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[Pg 1]

THE STORY OF SIGURD THE VOLSUNG AND THE FALL OF THE NIBLUNGS.

BOOK I.

SIGMUND.

in this book is told of the earlier days of the volsungs, and of sigmund the father of sigurd, and of his deeds, and of how he died while sigurd was yet unborn in his mother's womb.

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,
[Pg 2] And the entering in of the terror, and the death of the
People'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
again:
But if thou wouldst grant his asking, and make his heart full
fain,
Then shalt thou give him a matter, saith he, without a price,
[Pg 3] – Signy the fairer than fair, Signy the wiser than wise."

Such words in the hall of the Volsungs spake the Earl of
Siggeir the Goth,
Bearing the gifts and the gold, the ring, and the tokens of
troth.
But the King's heart laughed within him and the King's sons
deemed it good;
For they dreamed how they fared with the Goths o'er ocean
and acre and wood,
Till all the north was theirs, and the utmost southern lands.

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: then spake King Volsung and
said:

"A great king woos thee, daughter; wilt thou lie in a great
king's bed,
And bear earth's kings on thy bosom, that our name may
never die?"

A fire lit up her face, and her voice was e'en as a cry:
"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."

Then would he question her kindly, as one who loved her
sore,

But she put forth her hand and smiled, and her face was
flushed no more

"Would God it might otherwise be! but wert thou to will it
not,

Yet should I will it and wed him, and rue my life and my
lot."

Lowly and soft she said it; but spake out louder now:

"Be of good cheer, King Volsung! for such a man art thou,
That what thou dost well-counselled, goodly and fair it is,
And what thou dost unwitting, the Gods have bidden thee
this:

So work all things together for the fame of thee and thine.
And now meseems at my wedding shall be a hallowed sign,
That shall give thine heart a joyance, whatever shall follow
after."

[Pg 4] She spake, 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.

So wendeth his way on the morrow that Earl of the Gothland
King,

Bearing the gifts and the gold, and King Volsung's tokening,
And a word in his mouth moreover, a word of blessing and
hail,

And a bidding to King Siggeir to come ere the June-tide fail
And wed him to white-hand Signy and bear away his bride,
While sleepeth the field of the fishes amidst the summer-tide.

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:
There were gold-rings God-fashioned, and many a Dwarf-
wrought sword,
And many a Queen-wrought kirtle and many a written
spear;
So came they to the acres, and drew the threshold near,
And amidst of the garden blossoms, on the grassy, fruit-
grown land,
Was Volsung the King of the Wood-world with his sons on
either hand;
Therewith down lighted Siggeir the lord of a mighty folk,
Yet showed he by King Volsung as the bramble by the oak,
Nor reached his helm to the shoulder of the least of Vol-
sung's sons.
And so into the hall they wended, the Kings and their
mighty ones;
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.

But on the morrow noontide when the sun was high and
bare,
More glorious was the banquet, and now was Signy there,
And she sat beside King Siggeir, a glorious bride forsooth;
[Pg 5] Ruddy and white was she wrought as the fair-stained
sea-beast's tooth,

But she neither laughed nor spake, and her eyes were hard
and cold,
And with wandering side-long looks her lord would she be-
hold.
That saw Sigmund her brother, the eldest Volsung son,
And oft he looked upon her, and their eyes met now and
anon,
And ruth arose in his heart, and hate of Siggeir the Goth,
And there had he broken the wedding, but for plighted
promise and troth.
But those twain were beheld of Siggeir, and he deemed of the
Volsung kin,
That amid their might and their malice small honour should
he win;
Yet thereof made he no semblance, but abided times to be
And laughed out with the loudest, amid the hope and the
glee.
And nought of all saw Volsung, as he dreamed of the coming
glory,
And how the Kings of his kindred should fashion the round
world's story.

So round about the Branstock they feast in the gleam of the
gold;
And though the deeds of man-folk were not yet waxen old,
Yet had they tales for songcraft, and the blossomed garth of
rhyme;
Tales of the framing of all things and the entering in of time
From the halls of the outer heaven; so near they knew the
door.
Wherefore uprose a sea-king, and his hands that loved 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.

But e'en as men's hearts were hearkening some heard the
thunder pass
O'er the cloudless noontide heaven; and some men turned
about
And deemed that in the doorway they heard a man laugh
out.
Then into the Volsung dwelling a mighty man there strode,
One-eyed and seeming ancient, yet bright his visage glowed:
Cloud-blue was the hood upon him, and his kirtle gleaming-
grey
As the latter morning sundog when the storm is on the way:
A bill he bore on his shoulder, whose mighty ashen beam
Burnt bright with the flame of the sea and the blended sil-
ver's gleam.
And such was the guise of his raiment as the Volsung elders
had told
[Pg 6] Was borne by their fathers' fathers, and the first that
warred in the wold.

So strode he to the Branstock nor greeted any lord,
But forth from his cloudy raiment he drew a gleaming
sword,
And smote it deep in the tree-bole, and the wild hawks over-
head
Laughed 'neath the naked heaven as at last he spake and
said:
"Earls of the Goths, and Volsungs, abiders on the earth,
Lo there amid the Branstock a blade of plenteous worth!
The folk of the war-wand's forgers wrought never better
steel
Since first the burg of heaven uprose for man-folk's weal.
Now let the man among you whose heart and hand may
shift
To pluck it from the oakwood e'en take it for my gift.
Then ne'er, but his own heart falter, its point and edge shall
fail
Until the night's beginning and the ending of the tale.
Be merry Earls of the Goth-folk, O Volsung Sons be wise,

And reap the battle-acre that ripening for you lies:
For they told me in the wild wood, I heard on the mountain
side,
That the shining house of heaven is wrought exceeding wide,
And that there the Early-comers shall have abundant rest
While Earth grows scant of great ones, and fadeth from its
best,
And fadeth from its midward and groweth poor and vile:—
All hail to thee King Volsung! farewell for a little while!"

So sweet his speaking sounded, so wise his words did seem,
That moveless all men sat there, as in a happy dream
We stir not lest we waken; but there his speech had end,
And slowly down the hall-floor, and outward did he wend;
And none would cast him a question or follow on his ways,
For they knew that the gift was Odin's, a sword for the world
to praise.

But now spake Volsung the King: "Why sit ye silent and still?
Is the Battle-Father's visage a token of terror and ill?
Arise O Volsung Children, Earls of the Goths arise,
[Pg 7] And set your hands to the hilts as mighty men and
wise!
Yet deem it not too easy; for belike a fateful blade
Lies there in the heart of the Branstock for a fated warrior
made."

Now therewith spake King Siggeir: "King Volsung give me a
grace
To try it the first of all men, lest another win my place
And mere chance-hap steal my glory and the gain that I
might win."

Then somewhat laughed King Volsung, and he said: "O
Guest, begin;
Though herein is the first as the last, for the Gods have long
to live,

Nor hath Odin yet forgotten unto whom the gift he would give."

Then forth to the tree went Siggeir, the Goth-folk's mighty lord,
And laid his hand on the gemstones, and strained at the glorious sword
Till his heart grew black with anger; and never a word he said
As he wended back to the high-seat: but Signy waxed blood-red
When he sat him adown beside her; and her heart was nigh to break
For the shame and the fateful boding: and therewith King Volsung spake:

"Thus comes back empty-handed the mightiest King of Earth,
And how shall the feeble venture? yet each man knows his worth;
And today may a great beginning from a little seed upspring
To o'erpass many a great one that hath the name of King:
So stand forth free and unfree; stand forth both most and least:
But first ye Earls of the Goth-folk, ye lovely lords we feast."

Upstood the Earls of Siggeir, and each man drew anigh
And deemed his time was coming for a glorious gain and high;
But for all their mighty shaping and their deeds in the battle-wood,
No looser in the Branstock that gift of Odin stood.
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:
[Pg 8] And the least and the worst of them all was a mighty

man of war.

But for all their mighty shaping, and the struggle and the strain

Of their hands, the deft in labour, they tugged thereat in vain;

And still as the shouting and jeers, and the names of men and the laughter

Beat backward from gable to gable, and rattled o'er roof-tree and rafter,

Moody and still sat Siggeir; for he said: "They have trained me here

As a mock for their woodland bondsmen; and yet shall they buy it dear."

Now the tumult sank a little, and men cried on Volsung the King

And his sons, the hedge of battle, to try the fateful thing.

So Volsung laughed, and answered: "I will set me to the toil, Lest these my guests of the Goth-folk should deem I fear the foil.

Yet nought am I ill-sworded, and the oldest friend is best;

And this, my hand's first fellow, will I bear to the grave-mound's rest,

Nor wield meanwhile another: Yea this shall I have in hand When mid the host of Odin in the Day of Doom I stand."

Therewith from his belt of battle he raised the golden sheath, And showed the peace-strings glittering about the hidden death:

Then he laid his hand on the Branstock, and cried: "O tree beloved,

I thank thee of thy good-heart that so little thou art moved:

Abide thou thus, green bower, when I am dead and gone

And the best of all my kindred a better day hath won!"

Then as a young man laughed he, and on the hilts of gold His hand, the battle-breaker, took fast and certain hold,

And long he drew and strained him, but mended not the tale,
Yet none the more thereover his mirth of heart did fail;
But he wended to the high-seat and thence began to cry:

"Sons I have gotten and cherished, now stand ye forth to try;
Lest Odin tell in God-home how from the way he strayed,
And how to the man he would not he gave away his blade."
[Pg 9] So therewithal rose Rerir, and wasted might and main;
Then Gunthiof, and then Hunthiof, they wearied them in vain;
Nought was the might of Agnar; nought Helgi could avail;
Sigi the tall and Solar no further brought the tale,
Nor Geirmund the priest of the temple, nor Gylfi of the wood.

At last by the side of the Branstock Sigmund the Volsung stood,
And with right hand wise in battle the precious sword-hilt caught,
Yet in a careless fashion, as he deemed it all for nought:
When lo, from floor to rafter went up a shattering shout,
For aloft in the hand of Sigmund the naked blade shone out
As high o'er his head he shook it: for the sword had come away
From the grip of the heart of the Branstock, as though all loose it lay.
A little while he stood there mid the glory of the hall,
Like the best of the trees of the garden, when the April sun-beams fall
On its blossomed boughs in the morning, and tell of the days to be;
Then back unto the high-seat he wended soberly;
For this was the thought within him; Belike the day shall come
When I shall bide here lonely amid the Volsung home,
Its glory and sole avenger, its after-summer seed.
Yea, I am the hired of Odin, his workday will to speed,

And the harvest-tide shall be heavy. — What then, were it
come and past
And I laid by the last of the sheaves with my wages earned at
the last?

He lifted his eyes as he thought it, for now was he come to
his place,
And there he stood by his father and met Siggeir face to face,
And he saw him blithe and smiling, and heard him how he
spake:

"O best of the sons of Volsung, I am merry for thy sake
And the glory that thou hast gained us; but whereas thine
hand and heart
Are e'en now the lords of the battle, how lack'st thou for thy
part
A matter to better the best? Wilt thou overgild fine gold
Or dye the red rose redder? So I prithee let me hold
This sword that comes to thine hand on the day I wed thy
kin.

[Pg 10] For at home have I a store-house; there is mountain-
gold therein

The weight of a war-king's harness; there is silver plenteous
store;

There is iron, and huge-wrought amber, that the southern
men love sore,

When they sell me the woven wonder, the purple born of the
sea;

And it hangeth up in that bower; and all this is a gift for thee:
But the sword that came to my wedding, methinketh it meet
and right,

That it lie on my knees in the council and stead me in the
fight."

But Sigmund laughed and answered, and he spake a scornful
word:

"And if I take twice that treasure, will it buy me Odin's
sword,

And the gift that the Gods have given? will it buy me again