The name of the author of 'Jason' and 'The Earthly Paradise' is itself enough to draw our eyes with respect and expectation to this book. It is the first English translation of a famous Icelandic saga, or heroic romance, the original prose of which was composed, probably, in the twelfth century, from floating traditions and from songs and fragments of songs. The main features of the story are traceable in various forms in "the dark backward and abysm of time" through many generations of Teutons; and out of this scattered and nebulous condition it was rescued, and reedited, about the twelfth century, into more complete shape; or rather several various editors — namely, singers and saga-men — took the popular legend in hand, and produced a number of versions; Germany alone preserved more than a dozen. This Völunga Saga is the Icelandic version of the famous heroic story, which has been called the Iliad of Northern Europe; the story that appears in a metrical dress in the old German 'Nibelungen Lied,' to which celebrated work — belonging, probably, to the same century, but whether earlier or later we have no means of judging — Munus Magnusson and Morris, strangely enough, make contribution. Every student of popular legendary lore will find this faithful and fine translation highly valuable; and it is, moreover, a thing to be grateful for as a permanent accession to English literature.

As in all old stories, there is much that must appear tedious to the more reader for amusement. The hearers of the sagas were from their cradle familiar with the personages and incidents of the Epic, and there were, no doubt, as in the case of our Old Ballads, countless variations of the well-known theme introduced, according to the inventiveness of the story-teller, and received with child-like attention by an audience accustomed to circulating libraries or penny newspapers. Our translators have, we doubt not, been most respectfully careful of their ancient saga; but at the same time it is certain that no particular form of a story of this kind has any very special or sacred importance, as compared with other forms which do or might exist. The Preface tells us that we have here a translation of the most complete and dramatic form of the popular story, and we feel every disposition to accept the statement of the translators on this point. "We lay no claim," they add, "to special critical insight, nor do we care to deal at all with vexed questions, but are content to abide by existing authorities, doing our utmost to make our rendering close and accurate, and as free from as the same time, not over prosaic.

The story, as here given to us, is in forty-three chapters, of which the first twelve may be considered as introductory. The thirteenth tells of "the Birth and Waxing" of Sigurd (the Siegfried of the 'Nibelungen Lied'), the hero, the Achilles, of the tale. His foster-father, Regin, teaches him "all manner of arts, the choppling and the lore of runes, and the talking of many things." After he was "witted with kings' sons in those days," and helps him in the choosing of a horse, "Grani, the best of all the horses of the world." One day Regin tells young Sigurd of a great treasure of gold, guarded by a man turned into the shape of a dragon, "and Fafnir his name," and Regin, after several trials, makes Sigurd a sword, a wondrous weapon, and a magic locket of wool and to drive an evil in twain, and with this Sigurd slays the great and evil "worm," the man-dragon, called Fafnir, and takes the heap of gold. Sigurd drinks of the blood of Fafnir and eats of his heart, and straightway knows "the voice of all fowls" and what they speak of; from which he learns many things. After this, going forth upon adventure:

"By long roads rides Sigurd, till he comes at the last up en to Hindelf, and wends his way south to the land of the Francs; and he sees before him on the fell a great light, as of fire burning, and flaming over the mountain, and when even came, and the sun went down, thereto, lo, a shield-hung castle before him, and a banner on the topmost thereof: into castle went Sigurd, and saw one lying there asleep, and held not. Therewith he went to the head of the man, and saw that it is no man, but a woman."

This is the noble Brynhild, the beautiful warrior maid, who is also full of wisdom; and after some grave talk they come to an interesting перечисление. "Sigurd spake, 'None among the sons of men can be found wiser than thou; and thereby sware I, that thee will I have as mine own, for near to the heart's desire thou hast answered. Thee will I base, choose, though I be not the most. All men's eyes has to choose from. And thereto they plighteth troth both of them.'

There is a fine simplicity in this. As to the hero's looks:

"Now the hair of this Sigurd was golden-red of hue, fair of fashion, and falling down in great locks; thick and short was his beard, and of no other colour, high-nosed he was, broad and high-boned, but still he was one of the best figures in the world. But few folk came up under the brows of him; his shoulders were as broad to look on as the shoulders of two; most duteous was his body fashioned betwixt height and breadth, and such was his body, that the very white glittered; and this is the sign told of his height, that when he was girt with his sword Gram, which same was seven spans long, as he went through the full-grown rye-fields, the dew-shoe of the said sword smote the ears of the standing corn; and, for all that, greater was his strength than his growth: well could he wield sword, and cast forth spear, shoot shaft, and hold shield, bend bow, back horse, and do all the goodly deeds that he learned in his youth's days. Wise he was to know things yet undone; and the voice of all fowls he knew, whereof few things fell on him-unawares. Of many words he was, and so fair was the deal, that whenever he made it his business to speak, he never left speaking before that to all men it seemed full sure that no otherwise must the matter be than as he said. His sport and pleasure it was to give aid to his own folk, and all the goodly deeds that he learned in his youth's days. Wise he was to know things yet undone; and the voice of all fowls he knew, whereof few things fell on him-unawares.

"(And now we come to Sigurd's battle with Fafnir.)

Again met Sigurd and Brynhild, and their lovs waxed ever deeper and stronger, and Sigurd said "I swear by the gods that shall I have for mine own, or no woman else;" but Brynhild, having gift of foreboding, said, "Thou shalt wed Gudrun, the daughter of Giuki." And even so it befall; for Sigurd coming to the realm of King Giuki, the Queen Grimbhild gives him one day unwear a certain drink, whereby he forgets Brynhild, and takes instead of her the maid Gudrun, and after this, Queen Grimbhild, who is an inveterate matchmaker, advises her son Gunnar to woo to the famous Brynhild, and to take Sigurd with him on the expedition. The two princes reach Brynhild's castle, and after strange adventures, wherein Sigurd's powers enable Gunnar to overcome the trials put to him, the warlike Sigurd enters into himself conquered, and submits, though with deep misgivings, to Brynhild's will.

But when Brynhild and Gudrun, the wife of Sigurd, meet, then woe begins. They are envious and jealous of each other, and it soon rises to an angry quarrel with bitter words. Brynhild learns that it was only through Sigurd's help that Gunnar won her hand, and her fury against Sigurd, whom she has loved, may, whom she still loves passionately, is beyond all control. She persuades Gudrun, her husband's brother, to slay Sigurd:

"But of these evil wishes naught at all knew Sigurd, for he might not deal with his shapen fate, nor the measure of his life-days, neither deemed he that he was worthy of such things at their hands. So Gudrun went in to Sigurd the next morning as if they would do nothing; and his back do augur against him, but shrank back out again; yes, and even so he fared a second time, for so bright and eager were the eyes of Sigurd that few durst look upon them, and the third time he went in, and there lay Sigurd asleep; then Gudrun drew his sword and thrust Sigurd through in such wise that the sword-point smote into the bed beneath him; then Sigurd awoke with that wound, and Brynhild and Gudrun stood over him. Brynhild caught up the sword Gram, and cast it after him, and it smote him on the back, and struck him sounder in the middle, so that the feet of him fell from under him, and the head and hands back into the chamber. Now Gudrun lay asleep on Sigurd's bosom, but she woke up to woe that may not be told of, all swimming in the blood of him, and in such wise did she bewail her with weeping and words of sorrow, that Sigurd rose up on the bolster, and spake, 'Weep not,' said he, 'for thy brothers live for thy delight; but a young son have I too, to whom an ill turn have these played against their own fortunes; for never will they get a mightier brother-in-law to ride abroad with them; may, nor a better son to their sister, than this one, if he may grow to man's estate. Now I am in bonds which was foretold me long ago, but from mine eyes it has been hidden, for none may fight against his fate and prevail. Behold this has Brynhild brought to pass, even she who loves me before all men; but this may I swear, that never have I wrought ill to Gunnar, but rather have ever held fast to my oath with him, nor was I ever too much a friend to his. And if I were to be charged, and had been afoot with my weapons, then should many a man have lost his life or ever I had fallen, and all those brethren should have been slain, and a harder work would the slaying of me have been than the slaying of the mightiest bear or the mightiest boar of the wild-wood.' And even therewithal life the King; but Gudrun mourned and drew a weary breath, and Brynhild heard it, and said, 'Gudrun, son of Giuki, doth the thing. Then said Gunnar, 'Thou hast never that thy heart's roots are glutted, or else why doth thy visage wax so wan?' And Gudrun said, 'My kinsmen have been busier than we never knew, when we ride to the war and are come into the battle, then shall ye look about and see that Sigurd is neither on the right hand nor the left, and ye shall know that he was your good-lap and your strength; and if he had lived and had sons, then should we have been strengthened by his offering and his kin.'
How simply and deeply pathetic! Brynhild, finding life intolerable, 'caught up a sword and thrust it beneath her heart's ribs,' and lay in a last bough that her body be burned on one funeral pile with Sigurd's: "and then died Brynhild and was burned there by the side of Sigurd, and thus their life-days ended." After a time, Gudrun was persuaded to marry King Atli, though full of evil foreboding. "Thus then she needs befall, howsoever against the will of man, but it must be for Hjallr, for little it trembles now, less it trembled when it was in his breast of. So now they fell on Hogni even as Atli urged them, and cut the heart out of him, but such was the might of his manhood, that he laughed while he bled, and imitated the gesture of his great father. So did not his heart deride at his worth, and in perpetual memory it is held sithence. Then they showed it to Gunnar, and he said—"The mighty heart of Hogni, little like to that of Hjallr, for little it trembles now, less it trembled when in his breast of. Yet now have I myself determined for myself, and the Rhine shall rule over the gold, rather than that the Huns shall bear it on the hands of them." Then said King Atli, 'Have away the bondsman,' and so they did. But Gudrun called to her maids, and came to Atli, and said: 'May it fare ill with thee now and from henceforth, even as the last ill held to thy word with me! So Gunnar was cast into a worm-closet, and many worms abode him there, and his hands were fast bound; but Gudrun sent him a harp, and in such wise did he set forth his craft, that wisely he smote the strings with his toes, and so excellently well he played, that few deemed they had heard such playing, even when the hand had done it. And with such might and power he played, that all the crowds fell silent, save one adder only, great and evil of aspect, that crept under and thrust its sting into him until it smote his heart; and in such wise with great hardihood he ended his life-days."

Gudrun, mad with grief, kills two young men, and mixes their blood in the wine of King Atli,that then all Atli's men become slaves in his sleep. Other tragic adventures befall her before her death. Her daughter Swanild is slain, and she sends men to avenge her; and before they started, she "went about laughing now, and gave them to drink from mighty beakers." But when they were gone, she went to herbower, with heart swollen with sorrow, and thought of what had befallen her:"

"Ah, better would it be, Sigurd came to meet me, and I went my ways with thee, and for her wedfet now without with me neither son nor daughter to comfort me. Oh, mindest thou not, Sigurd, the white horse when we went into one bed together, that thou knewest not at all he was not me; yes, even from thine abiding-place among the dead." And thus had the words of her sorrow an end.

Many episodical and other matters are clustered round this, the main story. Though relieved with touches of tenderness and pathos, it represents a fierce and barbarous condition of humanity. Ferocity, tenacity as of bulldogs, are qualities in highest esteem. Both men and women are violent and bloody. Revenge is a virtue and a duty; yet within there is a certain dignity always observed, and a certain lofty sad resignation to Fate. Those, by the way, perhaps may doubt whether the world has really advanced in its moral views as we are accustomed to take for granted who have seen the photographs of seven hideous mutilated heads of Greek brigands now hanging in the shop-windows in our streets,—in some cases with the word "vengeance" written above.

To conclude a notice which our space will not allow us to do, the strange old story in its present dress will find readers. The English, although, we should say, too elaborately and obscenely archaic, is, on the whole, noble and pure,—a marvel in these hasty days of novel and newspaper. Some patience is requisite to follow the old-fashioned narrative; there is sometimes a barbarous abruptness, and not seldom, we should say, an evident loss of connecting links. In some places we have what seems like brief notes to help the memory of the Saga-man rather than a narrative.

The prose story is supplemented by numerous translations from metrical sagas related to it, and is ushered in by a beautiful Prologue in Verse, in which appears again the sadness, at times deepening into hopeless gloom, but mostly a tender melancholy shadow, which pervades Mr. Morris's poetry; the mournful sense of the shortness of life, and "that man that is born of a woman hath but a short time to live and is full of trouble."

The History of the Law of Tenure of Land in England and Ireland, with particular Reference to Inheritable Tenancy, Leasehold Tenure, Tenancy at Will and Tenant Right. By W. F. Finlason, Esq., Barrister. (Stevens & Haynes)

It is as essential that the law should fit the people for whom it is enacted as that a coat should fit the wearer. It is not enough that the law should be in itself a good and reasonable one if it does not sit well on the people on whom it is imposed, it must be altered, like the misfitting coat. The law of tenure of land in England and Ireland is formally the same, but while it has on the whole fitted John Bull pretty well, it has never sat comfortably on his Irish brother. It may seem difficult to understand how the same law should have produced such different results in the two countries, but in each country the operation of the law has been biased by the character of the persons affected by it. In England the asperities of the law have been softened by mutual good will, or at any rate by the recognition of a mutual interest between landlord and tenant. In Ireland, a feeling of distrust and enmity has led to a strict enforcement of legal requirements, which has resulted in that miserable state of things which our Parliament is now manfully struggling to remedy by the Irish Land Bill.

The operation of the law of tenure of land being thus different in the two countries, it is somewhat surprising to find that the author of this book appears to think that the settlement of the land question in Ireland must lead to legislation in the same manner with respect to the law of land tenure in England. Few persons can doubt that the English law is capable of improvement. Fewer still will consider that there is need of such legislation as is required by the existing land troubles of Ireland. The laws in the two countries have become in effect different, and to attempt to cure their respective defects the laws as they now stand would be as absurd as it would be for a doctor to prescribe the same remedies for two patients because they were brothers. The first and essential step for every one who would improve the law of tenure in either country is to understand the law as it exists; and a book which should give a history of the law of land in England and Ireland, in a concise and readable form would be very acceptable at the present time.

We cannot say that the book before us is
THE

ATHENÆUM

JOURNAL

OF

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