

CHAPTER V

HOPE AND COURAGE

I Kelmscott

WE have come a long way from the conventional picture of William Morris—the bluff, uncomplicated extrovert. But it would be a mistake to draw the other picture—the picture of conflict and of restless despair—in too uncompromising lines. During these years between 1866 and 1876, Morris found a hundred sources of interest and enjoyment. The work of the Firm went ahead at an amazing rate. His two daughters, Jenny and May, were growing up. His frequent visits to Kelmscott Manor, on the Gloucestershire-Oxfordshire border, brought relaxation and refreshment to his senses.

It might almost have seemed that he was in danger of forgetting, like so many of his circle, the fervour of his early revolt, and of himself taking on “the print of the golden age”, or of withdrawing altogether to the consolations of his poetry and the work of the Firm. He was coming to react against the more extreme affectations of romanticism.

“Just because I string a few rhymes together, they call me dreamy and unpractical. I can’t help writing verses, I must do it, but I’m just as much a business man as any of them”,

he once said. In the war scare of 1859-60, just after his marriage, he had joined the Volunteers. If his dress and his manners, in the early 1870s, were still considered by the orthodox to be eccentric, this was simply because he consulted his own convenience and was indifferent to conventional canons. He had little desire to enrage the Respectable and the Good. His private misery he concealed behind a self-sufficient manner which observers (from this time until his death) often confused with self-centredness, or lack of “warmth and responsiveness”.¹ To Rossetti

¹ *Angeli, op cit*, pp 110 f, 210.

he appeared (not surprisingly) "insolently solid" while the Hon Mrs George Howard (later Lady Carlisle), for whom Philip Webb had built and Morris had decorated a house in Kensington in 1868, recorded her impressions of him in 1870, when he visited her country home

"Morris arrived early this morning. He was rather shy—so was I—I felt that he was taking an experimental plunge among 'barbarians' [*Culture and Anarchy*, with its characterization of the aristocracy as 'barbarians', had appeared in the previous year]. However, he has grown more urbane—and even three hours has worked off much of our mutual shyness—A walk in the glen made me know him better and like him more than I fancied I should. He talks so clearly and seems to think so clearly that what seems paradox in Webb's mouth in his seems convincing sense. He lacks sympathy and humanity though—and this is a fearful lack to me—only his character is so fine and massive that one must admire—He is agreeable also—and does not snub me."¹

Clearly, the lady was flustered to know *what* to make of her unconventional visitor. In 1871 (the year of *Love is Enough*) Morris made a more surprising intrusion, this time into the world of the "Philistines". He accepted a directorship on the board of the company controlling the copper-mines from which a part of his income was still derived, and he attended the meetings of the board in the full regalia of top hat and formal dress.

His personal unrest seemed only to strengthen his capacity for complete absorption in whatever work he had on hand. "Whatever chanced to be Morris's goal of the moment", wrote his acquaintance, Theodore Watts-Dunton, "was pursued by him with as much intensity as though the universe contained no other possible goal." Even his favourite relaxations, rowing on the Thames and fishing, were pursued in this wholehearted manner. Watts-Dunton gives an amusing picture of his first meeting with Morris during these years

"It was shortly after he and Rossetti entered upon the joint occupancy of Kelmscott Manor on the Thames, where I was staying as Rossetti's guest. On a certain morning when we were walking in the fields Rossetti told me that Morris was coming down for a day's fishing and that 'Mouse', the Icelandic pony, was to be sent to the Lechlade railway station to meet him. 'You must mind your p's and q's with him, he is a wonderfully stand-off chap, and generally manages to take against people.'

¹ E. V. Lucas, *The Colvins and their Friends*, p. 35

" 'What is he like?' I said

" 'You know the portraits of Francis I Well, take that portrait as the basis—soften down the nose a bit, and give him the rose-bloom colour of an English farmer, and there you have him'

" 'What about Francis's eyes?' I said

" 'Well, they are not quite so small, but not big—blue-grey, but full of genius'

"And then I saw, coming towards us on a rough pony so diminutive that he well deserved the name of 'Mouse', the figure of a man in a wideawake—a figure so broad and square that the breeze at his back, soft and balmy as it was, seemed to be using him as a sail, and blowing both him and the pony towards us

"When Rossetti introduced me, the manager [of the Firm] greeted him with a 'H'm! I thought you were alone' This did not seem promising Morris at that time was as proverbial for his exclusiveness as he afterwards became for his expansiveness

"Rossetti, however, was irresistible to everybody, and especially to Morris, who saw that he was expected to be agreeable to me, and most agreeable he was, though for at least an hour I could still see the shy look in the corner of his eyes He invited me to join the fishing, which I did Finding every faculty of Morris's mind and every nerve in his body occupied with one subject, fishing, I (coached by Rossetti, who warned me not to talk about *The Defence of Guenevere*) talked about nothing but the bream, roach, dace, and gudgeon I used to catch as a boy in the Ouse

Not one word passed Morris's lips, as far as I remember, which had not some relation to fish and baits He had come from London for a few hours' fishing, and all the other interests which as soon as he got back to Queen's Square would be absorbing him were forgotten Instead of watching my float, I could not help watching his face with an amused interest at its absorbed expression, which after a while he began to notice, and then the following little dialogue ensued

" 'How old were you when you used to fish in the Ouse?'

" 'Oh, all sorts of ages, it was at all sorts of times, you know'

" 'Well, how young, then?'

" 'Say ten or twelve'

" 'When you got a bite at ten or twelve, did you get as interested, as excited, as I get when I see my float bob?'

" 'No'

"The way in which he said, 'I thought not,' conveyed a world of disparagement"¹

Kelmscott—a large farm-manor dating, probably, from Charles the First's time—and its surroundings, brought a continual renewal of his "deep love of the earth and the life on it", which

¹ *Athenaeum*, October 10th, 1896

he so often expressed. At first, it seems, the house was taken not for Morris himself, but for Jane and Rossetti. "We have taken a little place deep down in the country", he wrote to a friend after his first visit to Iceland in 1871,

"where my wife and the children are to spend some months every year, as they did this—a beautiful and strangely naïf house, Elizabethan in appearance though much later in date, as in that out of the way corner people built Gothic till the beginning of middle of last century. It is on the S W extremity of Oxfordshire, within a stone's throw of the baby Thames, in the most beautiful grey little hamlet called Kelmscott."¹

At the end of 1872 he wrote to Aglaia Coronio

"I went down to Kelmscott on Saturday last till Tuesday, and spent most of my time on the river. It was such a beautiful morning when I came away, with a faint blue sky and thin far away white clouds about it: the robins hopping and singing all about the garden. The fieldfares, which are a winter bird and come from Norway are chattering all about the berry trees now, and the starlings, as they have done for two months past, collect in great flocks about sunset, and make such a noise before they go off to roost. The place looks as beautiful as ever though somewhat melancholy in its flowerless autumn gardens. I shall not be there much now, I suppose."²

The "faint" sky, the "far-away" clouds, the winter birds from Norway, the starlings at sunset, the "flowerless" gardens—the selection suggests a melancholy as much within him as in the objects themselves. But as he came to know the place more intimately, it seemed to chime in with all his moods. Kelmscott Manor aroused in him a sense of history, of mingled labour and repose, and a mellow mood of content, in which he became ever more aware of the rich abundance and continuity of life. In his last years he described the house in an article,³ which concluded

"A house that I love with a reasonable love I think: for though my words may give you no idea of any special charm about it, yet I assure you that the charm is there, so much has the old house grown up out of the soil and the lives of those that lived on it: some thin thread of tradition, a half-anxious sense of the delight of meadow and acre and wood and river, a certain amount (not too much let us hope) of common sense, a liking for making materials serve one's turn, and perhaps at

¹ *Letters*, p. 45

² *Ibid.*, p. 49

³ Quoted in Mr. Henderson's introduction to *Letters*, pp. xlii-xliii, and Mackail, I, pp. 228-32

bottom some little grain of sentiment this I think was what went to the making of the old house "

It is at the end of *News from Nowhere* that the most famous description of the place—and of all that it came to mean to Morris in his later years—can be found

"Mounting on the cart-road that ran along the river some feet above the water, I looked round about me The river came down through a wide meadow on my left, which was grey now with the ripened seeding grasses Over the meadow I could see the mingled gables of a building where I knew the lock must be I turned a little to my right, and through the hawthorne sprays and long shoots of the wild roses could see the flat country spreading out far away under the sun of the calm evening, till something that might be called hills with a look of sheep-pastures about them bounded it with a soft blue line Before me, the elm-boughs still hid most of what houses there might be but to the right of the cart-road a few grey buildings of the simplest kind showed here and there "

Now, at the end of his life, full of hope in the future, Morris's haunting melancholy is all but extinguished in the sense of fruition and harvest—the "ripened seeding grasses", the sheep-pastures in the distance, the rich beauty of the garden

"My companion gave a sigh of pleased surprise and enjoyment, nor did I wonder, for the garden between the wall and the house was redolent of the June flowers, and the roses were rolling over one another with that delicious super-abundance of small well-tended gardens which at first sight takes away all thought from the beholder save that of beauty The blackbirds were singing their loudest, the doves were cooing on the roof-ridge, the rooks in the high elm-trees beyond were garrulous among the young leaves, and the swifts wheeled whining about the gables And their house itself was a fit guardian for all the beauty of this heart of summer

"Ellen echoed my thoughts as she said 'Yes, friend this many-gabled old house built by the simple country-folk of the long past times, regardless of all the turmoil that was going on in cities and courts, is lovely still amidst all the beauty which these latter days have created It seems to me as if it had waited for these happy days, and held in it the gathered crumbs of happiness of the confused and turbulent past '

"She led me up close to the house, and laid her shapely sun browned hand and arm on the lichened wall as if to embrace it, and cried out, 'O me! O me! How I love the earth, and the seasons, and weather, and all things that deal with it, and all that grows out of it,—as this has done '

"She led me on to the door, murmuring a little above her breath as she did so, 'The earth and the growth of it and the life of it' If I could but say or show how I love it' "

This mood of content belonged to his later years. During the early 1870s he was saved from becoming enmeshed in what he was to describe (in *Sigurd the Volsung*) as "this smoky net of unrejoicing labour" not only by his capacity for application in his creative work, but also by his ability to *choose* his work, to experiment, to travel, to create for himself the conditions of his labour. Morris's wealth has sometimes been exaggerated. What he had he spent freely, on the Firm, on his pleasures, and, in later years, on the Cause. In the mid-1870s he was under some anxiety. "I am very hard at work with one thing or another, firm's work for one thing", he wrote to Aglaia Colonio in February, 1873.

"I should very much like to make the business quite a success, and it can't be, unless I work at it myself. I must say, though I don't call myself money-greedy, a smash on that side would be a terrible nuisance, I have so many serious troubles, pleasures, hopes and fears, that I have not time on my hands to be ruined and get really poor. Above all things it would destroy my freedom of work, which is a dear delight to me."¹

There was every reason why he should desire to maintain this "freedom of work." But, during these years, there was always the danger that it should be bought at too high a cost—the moral and intellectual contamination, the indifference to the lives of the people and the individualist attitudes, which such a position of privilege must encourage.

Morris's greatness is to be found not so much in his rejection of the ideals and practice of an "age of shoddy", in this he was accompanied by Carlyle and by Ruskin, as well as by other contemporaries. It is to be found, rather, in his discovery that there existed within the corrupt society of the present the forces which could revolutionize the future, and in the moral courage which enabled him to identify his cause with these revolutionary forces. "So there I was in for a fine pessimistic end of life", he wrote in 1892 (see p. 154), "if it had not somehow dawned on me that amidst all this filth of civilization the seeds of a great change . . . were beginning to germinate."

¹ *Letters*, p. 53

"The study of history and the love and practice of art forced me into a hatred of the civilisation which, if things were to stop as they are, would turn history into inconsequent nonsense, and make art a collection of the curiosities of the past, which would have no serious relation to the life of the present

"But the consciousness of revolution stirring amidst our hateful modern society prevented me, luckier than many others of artistic perceptions, from crystallising into a mere railer against 'progress' on the one hand, and on the other from wasting time and energy in any of the numerous schemes by which the quasi-artistic of the middle classes hope to make art grow when it has no longer any root, and thus I became a practical Socialist"¹

The insight which enabled him to become conscious of "revolution stirring", and the moral courage which enabled him to meet that discovery, not with fear, but with joy and hope—these qualities in Morris were quite exceptional. While they were strengthened in the Socialist movement, he could never have become a Socialist at all if he had not already possessed them. Fitfully stirring in his earlier life and writing, it was in the early 1870s, the years of his despair, that they suddenly found nourishment and grew to stature. 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.

II *Iceland*

Already in the 1860s Morris had made some acquaintance with Northern sagas in translation, but while he felt something of their attraction he did not feel the full impact of their heroic qualities, and unconsciously translated them in his mind into the language of medieval romance. In 1868 he was introduced to Eiríkr Magnússon, by Warrington Taylor, the Firm's business manager, who felt sure that Morris "would like to make the acquaintance

¹ "How I Became a Socialist", *Justice*, June 16th, 1894.

of a real Icclander" Taylor was right Morris took to Magnússon at once, and proposed that they should read Icelandic together three times a week¹ In "The Lovers of Gudrun" (one of the latest, and the longest of *The Earthly Paradise* tales) Morris attempted to put his new knowledge to use, and to convey something of the spirit of the Icelandic The attempt is not fully successful His manner is too sweet and smooth for the saga material, even though his poem was derived from the Laxdaela Saga, a late thirteenth-century and slightly "domesticated" version of the tale And yet in this poem there is a note of passion, and an importance is given to action, as opposed to mood, which sets it apart from the others, and which may account for Morris's feeling that it was the most successful of them all

The attraction of the sagas was growing upon him with closer acquaintance His lessons from Magnússon were unsystematic

"Morris decided from the beginning to leave alone the irksome task of taking regular grammatical exercises 'You be my grammar as we go along,' was the rule laid down and acted upon throughout"²

For this reason Morris's acquaintance with Icelandic was never entirely at first-hand, and he lacked a complete understanding of the subtler shades of feeling and thought Very soon the two men were at work on translations, which Morris worked up from a literal version prepared by Magnússon³ *The Saga of Gunnlaug Worm-tongue* and *The Story of Grettir the Strong* were published in 1869 Prefaced to the latter was a sonnet, in which Morris wrote of the new interest brought by the sagas "to fill life's void" In the prose foreword, he strove to define the values he found within the story—attitudes very different from those expressed in his own *Earthly Paradise*

"To us moderns the real interest in these records of a past state of life lies principally in seeing events true in the main treated vividly and dramatically by people who completely understood the manners, life and, above all, the turn of mind of the actors in them The sagaman never relaxes his grasp of Grettir's character, and he is the same man from beginning to end, thrust this way and that by circumstances, but little altered by them, unlucky in all things, yet made strong to bear all ill-luck, scornful of the world, yet capable of enjoyment, and determined to make the most of it, not deceived by men's specious

¹ *Works*, Vol VII, pp xvi, xxxii-xxxiii

² *Ibid*, p xvii

³ *Ibid*, p xliii

ways, but disdaining to cry out because he needs must bear with them "

Endurance and courage in the face of an hostile material and social environment—these are the qualities which he seemed to find in the first sagas which he came to know closely

In the summer of 1869 he was introduced for the first time to the Volsunga Saga Magnússon had made a translation, and had sent it to him

"He was not so impressed with it as I had expected he would be, but added that as yet he had had time to look only at the first part of it Some time afterwards—I forget how long—when I came for the appointed lesson, I found him in a state of great excitement, pacing his study. He told me he had now finished reading my translation of the 'grandest tale that ever was told' "¹

He set to work on a prose translation directly, and in December, 1869, was writing of the saga to Professor Norton

"It seems as though the author-collector felt the subject too much to trouble himself about the niceties of art, and the result is something which is above all art, the scene of the last interview between Sigurd and the despairing and terrible Brynhild touches me more than anything I have ever met with in literature, there is nothing wanting in it, nothing forgotten, nothing repeated, nothing overstrained, all tenderness is shown without the use of a tender word, all misery and despair without a word of raving, complete beauty without an ornament, and all this in two pages It is to the full meaning of the word inspired, touching too though hardly wonderful to think of the probable author, some 12 century Icelander, living the hardest and rudest of lives, seeing few people and pretty much the same day after day, with his old religion taken from him and his new one hardly gained—It doesn't look promising for the future of art I fear I am not getting on well with my work, for in fact I believe the Volsunga has rather swallowed me up for some time past, I mean thinking about it I had it in my head to write an epic of it, but though I still hanker after it, I see clearly it would be foolish, for no verse could render the best parts of it, and it would only be a flatter and tamer version of a thing already existing "²

The translation was published in 1870. At the conclusion to the Preface he set down his noblest praise

"This is the Great Story of the North, which should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks—to all our race first, and

¹ *Works*, Vol VII, p xviii

² *Letters*, p 32

afterwards, when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been—a story too—then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us ”¹

Clearly, nothing had moved him so much or influenced him so deeply, since the days when he and Burne-Jones had broken with the conventions and thrown in their lot with Rossetti. His impressions were re-inforced by his visits to Iceland in 1871 and 1873. On the first voyage out, as the ship skirted the northern islands and turned towards the home of Grettir and Sigurd, Morris wrote to Janey

“I have seen nothing out of a dream so strange as our coming out of the last narrow sound into the Atlantic, and leaving the huge wall of rocks astern in the shadowless midnight twilight—nothing I have ever seen has impressed me so much ”²

The *Journals* he kept of the voyages are full of interest. The account of the first trip—which he took in the company of Magnússon and his old friend Charles Faulkner—is over-full of detail, but the detail is often amusing or revealing—the long journeys on ponies, the camping and the pride Morris took in his own cooking, evenings spent with the local people discussing the old sagas which lingered as verbal traditions, quarrels and accidents. “I find sleeping in a tent very comfortable even when the weather is very cold”, he wrote to his wife

“Last Thursday week we had a very bad day riding over the wilderness in the teeth of a tremendous storm of snow, rain, and wind. You’ve no idea what a good stew I can make, or how well I can fry bacon under difficulties. I have seen many marvels and some terrible pieces of country, slept in the home-field of Njal’s house, and Gunnar’s, and at Herdholt. I have seen Bjarg, and Bathstead, and the place where Bolli was killed, and am now a half-hour’s ride from where Gudrun died. I was there yesterday, and from its door you see a great sea of terrible inky mountains tossing about ”³

On August 6th he permitted himself some reflections in his *Journal*.

“Just think, though, what a mournful place this is—Iceland I mean—setting aside the pleasure of one’s animal life there: the fresh air, the riding and rough life, and feeling of adventure—how every place and name marks the death of its short-lived eagerness and glory, and withal so little is the life changed in some ways. But Lord! what

¹ *Works*, Vol. VII, p. 286

² *Letters*, p. 42.

³ *Ibid*, p. 44

littleness and helplessness has taken the place of the old passion and violence that had place here once—and all is unforgotten, so that one has no power to pass it by unnoticed yet that must be something of a reward for the old life of the land, and I don't think their life now is more unworthy than most people's elsewhere, and they are happy enough by seeming Yet it is an awful place set aside the hope that the unseen sea gives you here, and the strange threatening change of the blue spiky mountains beyond the firth, and the rest seems emptiness and nothing else a piece of turf under your feet, and the sky overhead, that's all; whatever solace your life is to have here must come out of yourself or these old stories, not over hopeful themselves "

The *Journal* of his second visit in 1873 is more abbreviated and condensed, with occasional descriptions of the bare scenery which—by means of their free use of strong active verbs—"break", "cleave", "strike", "sweep"—give the sense of a challenge to man

"It was terrible-looking enough", runs his entry for August 12th, "all in great flakes at this latter end, otherwise with great waves tossed up sometimes, or broken all into rough fragments, or the familiar regular flowing stream A few rods further on and we are among the black sand, and huge clinker rocks of lava at the foot of the sulphur hills, an ugly place a valley sloping up into a narrow pass among steep sand-heaps of hills burned red and buff and yellow by the sulphur, grassless of course, and every here and there the reek of a sulphur kettle with the earth about it stained bright yellow and white So up the pass, going past a cloven sand peak with a kettle at the foot of it, and winding along the path till on the hill's brow we can look across a wide open country, lava-covered, grey and dismal, walled by a sweep of ink-black peaks and saw ridges the whole view dismays one beyond measure for its emptiness and dolefulness "

It was a long way from here to Kelmscott Manor, and the sense of contrast was ever present to him "The journey was very successful, & has deepened the impression I had of Iceland, & increased my love for it", he wrote on his return to Aglaia Coronio.

"Nevertheless I was very full of longing to be back, and to say the truth was more unhappy on the voyage out and before I got into the saddle than I liked to confess but the glorious simplicity of the terrible & tragic, but beautiful land with its well remembered stories of brave men, killed all querulous feeling in me, and have made all the dear faces of wife & children, and love, & friends dearer than ever to me

"You wrote a very kind letter to me at Reykjavik you won't want to be thanked for it I know, but you will like to hear that it answered its kind purpose & made me happier—What a terrible thing it is to bear that moment before one gets one's letters after those weeks of absence & longing

"Do you know I feel as if a definite space of my life had passed away now I have seen Iceland for the last time as I looked up at Charles' Wain tonight all my travel there seemed to come back on me, made solemn and elevated, in one moment, till my heart swelled with the wonder of it surely I have gained a great deal and it was no idle whim that drew me there, but a true instinct for what I needed"¹

"A true instinct for what I needed"—what was it that he found in the cold volcanic island and its fierce mythologies which was strong enough to carry him out of his despair to the greatness of his last years? He asked the question himself in his poem, "Iceland First Seen".

"Ah, what came we forth for to see that our hearts are so hot with desire"

Is it enough for our rest, the sight of this desolate strand,
And the mountain-waste voiceless as death but for winds that may
sleep not nor tve?

Why do we long to wend forth through the length and the breadth
of a land,

Dreadful with grinding of ice, and record of scarce hidden fire "

Courage—this quality he mentioned again and again. "What a glorious outcome of the worship of Courage these stories are", he exclaimed at the end of one letter.² Recalling the impact upon him of his first acquaintance with the sagas, he wrote to Andreas Scheu in 1883

"The delightful freshness and independence of thought of them, the air of freedom which breathes through them, their worship of courage (the great virtue of the human race), their utter unconventionality took my heart by storm"³

Courage, not in the presence of hope and success, but in the face of failure and defeat and hostile fate the courage which was part defiance, part an assertion of the dignity and independence of man—this quality so opposed to the self-indulgent melancholy of romanticism in its decline, was surely one of which he felt the need, not only to face the world, but in his personal life as well?

¹ *Letters*, pp 58-9

² Mackail, I, p 335

³ *Letters*, p 186

"Self-restraint was a virtue sure to be thought much of among a people whose religion was practically courage in all the stories of the North failure is never reckoned as a disgrace, but it is reckoned a disgrace not to bear it with equanimity, and to wear one's heart on one's sleeve is not well thought of",

he said in one of his Socialist lectures¹ In a manuscript poem of 1871 he addresses the author of one of the sagas, and refers directly to that "mist of fear", the enervating sense of the presence of mortality so often encountered in his writing at this time.

"Tale-teller, who 'twixt fire and snow
Had heart to turn about and show
With faint half-smile things great and small
That in thy fearful land did fall,
Thou and thy brethren sure did gain
That thing for which I long in vain,
The spell, whereby the mist of fear
Was melted, and your ears might hear
Earth's voices as they are indeed
Well, ye have helped me at my need"²

"Earth's voices as they are indeed"—here was another quality he valued in the sagas which was in marked contrast with the trend of feeling within and without himself at this time In them he found heroic actions set forth, not in terms of motive or mood, but simply as deeds judged by the society in which the actors moved "The hero is made manifest by his deeds", he recalled in his Socialist lecture "'Many a man lies hid within himself', says their proverb" This gave him a quite new focus on the world, a quite new value to human action—viewing it no longer in terms of the subjective moods of the actors "The Man Who Never Laughed Again" had asked

"Why should he cast himself against the spears
To make vain stories for the unpitying years?"

The world had "narrowed to his heart at last" In the sagas the world grew as wide as mankind again, the focus was taken from the individual's heart

"Their morality is simple enough strive to win fame is one precept
Says Havamal

¹ May Morris, I, p 450

² Mackail, I, p 264

"Waneth wealth and fadeth friend,
And we ourselves shall die,
But fair fame fadeth nevermore,
If well ye come thereby

Be it understood that this was not the worship of success, on the contrary, success that came without valour was somewhat despised. Perhaps the serious consciousness of the final defeat of death made that mere success seem but poor to those men, whereas the deeds done could no longer be touched by death"¹

But such attitudes to life could only be valid in a society whose aims had something of the noble and the heroic about them. They could not be applied within a society whose dominant ethic was self-interest. So it was that there ran through Morris's response to the sagas and to Iceland a continual sense of the contrast between the ideals of the Northern past and those of his own society. Even in the Iceland of the nineteenth century he found a manliness and independence among the crofters and fishermen lacking in capitalist Britain. As he wrote to Andreas Scheu, in 1883, "I learned one lesson there, thoroughly I hope, that the most grinding poverty is a trifling evil compared with the inequality of classes"². Capitalist exploitation was more destructive of human dignity, both for the oppressors, and (so long as they did not rebel against it) for the oppressed, than the life of the impoverished working farmer in a semi-patriarchal society.

It is true that in the 1870s, before Morris came to his Socialist convictions, this was rather sensed than logically expressed. Nevertheless, the literature of the North provided him with a quite new measure of value to set beside his own age. Just as Carlyle, Ruskin, and Morris himself, had been enabled to criticize their own time by standing in the pre-capitalist ground of the Middle Ages, so now Morris could view his society from a new position. Some of the things he found in the old Icelandic society he expressed—once again with more logic than he may have held at the time—in his lecture to the Socialists.

"As to the manners of these early settlers they were naturally exceedingly simple, yet not lacking in dignity. Contrary to the absurd feeling of the feudal or hierarchal 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 weapon-smiths as for their fighting

¹ May Morris, I, p. 453

² *Letters*, p. 187

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

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 one chief says to his brother one eventful morning 'There's the calf to be killed and the viking to be fought Which of us shall kill the calf, and which shall fight the viking?'¹

"The position of women was good in this society, the married couple being pretty much on an equality there are many stories told of women divorcing themselves for some insult or offence, a blow being considered enough excuse"²

Moreover, while the qualities which attracted him in the Middle Ages only served to heighten the meanness of the present, the Northern message of endurance and courage seemed to give him the strength and the hope to struggle in his own time. In some manuscript notes on the northern mythologies which he made in the 1870s,³ he touches upon the destruction of the Gods, and seems to be brooding more upon his own time than the myth itself

"It may be that the world shall worsen, that men shall grow afraid to 'change their life,' that the world shall be weary itself, and sicken, and none but faint-hearts be left—who knows? So at any rate comes the end at last, and the Evil, bound for a while, is loose, and all nameless merciless horrors that on earth we figure by fire and earthquake and venom and ravine till at last the great destruction breaks out over all things, and the old earth and heavens are gone, and then a new heavens and earth What goes on there? Who shall say, of us who know only of rest and peace by toil and strife? And what shall be our share in it? Well, sometimes we must needs think that we shall live again yet if that were not, would it not be enough that we helped to make this unnameable glory, and lived not altogether deedless? Think of the joy we have in praising great men, and how we turn their stories over and over, and fashion their lives for our joy and this also we ourselves may give to the world

¹ Cf *Sigurd the Volsung*

"The king's sons dealt with the sail-sheets, and the earls and dukes of war
Were the halers of the hawsers and the tuggers of the oar "

² May Morris, I, pp 449-50

³ Mackail, I, p 333 (MSS at Walthamstow)

"This seems to me pretty much the religion of the Northmen. I think one would be a happy man if one could hold it, in spite of the wild dreams and dreadful imaginings that hung about it here and there."

Dismal as the contrast between that nobility and this self-interest might be, yet the sagas seemed to carry the message that men must not repine hopelessly under their misfortunes, but must meet their destiny halfway, and strive to master their conditions. The myth of the destruction of the Northern gods prepared his mind, also, for the idea of a revolution in his own society and, when he later understood the nature of that approaching revolution, it was perhaps the influence of these myths which coloured his view of "the Revolution" as one sharp swift, climactic encounter, sombre and dramatic,

"When at that last tide gathered wrong and hate
Shall meet blind yearning on the Fields of Fate"

From Iceland, then, Morris gained a diaught of courage and hope, which was the prelude for his entry into active political life in the later 1870s. But critics with a knowledge of Icelandic literature are agreed that he was not wholly successful in his translations and free renderings of saga material. His work was in the pioneering field, and he shared with his contemporaries certain misconceptions as to the nature of the material with which he was dealing. Moreover, in his prose translations he sought for a style (labelled by critics "Wardour Street English") in which (in the words of Magnússon) he could bring about "such harmony between the Teutonic element in England and the language of the Icelandic saga as the not very abundant means at his command would allow".

"He often used to say that the Teutonic was the poetical element in English, while the Romance element was that of law, practice and business. Morris was strongly impressed by the simple dignity of style of the Icelandic saga. There must be . . . many of his friends who heard him frequently denounce it as something intolerable to have read an Icelandic saga rendered into the dominant literary dialect of the day—the English newspaper language."¹

A letter to Fred Henderson, in 1885, emphasizes his view on this last question

¹ *Works*, Vol. VII, p. xvii ff., Introduction by Magnússon

"Things have very much changed since the early days of language once everybody who could express himself at all did so beautifully, was a poet for that occasion, because all language was beautiful. But now language is utterly degraded in our daily lives, and poets have to make a new tongue each for himself before he can even begin his story he must elevate his means of expression from the daily jabber to which centuries of degradation have reduced it. Study early literature, Homer, Beowulf, & the Anglo-Saxon fragments, the edda and other old Norse poetry & I think you will understand what I mean" (see p. 879)

But it was inevitable that the "new tongue" which Morris felt bound to make for the purposes of translation should emphasize not the vivid simplicity of the original but its strangeness and antiquity.

This criticism of Morris's style was voiced in his own lifetime. More recently, one scholar of Icelandic, Dr. Dorothy Hoare, has added further strictures. "His faults in manner", she writes, in relation to the prose translations,

"of reducing the speed, economy, plainness and vividness of the original to diffuseness, false rhetoric, obscurity, unfamiliarity, by making too literal a translation where the idiom needs to be translated by a *corresponding* English idiom, or by using phrases and syntax not in modern usage, and thus giving a kind of remote, medieval flavour to what is fresh and modern in spirit—may ultimately be reduced to the same first cause, the idea that the life dealt with was heroic in the ideal sense, a kind of earthly paradise where men were simple and free and noble, and untroubled by the misfortunes and oppressions of the modern world"¹

In her view, Morris suffered from—

"an incapacity to comprehend the spirit which looks on life and death with equal courage and acceptance, which faces facts as they are and deals with them in full knowledge of their value"²

Clearly, there is some truth in this, although certain phrases suggest a loading of the scales of judgement to Morris's disadvantage. For example, Dr. Hoare surely avoids the central argument when she suggests that the sagas are "modern in spirit" for they are no more "modern" in spirit (and also no

¹ Dorothy M. Hoare, *The Works of Morris and Yeats in Relation to Early Saga Literature* (1937), p. 55

² *Ibid.*, p. 56

less) than the "remote, medieval" poetry of Dante or of Chaucer, and, indeed, Morris felt his main problem to be the rendering into English, with due dignity, of literature whose spirit was so discordant with that of Victorian England. Moreover, while the suggestion that Morris, in contrasting the society depicted in the sagas with his own, tended to idealize certain aspects of the former, is both true and valuable, Dr Hoare then overstates her case by scouting the view that the life dealt with in the sagas was "untroubled by the misfortunes and oppressions of the modern world." In matters of historical understanding, Morris was not the mere tyro that the tone of much modern criticism might suggest: he knew well that the Iceland of the sagas was free from *certain* of the "misfortunes and oppressions" of modern capitalist society, even if it suffered from others of a different nature, and he was attracted to the sagas precisely because he did find in them certain values more noble, and more simple, than those of his own time. It is Morris's failure fully to convey the true spirit of the sagas in his own renderings of them (and Dr Hoare's criticisms express well the kinds of failure of which he was guilty at various times) which demands some explanation, rather than his "incapacity to comprehend" their spirit.

There is more than one stile to cross between comprehension and artistic communication, and these Morris seemed unable to surmount. It is noticeable that in those passages of his letters, journals, prefaces and lectures, where Morris is describing his own response to the sagas, he evokes their spirit with enthusiasm and conviction. But the creative problems which he faced in his own renderings of the saga material were enormous. And the matter is important, not only for a consideration of his work in this field, but also because he was faced with very similar problems in his later Socialist writings. Morris, as a poet, was a child of the romantic movement: the vocabulary, the associations of words, the very movements of thought and feeling of romanticism were part of his youthful being. Whenever he took pen in hand, these were the words, the attitudes, the conventional attributes of literature, which came most readily to his mind. No literature could be more opposed, in its essential nature and outlook, to nineteenth-century romanticism than saga. "Realism is the one rule of the Saga-man", wrote Morris himself.

"no detail is spared in impressing the reader with a sense of the reality of the event, but no word is wasted in the process of giving the detail. There is nothing didactic and nothing rhetorical in these stories, the reader is left to make his own commentary on the events, and to divine the motives and feelings of the actors in them without any help from the story-teller" ¹

If Morris were to have re-created the sagas in nineteenth-century English, he would have had to have broken decisively with romanticism—not only with its conscious themes and moods, but also with those associations of words, turns of phrase, facilities and languors of rhythm, at which he had first put himself to school, and which he had himself helped to mature.

Such a revolutionary transformation of his art could only have been achieved by the greatest creative concentration. But, in the 1870s, Morris was coming to regard his writing as (in the words of Henry James) a "sub-trade"—a form of pleasurable recreation and relaxation from other work—rather than as his central place of encounter with his age. He was coming to adopt an attitude towards his writing (derived in part from his own version of Ruskin's doctrine of pleasurable labour) which was incompatible with the fullest concentration of his intellectual and moral energies. "I did manage to screw out my tale of verses, to the tune of some 250 I think", he wrote to his wife in 1876 while working on *Sigurd the Volsung*. "That talk of inspiration is sheer nonsense", he is quoted as saying in later years. "I may tell you that flat. There is no such thing—it is a mere matter of craftsmanship." And again: "If a chap can't compose an epic poem while he's weaving tapestry he had better shut up, he'll never do any good at all" ² Morris adopted this attitude partly in antagonism to the excessive airs of the romantically "inspired" and in part he was influenced by his picture of the folk-poet, the scald, the bard who could in earlier societies entertain the company in the hall or round the open fire almost impromptu with an epic tale. But these poets, with every incident, every image and turn of phrase, every description of hero or heroine, were drawing upon the collected traditions of past singers, were evoking the memories, associations and accepted judgements of a people. To write in the same unconcentrating manner in the

¹ Morris and Magnússon, *The Saga Library* (1891), Vol. I, pp. 1-11.

² Mackail, I, p. 186.

nineteenth century could only mean that Morris must draw upon the only similar body of images and associations which existed—the romantic tradition

If Morris did not succeed in creating a fully adequate medium for conveying the true spirit of saga into English, and if his romantic equipment tended on occasion to soften and distort his material, his services as a pioneer must not be under-estimated "Old Northern Literature in England owes an incalculable debt" to William Morris, in the opinion of one modern scholar of Icelandic.¹ It was, unexpectedly, in his most ambitious and freest rendering of saga material—in his epic poem *Sigurd the Volsung*—that he succeeded best in impressing his own age with the power of Icelandic literature. Despite the hesitation expressed in his letter to Professor Norton in 1869, he embarked on the work in 1875 and completed it in November, 1876. In one sense, such a free re-creation of the literature of another society was an impossibility from the outset. Morris, on occasion, consciously used the old story as a vehicle for contemporary themes. In the result, the poem is a medley of different elements. It is possible to feel the pressure of Morris's feelings about his own society, the imminence of his own participation in political life, straining the fabric of the epic, as in the words put into Brynhild's mouth in her last encounter with Sigurd (in Morris's first version)

"O where are the days and the hours and the deeds they brought to birth'
 Are they dead, are they dreams forgotten, are they solacing dreams of the earth,
 Are they stones in the House of Heaven, are they carven work of the shrine
 Where the days and the deeds earth failed of in heaven's fulfilment shine?
 Ah once was I far-foreseeing, but the vision fades and fails,
 They have set down a sword beside me, they have cumbered the even with tales
 And I grow weary of waking, for gone is the splendour of day;
 In my hand are the gifts of Sigurd, but Sigurd is vanished away
 But the windy East shall brighten and the empty house of night
 And the Gods shall arise in the dawning and the world shall long for the light "'²

¹ Bertha S. Phillpotts, D.B.E., *Edda and Saga* (1931), p. 214

² *Works*, Vol. XII, p. xxix

As Dr Hoare reveals,¹ the original passionate motivations of the characters have been softened, and in their place greed and the lust for gold have been raised to be the main motivating force of the tragedy; and, while this is yet another indication of Morris's preoccupation with the problems of his own society, it is at the expense of the tragic situation of the original.

But *Sigurd the Volsung* cannot be judged in the same light as a close translation. It is a new poem, inspired by the saga, but translated into the language of romantic poetry. Morris was no longer striving to create a special language adequate to carry the spirit of the sagas. He was content to employ his romantic technique (modified to some degree to suit the material) in order to convey, less the spirit of the original, than the feelings aroused in him by the old legends. In the significance given to action rather than to mood, in its suggestion of heroic values, the poem marks a complete break with *The Earthly Paradise*. The poem never reaches epic stature in its own right. How could it do, when its inspiration is literary, rather than being derived from the experience of a whole people? The self-conscious alliteration, the long set speeches, the lack of hardness and muscle in the long lines—all these tend to keep Morris, the poet, in between the reader and the actions of the poem. And yet the poem *does* succeed, time after time, in suggesting heroic values, as it were at second remove—in calling to mind the qualities of other epic literature of other times. It does not so much generate heroic feeling as “fix” heroic associations, generated in other ages and by other poets. This was the most that Morris could do, in a mean and unheroic age, just as his own inspiration came less from experience than from literary sources. But it was enough to arouse in some of his contemporaries an excitement akin to his own when first he encountered the sagas, and to give them a glimpse of qualities latent in man which put their own age to shame. “That is the stuff for me”, said young George Bernard Shaw, after Morris had recited some passages. “there is nothing like it”² And Morris himself, while moving in the great legend of Sigurd and Brynhild, was gaining every day the strength to issue his first public challenge to the “age of shoddy”.

¹ Hoare, *op cit*, pp 67-76

² May Morris, II, p lxxvii