ANY men have written more abstrusely than I shall here attempt to write of William Morris's art. Many students have probed deeper into his principles of socialism than I should here care to probe. Many critics have looked more closely into his poetry than I on this occasion intend to look. If, however, I might accomplish one trivial end I should be more than satisfied. And that end would be to give you a hint of William Morris, the Man.

It was Merck who said of Goethe that what he lived was more beautiful than what he wrote. I have always felt, in much the same way, that it is only as the living, composite, sometimes incongruous enough, Man, that William Morris stands pre-eminent, triumphant. As a political economist his dearest dreams were tinged with that uncompromising ideality in which he himself, toward the end, sadly discovered the elusive rose-tints of utopianism. In his poetry, with all its vivid coloring, there are to be found grave defects; in it we look in vain for either the charm of Rossetti or the music of Swinburne. As an artist, pure and simple, he was not without his superiors.

Yet before William Morris, the Man, we stand overawed. We look back over his life bewildered, astounded into silence at the vastness of his accomplishment, perplexed at the diversity of his interests, amazed at the sheer vital force and unflagging energy of the man. To those who knew him more intimately it was this tireless and buoyant activity which saved him to the last. He was recalcitrant only from the knees down. Revolter though he was, he never forgot that this world was the workshop of God. Where Ruskin himself—intoxicated now and then, perhaps, by his own dizzy eloquence—eventually fell into the pitfall of empty petulance, Morris saved himself by being always more than a mere whiner. His revolt was dignified by struggle; the darkest hour of his pessimism was ennobled by heroic effort toward better things. And he was the Thompson as well as the Edison, the Erasmus as well as the Luther. It is a far cry from the Morris Commonwealth down to the Morris Chair. But each was a flower on his tree of
William Morris as I Remember Him

vigorou{s} life. The one, earth's children caught at readily enough; the other grew too high for nineteenth century hands.

Of Morris's early life I know little,—little, at least, beyond what may be gathered from hearsay and books. And books, at best, are half-hearted and halting interpreters. The great craftsman was already an old man when I first met him. It was, strangely enough, in Oxford, that beautiful, dreamy, grey city on the Isis, the city for which he had once stood ready to do so much, yet which still pored tranquilly and unperturbed over its Menander, when, in the summer of 1896, the last remains of its great son were carried through the grey-walled town, toward, perhaps, a more fitting resting place.

It is hard to say just what, in turn, Morris's own feelings for Oxford were. It must be acknowledged, at any rate, that they were curiously mixed. The earlier spell had long since fallen away. He felt that any old debt of gratitude was well wiped out by that winter day at Holywell, in 1885, when the undergraduates of his *alma mater* derisively pelted him with eggs and old vegetables, transforming an orderly meeting into open riot. It was a year later that Cambridge curled a contemptuous lip over his ideas. And I must here turn aside to add that this always seemed to me the most pitiable period in this great man's existence. I mean, of course, that period in the later eighties when so much of his good life was given up to inglorious scufflings with the London police, to the jostle and jeers of a huge city's uncomprehending rabble, and, what was worse, to the fawning adulation of a herd of parasitical hypocrites who utterly failed him in the hour of need. It is all more than pitiable, not so much because of its mere predestined futility and impotence, but more because of its ultimate effect on Morris himself. It left him to die a bitter and disheartened man; though the world, indeed, saw little of that bitterness. But throughout the more intimate tones of his verse the cry escapes him, again and again. He was but “the idle singer of an empty day.” Enlightened as to the ugliness and sordidness of his own age, he was forced to harp forever backward to an Age of Gold, or forward to an Age of Dream. I have seen him, after one of his evangelizing visits to the
William Morris as I Remember Him

East End of London, crushed in spirit and fatigued in body, silently but poignantly hopeless of that newer life for which he was willing to stake so much. It was sadly unpromising material he had to deal with, and knowing that particular type of stolid British workman whom he was struggling to awaken from disheartening apathy, I more than once asked him if, after all, it would not have been better had he undertaken this thing in America, the land of new ideas and new ideals. But to this he always shook his head; I knew that he was still English to the back-bone. Yet to-day I am often tempted to speculate, perhaps idly enough, on just how much William Morris might have accomplished had the hand of destiny flung him upon the New World, instead of the Old.

I have spoken at some length of Morris’s pessimism, but this, it must be remembered, was a thing which he did not wear on his sleeve. It was a development which did not properly belong to the man at all. Even in his last illness, he looked up one day and said: "If this means months of idleness and then the End, I don’t like it at all, for life has been a very jolly time to me!" I can remember, too, one bright morning on the High, in Oxford, as he walked with his short, quick, stocky steps out across Magdalen Bridge, and let his eyes wander musingly along the waters of the Cherwell. He suddenly drew in a great breath of air, scented with the smell of flowers from the Botanical Gardens, and gasped out: "My eyes, how good it all is!" These are the identical words, I have been told, that Morris uttered when he beheld the first page of his Kelmscott "Chaucer," the book which we all know well enough brought him down to his grave. "My eyes, how good it is!" At Kelmscott Manor, too, he seemed always to drink in the sheer joy of life, where, and especially in his later years, he loved to linger late in the mellow English autumn, and toward which he always hastened early in the Spring. It stands typical of the man, that curious old country house, with its low, many-gabled, mullion-windowed, rubble-stone walls, surrounded by well-kept English gardens, and yew hedges and hawthorn and wild rose, and beautiful elms,—elms the like of which you would scarcely find elsewhere in England,—and odorous clover-meadows and fragrant
William Morris as I Remember Him

hay-fields sloping dreamily down to the valley of the little Thames, where the master of the house himself so loved to steal away now and then and give a whole half day up to fishing and strolling along that bird-haunted stream. For with all his dreams of socialism, there was a touch of the aristocrat about William Morris, to the end. Cambridge, twelve years before his death, had taunted him with the charge that he made books and tapestry for only the wealthy and well-to-do. It was charged that his things were costly, and far beyond the reach of the poor, about whom he prated so much. Yet it was his awakening to the fact that the poor had neither the taste nor the opportunity to grasp at the beauties of life, as expressed in art, that first swept him from his rock of passive aristocracy into the turbid waters of socialism as he defined it. Culture, wealth, and friendship of such spirits as Rossetti, Burne-Jones, and Madox Brown, a youth that had been steeped in the grey loveliness of Oxford, a home that was all beauty and peacefulness, unlimited opportunities for immuring himself within his own Palace of Art,—all these were not enough to anchor him to a life of mere art and aristocratic indifference. “Oxford,” he once said to me, “taught me the need of beauty; Stepney taught me the need of humanity.” After the time-softened towers and walls on the Isis, it was small wonder that he railed against “the brick boxes with slate lids,” as he used contumaciously to dub the suburban villa architecture of London, and later of Oxford itself. Indeed, from the first he had fretted and fumed over what he called Oxford’s architectural errors. The re-roofing, with green Westmoreland slates, of Exeter College Chapel was a subject which angered him almost unreasonably. He was equally exercised over the restoration of the Tower of St. Mary’s; in fact, in the summer of 1893, old man that he was, he clambered up the tall tower for a personal inspection, and for many weeks fought with Mr. Jackson, the gifted enough restorer, about the displacing of the old statuary. He argued vehemently that the tottering and time-eaten old figures ought not to be done away with; let them be braced and supported and patched up, but above all things keep them where they were first placed. “Put an iron cage around them, if you have to,” he cried,
William Morris as I Remember Him

“only keep them there!” In more tangible ways, however, he had already done his share for Oxford, if not altogether personally and directly, at least through the firm of “Morris and Company.” One has only to study those beautiful windows in Christ Church College, or “The Star of Bethlehem” arras, still so badly stretched in Exeter College Chapel, to realize his services for his old university, whose walls he loved much better than all her books.

There is, too, one significant little fact I should like to point out in passing. It was the Oxford fritillary, that little, checkered, purplish flower commonly called the snake’s-head, which blooms so beautifully along the Isis, about Iffley, in the late spring, which gave to William Morris one of his favorite flower designs. The slender spike of the Oxford wild-tulip, which you will to-day find flowering about the meadows of the Cherwell, furnished him with an equally happy design. It was these simple flowers that he knew and loved best. Remembering this tendency of his for simple things, it has always puzzled me to understand why he should plead so passionately for the Gothic in architecture, and so pin his hope to “the distorted saint and tobacco-pipe column” style of building, as Germany’s greatest man termed it, when he stood before the Temple of Neptune at Paestum.

Although it has been said, and generally understood, that social problems did not perplex Morris until the latter part of his life, from his earliest day I believe him to have been a revolutionist at heart. We have that half-humorous and half-pathetic story of his monkish fasting and self-flogging at Exeter; even that was a revolt against youthful ease. He once expressed the wish that he might have been like Bernard Palissy, the Huguenot potter, burning his last chair in attic poverty. Perhaps, though, it was better he should show the world that the well-fed lion does not always lose its ferocity. He was an anarchist, if you will, but an anarchist only in the Kingdom of Ugliness. The great constructive hope of his life was to make the workman an artist; if, in the end, his family came into the fortune he left, it was only because those workmen whom he had called into his factory, under the new order of things which he hoped to establish, miserably and selfishly imposed on his
optimism, instead of joyfully and gratefully accepting his relief. "Art," he once said, "is utility touched with aspiration." Art is nourished, not by theory, he held, but by life; it should stand as an expression of life’s joy in labor. For this reason he despised all dilettanteism and idly toying with things artistic. Oriental art was sheer jugglery to him, for he believed that "feeling is the soul of architecture," in small things and in large things alike. He freely enough confessed that he was careless to all metaphysics, and indifferent to all religion. He bent his knee to only Beauty and Freedom. Before pedants and those opposed to his views he often lapsed into a sort of gloomy and silent petulance. Through an hour’s argument, outwardly destructive to all that he held most dear, he could sit obstinately, irascibly wordless. His practical, workman-like spirit was intolerant to the uttermost of mere empty theorizings. When he was moved to speak—and there were times when he could talk by the hour together—he spoke in short, crisp, Anglo-Saxon words, not easily and fluently, but hesitatingly, hacking and pounding at his sturdy, oak-like, inflexible English sentences. It was the seeming weight of personality behind the words that invariably saved him as a public speaker, though on the whole I believe that his brusque, fiery, intolerant harangues in vivid yet broken flights of homely Anglican idiom did not succeed in winning over his audience (and especially when they chanced to be an East End audience) as well as he and his sympathizers often might have wished,

As for the appearance of the man, the rugged shell which housed the great soul, Watt’s portrait will, I think, always stand the best. There was something leonine about the massive, rounded head, with its earnest, audacious, stubborn eyes, and its wealth of up-thrust, iron-grey hair. The full beard was of the same iron-grey tinge. His body was strongly-knit and heavy in line and movement (all but those wonderful, alert, restless hands!), and the length of the body itself was perhaps accentuated by the unusually short legs, which gave to his stride its nervous, quick motion under excitement, when he invariably fell to pacing the floor. At all times he affected a shirt of the plainest blue flannel, dressing unde-
William Morris as I Remember Him

viatingly in a stout, loosely-made suit of black-blue cloth, with an often rusty enough blue cloak, and a black, soft-rimmed wide-awake. He lived simply, always traveling third class, walking often where others would ride, enjoying to the last his pipe, his fishing-rod, his pictures and old manuscripts, his quiet home on the Thames, and, above all, his yearly task of trimming the yew-tree dragon, just under the tapestry-room, in the gardens of Kelmscott Manor.

THE NECESSITY FOR USING OUR EYES, IF WE ARE TO BE ARTISTS, HAVING BEEN ADMITTED, THE QUESTION COMES: HOW ARE WE TO GET PEOPLE TO USE THEIR EYES, ALWAYS KEEPING IN MIND THE FACT THAT FOR SOME TIME AFTER THEY HAVE BEGUN TO DO SO THEY WILL BE A TORMENT TO THEMSELVES AND THEIR NEIGHBORS, AS I AM.

WILLIAM MORRIS
ARCHITECTURE AND HISTORY
AND WESTMINSTER ABBEY