HE life and work of William Morris seem not to lose interest for the reading and artistic public. Any word concerning him, any fragment of design from his hand are seized and discussed over the seas, in France, or in America, with perhaps even greater eagerness than in his native England. The latest study upon him in his triple aspect of poet, craftsman and socialist is, without doubt, the one of all thus far published which will remain the best adapted and the most pleasing to the large majority of his admirers: to those who are not specialists in the arts or the theories to which he gave his many-sided, active and impetuous life. The student pure and simple will prefer the critical estimate of "William Morris, his Art, his Writings and his Public Life," by Aymer Vallance; the lover of accurate biographical detail will delve in the volumes of Mr. Mackail, which are compiled with the minuteness of a mediaeval chronicle. But the one seeking a just idea of the man rapidly conveyed, because conceived with sympathy and enthusiasm, will choose the most recent of the three studies: the one finished last autumn by Elizabeth Luther Cary, whose previous writings upon Tennyson, Browning and the Rossettis, had given her position and authority. To this woman the mediaeval quality, which is more easily recognized than described, appeals with peculiar force; as may be learned from her slight but penetrating criticism of "Everyman:" the fifteenth century morality play which has, this year, brought back to our stage with vital power the spirit of the Pre-Reformation age. Therefore, this new study of William Morris has about it nothing of task or toil. It is filled with a sympathy and an enthusiasm which are rarely found in writing outside of personal letters. And since enthusiasm is contagious, it passes from the writer to the reader, who gains a clearer, more concrete idea of the man and artist treated, than from the more laboriously compiled and necessary works which preceded it. But it must not be understood that the new study is a eulogy rather than a just

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"G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York. 300 pages, 6\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 9\(\frac{1}{2}\), full cloth. Price, $3.50 net."
William Morris

criticism. It is a frank, unbiased statement of facts, fitted to an appreciation of the surroundings in which these facts were accomplished. The title-page, indeed, bears a quotation from Canto One of Dante’s Inferno, which apostrophizes Morris with the well-known “O degli altri poeti onore e lume” (O, of other poets thou honor and light!). But the manner in which the allusion is made and the title given is justified in the first paragraph of the study. One there finds an estimate of Morris sufficiently strong and precise to create a fair idea of the man and his work in the mind of one who should take up the book ignorant of the very name of its subject and who should lay it down again, having but turned the page. This passage will be especially appreciated by the always-increasing number of those who are interested in the history of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. It reads: "There is, perhaps, no single work by William Morris that stands out as a masterpiece in evidence of his individual genius. He was not impelled to give peculiar expression to his own personality. His writing was seldom emotionally autobiographic as Rossetti’s always was; his painting and designing were not the expression of a personal mood, as was the case with Burne-Jones. But no one of his special time and group gave himself more fully or more freely for others. No one contributed more generously to the public pleasure and enlightenment. No one tried with more persistent effort, first to create and then to satisfy a taste for the possible best in the lives and homes of the people. He worked toward this end in so many directions that a lesser energy than his must have been dissipated and a weaker purpose rendered impotent. His tremendous vitality saved him from the most humiliating of failures: the failure to make good extravagant promise. He never lost sight of the result in the endeavor, and his discontent with existing mediocrity was neither formless nor empty. It was the motive power of all his labor; he was always trying to make everything ‘something different from what it was,’ and this instinct was, alike for strength and weakness, says his chief biographer, ‘of the very essence of his nature.’ To tell the story of his life is to write down the record of dreams made real, of theories brought swiftly to the test of experiment, of the spirit of
the distant past reincarnated in the present. But, as with most
natures of similar mould, the man was greater than any part of
his work, and even greater than the sum of it all. He remains one
of the not-to-be-forgotten figures of the nineteenth century, so
interesting was he, so impressive, so simple-hearted, so nearly ade-
quate to the great tasks he set himself, so well beloved by his com-
panions, so useful, despite his blunders, to society at large.”

As the narrative of the life of Morris proceeds, facts are used as can
be done only by a well-trained mind; giving the reader a definite,
accurate result, such as is obtained from a mathematical process.
This quality alone would remove the study from the great mass of
biographical writing which, as a rule, is a crude, undigested mass
of facts, discouraging to the general reader, and valueless except to
the seeker after specific points. For example, the writer sees in
the early letters of Morris a proof that in him the boy was father
to the man; that every turn in his career was due to the strong,
persistent influence over him of the tastes and occupations of his
boyhood. Viewed in this way, the various activities of the poet,
craftsman and socialist no longer appear separate and dissociated,
but arrange themselves into component parts of a simple purpose
and a fixed ideal. Again to quote the words of the study: “With
most men, who are on the whole true to the analogy of the cham-
bered nautilus and cast off the outworn shell of their successive
phases of individuality as the seasons roll, the effect of early en-
vironment and tendency may easily be exaggerated, but Morris
grew in the fashion of his beloved oaks, keeping the rings by which
his advance in experience was marked; at the end, all were visible.
His education began and continued largely outside the domain of
books and away from masters. His wanderings in the depths of
the quaint and beautiful forest, his intimate acquaintance with the
nature of Gothic architecture, his familiarity with Scott, his prompt
adoption of Ruskin: all these formed the foundation on which he
was to build his own theory of life, and all were his before he went
up to Oxford.” The facts furnished by the biographer are once
more used to advantage in describing Morris’s attitude toward his
life-work. The writer of the study observes that Mr. Mackail
notes with surprise the preference for Kingsley over Newman among the Anglo-Catholic group of students, of which Morris and Burne-Jones were fervent members. But for her the reason is plain, because to Newman religion as a mere sentiment was "a dream and a mockery," while for the youths who turned aside from Holy Orders to become artists and poets, "all life was a sentiment." This revulsion of feeling, this change of purpose, in the case of Morris is thus explained: "It was much more in accordance with his ideal of a vocation, a ministry to man, that he should contribute to the daily material comfort and pleasure of the world, that he should make places good for the body to live in and fair for the eye to rest upon, and, therefore, soothing to the soul, than that he should construct abstract spiritual mansions of which he could at best form but a vague conception. It was, then, with a certain sense of dedication, an exchange of method without a change of spirit, that he gave up the thought of Holy Orders, and turned to the thought of furthering the good of mankind by working toward the beauty and order of the visible world."

In commenting upon Morris's choice of architecture as a profession, the writer of the study does not, like the biographer, content herself with a plain statement of facts. To show a rational decision and a purpose unbroken to the end of a long, eventful career, she quotes the words of the man himself, when he expressed his views upon the relations of architecture to the lesser arts. She proves that as a decorator of houses Morris began rightly in acquainting himself with a knowledge of the construction which must exist before any ornament may be applied. And here, indeed, the homely words of the Englishman stand out from the printed page like the figure of a bluff old Saxon warrior must have appeared among his Norman opponents. There is something primitive and elemental in these words of Morris that recalls the forest, the swing of the woodman's axe and a liberty from convention unknown to the Latin races. It is good to hear his simple, strong, for the most part, monosyllabic words when he says: "If we did not know how to dye or to weave, if we had neither gold nor silver, nor silk, and no pigments to paint with but half a dozen ochres and umbers, we
William Morris

might yet frame a worthy art that would lead to everything, if we had but timber, stone and lime, and a few cutting tools to make these common things not only shelter us from wind and weather, but also express the thoughts and aspirations that stir in us. Architecture would lead us to all the arts, as it did with the earlier men; but if we despise it and take no note of how we are housed, the other arts will have a hard time of it indeed.”

In alluding to Morris’s description of Amiens Cathedral, which holds so high a place among the criticisms of the great edifice, the writer notes the master’s singular ability to convey the significant quality of what he admires: since from mere verbal repetition he gives, in one passage, the effect of massive modeling and the sense of weight, in another the effect of repose and sweetness, and in a third, with far more subtle power, the effect of color.

The writer of the study is, perhaps, at her best, when she discusses the poetry of Morris, between whom and Browning she offers a comparison: saying justly that the latter poet’s effort was always to render an idea which was perfectly clear in his own mind; that his volubility, obscurity and roughness frequently arose from his eagerness to express his idea in a variety of ways; but that all his stutterings and broken sentences failed to disguise the fact that an intellectual conception underlay the turbulent method, giving substance and life to the poem, however much it might lack grace and form; on the other hand, that with Morris the intellectual conception was as weak as with Browning it was strong, and apparently existed chiefly to give an excuse for the pictures which follow one another in rapid succession through every poem, short or long, dramatic or lyric, of both his youth and maturity. The strictures refer, of course, principally to the first manner of Morris when he strove “to copy Gabriel as much as possible,” and they least of all touch the “Life and Death of Jason” which the critic characterizes as “simple, certain, sweet,” and pre-destined to popularity. Later, her justice and scholarship are shown in her collation of important opinions regarding the Morris translations of Virgil and Homer, which certain noted men of letters have unsparingly ridiculed for their clumsiness and affectations.
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The chapter in the new study treating the history of the firm of Morris and Company is of course drawn from the writings of Mackail and Aymer Vallance, and suffers the disadvantage of being secondary work. But even here sympathy with the subject and critical acumen have produced passages which deserve to be widely known and to be taken to the heart. Among such passages the strongest describes Morris, who "conforming to the truest of principles, raised his work by getting under it. Nothing was too laborious or too lowly for him. Pride of position was unknown to him in any sense that would prevent him from indulging in manual labor. His real pride lay in making something which he considered beautiful take the place of something ugly in the world. If it were a fabric to be made lovely with long disused or unfamiliar dyes, his hands were in the vat. If tapestry were to be woven, he was at the loom by dawn. In his workman's blouse, steeped in indigo, and with his hair outstanding wildly, he was in the habit of presenting himself cheerfully at the houses of his friends, relying on his native dignity to save appearances, but entirely happy in his rôle of workman, though frankly desirous that the business should prosper. 'I have not time on my hands,' he said, 'to be ruined and get really poor.'"

The criticism regarding the disadvantage of secondary work may be extended to the chapter upon the socialism of Morris, but as the topic is, in some sense, a gloomy one,—since Morris consumed in the great cause a large amount of time and of unproductive thought,—the information once gained, concerning the socialistic writings, speeches and efforts of the whole-souled philanthropist and patriot remains too vivid in the mind of a reader to need renewal or addition.

Among the later chapters of the study one is prominent for its practical quality, giving a clear, concise idea of the establishment, work and standing of the Kelmscott Press, with explanations of technicalities fitted to the popular misunderstanding. Were it to be printed alone, it might serve as a welcome manual for incipient bibliophiles who could gain much from its simple, direct teaching. Interesting facts gained from the book-market here find a legitimate place and are stated in passages such as the following:
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"Whether the Kelmscott books will increase or decrease in money value, as time goes on, is a question that stirs interest in book-buying circles. They have already had their rise and ebb to a certain extent, and the prices brought by the copies owned by Mr. Ellis at the sale of his library, after his death, indicate that a steady level of interest has been reached among collectors, for the time being at least; only five of the copies printed on paper exceeding prices previously paid for them. The presentation copy on vellum of the great Chaucer brought five hundred and ten pounds, certainly a remarkable sum for a modern book, under any conditions, and nearly a hundred pounds more than the highest price which Morris himself, up to the summer of 1894, had ever paid even for a fourteenth-century book. The paper copy of the Chaucer sold at one hundred and twelve pounds, and a paper copy in ordinary binding sold in America in 1902 for $650, while a paper copy in the special pigskin binding brought $950 the same year. The issue price for the four hundred and twenty-five paper copies was twenty pounds apiece, and for the eight copies on vellum offered for sale out of the thirteen printed, a hundred and twenty guineas apiece."

And thus it would be possible to quote *ad infinitum* from this admirable study of "William Morris, poet, craftsman and socialist, with profit to each class of the admirers of the great Englishman; who was plainly, as the study portrays him, one of the great figures of the nineteenth century; whose accomplishments, great as they were, stand secondary to the influence toward beauty which he exerted in all the lesser arts of life," and which is still more powerful to-day than it was during his actual existence.