A VISIT TO THE SHOP OF WILLIAM MORRIS

A STROLL along Oxford St., London, in the social season, convinces one that the English do not know how to display goods. Here is one of the best retail sections in the largest city in the world, and the windows are so crowded with wares that, to borrow a popular saying, one cannot see the forest because of the trees. As one nears Hyde Park, the grade of shops improves, yet within two blocks of Rotten Row, the parade ground of fashion and wealth, the modestly tasteful window at No. 449 Oxford street, attracts little attention. It is not crowded to repletion as the neighboring shop windows are, and one thinks all the stock is shown. Perhaps in its dressing, it lacks the alluring quality of the Parisian, or the striking effectiveness of the American show-windows. It is so quiet and modest that one is surprised, when almost unconsciously he stops for a second glance. Then the few artistically arranged but really fine pieces of metal work, pottery and draped stuffs, compel a glance at the sign above, which reads: William Morris & Co., like any other tradesman.

Ah! here in the busiest part of busy London, with its rush and roar of traffic, its fog and dirt, its hurrying crowds, its barter and sale, the dreamer of the Earthly Paradise, “the idle singer of an empty day” as he called himself, has left his mark. Dropping his birth-right of ease, the young man, William Morris, known only as the graceful literary artificer, became in his maturity, the master of many crafts, the strenuous Socialist orator, the active apostle of brotherhood, the au-
thor of that most perfect of Utopias, "News From Nowhere."

It is a long distance from News From Nowhere to No. 449 Oxford St. It would seem that the author of such a book, could not be practical; that the founder of so strong and practical a business, could not have written the Utopia. Morris did both.

Entering the store, one is impressed by its business-like air and yet it is entirely different in fitting from its neighbors. There are no long stretches of counters piled high with goods and with waiting clerks behind them. Here is a glass case containing some fine embroidery or tapestry; there a table, or cabinet, simply but strongly made, with dignified, pleasing lines, in the natural wood, and without the high gloss given by cheap vanish. These are specimens of the Morris furniture.

On them are pieces of brass, metal, pottery, tiles, etc., examples of other crafts, which Morris, the master craftsman taught the present workmen. These too have graceful shapes, soft, pleasing coloring and scanty ornamentation which seems but the natural flowering of the maker’s love of beauty.

In a place where the light shines through, is a painted glass window, and, on a neighboring table, some small panes of the Morris glass. With light behind, these produce the effect of myriad jewels massed into meaning. The few pieces of painted glass in stock are for sale, but no more can be obtained at present, as the Morris Glass Works have enough orders for three years in advance.

Near the glass, were a few pieces of the Arras tapestry. This branch of the business has also orders for years to come. Only trained workmen and women can make these exquisite products. And not only training but natural aptitude and artistic instinct are needed, but these last are much more common than
is generally thought. A piece of tapestry or of stained glass is usually the work of one person and must be the flowering of that person’s individuality under favorable conditions. Then it is a “thing of beauty” and a “joy forever.”

The largest piece shown in the shop was some 4 x 2 1-2 feet in dimensions, and represented St. George and the Dragon. It was a wonderful blending of soft but brilliant color. The price was 70 pounds, or $350. Most of this tapestry and glass goes into public buildings. The price puts it beyond the reach of any but the very rich, and the Company prefers that these exquisite works of art, be where the people can see them. There is not the same feeling about other products like wall-paper, stuffs, carpets, etc., as these are reproductions of artistic designs.

In a rack along the wall were rolls of chintzes and light silks, and, at the back, behind a pretty grill-work screen, were samples of silks, velvets, damasks and wall-papers. The patterns on many of these were designed by Morris, Burne-Jones, Rossetti and other famous artists. A number have been reproduced by American manufacturers, but never with quite the same effect. In the Morris fabrics, the stuffs at the base are the best of their kind. The blue and white cotton chintz is made of the best cotton fibre twisted into strong thread and well-woven into substantial cloth. The same is true of the finest brocade or damask.

No aniline dyes are used and nothing but fast colors. It is a peculiarity of the vegetable and animal dyes that they harmonize with one another, do not glitter, and rarely fade; when they do, they soften, but do not dull. The aniline or coal-tar dyes are much more brilliant and make more striking effects, but they rarely harmonize with the vegetable dyes, and often do not harmonize with one another. Most of them rapidly fade and when they do, it is not to a softer shade, but to a
different and much duller color. Contrast this with the peculiar, age-softening of the vegetable-dyed old tapestries! The effect there is very lovely. If the dyes had been aniline, several of the colors, in fading, would have changed their character entirely. The result would have been dull and inharmonious. Stuffs that are made only to sell, are usually bright with aniline dyes and in interior decorations, the result is often exasperating to the artist.

Ah! what a world of soft, rich, blended colorings and flowing designs was revealed in these stuffs and papers. Colorings and designs that do not force themselves on the eye, do not stridently clamor for recognition, do not stun, but produce an effect of quiet, dignified, restful beauty.

We stayed a short time with Joseph Cadbury, Esq., the wealthy cocoa manufacturer and Quaker philanthropist, of the Manor House near Birmingham. The dining room was decorated by Wm. Morris & Co. It is a large, lofty room with two great bow windows to the east and south, and full of sun. It is fitted in dark greens and blues, with wood-work and furniture of dark oak. A stately organ fills one end, and on one side are doors, a buffet, and a low book-case. Windows with a noble outlook occupy the other two sides. Stately curtains of some dark stuff, undraped, but hanging in simple, almost severe folds, give dignity to the windows. There are divans with cushions, books, a writing desk and evidences of living, but none of the bric-a-brac that clutters many American houses. The furniture is simple in form, honest in design and workmanship, and there is not too much of it. Unobtrusive but soft and pleasing rugs cover the floor. Other details I cannot recall, but only the general impression of dignified beauty, a stately spaciousness, warmth, light and rest. Meals in that room, though of bread and water, are banquets. Such a room is an aid to noble living.

This, I take it, is the aim of the
Morris decorations: that man’s material environment should rest and inspire. In a large book-case at the rear of the second floor of the Morris shop, was a complete set of the Morris books. The most sumptuous one is the Kelmscott Chaucer, printed on hand-made paper, with type specially designed for it by Morris, with ink of a blackness and fineness, and letter-press of a clearness seldom seen, and with illustrations by Morris, Burne-Jones, Rossetti and others. The edition was small, is out of print now and is worth $500. This volume was not for sale. Since Morris’ death, the Company has stopped printing, and the Kelmscott books are growing scarce and valuable. They certainly are exquisite specimens of the printer’s art.

Near by, on this second floor, were rugs of the same characteristics as the stuffs and paper on the first floor, also embroideries, and an embroidery room; above were work-shops. Of course, only a small part of the work is done in London. Morris abhorred great cities, and thought that they were excrescences on social life. In his News From Nowhere, London is razed to the ground, save a few houses preserved as curiosities. The workshops at Merton Abbey are beautifully situated in a lovely country and have nothing of a factory air. Men and women go there for work, not for wages. The conditions are such and the treatment such that it is work they love and their work is honest and intelligent.

On their bill-head, Morris & Co. announce themselves as makers of painted glass, tiles, embroidery, Arras tapestry, chintzes, silks, velvets, etc., wall-papers, carpets and furniture decorations. Their work is not low in price. It is not meant for the masses. But it has a great effect directly on the mansions and palaces of England, and indirectly on the homes of all the people in England, in America and all over the world.

As far as his age and time
would allow, Morris embodied in a practical, successful, working business, the principle that he so clearly stated when he wrote: "Love of nature in all its forms must be the ruling spirit of works of art, and the brain that guides the hand must be healthy and hopeful, must be keenly alive to the surroundings of our own days."

THE PLANNING OF A HOME

On a spring evening, three persons were seated in a small reception room of a middle-class city dwelling. Through the open window the sounds of the street came with annoying insistance. The electric car, the newsboy, the cab and the costermonger followed one another with no truce for tired ears and nerves. The persons gathered in the room suggested a comparison with plants confined in close flower-pots having no depth of earth. If they moved freely, they struck some projecting article of use or adornment. The piano and the book shelves frowned haughtily, as if exercising "the right of eminent domain." The legs of tables and chairs stretched selfishly over the floor-space, and the people, close about the lamp, gave themselves up to the tyranny of inanimate objects.

The group appeared to have gathered for consultation: a middle-aged and a young man, with a woman evidently the wife of the former. The first man was, from his appearance, prosperous and as the world counts, happy. But he had the anxious, alert air which comes from too close contact with many