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WILLIAM MORRIS & THE COMMUNIST IDEAL

By MRS. TOWNSHEND

Published and sold by the Fabian Society.
Biographical Series No. 3. Price 2d.

LONDON:
THE FABIAN SOCIETY, 3 CLEMENT'S INN, STRAND, W.C.
DECEMBER 1912



WILLIAM MORRIS AND THE COMMUNIST IDEAL.

Boyhood.

WILLIAM MORRIS was born in 1834 and died in 1896. His working life therefore fell in the latter half of the nineteenth century, exactly the period when Commercialism was most rampant. It was a time of peace and prosperity. Manufacturers were raking in profits from the great discoveries of the beginning of the century, railways and steamships had given fresh impetus to trade. The long reign of a virtuous and narrow-minded sovereign favored the growth of vulgar self-complacency. It was a smug age, an age of rapidly increasing wealth ill-distributed and ill-spent.

Morris was a member of a well-to-do middle class family. His childhood was spent in a large house on the edge of Epping Forest, looking over a great stretch of the pasture land of Essex, with the Thames winding through the marshes. He passed a happy boyhood in a peaceful, old-fashioned, essentially English home. At fourteen he was sent to Marlborough. He entered but little, however, into the life of the school, took no part in school games, and is remembered by his school-fellows as a strange boy fond of mooning about by himself and of telling long stories "full of knights and fairies." He was "thickset and strong-looking, with a high color and black curly hair, good-natured and kind, but with a fearful temper." He was fond of taking long walks and collecting birds' eggs, and he was always doing something with his hands, netting if nothing else.

Like man like boy! The strangely diverse characteristics of this remarkable man were already noticeable, a poet without a poetic temperament, patient and industrious, kindly and gentle yet hasty and choleric, a lover of solitude for all his abounding sympathy with mankind. It was not at school but at home that he found congenial surroundings. "I am sure you must think me a great fool," he writes to his sister, "to be always thinking about home, but I really can't help it, I don't think it is my fault for there are such a lot of things I want to do and say."

Oxford Life and Friendships. Cult of the Middle Ages.

But though it is easy in his later life to trace the influence of his peaceful home between the forest and the plain, it was at Oxford that his genius found or formed the channels it was to flow through. At his own college (Exeter) and among the undergraduates of his own year he was fortunate enough to find a man with whom he was able to share his inmost thoughts. The tie between Morris and Burne-Jones was no ordinary college friendship. It lasted till death and affected the lives of both, but though (or perhaps because)

Morris (William)

Morris was the greater of the two men the intercourse between them had more important results on his career than on that of his friend.

At twenty Morris, full of vitality and with many markedly diverse characteristics, would have been singled out as a man certain to make his mark in the world, but the kind of work that lay before him would have been hard to foretell. Like his friend, he was destined for the Church. Both alike had felt the influence of that wave of mystical theology which had swept over the dry bones of Anglican Christianity, and both alike suffered a severe disillusionment during their first year at Oxford. Their readings in theology served to extinguish gradually in both the fire of religious enthusiasm, and to kindle in its stead a devotion to ideal beauty, curiously remote and exotic. It was associated with a passion for the Middle Ages and for the particular types and forms of Art that flourished in them, and of course with a contempt and loathing for contemporary life with all its seething confusion of industrial progress. In these quiet Oxford days, spent in poring over ecclesiastical poetry, mediæval chronicles and church history, it was no wonder that these youths should look at the world through a narrow peep-hole: the wonder is that in the case of one of them the peep-hole was never widened throughout a long industrious life of artistic production. Morris was too big a man to have his outlook on the world permanently circumscribed in this way, but in the output of his early years, and indeed in the artistic work—whether literary or plastic—of his whole life, we find the narrowing influence of his first introduction to the world of thought and emotion, and of his lifelong intercourse with Burne-Jones and the school to which he belonged.

Morris was by nature an artist. He was full of enthusiasm and vital energy, quick to see and to feel, eager to create. The pre-Raphaelite movement, with its worship of beauty and its atmosphere of rarity and remoteness, influenced him, not by making him an artist, but by cutting him off from the life of his day and generation, the true source of inspiration for living art. His life is the story of a pilgrimage out of a world peopled by shadows into the daylight world of his fellow-men. Unfortunately, his dearest friends continued to live in the world of shadows, and from time to time they drew him back into it.

Poetry.

The impulse towards self-expression found vent first in poetry, and, to the end, painter and craftsman though he was, his chief gift was literary. The gift seems to have been a sudden discovery during college days. Canon Dixon gives an amusing account of how he and Price went to Exeter one night to see the two friends. "As soon as we entered the room, Burne-Jones exclaimed wildly: 'He's a big poet!' 'Who is?' asked we. 'Why, Topsy'—the name which he had given him. We sat down and heard Morris read his first poem, the first that he had ever written in his life. It was called 'The Willow and the Red Cliff.' As he read it, I felt that it was something the like of which had never been heard before. . . . I

expressed my admiration in some way, as we all did, and I remember his remark: 'Well, if this is poetry, it is very easy to write.' From that time onward he came to my rooms almost every day with a new poem."*

He was rapid and prolific, and his poems filled many books. The best known is, perhaps, the long series of stories in verse called "The Earthly Paradise." "In all the noble roll of our poets," says Swinburne, "there has been since Chaucer no second teller of tales comparable to the first till the advent of this one." The stories, told sometimes in verse, sometimes, and even better, in prose, continued to pour forth from his fertile brain right on to the end of his life, with the exception, as we shall see, of seven years that were devoted to sterner work.

Choice of a Vocation.

But though his strongest and most enduring impulse was towards imaginative writing, it is not as a writer that his light shines before men. If he had poured the full stream of his creative vitality into this one channel, England might have added a new name to the list of her great poets, but there are things that the English of to-day need more than poetry. They need to learn that sordid labor degrades not merely those who perform it, but those who reap the fruits of it; that to enjoy cheap machine-made luxury is as degrading as to produce it; that a brutalized laboring class is sure to have for its master an unrefined, uncivilized plutocracy. These are the things Morris made clear to those who would look and listen. He could not have learned and taught them if he had sat in studious leisure producing poetry. His activity was many-sided, and he put heart and brain into it all. The real significance of his life story is that he created a fine career, a splendid personality out of the every-day experiences that come to all of us. He saw the outside world, the works of men and God, not with half-shut eyes and sleepy indifference as we most of us see them, but with vivid curiosity and wonder. Friendship and love, the home-building impulse and the sense of universal brotherhood visited him in turn as they visit every decent human being, but he received them not sluggishly, still less with stubborn resistance, but with alert and whole-hearted enthusiasm. Each new stage of experience was marked by a new departure in activity; but, and this was the most remarkable characteristic of all, the new enterprise did not supersede the old. In a prose romance, written while he was at Oxford, he has given us some suggestive touches of autobiography. "I could soon find out," says the hero, "whether a thing were possible or not to me; then, if it were not, I threw it away for ever, never thought of it again, no regret, no longing for that, it was past and over to me; but if it were possible and I made up my mind to do it, then and there I began it, and in due time finished it, turning neither to the right hand nor the left till it was done. So I did with all things that I set my hand to."†

* "Life of William Morris," by J. W. Mackail, Vol. I., pp. 51, 52.

† "Frank's Sealed Letter." "Oxford and Cambridge Magazine," I.

Architecture.

This was Morris's ideal, and this, too, was his practice. It describes the tenor of his whole life, as well as the bent of his character, although the bare recital of these early years might convey a very different notion. We have seen that his intention of taking orders did not long survive his first term of study and discussion at Oxford, and that Art in various forms, and especially the Art of the Middle Ages, began to fill the horizon of his mind. In the glow of enthusiasm roused by the cathedrals of northern France, where he spent two delightful holidays, it was natural enough that he should choose architecture to replace the Church as his future profession, the work by which he should earn his living. Though his apprenticeship to Street was of short duration, and though he never became an architect, yet the purpose that underlay this change of profession never altered. His business through life—a business pursued with unflagging industry which reaped a substantial worldly success—was to make modern houses worth living in. All the crafts that he turned his hand to—painting, furniture-making, dyeing, weaving—all were subservient, and consciously subservient, to this end: all with the one exception of the printing of books, the beloved Benjamin of his industries, which grew, not so much out of his life-long love of the house beautiful as out of a passion equally enduring for literature—the thoughts and words of men.

Painting.

It was under the influence of Rossetti, whose strange power of fascination altered many lives, that Morris took to painting, first as a pastime, then, dropping architecture, as his regular profession. "Rossetti says I ought to paint," he writes soon after his move from Oxford to London, in his twenty-fourth year; "he says I shall be able. Now, as he is a very great man, and speaks with authority and not as the scribes, I *must* try. I don't hope much, I must say, yet will try my best . . . not giving up the architecture, but trying if it is possible to get six hours a day for drawing besides office work. One won't get much enjoyment out of life at this rate, I know well; but that don't matter: I have no right to ask for it, at all events—love and work, these two things only. . . . I can't enter into politics, social subjects, with any interest; for, on the whole, I see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another."* In this land of dreams Morris lived for a year or two, in daily intercourse with those inveterate dreamers who were his friends; but it was not to such a world that he really belonged, and he was restless and unsatisfied. "He has lately taken a strong fancy for the human," says one of his companions at this time; and not long after, in his twenty-sixth year, marriage and the need of making a home brought him back into touch with the life of the world.

* Mackail, vol. I., p. 107.

House Decoration.

The act of becoming a householder was for him a new departure, and the building and garnishing of his home a kind of sacrament. He could not endure base surroundings. A fair orderly garden, a house wisely planned and solidly built, and within it chairs, tables and utensils that were a pleasure to make and to use—these were to him the necessary background of a decent life. His friend Philip Webb could build the house for him, and there were others among the younger architects who were of the true faith, but where was he to turn for his furniture and his wall-hangings? The domestic arts were extinct—killed by the factory system, by machinery, by steam and by industrial enterprise. Clothes, jewellery and all kinds of household gear were made, not for use, but for profit. They gave pleasure no longer either to those who fashioned them or to those who used them, but only to the hucksterer who made money out of transferring them from the one to the other, and whose interests it was that they should be cheap and showy and flimsy. All this was borne in on Morris just as he was beginning to feel sure that he was not meant for a painter any more than for an architect, and it helped him to find work that he *was* suited for, work that he could earn his bread by, and that needed doing.

How Morris became Tradesman and Manufacturer.

"The first thing that a man has to do," Ruskin had written ten years earlier, "is to find out what he is fit for. In which enquiry he may be very safely guided by his likings, if he be not also guided by his pride. People usually reason in some such fashion as this: 'I don't seem quite fit for a head manager in the firm of — & Co., therefore, in all probability, I am fit to be Chancellor of the Exchequer'; whereas they ought, rather, to reason thus: 'I don't seem to be quite fit to be head manager in the firm of — & Co., but, I daresay, I might do something in a small greengrocery business: I used to be a good judge of pease'; that is to say, always trying lower instead of trying higher until they find bottom. . . . I do not believe that any greater good could be achieved for the country than the change in public feeling on this head which might be brought about by a few benevolent men, undeniably in the class of gentlemen, who would, on principle, enter into some of our commonest trades and make them honorable." When Morris and his friends started a firm of decorators as Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co., it was not with any such benevolent motive. The undertaking was nevertheless destined to become even more important to the cause of social progress than to that of Art. It began quite humbly, with a ridiculously small capital, but Morris threw himself wholeheartedly into the work, for which he was extraordinarily well fitted. "From the first the firm turned out whatever anyone wanted in the way of decorative material—architectural adjuncts, furniture, tapestries, embroideries, stained glass, wall-papers and what not. The goods were first-rate, the art and the workmanship excellent, the prices high. . . . You could have the things such as the firm chose

that they should be, or you could do without them. . . . There was no compromise. Morris, as senior partner, laid down the law, and all his clients had to bend or break."* We cannot here pursue the fascinating story of the firm through its early struggles to the financial success that crowned them, and of the long list of industries undertaken, first at Queen Square and then at Merton, in which Morris was not merely manager but working foreman, giving to each in turn the insight of the artist, the skill of the craftsman, and the patience and industry which were so peculiarly his own, and which combined so strangely with his boyish vehemence. The mere amount of work he got through is amazing. We read of days spent in designing wall-papers and chintzes, and contriving how they ought to be printed, in watching over dyeing vats, and working at looms, and reinventing the lost art of tapestry weaving, while all the time, in moments of leisure, the stream of poetry flowed on, and yet his friends agree that he always had time for talk and laughter and for little feasts and holidays. Many new and delightful glimpses into his home life are to be found in Miss Morris's introduction and notes to the fine edition of his works now in course of publication. Of any little family festival he was the centre and mainspring, and to any public cause that seemed to him important he was always ready to give time and energy. His love of fun was as strong as his love of work, and his knowledge of common things and interest in them was unflagging. He was a clever cook, and enjoyed an opportunity of proving his skill. "I always bless God," he once said, "for making anything so strong as an onion."

"A Master Artizan."

If one wants to understand Morris, and especially the path that led him to Socialism, one must realize how much he identified himself with his shop, and especially with his factory. This was the work that he faced the world with—his "bread-and-cheese work," as he called it. In an intimate letter he speaks of himself as "a master artizan, if I may claim that dignity." That it was no empty claim one may gather from such passages as this from his letters: "I am trying to learn all I can about dyeing, even the handiwork of it, which is simple enough; but, like many other simple things, contains matters in it that one would not think of unless one were told. Besides my business of seeing to the cotton printing, I am working in Mr. Wardle's dye-house in sabots and blouse pretty much all day long." And again: "This morning I assisted at the dyeing of 20 lbs. of silk for our damask in the blue vat. It was very exciting, as the thing is quite unused now, and we ran a good chance of spoiling the silk. There were four dyers and Mr. Wardle at work, and myself as dyers' mate. The men were encouraged with beer, and to it they went, and pretty it was to see the silk coming green out of the vat and gradually turning blue. We succeeded very well as far as we can tell at present. The oldest of the workmen, an old fellow of seventy, remembers silk being dyed so long ago. The vat, you

* "D. G. Rossetti: His Family-Letters." With a Memoir by W. M. Rossetti. Vol. I., p. 219.

must know, is a formidable-looking thing, 9 feet deep and about 6 feet square, and is sunk into the earth right up to the top. To-morrow I am going to Nottingham to see wool dyed blue in the woad vat, as it is called." His toil at the dye vat was not in vain. There is plenty of testimony that he became an expert dyer. "When he ceased to dye with his own hands, I soon felt the difference," writes a lady who embroidered very skilfully for the firm. "The colors themselves became perfectly level and had a monotonous prosy look; the very lustre of the silk was less beautiful. When I complained, he said: 'Yes, they have grown too clever at it. Of course, it means they don't love color, or they would do it.'"

The Germ of Morris's Socialism.

That a man should put his heart into his work, and that the work should be of a kind that he can care about: this was a fixed belief with Morris, and it lay at the root of his Socialism. Of himself it was true right through every detail of his many crafts. "Lord bless us," he breaks out, when he had been worried by having to write tiresome letters, "how nice it will be when I can get back to my little patterns and dyeing and the dear warp and weft at Hammersmith." His work was done for the love of it, but there was nothing amateurish or unpractical about it. "I should very much like," he writes, "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." It is noticeable that the work he is thinking of here is not the "bread-and-cheese work," but that "pleasure work of books" that never ceased, for he goes on to lament that for the moment he was doing nothing original, and to express the hope that he was not going "to fall off in imagination and enthusiasm"* as he grew older. He need not have feared, for it was only in later life that he entered fully upon the inheritance of northern story and legend that inspired his best work. It was a curious case of discovered kinship. His hatred of modern civilization was part cause and part result of his passion for the early sagas. He saw in them a picture—far enough, no doubt, from the actual facts at any period, near or remote—of the brotherhood of man that he longed for. He was strangely out of place in artificial modern society, and the comradeship, the adventure, the freedom of these tales were like the breath of life to him, and one cannot doubt that they served to fan the smouldering sense of revolt that flamed out later into open rebellion against the sordid slavery of the workers as he knew them.

"I had been reading the Njala in the original before I came here," he writes from Leek, where he was busy among his dye vats. "It is better even than I remembered; the style most solemn: all men's children in it, as always in the best of the northern stories, so

* Mackail, vol. I., p. 291. Letter, dated Feb. 11th, 1873.

venerable to each other and so venerated: and the exceeding good temper of Gunnar amidst his heroism, and the calm of Njal: and I don't know anything more consoling or grander in all literature (to use a beastly French word) than Gunnar's singing in his house under the moon and the drifting clouds. What a glorious outcome of the worship of courage these stories are."*

Already in the "Earthly Paradise" we can perceive the hold they had on his mind. There is a zest and glow in "The Lovers of Gudrun" that are not to be found in the other tales. But it is in "Sigurd the Volsung," his most important literary achievement, that the influence of the north finds full expression. It was in the year 1876, when he was forty-two, that this great epic was written. One realizes the extraordinary vigor and many sidedness of the man at this middle period of his life when one remembers that it was the very time when, as we have seen, his craft work seemed to occupy every scrap of leisure. But this was not all. Great as he had proved himself as poet and craftsman, he was greater yet as man, too great to be shut in by study or workshop. Courage, energy, and patience personified, he was certain to come out into the open when the time was ripe and take his share in shaping events. It was not until middle life that the moment came. Two causes called him. In the one case the response came from his profound and growing sense of human solidarity, in the other from his reverence for the past and the work of the great men who were dead and whose art had died with them.

The "Anti-Scrape."

Indignation against the ruthless tide of restoration which was fast submerging the last traces of noble mediæval architecture finds expression again and again in the private letters transcribed by Mr. Mackail. At last, when one of the ancient parish churches that he loved so well close to his own country home was threatened, and just afterwards the beautiful Minster of Tewkesbury, indignation found vent in action. He wrote a letter to the *Athenæum*, explaining the urgency of the need, and begged all thoughtful people to join him in trying to meet it. "What I wish for is that an association should be set on foot to keep a watch on old monuments, to protest against all 'restoration' that means more than keeping out wind and weather, and by all means, literary and other, to awaken a feeling that our ancient buildings are not mere ecclesiastical toys, but sacred monuments of the nation's growth and hope." The appeal was not in vain. Within a month the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (the Anti-Scrape as he nicknamed it) was founded, with Morris for its secretary. Until his death his zeal for the cause never waned. He wrote for it a prospectus, a model of terse and simple English, which was translated into French, German, Italian, and Dutch; he poured out freely both time and money; and he gave in its interests the first of those public lectures which, fine as they were, never became a really congenial task.

* Mackail, vol. I., p. 335; 1877.

"Bulgarian Atrocities."

This was in the spring of 1877, a few months before Morris had been roused to his first political utterance by the terrible accounts of cruelty in Bulgaria and the dread lest England might take up arms against Russia in support of Turkey. "I who am writing this," he wrote in a letter to the *Daily News*, "am one of a large class of men—quiet men—who usually go about their own business, heeding public matters less than they ought, and afraid to speak in such a huge concourse as the English nation, however much they may feel, but who are now stung into bitterness by thinking how helpless they are in a public matter that touches them so closely. . . . I appeal to the working men and pray them to look to it that if this shame falls on them they will certainly remember it, and be burdened by it when their day clears for them and they attain all and more than all they are now striving for."*

I have quoted from this letter because it represents, together with the Manifesto to the Working Men of England issued a few months later, when war seemed imminent, Morris's first public utterance of Socialism. It is interesting to see that it was already tinged with distrust of a central representative government. The movement into which he threw himself with so much vigor was, however, Liberal, not Socialist, in its origin. Some leading Socialists, Hyndman for one, were indeed in the opposite camp. Long afterwards he described his surprise on meeting Morris in 1879 for the first time. "It was many years after I had enjoyed his poetry and mocked a little, as ignorant young men will, at his aesthetic arm-chairs and wallpapers that I met the man himself. . . . I imagined him as a refined and delicate gentleman, easily overwrought by his sentiments. That was not his appearance in the flesh, as we all know. Refinement undoubtedly there was in the delicate lines of the nose and the beautiful moulding of the forehead. But his hearty voice, his jolly, vigorous frame, his easy, sailorlike dress, the whole figure, gave me a better opinion of the 'atrocities mongers,' as I considered them, than anything I have seen before or since."†

But though the Eastern question led him to act for a time with the Liberal Party, it served also to show him that it was not an organization to which the welfare of the workers could be trusted. "Working men of England," he writes in the Manifesto already mentioned, "one word of warning yet. I doubt if you know the bitterness of hatred against freedom and progress that lies at the hearts of a certain part of the richer classes in this country. . . . These men cannot speak of your order, of its aims, of its leaders, without a sneer or an insult. These men, if they had the power (may England perish rather!) would thwart your just aspirations, would silence you, would deliver you, bound hand and foot, for ever to irresponsible capital."

* Letter to the *Daily News*, October 26th, 1876, signed William Morris, Author of "The Earthly Paradise."

† *Justice* for October 6th, 1896.

Every word of the Manifesto proves that he had become a Socialist by conviction, as he had always been one by temperament, and we shall do well to pause a moment in this brief narrative of his life in order to reckon up the debt we owe to the greatest Englishman who has passed away out of our ranks.

What Socialism Owes to William Morris.

When our children's children recall the great names of the Victorian Age, there is not one will kindle a warmer interest than that of William Morris. They will remember him for his stories and poems and for his pioneer work in the revival of handicraft, but above all for the vigor and charm of his personality. He was the sort of man who impressed his friends so strongly that the impression survives, a man who excelled the ordinary man in almost every direction of human activity and was typical nevertheless of his race and his country. He was a man of genius, but his genius irradiated not merely his craftsmanship and his poetry, but everything he turned his hand to. He was an expert not merely in literature and manufacture, but in life. A robust power of enjoyment was his most marked characteristic. He insisted on enjoying things. The very utensils in his house must give joy in the using or he would not use them. Work that brought no joy was fit only for slaves. It is this abundant vitality, this love of life and the world; it is the fact that he had eyes to see and ears to hear and a heart to perceive; it is, in short, because he was an artist and a genius, that his contribution to Socialism is of outstanding value, although he proved himself but a shortsighted leader and never grappled closely with the problems we have to face. Economic reasoning was not in his line, nor details of administration, but he knew a great deal about the world we live in and how to use it to the utmost advantage. The sense of brotherhood was strong in him, and it was illuminated by insight and sympathy. We can learn, therefore, far more from the story of his approach to Socialism, of the way in which he was driven to adopt it as the only hope, than from any formal statement that he ever made of its doctrines.

The Path to Socialism.

That approach can best be traced in his popular lectures on Art, which began in the year 1877. In these lectures his sympathies are with the craftsman. He recognizes no essential difference between the artist and the workman. As a contrast to the modest ideal of a 20s., or even a 30s. minimum wage, there is something delightfully inspiring in his claim that the hire of the workman should include "Money enough to keep him from fear of want or degradation for him and his; leisure enough from bread-earning work (even though it be pleasant to him) to give him time to read and think, and connect his own life with the life of the great world; work enough of the kind aforesaid, and praise of it, and encouragement enough to make him feel good friends with his fellows; and, lastly, not least (for 'tis verily part of the bargain), his own due share of Art,

the chief part of which will be a dwelling that does not lack the beauty which Nature would freely allow it if our own perversity did not turn Nature out of doors." "I specially wished," he writes, in answer to a complaint that he had strayed beyond the question of "mere Art," "to point out that the question of popular Art was a social question, involving the happiness or misery of the greater part of the community. The absence of popular Art from modern times is more disquieting and grievous to bear for this reason than for any other, that it betokens that fatal division of men into the cultivated and the degraded classes which competitive commerce has bred and fosters; popular Art has no chance of a healthy life, or indeed, of a life at all, till we are on the way to fill up this terrible gulf between riches and poverty. . . . It may well be a burden to the conscience of an honest man who lives a more manlike life to think of the innumerable lives which are spent in toil unrelieved by hope and uncheered by praise; men who might as well, for all the good they are doing their neighbors by their work, be turning a crank with nothing at the end of it. . . . Over and over again have I asked myself, why should not my lot be the common lot? My work is simple work enough; much of it, nor that the least pleasant, any man of decent intelligence could do if he could but get to care about the work and its results. Indeed, I have been ashamed when I have thought of the contrast between my happy working hours and the unpraised, unrewarded, monotonous drudgery which most men are condemned to. Nothing shall convince me that such labor as this is good or necessary to civilization."* It was this "burden on his conscience," growing heavier as experience and character ripened, that drove Morris to Socialism. That very insight into the happenings of human life, into joy and grief and desire which inspired his stories, enabled him to see society as in truth it was.

To him the vulgar luxury of the rich was even more hateful than the squalor of the poor. "Apart from the desire to produce beautiful things," he says, "the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization. . . . What shall I say concerning its mastery of and its waste of mechanical power, its Commonwealth so poor, its enemies of the Commonwealth so rich, its stupendous organization—for the misery of life; its contempt of simple pleasure, which everyone could enjoy but for its folly; its eyeless vulgarity, which has destroyed Art, the one certain solace of labor?" "The hope of the past times was gone," he goes on, telling the story of his conversion; "the struggle of mankind for many ages had produced nothing but this sordid, aimless, ugly confusion; the immediate future seemed to me likely to intensify all the present evils by sweeping away the last survivals of the days before the dull squalor of civilization had settled down on the world. This was a bad lookout, indeed, and, if I may mention myself as a personality and not as a mere type, especially so to a man of my disposition, careless of metaphysics and religion, as well as of scientific analysis,

* Letter to the *Manchester Examiner*, March, 1883.

but with a deep love of the earth and the life on it, and a passion for the history of the past of mankind. Think of it! Was it all to end in a counting-house on the top of a cinder-heap, with Podsnap's drawing-room in the offing, and a Whig Committee dealing out champagne to the rich and margarine to the poor in such convenient proportions as would make all men contented together, though the pleasure of the eyes was gone from the world and the place of Homer was to be taken by Huxley! Yet, believe me, in my heart, when I really forced myself to look towards the future, that is what I saw in it; and, as far as I could tell, scarce anyone seemed to think it worth while to struggle against such a consummation of civilization. So, then, I was in for a fine pessimistic end of life, if it had not somehow dawned on me that, amid all the filth of civilization, the seeds of a great change, what we others call Social Revolution, were beginning to germinate. The whole face of things was changed to me by that discovery, and all I had to do then in order to become a Socialist was to hook myself on to the practical movement."*

Avowal of Socialism. The S.D.F.

This "hooking on" took place in the autumn of 1882, when Morris, at the age of forty-eight, joined the Democratic Federation (which became subsequently the Social Democratic Federation, and eventually took the title of the British Socialist Party). "For my part, I used to think," he writes to a friend who remonstrated with him at this time, "that one might further real Socialistic progress by doing what one could on the lines of ordinary middle-class Radicalism. I have been driven of late into the conclusion that I was mistaken; that Radicalism is on the wrong line, so to say, and will never develop into anything more than Radicalism—in fact, that it is made for and by the middle classes, and will always be under the control of rich capitalists: they will have no objection to its *political* development, if they think they can stop it there; but, as to real social changes, they will not allow them if they can help it."†

"The contrasts of rich and poor," he writes, again to the same friend, a few days later, "are unendurable and ought not to be endured by either rich or poor. Now it seems to me that, feeling this, I am bound to act for the destruction of the system which seems to me mere oppression and obstruction. Such a system can only be destroyed by the united discontent of numbers: isolated acts of a few persons of the middle and upper-classes seeming to me (as I have said before) quite powerless against it: in other words, the antagonism of classes, which the system has bred, is the natural and necessary instrument for its destruction."‡

There was nothing half-hearted in Morris's acceptance of Socialism. He threw all his vigor, all his enthusiasm into propaganda, though it was not a kind of work that gave scope for the rarest

* "How I Became a Socialist." W. M. Reprinted from *Justice*.

† Letter to Mr. C. E. Maurice, June 22nd, 1883. See "Life of William Morris," vol. II., p. 103.

‡ Ibid.

powers of his mind and heart. It is pathetic to hear how he schooled himself to study Marx and tried to grasp economic problems, for it is only now and then, when he uses his gift as seer, that his Socialist writings spring into life and are of lasting value. His friends were grieved, naturally enough, that the poet should be lost in the lecturer, especially as he had no gift for oratory, but he made light very characteristically of any possible loss to the world. "Poetry goes with the hand-arts, I think," he says to an intimate friend, "and, like them, has now become unreal. The arts have got to die, what is left of them, before they can be born again. You know my views on the matter—I apply them to myself as well as to others. This would not, I admit, prevent my writing poetry, any more than it prevents my doing my pattern work, because the mere personal pleasure of it urges one to the work; but it prevents my looking at it as a sacred duty. . . . Meantime the propaganda gives me work to do which, unimportant as it seems, is part of a great whole which cannot be lost, and that ought to be enough for me."*

The Socialist League.

But it was not only the toughness of economic theory that made his new duties distasteful. From the first there were dissensions in the camp. "I find myself drifting," he says, "into the disgraceful position of a moderator and patcher up, which is much against my inclination." Worse still was to follow. The patching up was unsuccessful, and Morris found himself, in the beginning of 1885, the leader of a small body of seceders who took the name of the Socialist League.

For six years he gave much time and money to the internal management of the League, as well as to the revolutionary propaganda, which was its avowed object, and which was carried on chiefly by means of the *Commonweal*, first a monthly and afterwards a weekly paper, edited † and to a large extent written by Morris. Surely no Socialist paper can show a record so brilliant. "The Dream of John Ball" and "News from Nowhere" appeared in it as serials, and a long poem, "The Pilgrims of Hope," of which some portions stand high among his finest work—"Mother and Son," for instance, and "The Half of Life Gone."

In addition to these weightier contributions, few numbers are without some paragraph from his pen, all the more arresting from its simple familiar wording, that brings us directly into touch with his views on life and events.

Take this explanation, for instance, of the revolutionary attitude of the League from the first weekly issue, May 1st, 1886:—

"We believe that the advanced part of the capitalist class, especially in this country, is drifting, not without a feeling of fear and discomfort, towards State Socialism of the crudest kind; and a certain school of Socialists are fond of pointing out this tendency

* Letter to Mr. C. E. Maurice. See "Life of William Morris," vol. II., pp. 106, 107.
† E. Belfort Bax was joint-editor with William Morris,

with exultation. . . . But there is another thing besides bourgeois stumbling into State Socialism which shows which way the tide is setting, and that is the instinctive revolutionary attempts which drive them into these courses. What is to be said about these? They are leaderless often and half blind. But are they fruitful of nothing but suffering to the workers? We think not; for besides the immediate gain which they force from the dominant class as above said, they are a stern education for the workers themselves. . . . The worst thing that we have to dread is that the oppressed people will learn a dull contentment with their lot. . . . The rudest and most unsuccessful attempts at revolution are better than that." "The real business of Socialists," writes Morris in another number, "is to impress on the workers the fact that they are a class, whereas they ought to be society. If we mix ourselves up with Parliament, we shall confuse and dull this fact in people's minds, instead of making it clear and intensifying it."* And again, under the heading "Unattractive Labour": "It is no real paradox to say that the unattractiveness of labor, which is now the curse of the world, will become the hope of the world. As long as the workman could sit at home working easily and quietly, his long hours of labor mattered little to him, and other evils could be borne. . . . But now that labor has become a mere burden, the disease of a class, that class will, by all means, try to throw it off, to lessen its weight, and in their efforts to do so they must of necessity destroy society, which is founded on the patient bearing of that burden. . . . True, their masters, taught prudence by fear, will try, are trying, various means to make the workers bear their burden; but one after the other they will be found out and discredited. Philanthropy has had its day and is gone, thrift and self-help are going; participation in profits, parliamentarianism and universal suffrage, State Socialism will have to go the same road, and the workers will be face to face at last with the fact that modern civilization, with its elaborate hierarchy and iron drill, is founded on their intolerable burden, and then no shortening of the day's work which would leave profit to the employer will make their labor hours short enough. They will see that modern society can only exist as long as they bear *their* burden with some degree of patience; their patience will be worn out, and to pieces will modern society go."

After a visit to Leeds and Bradford he writes: "The constant weight of drill in these highly organized industries has necessarily limited the intelligence of the men and deadened their individuality, while the system is so powerful and searching that they find it difficult to conceive of any system under which they could be other than human machines." † Elsewhere we find the same idea condensed into an epigram: "Individual profit makers are not a necessity for labor, but an obstruction to it." ‡

* "Socialism and Politics." Supplement to *Commonweal*, July, 1885.

† *Commonweal*, May 8th, 1886.

‡ *Ibid*, July 2nd, 1887.

Speaking of "Education under Capitalism" he says: "My heart sank under Mr. McChoakumchild and his method, and I thought how much luckier I was to have been born well enough off to be sent to a school where I was taught—nothing, but learned archæology and romance on the Wiltshire Downs."*

Under the heading "How We Live and How We Might Live" he writes: "Often when I have been sickened by the stupidity of the mean, idiotic rabbit warrens that rich men build for themselves in Bayswater and elsewhere, I console myself with visions of the noble Communal Hall of the future, unsparing of materials, generous in worthy ornament, alive with the noblest thoughts of our time, and the past embodied in the best art which free and manly people could produce; such an abode of man as no private enterprise could come near for beauty and fitness, because only collective thought and collective life could cherish the aspirations which would give birth to its beauty or have the skill and leisure that could carry them out."†

Popular Control of Administration.

These cuttings from the *Commonweal* show that the views of the League were definitely revolutionary, and this is clearly stated in its Manifesto. There was to be no tinkering, no half measures; the basis of society was to be changed. "No number of merely administrative changes, until the workers are in possession of all political power, would make any real approach to Socialism." "By political power," Morris goes on to explain, "we do not mean the exercise of the franchise or even the fullest development of the representative system, but the direct control by the people of the whole administration of the community whatever the ultimate destiny of that administration is to be."‡

Communism.

One seeks in vain in the Manifesto for any definite suggestions as to the method in which this "direct control" was to be exercised, but Morris's lectures throw some light on the ideal of social organization that he had formed. "Those who see this view of the new society," he says, "believe that decentralization in it would be complete. The political unit with them would be not a nation, but a commune. The whole of reasonable society would be a great federation of such communes. . . . A nation is a body of people kept together for purposes of rivalry and war with other similar bodies, and when competition shall have given place to combination the function of the nation will be gone." "I will recapitulate," he continues, "the two views taken by Socialists as to the future of society. According to the first, the State—that is, the nation organized for unwholesome production and exchange of wealth—will be the sole possessor of the national plant and stock, the sole

* *Commonweal*, June 30th, 1888.

† *Ibid*, July 2nd, 1887.

‡ Manifesto of the Socialist League. A new edition, annotated by W. Morris and Belfort Bax. 1885.

employer of labor, which she will so regulate in the general interest that no man will ever need to fear lack of employment and due earnings therefrom. . . . According to the other view, the centralized nation would give place to a federation of communities, who would hold all wealth in common, and would use that wealth for satisfying the needs of each member, only exacting from each that he should do his best according to his capacity towards the production of the common wealth. . . .

"These two views of the future of society are sometimes opposed to each other as Socialism and Communism; but to my mind the latter is simply the necessary development of the former, which implies a transition period during which people would be getting rid of the habits of mind bred by the long ages of tyranny and commercial competition, and be learning that it is to the interest of each that all should thrive. When men had lost the fear of each other engendered by our system of artificial famine, they would feel that the best way of avoiding the waste of labor would be to allow every man to take what he needed from the common store, since he would have no temptation or opportunity of doing anything with a greater portion than he really needed for his personal use. Thus would be minimized the danger of the community falling into bureaucracy, the multiplication of boards and offices, and all the paraphernalia of official authority, which is after all a burden, even when it is exercised by the delegation of the whole people and in accordance with their wishes."*

Any detailed scheme of State Socialism roused ire and repugnance in Morris, though one does not deny that towards the end of his life he was brought in a chastened spirit to bow his neck to the Fabian yoke. Still, his submission had the unreality of a death bed repentance. The creed was, in truth, alien to his nature. His hopes and wishes for the future were dominated by the glorious visions of free human activity, of pride and joy in the work of one's hands and brain, which he associated, rightly or wrongly, with the past. It was not only capitalism which he hated. The tameness and elaboration of modern mechanical production would be just as odious to him if the plant were in State ownership and the management in the hands of Government officials. His delightful rural idyll, "News from Nowhere," was written, Mr. Mackail tells us, as a protest against the apotheosis of centralization and of urban life held up as the social ideal by Mr. Bellamy in his "Looking Backward." Characteristically enough the land of Morris's prevision was a Utopia for the worker rather than for the consumer. The production of wealth interested him more than its enjoyment, the joy of making more than the joy of spending.

"Mr. Bellamy worries himself unnecessarily," he wrote in the *Commonweal* for June, 1889, "in seeking, with obvious failure, some incentive to labor to replace the fear of starvation, which is at

* "The Labor Question from the Socialist Standpoint." W. Morris. (One of a Course of Lectures on "The Claims of Labor.") Edinburgh Co-operative Printing Company, Limited. 1886.

present our only one ; whereas it cannot be too often repeated that the true incentive to useful and happy labor is, and must be, pleasure in the work itself." How to preserve, or rather how to recover, that incentive is for Morris the problem of problems ; but it is one that the orthodox Socialist is apt to overlook, although the man in the street, that much underrated critic, is always ready to remind him of it. It is the old story once more of being led astray by that mythological person, the economic man. The social reformer constructs, or rather designs, an organization of industry which threatens to totter as soon as it is built for want of just this foundation stone, the significance of which was instantly apparent to the eye of the poet, though to the economist it seemed a negligible detail. And here we come upon the real mission of William Morris to his generation, his special function in the Socialist movement. A craftsman himself, he thought of the worker not as an abstraction, but as a comrade, with motives more or less like his own. This vital sympathetic outlook led him, no doubt, into blunders from time to time, especially in his dealings with individuals, but it preserved him from some serious and common errors. His view of the future, of the new social structure for which we are all working, may have been one sided, but the side he saw was the side unseen by men immersed in questions of administrative reform or in organizing the class war. Fabians and Social Democrats were alike in this. They were apt to leave out of their calculations the humanization of the worker in and through his work, of bringing home to him the realization of his own place in the social economy. A decent life for the workman, the recognition on his own part of the dignity of his work, seemed to Morris not merely the end for which we were striving, but the only means of attaining it. "It is necessary to point out," he writes, "that there are some Socialists who do not think that the problem of the organization of life and necessary labor can be dealt with by a huge national centralization, working by a kind of magic for which no one feels himself responsible ; that, on the contrary, it will be necessary for the unit of administration to be small enough for every citizen to feel himself responsible for its details and be interested in them ; that individual men cannot shuffle off the business of life on to the shoulders of an abstraction called the State, but must deal with each other ; that variety of life is as much an aim of true Communism as equality of condition, and that nothing but an union of these two will bring about real freedom ; that modern nationalities are mere artificial devices for the commercial war that we seek to put an end to, and will disappear with it ; and, finally, that art, using the word in its widest and due signification, is not a mere adjunct of life which free and happy men can do without, but the necessary expression and indispensable instrument of human happiness."*

Distrust of Political Action.

In his own day Morris stood almost alone among Socialists in his distrust of political action, of a "huge national centralization working

* Review of "Looking Backward" in the *Commonweal* for June, 1889, by W. M.

by a kind of magic." It is true that there were in England two antagonistic types of Socialism, but their opposition was one of method rather than of aim. Both intended to capture the Government of the country, in the one case by revolutionary, in the other by more insidious methods. Morris, on the other hand, was inclined to throw the government of the country to the winds and to scorn the notion of a democratic control of industry exercised by means of a parliamentary vote. He never committed himself, so far as I know, as to the actual means by which any other kind of control by the "useful classes" was to be brought into being, but there seems little doubt that, if he were alive now, we should find him in the Syndicalist camp. A deep distrust of salvation by means of the vote would lead him there, and a profound belief that revolutionary activity in the working class can be more effectively evoked and fostered by bringing home to them the sense of their social responsibility as workers than as parliamentary constituents. In the one case interest is focussed on party politics, usually in their crudest form, and the lesson learned by the worker is a lesson in docility: he is taught to function smoothly as a wheel in the party machine. In the other case he is brought face to face with the actual problems of industrial production and organization ; he learns to be resourceful and self-reliant and to take his place consciously and intelligently in the great enterprise of providing for the needs of mankind. I have said that Morris never committed himself as to the method in which this direct connection between the worker and the organization of industry was to be effected, but a private letter of his, written in 1888, gives a naive and vivid picture of industrial society as he visualized it in the future and the supersession of government: "Our present representative system," he writes, "is the reflection of our class society. The fact of the antagonism of classes underlies all our government, and causes political parties. . . . The business of a statesman is to balance the greed and fears of the proprietary class against the necessities and demands of the working class. This is a sorry business, and leads to all kinds of trickery and evasion, so that it is more than doubtful whether a statesman can be a moderately honest man. Now, the control of classes being abolished, all this would fall to the ground. The relations of men to each other would become personal ; wealth would be looked upon as an instrument of life and not as a reason for living, and therefore dominant over men's lives. Whatever laws existed would be much fewer, very simple, and easily understood by all ; they would mostly concern the protection of the person. In dealing with property, its fetish quality having disappeared, its use only would have to be considered, e.g., shall we (the public) work this coal mine or shut it up? Is it necessary for us to lay down this park in wheat, or can we afford to keep it as a place of recreation? Will it be desirable to improve this shoemaking machine, or can we go on with it as it is? Will it be necessary to call for special volunteers to cultivate yonder fen, or will the action of the law of compensation be inducement enough for its cultivation? And so forth. . . ."

"To return to our government of the future, which would be rather an administration of things than a government of persons. Nations, as political entities, would cease to exist. Civilization would mean the federalization of a variety of communities, great and small, at one end of which would be the township and the local guild, and at the other some central body whose function would be almost entirely the guardianship of the *principles* of society. . . . Between these two poles there would be various federations, which would grow together or dissolve as convenience of place, climate, language, etc., dictated, and would dissolve peaceably when occasion prompted. Of course public intercourse between the members of the federation would have to be carried on by means of delegation, but the delegates would not pretend to represent anyone or anything but the business with which they are delegated, e.g., 'We are a shoemaking community chiefly, you cotton spinners. Are we making too many shoes? Shall we turn, some of us, to gardening for a month or two, or shall we go on?' And so forth. . . . To my mind the essential thing to this view . . . is the township, or parish, or ward, or local guild, small enough to manage its own affairs directly. And I don't doubt that gradually all public business would be so much simplified that it would come to little more than a correspondence. 'Such are the facts with us; compare them with the facts with you. You know how to act.' So that we should tend to the abolition of all government, and even of all regulations that were not really habitual; and voluntary association would become a necessary habit and the only bond of society."*

It will be noticed that Morris differs both from Kropotkin with his "groups" and from most of the modern Syndicalists with their industrial guilds in localizing the communities that are to constitute his social framework. Notwithstanding his conviction that men must be organized as producers, his home loving nature refused to conceive a society which made light of the ties of neighborhood, of growth in a common soil. England was very dear to him as a land, though not as a nation; and still dearer was the corner of England where he was born and bred. If we understand Morris and his attitude towards the future, we shall see that his Socialism was revolutionary and uncompromising just because he was conservative at heart. The transition period, as he called it, of State Socialism was distasteful to him because it seemed to substitute a dull uniformity for the detail and variety of the past. He admitted eventually that it was bound to come, he saw that it was coming by means of humdrum agitation followed by humdrum legislation, but he could never feel any enthusiasm about it.

Education towards Revolution.

We have seen that the split with the Social Democratic Federation, in so far as it was not due merely to personal misunderstandings, was a protest against circuitous and indirect methods of

* Letters on Socialism by W. Morris to Rev. G. Bainton. London. Privately printed. 1894. (Only thirty-four copies.)

advance. His desire was to found a Socialist Party which should begin to act at once not by permeating cultivated people, nor by gaining representation in Parliament, but by raising a standard of revolt to which the oppressed could rally. His one encouragement in making a new attempt had been the signs of discontent among the masses. To focus this discontent and render it articulate was his purpose in forming the Socialist League. A passionate hatred had grown up in him of a society which seemed to him "mere cannibalism," "so corrupt, so steeped in hypocrisy, that one turns from one stratum of it to another with hopeless loathing." In one direction only did he see hope, the road to revolution; but that road, as he saw it, was gradual and arduous. To educate a strong party of workers in the aims of Socialism, so that when the seething forces of popular discontent could no longer be restrained, leaders should be forthcoming among the people to tell them what to aim at and what to ask for. An aimless revolt, leading to counter revolution, seemed to him a threatening calamity. Looking back to that period, a quarter of a century ago, we see that Morris over estimated the danger of a premature upheaval. Society was not ripe for it. Education was needed not merely to guide, but to produce that impatience of injustice and oppression which must be the motive power in such an upheaval. He believed that the new birth of society was at hand, and that the work for Socialists was to strive to help it forward, so that it might come with as little confusion and suffering as might be. "Education towards revolution seems to me," he said, "to express in three words what our policy should be." It was a policy which separated him on the one hand from Parliamentarians and Opportunists, and on the other from Anarchists ready for all risks of immediate revolution; and so it came about that the League grew but slowly, and steered with difficulty between Scylla and Charybdis. Morris held the helm as long as he could, but from the first the road to revolution that he saw had little attraction for most of his comrades. After a few years a policy of high handed robbery, of bombs and barricades, came to be openly advocated by many voluble members of the League, and in 1889 these views were so much in the ascendant that Morris was actually deposed from the control of the *Commonweal*, dependent as it still was on him both for matter and money. He continued to write for it until November, 1890, when he published in it a final statement of his views under the title "Where Are We Now?" After reviewing the seven years that had elapsed since Socialism had "come to life again," he goes on to describe the two lines on which the "methods of impatience" profess to work, the line of "palliation" and the line of "partial inconsequent revolt," and then explains his own policy, which differed as much from one as from the other. "Our business," he concludes, "is the making of Socialists, i.e., convincing people that Socialism is good for them and is possible. When we have enough people of that way of thinking, they will find out what action is necessary for putting their principles in practice."

This dignified protest was ill received by the majority of the members of the League, and Morris had no choice but to sever his connection with a body whose policy he disapproved.

Hammersmith Socialist Society.

After his withdrawal it struggled on for eighteen months, and then ended dramatically with the arrest of the printer and publisher of the *Commonweal*. Meanwhile Morris and the little group who shared his views organized themselves as the Hammersmith Socialist Society, and issued a circular drafted by Morris to the provincial branches of the League explaining their action.

The membership was very small at first, and never became large. Mr. Emery Walker was secretary and Morris treasurer, and the meetings took place in Kelmscott House.

Until the end of his life Morris relaxed no whit in enthusiasm for the cause, and his opposition towards Anarchism grew stronger rather than weaker. "It is not the dissolution of society for which we strive," he writes in December, 1890, "but its reintegration. The idea put forward by some who attack present society of the complete independence of every individual, that is, of freedom without society, is not merely impossible of realization, but, when looked into, turns out to be inconceivable."*

Seven Years of Peaceful Work.

But though his belief in Socialism was as strong as ever, he became convinced, as time went on, that the active work immediately called for was work unsuited to his taste and to his powers.

"In all the wearisome shilly shally of parliamentary politics I should be absolutely useless, and the immediate end to be gained, the pushing things just a trifle nearer to State Socialism, which, when realized, seems to me but a dull goal, all this quite sickens me. Also I know that there are a good many other idealists (if I may use that word of myself) who are in the same position, and I don't see why they should not hold together and keep out of the vestry business, necessary as that may be. Preaching the ideal is surely always necessary. Yet, on the other hand, I sometimes vex myself by thinking that perhaps I am not doing the most I can merely for the sake of a piece of 'preciousness.'"+

To make use of Morris for organizing meetings and speaking at street corners was to dig with a damascened sword blade. He was here to show how life, even in the nineteenth century, could be full of variety and delight. The revival of the lost art of printing, the engrossing occupation of his latest years, was a return to the true work of his life. We are glad to remember that the seven years of stress and turmoil, when he fought so nobly for the ideal that lay always before him, were succeeded by seven years of serene and happy work, which has left the world richer in all the crafts that subserve the making of books.

* Manifesto of the Hammersmith Socialist Society.

† Letter to Mrs. Burne-Jones, dated July 29th, 1888, quoted in Mackail's "Life of William Morris," vol. ii, p. 206.

To the last, however, he went on lecturing from time to time on Socialism. On October 30th, 1895, just a year before his death, he gave an address to inaugurate the Oxford Socialist Union. A few months later he was present at the New Year's Meeting of the Social Democratic Federation, and made there a short but noble and touching speech on behalf of unity. Two days afterwards he gave his last Sunday evening lecture at Kelmscott House, again on the same subject, the title being "One Socialist Party."

One more year marked by failing strength but unflinching industry was spent in seeing through the press the greatest of his printing achievements, the Kelmscott Chaucer, and in composing the last of his long series of stories, "The Sundering Flood."

He died on October 3rd, 1896, aged 62, and was buried in the little churchyard at Kelmscott. The body was borne to the grave in an open haycart, festooned with vines, alders, and bulrushes, and driven by a countryman.

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