

THE RIVAL QUEENS.

FROM the days of Clovis to the days of Charles Martel and Charlemagne the history of France, so far as its kingship is concerned, is almost a blank. It was an era of several centuries of incompetent and sluggish monarchs, of whom we can say little more than that they were born and died ; they can scarcely be said to have reigned. But from the midst of this dull interregnum of Merovingian sluggards comes to us the story of two queens, women of force and power, whose biography is full of the elements of romance. As a picture of the manners and customs of the Merovingian epoch we cannot do better than to tell the stories of these queens, Fredegonde and Brunehild by name, whose rivalry and enmity, with their consequences, throw a striking light on the history of those obscure times.

France at that time was divided into three kingdoms, Austrasia, Neustria, and Burgundy, King Chilperic reigning over Austrasia ; King Sigebert over Neustria. But the power behind the throne lay in the wives of these kings, with whom alone we have to do. Contrasted characters they were,—Fredegonde wicked, faithless, self-seeking ; Brunehild patriotic and devoted to the good of her country ;