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## BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION

By J. W. Mackail

William Morris, one of the most eminent imaginative writers of the Victorian age, differs from most other poets and men of letters in two ways—first, he did great work in many other things as well as in literature; secondly, he had beliefs of his own about the meaning and conduct of life, about all that men think and do and make, very different from those of ordinary people, and he carried out these views in his writings as well as in all the other work he did throughout his life.

He was born in 1834. His father, a member of a business firm in the City of London, was a wealthy man and lived in Essex, in a country house with large gardens and fields belonging to it, on the edge of Epping Forest. Until the age of thirteen Morris was at home among a large family of brothers and sisters. He delighted in the country life and especially in the Forest, which is one of the most romantic parts of England, and which he made the scene of many real and imaginary adventures. From fourteen to eighteen he was at school at Marlborough among the Wiltshire downs, in a country full of beauty and history, and close to another of the ancient forests of England, that of Savernake. He proceeded from school to Exeter College, Oxford, where he soon formed a close friendship with a remarkable set of young men of his own age; chief among these, and Morris's closest friend for the rest of his life, was Edward Burne-Jones, the painter. Study of the works of John Ruskin confirmed them in the admiration which they already felt for the life and art of the Middle Ages. In the summer vacation of 1855 the two friends went to Northern France to see the beautiful towns and splendid churches with which that country had been filled between the eleventh and the fifteenth centuries; and there they made up their minds that they cared for art more than for anything else, such as wealth or ease or the opinion of the world, and that as soon as they left Oxford they would become artists. By art they meant the making of beauty for the adornment and enrichment of human life,

and as artists they meant to strive against all that was ugly or mean or untruthful in the life of their own time.

Art, as they understood it, is one single thing covering the whole of life but practised in many special forms that differ one from another. Among these many forms of art there are two of principal importance. One of the two is the art which is concerned with the making and adorning of the houses in which men and women live; that is to say, architecture, with all its attendant arts of decoration, including sculpture, painting, the designing and ornamenting of metal, wood and glass, carpets, paper-hangings, woven, dyed and embroidered cloths of all kinds, and all the furniture which a house may have for use or pleasure. The other is the art which is concerned with the making and adorning of stories in prose and verse. Both of these kinds of art were practised by Morris throughout his life. The former was his principal occupation; he made his living by it, and built up in it a business which alone made him famous, and which has had a great influence towards bringing more beauty into daily domestic life in England and in other countries also. His profession was thus that of a manufacturer, designer, and decorator. When he had to describe himself by a single word, he called himself a designer. But it is the latter branch of his art which principally concerns us now, the art of a maker and adorer of stories. He became famous in this kind of art also, both in prose and verse, as a romance-writer and a poet. But he spoke of it as play rather than work, and although he spent much time and great pains on it, he regarded it as relaxation from the harder and more constant work of his life, which was carrying on the business of designing, painting, weaving, dyeing, printing and other occupations of that kind. In later life he also gave much of his time to political and social work, with the object of bringing back mankind into a path from which they had strayed since the end of the Middle Ages, and creating a state of society in which art, by the people and for the people, a joy to the maker and the user, might be naturally, easily, and universally produced.

Even as a boy Morris had been noted for his love of reading and inventing tales; but he did not begin to write any until he had been for a couple of years at Oxford. His earliest poems and his earliest written prose tales belong to the same year, 1855, in which he de-

terminated to make art his profession. The first of either that he published appeared in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, which was started and managed by him and his friends in 1856. In 1858, after he had left Oxford, he brought out a volume of poems called, after the title of the first poem in the book, "The Defence of Guenevere." Soon afterwards he founded, with some of his old Oxford friends and others whom he had made in London, among whom Dante Gabriel Rossetti was the leading spirit, the firm of Morris and Company, manufacturers and decorators. His business, in which he was the principal and finally the sole partner, took up the main part of his time. He had also married, and built himself a beautiful small house in Kent, the decoration of which went busily on for several years. Among all these other occupations he almost gave up writing stories, but never ceased reading and thinking about them. In 1865 he came back to live in London, where, being close to his work, he had more leisure for other things; and between 1865 and 1870 he wrote between thirty and forty tales in verse, containing not less than seventy or eighty thousand lines in all. The longest of these tales, "The Life and Death of Jason," appeared in 1867. It is the old Greek story of the ship Argo and the voyage in quest of the Golden Fleece. Twenty-five other tales are included in "The Earthly Paradise," published in three parts between 1868 and 1870.

During these years Morris learned Icelandic, and his next published works were translations of some of the Icelandic sagas, writings composed from six to nine hundred years ago, and containing a mass of legends, histories and romances finely told in a noble language. These translations were followed in 1876 by his great epic poem, "Sigurd the Volsung and the Fall of the Niblungs." In that poem he retold a story of which an Icelandic version, the "Volsunga Saga," written in the twelfth century, is one of the world's masterpieces. It is the great epic of Northern Europe, just as the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" of Homer are the chief epics of ancient Greece, and the "Æneid" of Virgil the chief epic of the Roman Empire. Morris's love for these great stories of ancient times led him to rewrite the tale of the Volsungs and Niblungs, which he reckoned the finest of them all, more fully and on a larger scale than it had ever been written before. He had already, in 1875, translated the "Æneid" into verse, and some ten years later, in 1886-87, he also made a verse transla-

tion of the "Odyssey." In 1873 he had also written another very beautiful poem, "Love is Enough," containing the story of three pairs of lovers, a countryman and country-woman, an emperor and empress, and a prince and peasant girl. This poem was written in the form of a play, not of a narrative.

To write prose was at first for Morris more difficult than to write poetry. Verse came naturally to him, and he composed in prose only with much effort until after long practice. Except for his early tales in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine and his translations of Icelandic sagas, he wrote little but poetry until the year 1882. About that time he began to give lectures and addresses, and wrote them in great numbers during the latter part of his life. A number of them were collected and published in two volumes called "Hopes and Fears for Art" and "Signs of Change," and many others have been published separately. He thus gradually accustomed himself to prose composition. For several years he was too busy with other things, which he thought more important, to spend time on story-telling; but his instinct forced itself out again, and in 1886 he began the series of romances in prose or in mixed prose and verse which went on during the next ten years. The chief of these are, "A Dream of John Ball," "The House of Wolfings," "The Roots of the Mountains," "News from Nowhere," "The Glittering Plain," "The Wood beyond the World," "The Well at the World's End," "The Water of the Wondrous Isles," and "The Sundering Flood." During the same years he also translated, out of Icelandic and old French books, more of the stories which he had long known and admired. "The Sundering Flood" was written in his last illness, and finished by him within a few days of his death, in the autumn of 1896.

## INTRODUCTION TO SIGURD

By The Editors

The story of Sigurd is important to English people not only for its wondrous beauty, but also on account of its great age, and of what it tells us about our own Viking ancestors, who first knew the story.

The tale was known all over the north of Europe, in Denmark, in Germany, in Norway and Sweden, and in Iceland, hundreds of years before it was written down. Sometimes different names were given to the characters, sometimes the events of the story were slightly altered, but in the main points it was one and the same tale.

If we look at a map of Europe showing the nations as they were rather more than a thousand years ago, we see the names of Saxons, Goths, Danes, and Frisians marked on the lands around the Baltic Sea. Those who bore these names were the makers of the tale of Sigurd. The name of the Saxons is, of course, the best known to us, and next in importance come the people we call Danes, or Northmen, or Vikings, who attacked the coasts of the Saxon kingdoms in England. The Saxons came from part of the land that is now known as Germany, and the Vikings from Denmark and from Scandinavia.

A third important tribe was that of the Goths, who dwelt first in South Sweden, and then in Germany.

All these people resembled one another in their way of life, in their religion, and in their ideas of what deeds were good and what were evil. Their lands were barren—too mountainous or too cold to bring forth fruitful crops, and their homes were not such as would tempt men never to leave them. So, though they built their little groups of wooden houses in the valleys of their lands, and made fields and pastures about them, these were often left to the care of the women and the feeble men, while the strong men made raids over the sea to other countries, where they engaged in the fighting which they loved, and whence they brought back plunder to their homes. North, South, East, and West they went, till few parts of Europe had not learnt to know and fear them.

Their ships were long and narrow, driven often by oars as well as sails, and outside them, along the bulwarks, the crew hung their round shields made of yellow wood from the lime-tree. The men wore byrnie or breast-plates, and helmets, and they were armed with swords, long spears, or heavy battle-axes. They were enemies none could afford to despise, for they had great stature and strength of body, joined to such fierceness and delight in war that they held a man disgraced if he died peacefully at home. Moreover, they knew nothing of mercy to the conquered.

Courage, not only to fight, but also to bear suffering without impatience or complaint, and the virtue of faithfulness were the qualities they most honoured. To be wanting in courage was disgraceful in their eyes, but it was equally disgraceful to refuse to help kinsfolk, to lie, to deceive, or to desert a chief.

If they put their enemies to death with fearful tortures, they did not treat them more severely than the traitors they discovered among themselves, and if they had no pity for those they conquered, yet they knew well how to admire great leaders, and how to serve them faithfully. But we can best realise their ideas on these matters by considering their religion and their stories.

They worshipped one chief god, Odin, and other gods and goddesses who were his children. Odin was often called All-father because he was the helper and friend of human beings, and appeared on earth in the form of an old man, "one-eyed and seeming ancient," with cloud-blue hood and grey cloak. He had courage, strength, and wondrous wisdom, for he knew all events that happened in the world, and he understood the speech of birds, and all kinds of charms and magic arts. Men served him by brave fighting in a good cause, and when they perished in battle he received their souls in his dwelling of Valhalla in the city of Asgard, where they spent each day in warfare, and where at evening the dead were revived, the wounded healed, and all feasted together in Odin's palace. There they fed upon the flesh of the boar Saehrimner, which was renewed as fast as it was eaten. Certain maidens called Valkyrie, or Choosers of the Slain, were Odin's messengers whom he sent forth into the battles of the world to find the warriors whom he had appointed to die, and to bring them to Valhalla.

In the story of Sigurd Odin has a very important part to play, but for the understanding of the tale it is necessary to know something about another of the gods. This is Loki, who, though sprung from the race of the giants, yet lived with the sons of Odin in Asgard, behaving sometimes as their trusty helper, but more often as their cunning enemy. He caused much wretchedness, not only among the gods, but on earth also, for he delighted in the sight of misery. His vices were all those most hateful to the Norse people, for he was before all things a liar, a deceiver, a faith-breaker, a skilful worker of mischief by guile instead of by fair fight. There are many stories of his cunning thefts, of the miseries he wrought among his companions, and of his envy of the beloved god Balder, whom he slew by a trick. His children were terrible monsters, as hated as himself. Yet, strange to say, Loki was Odin's companion in many of his adventures.

The gods inhabited Asgard, a city standing on a high mountain in the middle of the world. Odin's palace of Valhalla was there, and other palaces for his sons and daughters. All round Asgard lay Midgard, or the ordinary world of men and women. Its caves and waste places were inhabited by dwarfs, whom Odin had banished from the light of day for various ill deeds. They were a spiteful and cunning race, jealous of mankind, and eager to recover their lost power. Their strength lay in their wondrous skill in handicraft, for they could forge more deadly weapons, and fashion more lovely jewels than any made by the hands of men. But, though possessed of wisdom, they had no spirit of kindness, no respect for right, and no dislike of wrong.

Around Midgard lay the sea, and beyond that Utgard, a hideous frozen country inhabited by giants, enemies of the gods.

But this arrangement of the world was only for a season. The gods themselves looked forward to a time of defeat and death, when Asgard should perish in flames and the world with it, and the sun and moon should be darkened, and they themselves should be slain. This great day was called Ragnarok, or sometimes the Twilight of the Gods. Then Loki would gather giants and monsters to a great battle against the gods, who would slay their enemies, but

who would themselves fall in the struggle. The sea would drown the earth, the stars would fall, and all things would pass away.

This terrible fate the gods awaited with calm and cheerfulness, showing even greater courage than in their many deeds of war. They had to submit to this fate, for there were three beings even greater than they. These were the Norns, deciders of the fate of gods and men alike. They were three giant maidens who dwelt by a sacred, wisdom-giving fountain, and who controlled the lives of men, giving to each sickness and health, success and failure and death when they would. No man or god might escape what the Norns decreed for him.

Many stories of these gods, together with tales of famous men, were told among the northern peoples. These stories were passed on from one to another by word of mouth, till they grew much longer and fuller, and the happening of certain historical events helped to take them from country to country.

As we have seen, all the races of the North were warlike and eager for adventure, and so when trouble came upon them in their own homes, they readily took to the sea to plunder the coasts or to conquer other lands. Between 800 and 900 A.D., when the Danes were invading England, many were driven from Norway because they refused to submit to a king called Harold Fairhair, and when he pursued them to the Orkney and Faroe Islands they took refuge on the coasts of Iceland. There they settled, built themselves wooden houses, planted such crops as would grow in that bleak land, and founded a commonwealth. Little by little they left the old Viking life, and it lived only in their songs and stories.

They had come to Iceland with a vast stock of tales in poetry, which were related or sung by professional poets, called skalds, at all kinds of feasts and gatherings. The skalds arranged and improved the old stories, but they were not written down until about the time of our King Stephen, when some unknown writer collected them into one book called the Elder Edda. Very soon after this another book was written containing the same stories in prose and called the Younger or Prose Edda. In this way many of the old poems, and a great many stories containing much information about

the religion which the people took with them to Iceland, have been preserved.

But it was from neither of the Eddas that William Morris took his story of Sigurd.

All through the period from 800 A.D. till about the time of Henry III. of England, the skalds had been re-telling many of the poetic stories in prose, and as the people grew more civilised, one tale after another was written down in its new form.

These prose tales were called Sagas, and among the very greatest is the Volsunga Saga, or Story of Sigurd. It is a tale which has been told in other lands besides Iceland. We read part of the same story in the Old English poem of Beowulf, and in Germany it was made into a great poem called the Nibelungenlied. The German musician, Richard Wagner, set it to music in a famous series of operas called the Nibelungen Ring. But his tale differs in many points from that contained in Morris's poem, for Morris chose the old saga as it was written in Iceland, not the German story. On this he founded his poem, adding much beautiful description, and greatly lengthening the whole.

The story deals first with a certain King Volsung, to whose son, Sigmund, Odin presented a magic sword.

But Siggeir, the jealous king of the Goths, slew Volsung, and took Sigmund prisoner that he might have the sword for himself. Only after many toils and perils did Sigmund win it back and reign in his father's kingdom. At last in his old age he fell in battle and the sword of Odin was shattered. But his wife, Queen Hiordis, kept the fragments for the son who was born to her soon after in Denmark, whither she fled for safety. This son of Sigmund and Hiordis was Sigurd the Volsung. He was brought up in Denmark and grew strong and beautiful, brave, kind of heart, and utterly truthful in word and deed.

When he became a man he longed to win fame and kingship by mighty deeds, and when his tutor told him of a great dragon that guarded a hoard of ill-gotten gold in the mountains, he resolved to kill it. So the fragments of Odin's sword were forged into a new blade, and Sigurd slew the dragon and took the gold, but with it he

brought on himself a curse which had been put upon the treasure by the dwarf from whom it had been stolen.

Sigurd then found and wakened Brynhild, a maiden who lay in an enchanted sleep upon a high mountain. They loved one another, and Sigurd gave her a ring from the dragon's treasure, promising to return and marry her.

Then the curse led him to join with the fierce and treacherous Niblungs or Cloudy People. Their king and his mother grew jealous when they saw Sigurd more mighty and more beloved than themselves, and by enchantments they caused him to forget Brynhild, to wed the princess Gudrun, and at last to aid the Niblung king, Gunnar, to win Brynhild for his own wife.

Then the curse of the gold brought death to many, for Sigurd and Brynhild discovered all the treachery of the Niblungs, who, in their anger, slew Sigurd, and Brynhild killed herself that she might not live and sorrow for him.

Such is the story of Sigurd as it was told a thousand years ago in distant Iceland, and as it is retold in this poem by William Morris.





## THE STORY OF SIGURD THE VOLSUNG.

### BOOK I.

#### SIGMUND.

*Of the dwelling of King Volsung, and the wedding of Signy his daughter.*

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 were 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.  
There dwelt men merry-hearted, and in hope exceeding  
great  
Met the good days and the evil as they went the way of fate:  
There the Gods were unforgotten, yea whiles they walked  
with men,  
Though e'en in that world's beginning rose a murmur now  
and again  
Of the midward time and the fading and the last of the latter  
days,  
And the entering in of the terror, and the death of the Peo-  
ple's Praise.

Thus was the dwelling of Volsung, the King of the Mid-  
world's Mark,  
As a rose in the winter season, a candle in the dark;  
And as in all other matters 'twas all earthly houses' crown,  
And the least of its wall-hung shields was a battle-world's

renown,  
So therein withal was a marvel and a glorious thing to see,  
For amidst of its midmost hall-floor sprang up a mighty tree,  
That reared its blessings roofward, and wreathed the roof-  
tree dear  
With the glory of the summer and the garland of the year.  
I know not how they called it ere Volsung changed his life,  
But his dawning of fair promise, and his noontide of the  
strife,  
His eve of the battle-reaping and the garnering of his fame,  
Have bred us many a story and named us many a name;  
And when men tell of Volsung, they call that war-duke's  
tree,  
That crownèd stem, the Branstock; and so was it told unto  
me.

So there was the throne of Volsung beneath its blossoming  
bower,  
But high o'er the roof-crest red it rose 'twixt tower and tower,  
And therein were the wild hawks dwelling, abiding the dole  
of their lord;  
And they wailed high over the wine, and laughed to the  
waking sword.

Still were its boughs but for them, when lo, on an even of  
May  
Comes a man from Siggeir the King with a word for his  
mouth to say:  
"All hail to thee King Volsung, from the King of the Goths I  
come:  
He hath heard of thy sword victorious and thine abundant  
home;  
He hath heard of thy sons in the battle, the fillers of Odin's  
Hall;  
And a word hath the west-wind blown him, (full fruitful be  
its fall!)  
A word of thy daughter Signy the crown of womanhood:  
Now he deems thy friendship goodly, and thine help in the  
battle good,  
And for these will he give his friendship and his battle-aid