast welcomed me. The sleep and darkness of my faintness stands away from me. So tell me: whom is it that I thank?"

Just then the firelight died down, and from flame there was but a mere glow on the walls. Only in the darkness the glow lit on the hilt of the sword that a stranger on the day of her marriage feast had thrust in the ash-stem, and on the head of a stranger who lay at the hearth. Yet wondrously spring bubbled in her heart, though as yet she knew nought but that only a wayfarer had happened here, and that she had relieved his sore need.

"The house is Hunding's," said she. "She who gave thee drink is the wife of Hunding," and at that the hatred of her man rose bitter and deadly in her throat "His guest — the guest of Hunding art thou. Abide then here, he will soon be home."

Thereat a sudden log caught fire in the hearth, and in the blaze she saw the colour fly to his face, and the light from the firelight sparkle in his eyes. And they were grey, but blue was behind them, as if a summer cloud flecked the open heaven.

"There is no harm," said he, still weak from his adventure, and loth to meet her gaze; "I am without weapon. He would not grudge a weaponless guest such harbourage, though his wife is alone with him and tends to him. Also I am wounded."

"Wounded!" she cried; and again there was nought but pity in a woman's heart for a man in distress, pity and the need to give help. "Where art thou wounded? Let me see to thy hurt."

Again he raised his eyes to her, and at the sight his blood beat quicker, and resumed its more wonted way, and, refreshed of his faintness by the water she had brought him, he shook the hair back from his white forehead, and though not yet enough himself to stand up, sat erect on the bear-skin, rejoicing to feel the life return in warmth and tingling to his limbs. And he thought no more of his wounds, for it was of the gracious woman who faced him that he thought.

"Ah, they are nothing," he said. "They are not worth the words we have already spent on them. See! my arms will serve me yet," and he thrust out first one and then the other with vigour, so that the muscles stood out on them like cords, and in turn he clenched his hands. "Would that my shield

and spear had served me as well," said he; "then should I not have run from my foes, but my shield was shivered, and my sword broken. Yes, I am a man who ran from his foes. What else could I do? Often through the forest they were close behind me, and often the branches through which I plunged had not yet closed behind me, when one or another of my foes was lashed by the back-stroke of the twigs. But now, faster than my flight my faintness leaves me. Faster than the storm, which all day has buffeted me, riding on the wings of the wind, my strength returns; my fear and the night and darkness which closed over my senses roll away, and the sun comes out again."

Low burned the firelight on the hearth; and in the darkness she could scarce see the stranger's face, but the music of his voice beat on her ear, and within her, her heart beat in tune to it. And a sudden tumult shook her, and she sprang up, feeling the need to do something, not to watch only for the upspringing of the fire so that she should see him, nor to question him so that his voice should sound on her ear. So again she took the drinking-horn of Hunding, and fetched honey from the store-chamber, and made within it the yellow mead, and handed it him.

"Drink," she said. "The water has given thee life; take thy strength again also."

"Drink thou first," said he.

So Sieglinde took the horn and sipped it, and gave it back to the stranger. And he, putting his lips where hers had touched the horn, drank deeply of it, and bowing his head in thanks gave it back to her. As he did so, again the fire shot up and prospered on the hearth; each saw the other more clearly than before, and the woman was fair and the man also, and in each grey eyes were shot with blue, and the yellow hair of each was of the same brightness. Long they looked at each other undismayed, he, because he must soon depart, and this one long look could hurt neither, unless a little heart-ache were a hurt; she, because her dreams had become suddenly coloured with life, and because she hated Hunding.

But there comes an end to all moments be they sweet or bitter, and soon he got up. Tall was he as Hunding, but his form was slight as of a youth but lately come to man's estate, but in the clean lines of arm and leg there was strength and swiftness.

"Thou hast refreshed my faintness," said he. "Thou hast given me life again. And for thanks what can I say? This only: may sorrow ever be a stranger to thee. May happiness be ever about thy home. I am rested and refreshed; I will go on my way."

Then her heart awoke, and told her that she could not let him go. Already the fire of love was beginning to burn within her, and her dreams every moment were flushed more deeply with life. And though her voice was half strangled in her throat, she answered him lightly: "Why such haste?" she said; "wait a little longer."

He paused on his foot and looked at her.

"That would be but poor thanks for thy kindness," said he; "for wherever I go I bring sorrow with me, sorrow and ill-luck. If thou wert my enemy I would stay; it is because thou hast been good to me and gracious that I go, taking my ill-luck with me, that it should not abide untowardly in thy house. So I delay not, but go," and he turned quickly and went to the door.

Then when his hand was on the latch, and in the next moment he would have gone forth into the night, and out of her sight for ever, her heart again would not suffer her to remain dumb. Little of sorrow or ill-luck could he bring to her while she abode still in the house of Hunding, for all the sorrow in the world, or so it seemed to her, was hers already, nor was there any ill-luck which he could bring which should be comparable to that which was ever about her house and about her bed, and sat at meat with her.

"There is no sorrow thou couldest bring me," said she, "for it is mine already. Look on these walls; they are builded firm, and it is of hate they are builded. Sorrow and hate and ill-luck were the masons, and they have built well. Look! thou wilt find no cranny nor chink. O, I have a well-established house!" and she laughed with sudden bitterness. "So stay," she said, and her voice quivered like an aspen leaf.

By now the logs that Sieglinde had cast on the hearth against Hunding's return were fully caught, and loud laughed the firelight on the walls. In that brightness they saw each other more clearly yet, and the long look that had passed between them was again renewed. Other fires, too, were burning, for each now felt much pity for the other – Sieglinde for the stranger in that he was lonely and the quarry of ill-luck; the stranger for her in that when love should have been blossoming in her home, the strong poisonous flowers of hate were there instead. But as she spoke, the latch fell from his fingers, and he slowly returned and sat down by the hearth.

"Yet I have warned thee," said he. "Woe is my name, and if thou fearest not Woe, thou fearest not me. I will wait for Hunding to thank him for the rest and refreshment I have found in his house."

Then though Sieglinde's heart rejoiced that she had stayed his going, yet she was troubled. For though nothing could have been more right than that he should wait for Hunding, her lawful lord, yet she knew why she had bade him stay, for the woman in her called for man. And in silence she lit the lamp and placed it on the table; and in troubled silence she made all ready for Hunding's coming. Not long did she wait, for in a short space she heard the stroke of his horse's hoofs on the stones without; she heard him lead the beast to the stable and shut the door; she heard his step again outside and the jar of the lifted latch.

Then she looked once more at the stranger and he at her, and with that the door opened, and Hunding, black as the night outside, stood there. Then seeing a stranger by the hearth he paused, with the door still swung open, and looked with an unspoken question at his wife. From without came in the warm breath of the spring night, and the dwelling-place was filled with it, as the vats are filled with the odours of the wine when the vintage time has come, and in the heart of Sieglinde the flowers of hate burst into passionate blossom, and with that growth was mingled another.

CHAPTER III

THE STORY OF THE STRANGER

For a moment there was silence. Then said Sieglinde: "I found him here by the hearth, Hunding; he was faint, his foes pursued him."

Hunding looked darkly at her, and more darkly yet at the stranger. He on Hunding's entrance had turned himself, and risen from his seat, as if to greet his host; but even as his greeting was on his lips he had paused, for there was something in that black look which made him feel some echo of Sieglinde's hate.

"It is ever well to help the helpless," said Hunding evilly. "Thou gavest him refreshment?"

"Even so," said she. "He was my guest – your guest; faint by the hearth I found him. He waited for your coming." Not a smile of welcome did Hunding give, for it was not his way to smile; and already in his black heart hatred blackened towards his guest, and suspicion, ere yet it came, cast its shadow. And as his host did not greet him, neither did the stranger greet his host. Yet he could not bear that the woman should be blamed for what he had done. His was the blame.

"I was shelterless," said he, looking at Hunding. "She sheltered me. I was faint: she revived me. Is there blame in that?"

"Blame? Who talks of blame?" said Hunding more blackly yet. "My hearth is holy: not otherwise has any guest of mine found it, and guest of mine art thou. Inviolable are these laws."

And without more words he turned to Sieglinde, who, as her custom was, took his weapons of hunting and hung them up on the ash-tree beneath the gleaming sword-hilt Hunding hated the sword-hilt, for he had not been able to move it, and he knew that in this world there was but one who could. On that day also he knew trouble would come to his house. But he told Sieglinde to bring supper for him and his guest, and as she moved about her work, he stood beneath the ash-stem and looked from her to the stranger and back again. Each was cast in noble mould, and they were strangely like the one to the other, for the head of each was bright with sunny hair, and in the grey eye of each was seated some secret sorrow. Tall was his wife, and tall the stranger, and the skin of each was fair as the skin of a child, and as smooth. For himself he felt like a base-born man in the presence of the gently bred; and as he looked he hated each, and the shadow of his suspicion grew darker. Then he turned to the stranger, and speaking like a man who conceals nought —

"Thy way has been long," he said, "and thou hast no horse. Where hast thou come, and whither goest thou? What journey has thus travel-stained thee?"

Then said the stranger: "The storm and the foe have driven me far, and by what way I know not. And where I have come I know not, for my way was long, and the heavens and earth were blinded with tempest. Tell me then where I have come."

And as Hunding looked on him again, the likeness of the stranger to his wife smote on him like a blow; and again he looked from one to the other, as Sieglinde brought in venison and the fresh-baked bread, and put them ready on the table. But he answered him with seeming frankness.

"It is to Hunding's house thou hast come," he said, "and under the roof of Hunding thou hast rested. Not here is the home of my kindred, but far away to northward; and they of my blood are mighty and many. Be seated then, guest of mine, and in return tell me thy name."

So the stranger seated himself, and when he was seated Hunding sat down also, and Sieglinde, who had finished the serving, sat by her husband opposite to their guest, and her eyes dwelt ever on him very steadfastly, and his on her, and neither took heed of Hunding, who watched them both. Eagerly she waited for him to tell them his name, expecting she knew not what; but as her eyes looked on him, she forgot even that Hunding had asked it, for she forgot all else except that in front of her and at her husband's table was seated the fair-haired stranger. As for him, his eyes were fixed in thought,

as if he meditated on his answer. Yet since it was a strange thing that a guest should not tell his name to his host, again Hunding questioned him.

"Surely I would not press aught unwelcome on my guest," said he, "if he wills not to tell me. But see how my wife also waits for your answer. She too would fain know the name of her guest and mine;" and again he looked at Sieglinde.

But she took not her eyes off the stranger, for the sight of him fed her heart, making her content. And though she cared not to know his name, she could not but do her husband's bidding, and she too asked him his name, if so be he would be willing to tell it.

Then again for a long moment was the stranger still silent, but at the last he raised his eyes and looked at her, and some secret sympathy passed like a wave between them; and he spoke to her only.

"My name is Wehwalt, the man of Woe," said he, "for mine is the portion of sorrow, and my father was called 'The Wolf.' He begat twins, a sister and myself; but while I was yet so young that I scarce knew her name or the name of my mother, the Wolf, my father, took me into the forest, there to rear me up to be strong and warlike, even as himself. Strong too and warlike were his foes, and there were many of them. Then, after years, one day he took me home, but no home found we there, but only the burnt ashes of what had been. There lay my mother, fallen and dead in defence of the hearth, but of my sister no trace was left. Such was my home-coming."

He paused, but took not his eyes from Sieglinde's face, and his voice rose in sudden fire as he went on with his tale.

"The treacherous Niedings had done this," he cried, "and deadly was their work. Bitter and relentless they pursued us, and for years my father and I lived a hunted life in the forest, beset with our foes. Yet ever his courage and his cunning avoided the snares they set for us, and, by the side of the Wolf, the Whelp grew up through boyhood to early manhood."

Thereat he paused again, and turned to Hunding.

"That Wolfs whelp tells you the tale," said he.

Now at the words of the stranger the suspicion that had hung over Hunding's heart like a poised hawk grew suddenly nearer, as if it stooped to its prey, for even in the manner in which the stranger told them his sister had been lost to him, in that manner was his own wife won. Well he remembered how the mother fought for the daughter, but at the end she was slain, and the house burnt, and the girl carried off by force; and again the strange likeness of the two struck on his heart. As for his wife Sieglinde, her face was a mask, and she only gazed at the stranger with wide, grey eyes, and what she thought no man knew, and least of all her husband. Also he had heard stories of the Wolf and the Whelp, as the forest folk called them, and now the Whelp told the tale himself. But since he must needs know more yet, he curbed himself.

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