

4.

THE ELFIN HILL.

Forth I, a young swain, fared on my wooing; and riding through shaded forest glades where clustered the wild roses, heavy with sun-warmth and with scent, I was minded to rest a while thereunder.

But resting there, my head was laid on the side of the elfin hill, when straightway a drowsiness fell upon mine eyes, and on my heart a heaviness. Out from the hill trod maidens, and with words sounding as from afar they spoke to me. One with her white fingers touched my cheeks, another whispered elf-magic in my ear. "Awaken, young swain," said she; "awaken, if so be you list to tread in the dance-measures: to you, too, shall my maidens sing, a song than which you heard never a fairer."

Forth they bore a seat of gold whereon the maiden rested; but I say in truth that my heart was ill at ease and without joy. Her lips she opened, and a song she sang, nor heard I ever a fairer: the very streams stayed their flowing and were silent, and the fish of the flood lay therein without motion.

The timid deer in the woods that were,
They ceased their running and springing;
The very birds in the swaying boughs
For her song stayed their singing.
Since first I saw her face!

The elf-maidens danced out, and they danced in, and each with her best-beloved; but I, lorn swain, sat alone, my cheek resting upon my hand.

"Hear now, young swain," said they; "wilt thou abide with us, then shalt thou be taught the lore of the runes, and by us shalt thou be well beloved; the binding of the wild boar shalt thou be taught, and the staying of the eagle under the clouds; the dragon, too, that sits in guard over the gold-hoards shall flee before thee."

They danced in, they danced out, in a wildering elfin maze; and I, lorn swain, sat in their midst, leaning upon my sword.

"Hear thou, young swain," said they; "wilt thou not speak to us, lo then shall the keen knife and the sharp sword lay thy heart ever in deepest sorrow."

Eftsoons came a youthful maiden, lightly treading from the elfin hill, and in her two hands she bore a vessel of silver; but at her feet the drink borne therein she spilt when, resting her eyes upon him, she knew the swain that sat before her.

"Hear thou me, my dear sister," said I, "me wilt thou not deceive:—must I indeed drink with thee this day?—in very sooth answer thou me."

"Slyly to thy lips lay the horn, so that the mead may run adown thy breast; yea, for evil it is to dwell here in the elfin hill with elf-maidens."

To my lips I set the horn, so that adown my breast ran the sleepy mead; then clapped the elf-maidens their hands together, deeming they with their magic draught had won me.

"Hear me, dear sister; and wilt thou ride hence with me? From the elves far shall I bear thee, and far from thy sorrow."

"From sorrow thou couldst not bear me so far
(Were it even where earth has ending),
But hither again I needs must fare
Ere the sun were at morn ascending."
Since first I saw her face!

Had not the good God so ordered my fortune that the cock now beat his wings ere the day-dawn, surely had I too entered the elfin hill, into the presence of the elf-maidens. And to all youthful swains who will fare riding in the forest, my rede is this: Ride not to elfin hill, nor rest on its side in slumber.

And this is my rede to Danish swains
Who fare through the forest wooing—
That he tarries not under the elfin hill,
Full near was it my undoing.
Since first I saw her face!

5.

GRAMVOLD, THE KING'S SON.

Away in eastern lands lies a mountain wherein is great treasure of silver and the red gold; but of what avail is that when under the mountain lies, too, the dreaded Lindworm, the dragon that wounds and wastes all the land?

Forth to Berne rode Gramvold, the King's son; and in the secret pathway leading upwards to the silver mountain, there in the secret pathway, crouching endlong in the grass, beheld he the loathsome Lindworm.

"Well met," it cried, "King's son, Gramvold;
Full fast thy good steed speedeth;
But who hath revealed to thee, too bold,
The secret path that leadeth
All up to the high-born Silverlan, who dwelleth
under the mountain?"

To the Lindworm answered Gramvold, and in nobleness of appearance he showed as a god: "All paths and secret pathways that I know, to me have been made known by Our Lady; and moreover, I am bent to slay the Lindworm loathly, bearing under its shoulder its burden of gleaming gold."

"Not this day wilt thou slay the Worm," it made answer, and with deceitful and wiling words it added: "Thou bearest not in the breast of thee the heart to do this thing."

"Were thy great strength yet greater, and were it increased twofold," said Gramvold the free of heart and a King's son, "yet would I this day strive with thee."

There to his good steed, for it had the power of man's speech, said to Gramvold: "Wouldst thou this day make an end of the Lindworm? Then must thou bear in thy bosom a heart as iron hard, and stout as steel."

Naught answered Gramvold, but from its sheath drew his bright sword Adelring;—and thereon might be heard from far the harsh cries of the Worm as it leapt with crooked limbs and lay its long folds now here, now there, struggling against Gramvold and striving.

One day—two days—long they strove,
And the third day's eve was gleaming,
When Gramvold through the Lindworm clove,
So it lay in its red blood streaming;
The deed of Gramvold, the King's son, under
the silver mountain.

From the dead body Gramvold with his sword hewed the head, smoking with hot blood, and set it on his spear. Holding it on high as a sign he rode up the mountain to the abode of the highborn Silverlan, and, calling, he bade her forth from her bower.

"Without hurt thou standest, O high-born Silverlan! radiant and clear-browed in thy crimson robes; but know that I have slain the Lindworm, and by that encounter have I parted you two asunder."

"Hast thou indeed slain the Lindworm?" said she. "Then art thou become lord of all the mountain, and for thy labour hast thou won its treasure of silver, and for thy strokes the treasure of red gold that lieth therein.

"And hast thou slain the Lindworm fell,
That fouled the mountain steep,
Thou here, the mountain's lord, shalt dwell,
And on mine arm shalt sleep."
So spake the high-born Silverlan, blossoming
under the mountain.

Then again his good steed, having power of man's speech, said to Gramvold: "Wilt thou plight troth with this woman, a heathen? Never shalt thou know the face of fortune thereafter."

To Silverlan answered Gramvold: "As for the treasure of silver and red gold, sit thou still in the lordship thereof, O most fair and gracious Silverlan! A maid there is of the King's land, and in her keeping is my heart; and the good God forfend that I should prove unfaithful, for a royal maiden is she, and each day as the sky of the East lightens in dawn she awaits my coming." Thereupon he reined his steed about, saying: "Fare thee well, O high-born Silverlan! To this mountain and to thee I will return never more."

Gramvold rode down the mountain side,
No word did Silverlan speak,
But silent there she stood, dim-eyed,
And the sad tears bathed her cheek,
All for the comely King's son, Gramvold,
riding under the mountain.