

I shall sit on the howe that hides thee, and thou so dear and nigh!
A few bones white in their war-gear that have no help or thought,
Shall be Thiodolf the Mighty, so nigh, so dear—and nought.

These are good rhymes, as old Mr. Pope used to say.

58. Henry Hewlett, review, *Nineteenth Century*

August 1889, xxvi, 337-41

A particularly appreciative response to the romance, by the critical reviewer of *Sigurd* (No. 43).

Your invitation, my dear Editor, gives me a welcome opportunity of recognising the special claims to notice of Mr. William Morris's *House of the Wolfings*. None of his recent writings will be generally read, I think, with more unqualified pleasure. His genius has always seemed to breathe most freely in the atmosphere of prehistoric or semi-historic mythology, whether Gothic or Greek, and the subject of his present choice happily affords scope for illustrating certain characteristic conceptions which the Gothic and the Greek minds held in common. For the material framework of his epic he has resorted to Northern Europe at the time of the earliest Roman invasion, when the Gothic communities upon the banks of the Elbe kept their primitive institutions of Mark, Thing and Folk-mote unchanged; when totemism and exogamy were still inviolate customs, and the grim religion of Odinism maintained its hold upon the affections and satisfied the aspirations of its believers. (The spiritual motives and human interest of the story are independent of time and place, and turn upon the eternal conflict between Love, Fate and Conscience, the doubtful issue of which is finally determined by the 'stern lawgiver' Duty.) The level of the prose

narrative is broken at frequent intervals by waves of ballad-verse, appropriate to the utterances of the chief speakers, and occasionally varied by lyrical outbursts of more impassioned feeling.

The tale opens with a graphic picture of the idyllic life led in time of peace by the Wolfings, a great family of the Mark Kindreds, amid the forest-clearing beside the Mirkwood water, where it had fixed its seat. Prominent in this picture is the homestead or Roof of the clan, externally 'framed of the goodliest trees of the wildwood . . . and clay wattled with reeds;' internally fashioned church-wise, with a central nave or hall, separated by two rows of pillars from its aisles, and having a daïs at the further end, above which hangs the Hall-sun, a holy lamp ever kept burning by its appointed guardian, the fairest maiden of the house. On a summer evening, when the foremost warriors are grouped on the daïs round their mighty chief Thiodolf, with his supposed foster-daughter, the guardian of the Hall-sun, beside him, the quiet scene is disturbed by the sudden arrival of a swift runner, bearing a 'ragged, burnt, and bloody arrow,' the symbol that summons the Marksmen for united defence against a common danger. The invaders, described as a 'Welsh,' or foreign, race of fierce marauders from the Southlands, prove to be an army of the Romans, hitherto known only by report as a formidable foe. The tidings of its approach at once rouses the watchful and warlike Goths, and Thiodolf, mustering them to arms, announces that on the morrow he will march at their head to the assembling-place of the Kindreds.

While the rest spend the eve of departure in preparing their battle-gear, in feasting, or sleep, he enters the forest to keep a moonlight tryst with his love, 'the Wood-sun,' one of the Valkyrie, or Choosers of the Slain. An immortal 'daughter of the Gods,' but passionate and tender as a mortal woman, she had given her heart to his youthful beauty and hardihood, twenty years before, when at the victorious close of a single-handed combat with three champions of the Huns, he was found by her sinking from exhaustion, and restored to life and love. Their union, of which the Hall-sun's guardian was the offspring, yet remained secret. At this interview she tells him of her forebodings that the coming contest is pregnant with the doom of his death and her own desolation, unless he consents to avert it by wearing a charmed hauberk she has brought for his protection. Disdainful of danger, he strives to dispel her fears, but without avail. His chivalrous scruples to enjoy an immunity his fellows-in-arms cannot share, and his avowed mistrust that the finely-wrought mail (wherein he recognises the

Wolfings. The Wood-Sun knows that her lover, Thiodulf, will be slain in these wars, and she has gained by stratagem a hauberk which, wrought by the Dwarfs, will preserve his life if he will wear it; but a curse goes with it, and the warrior will be saved only by the loss of his cause and people. The Wood-Sun does not tell of this, but Thiodulf is fearful of some such charm, and leaves the hauberk with the Daylings, and succeeds against the Romans, until the Wood-Sun again intervenes, and, obtaining the hauberk by disguise, tells Thiodulf there is no harm in it, and persuades him to wear it. The consequence is that in the thick of the battle and at its crisis the chief is overcome with faintness, and loses his opportunity and the day. The Goths, defeated, retire into the Wild Wood. Thiodulf's daughter, the Hall-Sun, who has the second-sight, has now discovered the cause of the trouble, and by her intervention the Wood-Sun confesses to Thiodulf her lie, bids him take off the magic armor, and though seeing the end of their love in his approaching death, yet consents to it. Next morning the storm of attack begins under Thiodulf, now restored to his full faculties, and in the moment of victory he dies. In this portion of the plot lies the ethical element of the narrative, and out of it grows the supernatural element, of which much is made in the characters of the Wood-Sun and the Hall-Sun, through whom the life of the people is brought into relation with destiny and the gods.

We have chosen to give the outlines of the story as the best way of exhibiting to the reader the varied character of the saga; and if he is familiar with Mr. Morris's handling, he will perceive at once that this is a story after the poet's own heart, and that in its wide scope is given for the special traits of his genius. (Something must be added, to make the matter clear, concerning the literary style and mould into which the poetry is run.) The larger portion is prose, but the speeches are usually given in verse. The prose itself, however, is not ordinary prose, but is written in a peculiar and artificial style, well sustained, but having the effect to remove the work out of the domain of prose. Though measured, it is not rhythmical to any such degree as to arouse a particular metrical expectation in the reader, and it thus escapes the principal defect of so-called poetical prose. On the other hand, it brings about an illusion akin to that worked by ordinary verse form. It is very beautiful in its general movement and color, and very noble in phrase; its affectation, even, sympathizes with the Gothic element in the work itself. (It is such prose as only a poet could write, and it does effect what the poet intended.) Those who hold that prose is not the best

medium for poetical thought will easily find objections to the poet's method; independently of all that, he succeeds in his aim. The test of his experiment lies rather in the question whether, having chosen this form, he should not have kept to it, whereas, as has been said, he has put the speeches, as a rule, into rhymed verse. The answer seems to us to depend on whether or not the change is natural in its place, and maintains the illusion already obtained by the prose. For ourselves, we must acknowledge that this change appears in each instance arbitrary, and also that at the moment of the transition the illusion is destroyed, and recurs only after an interval, and then in the different form of poetical expression. The poems, so to speak, are as much a change as it would be in an English book to find extracts in French. Not only is continuity broken, but consistency is lost. (This, however, is an individual impression, and is apposite rather to the question, which has been raised, whether Mr. Morris may not have illustrated in this work a new literary form of mingled prose and verse, with a future development before it, analogous to the old and now well-worn forms of the epic and the drama. It does not appear to us that this is any other than a hybrid product of art, or that it contains in itself any principle by which the repugnance and incongruity of prose and poetry as modes of expression can be harmonized. Prose has been written in a poetical spirit before now, and has produced the illusion here sought for. This is of a lower intensity and less reality than the illusion of the epic or the drama; and in this work it does not show more power.

Within the limits which Mr. Morris has set for himself by his choice, the work itself is one of extraordinary beauty in detail, and rich both in minute and broad effects. The author's characteristics shine through his words, as must be the case in creative literature; and, most prominent of all, the artistic nature is clear. Each of his chapters becomes, sooner or later, a picture, admirably grouped, lovely or grand in its unity, but with that care for light and shade and posture, even for costume and framework, which discloses the artist: sometimes there is but one figure, sometimes there is a throng; now the scene is under the sunshine of the clearings, often in the shadow of moonlight or the thicket; here a stormy dawn, there a midsummer afternoon; but throughout there is the pencil of the artist. This quality in his work is especially felt in the heightening of the external beauty of the home surroundings of the Goths, in the carving of the woodwork of the House of the Wolfings, in the contents of their chests of precious stuffs and jewels, and generally in the manual decoration of the properties

which he has chosen to use. Out of all this comes, in part, the singleness of impression and the poetical illusion which are implicit in the narrative, and in part, also, the sense of artificiality and tenuousness of fact, which will be felt even by those who lend themselves most willingly to the poet's magic. A second trait is the strong expression of the social union of the Marksmen as one people, generally most powerfully brought out in the speeches of Thiodulf as their leader, and of the Hall-Sun as their 'soul' (so she calls herself); their tribal self-consciousness, as an evolutionist would say. The delight of Thiodulf in the thought that his life, through his deeds, will live on and become immortal in their destiny as a folk among men springs certainly from a modern feeling, or gains by it; so that the doctrine of the brotherhood of men in races and kindred, and their duty to society as a part of a larger life, has seldom been so nobly and almost triumphantly expressed. The source of this in Mr. Morris is not far to seek. The great shadow of the English race is also cast backward to make this little body of a few thousand warriors loom larger on the confines of our history. So one may detect separately many of the strains that the poet has woven into a tale which is an expression of emotions and beliefs and tastes that are more vital now than they were in the days of the Roman border wars. In one point Mr. Morris has been extraordinarily successful. We have been told in books of the position and character of the women of the Goths, and from these hints he has worked. The Hall-Sun is the idealized type of this womanhood; in the story she does not stand alone, but is surrounded by a throng of companions, unlike other women in poetry, with a kind of heroism, dignity, and serviceableness, which lends a main element of attraction to the narrative.

Criticism, however, does but half its work in making such a volume known, and discriminating between the several elements of which it is compounded. It is a harder task to give any appreciative account of the charm of the story; of its inventive power; its northern sense of life and strength and the delight of action; its simple handling of many adventures; its broad, clear sketches of the borderland of the forest, and of existence in its quiet glades and by the river; the picturesqueness of its trophies and emblems; the aloofness of its gods; the naturalness of its superstitions, and, more particularly, of the phrase and measure in which all this is set forth in color, and landscape and the murmur of a people's life. For these we refer the reader at once to the volume, in which he will find, after all criticism, one of the few contributions of our present time to imaginative literature.

THE ROOTS OF THE MOUNTAINS

1890

60. Unsigned review, *Spectator*

8 February 1890, lxxv, 208-9

A vigorous attack on Morris's archaic language.

This is a good thing spoilt. Had Mr. Morris been content to tell us about the men of Burgdale, 'their friends, their neighbours, their foemen, and their fellows-in-arms,' in a style which would be easily comprehended of the ordinary plain person, the freshness and novelty of this attempt to reconstruct the Pagan ideal of rural life would have pleased where it now only exasperates. From beginning to end, the story is written in what a critic has happily called 'Wardour Street English.' Mr. Morris disdains to use a good English phrase, no matter how old, that is still current. It is his constant endeavour to unearth the archaic, or to coin some quasi-archaic phrase. Thus, he disdains to use the expression 'great with child,' and must needs talk of women 'big with babes;' and reaches the *reductio ad absurdum* of his method by his avoidance of the homely but expressive figure, 'as the crow flies,' in order to substitute for it some laborious periphrasis. He will not talk of shooting with, but *in* the bow. People are not buried, they are 'borne to mound.' This studied research of the antique sometimes leads Mr. Morris into positive error. His disinclination to use the term 'track' induces him to talk of the 'slot of men.' Now, unless we are greatly mistaken, the term 'slot' not only never is, but never was, correctly used of men. It is surely the object of a writer of a simple tale of primitive life to appeal to a wide circle of hearers. But Mr. Morris curtails his circle very considerably by using a lingo which to many people would prove unintelligible. Take one passage: 'Within these