

CHAPTER I

THE NORSEMAN IN ENGLAND

The thought often occurs to one, as he reflects upon the life and works of William Morris, that in spite of Morris's association with the Socialist movement, with the Arts and Crafts League, the Icelandic famine relief, and the problems of humanity in general, there was no man of his time who was so remarkably 'out of his element' as he. He thought, dressed, lived, and wrote in the manner of another age. His unqualified acceptance of the spirit of the Middle Ages is seen in A Dream of John Ball, in his attempts to revive the handicrafts of the past, in his desire to re-establish the guild system, and in his translations and adaptations from the Old Norse. It is to be found as well in that part of his activity which most closely connects him with Victorian England, - his social theories. They were conceived for the betterment of modern humanity; but they were established upon a medieval guild principle: fellowship. The more one attempts to single out the various interests of Morris, and to place them in neat categories, - Art, Poetry, Social Theory, Handicraft, - the more one is struck by the fact that there is an almost disconcerting homogeneity among his many activities. He attempted to lead the present age to a new appreciation of life by turning its vision back toward the Middle Ages. Morris was not of the 'here and now'; it was as though a medieval poet, artist, and craftsman had slept for four hundred years, and had awakened to find popular interest in poetry, art, and the crafts

usurped by a pre-occupation, on the part of thinking men, with poor-laws, science, didacticism, smugness, commerce, imperialism, and bad taste. Morris could not remove the fetters of modernity, but he could return, in his own practice, to the old order of things. That is exactly what he did.

The escapes from contemporary thought which the 'non-Victorian Victorians,'- Morris, Swinburne, Rossetti, Patmore, Thomson,- found, were in no two cases alike. Thomson took refuge in well-articulated despair, Patmore in the Church of Rome, Swinburne in thinking of himself as a child of the Sea and Earth, Rossetti in the fanciful medievalizing which he called Pre-Raphaelitism. But Morris fled to a pagan ideal which presupposed the inherent right of every human-being to live happily, and to express the natural impulses of his animal and intellectual self as he saw fit. It is not exactly obvious in his works what Morris meant when he said, "In religion I am a pagan," but this much is certain: his philosophy required that a man depend upon himself rather than upon a deity; that he have the courage to face life and death with equanimity; that he fight for and protect his fellows; that he pass through his earthly existence without definite assurance as to what the next life might be. The Christian God does not enter into this view of living; but the 'gods' (whatever they represented to Morris) would reward all who are deserving. It is not difficult to believe that the ethical principles which are contained in this philosophy have their source in the Elder Edda, wherein we learn of the courage of great heroes and their reward in Valhalla. If the pagan William

Morris could find no real assurance that life was worth living in the stories of the gods and heroes of old, in the tales of men whose 'deeds availed somewhat before they changed their lives,' he found it nowhere. He gave up his early desire to be a church architect when he saw that ecclesiastical architecture (excepting Gothic) was bad and impossible to reform; he forsook Holy Orders because he was concerned with the bodies, not the souls, of men. He does not speak, in his lectures on social reform, of finding a repository for our spirits; he asks us to provide spaciousness and attractive surroundings for our earthly forms. He asks us to be men, to be courageous.

These ideas are not so remote from the Old Norse as they might seem to be. In that literature, a life that was lived to the full, whether its efforts were directed toward charitable deeds or not, was a worthy life; such was Njal's, such were Grettir's, Gudrun's, Snorri-the-Priest's, and Sigurd's. Morris was not naïve, in the strictest sense of the word, but he had a child-like admiration for great persons of the past. He had not the practical hero-worship of Carlyle, nor the strangely selfish hero-adulation of Swinburne; but he possessed a love of courage which, when we are acquainted with his Norse interests, is not beyond our understanding. "What a fine outcome of the worship of courage these stories are," he once said, in epitomizing the great spirit of Old Norse literature. If he could not believe in the stories themselves, if he had no real faith in the pagan doctrines of the Edda, he came as close to such belief and such faith as anyone reared in an atmosphere of

Christianity may possibly come. We may say with some truth that at least he wanted to believe in them. This from the Norse,- the courage without which Morris thought one could not pass a decent existence on earth,- was congenial to the poet's ideas. If such a doctrine did not originate, in his case, with the reading of Old Norse literature, it was certainly crystallized, given form and expression, through that reading. Such a spirit is manifested by his belles lettres, his social theories, and his own life. There is almost nothing he wrote after 1870 (about the time he became fully aware of the true spirit of the Old Norse), which does not in some way bear the brand of the ideal of courage. It is as apparent in A Dream of John Ball as it is in Sigurd the Volsung.

II

The specific contributions of the Old Icelandic language and literature to the writings of William Morris are more easily tabulated. First among these is the great store of actual substance which the literature of the North gave to him. Evidence of his use of materials from Old Norse reading is to be found as early in his writings as The Hollow Land, 1855-1858, where such substance was quite indefinite and dilute, through The Earthly Paradise, 1865-1870, and Sigurd the Volsung, 1876, where it was employed by Morris in the direct adaptation of five Old Norse stories into English poetry, and as late as the late Prose Romances which he wrote in his declining years, where it

again becomes indefinite in the sense that the poet was not adapting Old Norse stories as such, but was creating a new form of the English novel with the Icelandic sagas as his models. To weigh the value to Morris of the Old Norse story materials we have only to ask ourselves what his poetic reputation would be without The Lovers of Gudrun and Sigurd the Volsung. The consensus of opinion among critics seems to be that Morris is known as a poet chiefly for The Earthly Paradise, of which The Lovers of Gudrun is doubtless the most important poem, and for Sigurd. If this be true, we may conclude easily enough that his reading the Laxdala and Völsunga-Sagas had not a little to do with his success as an English poet. We can by no means suggest that his position among English men of letters would be jeopardized if we were to remove those two poems from the works of Morris, for doubtless he could and would have written two great and tremendous poetic narratives upon other subjects if these stories had not come into his store of knowledge; but we may insist, nevertheless, that the two masterpieces of William Morris's Corpus Poeticum were based upon the Old Norse literature.

That Morris thought himself forced to change these stories somewhat no one will deny; the wisdom of his changes, however, may be questioned. It is quite accurate to say that the majority of the poet's detailed alterations, such as those in The Wooing of Hallbiorn, in Gudrun, and Sigurd, were made for one or both of two reasons: first, to allow the modern reader to

achieve a better understanding of the stories themselves, or, secondly, to make the general natures of all of them, - since they had a common theme of love, - conform to what Morris considered to be the ideal of the Old Norse love story. But if he made such changes for the increase of our comprehension, if he accentuated here and omitted there, and in general brought the story to the reader instead of making him labor to get it as he sometimes is forced to do in reading a saga, there is one change which Morris happily did not make. He never, under any circumstances or for any reason whatsoever, rationalized the actions of his characters, or explained, upon logical grounds, the machinery and devices of the story, unless the Saga-man before him had also done so. He would not break faith with the unknown authors of his originals in order to make the plots and mechanics of his adaptations acceptable to modern skepticism. He would explain the contention between Gudrun and Brynhild by showing a growth of friction between them, - that is so the reader may understand; but he would not omit the love-potion, which Grimhild gives to Sigurd, in order to make the reader believe. He asks us to accept the stories of the Saga-writers just as they are; he does not pretend to comprehend the workings of fate, yet he tells us that fate governs men's lives. If Morris modernized the technique of the Saga-man, if he perfected, dramatically, the abrupt situations of the sagas, he did not, on the other hand, meddle with the unknowable. To rationalize and explain away the supernatural devices of the

characteristics of the Northern literature were described by Thorpe in his second-hand versions of the Edda; as a consequence, Morris could merely describe them in The Fostering of Aslaug, the story for which he took from Thorpe's work. But the vital spirit of the Old Norse literature permeates the original tale of the men of Lax-river-dale, and the Icelandic Saga of the Volsungs and Niblungs. The poet had merely to preserve the atmosphere and feeling already present in his models when he adapted his two great poems from their Norse sources.

One way of measuring the influence of the Old Icelandic literature upon the quality of the English poet's works, is to observe the great difference between The Fostering of Aslaug and Sigurd the Volsung. The fact that these poems are not of similar magnitude need not invalidate such comparison, for an obviously bad poem like The Fostering of Aslaug would not improve in quality were it expanded to the length of Sigurd. The translations which Morris made gave him at first hand the equipment for writing Sigurd; but almost any of his contemporaries could have read Thorpe, and made as good a poem of the Aslaug story as he did.

Another contribution of the translations is apparent not in single poems, but in nearly all of the poet's work. The specialized literary medium, the language which Morris developed while he was engaged in the translation of the sagas, owes its existence to the fact that the poet was a translator. The language of Morris's Grettir the Strong is the language of his

Glittering Plain; the one is a translation from an Old Norse Saga, the other is an Englishman's saga-like fabrication. When the poet was working upon the Grettis Saga, he saw the need of using a non-modern diction and syntax to convey to the English reader something of the flavor of olden times; he re-constructed such a diction and syntax. Later in his career, while he was composing the first of his eight Prose Romances, he apparently discovered that the same language could be employed in these fictional works to give the effect of the archaic. One is not startled when he finds that William Morris's language of translation and his language of medieval fiction are for the most part identical. He wonders, however, to what extent Morris would have written in archaized diction if he had not spent most of the years 1868 to 1875 in studying and translating the Old Norse language.

Besides the comparatively large body of Old Norse saga translations in the complete works of Morris, there is another similar body which we should mention here also; the Old Icelandic ballads, such as The Lay of Christine. They doubtless exerted some influence upon Morris's poem, The Wooing of Hallbiorn the Strong. This piece reminds one of the Scottish popular ballads, to be sure, but its form is Icelandic. It may be that that form was first made known to Morris when he attempted, about 1868-1870, to translate a few þjóð ballads.

Morris's Old Norse literary allusions, in spite of the fact that some of them were certainly acquired during the period when he was translating with Magnússon, are a poor index to

the influence of the Old Icelandic upon the poet's works. For some inexplicable reason, Morris did not employ these allusions so frequently as one would expect in his non-Norse poems, and strangely enough, the poems written before he learned to read Old Norse yield more examples of saga and Eddic allusions than do those of a later date. This means, of course, that his readings in the English versions of Norse works made by Dasent, Laing, and others, influenced this part of his literary work more than did the original Norse materials. But the true measure of the poet's appreciation of the Old Norse literature, as we have stated above, is not to be found in isolated and miscellaneous references to Volsungr, Thor, and Odin, but in the English poetical renditions of whole stories, - The Lovers of Gudrun, Sigurd the Volsung. After all, the chief service of the translations which Morris made is that they enabled an English poet to bring strange and new materials into modern English literature. Whether his own contribution lies in his handling of the stories themselves, or in the new direction which he tried to give to the English language, is a matter which one need not now decide.

IV

In 1877, Morris was offered the Chair of Poetry at Oxford. But he refused it, and said, in his apologetic letter of refusal, that "the practice of any art rather narrows one with regard to the theory of it." He stated, on that occasion, that

he was a maker of poetry, not ^{an} anatomist of its composition. He did not hold that the business of poetry was 'to instruct and delight,' nor that one of its first principles forced a poet to put into it a 'criticism of life'; the business of William Morris's poetry was quite obviously to amuse, or as he might have said of it, as he did of art, to give "pleasure to both maker and user." This may be among the reasons why he was one of the chief Romantic Poets in an age not entirely romantic. To look back upon Keats as the first modern English poet, to accept Tennyson, to admire Browning, but to worship Scott, was another way in which Morris showed that he was not properly 'of his own time.' Scott and Keats did not dwell upon optimism, faith, and doubt; neither did the Saga-men and poets of Old Iceland. The delicate muse of Keats, the virile muse of Scott, and the sad goddess of Old Icelandic literature have very little in common. But Morris learned that all three, in their diverse ways, presided over literary products which were beautiful, moving, often supernatural, - romantic in the genuine sense of the word. When he fell, sometime before 1858, under the influence of Rossetti, and hence under that of the poet whom Rossetti looked upon as the morning-star of English song, - Keats, - Morris accepted an idea which never lost its hold upon him: that re-creating the literature of the Middle Ages was the highest aspiration of the modern poet. Two poems by very different authors, follow this theory: The Pot of Basil and Sigurd the Volsung.

When Morris broke away from the influence of Rossetti he did not discard what he thought to be the guiding principle of Rossetti's avowed poetic master. He simply redirected his ef-

forts to re-create the medieval. It is well to bear in mind, while we think now of Morris as a modern English heroic poet, that he was also a (Victorian) romanticist, and that these two terms are almost diametrically opposed. But as Morris shifted his interest from the romantic to the heroic (from the type of medieval imitation created by Keats to the kind which Gray had previously attempted) he could not obliterate the first ideal from his new poetry. That is why one must carefully qualify Morris's romanticism by remarking that it also is partly heroic; that, too, is the reason for declaring, conversely, that his Northern temperament is mixed with a belated English romanticism which does not always become his subject. The ideal for both, so far as Morris is concerned, was the same; but the coloring of the one may not enhance the attempts of a poet to re-create the other. Upon these grounds we may truthfully say that there is too much of the romantic in both The Lovers of Gudrun, and Sigurd the Volsung.

When we take cognizance of these conflicting elements in Morris's writings, we find no reason to argue that he looked upon the Old Icelandic literature as the one great literature in the world. But the fact that of all the many objects of his enthusiasm, Old Icelandic literature was the only literature to which he constantly returned, and which he used consistently in his own writings, provides a fair commentary on his appreciation of it, and on its relative importance in his works. It is also well to take notice of the coincidence that Morris considered

his poetry, rather than his prose, to be his important contribution to letters, and that the most successful pieces resulting from his associations with Old Norse literature are in poetic form. It was characteristic of Morris that he plunged into each fresh activity which he took up with tremendous energy and unbounded zeal. By the time he turned his attention to the Old Norse, he had already entered the fields of painting, poetry, mural-design, editing,- he had even been in business. But he proceeded with utmost speed to work in his new-found occupation, the translation of Icelandic sagas. Intellectual curiosity was born in him; he wanted to know. It is no inconsiderable testimony to the success of his ambition that within fewer than two years after he commenced the study of Old Norse he had completed one of his best poems, based upon an untranslated Saga: The Lovers of Gudrun.

V

William Morris's associations with Old Icelandic literature made him one of the most singular men of his time, and certainly the most singular poet. One might almost say that he resembles most English men of letters contemporary with him ^{only} because he, like they, wrote in English. Their ideas, their purposes, their materials were all quite different from his. For direct comparison of his work with that of a more typical representative of his day, we may take Sigurd the Volsung, and The Ring and the Book. Browning's long narrative, like Morris's, is based upon material taken from a country not his own. Scholars

have said that its picture of Italy in the time of its story is accurate, and that the characters themselves are true Italians. But if it is completely Italianate, if it was written by a man who is reputed to have known Italy better than any foreigner, at least any Englishman, of the nineteenth century, it also contains certain characteristics which we like to call (possibly because they are present in Browning's works) 'Victorian.' One such element is often considered as the theme of The Ring and the Book; it is found in the attempt of the author to attain to, or to develop a method for attaining to, the truth. That, we may say, is like Browning, as well as like Huxley, Darwin, Arnold, and Tennyson. But it is not like William Morris. Sigurd the Volsung is a poem based upon a foreign literature, written by a man who knew that literature as well as any Englishman of his day. It contains, for the most part, the incidents and characters which are found in its original, although they are to a certain degree, but scarcely a damaging one, colored by the poet's own ideas. But there is not, in Sigurd the Volsung, any dominant theme which we may associate with a Victorian ideal. It is not a document which may be 'dated' because it exhibits the traits of a particular age.

This comparison is not intended to show the relative merits of Browning and Morris as poets. Browning is perhaps entirely too great a poet to be compared with Morris; yet even if such a comparison were to be made, one would find it difficult to provide bases upon which to make qualitative judgments. The present writer is of the opinion that the experiment in hand will show

only how different from Browning's masterpiece is the chief poem of Morris; or, to go a step further, how 'un-Victorian' is the author of Sigurd. It was Morris's medievalism (how strangely unlike the medievalism of Arnold and Tennyson!), turned in a particular direction by his acquaintance with the Old Icelandic, which caused his work to be so remote from that of his contemporaries. The great literature of the North gave impetus to Morris's intellect, and substance to his poetry; it made him the strangest (hence perhaps the most fascinating) poet of Victorian England.

VI

There remains for our discussion one more contribution of the Old Icelandic to the works of William Morris; this is the effect of that literature upon his personality. It may be suggested that his Old Norse readings gave Morris a large share of the genuine and kindly robustness, the zest for living, which he somehow magically transmitted to his writings. Sir Edward Burne-Jones once said of the poet, his closest and oldest friend, that he was "really sort of a Viking, set down here and making art because there is nothing else to do." With these words he paid tribute to the very spirit, the Viking love of exploration, which guided and permeated all of Morris's accomplishments. Morris was a sort of Viking; his appearance and manner did not indicate that he was a Victorian gentleman. His curiosity and love of

courage were akin to the exploring urge of the Vikings themselves. It was the courageous, and inquisitive nature of Erik the Red, indeed, which sent him on expeditions in the dead of winter through uncharted seas. Morris did not take long to emulate that spirit. We learn from the poet's biographers and from documentary comments of his friends that he liked to imagine himself another person, - a character from Dickens, - a Norse sea-rover. Can we not say that it was perhaps an inborn Viking spirit in a Victorian Englishman, enhanced by his affection for Old Norse, and transferred from geographical to intellectual exploration, which led Morris through the art, the architecture, the literature of the Middle Ages; which urged him to re-learn and teach to his men half a dozen forgotten medieval crafts, which forced him to pry into many literatures? Perhaps we may say also, that it was an irrepressible love of adventure which caused him to write, in the conclusion to one of his Northern works:

Thus have I striven to show the troublous life
Of these dead folk, e'en as if mid their strife
I dwelt myself.

Morris loved life; he knew that to be essential to happiness. But like the Norseman he did not fear death. His poetic characters, - like himself, understood that when the doom of the Norns comes down on a man he had best meet it with resignation. But the poet inquired into the nature of life; as he journeyed toward death, he passed, like the Ragnar of his own poem, "through strange wild ways of joy and pain." He traveled to Iceland, and

underwent the hardships attendant upon such a voyage in order to visit the Saga-steads and homelands of his heroes. While he was there, as his Icelandic Journal tells us, he learned that the old order had changed; he discovered that littleness had sprung up where greatness had flourished before. He became pessimistic, and returned eagerly to his new home at Kelmscott, like Bodli coming back from Norway. Morris had seen enough. He had contemplated 'life's change' in the shadow of Gunnar's cairn. He could remember what he had written of Snæbiorn: "'Sharp sword,' he sang, 'and death is sure'"; he could recall also that forgetfulness for grief was contained in the sequel to that line: "'But love doth over all endure.'" So he returned to his family; but nevertheless, Iceland called him back two years later!

Morris did not acquire from Old Norse literature a complete philosophy of life, a garland of tangible certainties which put an end to doubt. But he obtained from it all that a reasonable man may expect. Judgment has long since been given; but life, the indefinite span of days allotted to each man by fate, may be intense and happy,- if a man possess courage. The days which the Norns bequeath may be tragic; but a man may lighten their burden,- if he attain love. No true Viking can deny that all will be swept away,- courage, love, and man,- when the awful Doom of the Gods shivers the earth. Morris went a step beyond the mere refusal of negation: he affirmed that pagan fact. His chief biographer, J. W. Mackail, states that even when Morris learned, in his last years, that he was slowly and surely dying, he did not give

up his stout spirit, nor did his Viking courage abandon him. One of the last things he did on earth was to make a trip to Norway. If such was the temper of the man when death was upon him, we need not marvel nor wonder at the fact that his writings, composed while he was in the fulness of his physical powers, are filled with the joy of living (and yet with the acceptance of death's imminence), as well as with ample proof that their author was a re-discoverer, a re-creator of things almost forgotten.

APPENDICES