

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

Prose Romances of William Morris

(Feb 14th 1891)

Some of the company present tonight may, perhaps, be acquainted with Mr. Morris as a writer of his charming tales and romances in verse as can easily be found in the English language; but I venture to say that very few indeed know, even by name, the prose romances which he has been producing during the last few years; while probably more know of him as a maker of chintzes and wall papers than as a poet or romancer. These romances have not been heralded with any pompous introductions or advertising, but have been left to find their way to such part of the public as might care to inquire for them.

Mr. Morris has not in these romances deserted the field of Teutonic legend and folk-lore which he has made so strikingly his own in parts of the "Earthly Paradise", in "Sigund the Vulsing", and in the "Defense of Guinevere"; but he has blended the methodologic and legendary element of historic veracity by which he has sought to restore to us our ancestors of the German forests and mountains and the "Paks" and "Fjords" of Scandinavia. How far he has succeeded in this, I hope to enable you in some small measure to judge, but it will be sufficient reward if I have induced some to read and judge for themselves.

In the dawn of history of the Teutonic peoples in the second century of the vulgar era we find a Germanic tribe, one of those afterward known under the national name of Goths, engaged in conflict with the Roman Empire at the period of its greatest glory and extension under Marcus Aurelius.

This tribe was known to the Romans as the Marcomanni, a name which we can easily turn back in its Teutonic form as marksmen, the men of the Mark or cleared space in the forest. This was probably only a tribal designation, for we learn from the Malsburg glass in the Lex Salica that the general term employed by the German invaders of the Roman Empire, to designate them selves was Theoda, a word meaning simply the people, from which is derived the words Deutsche, Dutch, Tedesco, and probably, but not so surely Teuton and Teutonic. These Marcomanni kept the whole force of the Empire busy for years and held the Roman invaders out of their forests while they threatened the provinces of the Empire along the Danube during the latter half of the life of the philosopher Emperor.

Two years ago Mr. Morris felt himself impelled to tell us what might have happened during one of the raids of the Romans into the forests held by these Marcomanni. Indeed, but for the skillful and poetic use of the superstitions of the Germans he has made we might fairly say what did happen not once but many times in the course of this border war and this he has done in the first of his romances, "The House of the Wolfings."

The title of this work in full is "ATale of the House of the Wolfings and all the kindreds of the Mark, written in prose and verse, by William Morris." When I have spoken of

these as prose romances I refer to the fact that the bulk of them is written in prose, but they contain a considerable amount of verse in the shape of introduced songs of which as well as of the orations which in the House of the Wolfings at least are sometimes in verse, I hope to give you a sample.

And now to turn to the book itself. It opens with a description of the land and of the people, and this very description is so noble a sample of what good if somewhat archaic English should be when applied to such a subject that I quoted here by way of preparing you for further taste of the verse and narrative parts.

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The tale goes on:

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So the host of the men of the Mark set forth to meet the invasion of the Romans. And the friends of the Houses gathered and met on the road; and on the march there were many things said and among them was this, which I think worthy of quotation as a noble description of the great battle in which Marius overthrew the Germans: on the road some of the warriors of the different Houses had fallen into a conversation about the manners and customs and prowess of the Romans. The talk proceeded as follows:

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Then the various peoples of this nation gathered in their folk-mote; and in this meeting of the people were two war-dukes elected, one of them Theodolf, and the other, with whom the tale has less to do, one Otter. And they met the advance guard of the Romans and defeated them. And, to make a long story short, the Wood Sun had foreseen that one must die for the people, and that this one must be her love, Theodolf; and it was for this that she had given him the magic hauberk; detail of which, though a little out of the order is the story she told him in this form:

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And so through two battles did Theodolf wear this enchanted hauberk in each, in the heat of battle, did he fall down fainting and was he carried from the field, while his people were beaten. But finally, through the farsighted powers of the Hall Sun, the Wood Sun was prevailed upon to tell this story which I have just read, and in the last and final battle with the Romans after the Romans had entered into the Mark and had occupied and fortified the House of the Wolfings, Theodolf was slain, the Romans were defeated and were driven from the habitations of the Markmen never to return.

I have told this tale very briefly in the hope merely of giving such an idea of it as might induce some of those present to read these romances for themselves, and I propose to give some further samples of the style in prose of the author in this romance.

And now I take a passage in the description of the battle in the Mark after the Romans had entered it, between the Romans and the Goths. And this description embraces the

effects of the magic hauberk.

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And, in conclusion our author says:

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The tale tells not that the Romans ever fell on the Mark again; for about this time they began to stay the spreading of their dominion, or even to draw in its boundaries somewhat.

And this is all detail as detail concerning the House of the Wolfings and the Kindreds of the Mark.

Three hundred years later, near Chalons, in the great plains of champagne, the Allied hosts of the Romans and the Goths under the joint command of Theodoric, the king of the Goths, and Stilicho, the Imperial general, overthrew the first, so far as history knows, of these Tartar invasions which, at one time or another, have turned some of the fairest provinces of Europe into a desert, and the consequences of the last of which have scarcely yet disappeared from the map of Europe.

Some years later this great migratory horde, led by Atta, broke to pieces, and the Huns became no longer a nation or an army, but a mere collection of wandering tribes; and it is at this period of history in the conflicts which may, nay must, have taken place between the Germans and the Huns in the foothills of what are evidently the Eastern Alps, that Mr. Morris opens his next romance, "the Roots of the Mountains". The introduction to this lies upon the title page, and reads as follows:

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Now, as to the story of "The Roots of the Mountains" it is a tale of the simple manners and customs of the old German Folk; but it does not contain by any means so large an admixture of the supernatural as does the tail of "The House of the Wolfings". The author in this case makes no demand on us to believe, or feign belief, in any communion between man and the Gods except that communion which is matter of belief among all primitive peoples, known by the name of "second sight."

The hero of the story is called "Face-of-God," and sometimes Gold-mane.

In the course of wandering into the woods he fell in with some people dwelling in waste places, and grew to love one of the House of the Wolf and the tale tells of the fortunes of his love and of the fortunes of the war between his people and the invading Huns.

I will not delay to tell this story because it is not so much the story itself, which is but a simple one, but the manner of its telling, that is so worthy of note. And this I will try to illustrate by some selections. And first, I read from a place where Gold-mane is leaving the valley wherein he dwells on an excursion in the woods

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Now, a little later in the tale is the description of the “yule-feast” which though somewhat long, I will read entire, as it seems to me a very noble and poetic description of what I believe to have been a real Germanic custom, as indeed, almost everything contained in these romances is founded upon real Germanic and more particularly, Norse and Icelandic customs.

And so this description says as follows:

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I have taken this passage as giving somewhat at length a fair sample of the style and prose of these two romances, as the selections I have already taken give some examples of the verse.

The plot of the story is considerably more complicated and it is too full of event for an abstract to do justice to it. So that I am compelled to confine myself to selections, giving an idea of the style. And my next selection is the song of the Men of the Wolf and the unfurling of their great banner:

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With these few selections from the two romances quoted from, I I trust I may have given some idea of the charm of style which makes their publication to my mind, a noteworthy event in the history of English Literature. They are, if I may be permitted to use the phrase English verse written in prose. There is something rhythmic not unlike the movement of verse, about the prose of these two romances, – something which pre-supposes a verse original done over into prose by the author. Even the archaism of the English adds something to the charm and the force of the tales.

And the third, as yet unpublished, save and periodical form, known as “The Glittering Plane, or the Land of Living Men” is worthy of the other two. I am sure, however, that I may be forgiven for omitting to make quotations from it, or to try to give any idea of the plot of the story, as those to whom I have by this effort been able to give any idea of the charm that pervades these last works of the poet will, I feel sure, taste for themselves; while further attempt by mere selection from that which should be read in its entirety would, I feel sure, do injustice to author and hearers alike. And so, I may be permitted to conclude, thanking you for your attention, by saying that if I shall induce any to read for themselves these romances, and they enjoy them as I have done, I shall be amply repaid for any labor in the preparation of this essay.

Geo Hoadly Jr