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CHAPTER III

THE WHOLENESS OF MATURITY: SIGURD THE VOLSUNG

Between 1872 when he finished *Love Is Enough* and October 1875, when he began writing *Sigurd the Volsung*, "but for a few lyrics, original or adapted from Icelandic and Danish ballads, his writing was confined to translation until he began his great epic."[121] The poem was published in November 1876, with the imprint of 1877.[122]

These were years of dramatic and apparently sudden broadening of Morris's outlook. On October 24th, 1876, he took the unexpected step of protesting against the threatened war with Russia over the Near East, by means of a letter to the *Daily News*, in which he expressed his horror at the possibility of England going to war for a cause which bore no relation to the real interests of the nation.[123] This was the first public step which Morris took in the political course which eventually led to his acceptance of the theory and practice of Marxism. The thoughts and feelings which led him to this startling departure were already at work in his mind while he was composing *Sigurd the Volsung*. The most remarkable aspect of Morris's entry into politics is that from the beginning, though he regarded himself for the moment as a liberal — the Liberal Party for a short period taking the lead in anti-war agitation — Morris understood the important role to be played by the proletariat. On Morris's first letter to the papers we may quote Thompson, who has made a detailed study of this period: "For the first public utterance of a poet and artist, there is a quite surprising understanding of the power of popular organization. The whole letter is an appeal to the people to carry the agitation to new heights. From the very outset Morris saw the working class as the real force behind the agitation."[124] Morris's glad acceptance of working-class political activity was thus an early and fundamental feature of his whole political attitude, and was the basic difference between him and, for example, Bernard Shaw, who, being shocked in the eighties by the way the police broke up mass demonstrations without organised opposition, became convinced of the ineffectiveness of working-class action, and was more than ever confirmed

in his Fabian beliefs. Morris, on the other hand, used his experience of the Trafalgar Square fights for his descriptions of the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism in *News from Nowhere.*

Thompson has also pointed out that the insight and moral courage which made Morris accept the need for revolution, came to him in the first place in the early seventies, from an unusual source: "This new strength came to him, in the first place, not from his work, nor from Kelmscott, nor from new friendships, nor from contact with the industrial proletariat, nor from any experience in his everyday life. He drew this strength, as it seemed, from the energies and aspirations of a poor people in a barren northern island in the twelfth century. There can be few more striking examples in history of the revolutionary power of culture than this renewal of courage and of faith in humanity which was blown from Iceland to William Morris, across the waters of the North Sea and eight hundred years of time."[125]

This historical conception of the progressive tradition Morris expressed in his first song written directly for a working-class audience — "Wake, London Lads" — sung on the occasion of the mass Anti-War meeting of January 16th, 1878:

> From out the dusk, from out the dark,
> Of old our fathers came,
> Till lovely freedom's glimmering spark
> Broke forth a glorious flame.[126]

This image, expressing the glow of human values down the darkness of the centuries, is one which Morris uses both in *Sigurd* and in his later prose romances, and is part of the intimate unity of his thought and creative literary work from this time onwards.

The poem of *Sigurd the Volsung* takes up 306 pages in the Collected Edition and consists of over 10,000 lines. The metre is a rapidly moving six-stress rhyming couplet, with little enjambement even within the couplet itself, and practically every line divided by a strong caesura after the third foot. Monotony is avoided by a considerable variety in the type of stress unit or foot. These units are clearly felt: in spite of the very strong stress rhythm, this is not stress metre in the sense that the alliterative verse in *Love Is Enough* is stress metre, i. e. it is not based on Anglo-Saxon or on 14th-century Middle English alliterative metre. The feet are recognisably anapaests, iambs, dactyls, etc. The main technical feature which provides variety would seem to be occasional alternation between "rising" and "falling" rhythm in the two halves of the line, and the alternating groupings of unstressed or "hypermetrical" feet at the caesura. The metre is described by Grierson and Smith as a "trampling measure", "a line of six beats in rising rhythm with frequent anapaests and

extra mid-line syllables, perhaps as good a substitute for the dactyllic hexameter of Homer as our rude northern tongue affords." The basic pattern of the metre is given in the first line:

There was a dwelling of Kings/ ere the world was waxen old.

The number of syllables ranges from 13 to as many as 18. The lines fall into verse paragraphs of varying length.

Morris divided the abundant material of the *Volsungasaga* into four books. Book I, *Sigmund,* deals with the events of the saga before the entry of Sigurd and Brynhild. Book II, *Regin,* deals with the upbringing of Sigurd and his early deeds up to the meeting with Brynhild. Book III, *Brynhild,* almost twice as long as any of the others, gives us the main section of the story to the death of Sigurd and of Brynhild, while Book IV, *Gudrun,* tells of the destruction of the Niblungs and the vengeance of Gudrun. The conclusion of the *Volsungasaga* (the story of Swanhild) was omitted by Morris.

We can see at the outset from his selection of material that Morris was bent on preserving the general shape of the saga, keeping the introductory tale of Sigmund, Signy and Sinfiotli as a prelude and discarding the short final section as irrelevant to his purpose. Opinions as to what this purpose was vary. Morris has been both praised and criticised for including the story of Sigmund, the father of Sigurd, in his poem. Mackail, who was of course influenced by his classical conception of epic, considered that the story has "epic unity only from the point at which Sigurd's own conscious life begins", and that while Morris effected skilfully the transition from the tale of Sigmund to that of Sigurd, yet "the fact remains that what he tried to do was wrong."[128] May Morris disagrees with Mackail here and considers that

"The first book, with the terrible figures of Sigmund, Signy and Sinfiotli, is no mere preliminary account of the Volsung stock: it introduces the very motive of the epic, the Wrath and Sorrow of Odin. It enforces the sense of Doon that hangs over the story: The God himself who moves the puppets, sets going machinery that he cannot stop — the Fate beyond himself, the Fate that as in mockery of humanity puts on the semblance of human will and human action."[129]

We shall consider later the question of Morris's attitude to the idea of Fate in the saga, but here we may note that Drinkwater, who has written one of the most appreciative accounts of *Sigurd,* believes that the motive

"is in reality the splendid survival of one brand plucked from the ashes of the Volsung house; the avenging, not in blood, but in the one swift arc of Sigurd's heroic life in a world where he stands magnificently alone, of the Volsung name. The sense of Fate, the wide horizons, the sinister figure of Grimhild and the terrors of the Glittering Heath are all alike influences that work upon the shaping of this central theme, and to confuse them with the motive itself makes it impossible to see clearly the rightful place of the book of Sigmund in the poem.

It is there that the disaster, the catastrophe, of which Sigurd's passage from birth to death is the compensation and adjustment, is set forth, and without it, it seems to me, the epic unity of the poem would not have been intensified, but made impossible."[130]

Morris himself conceived the *Volsungasaga* as a work of art which had evolved historically and contained at least three successive and historically conditioned conceptions of Sigurd, the folk-hero. He expressed this opinion in a letter of 1894, many years after he had written the poem.[131]

"The terrible incestuously begotten Sinfjotli is, I think, the original Sigurd (so to say), the Dragon-Slayer and the releaser of Sigrdrifa the second, and the ally of the Nibelungs and husband of Gudrun the third. The Andvaranautr [the Ring of gold] and Regin and the Gods belong duly, I think, to the second one... You will understand that I would on no account wish that the curious entanglement of the ages (which) has been thus at work on the greatest story of the world had not taken place; it has on the contrary, it seems to me, produced something of wonderful imagination and clearness of outline, without disturbance of the huge and vague figures of the earlier times."

This interpretation may owe something to Morris's later Marxist studies, but there can be no doubt from the internal evidence of the poem (which will be adduced) that even in the mid-seventies Morris's thought, always strongly inclined to a materialist conception of history, was coming to see historical development more and more in terms of successive economic and social systems and that he tended more and more to assess these systems from the view-point of the people and their daily work. Certainly too the divisions of his poem correspond to the above interpretation of the stages of the epic, Book I dealing with the "huge and vague figures of the earlier times", Book II with the second stage — the entry of the treasure — the conflict of Sigurd, the hero of the folk, with the death-bringing treasure, while Books III and IV deal with Sigurd's life as the ally of the Nibelungs, and the destruction which results from the urge towards power and wealth of early feudal society. The descriptions of the life of his heroes and their communities corresponds in each of these three divisions to a different stage of human society and behaviour. Unity of conception is preserved by the unity of moral theme — which is the courage of man in his struggle against nature, and the frustration of that courage when the bonds of kindred and community are rent asunder by the demands and intrigues of class society.

It is clear that the first Book was necessary to Morris's conception in order to set the colossal scene and provide the background. Morris selected and arranged his saga material not in order to provide merely a re-telling of the saga in modern English[132], but to give us his interpretation of it. Thus he omits the primitive mythology of the introductory passages dealing with the supernatural parentage of Volsung and plunges straight into a vividly realised description of the life of Volsung and his people.

These first lines of the poem show at once the aspect of this saga life which Morris wishes to stress. It is a tale of kings, but they are not feudal kings:

There was a dwelling of Kings ere the world was waxen old;
Dukes were the door-wards there, and the roofs were thatched with gold;
Earls were the wrights that wrought it, and silver nailed its doors;
Earls' wives the weaving-women, queens' daughters strewed its floors,
And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast
The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast.

(Vol. XII, p.1)

This conception of the theme belongs to the very beginning of Morris's work on the poem — in fact these very lines commence the first draft dated October 1875, in which the rolling line of the poem is apparently not fully worked out, but written as short lines of three stresses. Thus even before the final adoption of the metre, which critics have considered so fitly adapted to the theme and so bound up with Morris's conception, the poet had clearly fixed on those aspects of the epic which he specially desired to emphasise.[133] Besides the barbaric and rude splendour, Morris stresses the closeness of the rulers of this people to the manual work of society. We are reminded of Morris's own words in an unpublished Socialist lecture in which he spoke of the old Icelandic chiefs:

"Contrary to the absurd feeling of the feudal or hierarchical period manual labour was far from being considered a disgrace: the mythical heroes have often nearly as much fame given them for their skill as weaponsmiths as for their fighting qualities; it was necessary of course for a Northman to understand sailing a ship, and the sweeps on board their long-ships or fighting-craft were not manned by slaves but by the fighting-men themselves; all this is perhaps a matter of course, but in addition the greatest men lent a hand in ordinary field- and house-work, pretty much as they do in the Homeric poems: one chief is working in his hay-field at a crisis of his fortune; another is mending a gate, a third sowing his corn, his cloak and sword laid by in a corner of the field: another is a great house-builder, another a ship-builder."[134]

To this we may add the following quotation from a Marxist work on Icelandic History:

"Since work was a matter of honour it was no obstacle to the intellectual development of the people, as was the case in societies where work was the heavy burden of the oppressed classes. We may say that it was precisely work which here (i.e. in the old kindred society of Iceland) was the source of creative intellectual strength."[135]

Yet even this society of "men merry-hearted", is threatened by change, the foreboding of this change being expressed in the songs of the Edda — which Morris also knew and translated — rather than in the straightforward prose narrative of the saga proper. This ineluctable change was one of the main

features of Morris's conception: "the entering in of the terror, and the death of the People's Praise," the line with which the first paragraph of his poem ends. Thus with remarkable compression Morris sets the scene, creates the atmosphere of the whole poem, and sums up his theme and intention.

The Hall of the Volsungs — "A rose in the winter season, a candle in the dark" — which is only shortly characterised in the saga as a splendid hall with a mighty oak, the Branstock*, standing in the middle — is described by Morris in some detail not only here but also at other points in the poem, and Morris's descriptions accurately reconstruct the hall of the kindred, the type of dwelling which he later used with such effect in his prose romances, *The House of the Wolfings* and *The Roots of the Mountains*. The Hall is in fact the symbol of the unity of the folk.

Morris follows the saga[136] in the swift development of plot with the appearance of Siggeir the Goth as Signy's suitor. But while the saga here gives expression to Signy's unwillingness only very drily — e. g. by such a phrase as "she however expressed no pleasure" (3,p.29), Morris endeavours to bring the scene concretely before us, while preserving the emotional reticence of the saga.

I do not intend to deal at this point with the suitability or otherwise of Morris's language in his translations of the sagas, but while we may concede that his language tends to be too mannered for a direct translation, the point at issue here is different. Morris could not have written the type of poem he planned in *Sigurd*, if he had confined himself to the dry, tight-lipped, terse expression of emotion which the saga gives us — e. g. "Now Signy wept bitterly and begged not to have to return to King Siggeir." (5, p.31) But Morris was concerned to give a dramatically realised interpretation of the saga, and for this the extreme reticence of the sagas is not enough. What we are entitled to demand of Morris is, that he should not change the quality of the emotions, that they should remain credible for us as the feelings of people of the saga time, while having a sufficient degree of permanence to tell us something relevant to human emotions today. Morris amplifies the figure of Signy, especially her tenderness for her kindred. Here we have the first glimpse of Signy when King Siggeir's envoy appears to ask her in marriage:

> But nought said the snow-white Signy as she sat with folded hands
> And gazed at the Goth-king's Earl till his heart grew heavy and cold,
> As one that half remembers a tale that the elders have told,
> A story of weird and of woe.
>
> (p.2)

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*) In the original either barnstokkr, tree of the children, or brandstokkr, as Morris prefers, tree of the sword. cf. L. Zatočil, *Sága o Volzunzích*, p.180, barnstokkr.

And her answer to Volsung's question, if she will marry Siggeir, achieves simultaneously the austere acceptance of the saga with a consciousness of implications which the brevity of the saga often fails to give:

> I will sleep in a great king's bed, I will bear the lords of the earth,
> And the wrack and the grief of my youth-days shall be held for nothing worth.
>
> (p.3)

Even in this short introductory incident we can see what Morris means when he says he has added detail — it is not merely detail of dress or furnishing or surroundings or even scenery, but also detail and expansion of incident, and generally the effect is to give a more logical and better-spaced development to the story. In the saga, for example, King Siggeir arrives at once on the scene, demanding Signy's hand, and the marriage follows at an unspecified time. Morris however shows us directly the approach by one of Siggeir's earls to Volsung, the acceptance, and the departure of Siggeir's messenger, and the lapse of time is suggested:

> ... and the feast sped on, and the speech and the song and the laughter
> Went over the words of boding as the tide of the norland main
> Sweeps over the hidden skerry, the home of the shipman's bane.
>
> (p.3)

This is a good example of how Morris mingles the development of the tale with the suggestion of scenic background, all bound up with the atmosphere of doom.

A further illustration of the type of detail Morris adds can be found in the description of the arrival of Siggeir — passed over in the saga itself with a simple statement. The whole passage is intended to create the atmosphere of this fateful moment:

> So on Mid-summer Even ere the undark night began
> Siggeir the King of the Goth-folk went up from the bath of the swan
> Unto the Volsung dwelling with many an Earl about;
> There through the glimmering thicket the linkèd mail rang out,
> And sang as mid the woodways sings the summer-hidden ford ...
> And they dight the feast full glorious, and drank through the death of the day,
> Till the shadowless moon rose upward, till it wended white away;
> Then they went to the gold-hung beds, and at last for an hour or twain
> Were all things still and silent, save a flaw of the summer rain.
>
> (p.4)

This is followed by a magnificent description of the harping at the feast — one of several striking references to harping in the poem, a later one being the

description of the harping of Hreimar, and the most imposing that of Gunnar harping during the last fight in the hall of Atli, and then in his grave-pit. Here we are told that "though the deeds of man-folk were not yet waxen old" yet the Volsungs have "Tales of the framing of all things and the entering in of time":

> Wherefore uprose a sea-king, and his hands that love the oar
> Now dealt with the rippling harp-gold, and he sang of the shaping of earth,
> And how the stars were lighted, and where the winds had birth,
> And the gleam of the first of summers on the yet untrodden grass.
>
> (p.4)

And this recapitulation of the earliest ideas of the Northern peoples about the origins of the world is a fitting prelude to the momentous entry of Odin.

It will be seen that this careful build-up of atmosphere in Morris differs entirely from the method of the saga, which tells us very simply that as the men sat by the fire along the hall in the evening, all at once into the hall stepped a man. The seizing upon and elaborating of the dramatic moment, which the saga treats so tersely, is typical not only of the chivalric romance but also of the ballad, and it may be that Morris here is thinking also of that romance which is nearest in spirit to the ballad, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which also contains a stirring account of a surprising uninvited guest.*

Morris's treatment of the drawing forth of the sword from the Branstock also demonstrates how he heightened those incidents which he considered critical for the tale. While the saga simply tells us how one after another all present tried to pull out the sword, and at last Sigmund succeeds, and Siggeir offers him three times its weight in gold, while Sigmund's mocking refusal provokes Siggeir's carefully concealed anger and longing for revenge, Morris illustrates all this dramatically, and describes how Siggeir himself first strained at the glorious sword "Till his heart grew black with anger". Furthermore, Morris underlines the qualitative contrast between the background of Siggeir, the warlike conqueror and successful king, with his powerful Earls, and that of the simpler Volsungs:

> Then uprose Volsung's homemen, and the fell-abiding folk,
> And the yellow-headed shepherds came gathering round the Oak,
> And the searchers of the thicket and the dealers with the oar:
> And the least and the worst of them all was a mighty man of war.
>
> (p.6)

But the idea that he has been made "a mock for their woodland bondsmen" adds to Siggeir's smouldering anger.

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*) cf. also the parallel suggested in discussing *The Land East of the Sun*, supra p.57.

The material of Morris's first book is covered in the saga by twelve chapters. In place of these, Morris divides his book into nine sections. As he omits the first chapter of the saga and most of the second, as well as almost the whole of the ninth (the inset tale of Helgi and Sigrun, irrelevant to his purpose), it will be seen that for the same material he retains the same number of divisions as the saga. Morris's arrangement of the material is however different and more purposeful than the rather haphazard divisions of the saga, in which the chapters do not always coincide with the real transitions of the story. Several considerations seem to weight with Morris in deciding his selection of material. Perhaps the most prominent is his rejection of the grotesque elements in the saga. More recent criticism of Morris has been hard on him for his lack of robust humour, attributing it to Victorian squeamishness. We know that in his own literary tastes and in his own life Morris was by no means without appreciation of broad humour (among his favourite authors was Dickens, and more surprising, Surtees). But to incorporate the grotesque elements of the saga (typical folk-tale elements) into a narrative on the sustained tragic and cosmic note at which Morris was aiming would have demanded gifts which we find perhaps nowhere else than in Shakespeare, who can use humour grimly to heighten tragic effect. Do the actual saga narratives gain anything by the grotesque details of incidents which tell us nothing about the characters involved and are commonplaces of folk-tale throughout the world? We can scarcely quarrel with Morris for keeping consistently to his conception of the sagas and selecting rigorously those elements which harmonise with this conception — all the more so as his conception of the sagas is on the whole historically correct.

The most prominent incidents which Morris omits or modifies are the grotesque covering of Sigmund's face with honey, so that the wolf instead of biting him to death, licks his face and thus enables him to bite out her tongue; the incident of Signy sewing her sons' shirts to their arms to prove their capacity or bearing pain, and Sinfjotli's* comic flyting with Granmar. None of these can be considered essential to the development of the tale, and are outweighed by the points in which Morris as it were deepens or underlines the significance of the sagas.

While Morris expands the development of character and of significant incident, he does not hesitate to speed up the narrative where it would be tedious if it too closely followed the saga version. For example, the saga tells us dryly that when the sons of Volsung were defeated by Siggeir and tied to a tree-trunk in the wood to die, a she-wolf came for ten nights in succession and

* Different forms of the same names are used according to whether reference is to Morris's version or to the saga.

each night bit one of the Volsungs to death. Morris wants to heighten the dramatic suspense and also to show the cumulative effect on Signy. In the saga, it is Signy who sends messengers to the wood to find out how her brothers are faring; but Morris stresses her helplessness and isolation by making them messengers of the king, who arrive daily to tell him of the Volsungs' fate. Obviously ten such messengers on ten successive occasions would strain the reader's attention and the poet's ingenuity, so Morris, instead of one wolf, provides two, so that the reports are reduced to five, while "watchful eyes held Signy at home in bower and hall", and not until the last report comes, that "There is nought left there but the bones, and the bonds that the Volsungs bound", does Signy rise up with a cry and go way to the wood, "And no man watched her or hindered, for they deemed the story done." (p.19) These slight changes undoubtedly heighten the dramatic moment when Signy comes to the clearing in the wood and finds Sigmund there digging a grave for his brothers. Only after they have together buried the brothers does Sigmund tell the tale of what has happened. We see now that it is not purely for its grotesquerie that the honey (supplied in the saga by Signy) is omitted, but also because it implies Signy's communication with her brothers, while Morris wants to stress her isolation, suffering and endurance. Morris understood very well the qualities valued by the writers of the sagas. But he did not make the mistake of supposing that these qualities could be expressed for 19th-century readers in the same way as the sagas expressed them. True to his own precept, he mastered the source material, and then told the story in his own way.[137]

The tale of the birth of Sinfjotli was certainly a challenge to Morris, who had to make it credible and acceptable to the reader of his own day without changing the spirit of the saga. He does so not by softening the crudeness and harshness of incident. He follows the saga step by step very faithfully, merely reducing for the sake of compression and heightening of contrast the two sons of Siggeir, who are sent by Signy to be fostered by Sigmund in the forest, to a single son, who instead of being killed by Sigmund on Signy's advice, comes out of the test in a different way. Though "Sigmund deemed in his heart that the boy would be bold enough", he cannot withstand the test of the hidden serpent in the flour; yet when Sigmund tries his courage with his sword, "the serpent of death", he shows no fear. And only after long musing, does Sigmund come to the conclusion that the quality of his courage is not that required to carry out the revenge of the Volsungs, and sends him back to Signy with the message, "The sons of the Gods may help me, but never the sons of Kings."

Morris now stresses the depth of Signy's character:

> Long while she mused and pondered while day was thrust on day,
> Till the king and the earls of the strangers seemed shades of the dreamtide grey,

And gone seemed all earth's people, save that woman midst the gold
And that man in the depths of the forest in the cave of the Dwarfs of old.

(p.27)

It now seems to Signy that her purpose to bear a son by Sigmund is justified by the "ancient song" which speaks of the twin-born Gods. When the witch with knowledge of shape-changing appears, the saga simply relates the events. Morris's Signy has a moment of decision:

... Alone I will bear it; alone I will take the crime;
On me alone be the shaming, and the cry of the coming time.
Yea, and he for the life is fated and the help of many a folk,
And I for the death and the rest, and deliverance from the yoke.

(p.27-8)

The episode of Sigmund and Sinfjotli as were-wolves is slightly changed in Morris, but most of all in its motivation. In the saga from the beginning of his training Sinfjotli urges Sigmund to kill his putative father Siggeir. (Ch.8, p.33) But in Morris nothing is said about this till the period of trial is over, and when Sigmund asks Sinfiotli if he will slay the foe, even if it is his own father, Sinfiotli replies that he can have no other father "save him that cherished my life, The Lord of the Helm of Terror, the King of the Flame of Strife" and that his hand is "ready to strike what stroke thou wilt". This answer is not merely credible in terms of human feeling and experience but also perhaps close to the basis of the tale in possible historical truth: for the legend of the fostering of Sinfiotli by his mother's brother is presumably the rationalisation by a later social system of the practice of the earlier exogamic gens society, where the children of the mother belonged to her kindred, not to that of the father.*

Morris's telling of the tale of Signy is distinguished by the warmth of human emotion with which he infuses it. Was this purely Morris's own reading of the tale or does the original contain hints of this emotional warmth which the method of the saga did not exploit or develop? We have seen that the saga speaks of Signy's foreboding and grief; it tells also of her love for her brothers and her request for them to be left alive even if it means for them torture. Both her quotation of the proverb, "Sweet to eye while seen", and Siggeir's reply

*) It is not known whether Morris ever read Engels's *Origin of the Family* (cf. Thompson, p. 835). Certainly at this period he could not have done so. May Morris states that he read the important works of European history and anthropology as they came out (Works, Vol. XIV, Intro. p. XXV). By the time of *Sigurd* he m i g h t have read the earlier works of Morgan, though *Ancient Society* was not published till 1877. Whatever background of study he had at this time, his outlook on these questions was certainly not tinged with Victorian ideas of what was right and wrong, shocking or correct.

that she must be mad to wish such a fate for them (ch. 5, p. 31) are used by Morris. No emotion is expressed in the saga throughout the testing of Signy's sons, or during the attack on and overpowering of Sigmund and Sinfjotli, up to the moment of the burning of Siggeir's hall. We are allowed to judge the characters solely by their actions, which are presented baldly and without comment. But at the critical moment of the climax, when the hall is in flames, we are given a glimpse into their feelings. Sigmund, wishing to lessen the pain of the sister who has saved him, bids her come out from the fire and receive his homage. In her speech in reply Signy for the first time seeks to justify herself, speaking of her revenge on Siggeir for the murder of Volsung, her murder of their children, her change of shape and the birth of Sinfjotli, and saying that she has been so active in seeking for revenge on Siggeir that she can no longer live, and will now of her own free die along with him, though she was his wife only by force. And kissing Sigmund and Sinfjotli she turns away into the fire to die (ch. 8, p. 35).

Not only does Morris make full use of this episode, but he leads up to it in a way that the saga does not, by showing us more intimately the emotions of Signy at earlier stages. She has acted as she has from devotion to her kindred, and in the time to come all shall remember "how I loved the Volsung name, Nor spared to spend for its blooming my joy, and my life, and my fame." Her last words as she turns back into the fire have a ballad note:

> She said: 'Farewell, my brother, for the earls my candles light,
> And I must wend me bedward lest I lose the flower of night.'
> (p.41)

The conclusion of this section describing the fall of the roof has a fine inevitability:

> And its huge wall clashed together, and its mean and lowly things
> The fire of death confounded with the tokens of the kings.
> A sign for many people on the land of the Goths it lay,
> A lamp of the earth none heeded, for the bright sun brought the day.
> (p.41)

It is worth noting that Morris marks his sense of the finality of this incident by ending here a section of his narrative, whereas the saga continues in the same chapter to tell of the further adventures of Sigmund and Sinfjotli, passing over more than fifteen years in a few sentences.

The following section, dealing with Sigmund's son Helgi and the king's daughter Sigrun, and the grotesque quarrel between Granmar and Sinfjotli, Morris omits as irrelevant to the main development of the tory. He passes straight on to the death of Sinfiotli. Nevertheless he does not altogether ignore

the incident of the quarrel; he includes it in the account of the events leading to Sinfiotli's death, but in a changed guise. In the saga, the quarrel falls out between Sinfjotli and Borghild's brother. Morris gives this brother the name Gudrod, and the cause of the quarrel is different. In the saga the two are rivals for a beautiful girl, and the quarrel is not described in detail. But Morris apparently wanted to compensate for omitting the previous quarrel between Granmar and Sinfjotli, described in the saga with such gusto, which ends with Helgi blaming them for their shocking language and does not lead to blows. Morris uses the hint given by this to describe a quarrel over the fair division of booty, which shows up Gudrod as mean and greedy, and Sinfiotli as magnanimous and fair-minded. It also gives occasion for a kind of flyting, but of a much more decorous and lofty kind, in which Sinfiotli maddens Gudrod by accusing him of greed "unmeet for kings to hear Of a king the breaker of troth, of a king the stealer of gear." This quarrel leads to a formal fight in which Gudrod is killed, and the tale proceeds to the death of Sinfiotli as in the saga.

This change illustrates well the degree to which Morris sought to limit more commonplace incidents, motives and passions in his tale. But it is also worth noting that the incident as Morris develops it has positive value as illustrating something of the saga way of life, the attitude to fair dealing. Olgeirrson has pointed out that the virtues of the ancient kindred society in Iceland were sincerity, loyalty, magnanimity and respect for others.[138]

The actual death of Sinfiotli is followed closely by Morris, only the grotesquerie of Sigmund's drunkenness is somewhat softened. Morris elaborates effectively but with reticence the grief of Sigmund and the bearing away of Sinfiotli on the boat by Odin. This incident might well be contrasted with the heavy and elaborate sentimentalism of Tennyson's *Passing of Arthur*, to show how Morris illuminated his sources rather than changed them.

> Forth fared the Volsung child
> With Signy's son through the doorway; and the wind was great and wild,
> And the moon rode high in the heavens, and whiles it shone out bright,
> And whiles the clouds drew over . . .
> Then came he unto the thicket and the houses of the wind,
> And the feet of the hoary mountains, and the dwellings of the deer,
> And the heaths without a shepherd, and the houseless dales and drear.
> Then lo, a mighty water, a rushing flood and wide,
> And no ferry for the shipless . . .
>
> (p.48)

A boat appears, bearing Odin, who bids him place Sinfiotli on board, but the boat vanishes before Sigmund can follow, and he returns to be made King of the Volsungs: "And he hearkened and doomed and portioned, and did all the deeds of a king."

The conclusion of the first book, the death of Sigmund and the bringing of Hjordis his queen to the land of the Helper (Hjalprekr, King of Denmark), whose son Elf (Alfr) she weds after the birth of Sigurd, follows the saga very closely both in incident and general atmosphere. Two outstanding passages must be mentioned, the first of which amplifies what is in the saga. This is Morris's magnificent description of the death of Sigmund in battle, at the moment when, seemingly irresistible, he is stopped by Odin:

> White went his hair on the wind like the ragged drift of the cloud,
> And his dust-driven, blood-beaten harness was the death-storm's angry shroud,
> When the summer sun is departing in the first of the night of wrack;
> And his sword was the cleaving lightning, that smites and is hurried aback
> Ere the hand may rise against it; and his voice was the following thunder...
> And he thought: A little further, and the river of strife is passed,
> And I shall sit triumphant the king of the world at last.
>
> (p.53)

The second passage has no direct parallel in the original, but is Morris's summing-up of the significance of the life illustrated in the first part of the saga, his interpretation of the saga world:

> To what end was wrought that roof-ridge, and the rings of the silver door,
> And the fair-carved golden high-seat, and the many-pictured floor
> Worn down by the feet of the Volsungs? or the hangings of delight,
> Or the marvel of its harp-strings, or the Dwarf-wrought beakers bright?
> Then the Gods have fashioned a folk who have fashioned a house in vain:
> It is nought, for nought they battled, and nought was their joy and pain...

But just as a mighty forest oak is cut down by the axe and destroyed, and then becomes a ship to sail over the sea — the significance being that Hjordis has crossed the sea with the unborn Sigurd, destined to restore the name of the Volsungs — so the Volsung dwelling is destined for "a fame that groweth not old":

> Lo, such is the Volsung dwelling; lo, such is the deed he hath wrought
> Who laboured all his life-days, and had rest but little or nought,
> Who died in the broken battle; who lies with swordless hand
> In the realm that the foe hath conquered on the edge of a stranger-land.
>
> (p.58)

Thus Morris expresses the lonely end of Sigmund and the apparent fall of the house of the Volsungs.

Morris designates Book II of his poem with the name of Sigurd's teacher, Regin, and thus stresses the importance of this character from mythology, the cunning smith who teaches Sigurd so much of what he needs before he can become a hero. In the saga, Hreidmarr teaches Sigurd skills, chess and runes and to speak many languages. It is Regin who tries to wake in Sigurd the desire for Hreidmarr's treasure and who taunts him with his servitude to Hjalprekr. On Regin's suggestion he asks the king for a horse, which he is sent to choose. After he meets in the wood an old man with a long beard, the horses are driven into a deep river and Sigurd chooses the only horse which swims against the stream. We are told that Odin himself has sought out Sigurd (ch. 13, p. 41). Regin once again taunts Sigurd and now tells him the story of Fafnir on Gnitaheidr and the tale of the treasure.

Morris on the whole follows this version. He does, however, stress the nature of this land "of the Helper" and the nature of Sigurd's education. This is a peaceful land — unlike the proud, power-seeking kingdoms we meet with later, of Gunnar and of Atli. It is protected by its isolation, and also by strange guardians who ward over it.

In the saga, we are introduced suddenly to Gripir, the brother of Sigurd's mother Hjordis, after Sigurd has killed the dragon. But Morris makes much more of this figure of Gripir and his prophecy, and in order to do this he introduces him at the beginning of the Book, makes him an uncle of the king and a king himself, of the kindred of the giants, owner of the herd from which Sigurd chooses his horse. This is only one example of how Morris tries to rationalise inconsequential incidents or characters in the saga and tie up loose ends, with the purpose of achieving greater artistic unity.

One of the reasons for this amplifying of Gripir is to add contrast to Regin. Gripir is of giant kin, "of the folk that are seen no more; Though whiles as ye ride some fell-road across the heath there comes The voice of their lone lamenting o'er their changed and conquered homes." He has the power of prophecy and no doubt as the representative of the giants he figures here as the enemy of Regin who is of the dwarf kin. Morris sets his characterisation of Regin immediately after that of Gripir: "Again, in the house of the Helper, there dwelt a certain man, Beardless and low of stature, of visage pinched and wan." He is so old that none knows when he came to the land, but he had fostered all the kings and knew all kinds of cunning except the use of the sword: he is a harper, a smith, has knowledge of the weather, of sailing and of healing. Morris' method of introducing these two characters at the beginning of the book and then abruptly passing on to Hjordis and the birth of Sigurd is an imitation of the saga inconsequence of incident, but used of course deliberately to create the saga-like atmosphere of naive artlessness. None of the incidents used by Morris are really inconsequential, but belong to the artistic fabric of the poem.

Morris shows us the human feeling of Hjordis at the birth of Sigurd, and the incident is designed to underline the destiny of Sigurd and his future as a folk-hero, "the hope of the people". By stressing the peacefulness of his upbringing Morris stresses also the contrast with his future fate. This is an interlude of peace in the turmoil of the tale. In Morris, Regin asks the king to let him foster Sigurd. The king permits him, but begs him to "withold his guile" from Sigurd. But Regin laughs, and foretells that Sigurd will be cleverer than he is himself, and foresees his own doom at the hands of a beardless youth. Regin tries to persuade Sigurd that the land is "nought and narrow, and Kings of the carles are these, And their earls are acre-biders, and their hearts are dull with peace," but Sigurd is angry at Regin's words of those who have cherished him. In the saga, Regin begins by telling Sigurd about the treasure, but in accordance with Morris's conception of Sigurd's character Regin here seeks to fire his ambition and love of adventure by telling him tales of kings.

Morris makes a very impressive story of the choosing of the horse. Sigurd must first visit Gripir, who dwells "on a crag from the mountain reft." He is a fairy-tale character:

> Amidst was Gripir set
> In a chair of the sea-beast's tooth; and his sweeping beard nigh met
> The floor that was green as the ocean, and his gown was of mountain gold,
> And the kingly staff in his hand was knobbed with the crystal cold.
> (p.70)

The meeting of Odin, the driving of the horses into the river, are vividly described, and Odin, when he addresses Sigurd, uses one of the main motifs of the poem, speaking of his fathers, who have attained glory,

> Nor prayed for a little longer, and a little longer to live.

He disappears impressively, striding towards the mountains:

> But dim did his bright shape grow,
> As a man from the litten doorway fades into the dusk of night;
> And the sun in the high-noon shone, and the world was exceeding bright.
> (p.72)

Morris obviously cannot use the saga name Grani for the horse of Sigurd, as it would have absurd connotations in English, so he calls him Greyfell.

Regin again tries to taunt Sigurd with his dependence on the Helper. Regin, the Master of Sleight, knows how to work on Sigurd's generous feelings, and tells him that the deed he must do is "the righting of wrong, And the quelling a bale and a sorrow that the world hath endured o'er long." Winning the

treasure is a secondary consideration. Sigurd however is suspicious of Regin's relationship to this treasure "that thou seemest to give as thine own." It is now that Regin tells him the story of the treasure.

In retelling the tale of the treasure of the dwarfs, Morris seeks to give it a general application to the development of society. Regin describes how the Gods, the Asa, came on earth and obliged the dwarfs to do their will: "In the womb of the woeful earth had they quickened the grief and the gold." The three sons of Reidmar represent the three types of action which produces the world as we know it — Fafnir, with "the brow of hardened iron", "the greedy heart of a king, and the ear that hears no wail", Otter with "the longing to wend through the wild-wood" and "the foot that never resteth, while aught be left alive That hath cunning to match man's cunning or might with his might to strive", and Regin, whose "gift for the slaying of ease" is

> ... the grief that remembers the past, and the fear that the future sees;
> And the hammer and fashioning-iron, and the living coal of fire;
> And the craft that createth a semblance, and fails of the heart's desire;
> And the toil that each dawning quickens and the task that is never done;
> And the heart that longeth ever, nor will look to the deed that is won,
>
> (p.75-6)

— all three types which in Morris's own day were still obviously in the service of the "gold of the dwarfs", the administrator, the explorer, the scientist.*

Morris is not at pains in Sigurd to explain the significance of Odin. The Gods play their conventional part, according to the Scandinavian mythological tradition, and Morris on the whole leaves Odin as the rather shadowy figure who occasionally intervenes in the tale. He is the God of the kindred, and his sorrow is the "sorrow of Odin the Goth". But the role of the dwarfs, as the protagonists of change in the world, of the new and evil society which must come into being for the fulfilment of the world's destiny, is given full value. It must be emphasised that the spirit in which Morris makes these identifications is a materialist one, that he seeks continually behind the myth for the logical relation to the real world, not only of history, but of human life in general. For this conception, the idea of the evil of the gold is paramount: from it springs the evil which engulfs Sigurd and the rest in tragedy. Thus the moment of entry of this theme is outstandingly impressive:

> There is a desert of dread in the uttermost part of the world,
> Where over a wall of mountains is a mighty water hurled,
> Whose hidden head none knoweth, nor where it meeteth the sea ...

*) For the identification of the treasure of the dwarfs with Capital, cf. Shaw's essay on The Ring, *The Perfect Wagnerite*, London, 1898.

It is there beneath the waterfall that Loki seeks the treasure and hears the baleful prophecy of Andvari:

> How that gold was the seed of gold to the wise and the shapers of things,
> The hoarders of hidden treasure, and the unseen glory of rings;
> But the seed of woe to the world and the foolish wasters of men,
> And grief to the generations that die and spring again.
>
> (p.83)

Morris's conception of Regin is a subtle one. He represents the uneasy and restless talent of the man who invents and makes. This is best illustrated in the passage where Regin tells what happened to him when he fled from Fafnir and came to the land of the Helper:

> ... I taught them to reap and to sow,
> And a famous man I became: but that generation died,
> And they said that Frey had taught them, and a God my name did hide.
> Then I taught them the craft of metals, and the sailing of the sea,
> And the taming of the horse-kind, and the yoke-beasts' husbandry,
> And the building up of houses; and that race of men went by,
> And they said that Thor had taught them; and a smithying carle was I.
> Then I gave their maidens the needle and I bade them hold the rock,
> And the shuttle-race gaped for them as they sat at the weaving-stock.
> But by then these were waxen crones to sit dim-eyed by the door,
> It was Freyia had come among them to teach the weaving-lore.
> Then I taught them the tales of old, and fair songs fashioned and true,
> And their speech grew into music of measured time and due,
> And they smote the harp to my bidding, and the land grew soft and sweet:
> But ere the grass of their grave-mounds rose up above my feet
> It was Bragi had made them sweet-mouthed, and I was the wandering scald,
> Yet green did my cunning flourish by whatso name I was called ...
>
> (p.87)

We can see here very clearly illustrated Morris's essential identification of art with work-processes, his materialistic explanation of the development of the arts, skills and religion. Yet his sympathy for Regin, the maker, is limited by his recognition of the part too often played in history by the maker who longs for power and wealth, as Regin longs for the power and wealth of Fafnir, which he dares not take for himself. It is this longing for power which brings Regin to educate Sigurd as the instrument of his greed, although he knows that in carrying out his will, Sigurd will become the slayer of his teacher, Regin.

In this part of the poem Morris deliberately concentrates attention on Sigurd's fate as the wager of the fight against Fafnir. Whereas in the saga, before Sigurd carries out the will of Regin and slays Fafnir, he first of all

'avenges his father Sigmund on the Hundings who killed him, this incident is omitted by Morris. He is not interested simply in chronicling incident after incident, fight after fight. He wants to convey to us his conception of Sigurd, not as the protagonist of a family blood-feud, the warrior of ambitious pre-feudal expansionism, but as the "golden Sigurd", the folk hero who smites on the door of Destruction and wakens the warder of Death. Thus Morris fills in the outlines given by the saga of the forging of his sword by Regin, his speech with his mother when she gives him the shattered shards of Sigmund's sword, and the prophesying of Gripir. Sigurd is likened to Balder the Beautiful; but he also has the qualities of the folk-heroes in Morris's late prose romances — above all he is without guile, direct in speech and action, and happy:

> And the light of life smote Sigurd, and the joy that knows no rest,
> And the fond unnamed desire, and the hope of hidden things.
>
> (p.95)

Thus Morris expands the mere hints of the saga: "The older Sigurd was, the more he pleased everybody, so that every child loved him warmly" (ch.15, p. 44).

The lofty strain of the poem is largely achieved by such devices as the prophesying of Gripir:

> Cry out, O waste, before him! O rocks of the wilderness, cry!
> For tomorn shalt thou see the glory, and the man not made to die!
> Cry out, O upper heavens! O clouds beneath the lift!
> For the golden King shall be riding high-headed midst the drift:
> The mountain waits and the fire; there waiteth the heart of the wise
> Till the earthly toil is accomplished, and again shall the fire arise;
> And none shall be nigh in the ending and none by his heart shall be laid,
> Save the world that cherished and quickened and the Day that he wakened and made.
>
> (p.100)

After the prophesying of Gripir, Regin and Sigurd ride out to the Glittering Heath. Regin becomes more and more fearful, while Sigurd glows and gleams more gloriously. Regin tries half-heartedly to cling to his life and give up the dangerous exploit of killing Fafnir, but Sigurd laughs at him:

> Shall the day go past and leave us, and we be left with night,
> To tread the endless circle, and strive in vain to smite?
>
> (p.104)

Whatever is the purpose of Regin, Sigurd for his part will devote his life to the service of mankind:

Let each do after his kind! I shall do the deeds of men . . .
To them shall I give my life-days . . .

(p.106)

Morris now evokes a grim scene of desolation in the mountains, certainly based on his Icelandic travels.

Then they rode a mighty desert, a glimmering place and wide,
And into a narrow pass high-walled on either side
By the empty night of the shadow; a windless silent place . . .
But the white moon shone o'erhead mid the small sharp stars and pale,
And each as a man alone they rode on the highway of bale.

(p.107)

The killing of Fafnir is preceded by an exchange between the two, which like the talk between Gripir and Sigurd provides something of the atmosphere given at various critical moments of the saga by the Eddic songs:

And strong words of ancient wisdom went by on the desert wind,
And words that mar and fashion, the words that loose and bind;
And sounds of a strange lamenting, and such strange things bewailed,
That words to tell their meaning the tongue of man hath failed —

(p.112)

lines which might well describe the obscure boding of the Edda.

The rather grotesque incidents of the roasting of Fafnir's heart and the speech of the birds — so familiar from numerous fairy- and folk-tales — are given great dignity of treatment by Morris, and we see the rising of Sigurd's wrath, "For he felt besed of evil in a world of many foes", while the twittering of the birds in the saga, which warns Sigurd of Regin's treachery and foretells the meeting with Brynhild, is changed by Morris to the triumphant song of eagles:

Bind the red rings, O Sigurd! for thy tale is well begun,
And the world shall be good and gladdened by the Gold lit up by the sun . . .

(p.119)

The incident of Grani's refusing to move with the treasure until Sigurd mounts him, which in the saga sounds rather flat and unnecessary, is treated more forcefully by Morris and adds to the vividness of the tale, while bringing Sigurd well on his way to Brynhild:

Then Sigurd pondered a while, till the heart of the beast he knew,
And clad in all his war-gear he leaped to the saddle-stead,
And with pride and mirth neighed Greyfell and tossed aloft his head,
And sprang unspurred o'er the waste, and light and swift he went,
And breasted the broken rampart, the stony tumbled bent;

And over the brow he clomb, and there beyond was the world,
A place of many mountains and great crags together hurled.

(p.119)

Morris's friends and family attempted at various times to arouse interest and enthusiasm in him for the Ring cycle of Wagner, but quite without success. He could not tolerate the artificialities of 19th-century grand opera. May Morris tells how he raged at the "mechanical realism" of Wagner's operatic productions, how he stormed "at the representation of the great scene of the Awakening [of Brünhilde] on the Mountain, where the most enthusiastic of his musical friends could not hide the inadequacy of that difficult moment when the tenor, laying his hand on the breast of the stalwart Brünhilde (reclining decently composed in her unimaginative 'princess-robe' of golden mail), warbles, with all the surprise he can manage to force into his voice, 'Das ist kein Mann!'"[139]

In view of Morris's objection to the operatic-heroic, it is interesting to see how he dealt with this climax, the meeting of Sigurd and Brynhild. Keeping close to the development of the saga at this point, he stresses the inevitability of this love. He also stresses the tenderness of Sigurd's feeling for Brynhild, and the identity of their thought. Brynhild warns Sigurd not to seek to know the future, but to "Cherish thine hope in the freshness of days, And scatter its seed from thine hand in the field of the people's praise." As in the cryptic Eddic verses quoted in the saga, Brynhild "told of the hidden matters whereby the world is moved."

In the saga, the incident ends with the exchange of vows. But Morris shows us the growth of love between Sigurd and Brynhild and ends this second book with a passage that recalls the idylls of *The Earthly Paradise*, remarkably introducing a lyric note into the heroic verse of the tale. Brynhild, having spoken prophetically of

...the fall of mighty houses, and the friend that falters and turns,
And the lurking blinded vengeance, and the wrong that amendeth wrong,
And the hand that repenteth its stroke, and the grief that endureth for long:
And how man shall bear and forbear, and be master of all that is;
And how man shall measure it all, the wrath, and the grief and the bliss,

(p.128)

then leads Sigurd up on the burg of Hindfell, so that they can look down on "the kingdom of the earth", on

The house and the ship and the island, the loom and the mine and the stall,
The beds of bane and healing, the crafts that slay and save,
The temple of God and the Doom-ring, the cradle and the grave,

(p.129)

and from thoughts of fate and the future she returns to memories of girlhood and "the little land of Lymdale by the swirling river's side" — and this phrase winds its way through the closing lines of the book almost like the refrain of a lyric, yet without disturbing the flow of the epic metre. This conclusion to the book provides contrast to the bleak scenes of the slaying of Fafnir, but it also makes us realise Brynhild as a human being, and the love of Sigurd and Brynhild as human love, while at the same time it prepares us for the transition in the Third and Fourth Books to the world of the Niblungs and of Lymdale, which Morris wants us to conceive as later in time than the bleaker, more primitive world of Sigmund and the early hall of the Volsungs. The softening, the mellowing of the heroic at the very end of the Second Book is deliberate. The mutual vows of Sigurd:

> If I seek not love in Lymdale and the house that fostered thee,
> And the land where thou awakedst 'twixt the woodland and the sea!

and of Brynhild:

> Ere I forget thee Sigurd, as I lie 'twixt wood and sea,
> In the little land of Lymdale and the house that fostered me! —
>
> (p.130)

calling up the atmosphere of the quiet land where Brynhild has lived, do not contradict the simplicity of the saga, but offer a warm human contrast to the severity of the first part of the poem.

Book III — *Brynhild* — in which the tragic climax of the tale is reached with the deaths of Brynhild and Sigurd, is twice as long as any of the others and like each of them forms a unity centred on a single theme. While Book I deals with the prehistory, as it were, the misty and awesome times of Sigmund and the early kindred, emphasising the sacrifice of the individual to the community, Book II has as its theme the sharply contrasted characters of Regin and Sigurd, and in it Regin clearly represents the ingenuity of mankind, and Sigurd the moral qualities of the hero who can see beyond himself and seeks action not only to satisfy his own ambition but also for some end which he sees as bound up with the fate of mankind. The theme of Book III is more concerned with the emotions of individuals, just as it has moved to a society in which the ambition of individuals comes to count more than the welfare of the folk.

The Book starts with a change of mood and a wider development of background — "And now of the Niblung people the tale beginneth to tell" — and

here Morris considerably amplifies the succint transition of the saga: "There was a king called Gjuki whose realm lay south of the Rhine... The might of the Gjukings was in full flower..." (ch.26, p.55). Morris tells us:

> How they deal with the wind and the weather; in the cloudy drift they dwell
> When the war is awake in the mountains, and they drive the desert spoil,
> And their weaponed hosts unwearied through the misty hollows toil;
> But again in the eager sunshine they scour across the plain...
> These come to the council of elders with sword and spear and shield,
> And shout to their war-dukes' dooming of their uttermost desire...
> And their days are young and glorious, and in hope exceeding great
> With sword and harp and beaker on the skirts of the Norns they wait.
>
> (p.131)

Whereas in Book I the stress was on the close kindred of the Volsungs, all gathered in their tribal hall, we are now in the period of the very early forming of states. The Giukings are a war-like expanding people, the king of the Niblungs is "noble". This is an early class society, with the surroundings of early feudalism. Gudrun is accompanied by damsels and attended by a nurse, and the "kin" no longer means the whole folk, but the much narrower group of rulers. The spirit of this kingdom is represented by Grimhild, "the woman overwise", whose ambition knows no bounds and is the cause of the subsequent tragedy. As if to stress the courtly nature of the background, the action begins with Gudrun's conversation with her nurse in the garden, and her account of her dreams. In this and the subsequent visit to Brynhild for the reading of the dream, Morris follows but amplifies the saga. Where, however, the saga at the opening of this section rather clumsily and irrelevantly mentions Budli, father of Brynhild and Atli, and gives a short characterisation of Atli's cruelty, Morris reserves mention of Atli for the appropriate moment later.

The sisterly and gentle meeting of Brynhild and Gudrun, follows the account of the saga, but with more dramatic emphasis. The slight hints given in the saga of the manner of the journey and the splendid surroundings of Brynhild are depicted in concrete detail by Morris, and this is no mere upholstery, for he uses motifs such as the Midworld Serpent and others which appear again and again at the various crises of the poem.

Brynhild and Gudrun, in the midst of their talk of kings and heroes, fall silent, each occupied with her own thoughts, till at last Brynhild cannot refrain from speaking of Sigurd, who has "the hand of victory" and "the overcoming speech, And the heart and the eyes triumphant, and the lips that win and teach." Although both Gudrun and Brynhild have some foreboding of evil, Brynhild bids Gudrun speak of what lies on her heart. In the saga, the dramatic effect is lessened when Brynhild, in expounding the second dream of Gudrun, fore-

tells the actual course of events, including her own betrayal and the giving of the magic drink to Sigurd by Grimhild. Morris is certainly dramatically right in limiting Brynhild's prophecy to a foretelling of disaster in general terms:

> Is it strange, O child of the Niblungs, that thy glory and thy pain
> Must be blent with the battle's darkness and the unseen hurrying bane?
>
> (p.138)

The two queens gaze on each other with the premonition of the future events which will bind them together. The journey home through the dusk, the moonlight and the dark is another of Morris's unforgettable pictures which seize upon the impinging of emotion and landscape, as the warders of the Niblung gate look out

> And saw the gold pale-gleaming, and heard the wain-wheels crush
> The weary dust of the summer amidst the midnight hush.
>
> (p.139)

The coming of Sigurd to Lymdale and his finding of Brynhild in her hall evokes the atmosphere of the summer forest — the "odorous dusk of the pine-wood", which for the people of Lymdale is "their barn and their store-house, and their bower and feasting-hall."

Morris transposes the incident of Gudrun's visit to Brynhild, placing it before Brynhild's second meeting with Sigurd. In this way, he attains a more effective and dramatic sequence of events, besides introducing us to the Giukings and their warlike way of life before he returns to Lymdale and the peaceful life of Heimir's kingdom. He also gives the meeting of Sigurd and Brynhild a more dramatic course by omitting the preceding conversation between Sigurd and Alsvid, where he speaks of seeking out Brynhild, giving her gold as a gift, and winning her love. In Morris, the love of Sigurd and Brynhild is instant and mutual. Brynhild is sitting alone, when Sigurd comes upon her, and Morris amplifies in detail the saga hint that Brynhild was embroidering on a golden carpet the heroic deeds of Sigurd, by describing this embroidery, which tells the whole history of the Volsungs. Whereas in the saga, Brynhild on this occasion too continues to warn Sigurd that their love will come to naught, that she is a warrior maiden who will not wed, and that he will marry Gudrun, Morris omits these prophecies, because he wants to stress the mutual and powerful love of Sigurd and Brynhild. Once more Brynhild swears that

> The sun shall turn to blackness, and the last day be outworn,
> Ere I forget thee, Sigurd, and the kindness of thy face.
>
> (p.147)

The passage concludes with the two contemplating the days to come as they hope they may be:

> And they saw their crowned children and the kindred of the kings,
> And deeds in the world arising and the day of better things . . .
>
> (p.148)

Sigurd now rides off. The saga gives no reason for his leaving the court of Heimir, Morris says little of it, except to suggest that Sigurd leaves to fulfil his destiny as a hero: "The world lies fair before him and the field of the people's praise." He leaves the peaceful land of Lymdale and riding west towards the great mountains, comes to the burg of the Niblungs. The might of the Niblungs is characterised by the description of their stronghold:

> For as waves on the iron river of the days whereof nothing is told
> Stood up the many towers, so stark and sharp and cold; . . .
>
> (p.152)

Sigurd when he is greeted by Giuki, tells us something of his purpose in life:

> For peace I bear unto thee, and to all the kings of the earth,
> Who bear the sword aright, and are crowned with the crown of worth;
> But unpeace to the lords of evil, and the battle and the death;
> And the edge of the sword to the traitor, and the flame to the slanderous breath:
> And I would that the loving were loved, and I would that the weary should sleep,
> And that man should hearken to man, and that he that soweth should reap.
>
> (p.154-5)

The meeting of Sigurd and the Niblungs ends with a feast which seems to foretell still greater triumph and fame for the Niblungs.

Among the most impressive of Morris's passages is that describing the winter campaign of the Niblungs, which he gives in a series of vivid pictures showing the early-morning departure from the burg, and the journey through the mountains to attack the cities beyond. Yet interwoven with the sharp pictures is a constant commentary which assesses the moral value of all that happens. This alternation or rather weaving together of vivid event or scene and trenchant commentary is the characteristic approach of Morris in Sigurd, rendered possible by his tacit assumption that the speaker of the poem is seeing events from the standpoint of a folk-bard:

> And they sing of the golden Sigurd and the face without a foe,
> And the lowly man exalted and the mighty brought alow:

And they say, when the sun of summer shall come aback to the land,
It shall shine on the fields of the tiller that fears no heavy hand;
That the sheaf shall be for the plougher, and the loaf for him that sowed,
Through every furrowed acre where the Son of Sigmund rode.

(p.158)

The extended treatment of the warfare of the Niblungs not only adds depth and a spatial sweep to the tale, but also gives Morris the opportunity of suggesting vividly to us the quality of this heroic life, as well as the peace and prosperity which Sigurd has brought to the land:

Yea, they sing the song of Sigurd and the face without a foe,
And they sing of the prison's rending and the tyrant laid alow...
And they tell how the ships of the merchants come free and go at their will,
And how wives in peace and safety may crop the vine-clad hill;
How the maiden sits in her bower, and the weaver sings at his loom,
And forget the kings of grasping and the greedy days of gloom;
For by sea and hill and township hath the Son of Sigmund been,
And looked on the folk unheeded, and the lowly people seen.

(p.161)

As a constant background to this idyllic picture of the magnanimous deeds of Sigurd, there grows the sorrow and longing of Gudrun, who loves him in secret. At the climax of this happiness and prosperity, when Sigurd is sitting in the hall and sings to the harp of the deeds of old and of his forebears, while "his song and his fond desire go up to the cloudy roof, And blend with the eagles' shrilling in the windy night aloof", Grimhild brings him the poisoned cup:

Therein with the blood of the earth
Earth's hidden might was mingled, and deeds of the cold sea's birth,
And things that the high Gods turn from, and a tangle of strange love,
Deep guile, and strong compelling, that whoso drank thereof
Should remember not his longing, should cast his love away,
Remembering dead desire but as night remembereth day.

(p.166)

As Sigurd drinks "the soul was changed in him" and those who watch see his sorrow and their hearts sink. But Grimhild rejoices, for she sees that "her will had abased the valiant, and filled the faithful with lies." This passage especially allows us to see how wrongheaded is the belief that Morris spoilt the simplicity of the saga, that he produced something less artistic. The saga treats this moment in a matter-of-fact way which does little to arouse our feeling or sympathy; but Morris gives the whole incident psychological depth and makes it something very different from a mere tale of magic. Sigurd does not merely forget Brynhild, but this forgetting leaves him with the sense of loss and con-

fusion which is felt also by the spectators, who are filled with apprehension. Uncomprehendingly Sigurd rides out into the night, rides round the burg of Brynhild, and then returns again to the home of the Niblungs, which at first he does not recognise. It is only when he sees the trouble and fear of the people that "the pride in his soul" forces him to thrust aside his care and "tangled thought" and "cast his care on the morrow, that the people might be glad." It is in the midst of his own uncomprehending sorrow that he sees and recognises the sorrow and longing of Gudrun and

> ...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.
>
> (p.172)

And as he speaks to her,

> He seeth the love in her eyen, and the life that is tangled in his,
> And the heart cries out within him, and man's hope of earthly bliss.
>
> (p.172)

This love between Sigurd and Gudrun is real, although for Sigurd it is not the perfect love he felt for Brynhild, but a compensatory love.

The marriage feast is celebrated and the love of Sigurd and Gudrun appears to be idylic — yet Sigurd is conscious more of pity for Gudrun, he is "kind" rather than passionate and Gudrun in the midst of her joy is afraid of she knows not what. Behind the ceremonial of the wedding and the swearing of allegiance to Sigurd there lurks some uncertainty, for Guttorm, the youngest son of Giuki who eventually slays Sigurd, is not present at the feast and so is bound by no oaths of loyalty. The whole atmosphere of the "builded Burg of the Niblungs" is heavy with ambition and power, and Sigurd vows to "bear forth the fame of the Niblungs through all that hindereth", to "work for the craving of Kings, and accomplish the will of the great". Sigurd, though he swears "to abide and hearken the prayer of any thrall", to "sit on my throne in the guise of the kings of the earth, Though the anguish past amending and the unheard woe have birth" (p.178) nevertheless is now less of the Volsung kin, of "the folk that the Gods had begotten the praise of all people to win" (p.56), since he has identified himself with the ambition of the Niblungs, the "war-fain, darkling kindred," (p.176) and has fallen victim to Grimhild's guile. Sigurd now becomes the blood-brother of the Niblungs and one of their rulers. He is known as the most just of the rulers, "To every man he hearkeneth, nor gainsayeth any grace, And glad is the poor in the Doom-ring when he seeth his face mid the Kings," (p.182) but he is sad, speaks little, and seldom sings.

After the death of Giuki, Grimhild persuades Gunnar to seek out Brynhild as his wife. He sets out in the company of Sigurd and Hogni. Morris omits the visits to Budli and to Heimar, and the three, still as it were under the force of Grimhild's enchantment, ride straight to the burg of Brynhild. Throughout all these events Sigurd is as it were a man forbid, he senses some evil compulsion but does not know what it is and complies with everything as if it must be. When the spell works and he changes shape with Gunnar in order to gain Brynhild for him, the effect is also psychological: "The thought was frozen within him, and the might of spoken words." (p.189) Though Sigurd now shares as it were Gunnar's thoughts, yet when he rides through the fire and comes face to face with Brynhild, he recognises her anguish when she sees not Sigurd, but apparently Gunnar before her:

> The speech of her lips pierced through him like the point of the bitter sword,
> And he deemed that death were better than another spoken word.
>
> (p.190)

Yet he is unable to answer otherwise than as Gunnar.

The bridal night is described in terms of intense sorrow, and in the morning Sigurd returns "As a conquered king from his city fares forth to meet his foes", and instead of riding, leads his horse "afoot through the cold slaked ashes of yester-eve", and at first fails to recognise Hogni and Gunnar. The two change back into their own shapes and return. Gudrun sees the ring of Andvari on Sigurd's finger "the ring he has taken from Brynhild, and he gives it to her. This is the ring from which there

> . . . sprang a flame of bitter trouble, and the death of many a man,
> And the quenching of the kindreds, and the blood of the broken troth,
> And the Grievous Need of the Niblungs, and the Sorrow of Odin the Goth.
>
> (p.196)

The description of the wedding of Gunnar and Brynhild passes swiftly from the idyllic peacefulness and hopefulness of Brynhild's arrival and her greeting by the people, to the tense moment when she comes face to face with Sigurd and recognises him amidst the strangers, while Sigurd is suddenly freed of the spell:

> His face is exceeding glorious and awful to behold;
> For of all his sorrow he knoweth and his hope smit dead and cold . . .
> He knows of the net of the days, and the deeds that the Gods have bid,
> And no whit of the sorrow that shall be from his wakened soul is hid:
> And his glory his heart restraineth, and restraineth the hand of the strong
> From the hope of the fools of desire and the wrong that amendeth wrong . . .
>
> (p.201)

Brynhild will not give way to her sorrow, but greets Sigurd and wishes him well: "All grief, sharp scorn, sore longing, stark death in her voice he knew." Sigurd foresees the future in which they will live alongside each other and betray their sorrow to none:

> And Sigurd sat with the Niblungs, and gave ear to most and to least,
> And showed no sign to the people of the grief that on him lay.
>
> (p.202)

The further theme of Book III is thus the tragic passion of these two who are bound by duty to love others.

Morris now shows how Brynhild endeavours to ward off "the barren stark contention", and humbles herself before Gudrun, while Gudrun comes to scorn everyone except Sigurd. Her jealousy of Gunnar, who is credited with Sigurd's deed in winning Brynhild, grows. The cruelty and ambition of the Niblungs increases, there is "measureless pride" in Hogni, and "a stern heart, stubborn and cold", while the bloom of Gunnar's youth is over and he is burdened with troubles and with secret shame at the deception practised on Brynhild. Grimhild continues to fire his ambition with talk of "the measureless gold", and of "king's supplanters", trying to persuade him that Sigurd is planning treachery.

Sigurd meanwhile sees and understands all that is going on, the sorrow of Brynhild and the growing hatred of Gudrun towards her, and begins to see that "from the heart of a loving woman shall the death of men arise." Yet during this time of difficulty Sigurd carries out his duty:

> It was most in these latter days that his fame went far abroad,
> The helper, the overcomer, the righteous sundering sword . . .
> The eye-bright seer of all things, that wasteth every wrong,
> The straightener of the crooked, the hammer of the strong:
> Lo, such was the Son of Sigmund in the days whereof I tell,
> The dread of the doom and the battle; and all children loved him well.
>
> (p.205)

In his telling of the quarrel of the two queens, Brynhild's revenge, and the death of Sigurd and Brynhild, Morris follows closely the general outline of the saga, but heightens the feeling of unavoidable fate and makes clearer the attitudes and motives of the characters which in the saga, from the point of view of the modern reader at least, are at times left in ambiguity. He endeavours to show us how the actions, especially of Brynhild and Gudrun, spring in the first place from their love rather than from hatred, jealousy or ambition. It is when she catches sight of Gudrun, preparing to bathe in the river with "her face yet dreamy with the love of yesternight" that Brynhild grows white with anguish. While in the saga it is Brynhild who first taunts Gudrun that Sigurd had been

the slave of Hjalprak, in Morris it is Gudrun who first provokes the quarrel, casting up to her that Sigurd, the best of the world, is hers, while Brynhild lies with Gunnar. And when Gudrun shows the ring as proof, Brynhild departs in agony. Later Gudrun tries in vain to humble herself before Brynhild, but Brynhild curses the kin of the Niblungs, although greater than her hatred of the Niblungs is her longing for Sigurd:

> O Sigurd, O my Sigurd, what now shall give me back
> One word of the loving-kindness from the tangle and the wrack?
> ...O nameless, measureless woe,
> To abide on the earth without him, and alone from earth to go.
> (p.213)

Morris now shows us the different reactions of the characters to this crisis. Brynhild is lost in her sorrow, Gudrun is full of fear and apprehension as she moves from one to the other of her brothers and Sigurd and finds each clad in his armour and waiting for what will happen. Gunnar is full of the suspicion, planted in his mind by Grimhild, that Brynhild and Sigurd are plotting against him, only Sigurd welcomes the fact that all the lies have been uncovered. In spite of is grief, he carries out as usual the duty in the Doom-ring "for the sifting of troublous things."

The treatment of Gunnar's psychological development is also subtle, for Morris wants to show how Gunnar is brought to agree to Sigurd's death in spite of their oaths of loyalty and brotherhood. The seeds of distrust planted by Grimhild bear fruit when he speaks to the silent, grief-stricken Brynhild, and his ambition adds to his anger:

> The words of his mother he gathered and the wrath-flood over him rolled,
> And with it came many a longing, that his heart had never told,
> Nay, scarce to himself in the night-time, for the gain of the ruddy rings,
> And the fame of the earth unquestioned and the mastery over kings,
> And he sole King in the world-throne, unequalled, unconstrained.
> (p.216)

He accuses Brynhild of longing for Sigurd, "the foe, the King's supplanter." He imagines too that Brynhild and Sigurd have actually been lovers. On this point Morris follows the saga in remaining somewhat ambiguous.*

Of all the kings of the Niblungs, at this time only Sigurd carries out his duties. Gunnar and Hogni are alone with their dark thoughts, but Sigurd sits

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*) According to the end of the saga, Aslaug was the daughter of Sigurd and Brynhild, left with Heimar for fostering. Morris told her story in *The Earthly Paradise*.

Alone of the Kings in the Doom-ring, and the council of the wise,
By the street and the wharf and the burg-gate he shines in the people's eyes;
Stately and lovely to look on he heareth of good and of ill,
And he knitteth up and divideth, with life and death at his will.

(p.217)

Gudrun now longs to prevent the evil which is about to fall on the house of the Niblungs and on Sigurd, and she seeks out her brothers in turn to send them to Brynhild and entreat her. Gunnar sits alone, with his sword across his knee, not knowing how to act, "Fast bound in the wiles of women, and the web that a traitor hath spun". Hogni, too, she finds armed and waiting, and he bids her also to wait. She finds Sigurd sitting apart, armed, and he remains sitting alone through the day, the evening and the night, while above the tense figures in the Burg of the Niblungs the dark fades and the dawn appears.

Sigurd now comes to Brynhild and tries to persuade her that she should live for the sake of mankind, but she refuses to go on living "the death in life", "That we twain should be dwelling, the strangers, in the house of the Niblung pride." She can live no longer, for "My heart is the forge of sorrow, and my life is a wasting dearth." As in the saga, Sigurd says he will put away Gudrun, and wed Brynhild, but she replies simply:

I will not wed thee, Sigurd, nor any man alive,

(p.224)

a line in which the metre is reduced to its smallest number of syllables and which thus stands out strongly in the midst of the fuller, more crowded lines which are typical of the poem.

While Morris follows the outline of the saga, he stresses the horror and compulsion felt by the actors in the tragedy. Whereas in the saga it is Gunnar who thinks of using the youngest brother, Guttorm, to murder Sigurd, as he has not taken the oath of brotherhood, Morris makes the initiator of this again Grimhild, thus absolving Gunnar from at least the cunning and calculation of treachery. Morris is concerned to preserve our sympathy for the main actors in the drama.

He is also concerned to heighten the atmosphere of tension and horror:

... the torches flare from the wall
And the woven God-folk waver, but the hush is deep in the hall,
And those Niblung faces change not, though the slow moon slips from her height
And earth is acold ere dawning, and new winds shake the night.

(p.228)

As in the saga, twice Guttorm comes to Sigurd, and is held back by his wide-open eyes. Before the third attempt, Morris still increases the tension by bringing Brynhild into the hall:

Now dieth moon and candle, and though the day be nigh
The roof of the hall fair-builded seems far aloof as the sky,
But a glimmer grows on the pavement, and the ernes on the roof ridge stir:
Then the brethren hist and hearken, for a sound of feet they hear...

(p.229)

Guttorm now slays Sigurd, and is himself slain. In the saga, Sigurd's last words refer to the revenge his son would take if he were old enough. Morris not only omits all mention of this child of Sigurd and Gudrun (as we have noted already, he also omits mention, in this poem, of Aslaug), but allows Sigurd no thoughts of revenge, and no regrets at having fulfilled his fate:

I have done and I may not undo, I have given and take not again.

(p.230)

The house is now plunged in mourning, blended with fear:

And many there were of the Earl-folk that wept for Sigurd's sake,
And they wept for their little children, and they wept for those unborn,
Who should know the earth without him and the world of his worth forlorn...

(p.232)

The happiness of the Niblungs is destroyed, as they have destroyed Sigurd:

For he, the redeemer, the helper, the crown of all their worth,
They looked upon him and wondered, they loved, and they thrust him forth.

(p.232)

We may sum up Morris's treatment of this passage by pointing out that he stresses, as the saga does not, Sigurd's role as the hero of the folk, the just ruler, the popular hero. He uses in his own way all the most effective moments of the saga, e.g. the words of Brynhild, "I will not wed thee, Sigurd, nor any man alive", and of Gudrun: "For my kin hath slain my lord". But he adds depth and sympathy for the protagonists. He also omits irrelevancies and incomplete or obscure references in the saga, for example the obscure mention of Atli in Brynhild's conversation with Gunnar immediately after the murder. Morris above all wishes to give equal importance to the grief of Brynhild and of Gudrun, and yet to distinguish the quality of this grief. He does this by keeping Brynhild completely silent after the death of Sigurd until after Gudrun has expressed all her grief, and shows us an impressive moment when the two women, both sorrowing for Sigurd, meet together in the hall:

...and the eyes of the women met,
And they stood in the hall together, as they stood that while ago,
When they twain in Brynhild's dwelling of days to come would know;

But every soul kept silence, and all hearts were chilled to stone
As Brynhild spake.

(p.236)

And Morris makes this the moment when Gudrun flees from home and wanders in the forest, "And the wolves are about and around her, and death seems better than life."

The reason for this change in the course of events is obviously so that the poet can concentrate on the death and dying prophecies of Brynhild, and here again Morris shows that dramatic power with which he can unfold a story and transpose events so as to gain the greatest effect. Gudrun flees into the forest, and Brynhild remains almost alone and silent in the hall, beside "the evil deed of the Niblungs and the corner-stone of woe." Not until the funeral pyre is prepared for Sigurd does Brynhild speak her prophecies, and they are not precise, as in the saga, but full of confused foreboding. Morris retains very closely the underlying sense of the saga, which in the original is at times overlaid with obscurities. He reports faithfully that Gunnar, unable to bear the thought of losing Brynhild, begs Hogni to remonstrate with her against killing herself, and Hogni refuses, since "She came to dwell among us, but in us she had no part".

Brynhild now kills herself, and her last words are:

Now at last, O my beloved, all is gone; none else is near,
Through the ages of all ages, never sundered, shall we wear.

(p.242)

In place of the saga's detailed description of the funeral, the slaying of the slaves or servants and of Sigurd's young son, and of Brynhild's mounting on the pyre — all of which may be much nearer the actual historical truth of a similar funeral than Morris's heightened effect — nevertheless Morris gives instead of it an incident not in the saga, which, however, brings the situation and its implications vividly before us:

Then cometh an elder of days, a man of the ancient times,
Who is long past sorrow and joy, and the steep of the bale he climbs;
And he kneeleth down by Sigurd, and bareth the Wrath to the sun...
Till the wondering mountain-shepherds on that start of noontide stare,
And fear for many an evil...
...then he sinks the pale white blade
And lays it 'twixt the sleepers, and leaves them there alone —
He, the last that shall ever behold them, — and his days are well nigh done.

(p.244)

"Thus ended their life", says the saga simply. (ch. 33, p. 66) We must however

remember that the simplicity or lack of elaboration of the saga is not purely the result of a selected artistic method, which to some modern taste appears preferable to any kind of elaboration; it was also rendered possible because the composers of the sagas were addressing an audience aware of the implications of the saga tales, aware of the characters of Sigurd and Brynhild and the rest and of what they stood for, knowing the mythology, and thus able to take much for granted. Morris writing for a later and uninformed audience, must interpret their significance for us in some way, even though he chooses a different method and indeed a different interpretation from that, say, of Wagner:

> They are gone — the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth:
> It shall labour and bear the burden as before that day 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 of Baldur, and the happy sealess shore.
>
> (p.244)

Morris endeavours to blend the attitudes and beliefs of the sagas with his own conception of history and his own belief in the destiny of mankind, which although it was not yet Marxist, was already approaching the position of historical materialism.

Book IV is entitled *Gudrun*. Both the original saga, and Morris's version, devote about one-fifth of the whole narrative to the fate of Gudrun and her brothers after the death of Sigurd and Brynhild. Yet we may say that Morris concentrates less on external events than does the saga, and more on the character and sorrow of Gudrun. She has fled from the home of the Niblungs and found refuge with the simple people of Thora. But when King Atli — specified by Morris not as the brother of Brynhild, as he is in the saga, but simply as "a King of the outlands", who "craved the utmost increase of all that kings desire" (p.245-6) — sends his Earl to the court of the Niblungs to ask for the hand of Gudrun, Grimhild reveals that she knows where Gudrun is, and the brothers and mother set out with a great train to bring her home. When she sees them, she is filled with hatred, though Gunnar is stirred when he hears his sister's voice, and he enters "glad and smiling". Gudrun however asks them bitterly if they bear her tidings of Sigurd, if he is risen from the dead.

> Dead-pale she stood before them, and no mouth answered again,
> And the summer morn grew heavy, and chill were the hearts of men,

> And Thora's people trembled: there the simple people first
> See the horror of the King-folk, and mighty lives accurst.
>
> (p.251)

She will listen neither to the words of Gunnar nor of Hogni, but drinks the cup offered by Grimhild, "wherein with the sea's dread mingled was the might and the blood of the land." She now agrees to go with them and they depart:

> Forth fare the Cloudy People, and the stony slopes they ride,
> And the sun is bright behind them o'er Queen Thora's lowly dale,
> Where the sound of their speech abideth as an ancient woeful tale.
>
> (p.253)

As elsewhere in the poem, Morris here stresses the contrast in the quality of life of different societies at different stages of development.

In the saga it would seem to be prudence and a feeling of fitness that at first prevent Gudrun from agreeing to the wedding with Atli, and her grief for Sigurd is expressed in a very restrained way (ch.34, p.68). Morris however stresses the undying nature of her hatred — even her former home, the Burg of the Niblungs, is now a place

> That hath no name for Gudrun, save the place where Sigurd fell,
> The strong abode of treason, the house where murderers dwell.
>
> (p.254)

In accordance with this conception, Morris omits the runic warning which in the saga Gudrun sends to her brothers, but, on the contrary, makes Gudrun the initiator of Atli's treacherous invitation.

Again the court and the kingdom of Atli offer a contrast to the life of the Niblung kingdom and to the earlier time of the Volsungs. Atli is "a King that knows not ruth":

> Great are his gains in the world, and few men may his might withstand,
> But he weigheth sore on his people and cumbers the hope of his land;
> He craves as the sea-flood craveth, he gripes as the dying hour.
>
> (p.255)

Gudrun despises her new surroundings, the "venom, and guile, and the knife." She persuades Atli that he should revenge her on her brethren, and that he should secure the Gold of Andvari. She can think of nothing but the moment of horror when she lay beside the murdered Sigurd. Atli sends a messenger to Gunnar and his brothers, who works on their feelings by describing the suffering and longing of Gudrun for her brethren, and tells Gunnar that Atli will

hand over his kingdom to the Niblungs. In the saga we are told that one excuse for Gunnar's foolish decision is that he was drunk. Morris changes this drunkenness into a kind of madness:

> With the joy of life were they drunken and no man knew for why,
> And the voice of their exultation rose up in an awful cry —
>
> (p.261)

a cry which, though it is a cry of mirth, sounds throughout the land like a wailing lament, and Gunnar in a kind of ironical prophecy repeats the earlier words of Brynhild, foretelling the desolation of the Niblung's hall, and they settle down to their last sleep there:

> They sleep; in the hall grown silent scarce glimmereth now the gold:
> For the moon from the world is departed, and grey clouds draw across,
> To hide the dawn's first promise and deepen earthly loss.
>
> (p.263)

The following passage is an interpolation of Morris's which actually fills a gap in the saga version and relates it to the *Niebelungenlied* version and to that in the Edda. He tells us how Hogni in the middle of the night sinks the fated treasure in a deep pool in the river.

> Down then and whirling outward the ruddy Gold fell forth,
> As a flame in the dim grey morning, flashed out a kingdom's worth, . . .
> Then the waters roared above it, the wan water and the foam
> Flew up o'er the face of the rock-wall as the tinkling Gold fell home,
> Unheard, unseen for ever, a wonder and a tale,
> Till the last of earthly singers from the sons of men shall fail.
>
> (p.264)

Morris uses effectively the incidents of the warning dreams of Kostbera and Glaumvor, and after the departure of the kings he adds a stately description of the death of Grimhild, as she foresees the destruction of the Niblungs and the end of all her plans. In the saga, the fate of Grimhild is ignored, as is the death of Giuki, which must be merely presumed when he ceases to be mentioned.

In telling of the journey to the land of Atli, Morris develops the saga incident of how the Niblungs do not tie up their ships, which drift away on the water:

> And who knoweth the story to tell,
> If their wrack came ever to shoreward in some place where fishers dwell,
> Or sank in midmost ocean, and lay on the sea-floor wan
> Where the pale sea-goddess singeth o'er the bane of many a man?
>
> (p.274)

Again he uses an incident to suggest fate, remoteness, death.

Morris increases the drama of the arrival at the court of Atli by a device which is not in the saga. The whole countryside is deserted, and the treacherous messenger explains that this is because Atli will have his threshold trod by no feet but those of the Niblungs. As in the saga, however, Hogni slays Atli's messenger for his treachery. The events in the saga are told in a somewhat confused manner, but Morris gives a very clear account. His conception of the character of Gudrun is more unified than that of the sagas. Jack Lindsay has suggested that Morris has blurred the clear contours of character given in the saga, especially in dealing with Gudrun.[140] We must however emphasise that it is in the saga that Gudrun's character is softened and her love for her kindred overcomes her desire for revenge. She warns her brothers in advance of Atli's treachery, and when they are finally attacked by Atli and his men, she herself puts on armour and fights on their side. (ch.38, p.72) In the saga, the revenge of Gudrun is taken only on Atli, not on her brethern, and Morris's Gudrun is actually more of "the shattering revenger" than is the Gudrun of the saga, though Lindsay claims that Morris conceives her in passive terms. But there is nothing passive about the depiction of Gudrun in this last Book. She remains inactive during the betrayal of her brothers, partly because she wishes for their destruction, as the destroyers of Sigurd, but also because she is plotting revenge against Atli. When the moment of revenge comes, she is resolute.

Lindsay has also claimed that Morris "in his inability to enter into the saga-world... smooths things out by emphasising the machinery of doom."[141] Precisely what Lindsay means by the "machinery of doom" is not clear; but what Morris of course emphasises is the suffering of the doomed and their inability to escape even by the exercise of the greatest heroism and fortitude: Gunnar playing on his harp, and seeing Gudrun as his sister long ago, "the little maiden of the face without a flaw", and Hogni, who feels "as a man unholpen in a waste land wending along." And Morris expresses the supreme suffering of Gunnar when Atli demands to know where the gold is hidden, and Gunnar at last replies, that the gold was won by Sigurd, his sworn brother, whom he had betrayed:

> The praise of the world he was, the hope of the biders in wrong,
> The help of the lowly people, the hammer of the strong...
> I slaughtered Sigurd my brother, and looked on the work of my hand,
> And now, O mighty Atli, I have seen the Niblungs' wreck.
>
> (p.291)

Morris remains true to his conception of Gudrun's character, for while in the saga it is she who brings Gunnar's harp to him when he is laid in the pit of the serpents, in Morris, it is the men of Atli. All this time Gudrun remains

passive — but this merely emphasises the violence and swiftness of her revenge on Atli.

The playing of Gunnar on his harp in the death pit was an idea that appealed strongly to Morris, and Gunnar's death-song actually sums up the themes of the whole poem. First of all, comes a summary of Norse mythology. But when the serpents sleep, "All save the Grey and Ancient" which is the "midworld's ancient curse" and which will kill Gunnar, the harper addresses mankind, "O Hearken Kindreds and Nations, and all Kings of the plenteous earth", and proclaims that he is ready for death. He calls on Odin, but finds no help in him,

> For cold the world hath grown,
> And cold is the heart within me, and my hand is heavy and strange;
> What voice is the voice I hearken in the chill and the dusk and the change?
> Where art thou, God of the war-fain? for this is the death indeed;
> And I unsworded, unshielded, in the Day of the Niblung's Need!
>
> (p.299)

The short last section of the poem deals with the end of Gudrun. Here Morris does not follow the saga, which tells of Gudrun's attempted suicide, and of how she was borne by the waves to another country where she became the wife of a king; the saga also tells of various later events, such as the death of Swanhild, daughter of Sigurd and Gudrun, and the pendant tale of Aslaug, which rightly belongs to another saga, is also sometimes added. But Morris correctly considered that these events would spoil the unity and tragedy of the tale, and leaves the ending of Gudrun in the sea as the conclusion of his epic.

There can scarcely be any doubt that Morris, whether or not he was unable "to enter into the saga-world" made a more splendid and logical tale of the ending of the Niblungs than we have in the saga. Atli and his people are uncertain as to how Gudrun will behave after the death of her brothers, but when she greets Atli lovingly, they commence a seven days' feasting and forget the world outside. At length, when all are sunk in drunken slumber, Gudrun arises. Here Morris paints one of his favourite scenes: the moment when night fades into dawn:

> Yet a while; — it was but an hour and the moon was hung so high,
> As it seemed that the silent night-tide would never change and die;
> But lo, how the dawn comes stealing o'er the mountains of the east,
> And dim grows Atli's roof-sun o'er yestereven's feast;
> Dim yet in the treasure-houses lie the ancient heaps of gold,
> But slowly come the colours to the Dwarf-wrought rings of old.
>
> (p.304)

Now Gudrun appears in the dusk, holding a burning brand and a war-sword, sets fire to the hall as the sun rises, and plunges the sword into the body of Atli.

Morris completely omits the slaying of her sons, and Gudrun hurries to the edge of the sea-cliff, where the scene is in utter contrast to the devastation of the hall:

> A light wind blew from the sea-flood and its waves were little and fair,
> And gave back no sign of the burning, as in twinkling haste they ran,
> White-topped in the merry morning, to the walls and the havens of man.
>
> (p.306)

Gudrun begs the sea to deliver her 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 leaps into the waves, and "Who knoweth the deeps of the sea, And the wealth of the bed of Gudrun, and the days that yet shall be." Thus Morris closes the story of Gudrun, not explicitly denying the end of the saga, and yet fittingly concluding the tragedy with the disappearance of all the chief actors. In place of the irrelevancies of the saga, he sums up the tale in a few lines:

> Ye have heard of the Cloudy People, and the dimming of the day,
> And the latter world's confusion, and Sigurd gone away;
> Now ye know of the Need of the Niblungs and the end of broken troth,
> All the death of kings and of kindreds and the Sorrow of Odin the Goth.
>
> (p.306)

As in the case of most of Morris's work, opinions on *Sigurd the Volsung* differ very greatly. We have already mentioned the opinion of Dorothy Hoare, which appears to have been accepted by Thompson and by Lindsay.[142] The Icelandic Marxist, Einar Olgeirsson, expresses however a very different point of view, pointing out that Morris was one of the first to realise the significance of the sagas as a reflection of pre-feudal society and of certain of its values, which remain permanent for humanity:

"Workers in the contemporary labour movement should realise how close they are to the heroes of the old kindred system in their fight against the accursed gold. But only a few people realise the connection here. The memory of Sigurd the Dragonslayer unfortunately got into the clutches of the German ruling class, which dealt with it in the same way as Nazism dealt with the spiritual heritage of the German workers.

"Although workers in the labour movement up to the present day (with the exception of Marx and Engels) have remained all too indifferent to the heritage of the old classless society, it is nevertheless no accident that one of the greatest socialist leaders, that outstanding figure of 19th-century England, the poet William Morris, created one of the finest epics of last century, precisely about Sigurd the Volsung. William Morris was closely

bound to Iceland. He knew Iceland, he passionately loved the Icelandic sagas and along with Erikr Magnússon he worked on translating them. Morris travelled in Iceland and his direct knowledge of the land and the people undoubtedly enabled him to comprehend the kindred society and its literary legacy more profoundly than any of his contemporaries. Morris so deeply felt the greatness of the *Volsungasaga* that he could not find words sufficiently strong to condemn the 'desecration' which in his opinion Richard Wagner committed when he made it the subject of opera.

"William Morris deserves the recognition of the labour movement for having realised the connection between the heroic period of the kindred society and the socialism of his own day."[143]

The fact that when Morris first came to this realisation of the significance of the kindred society he was not yet a fully-fledged Marxist socialist, makes this perception of his all the more remarkable. I have endeavoured to show that it was the "wholeness" of his thought, the "seamless garment" of his life-work as a poet, artist, worker and thinker, that made this possible. Socialism was for Morris something which developed from the deepest springs both of thought and emotion and in *Sigurd* he expresses both the thought and emotions which were forcing him into public life, and which could find no satisfaction in even the most radical of Radical politics.

In the character of Sigurd we see very clearly illustrated the qualities which Morris felt were necessary in a popular leader. Again and again he contrasts Sigurd, "the face without a foe", the beloved of all children, with the individualistic heroes of the Niblungs. It is Sigurd who remains conscious to the end of his duty to deal justly with the people, even in the midst of his own grief, it is in Sigurd that are expressed all the virtue, heroism and wisdom of the ancient kindred society, whose death is the sign for the beginning of "the latter world's confusion." But in the day of the saga, the time has not yet come for these virtues to be triumphant; and this is the real tragedy which Morris emphasises. It is not merely the tragedy of strong individuals, told by the saga as an absorbing tale: it is the tragedy of mankind, the tragedy of history. The images and metaphors which Morris uses in the poem are of the "cosmic" type which bring to our minds not the pathetic fallacy of the romantics, but the actual unity, springing from their common material basis, of human society and experience and natural phenomena.*

It is thus beside the point to deal with *Sigurd the Volsung* as if Morris had intended it to be a reproduction for modern readers of the *Volsungasaga,* and to complain that Morris introduces elements foreign to the original. "The magnificent 'Sigurd' has the Norse spirit, but it has something more that the sagaman would not have recognised."[144] This "something more" is the reflection of Morris's own time and its problems.

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*) See the discussion of Morris's imagery in the last chapter, p.188, 189, 192.

Shaw has characterised the change which came over Morris in the years after *The Earthly Paradise*: "Later on he finds his destiny as propagandist and prophet, the busy singer of a bursting day" [my emphasis]. Shaw recognises the importance of the saga influence in this development. "Iceland and the sagas helped by changing the facile troubadour of love and beauty into the minstrel of strife and guile, of battle, murder and death."[145] It is in fact in this atmosphere of "strife and guile" that we can see clearly the reflection of Morris's own day in *Sigurd*.

Throughout the poem Morris returns again and again to the "latter days", contrasting them with the simplicity and good faith of the world which produced Sigurd. This is not utopian longing for a vanished past. In fact, Morris's treatment of the early life of Sigurd and his forebears emphasises rather than diminishes the severities of the heroic age.* What Morris stresses are the superior values of this society, not its superior refinement or romance: simplicity, lack of guile, honourable dealing, love of kindred, daring, strength, and heroism in the face of disaster. Without overloading the structure of his poem, without confusion, and without overdidactic insistence, Morris shows us by means of the different levels of social development and behaviour with which he contrasts the earlier kindred society, both what has been gained in complexity and refinement of life and feeling, and also what has been lost in simplicity and sincerity. But Morris does not believe it has been lost irretrievably; this is the implicit meaning of the poem — implicit because it is conveyed by artistic means rather than by explicit statement.

Even as early as 1874 Morris was longing for some revolutionary change in society, in despair at the folly of so-called civilisation, and longing for some "great and tragical circumstance" which would put an end to the "sordid loathsome place" that was Victorian London.[146] The vaulting ambition of the Niblungs — given artistic expression especially in such passages as that already quoted on p.158 — the cruelty and deceit of the court of Atli: in these Morris expressed his sense of alienation from the capitalist society of his own day. The Burg of the Niblungs, "so stark and sharp and cold", stands as a contrast to the hall of the Volsung kindred, "a candle in the dark", just as, in contrast to the calm re-entry of Signy into the burning hall of Siggeir, to accept her death there, the conflagration of Atli's palace, "the hall for the traitors builded, the house of the changeless plain", becomes the scene of savage, chaotic despair:

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*) cf. Margaret Grennan on Morris's consciousness of the limitations of early Icelandic society: "It is surprising that a man who rarely wrote a passage of praise without qualifying it with the less attractive side of the picture his honesty and good sense discovered, should be so often described as seeing the medieval period through a golden haze." (op. cit. p.40).

They cried, and their tongues were confounded, and none gave answer again:
They rushed, and came nowhither; each man beheld his foe,
And smote at the hopeless and dying, nor brother, brother might know,
The sons of one mother's sorrow in the fire-blast strove and smote,
And the sword of the first-begotten was thrust in the father's throat,
And the father hewed at his stripling; the thrall at the war-king cried,
And mocked the face of the mighty in that house of Atli's pride.

(p.305)

In the society of greed, even the closest bonds of kindred can be rent by self-interest.

The true victors of the poem are Sigurd and Brynhild, "the lovely, the mighty, the hope of the ancient Earth", killed by a society whose values they despise; while the refusal of Gunnar to reveal the secret of the gold in exchange for his life, and Gudrun's revenge on Atli, are treated by Morris as the final protest against the evil of the "latter world". By the end of the poem we have reached the time foretold in the opening lines: "the last of the latter days", "the entering in of the terror." Margaret Grennan has recognised the importance of *Sigurd* for Morris's development: "The epic is impregnated with Morris's concern for the world, for the "poor in the doom-ring", for the victims of the 'fashioners of tears' and with his hope for the ragnar rok that will sweep away old tyrannies. All the impulses of the Oxford years, the wish 'to do some good in the world', the influences of earlier reading, seem to be gathered like the shards of Sigmund's sword and welded into a unity of purpose in the fires of creative imagination. Morris forged his own 'Wrath' and after the writing of *Sigurd the Volsung* he never again looked at the Victorian world with the comparative detachment of the Red House days."[147]

What Morris thought and felt about life he also endeavoured to express in his creative writing. So far from being 'escapist', in the sense of helping the writer or reader to forget the real world, Morris's literary work is a life-long attempt to interpret the world and human life in terms which will lead to greater understanding of it. *Sigurd the Volsung* is his most artistically significant expression of this interpretation in terms of poetry. Shaw was right in calling it "the summit of his professional destiny"[148] — that is, as a poet. We shall in course of the consideration of his later poems enquire as to why it was impossible for Morris to attain yet another such summit in dealing in poetry with the problems of modern life. *Sigurd* was in fact the summit of his professional destiny in the sense that, in poetry, it marked the height of his actual achievement. The unity of thought, action and creative writing in Morris is perfectly illustrated by the fact that it was the months which saw the completion and publication of *Sigurd* that also saw his first public entry into politics.