WILLIAM MORRIS THE MAN. BY GEORGE WHARTON JAMES

It is to William Morris, beyond all question, that the world owes its recent awakening to the spirit which should animate all labor. This man was one of the powerful prophets of the nineteenth century. His life was as truly an awakening as that of Peter the Hermit, and his influence strong for the welfare of humanity.

Of William Morris, poet, teller of weird tales, illuminator, painter, decorator, church restorer, craftsman, socialist, reformer, we have had much and good writing—articles in magazines, pamphlets and books innumerable.

Yet, except to a limited number, Morris, upon the human side, is almost unknown. It is, therefore, as a man that I now wish to present him. Necessarily I shall have to touch somewhat upon the varied work in which he was engaged, as no life can be considered apart from its labor; but I shall refer to it only as it serves to explain the personal character of my subject.

The casual reader, looking over the list of Morris’s activities, rejects the idea of his being a simple man. And even critics have recorded that if he erred at all, it was because “in his eagerness to create the beautiful, he lost sight of the value of simplicity.”

Yet I wish to show that his versatility, instead of being an evidence of complexity, is really a proof of his simplicity. For instance, he believed in the dignity of labor, and equally in the joy of the laborer, which can only exist when his work is artistic and beautiful. To give a practical coördination of these two beliefs it was necessary for him to be artist or designer, and artisan or maker. Hence, he never designed a piece of work in his office that he could not go out into his shops and make.

What was his need for going into business at all? To all outward appearance, none whatever. He was born well-to-do, and with care of his inherited fortune, he could have lived a life of luxury and ease. But he looked upon life much too seriously for that. Manhood without work was impossible, hence his determination to be an architect.

It is interesting and instructive to see what led him to this decision. As a child he had ridden about the country, making rubbings of ancient brasses found in the old churches, and studying the buildings
Emma Lazarus, who saw Morris in 1886, thus describes him: "We saw framed against the black background of one of the upper windows, the cordial face and stalwart figure of William Morris, clad in a dark-blue blouse. Before we had alighted he was at the gate to receive us, welcoming us with his great, hearty voice and warm hand-grip. 'The idle singer of an empty day' might sit for the portrait of his own Sigurd. He has the robust, powerful form of a Berserker, crowned with a tall, massive head, covered with a profusion of dark, curly hair plentifully mixed with gray. His florid color and a certain roll in his gait and a habit of swaying to and fro while talking, suggest the sailor or the yeoman, but still more distinctly is the poet made manifest in the fine modeling and luminous expression of the features. An indescribable open-air atmosphere of freedom and health seems to breathe from his whole personality."
themselves; so that at sixteen years of age he was well versed in the archaeology of the neighborhood. He carried on these same studies at Marlborough, and his reading for the Church made him familiar with some of the finest descriptions of the ancient buildings of the world. Ruskin’s “Stones of Venice” had further awakened his love for architecture; his first holiday out of England was spent in Belgium and Northern France, where he fell in love with those poems in stone, the churches of Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Amiens, Beauvais and Chartres; nearly four years he passed in Oxford with the wealth of its ancient buildings always in view; and, finally, he was roused by the destructions under the name of “restorations” in progress throughout the country, which, as a professional architect, he felt that he might have some slight influence to prevent.

But before he left the University to become an architect’s apprentice, the Brotherhood was organized, the life and power of which show better than any comment can do the real character of the lads who composed it. What the Brotherhood was is too well known to need explanation here, but I cannot refrain from commenting upon the difference in the spirit shown by him and his comrades from that of many of the young men and women in college to-day. How often do we find Morris’s earnest, all-absorbed spirit, his determination to profit by opportunities, his resolution to work for the highest and the best, and for that alone!

In Morris, as a young man, there were certain qualities which challenged immediate attention. They were prominent features in his make-up which could not be overlooked. Of these things let us now take a careful survey, and see how they were manifested in his later life. These prominent characteristics are three in number, namely: he loved beauty, he loved humanity, and whatever he did he did intensely. His love of beauty is shown in everything that he did. He studied architecture because he loved the glorious old churches and other buildings of England and, later, of the world; he wrote poetry and did it well because he loved a beautiful story well told; all his craftsmanship came from this same devotion to the beautiful. As for his love of mankind, Canon Dixon, in speaking of the college days of the “set” to which he and Morris belonged, plainly states that this love of humanity was a passion in all of them: “We all had the notion of doing great things for man.”
WILLIAM MORRIS THE MAN

In his relationship to his workmen, in his passionate pleas for true art as the only possible pathway to the happiness of the worker, finally, in his chivalric devotion to the cause of socialism, he justified his professions and practically laid down all selfishness at the shrine of his love for the downtrodden and distressed.

And now, for a clearer comprehension of his life, let us look at the spirit of intensity he showed toward everything in which he became interested! This intensity was instinctive and unconscious with him. He possessed it as a child. This is seen from the fact often noted that he never forgot, or confused with any other, a landscape, building, flower, or other object he had once seen. He was fond of certain athletic sports, chief of which was fencing with the single-stick. When he engaged in this exercise he was so impetuous that it was not an uncommon thing for a table to be placed between him and his opponent.

Another characteristic manifestation of this intensity, and also a proof of his determination to respond quickly to the highest spiritual demands, was that, when he had lost his temper, had failed in some evident duty, he would beat his own head fiercely with his clenched fist, and deal himself vigorous blows, to “take it out of himself.”

It was this intensity of nature which made him do everything decisively, whether well or ill. He burst into poetry suddenly, and when his work was read to his critical friends, they all pronounced it: “a thing entirely new, founded on nothing previous, perfectly original, whatever its value, and sounding truly striking and beautiful, extremely decisive and powerful in execution.” . . . “In my judgment,” writes one of them, “he can scarcely be said to have much exceeded it afterward in anything that he did.”

This same spirit led him to do things thoroughly. As a lad of sixteen he visited a Druidical circle and took notes upon it. The next day he was told of something which he had not observed; so straight he went back, made new observations and secured the needed information.

This positive directness led him to hate everything vague, whether in art, poetry, politics, architecture, color, or speech. It was this quality of mind which led him to resign his treasurership in the National Liberal League; to lose patience with the rich customer who came to see his “subdued” carpets; which compelled him to become
weaver, dyer, and cabinet maker. Vagueness, to him, was immoral. In later life he taught in one of his lectures: "Be careful to eschew all vagueness. It is better to be caught out in going wrong when you have had a definite purpose, than to shuffle and slur so that people can't blame you, because they don't know what you are at."

Such was his strong protest against lukewarmness. Yet, while believing in positiveness, he did not countenance obstinacy. This quality he showed even in his hesitations before uniting himself with the Socialist movement. Concerning this he wrote: "I am in rather a discouraged mood, and the whole thing seems almost too tangled to see through and too heavy to move. Happily though, I am not bound either to see through it or move it but a very little way; meantime I do know what I love and what I hate, and believe that neither the love nor the hatred are matters of accident or whim." This intensity of nature was further demonstrated in his great power of concentration. He was able so to fix his attention upon a given subject as to master it in a time that to other men seemed impossible. For the moment, the one subject completely absorbed and dominated him. As a natural complement to this faculty, he was gifted with versatility; for the latter is but natural capacity, made effective by concentration. Morris's intense nature made this the simplest thing in the world.

He was always sufficient to himself. Even as a boy at school he cared little for companions. How could a man so intense in his nature be sociable with men who were more interested in frivolities than in truth? The very intensity of his nature prevented such waste of his time.

When a thing displeased him he showed it with characteristic vehemence. Once, as the director of a certain corporation, he was persuaded into wearing a silk hat; but at the end of his directorate, he walked rapidly home, put down his hat and, with evident pleasure, sat on it.

Concerning his calm way of regarding his tempests when they were over, he writes in one of his letters: "I lost my temper in the dye-house for the first time this afternoon; they had been very trying, but I wish I hadn't been such a fool; perhaps they will turn me out to-morrow morning, or put me in the blue-vat."

He was direct in speech. He did not aim at style or fine diction. Strong thought, strongly expressed, is what we find in him, and this
quality reveals a virile nature, ruled by essentials rather than by refinement and culture which are secondary. In speaking of the benefits of a knowledge of the history of the Decorative Arts, he called his period "a time when we so long to know the reality of all that has happened, and are to be put off no longer with the dull records of the battles and intrigues of kings and scoundrels." Here he uses a word which we all have felt, but have never cared to use. But he, with simple directness which values truth first, states it, in its force; so that the reader gains a new grasp upon the vanity of calling that "history" which deals mainly with the waste of human life and energy made by many of the rulers, statesmen, and warriors of Europe.

As an example of his simplicity of statement I quote from his lecture upon "Art and Its Producers": "Shall we pretend to produce architecture and the architectural arts without having the reality of them?" He then answered: "To adopt this plan would show that we were too careless and hurried about life to trouble ourselves whether we were fools and (very tragic fools) or not."

It was this spirit which made him obnoxious at times to those who did not understand him. Who is there that cannot understand his impatience, when the lordly customer came to look at his carpets, and wanted the neutral colors which came from an unclean dye. "Are these all?" "Yes!" "But I thought your colors were subdued?" "Subdued? If you want dirt you can find it in the street!" And, turning on his heel, he left the astonished customer to find his way out of the shop.

Morris was incorruptibly honest. He did not believe in "restoring" ancient churches, cathedrals, abbeys, castles and the like. He contended that they were too valuable as historic examples to be spoiled by meddling. If they were needed for actual use, it were better to build another structure, than ruin what should be the untouched legacy of the past. One profitable branch of his business was the designing and making of colored glass windows, so often needed in the restoration of old buildings. Yet so inflexible was he in his principles that he refused many commissions, because he would not violate his conscience and, for pay, do the work which his artistic instinct told him was wrong.

But it is particularly to his love for humanity, as shown in his never-ceasing efforts to dignify labor, and his passionate devotion to
WILLIAM MORRIS THE MAN

the elevation of the laborer himself that I want now to call the attention of my readers.

With Morris the man was everything; convention, fashion, show nothing. The world was made for man, and everything must yield to his interests. Like Browning, Emerson and all the great poets and philosophers, the world meant nothing without man; therefore, he was alert to see that man got the best there is from the earth.

When he saw his fellows slaving and toiling for a mere pittance, when he saw commercialism making of human beings nothing more than machines, and every good and noble thing in manhood sacrificed at the shrine of mammon, his very soul was roused to rebellion. Seeing the awful demoralization which possessed many of the working men of England, he sought, with characteristic energy, to discover the cause. His conclusion is summed up, practically, in one sentence: "If I were to spend ten hours a day at work I despised and hated, I should spend my leisure, I fear, in drinking."

He was about twenty-two years of age when the social condition of the lower classes forced itself upon his notice. It must be remembered that he was a true aristocrat, not in blood, but in education and feeling. Many a born aristocrat is a boor and snob, but here was a lad with all the sentiments and ideals which we associate with the term: "a part of his very nature." Price—his student friend "Crom"—knew all the conditions and felt them, and, through his profound sympathy, Morris soon felt as he did. Here is what Price writes: "Things were at their worst in the forties and fifties. There was no protection for the mill-hand or miner—no amusements but prize-fighting, dog-fighting, cock-fighting, and drinking. When a little boy I saw many prize-fights, bestial scenes; at one, a combatant was killed. The country was going to hell apace. . . . We could not make short cuts to school without passing through slums of shocking squalor and misery, and often coming across incredible scenes of debauchery and brutality. I remember one Saturday night walking five miles from Birmingham into the Black Country, and in the last three miles I counted more than thirty lying dead drunk on the ground, nearly half of them women."

It is easy to see that when these facts fully entered Morris's inner consciousness, his intense nature was awakened to action. Something must be done and done speedily. With the same impetuosity that
made him so powerful a reader, so fierce an opponent at single stick, so devoted a student of old churches, he plunged heart and soul into the work of social regeneration. And how nobly he rose to the need. It was nothing to him that others of his class stood by indifferent. He took upon himself, with sublime self-effacement, the burdens of the common people. There are at this time a simplicity, a dignity, a power in his words which make them intensely pathetic:

“As I sit at my work at home, which is at Hammersmith, close to the river, I often hear go past the window some of that ruffianism of which a good deal has been said in the papers of late. As I hear the yells and shrieks, and all the degradation cast on the glorious tongue of Shakspere and Milton, as I see the brutal, reckless faces and figures go past me, it rouses the recklessness and brutality in me also, and fierce wrath takes possession of me, till I remember, as I hope I mostly do, that it was my good luck only of being born respectable and rich that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side and the empty street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings. What words can say what all that means? Do not think, I beg of you, that I am speaking rhetorically in saying that when I think of all this, this great country should shake off from her all foreign and colonial entanglements, and turn that mighty force of her respectable people, the greatest power the world has ever seen, to giving the children of these poor folk the pleasures and the hopes of men. Is that really impossible? Is there no hope of it? If so, I can only say that civilization is a delusion and a lie: there is no such thing, and no hope of such a thing.

“But since I wish to live, and even to be happy, I cannot believe it impossible. I know by my own feelings and desires what these men want, what would have saved them from this lowest depth of savagery: employment which would foster their self-respect and win the praise and sympathy of their fellows, and dwellings to which they could come with pleasure, surroundings which would soothe and elevate them; reasonable labour, reasonable rest. There is only one thing that can give them this, and that is art.”

Morris saw that there was no alternative: either art must sweeten man’s labor, or labor will render man a machine. It is a fact not to be ignored that in all work in which man has no pleasure he has de-
generated. Ruskin’s aphorism is true: “Life without industry is guilt, industry without art is brutality.” This was the constant burden of Morris’s plea: “I wish specially to point out that the question of popular art is a social question, involving the happiness and misery of the greater part of the community.” Again: “Popular art has no chance of a healthy life, or, indeed, of a life at all, till we are on the way to fill up the terrible gulf between riches and poverty.”

In the opening of his Sigurd the Volsung, Morris sets forth what to me is a poetic and ideal condition of labor:

“There was a dwelling of kings ere the world was waxen old; Dukes were the door wards there, and the roofs were thatched with gold; Earls were the Wrights that wrought it, and silver nailed its doors; Earls’ wives were the weaving women, queens’ daughters strewed its floors, And the masters of its song-craft were the mightiest men that cast The sails of the storm of battle adown the bickering blast.”

Here is the dignity of labor presented with power. Here is the reality of poetry never better set forth. Morris was driven to his position that we must make useful things beautiful by the stern necessity for work. “For man must work,” whether he will or not. Even though machines are invented for doing everything, and doing it in the simplest, quickest and least costly way, there is still work to be done which men must do one for another. How, then, shall this be accomplished? Grudgingly, slavishly, hatefully? Nay, let us find a better way; and that way, said Morris, is by putting art into it, and thus finding pleasure in doing it.

“Time was when everybody that made anything made a work of art beside a useful piece of goods, and it gave them pleasure to make it. That is an assertion from which nothing can drive me; whatever I doubt, I have no doubt of that. And if there is anything in the business of my life worth doing, if I have any worthy aspiration, it is the hope that I may help to bring about the day when we shall be able to say: ‘So it was once, so it is now’.”

For years he worked toward these ends, and it was in the hope of urging on the happy day he longed for, that he became a socialist. At first, he felt that only by a social revolution could the change come about, and the devotion he showed to this apparently hopeless cause is most pathetic. As he said: “I could never forget that in spite of all drawbacks my work is little else than pleasure to me; that under no conceivable circumstances would I give it up even if I
WILLIAM MORRIS THE MAN

could. Over and over again have I asked myself why should not my lot be the common lot? My work is simple work enough; much of it, nor that the least pleasant, any man of decent intelligence could do, if he could but get to care about the work and its results. Indeed, I have been ashamed when I have thought of the contrast between my happy working hours and the unpraised, unrewarded, monotonous drudgery which most men are condemned to. Nothing shall convince me that such labor as this is good or necessary to civilization."

Many who have appreciated Morris on all his other sides have expressed their utter disapprobation of his socialism, and their inability to understand why so clear minded a man should have entered into so endless a conflict with co-workers so crude, so quarrelsome, so inadequate to the strife.

I now wish to show that his socialism was but the result of a combination of three influences within him. These were his story telling faculty (the vividness of imagination), his high hopes for humanity, and his artistic desire to do well whatever he attempted. His sympathies were roused: he saw the wrongs, the inequalities, he felt the sorrows, the pangs of the downtrodden and oppressed; on the other hand he knew the possibilities of joy, and his imagination, cultivated by years of story-telling, saw a new social condition in which sorrow and injustice should be done away, and justice and joy should take their places. If it was an unattainable dream, it showed an almost mother-like love for that portion of humanity which could not help itself. God give us more such dreamers with such a spirit! The leaven of their work will result some day in a better state of society, when men, in deed, and not in name alone, shall be brothers.

And did he fail in his socialist dreaming? Ask all the dreamers of the past, who have seen visions of highest good for the race. Did Moses dream in vain? Did David and Cyrus and Julius Caesar and Stephen Langton and John Wycliff and Cromwell and George Washington dream in vain? To the man who tries there is no such thing as failure either for himself, or his cause,

"For thence,—a paradox
Which comforts while it mocks,—
Shall life succeed in that it seems to fail?"

Even though it seemed to fail, Morris's work for humanity succeeded, is successful, and will continue to develop.

420