GOLDEN WINGS
AND OTHER STORIES
by
WILLIAM MORRIS

NEWCASTLE PUBLISHING CO., INC.
P.O. Box 7589 Van Nuys, Calif. 91409
1976
INTRODUCTION

WILLIAM MORRIS, “poet, artist, manufacturer, and socialist,” was born on the 24th of March 1834. He went up to Exeter College, Oxford, in January 1853, with a considerable knowledge and love of architecture, poetry, and old stories. He went up at a time when “all reading men were Tennysonians; and all sets of reading men talked poetry”; when, moreover, the spirit of Darwin was brooding over the intellectual world and the Crimean war was about to set the younger generation thinking about schemes of social regeneration. All creeds and systems were going into the intellectual melting-pot. Nothing was a very sure refuge for the mind but the beauty of the visible world as revealed and made enduring in art. Everything else appeared to be changing, decaying, passing away. The visible world itself was not so beautiful as it had once been. Art was the consoler of the pessimists and the redeemer of the optimists. Ruskin was the prophet of the new religion, “the religion of beauty”; and hundreds that had grown sick of the controversial wrangles of the time were turning to it for relief with all the passion which their forefathers would have felt in seeking the consolations of the Church. Morris himself, when he came up to Oxford, has been described as a High Churchman and a Neo-Catholic. It may very confidently be affirmed that he was neither more nor less than a worshipper of beauty, and that the ritual of the Church was nothing more or less to him than a form of style.

“Twas in Church on Palm Sunday
Listening what the priest did say
Of the kiss that did betray,

That the thought did come to me
How the olives used to be
Growing in Gethsemane.

That the thoughts upon me came
Of the lantern’s steady flame,
Of the softly whispered name.

Of how kiss and words did sound
While the olives stood around,
While the robe lay on the ground.
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Then the words the Lord did speak
And that kiss in Holy Week
Dreams of many a kiss did make:
Lovers kiss beneath the moon,
With it sorrow cometh soon:
Juliet's within the tomb:
Angelica in quiet light,
Mid the aureole very bright;
God is looking from the height.
There the monk his love doth meet:—"

and so forth, he wrote, in a poem which he sent to Cornell Price (not included in any of his volumes). And it is obvious that he was not exactly listening to "what the priest did say," from a "High Churchman's" point of view, but simply and solely from the point of view of an artist. Even in church he was striving to build a "shadowy isle of bliss midst the beatings of the steely sea." He was probably aided and abetted in this by the great friendship of his Oxford days which is, perhaps, the most important fact of that period of his life—the friendship he formed with Burne-Jones, who had also gone up to Exeter College in 1853.

He was "aided and abetted," I say, because I do not think he was influenced very much by Burne-Jones or by any one else. His life was a very extraordinary completeness and coherence. It is a happy chance that the whole childhood of William Morris may be seen at a glance, as on a single splendid fragment of his own romance-empurpled tapestry. About the year 1841, any one wandering near Woodford Hall, on the borders of Epping Forest, and within sight of the clear Thames, with its "white and ruddy-brown sails moving among cornfields," might have been surprised by the vision of a curly-haired young knight in glittering armour, riding through the strange glades of hornbeam on one of Titania's palfreys, a pet such as in fairyland might have been "tethered to a poppy or stabled in a tree." But here, in broad noon, it was pacing proudly beneath a bearded and breastplated young warrior from Joyous Gard, a child-champion shining through the fairy-fringes of that sunny nook of unspoil England, like some virgin star through the branches of Broccliande, in quest of the "beauty folded up in forests old!" The small knight-errant was, of course, no ghost of Galahad or Percivale, but the future poet of the Earthly Paradise; and his age was about seven summers.

The prosaic interpretation of this picture is that he had been given a toy suit of armour; but as he made such use of it we may safely assume that it corresponded to a desire of his own; and, indeed, it seems in a sense the natural outcome, the
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was ever the very spirit of childhood voiced so perfectly as in the lines that follow—though the child itself be only seen through a stained-glass window darkly?

Yet besides I have made this
By myself: Give me a kiss,
Dear God, dwelling up in heaven!

Yea, besides, I have made this:
Lord, give Mary a dear kiss,
And let gold Michael, who look'd down,
When I was here, on Rouen town
From the spire, bring me that kiss
On a lily! Lord do this!

It is curious, too, how the dumb stone of King Arthur's Tomb seems to make almost a third character in that wonderful interview between Guenevere and Lancelot. The tomb itself is hardly mentioned, but the reader gradually gets an almost physical realisation of its palpable and stony presence; and, though it was in later years that Morris acquired his knowledge, one may quite safely affirm it to have been his childhood that gave the glamour when he wrote—

Edward the king is dead, at Westminster
The carvers smooth the curls of his long beard.

This atmosphere pervades the whole of Morris's first volume, and though it may be said to belong to the manner of his school, it belongs also to an architectural region which the other Pre-Raphaelite poets left comparatively unexplored, a region into which it may quite justly be said that Morris first wandered in his own childhood and apart from any influence but that of his own father.

In the childhood of most impressionable people there are usually one or two moments, events, or landmarks of which the memory is as vivid throughout the whole of their lives as the foot-prints on the sand in Robinson Crusoe. It is probable, for instance, that Stevenson in his childhood had been tremendously impressed, and perhaps terrified, by some blind beggar with a tapping stick like those that appear in Treasure Island and Kidnapped. However that may be, there are two early imprints upon the mind of William Morris that probably—taken with the rest of his early environment—would count for quite as much in determining his choice of the Middle Ages for his "form of style," as any later influence. One of these is the fact that when he lived at Woodford Hall, there were stocks and a cage there on a bit of wayside green in the middle of the village; and he himself has said in a letter

"My mother taught me prayers
To say when I had need;
I have so many cares,
That I can take no heed
Of many words in them;
But I remember this:"

presented with considerable elaboration. It is probably not too fanciful to say that this determined the character of some of the masque-like poems in Morris's first volume and, perhaps, even of the later morality play, Love is Enough. Those who know childhood best will be the most likely to go further and say that some of the peculiarly vivid hunting, roasting, and feasting passages in Jason derive some of their glamour from that early proximity of Epping Forest, and the fact that as a child William Morris was allowed to roast the rabbits and fieldfares which he shot for his own supper. It was an affair of the imagination even in those earliest days; for we are told that his great ambition was to shoot his game with bow and arrows. Like most great men, Morris retained his childhood to an exceptional degree; and, with all due deference to the critics, who find a more solemn import in the mere fact that he endeavours "to take up the lost threads of the mediæval artistic tradition," I can only see him still "making believe," attempting to build his shadowy isle of bliss, yearning to shoot his game with bow and arrows, and striving to recapture the happiness of his own childhood's kingdom.

Morris's father had a great liking for the old churches in the neighbourhood of Woodford Hall, with their monuments and brasses; and his young son used to accompany him on visits to them. When he was eight years old William Morris was taken to see Canterbury. On the same holiday he saw the church of Minster in Thanet, and it is said that fifty years later, never having seen it in the interval, he described the church in some detail from that memory. "Gothic architecture" could have been little more than a romantic phrase to him at that age; yet if his father really loved it and spoke simply to him about it, a spire might seem more like a soaring prayer to a child than anything built with hands could seem to a man. At any rate the glorious impression that the individual scenes left upon him is indubitable. It must be remembered that they meant—at the very least—the pillars and dark aisles and stained glass and dim rich streaming lights over cold mysterious tombs. It must be remembered that they meant curious inscriptions and strange recumbent figures in eternal armour, with frozen swords and stark upturned feet. The memory certainly survives in the Guenevere volume, and gives it much of its atmosphere. The naïveté of some of its language is that of a child rather than of the Middle Ages. For instance, when Rapunzel sings—
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to his daughter, that he used to regard them with considerable
terror and decidedly preferred to walk on the other side of the
road. To my mind there is not the slightest doubt that this
careful and imaginative dread is responsible for the extra-
ordinarily vivid sense of terror with regard to such instruments
which he displays in depicting Sir Peter Harpdon's torture.
The second of these foot-prints on the sand he has recorded in
his Lecture on the Lesser Arts of Life:—"Well I remember as
a boy my first acquaintance with a room hung with faded
greenery at Queen Elizabeth's Lodge, by Chingford Hatch, in
Epping Forest, and the impression of romance that it made
upon me. I feel that always comes back to me when I read
Sir Walter Scott's Antiquary and come to the description
of the Green Room at Monkham, amongst which the novelist
has imbedded the fresh and glittering verses of the summer
poet Chaucer: yes, that was more than upholstery, believe
him.

It is quite possible that here we have Morris's first little
private gateway into the greenwoods of Chaucer. At any rate, it
is quite obvious that all his adventures were really his own, and
that he made his own discoveries as he went along
his own winding path. As a rule it is not profitable to indulge
in such conjectures and suggestions as the foregoing; but the
case of Morris is exceptional; and as he has been so often
treated in the Pre-Raphaelite manner as one of a school, it
becomes all the more desirable to show the unity and
continuity of his intellectual life. Not only were his sense-perceptions
extremely acute, but his memory of them and all their
associations was extraordinary. It was not only big things like
chairs that he was able to remember for fifty years after
seeing them once in childhood. "To this day," wrote Morris
in his latter years, "the smell of May reminds me of going to
bed by daylight." Those who fully understand what such a
remark implies will also understand what we mean by saying
that Woodford Hall, his early home, was the germ of all Morris's
later work. He extended the boundaries of his world; but he
never shifted its centre. Woodford Hall, with the clear Thames
flowing past its door, and the scents of the May-tide in its
garden, and the bloom of the plums upon its walls, was at the
heart of all his works, even when he became a Socialist. It
thrust itself up through his theories like the boughs of the
Branstock through the hall of the Niblungs. More perhaps than
any other English poet, Morris gives expression to that emotion
which Tennyson called "the passion of the past." In Morris
this passion is intense to the point of pain. It appears under
many disguises. His Utopias of the past, though he projected
them into the future, were in many of their aspects hardly more
than a lyrical cry for his own dead days. His tales of the
Middle Ages are as it were remembered from a past of nearer
date, a past in which he had himself lived. Woodford Hall
was the nucleus of that "shadowy isle of bliss" which William
Morris was ever afterwards striving to build—for himself and
for others—midst the beatings of the world's bitter and
steely sea. At Kelmscott Manor, which he loved so dearly
that he broke down when forced to leave it; or on a tub at
Hammersmith, that was his only refuge—to realise the Earthly
Paradise. The Earthly Paradise was enough for him. He,
indeed, desired no golden groves or quiet seats of the just.
The sights and sounds and scents of the immediate May-time
were all that he desired. But these, with the youth that
seemed necessary to complete them, were ever passing away.
Passing Away is the burden of his poetry—so much so that
one might almost say it is possessed with the long anguish of
the fear of death. The only philosophical utterance he ever
made about the matter was that perhaps change and death were
necessary or there would be no good stories—our finest stories
being those that told of oldest and saddest happenings. And
when he was brought face to face with the fact that he could
not "make quick-coming death a little thing, or bring again
the pleasure of past years," he turned instinctively to the
Middle Ages as a permanent and definite form of style, beyond
the reach of change, whereby he might embody what he loved
and raise it above the beatings of that bitter sea. He turned
to the Middle Ages not as a mere aesthete seeking an anodyne,
but as a child turns to fairyland. It was his method of
removing what he loved out of space and time in order to
view it in the light of eternity. He deliberately adopted the
convention that made Troy a belfried town like Bruges and
Chartres, because he felt that this, too, was another method of
defying time, and that he had thus in some strange way the
power of building himself a continuing city. He felt an
altogether modern and scholarly pleasure in the anachronism,
a little shock of delight as he brought the facts of history into
collision and resolved the resultant discord into harmony by a
deeper note. He felt a peculiarly modern pleasure as his
fabled cities rose to music, a pleasure that separates him by
many centuries from Chaucer (to whom Walter Scott
candidly likened) on the one hand, while there is a
depth of sincere feeling, a passionate desire, a reality of self-
expression, living and breathing through it all which entirely
differentiates his work from that of the pervers and paradoxical
aesthetes who followed him. His world is an entirely
remembered one; and it is largely this that gives his work
vitality, and sets it apart from the work of Wardour Street
connoisseurs. It is Morris's craving to capture the golden
moments that slipped out of his own living hands (a craving
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of the same kind as that expressed by Keats in his Odes, which lifts his work, not so much in great single lines as in its whole wistful atmosphere, to the level of high poetry. It is this that fills it with the light of that Eternity which he always refrained from attempting to fathom; and it is this that allows one to see in his pictures of earthly beauty that high intellectual passion which, conscious or unconscious, is the first essential to great art. First and last, art is religion. There is no room in it for preciosity—no room in it for anything but the Eternal. There was no preciosity in William Morris's choice of the Middle Ages as his "form of style." He turned to them quite naturally, as world-weary men turn to their childhood, knowing perhaps that except as a little child in glittering armour he could not enter into his Kingdom of Heaven.

The contents of this volume are representative of Morris's first period. They include the whole of his first volume of poems (some of which were first printed in the Oxford and Cambridge Magazine); and also a considerable quantity of the prose which he contributed to the same periodical. The Oxford and Cambridge Magazine, conducted by members of the two universities, was first published on January 1, 1856. Only twelve monthly numbers appeared. At first it was controlled by Morris himself; but very soon his connection with the management was "confined to writing cheques." He contributed in prose or verse, however, to every number, except those for June and November. Two-thirds of the contents were supplied by the "Oxford Brotherhood"; but three of Rossetti's finest poems also appeared in the later numbers: "The Burden of Nineveh," "The Blessed Damozel" (reprinted with many variant readings from its original form in The Germ), and "The Staff and Scrip." Morris's own contributions were as follows:

January.—The Story of the Unknown Church (a tale). Winter Weather (a poem).

February.—The Churches of North France: No. 1, Shadows of Amiens.


April.—Frank's Sealed Letter (a tale).

May.—Riding Together (a poem).

June.—Gertha's Lovers (a tale) c. 1-3. Hands (a poem, reprinted in "Rapunzel" as the Prince's Song).

August.—Death the Avenger and Death the Friend. Svend and his Brethren (a tale). Gertha's Lovers (c. 4, 5).

September.—Lindenborg Pool (a tale). The Hollow Land (a tale) c. 1, 2. The Chapel in Lyonnais (a poem).

Publisher's Note: The present (1976) edition omits the poetry, but includes all the tales.

October.—The Hollow Land (c. 3). Pray but one Prayer for Me (a poem; reprinted in "Defence of Guenevere" with title of "Summer Dawn").

December.—Golden Wings (a tale).

Of these early works one of the "Oxford Brotherhood" wrote enthusiastically—long afterwards—they seem to be lifted out of poetry: to have, besides poetry, a substance of visible beauty of one particular kind: to be poetry without any notion of being poetry, or effort or aim at it.

1907.

ALFRED NOYES.