

and slay the whole host of the Niblung people, and of Gudrun's second and final vengeance upon those who had been the instruments of her own revenge. When all the Niblungs are slain and the victorious carls of Atli have feasted themselves full in the Golden House, it is Gudrun herself who, in obedience to the fierce law of kindred among a barbarous people, sets the fire to burn the house over those who in slaying her brethren have only fulfilled her bidding; and with her own hand she pierces Atli to the heart. And here is the ending of Gudrun:—

Then Gudrun girded her raiment, on the edge of the steep she stood,  
She looked o'er the shoreless water, and cried out o'er the measureless flood:  
'O Sea, I stand before thee; and I who was Sigurd's wife  
By his brightness unforgotten I bid thee deliver my life  
From the deeds and the longing of days, and the lack I have won of the earth,  
And the wrong amended by wrong, and the bitter wrong of my birth!'

She hath spread out her arms as she spake it, and away from the earth she leapt  
And cut off her tide of returning; for the sea-waves over her swept,  
And their will is her will henceforward: and who knoweth the deeps of the sea,  
And the wealth of the bed of Gudrun, and the days that yet shall be?

This is hardly the place to dwell upon that wide field of interesting questions which a study of this fine rendering of the wonderful Northern story, and a comparison of it with the older renderings, must necessarily suggest. Otherwise it would be curious to remark the points of difference as well as of contact, the seemingly accidental shifting and transference of names, the variation in the characters that is revealed by a parallel reading, for instance, of the *Story of Sigurd* and of the *Nibelungen Lied*. For example, Gudrun has taken the place of the beautiful Chriemhild, who reappears as Grimhild, the royal witch; Regin is here the Smith himself, while in the *Heldenbuch*<sup>1</sup> he is the Dragon, the Smith's brother, the Fafnir of this poem; the Sword, 'the Wrath of Sigurd,' which is only forged successfully at the third trial, has a different object altogether from the sword Balmung. Mere dialectical changes of name—Atli for Etzel, Gunnar for Gunther, Hogni for Hagen, &c.—are unimportant; but the great differences of all, those of the winning of the hoard and of the relations between Brynhild and Sigurd, affect the whole course of the poem. There can be no comparison between the story that Regin tells—the story of greed in wild waste places transforming a hero into a 'wallowing'

<sup>1</sup> Collection of medieval heroic poems.

monster—and the clumsy incident of the *Heldenbuch*, where Siegfried's finding of the treasure is brought about by a string of purposeless accidents. And in the Saga, as Mr. Morris adapts it, how high above the coarse Brunhild of the German poem towers Brynhild, endowed with the wisdom of Odin and beauty untold, but hemmed in by a fate most tragic and most human! It is a sound instinct that directs this modern teller of old tales to the northern in preference to the southern source; to the Sagas rather than to the *Nibelungen Lied*.

#### 40. Unsigned review, *Literary World*

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A brief review of the American edition.

In *Sigurd the Volsung* we have at once the manliest and the loveliest work of Mr. Morris's genius. The atmosphere of soft and slightly enervating sadness which pervaded the *Earthly Paradise* and *Jason* is replaced by one clearer and more tonic. These Norse heroes fight under skies fraught with storm, and awesome with the shadowy footsteps of the hastening Norns; but they fight with cheerful and steadfast valor, and they die triumphant. The last word of all, which 'ends their strange, eventful history,' is not the empty echo of 'in vain! in vain!' but a promise, a watch-word,—or rather a pass-word for admission to a brighter and securer life:—

They are gone, the lonely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient earth:  
It shall labor and bear the burden as before the days of their birth;  
It shall groan, in its blind abiding, for the day that Sigurd hath sped;  
And the hour that Brynhild hath hastened, and the dawn that waketh the dead;  
It shall yearn and be oft-times holpen, and forget their deeds no more  
Till the new sun beams on Baldur and the happy, sealess shore.

The form of the Niebelungen story which Mr. Morris has chosen for illustration is that contained in the Icelandic saga of the Volsungs, of which the poet published a literal prose translation some five or six years since. He prefers this Icelandic form to the more familiar one adopted by Jordan for his great poems of the Niebelungen or Sigfrid's saga, and by Wagner for his trilogy. He speaks of it, in the preface to the aforesaid prose translation, as 'the most complete and dramatic form of that great epic of the North, which ought to be to all our race what the tale of Troy was to the Greeks'; and he has brought to the execution of his own long-meditated version a high and constant enthusiasm, and a tempered force and finished grace of poetical expression, which will go far toward securing for his subject the supreme place in our affections which he claims for it.

The poem is in four books or divisions. The first, 'Sigmund,' contains the story of the ancestry of the great Sigurd (Sigurd being identical with the Sigfrid of the German Niebelungen), and especially of his father, Sigmund himself, a most illustrious hero. The second, 'Regin,' records the birth of Sigurd; his fostering by Regin, the king of the dwarfs; how he slew, when scarcely arrived at manhood, the great serpent Fafuir, who guarded, upon the Glittering Heath, that immense treasure of gold, so famous in all Scandinavian story, which brought doom to all who obtained it; how he subsequently slew Regin himself, and carried his treasure to the burg of the Niblungs or Niebelungen. In the third book, 'Brynhild,' the passion of the story culminates. We hear once more, but with unexampled interest, the original of the countless fables of Sleeping Beauty and Fairy Prince: how Sigurd, riding towards the cloudy home of the Niblungs, finds Brynhild asleep upon Hindfell, and breaks the strong enchantment which had bound her; of their betrothal, and the cruel craft which parted them; of Sigurd's marriage to the daughter of the Niblungs,—Gudrun,—and of Brynhild's to the Niblung prince Gunnar or Gunther; of the anguish of both when the plot was discovered which had estranged them; of their love, their honor, their struggles, and their death. The fourth book, 'Gudrun,' tells of her subsequent marriage to Atti, and the frightful manner in which he avenged the death of Sigurd upon her Niblung brethren.

Meagre as this outline is, it may suffice to give some slight idea of the power and consistency of the story. To illustrate by the ordinary method of quotation the splendor of Mr. Morris' literary treatment is a far more difficult matter; for the strong thread of the narrative is

hardly broken by a single episode, and, for so long a poem, the equality of excellence in the versification is marvellous. We open the book at random, and light on the melodious quatrain in which Gudrun is introduced:—

And there is Gudrun his daughter, and light she stands by the board,  
And fair are her arms in the hall as the breaker's flood is poured.  
She comes, and the earls keep silence; she smiles, and men rejoice;  
She speaks, and the harps, *unsmitten*, thrill faint to her queenly voice.

And space must certainly be made for the exquisite passage which describes the bridal journey of Brynhild, when she went heartbroken, yet unflinching in her obedience to Fate, to fulfil her troth plighted to Gunnar:—

So wear the ten days over, and the morrow morn is come,  
And the *light-foot expectation* flits through the Niblung home;  
And the girded hope is ready, and all people are astir,  
When the voice of the keen-eyed watchman from the topmost tower they  
hear:  
'Look forth from the burg, O Niblungs! and the wargate of renown;  
For the wind is up in the morning, and the Mayblooms fall adown.  
And the sun on the earth is shining, and the clouds are small and high,  
And here is a goodly people, and an army drawing nigh.'

[quotes next two stanzas]

We have heard the complaint made that the versification of *Sigurd* becomes painfully monotonous after no long reading. To myself, it is the most satisfying English measure ever yet adopted for the telling of a long story in verse. No English measure can compare with the Latin hexameter for such a purpose,—not even the blank verse of Milton or of Tennyson. But this, which is founded on the original Niebelungen measure, only infinitely refined and beautified, seems to us to approach within sight of the unattainable model. It is noble, yet changeable; supple and sustained. There is a kind of wistful sweetness, both in its hurrying anapests and its lingering iambs, which makes them cling to the memory; while the frequent use of alliteration marks its kinship with the primeval forms of Scandinavian story. Whatever its immediate reception may be, William Morris's *Sigurd* is certain eventually to take its place among the few great epics of the English tongue.