

### 39. Unsigned review, *Saturday Review*

20 January 1877, xliii, 81-2

Mr. Morris's Northern Poems are not only interesting in themselves, for those qualities of dim beauty and sweetness long drawn out in which few poets since Spenser can approach him, but as recalling attention to the whole cycle of Northern mythology. Nearly half a century ago Mr. Carlyle, in his essay on the Nibelungen Lied, spoke with 'gratitude and love' of the unknown singers of that 'wondrous old tale,' with 'its true epic spirit, its meaning and charms for us'; and again, in his Lectures, he found out the perennial value of the old Odin worship which was the centre of the Northern religions. But since then, till very lately, there has been no re-creation of the stories themselves for a modern public, no attempt to reinvest the characters of the Sagas and their German counterparts with a human interest. At last, however, and in the same year, 'music and sweet poetry agree' to recall Sigurd or Siegfried, Chriemhild or Gudrun, from their sleep of ages; in Bayreuth and in London Wagner and Morris make simultaneous celebration. Perhaps this is no more than a coincidence; and no doubt with the German the dominant motive was one that is absent from the English poet—that is to say, a national motive. But Mr. Morris's own interest in this subject is a sign of the times. Let us not call it a reaction against the influence of the South, against Greek art and classical tradition; rather it is a new development of that very Renaissance which brought Greek models back to Europe—it is a fresh departure in the 'search for beauty and pleasure' which the Renaissance began. Science, in showing the essential unity of all mythologies, has given the hint; and now the artist asks, if Greece in gazing upon the Sun created Apollo, the North in the same way created Sigurd, and how is Sigurd less beautiful than Apollo? Change what must be changed, for the Athenian, 'ever delicately moving through most polluted air,' put the Northman, Goth or Volsung, toiling over the waste and the fell, or feasting while the storm beats upon his hall, and you have the same field for poetry, the same eternal human passions, and the same needs, 'hunger and labour, seed-time and harvest, love

and death.' Human nature is wide, it is true, and the 'note' of a Northern poem must be different from the note of a Southern; the Greek is full of a sense of order, the Saga-maker of a sense of mystery; but the humanity is at bottom the same in both. It is in the admirable way in which he has wedded these two elements, the living and human element, and the special Northern element of mystery—a mystery as of the storm, a sense of dark dragon-haunted places, of unknown forces ringing in man's life—that Mr. Morris has made good his claim to be considered in the first rank of modern poets. We regard this *Story of Sigurd* as his greatest and most successful effort; of all poetical qualities strength, subtlety, vividness, mystery, melody, variety—there is hardly one that it does not exhibit in a very high degree.

A poem is not a novel, the charm of which depends on the surprises of the plot, and therefore there is no harm done if a reviewer tells intending readers the story that they must expect to find in the book. We will proceed then, without apology, to do this with the *Story of Sigurd*; especially as we shall thus be enabled in the most natural way to choose out some of the lovely passages, full of subtle imagery or noble eloquence, with which the poem abounds. There are four books, named after the dominant characters in them—Sigmund, Regin, Brynhild, and Gudrun. The first, as is generally the case with the Saga literature, reaches back some way into genealogy; it tells not of Sigurd, but of his father Sigmund, and his grandfather Volsung. It is in the dwelling of this last that the story opens, with the wooing and wedding of his daughter Signy by Siggeir, the King of the Goths. It was a wedding full of doom; for in the midst of the feast a 'mighty man' strode into the hall and planted, not an apple of discord among them, but a sword deep in the wood of the mystic Branstock, the tree that grew there, and left it, 'Odin's gift,' to the warrior that would draw it forth. All failed till Sigmund came:—

At last by the side of the Branstock Sigmund the Volsung stood,  
And with right hand wise in battle the precious sword-hilt caught,  
Yet in a careless fashion, as he deemed it all for nought:  
When lo, from floor to rafter went up a shattering shout,  
For aloft in the hand of Sigmund the naked blade shone out  
As high o'er his head he shook it: for the sword had come away  
From the grip of the heart of the Branstock, as though all loose it lay.

Deep envy filled the heart of Siggeir at this; he tried first to buy the sword from Sigmund, and then, when that offer failed, he invited the

Volsungs treacherously to the 'house of the Gothkings,' 'that the dusky days and drear might be glorious with their presence.' The story of the visit, of the ambush, of the battle, and 'the ending of all Volsung's sons, save Sigmund only,' the birth and wild woodland life of Sinfliotli, Signy's son, the new treasons of Siggcir and his death, the murder of Sinfliotli, the second marriage of Sigmund, his last battle and 'the death of him,' and the hopes of his queen Hiordis—such is the story of this first book; and it is only in the beginning of the second that we come to the birth of Sigmund's son, Sigurd, who is to outdo the glories of his father. Like the young Achilles at the feet of Chiron, like many a hero in all mythologies, Sigurd has his first lessons from a mysterious and unearthly teacher—

Again, in the house of the Helper there dwelt a certain man  
 Beardless and low of stature, of visage pinched and wan:  
 So exceeding old was Regin, that no son of man could tell  
 In what year of the days passed over he came to that land to dwell:  
 But the youth of King Elf had he fostered, and the Helper's youth thereto,  
 Yea and his father's father's: the lore of all men he knew,  
 And was deft in every cunning, save the dealings of the sword:  
 So sweet was his tongue-speech fashioned, that men trowed his every word;  
 His hand with the harp-strings blended was the mingler of delight  
 With the latter days of sorrow; all tales he told aright;  
 The Master of the Masters in the smithying craft was he;  
 And he dealt with the wind and the weather and the stilling of the sea;  
 Nor might any learn him leech-craft, for before that race was made,  
 And that man-folk's generation, all their life-days had he weighed.

It is he who teaches Sigurd strange things, helps him to take the horse Greyfell, 'come of Sleipnir's blood, the tireless horse of Odin,' and tells him of his kindred, and 'of the gold that was accursed from ancient days.' In the winning this gold lies the 'deed' that Sigurd's heart has been pining to do since his childhood. 'Tell me,' he says, as the crafty Regin tempts and taunts him—

'Tell me, thou Master of Masters, what deed is the deed I shall do?  
 Nor mock thou the son of Sigmund lest the day of his birth thou rue.'

Then answered the Master of Sleight: 'The deed is the righting of wrong,  
 And the quelling a bale and a sorrow that the world hath endured o'erlong,  
 And the winning of a treasure untold, that shall make thee more than the kings;  
 Thereof is the Helm of Aweing, the wonder of earthly things,  
 And thereof is its very fellow, the War-coat all of gold,  
 That has not its like in the heavens, nor has earth of its fellow told.'

The story that follows, the central story of all this Nibelungen cycle, is that of the hoard of gold which is ever a curse to its possessor, and which yet the great and the noble are fated to possess. It has of ancient time belonged to the elf Andvari, 'in the uttermost part of the world.' But Regin, who tells the tale, is one of the three sons of Reidmar, and brother to Otter, the hunter who 'wades the highways wet,' and to Fafnir, whose 'brow is of hardened iron.' To them in days long gone the gods had come wandering—Odin, the Father of the Slain, Loki, the World's Begrudger, and Hæmir, the Utter Blameless; and craftily Loki had slain Otter on his way. The vengeance of Reidmar and his sons is to lay a snare for the gods as Hephæstus did for Ares, and to hold them fast till they had sent Loki to bring with him as a ransom this treasure of gold, with the Ring of Andvari, the Sword, the Helm, and the War-coat. The curse that lurks in them has instant effect almost; death lives in the gold as it lived in the florins found by Chaucer's 'Riotours.' While Regin is absent, Fafnir slays his father Reidmar,

that he alone may keep

The gold of the darksome places, the candle of the deep.

Regin flies away, 'lest his blood be cast on the guilt'; and once, long after, wanders back to the land, to find the house rent and ragged, the gold heaped up, and rolling upon it a mighty serpent, who is none other than Fafnir, changed into a Worm by brooding upon the treasure, as Otter had changed into the shape of the hunting-beast by brooding upon the prey. Long, long years passed by, and Regin, 'dwelling with the short-lived folk of men,' was for ever on the watch for the destined hand that should win him back the treasure, and 'bring his heart its rest.' He sees that in Sigurd he has what he has wished for, and Sigurd answers all too readily to the fatal invitation. But Regin must forge him a sword, for no sword of the earthly makers will pierce the armour of the Serpent. At last the sword is made—it is the old Odin-given sword of Sigmund reforged—and Sigurd sets out on the quest, passing onward with Regin

About the cold-slaked forges, o'er many a cloud-swept bent,  
 Betwixt the walls of blackness, by shores of the fishless meres,

till they come to the glittering heath, and the 'deserted land' of the Worm. How Sigurd meets the Wise One; how he lies in ambush in a pit in the Serpent's path; in what weird fashion the folds of the monster enwrap him 'with the swaddling of Death'; how he smites

upward and slays; how, chancing to taste the blood of the Serpent, he learns hidden mysteries and the meaning of the cries of the eagles around; how he slays Regin in time to prevent his treachery; how he finds the gold, and arms himself with the Coat and the Helm of Aweing, and takes the Ring of Andvari—all this it would be long to tell. Success that carries its curse with it is Sigurd's fate. Turning homeward, he comes to Hindfell, and there wakes Brynhild, the 'sleeping beauty,' who lies clad in armour till the sword of the destined man shall 'rend her fallow bondage.' It is here that the human and tragic interest of the poems begins, with the mutual passion of these two, the strongest man and the wisest and most beautiful woman in the world. He has awakened her from the magic sleep into which Odin had thrown her for a season. Of Brynhild, who once was the fellow of the gods and the 'Victory Wafter,' he has made 'her that loveth,' and on her finger, with exchange of oaths, he sets Andvari's ring.

The scene now changes to the Burg of the Niblungs and the hall of King Giuki, whose children are Gunnar, 'the great and fair'; 'the wise-heart Hogni'; Guttorm, 'of the fierce and wandering glance'; and Gudrun, 'the white-armed Niblung maid.' It is with the love of Gudrun for the 'golden stranger' Sigurd and all its consequences that the rest of the story deals. She dreams that a falcon, 'whose feathers were all of gold and his eyes as the sunlit glass,' flew and nestled in her bosom—a dream which of course her wise nurse interprets of a mighty lover that is to come from other lands:—*Externum cernimus, inquit, adventare virum.*<sup>1</sup> By a strange freak of destiny, it is to Brynhild, in her new home in Lyndale, that the maid who is fated to be Brynhild's supplanter goes to learn the full meaning of the dream. All happens as might be feared. Sigurd comes, is welcomed in the Niblung hall, and fights the Niblung battles, and all unconsciously becomes beloved of the Niblung maiden, though he himself loves none but Brynhild. But Grimhild, 'the wise wife,' Gudrun's mother, has other ends in view for Sigurd; and, with a skill that she has learned of old, she mixes a cup for him at the banquet. This is the beginning of the curse; 'the soul was changed in him,' and Brynhild is forgotten, and nothing remembered but a dim sense of happiness lost. More in sympathy with her look of sorrow than for love of her, he approaches Gudrun:—

He knows in an instant of time that she stands 'twixt death and love,  
And that no man, none of the Gods can help her, none of the days,  
If he turn his face from her sorrow and wend on his lonely ways.

<sup>1</sup> We perceive, he said, a stranger approaching.

So they are married, and she is happy, 'as one that hath gotten the best'; while he walks as in a dream; and far away in her fire-encircled palace Brynhild sits, 'weary-hearted,' on her dark blue throne. For a picture of sheer loveliness we know of few more perfect than the poet's account of the wedding-eve, when Sigurd and Gudrun are left alone,

till at last, amidst her tears,

The joy and the hope of women fell on her unawares;

and little by little the new love grows upon Sigurd; 'the tangle straighteneth before him,' though his youth is gone. But the same spell which Grimhild has wrought on him she works upon her son Gunnar, who 'bethinks him of the maiden sitting alone,' Brynhild, in her fire-ringed house. How this new wooing is accomplished by Sigurd's riding through the fire-wall, his aspect changed by the wise-wife's magic into that of Gunnar, the strange cold betrothal, the wedding, the contention between the queens, and Brynhild's wrath and shame at the bitter deceit that has been practised upon her—all this follows on rapidly, and hurries Sigurd and with him all the Niblung race to their doom. The Ring is what brings the curse to its effect. Given back by Brynhild, as she believes, to her husband, Gunnar, but really to Sigurd, and by him to Gudrun, this latter in a wild moment of triumphant rage shows it to her rival and tells the whole secret of the wooing. From this moment the story is one of blood and murder, 'of broken love and troth.' Brynhild must have the death of Sigurd; and he is killed by Gudrun's brother Guttorm, as he lies sleeping in her arms—only awaking to fling 'the Wrath' at the flying murderer and to strike him to the ground. Brynhild's own death follows soon, her one prayer being that she may be laid side by side with Sigurd on the funeral pile:—

How then when the flames fare upward may I be left behind?  
How then may the road he wendeth be hard for my feet to find?  
How then in the gates of Valhall may the door of the gleaming ring  
Clash to on the heel of Sigurd, as I follow on my king?

The story might well end here, had the tellers of Sagas and of the *Nibelungen Lied* so chosen. But, as is well known to readers of the 'Northern cyclics,' Gudrun must marry again, not for love, but for the hope of avenging herself upon the kin that slew her lord. The fourth book, then, is the tale of her wedding with Atli, the 'king of the Eastland folk' (the historic Attila), of the trap they laid to entertain

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, scaleless shore.