

[Part III]

CHAPTER II

THE WOING OF HALLBIORN THE STRONG

is quite brief, and must be retold here for purposes of comparison with the Morris version. Hallbiorn, son of Odd o' Kidrock, married Hallgerd, daughter of Odd o' Tongue. Snaebiorn, a relative of Odd's, was sometimes at the house of Hallgerd's father. Hallbiorn and Hallgerd dwelt with Odd o' Tongue throughout the winter following their marriage, but there was "little love between them" [Óastugt vas með þeim hionum]; and Snaebiorn was there also. In the spring, Hallbiorn made ready to go to Kidrock, his father's home, and Odd departed to bathe at Reykholt "where his sheep-house was, for he did not wish to be at home when Hallbiorn went away," since he thought Hallgerd would not want to go with her husband. "Odd had ever been a peacemaker between them." [Oddr hafðe jamman um bóett með þeim.] Hallbiorn saddled his horses and went into Hallgerd's bower, where she sat combing her hair. "She had the best hair of any women that have ever been in Iceland (save Hallgerd Long-breeks)." Three times Hallbiorn commanded his wife to stand up, and three times she refused. Then Hallbiorn sang a song:

'The linen-veiled lady lets me stand as a beggar....'

[Olkarma lætr arman eik....]

He twisted her hair, trying to drag her to him, but she would not move. "Then he drew his sword and hewed off her head." Word was sent to her father, Odd, but he would not ride after Hallbiorn and his men to avenge his daughter; but Snaebiorn did so, and his men engaged in battle with Hallbiorn's, killing Hallgerd's husband and his followers. Now Snaebiorn sailed away, and was

killed on an island by Stýrbjörn from whom he tried to take a treasure they both found.

This is the story as Morris read it in Ári's history. It is a typical Icelandic historical episode; the impetuous husband will not tolerate the shrewish nature of his wife, and when thrice she ignores his bidding, he takes her life in the quickest and most expedient manner,- by chopping off her head. The chief actors in Morris's little drama are the same: Fallbiorn, Hallgerd, and Snaebiorn,- but the story is so greatly changed that it becomes no longer an incident in the history of the families of the two Odds, but a tale of Northern love and hate, of lust and revenge, with a love triangle introduced, and an imminent fate hovering over the head of Hallgerd.

Most important is the tone of Morris's poem. It is entirely different from that of the Landnámabók, and this change of spirit is due to the incidental facts which Morris added or omitted. First of all, there is an introductory passage wherein Hallbiorn asks for the hand of Hallgerd:

'Hail, Master Odd, live blithe and long!  
How fare the folk at Deildar-Tongue?'  
'All Hail, thou Hallbiorn the Strong!  
How fare thy folk by the Brothers'-Tongue?'  
'Meat have we there, and drink, and fire,  
Nor lack all things that we desire.  
But by the other Whitewater  
Of Hallgerd many a tale we hear.'<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The Collected Works of William Morris, edited by May Morris (New York and London, 1910-1915), IX, 95.

The match appeals to Hallgerd's father, who says:

'Come hither, daughter, fine and fair,  
Here is a wooer from Whitewater.  
East away hath he gotten fame,                   5  
And his father's name is e'en my name.  
Will ye lay hand within his hand,  
That blossoming fair our house may stand?'<sup>6</sup>

And so, as in the original, Hallbiorn and Hallgerd are married; but not only is there "little love between them" in Morris's version,- in addition, Hallgerd is shown to be unfaithful to her husband. Hallbiorn loves her, but she gives her affection to Snæbiorn, the relative of Odd who, in Morris's poem, is the 'other' in the triangle which Morris portrays:

Dark are the days, and the nights are long,  
And sweet and fair was Snæbiorn's song.  
Many a time he talked with her,  
Till they deemed the summer-tide was there.<sup>7</sup>

This Snæbiorn, in Ari's book, is unimportant to the story; he is merely a family hanger-on who avenges Hallgerd's death when her father refuses to do it. But in Morris's adaptation he becomes the stealthy lover of Hallgerd and consequently a sinister tragic force in the story. It is he who plays the fiddle and sings the mournful dirge at Hallgerd's wedding, he who weaves the music of Hallgerd's fate on his bow-strings, just as the Norms tie the knots of destiny on their fatal looms:

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5 That is, Odd frá Kiðjaborge and Odd-Tungo.

6 Collected Works, IX, 97.

7 Ibid., p. 97.

Clear and loud his voice outrang,  
And a song of worth at the wedding he sang.  
'Sharp sword,' he sang, 'and death is sure.'

. . . . .

'But love doth ever all endure.'<sup>8</sup>

Odd goes away to Reykholt, not, as in the history, "to bathe," and because he does not want to be present when Hallbiorn departs, but "To see if his mares be ought of worth." Then Hallbiorn tries to take Hallgerd away with him, and he asks her three times if she will go, but she combs her beautiful hair in silence:

He drew her by the lily hand:  
'I love thee better than all the land.'  
He drew her by the shoulders sweet:  
'My threshold is but for thy feet.'  
He drew her by the yellow hair:  
'O why wert thou so deadly fair?'<sup>9</sup>

The triple repetition of Hallbiorn's demand for her to go with him, Morris found in his source, but this protestation of love is foreign to the story in the Landnámabók, as is the song Hallgerd sings before her death, taken, with ballad-like repetition, from the prophetic song Snæbiorn sang at the wedding:

'Sharp sword,' she sang, 'and death is sure,  
But over all doth love endure.'<sup>10</sup>

The death of Hallgerd by decapitation at the hands of Hallbiorn, as it exists in history, is a bit of action too strenuous for the love story as Morris wrote it; so the poet substituted a

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 97.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 99.

less brutal stabbing. In the lines telling of this, the falseness of Hallgerd is brought out:

Instead of the sunbeam gleamed a brand,  
The hilts were hard in Hallbiorn's hand:  
The bitter point was in Hallgerd's breast  
That Snæbiorn's lips of love had pressed.<sup>11</sup>

Now Hallbiorn rides away, pursued by Snæbiorn, who has not Odd's vengeance at heart, as in the Landnámabók, but who has his own reasons for revenge upon Hallbiorn, the husband and killer of his mistress. He and twelve men overtake Hallbiorn and his troop and put them to death. Snæbiorn, now a loveless, homeless recluse, sails away toward a desolate isle where there is only dreariness:

'But these are Gunnbiorn's skerries wan,  
Meet harbour for a hapless man.  
In all lands else is love alive, <sup>13</sup>  
But here is naught with grief to strive.

II

Thus, the tale of Hallbiorn and Hallgerd ends on that note of despair which Morris found ever-present in the literature of the Old Norsemen; moreover, the desolation is not without the saving grace of the stoical resignation and courage in defeat which so clearly stamps the great stories of the North. In Ari's history, Snæbiorn seeks Gunnbiorn's reef merely to get away from Hallgerd's country, and to look for

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 99. The italics are mine.

<sup>12</sup> Gunnbiorn's Skerries, the Gunnbjarnar-Sker, a reef off Greenland, mentioned in the Landnámabók [Origines Islandicæ]: II.7.1; II.12.2; III.25.4.

<sup>13</sup> Collected Works, IX, 108.

treasure; in Morris's version, he goes there to find a solitary and dreary place which will harmonize with his heavy mood.

Aside from the addition of several dramatic details, to recapitulate, the contributions and alterations which Morris made to the Hallbiorn history are, for us, extremely important. He changes the position of Snæbiorn in the story, and makes him a part of the triangle which does not exist in the Landnámabók. His function as a villain here is entirely comparable to that of Bikki in the Swanhild story, which is discussed below. Morris makes the tragedy one of justice and domestic revenge by laying stress upon the love of Hallbiorn for Hallgerd. Finally, the killing of Hallgerd is a mark of this justice and revenge, for she is proved to be untrue to her husband, and hence is more deserving of death than the Hallgerd of Ari whose husband dispatches her not with "'O, why wert thou so deadly fair,'" but with the quick and heartless act of a husband who cannot bear the effrontery of "the linen-veiled lady" who lets him stand as a beggar while she ignores his commands.

Miss May Morris, in her very brief remarks on her father's poem,<sup>14</sup> suggests that William Morris's treatment of such stories as Swanhild, In Arthur's House, and Hallbiorn is 'un-northern.' There is a great measure of truth in such a statement. The poem resembles a formalized popular ballad more than anything else; it does not have the heroic quality of skaldic

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14 Collected Works, XXIV, Introduction, p. xxxi.

verse. But if The Wooing of Hallbiorn the Strong is not exactly "Old Norse" in spirit and detail, there seems at least to be adequate reason for the changes which Morris made in the plot itself, and these reasons will tend to obscure the 'un-northern' qualities of the poem. In short, to take a simple story of domestic unhappiness and to add to it the elements of conflict and unharmonious love, specifically, to make it a tale of the troubles of two men and a woman, is to put it into the same category with other better-known Old Norse love stories. The difficulties, the adversities, the unfortunate circumstances of Hallbiorn, Hallgerd, and Snæbiorn, are, in a little drama less great than the Volsunga Sage, or the Laxdæla, the vicissitudes of Gudrun, Brynhild, and Sigurd; of the other Gudrun, Bodli, and Kiartan; and, as we shall see in Morris's English version of the post-Volsung story of Swanhild, those also of Swanhild, Randver, and Jormunrek.



[Part III]

CHAPTER III

THE WOOING OF SWANHILD