WILLIAM MORRIS:
HIS SOCIALISTIC CAREER.

EDITOR’S NOTE.—In the effort to offer an accurate portrait-sketch of William Morris, the artist-socialist, handicraftsman, poet and man of business, we have thought best not to conceal those characteristics which separated him so widely from the men of his class and condition. The force and even vehemence of his nature led him to extremes which are inconceivable to the calm-minded and conservative.

But in his violent and sudden reversions from the active to the contemplative life, we may see the effort of a truly practical man of his time to control the impulse of the prophet within him, who looked forward to a distant age when all social wrongs should be righted, and the relations of man to man should be those of brother to brother.

We present the personality of William Morris with neither praise nor blame; but simply with the suggestion that if we take him for all in all, we shall not soon see his like again.

SOCIALISM is a word often vaguely and indiscriminately used; since its definition differs greatly in the various groups of those who profess its principles. Therefore, in order to understand the methods of thought and action of any individual classing himself among those seeking a re-adjustment of the present relations between man and man, it is necessary to discover the germ-ideas of the individual, and to consider the environment which forced these ideas into development and productiveness.

In the case of William Morris, the evolution is most interesting, in that it presents a slow, natural, normal process, divided into the three phases observed in all living things: a weak infancy; a vigorous maturity; a troubled and passive decline.

From documentary evidence, we learn that in youth Morris had no objection to the principle of monarchy. Indeed, his undergraduate utterances in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine (which was founded by himself and his Exeter College friends) have a true Carlyliian ring, when he says:

“People will have a king, a leader of some sort, after all: wherein they are surely
right, only I wish they would not choose king critic-
mob."

The passage quoted was written in 1856, when Morris was as yet the country-bred boy, the easy liver and aristocrat. But the influence of certain of his college associates was like seed left to germinate in his mind. His friends, Price and Faulkner, brought to Oxford actual knowledge of the inhuman conditions of human life in the great industrial areas of England. Their practical enthusiasm for Factory Acts, for sanitation, for all that implied the betterment of the condition of the working classes gradually replaced in the mind of Morris what we may call his personal Mediaevalism; that is: the tendency to excessive hero-worship, and the desire to isolate himself from the common life of the world. He came very slowly to recognize that the classes, or strata of society are interdependent; that harm to one means harm to all; that true freedom, real morality and living art depend upon the physical and social wellbeing of the masses.

Morris’s stage of development at the outbreak of the Russo-Turkish War, which proved to be a crisis in his life, may be described as nothing beyond a frank and thorough liberalism; but yet the trend of his evolution as a thinker was then plainly visible. This moment has been called by one of his most sympathetic biographers: "The Parting of the Ways." It was the beginning of his conversion to a definite and dogmatic socialism. The occasion can be briefly described.

In the autumn of 1876, England was stirred by the reports of Turkish massacres in Bulgaria, and public opinion rallied to the Russian and Christian side; but, during the course of a few weeks, the influence of the Tory ministry so changed the dominant sentiment that the country seemed about to take up arms in the cause of Turkey. Then it was that
William Morris, hitherto known only as an artist and literary man, addressed his now famous letter to "The London Daily News," under the caption: "England and the Turks." After scathing the authors of the Bulgarian massacres and the party in England which, for political and commercial reasons, was ready to condone them, Morris declared that the Tories, in case they precipitated the country into defending the Turks, would find only shame in victory. He ended by an appeal to the working men, recognizing them, for the first time, as an organized body struggling toward clearer light and higher ground. For a final sarcasm, he begged to inscribe himself, in company with Gladstone, Freeman the historian, and all other men whom he esteemed, as "an hysterical sentimentalist."

The war-party persisted in its efforts, and to meet the political crisis, the Eastern Question Association was formed by the friends of neutrality and peace. For a meeting called in the interests of this organization, in January 1878, Morris composed a song in support of the object of the meeting, and beginning with the words: "Wake, London Lads." Collaborating with the patriot-poet, Burne-Jones, the artist designed a platform ticket bearing a vignette entitled: "Blind War." It is interesting to know that both these unusual souvenirs are extant; being preserved in a volume of documents bearing upon the Eastern Question.

Morris had now in middle life shown himself keenly sensitive to the problems of modern civilization. Through a deep study of mediaeval art and citizenship, he had come to be a Socialist in the true sense: not a propagandist and a destructive agent, but rather one who regarded his fellow-beings in some degree as companions, and who ceased not to advocate equity, good-will and kindness. In defining the Socialism of Morris, a well-known American critic has said: "It grew out of his love of art, which inflamed him to bring
all men within its domain.” And so it would appear; since according to his own testimony, and that of his friends and biographers, he entered upon his socialistic career ignorant of economics; to which study he afterward devoted much good-will, and, at times, it must be confessed, ill-directed although sincere efforts.

From the conditions of its origin and early development, the Socialism of William Morris was always largely free from doctrine and dogma. It was innate in his being, through his complete understanding of the principles from which a free life and a pure art can alone spring. As formulated in his mind, it was a system which would abolish, entirely, or in great part, the individual effort and competition on which modern society rests, and substitute for it co-operative action; which would introduce a more perfect and equal distribution of the products of labor, and would make land and capital, as the instruments and means of production, the joint possession of the members of the community.

With such beliefs as these, Morris set himself to denounce with pen and voice the modern industrial and economic system. From the platform of the Hall of University College, Oxford, he cried out to the undergraduates before him: “It is my business here to-night and everywhere to foster your discontent,” and as a practical step toward a new order of society, he counseled the young men to marry beneath their station, in order to break down the existing barriers between class and class.

Protests arose against the defection of the man of position, wealth and education from the class into which he was born. Certain of his acquaintances, and among them even those who knew him well, regarded his Socialism as a sudden, unreasonable, inexplicable action. To such as these always remained unknown the long struggle, the deep brooding, the hesitations and the discouragements through which Morris
passed during his career as a Socialist. Accustomed to
find his thoughts and actions misconstrued by those who,
with little pains, might have understood them, he realized
his loneliness with a touching pathos:

"I have had a life of insults,"

he once said.

Again, in a private letter, he
wrote on New Year's Day, 1881:

"I have of late been somewhat
melancholy. . . . When one is just so much sub-
dued, one is apt to turn more specially from thinking of
one's own affairs to more worthy matters; and my mind
is very full of the great change, which I hope, is slowly
coming over the world. Nor will you perhaps think it
ceremonious or superstitious, if I try to join thoughts with
you to-day in writing a word of hope for the new year;
that it may do a good turn of work toward the abasement
of the rich and the raising up of the poor, which is of all
things most to be longed for; till people can, at last, rub
out from their dictionaries altogether these dreadful words :
RICH and POOR."

Four years later, a sense of
despair seems to have stolen over him, after one of his
visits to the East End of London. He writes:

"On Sunday, I went a-preach-
ing Stepney way. My visit intensely depressed me, as
these Eastward visits always do; the mere stretch of
houses, the vast mass of utter shabbiness and uneventful-
ness, sits upon one like a nightmare. You would perhaps
have smiled at my congregation; some twenty people in
a little room. . . . It is a great drawback that I can't
talk to them roughly and unaffectedly. I don't seem to
have got at them yet—you see this GREAT CLASS
GULF lies between us."

In the effort to make plain the
intense, lonely and lofty personality of William Morris,
we are, perhaps, losing sight of his evolution as a Socialist.
We have seen that the Eastern Question, in its phase of 1876-1878, was the active cause of his conversion to the faith in which he died. When he entered upon his novitiates, by his own confession, he had not so much as opened Adam Smith's "Wealth of Nations," which for Englishmen is the Genesis of economics. Nor had he even heard of Ricardo or Karl Marx. His Socialism from the beginning was of the heart, not of the head.

Through the same rapid power of absorption and assimilation which caused him to master successively a half dozen arts and crafts, he gained a theoretic knowledge of the political and social principles which he adopted midway in life. As understood by him, Socialism represented those hopes of the laboring classes which had been extinguished more than a quarter-century previously by the collapse of the movement known as Chartism: which demanded recognition by the government of the citizenship and the human rights of the working man.

A public profession of faith was made by Morris in joining the so-called Social Democratic Federation, which rose in 1883 out of the union of the Radical, or Liberal clubs of London: these being organizations whose object was to advocate the reform and control of Parliament by making its members habitually subservient to their constituents. The rise of the Federation marked the first appearance in England of modern, or scientific Socialism, and the first step of the new body was to institute a series of meetings for the discussion of "Practical Remedies for Pressing Needs;" the subjects including the now familiar "Eight Hours Law," "Free Meals for School Children," and the "Nationalization of Railways." In the first discussion Morris participated, and his adhesion to the body, because of his high character and great reputation, was counted as a notable victory for the cause. Indeed, so important was it regarded, that a prominent Socialist cried out:
“It has doubled our strength at a single stroke!”

The programme of the Democratic Federation to which Morris subscribed was virtually a scheme of State Socialism; that is: the joint ownership by all members of the State of the land, and of the instruments and means of production; the distribution among the members of the produce, by a public act, performed according to rules laid down by the State; the negation of ownership on part of the members of the State of things that do not perish in the using.

To these theories, distant from their accomplishment, were joined practical measures for the betterment of the condition of the working man, and for the extinction of competition.

Toward the evils of the modern commercial system Morris was especially bitter. He describes the artisans of to-day as “working consciously for a livelihood, and blindly for a mere abstraction of a world-market, but with no thought of the wares passing through their hands.”

With these human automata he thus compares the craftsmen of the Middle Ages:

“Who worked directly for their neighbors, understanding their wants, and with no middle men coming between them.”

“Now,” he continues, “people work under the direction of an absolute master whose power is restrained by a trade’s union, in absolute hostility to that master. In the Middle Ages, they worked under the direction of their own collective wills by means of trade guilds. The old system, in its simplicity, assumed that commerce was made for man; whereas our modern system is based on the assumption that man is made for commerce; that he is not an intelligent being; but a machine, or part of a machine that yields but one
result: the degradation of the external surroundings of life, or, simply and plainly: UNHAPPINESS."

The work of Morris in the interests of the Federation (and it was arduous and long continued) is very well indicated by the titles of four lectures which he delivered in the large towns of the United Kingdom: "Useful Work versus Useless Toil;" "Art and Labor;" "Misery and the Way Out of It;" "How we Live and How we Might Live."

The loyalty of the great man to the Federation and its interests was limitless; but the Socialism of the body rapidly assumed a dogmatic and sectarian coloring. Toward the end of 1884, a rupture occurred in the organization, and Morris was the most important and influential figure among the seceders; since the broad-minded patriot and humanitarian revolted against the assertion that a Socialist, worthy of the name, could not live and work outside the Federation.

A new club, or body, "The Socialistic League," of which Morris was the treasurer, was now formed, with the purpose of promoting Revolutionary International Socialism. An official journal of the League was immediately founded, and its first issue, under the name of "The Commonweal," opened with an introductory column, written and signed by Morris, which was in advance of any socialistic sentiments previously expressed by him. In the course of the article, he observed:

"It is our duty to attack unsparingly the miserable system which would make all civilization end in a society of rich and poor, of slaves and slave-owners."

And again:

"We assume as a matter of course that a government of privileged persons, hereditary and commercial, can not act usefully toward the community. Their position forbids it. Their arrangements
for the distribution of the plunder of the workers, their struggles for the national share of the exploitation of barbarous peoples are nothing to us, except so far as they may give us an opportunity for instilling Socialism into their minds."

The League advocated the complete destruction of existing social conditions; offering as a substitute a Statn ic which land, capital, machinery, factories, workshops, means of transit, mines, banking, and all means of producing and distributing wealth should be declared the common property of all.

During a membership in the League of six years (1884-1890), Morris was unwearied in his efforts as a writer and public speaker, and generous to the point of lavishness with his private contributions to the expenses of the body. Two hundred fifty issues of "The Commonweal" passed through his hands; lectures were delivered by him in all parts of the Kingdom, irrespective of weather and personal comfort; his superb collection of early printed books was sacrificed to the cause that he loved; and, following his other treasures, his health was thrown ungrudgingly into the balance.

In 1887, at the culmination of the acute stage of his Socialism, Morris took part in the gathering ordered to assemble in the Trafalgar Square, and to be composed of delegates from the Radical Clubs of London, the Irish National League, the Democratic Federation and the Socialistic League. A spectator has thus graphically described the demonstration, as the great concourse of people began to pour out of the Square down Parliament Street:

"On they came, with a sort of irresistible force,—and right in front—among the red flags, singing with all his might, was William Morris. He had the face of a Crusader, and he marched as the Crusaders must have marched."

As in the case of the first
organization, narrow and dangerous tendencies developed within the Socialistic League which drifted toward Communist-Anarchism. While thus his companions were restive of all authority, Morris, although believing in a complete equality of condition for all persons, insisted that there must be a public, or social conscience, to restrain the desires and passions of individuals; without which Authority there could be no Society.

So, once again, Morris found himself detached from those whom he had chosen as companions in social progress, and in 1890, in his farewell article in "The Commonweal," he acknowledged that the ideals for which he had so fervently labored, and which at times had seemed to him so near of realization, were distant and impalpable. He retired to write his most important and mature work upon the great movement, which he gave to the world under the title of "Socialism, Its Growth and Outcome."

For the remaining years of his life he was passive in the cause. He recognized that the accumulated wrongs of centuries can not be set right in a lifetime; that the evolution of human happiness can not be otherwise than very gradual.