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This grey wall of the hammer in the tempest of the spear.

Alike in its healthiness of moral tone, imaginative truth, and artistic skill, *The House of the Wolfings* seems to me to mark a distinct advance in the quality of Mr. Morris's work.

59. Unsigned review, *Atlantic Monthly*

June 1890, lxxv, 851-4

An appreciative review of the American edition of 1890.

Mr. Morris is a long-practiced story-teller, and in the present tale he employs a very perfect art. It is a narrative of the summer campaign between a gathering of Gothic Marksmen and some Roman legionaries who were making a foray into their country. It begins with a pastoral scene, disclosing the clearing along the river, in which the House of the Wolfings stood, above the meadows and pasture, and hemmed upon the other side by the Wild Wood. Thither comes the tidings of the threatened invasion, borne by the runner with the war-arrow; and immediately the action of the piece commences with the arming of the people, the setting forth of the host, joined by the contingents from other villages, each under its own banner, and the grand folk-mote of all the kindreds at the chief meeting-place of the entire clan. There leaders are chosen, and, the reports of scouts and stragglers having given warning that this new enemy, the Romans, is near at hand, part of the host goes out to meet them. The first ambuscade and the first battle are won by the Goths; but the main body of the Romans has meanwhile taken the country on the flank, and, passing the open ways by guides, has fallen on the House of the Wolfings itself. The Goths follow, upon these tidings, and by two lines of march come up with the Romans, after which there is much various fighting, ending in the overthrow and destruction of the entire Roman force in the Wolfing stronghold. This is the material part of the narrative, and the opportunities it affords for scene-painting, landscape, and battle, under conditions strange to us, are fully availed of.

With all this, however, mingles another poetical element. Thiodulf, the war-duke of the host, is loved by a goddess, the Wood-Sun, and by her has had a child, now grown to womanhood, who is the priestess of the people, and called the Hall-Sun, because she cares for the lamp that is kept burning continually under the roof of the House of the

handiwork of the man-hating dwarfs) carries some unkindly spell, are quieted by her assurances that, though chief of the Wolfings, he is not of their kin, but sprung from the Gods, like herself, and that no evil glamour lurks in her gift; and he agrees reluctantly to accept it.

At the folk-mote of the Marksmen he is chosen by general acclaim first war-duke of the host; but, impressed by the warning of an ancient seer who discovers an ill omen in the hauberk, he doffs it before encountering the enemy. Tidings that the Marksmen have triumphed in their first engagement, and that Thiodolf, though unmailed, has escaped without a wound, is brought to the women at the Wolfingstead, where the Hall-sun's guardian, who inherits her mother's gift of partial prescience, has been impelled to utter troubled visions of alternate victory and disaster. Among the listening women is the disguised Wood-sun, who, in renewed alarm for Thiodolf's safety, proceeds to recover the hauberk from the place where he had left it, and seeks another meeting with him in the forest. Redoubling her fond entreaties that he will not court the fate which menaces their love by refusing to wear the hauberk, and spurning by an indignant protest his doubt lest care for his own life should involve unknown peril to the Wolfings, she exacts his promise to consent. In the ensuing conflict the Marksmen, despite their stout defence and skilful tactics, are worsted and baffled, and the invaders, taking a circuitous route through the forest, reach the Wolfingstead, which (the women having fled at their approach) they strongly entrench. Thither the Marksmen quickly return to attack them, and the armies encounter beside the river. At the moment of onset Thiodolf suddenly drops his great sword, 'Throng-plough,' and falls swooning, though unsmitten, to the ground. Borne off the field by his comrades, he recovers from the swoon, but remains dazed in mind, without a clear sense of his obligations as war-duke, or his habitual eagerness for victory, but dreamily conscious of his longing for the Wood-sun, whom he imagines near him. The Goths, bewildered by his unwonted mien, fight with heavy hearts. When, rousing himself by a desperate effort, he plunges into the fray and again falls swooning, they are driven back, and only escape destruction owing to the indecision of the Roman captain.

During the breathing-space that follows this battle the guardian of the Hall-sun, who has fathomed the secret of her birth, and the mysterious curse her mother has invoked, interposes to save her father from dishonour and the Wolfings from ruin. Bringing about a last interview between her parents, she insists with affectionate frankness

upon the alternatives before them, adjuring her mother to think what it will profit,

That after the fashion of Godhead thou hast gotten thee a thrall
To be thine and never another's whatso in the world may befall;

and bidding her

mighty father make choice of death in life,
Or life in death victorious and the crownèd end of strife.

Rising under the stress of this appeal to her spiritual height, the Wood-sun confesses the deception born of her love, whereby she had sought to ward off the stroke of doom, and laments the miserable failure of her scheme:

If my hand might have held for a moment, yea, even against his will,
The life of my beloved! But Weird is the master still!

Knowing that the hauberk (which one of her sisterhood, enamoured of a mortal, had once obtained by fraud from a malignant dwarf) would confer protection upon the wearer at the cost of his forfeiting power as a leader, she had blindly sacrificed all other interests to the desire of saving Thiodolf's life. But the helpless man, whom she has so spell-bound that he owns his willingness to abandon duty and ambition for her sole sake, is not the hardy warrior of her ideal. The sight fills her with self-reproach, and she bids him doff the hauberk. He obeys, and in a moment regains his true manhood. Putting away as a shameful dream the illusion of an unheroic and disloyal life which her glamour had wrought, but pardoning her fond deceit as venial in one 'of the God-kin, because they know not the hearts of men,' he bids her take comfort in the proud memory of his 'scorn of death,' and the conviction that, though awhile sundered, 'our love hath no end.' With this tender farewell, unshaken by her 'bitter wailing,' he passes to the field. Reinspired by his presence, the Marksmen rally their forces, surround the Romans in their entrenchment, and carry the four gates by storm. After a fierce struggle round the Wolfingstead, which the besieged in their desperation set on fire, the besiegers burst into the hall in time to quench the flames, slaughter or capture the garrison, and rescue their prisoners. Thiodolf, meeting the Roman captain on the threshold, spurns him with an unarmed hand, but receives his sword-stroke in the heart and dies at the climax of victory.

Owing perhaps to familiarity with them in the legendary literature

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