

CHAPTER III

THE WOOING OF SWANHILD

I

The Wooing of Swanhild belongs to that group of Morris's poems known as the "Earthly Paradise Poems," which means that it is one of the several fragmentary and complete poems composed originally as parts of The Earthly Paradise during the years 1865-70, but which, for one reason or another, were never used in the great frame-work poem. It is tempting to speculate as to Morris's intention in writing The Wooing of Swanhild. It deals with the daughter of Sigurd and Gudrun, as his other poem, The Fostering of Aslaug (actually a part of The Earthly Paradise), concerns the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild. These two poems, the first tragic, the second by no means tragic, were written, perhaps, during those late years of the "Earthly Paradise Period" when Morris was so much moved by and so much interested in the Volsung stories. Having finished the fortunate history of Aslaug, he may have wished to show that Sigurd's other daughter had a fate more nearly like that of her brave and unhappy father. But Morris never finished the Swanhild poem; he found other completed poems more suitable to his larger work, or other subjects less difficult upon which to write.

The facts concerning Swanhild were available to Morris in a number of books: in The Völsunga Saga, both Eddas, and in an epitome in Benjamin Thorpe's Northern Mythology. Swanhild's his-

tory is a brief Volsung episode which occurs in its most extended form at the end of the Saga dealing with the Volsungs. Swanhild, daughter of Sigurd and Gudrun, goes with her woe-begone mother to the court of King Jonak, whither they were washed by the waves which refused to drown Gudrun after her troubles with Atli, her last husband. Swanhild becomes the wife of King Jormunrek [Hermanaric] who sent his son, Randver, and his counsellor, Bikki, to woo her for him, being himself aged and feeble, and unfitted for the delicate task of proposing marriage to so beautiful a maiden. Returning to Jormunrek with Swanhild and Randver, Bikki urges Randver to woo the maid for himself, saying that he is a more proper husband for her than his decrepit father. This, the Saga tells us, "Pleased Randver well, and he spoke to her in friendly wise, and she to him again." Bikki tells the King, on his return, that Swanhild is Randver's mistress, and the King has Randver hanged despite his declaration of innocence. Then Jormunrek cries for the blood of Swanhild also, so she is put to death by being trampled under horses' hoofs. Her searching eyes at first cause the horses to stand back in fear, but when a sack is placed over her head, they are able to accomplish their ugly task.

The striking feature of this story, both in the Saga and the Poetic Edda, is the death of Swanhild. It is also the most important part of the story, for aside from being tragic in itself, it adds to the now unbearable woes of Gudrun, the mother

There is also another observation to be made with regard to the nature of the Swanhild legend in the Saga and Edda: neither the Saga-writer nor the Edda compiler was certain or definite concerning the actual relations of Randver and Swanhild. If she was faithless to her husband, we know it only by inference. The Elder Edda's poet says,

'Bikki's word her death shall be,
For dreadful the wrath of Jormunrek;
So slain is all of Sigurth's race,
And greater the woe of Guthrun grows.'³

Another passage tells us that "With him was Bikki, who counselled that Randver, the king's son, should have her,"⁴ while yet another portion speaks of Randver not as Swanhild's lover, but as her [step-] son:

On their road they [Gudrun's sons] fared,
And an ill way found,
And their sister's son on a tree they saw,⁵

The Saga gives us the same information:

'And Bikki said unto him [Randver]: 'Meet and right it is, lord, that thou shouldst know what has befallen, though hard it be to tell of, for the tale must be concerning thy beguiling, whereas thy son has gotten to him the full love of Swanhild, nor is she other than his harlot; but thou, let not the deed be unavenged.'⁶

³ Sigurtharkviða en Skamma, stanza 63 (Bellows' translation). Incidentally, the Edda reference to the story in connection with the woes of Gudrun should be observed in passing.

⁴ Prose passage before the Guthrunarhvot (Bellows' translation).

⁵ Hamthesmal, stanza 19 (Bellows' translation).

⁶ Collected Works, VII, 393.

The only person who actually accuses Randver and Swanhild is Bikki, and we know he is a traitor. There is no specific reference or allusion in the early versions of this legend to illicit love between Randver and Jormunrek's wife. Thus, the story in Old Norse is typical of that blind fate which governs the destinies of our unfortunate Norse heroes and heroines. Bikki counsels the younger man to woo his father's bride-to-be for himself. This 'pleases' Randver and Swanhild, but Bikki deceives them and his wicked counsels cause their deaths,- and create the final, crushing woes of Gudrun.

II

So runs the story in Old Icelandic; it is a narrative with less intrinsic than implied significance. Its catastrophe is not only important in itself; it also increases the heavy sorrows of Sigurd's relict. But this is not the same story which William Morris tells. Morris's fragment covers thirty-five pages, and one might hazard the guess that it would come to seventy or eighty, were it finished. But it is, even as a fragment, a story pre-eminently self-sufficient. The effects of the catastrophe may fall upon the head of Gudrun, as did nearly all the trials of the Volsungs; but in The Wooing of Swanhild there is first of all a tragedy of young love come to naught, or, perhaps more accurately, young love stifled by fate. The Wooing of Swanhild is the history of an old king who sends his counsellor and his son to woo for him; it tells how the young man is smitten by Swanhild's beauty, how Bikki counsels him falsely, so that he woos Swanhild for himself. It is chivalric, and romantic; Randver is the

knight-errant, the brave suitor for the hand of a lovely lady. The Saga tells of the tragedy of Swanhild; Morris relates the wooing, with the pageantry, the sentiment, the romance of a literature more continental than Icelandic.

But even though The Wooing of Swanhild is romantic, in the sense that it is non-Icelandic, it gives evidence of that grim, prophetic, fatalistic spirit which the great sagas possess: tragedy hangs over it like a pall. In the person of Gudrun, to whom Morris gives the role and voice of old woe prophesying the new, Old Norse fatalism is apparent to us. Randver foreshadows unknown and terrible events when he says, "I look to hear of deeds past men's belief," but Gudrun, a woman long-suffering, and too well advised by her own sad experiences in the ways of tragedy, incants a more awesome prophecy:

'O me', O me, again beginneth strife...

.....

...thou shalt be cast
Into an endless sea of strife and ill.'

Morris's story of Swanhild, however, since it breaks off after Randver meets Swanhild, does not attain to this tragic conclusion. This is but accident; for if Morris had finished his poem, he would have narrated the consuming woe of which his "Argument," at the beginning of the poem, speaks:

Of old time a certain king, well stricken in years,
sent his young son to woo for him an exceeding fair
maiden [finis], but, whereas evil tongues were busy
about these three, the end of it was that the young
folk bewrayed the old king, and, bewrayed in their
turn, died a terrible death.⁷

⁷ Collected Works, XXIV, 281.

The changes in the story up to the point where Morris left off ([finis], above) are so many that we may scarcely speak with any assurance of the manner in which the poet might have completed his tale. It is reasonable to say, however, that, having exhausted the tragic irony of the situation, - Randver in love with this father's bride, - and having disposed of his hero and heroine by the shocking incident (the trampling) of the Saga, Morris would perhaps have again connected the story with the troubles of Gudrun, although the detailed sufficiency of his fragment is already indicative of the fact that, were it finished, it could stand alone and apart from any relation to the Volsunga Saga.

III

The greatest external difference between Morris's poem and the original in the Saga and Edda, is one of length. This is due to Morris's expansion and addition of what the Sagaman had possibly considered unnecessary detail. The chief internal changes and additions are to be found in Morris's use of the characters of Bikki, Randver, and Gudrun, whose functions here are in no way compatible with their positions in the original story. Let us turn to a discussion of such detailed alteration and expansion.

Like Snæbiorn, the villain of Hallbiorn the Strong, Bikki becomes more important as a villain, in Morris's tale of Swanhild. He is a long-trusted counsellor, who, like Iago,

marshalls his villainy behind the shield of credulity, for:

The King had seen him kind, and knew his word
A thing ne'er broken:⁸

Yet his sternness and his power over the King were well known
to the people:

Folk trembled at his name, prayed for him, deemed
His death a hope that scarcely might be dreamed.⁹

Bikki was also the eternal enemy of Randver (for some reason
which the poet does not explain), not (as in the Saga) a casual
deceiver. Randver returned this feeling:

Yet one there was that had no wish to praise
The state of Bikki, e'en the King's one son,¹⁰

Bikki's most effective and villainous trick is his sug-
gestion that the King marry Swanhild. This we do not find in
any of the sources for the story. In both Eddas, and in the
Saga, no one counsels the King that he shall take the fair
daughter¹¹ of Sigurd as his bride.

8 Ibid., p. 282, stanza 3.

9 Ibid., stanza 1.

10 Ibid., stanza 5.

11 Prose Edda: "King Jormunrek...learned of her beauty, and
sent his son Randver to woo her...." [The Prose Edda, translated
by Arthur Gilchrist Brodeur (New York, 1929), p. 158.]

Poetic Edda: "There was brought up Swanhild, Sigurth's
daughter; she was married to...Jormunrek." [Bellows, op. cit.,
p. 538]

Völsunga Saga:

Jormunrek was the name of a mighty king of those days,
and his son was called Randver. Now this king called
his son to talk with him, and said, 'Thou shalt fare

But in Morris's adaptation, Bikki comments on the King's increasing age, saying that it would be a good thing for the people if he should marry,¹² The King is amenable and asks Bikki what woman he would suggest,

'Speak out, O friend, what more thou hast to say,

.

Speak out the name thy heart hath bade thee speak.'¹³

and so Bikki tells him of Swanhild:

'Yea,' Bikki said, 'so was it that there died
A man-child with him,¹⁴ but when Gudrun lay
Over her husband dead, within her side
There lay a child unborn--fair was the day
That saw her first,'¹⁵

The King agrees that the daughter of Sigurd would make a likely bride. Morris at once lays the foundation for tragic irony when he has Jormunrek take counsel of his son regarding Swanhild:

on an errand of mine to King Jonakr, with my counsellor Bikki, for with King Jonakr is nourished Swanhild, the daughter of Sigurd Fafnir's bane; and I know for sure that she is the fairest may dwelling under the sun of this world; her above all others would I have to my wife, and thou shalt go woo her for me.'

[Collected Works, VII, 392.]

¹² There is no attempt on Morris's part to explain the reasons for this. It is obvious that Jormunrek had an heir in his son, Randver.

¹³ Collected Works, XXIV, 284, stanza 4.

¹⁴ That is, with Sigurd.

¹⁵ Collected Works, XXIV, p. 285, stanza 5.

'Hearkenest thou, son,
 To what our counsellor saith, and deemest thou
 That it were good we wedded such an one,
 Daughter of Sigurd, were she fair enow
 To look down from the throne,'¹⁶

In Morris's poem, Bikki is of course the evil counsellor of the older versions, but instead of waiting until Randver meets Swanhild, Bikki tries to make the son jealous of his father's prize even before they depart from the kingdom of Jormunrek. He says to Randver:

'Medreamed that on my bed last night I lay
 And heard a moaning slowly drawing near,
 And through the open door there came a may
 Bewailing her, more fair than aught is fair
 Who seemed unto my inmost heart more dear
 Than mine own life. She held out hands to me
 And showed her slim wrists shackled cruelly

And moaned, "O, Bikki, thine hand forged me these
 And who shall free me?"¹⁷

He tells Randver that this unfortunate woman of his dreams was Swanhild, inferring that Randver should not place Swanhild in these shackles, that is, in the bed of old Jormunrek. On the other hand, Bikki urges the King to marry Swanhild, and then almost immediately plucks the string of discord and tries to disturb the harmony between father and son. His treachery, moreover, is not confined to creating jealousy between father and son over one woman. He has larger aims, and would be a

16 Ibid., p. 286, stanza 4.

17 Ibid., p. 294, stanzas 3-4.

political traitor to the King, as well as a personal enemy, if Randver would hear to it. He says:

'I have heard tell of men who cast all life away
For such a hope as when I lie asleep
Betwixt my troth and vague desire will creep.'¹⁸

Later he speaks to Randver with more boldness:

Then Bikki came to him and said: 'Fair lord,
Worse than my thought went matters yesternight.
The King has fools about him and some word
Has reached his ears from these in my despite
Nor might I strive this morn the thing to right
For fear of worsening them--Let be, for time
Shall help thee yet--high shall thy fortune climb.'¹⁹

Bikki's part in The Wooing of Swanhild is, in general, more important than the originals permit. He should be pictured, were an adaptor to be consistent with his sources, merely as a knave who whispers into the King's ear a false story concerning Swanhild and Randver. But to Morris, Bikki represented more than this. He became one of the obstacles to love. His villainous deeds interfered with (we may assume they were to destroy, had Morris finished his poem) the enjoyment of a great love which was to belong to Randver and Swanhild for a short while, and which, because it was stolen, must of necessity have ended in tragic death. Gudrun is the advocate of love:

'An be beloved,--and be beloved as I
Was never loved....'

18 Ibid., p.292, stanza 5.

19 Ibid., p.298, stanza 3.

as Bikki is its scheming destroyer. He recommends to Randver that he deceive his father and take Swanhild for himself, then observes the course of Randver's wooing so that he may report it to Jormunrek. At the banquet table of King Jonak and Gudrun, where the joy of Randver and Swanhild was at its height, it was the furtive glance of Bikki which tripped up the lovers:

Meanwhile who noted them? Bikki talked loud
 With flushed face, and the King sat glad and smiled
 With lips and eyes and heart;²⁰

Here, in the character of Bikki, is a complete villain, a man whom Morris constructs from the stereotyped evil counsellor of the Saga. Observing his traitorous accomplishment thus far in the incomplete poem, we may foresee his later devices, and imagine his manipulating the forces which would ultimately bring about the untimely deaths of Randver and Swanhild.

IV

In the old Jormunrek legends Randver was merely the innocent envoy of his father, an unhappy man whose death was in keeping with the fatalism of Old Norse literature. In Morris's poem, however, he is a fully developed character, a man of ambition, vigor, romantic attraction, and heroic masculinity. Morris made him the lover of Swanhild, but also portrayed him as a man who gives less thought to love of women than to the

²⁰ Ibid., p. 314, stanza 3.

accomplishment of great deeds, for like the saga heroes, Randver is anxious for the approval of his fellows, - "For praise and love he longed for over much." He knows what the life of a hero should be, and though he would fain have fame in deeds of arms, he realizes the greatness of love. In speaking of Sigurd, Randver shows that he knows the Volsung's honor in battle to be no less great than his fame as a lover:

'Sigurd, wheresoe'er thou art
 I drink to thee!--who in such happy case
 Abode that thou wert loved, nor diedst apart
 From her who was the highest to thine heart--
 So fell the shadows from thee--would that I
 None otherwise than thus might live and die!'²¹

But Randver makes his choice between practice in the art of love and heroic reputation when his father asks him to woo Swanhild for him. Instead of accepting Jormunrek's offer and commission to journey with Bikki to the court of Jonak and Gudrun, Randver requests his father to allow him to go on a Viking expedition. This is a situation which Morris contributes to the old material. When Bikki at last persuades the King's son to join him as a wooer of Swanhild, the involuntary meeting of Randver and Swanhild makes their love more spontaneous, and its consequences more tragic. In the scene at Jonak's court, Morris again modifies his sources and extends the phrase of the Saga, "This pleased Randver well." (Bikki's suggestion that he sue for the maiden as his own wife). He pictures Randver as guiltily coveting his father's

²¹ Ibid., p. 285, stanza 3.

prospective bride. Yet the poet carefully keeps the story within the bounds of propriety, at least so far as one can tell from the unfinished poem, and thereby perhaps attempts to detract less from the fate motif in Randver's (probable) death, with this safe device:

Randver saw Swanhild oft 22
But never so but some one was anigh,

One can hardly imagine how long this arrangement, scarcely conducive to the consummation of their love, was to continue in the remainder of the projected poem. Morris's "Argument," however, stating that "the young folk bewrayed the old King," permits the conjecture that Randver and Swanhild would return to Jormunrek's court as guilty as Bikki might say they were. We may assume that the later "Wooing of Swanhild" was less well chaperoned, for the developments thus far in the Morris version of the story indicate definitely the poet's desire to show Randver's participation in the causes of his own death through his actual love for Swanhild.

Through particular emphasis upon the character of Randver, Morris accentuates the eternal triangle in the Swanhild legend. The two young persons are not simply 'pleased' as in the Saga, with Bikki's suggestion that they should be lovers; they are obviously in love with each other. The jealousy of Jormunrek, which we might with certainty expect had Morris finished the story, would hence be founded not so much upon the lies of Bikki as it stands in the originals, but more upon Bikki's malicious

²² Ibid., p. 314, stanza 5.

information,- his telling the King of a love affair which is even in this incomplete fragment, beautiful, romantic, unfortunate, and imminently tragic.

V

But if The Wooing of Swanhild revises the Swanhild legend to conform with what apparently is Morris's desire to dwell at length upon the conflicts of love, and hence to place this minor tale on a level with the central theme of the Völsunga Saga, it must be said that even though this tale of Randver and Swanhild is a part of the Volsung matter, it is not, in Morris's treatment, a dependent story. Were it completed with the same degree of detail present in its existing form, we should have no reason to think of it, as we do of its sources, as part and parcel of the Volsung material. The Wooing of Swanhild is not, even though its original decidedly is, a small and final part of the 'woes of Gudrun.' And yet Morris does not sever all connection with Sigurd's wife in spite of the fact that his story is independent. Instead of employing Swanhild's death as the symbol for Gudrun's ultimate torment, as the Saga writer does, Morris introduces Gudrun herself into the poem, makes her, with Randver, the antiphonal voice of fate, and the champion of great and tragic love. She says to Randver:

'I know thee that thy heart may well grow hot
With the sweet poison that for me is past....'²³

²³ Ibid., p. 306. stanza 1.

and with her 'sweet poison' she describes what to Morris was the character of love in Old Norse literature. Love was 'sweet,' as it was desirable, necessary, and beautiful; it was often the highest object of man's endeavor; it was 'poison,' in that its fruits were death and despair. 'Sweet poison,' is a precise phrase; it carries with it a whole series of impressions which epitomize Morris's conception of one great aspect of Northern literature. Gudrun warns Randver:

'O haste enow,' she said, 'else might I tell
A many signs to thee whereby I deem
That most strong longing on thy spirit fell
Ere thou might know it...

.

How should I tell? but born in dreadful wise.²⁴
And she warns him again, yet praises the sweet and fatal necessity that will be upon him when love of Swanhild strikes into his heart:

'Nay, ere men sleep begins the misery--
O man, O man! when thou hast her in thy sight
How shalt thou bear to let that dear delight
Pass without thee adown life's dismal road?'²⁵

And so Gudrun sings the fate of man. She remembers her own woes, and she finds that although her life was bitter, love, though brief, tempered its miseries with a sweetness. She tells Randver that if he should love Swanhild, once he sees her, he should cast fate and trouble to the winds, and woo her for the sake of

²⁴ Ibid., p. 306, stanza 5.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 307, stanza 2.

a little love:

'Not all so ill
 Thou choosest, son! short life with woe, to fill
 And be beloved--and be beloved as I....²⁶

She speaks the words, recites the argument which is everywhere prevalent in Morris's Old Norse adaptations: life is short and heavy with sorrow; love is short also, and often bitter; but since it lightens the load of misery as man journeys to his grave, partake in full measure of the love which is rightfully yours! Gudrun fears for the youth, she trembles at the memory of fate's unkindness to her, she shrinks from the awful truth that her daughter's marriage with Randver will increase her own woes and bring misery upon Swanhild and Randver as well,- and yet, with the brave abandon which Morris found inherent in all great Norse heroes and heroines, the poet's Gudrun, herself heavy with age and tribulation, virtually commands Randver to pursue the course of love. This is the Gudrun of the Völsunga Saga, transported by an English poet into a story where no Saga-man had placed her. Her fading beauty and deathless courage are not a little responsible for whatever measure of greatness The Wooing of Swanhild may possess.

VI

The personalities of these three, Bikki, Randver, and Gudrun, and Morris's use of them, will show sufficiently how

²⁶ Ibid., p. 308, stanza 2.

the poet changed and expanded the original story of Swanhild. Three other changes and additions, however, all included for dramatic effect, deserve separate enumeration. First, at the court of Jonak, Jonak himself creates a situation of extreme tension and irony when he supposes that Randver has come to woo Swanhild for himself, and looks upon Randver as a likely suitor.²⁷ Secondly, Gudrun mentions Ulf the Red in order to motivate a quick and easy escape for Randver, which he dramatically declines.²⁸ Thirdly, the entrance of Swanhild, toward the end of the fragmentary poem, is accompanied by a pageantry and luxuriance of description foreign to the nature of Old Norse literature, and which brings to mind the Romances of Europe rather than the Sagas of Old Iceland.²⁹

In these two short poems, The Wooing of Hallbiorn the Strong, and The Wooing of Swanhild, we have presented to us the love-conflict of "The Great Story of the North." Love, as Morris learned it from the Saga-man, was not smooth and easily attained. It thrived in adversity and persisted in pain. A little love, even illicitly won was better than no love at all, and since the greatest love stories of Old Norse, - those of the Volsungs and the Laxdaelers, depended upon the triangle for dramatic effects, for their obstacles, and tragic consequences,

27 Ibid., p. 303, stanza 3.

28 Ibid., p. 306, stanza 3.

29 Ibid., pp. 311-312.

so the simpler stories of Hallbiorn and Swanhild, in this new treatment by Morris, were made to conform to those older legends which are not, in the strictest sense of the word, their prototypes.

[part III]

CHAPTER IV

THE FOSTERING OF ASLAUG