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A MÆDIEVAL EPIC.



AR back in a dim shadow-land viewed by us through the mists of centuries, the figures of the great men of that distant time loom up gigantically till like the genius in the Arabian Nights they seem to touch the clouds. The fables of

a Hercules and a Theseus, of an Odin and an Arthur, of a Hiawatha and a Quetzal have their rise, let us be sure, in some mighty deeds performed by real men but magnified into vast though cloudy proportions in the alembic of the poet's brain. Genuine heroism is the nucleus of every epic, and the land whose literature contains not an epic is a land whose history was not made by heroes.

The epic age of Greece and Rome was long before the Christian era, but it was not so for the northern countries of Europe. Of these it may almost be said that they did not begin to exist till the period of their conversion to the faith of Christ. At least none of the legends of the time of their total barbarism have been preserved to literature, and it is the story of a race supposed to have existed as late as the sixth or seventh century of our era which is told by the *Nibelungen Lied*.

What the Iliad is to Greece, the *Nibelungen Lied* is to Germany. Both of these epics—for the latter is really an epic though not equal in merit to the former—describe the heroic deeds of valiant races of semi-civilized men, men who although

possessed of many noble qualities and rude virtues are yet swayed by passions of the most violent nature, which they believe it would be unmanly to attempt to quell. The epic heroes are jealous, revengeful and greedy: yet they are bounteous in hospitality, and faithful in friendship even unto death. The heroines are capable of love and hatred of an equally passionate intensity, and yet are not altogether wanting in the modesty, and other gentle qualities which are the ornament of their sex. But their untutored feelings lead them to the commission of many unwomanly deeds in order to gratify a desire of vengeance arising from a sense of cruel wrong.

The Nibelungers, whose song or *lied* this mediaeval epic sings, were a race said to have dwelt on the Lower Rhine in what is now known as the Netherlands. They were not the original Nibelungers, but had usurped the name together with a treasure of almost incalculable value, the property of a mythical king Nibelung of Nibelungenland (Norway). Siegfried, prince of the Netherlands proceeded against King Nibelung, slew seven hundred of his chiefs and subdued the country. But before obtaining possession of the wondrous Nibelungen hoard which was secreted in a gnome-guarded mountain cavern he had to elude the wiles not merely of men, but of elves and wizard dwarfs. The amount of the treasure is thus set forth in the poem: