THE FIRM OF

MORRIS & COMPANY, DECORATORS.

THIS firm, by reason of its peculiar constitution, stands unique in the history of business ventures. Forty years since, had its scheme been offered to practical men of affairs, it would have been rejected with sarcasm and ridicule. Even now to the prudent-minded, a similar enterprise would seem to be lacking in the elements which assure success. Two features of its organization call for special comment. Firstly: It was composed of artists, students and literary men whose aspirations and occupations drew them away from the method of the shop and the counting-room. Secondly: It was founded for the production of objects demanding the highest originality of conception and the most accomplished skill in execution, upon a capital which was merely nominal.

The idea of the Firm rose almost equally from two impulses on the part of its members: the desire for an intimate association together, which should extend to all the concerns of life; the desire also to furnish and decorate a single house which was to be the permanent home of William Morris.

In undergraduate days at Oxford, Morris and Burne-Jones had devised a religious brotherhood in which they both hoped to live, cloistered and as celibates. But as their thought was gradually secularized by years and by London experiences, they came to realize that the demand of modern times is for work and not meditation. So, the dream of the monastery condensed into a real workshop, and the brothers of the religious order evolved into handicraftsmen.

The house built for Morris by his friend and fellow-student in architecture, Philip Webb, was completed as to its work in brick and wood in 1859. But owing to what has been called by a critic: “The
flat ugliness of the current article," the owner and his group of artist-friends set themselves to the designing of the house furnishings and utensils; from the tables, cupboards and settles down to the fire-dogs, candlesticks and table-glass.

The success attendant upon these efforts was recognized at its practical and possible value; and the idea of the firm, as it would now appear, occurred simultaneously to a number of the prospective members; the two oldest and best-known artists of the group, Rossetti and Ford Madox Brown, having the largest share in establishing the enterprise; while it must be acknowledged that the permanence of the work and influence was due alone to the patience, energy, enthusiasm and originality of William Morris.

The firm was called into existence in April, 1861, and an assessment was made of one pound sterling per share; one share being held by each member. This scanty sum and an unsecured loan of one hundred pounds from Mrs. Morris, mother of the artist, furnished the trading capital for the first year.

The initial step of the new association was to make its existence known to the public, by means of a circular letter which, by reason of its style and contents, awakened much comment, antagonism and even ridicule.

At this period, the practice of the decorative arts was understood to be a superficial accomplishment suited to affluent young ladies; and the current opinion of the tradesman was such that no person of culture and position would lightly subject himself to the reproach of having sold his birthright. Indeed, the prejudice excited by the circular can scarcely be appreciated at the present time. Nor did the bitter opposition come from one quarter alone. The tradesmen themselves resented the intrusion into their affairs of a body of men whose training had not been commercial, and whose
influence, they foresaw, would be destructive to their system.

The effect of this pressure from without was to consolidate the membership of the firm, to kindle the common enthusiasm, and to establish a healthful freedom of criticism between the employers and the employed. The situation was a novel one, and as the work was carried farther and farther afield, the ideals rose to heights which were, at the beginning, unsuspected by the boldest member of the friendly circle.

The original intentions of the Firm are best understood by reference to the circular letter, and as this is become an historical document, quotations from it are of real significance to those interested in the development of the decorative arts. The composition of the letter bears traces of what has been called "the imperious accent" of Rossetti; but, as we know, after events more than justified the initial claims made by the artists.

The letter is headed by the first title of the Firm:


The document then proceeds:

"The growth of decorative art in this country has now reached a point at which it seems desirable that artists of reputation should devote their time to it. Although no doubt particular instances of success may be cited, still it must be generally felt that attempts of this kind hitherto have been crude and fragmentary. Up to this time, the want of that artistic supervision, which can alone bring about harmony between the various parts of a successful work has been increased by the necessarily excessive outlay consequent upon taking one individual artist from his pictorial labors."
After enlarging upon the advantages of association and co-operation, and having enumerated the classes of objects to be produced by the Firm, the letter ends with the subjoined concise paragraph, the sentiment of which is worthy to serve as a text for those who preach the gospel of household art:

“It is only requisite to state further that work of all the above classes will be estimated for, and executed in a business-like manner; and it is believed that good decoration involving rather the luxury of taste than the luxury of costliness will be found much less expensive than is generally supposed.”

This last statement was abundantly proven by the accomplishments of the Morris Firm, or rather by those of Morris himself, who wrought a silent revolution in the most necessary arts and crafts, and whose influence having beautified the English middle-class home, gradually involved the New World in the movement toward true aestheticism.

If we follow the history of the Firm, we find that, at the beginning of the year 1862, the organization was in full working order. A further call was at that time made of nineteen pounds sterling (one share representing each member); thus raising the paid-in capital to one hundred forty pounds, which was never increased till the dissolution of the firm in 1874. A few hundred pounds of further capital was supplied by loans, which bore, or were supposed to bear, interest at five per cent.; these loans coming from Morris himself, or from his mother. Work done for the firm by any member was credited to his account at fixed rates, and paid, like other debts; while Morris, as general manager, received a salary of one hundred fifty pounds.

After the manner of all artistic enterprises, the Firm passed through many crises and led for several years a true Bohemian existence. Production was necessarily slow, as it was the result of experiment
and venture. Sales were uncertain, since the effort of production was doubled by the task of creating an intelligent purchasing public. And, hardest of all, there was no reserve fund upon which to draw. The extension of the business, although finally remunerative, at times unbalanced the finances, and Morris, little by little, cast his entire fortune into the rapidly developing scheme. But owing to his industry, sagacity and constancy, the Firm survived, and a capital began to form itself from the accumulated profits. These last were, in strict law, and according to the first contract, equally divisible among the partners who, it is needless to say, bore very unequal shares in the labor of designing and executing; none beside Morris and Faulkner devoting their exclusive time to the affairs of the company. Hence, through the initial fault of the enterprise, arose unpleasant complications which impaired and even destroyed friendships, and nearly led to disaster, at the time of the dissolution and reconstitution of the Firm in 1874.

As the Company extended its activities, which were at first largely confined to the production of household furniture and stained glass, Morris was subjected to the sarcasm of Rossetti. "Top has taken to worsted work" wrote the Chief of the Pre-Raphaelites; using the familiar name applied to Morris by his intimates, as a shortened form of Topsy, and as indicating his thick mop of hair. The "worsted work," or rather embroidery in crewels, was applied to dark serge of Yorkshire manufacture, and designed for mural decoration. In after years, this material with its applied ornament, was superseded by the chintzes and paper-hangings which became the staple products of the Firm. Still later, were developed the beautiful carpets and tapestries upon which Morris lavished the best efforts of his study and manual skill, as well as a wealth of time and physical strength.

Midway in the sixties, the
fortunes of the Firm improved with the spread of Ritualism; owing to which movement commissions for church decoration were received in great number; Burne-Jones, Madox Brown and Morris furnishing cartoons for stained glass, and Morris alone the designs for hangings, altar-cloths and floor-tiles.

The work of the Firm thus rapidly increasing, and the original workshops in Red Lion Square, W. C. proving insufficient, the question of removal became imperative. It was first proposed to make additions to the Red House at Upton,—so that Burne-Jones as well as Morris might live there,—and to locate the new workshops in the vicinity of the beautiful residence. But this plan was rejected because of the distance of the place from London, and the difficulty of country travel in stormy and wintry weather. Then Morris found himself forced to choose between giving up the home, which he had hoped to make the most artistic house in England, and the alternative of retiring from the Company into which he had put so much of his best thought and work. He chose the latter course, and did further violence to his feelings by renting a house in Queen Square, Bloomsbury, large enough to serve as both living place and workshops. From the Red House he retired in the autumn of 1865; leaving behind him splendid art-treasures which were too cumbersome for displacement, or else by their very nature unremovable. Such were the mural paintings in tempera executed by Burne-Jones; the sideboard designed by Philip Webb; and the two great cupboards, the one painted with "The Marriage of King Rene;" the other with the story of the Niebelungenlied. The Red House Morris never saw again, since, as he acknowledged, the experience would have been too painful for him. The new home in Queen Square was not altogether without dignity, as it was situated in the fashionable suburb of the London of Queen Anne and bore distinct marks of its old-time splendor.
For the next five years, Morris lived and labored in London; devoting the time saved by combining his workshops and residence to technical experiments and to new literary studies. During this period, the business affairs of Morris & Company were directed by a Mr. Taylor, a man of artistic taste and financial ability, under whom the Firm became organized and prosperous. These years were also marked by the receipt of the first really important commission in non-ecclesiastical decorative work: the mural decoration of the Green Dining Room at the South Kensington Museum, which to-day remains intact, and which, although of heavy first cost, is now regarded by the Museum authorities as the most economical outlay ever made upon the buildings. The work, from its singular merit, proved to be of great value in making known the name of the Firm and the specific character of its productions. As is usual, success engendered success, and the business extended so rapidly as even to cause anxiety among the members of the Company. As we have seen, the capital, invention and control were supplied practically by Morris, who, nevertheless, under the original instrument of the partnership, could not claim greater rights in the management of the assets of the Firm than any of his five or six associates. On the other hand, the members whose connection with the Firm was slight, might, at any moment, find themselves seriously involved in the liabilities of the business, which had been established prior to the passage of the Limited Company Act. The profits, after the first year or two, and for several reasons, had never been divided. But these legal claims now represented sums which involved intricate calculations, and which, if settled, would drain the resources of the business, that is to say: the private fortune of William Morris.

The question of dissolution having been discussed, three of the partners: Burne-
Jones, Faulkner and Webb, refused to accept any consideration in respect to their claims as partners; while the other three stood for the strict letter of their legal rights. The position of the latter group is explained in the words of an attorney:

"That as in the inception of the Firm no member invested money, nor gave any time or labor, without being paid at an agreed rate, the position of the several members ought to be considered as equal in respect to their claims on the assets of the Firm; further, the good will ought to be taken at three years' purchase and ought to be included in the said assets."

The extreme falsity of such claims is manifest; since the associates, other than Morris, and beyond the first assessment, had contributed nothing toward the capital. They had also, as they averred, been paid on every occasion when they had given assistance, or furnished designs or other work to the Company; by which arrangement Morris, in all justice, was released from obligations toward them. But the usual contest between law and equity ensued. Long and complicated negotiations were made on one side and the other. Friendships were broken, and among them, that of Rossetti with Morris was never again renewed. Finally, the dissolution was effected, but without satisfaction to the contesting, and a new firm came into existence in March, 1875, bearing the name of Morris & Company, and under the sole management and proprietorship of William Morris; Burne-Jones and Webb retiring their interests, but continuing to aid with designs for stained glass and furniture.

At last, the world's verdict repaired the injuries inflicted by friends upon the upright man and the great artist. Morris is to-day honored in England, France and America as a personality unique in the nineteenth century, and as one who practised the most essential arts and crafts only to transfigure them.