

WILLIAM MORRIS AND HIS SCHOOL

It is proper enough that the unveiling of the bust of William Morris should approximate to a public festival, for while there have been many men of genius in the Victorian era more despotic than he, there have been none so representative. He represents not only that rapacious hunger for beauty which has now for the first time become a serious problem in the healthy life of humanity, but he represents also that honourable instinct for finding beauty in common necessities of workmanship which gives it a stronger and more bony structure. The time has passed when William Morris was conceived to be irrelevant to be described as a designer of wall-papers. If Morris had been a hatter instead of a decorator, we should have become gradually and painfully conscious of an improvement in our hats. If he had been a tailor, we should have suddenly found our frock-coats trailing on the ground with the grandeur of mediæval raiment. If he had been a shoemaker, we should have found, with no little consternation, our shoes gradually approximating to the antique sandal. As a hairdresser, he would have invented some massing of the hair worthy to be the crown of Venus; as an ironmonger, his nails would have had some noble pattern, fit to be the nails of the Cross.

The limitations of William Morris, whatever they were, were not the limitations of common decoration. It is true that all his work, even his literary work, was in some sense decorative, had in some degree the qualities of a splendid wall-paper. His characters, his stories, his religious and political views, had, in the most emphatic sense, length and breadth without thickness. He seemed really to believe that men could enjoy a perfectly flat felicity. He made no account of the unexplored and explosive possibilities of human nature, of the unnameable terrors, and the yet more unnameable hopes. So long as a man was graceful in every circumstance, so long as he had the inspiring consciousness that the chestnut colour of his hair was relieved against the blue forest a mile behind, he would be serenely happy. So he would be, no doubt, if he were really fitted for a decorative existence; if he were a piece of exquisitely coloured card-board.

But although Morris took little account of the terrible solidity of human nature--took little account, so to speak, of human figures in the round, it is altogether unfair to represent him as a mere æsthete. He perceived a great public necessity and fulfilled it heroically. The difficulty with which he grappled was one so immense that we shall have to be separated from it by many centuries before we can really judge of it. It was the problem of the elaborate and deliberate ugliness of the most self-conscious of centuries. Morris at least saw the absurdity of the thing. He felt it was monstrous that the modern man, who was pre-eminently

capable of realising the strangest and most contradictory beauties, who could feel at once the fiery aureole of the ascetic and the colossal calm of the Hellenic god, should himself, by a farcical bathos, be buried in a black coat, and hidden under a chimney-pot hat. He could not see why the harmless man who desired to be an artist in raiment should be condemned to be, at best, a black and white artist. It is indeed difficult to account for the clinging curse of ugliness which blights everything brought forth by the most prosperous of centuries. In all created nature there is not, perhaps, anything so completely ugly as a pillar-box. Its shape is the most unmeaning of shapes, its height and thickness just neutralising each other; its colour is the most repulsive of colours--a fat and soulless red, a red without a touch of blood or fire, like the scarlet of dead men's sins. Yet there is no reason whatever why such hideousness should possess an object full of civic dignity, the treasure-house of a thousand secrets, the fortress of a thousand souls. If the old Greeks had had such an institution, we may be sure that it would have been surmounted by the severe, but graceful, figure of the god of letter-writing. If the mediæval Christians had possessed it, it would have had a niche filled with the golden aureole of St. Rowland of the Postage Stamps. As it is, there it stands at all our street-corners, disguising one of the most beautiful of ideas under one of the most preposterous of forms. It is useless to deny that the miracles of science have not been such an incentive to art and imagination as were the miracles of religion. If men in the twelfth century had been told that the lightning had been driven for leagues underground, and had dragged at its destroying tail loads of laughing human beings, and if they had then been told that the people alluded to this pulverising portent chirpily as "The Twopenny Tube," they would have called down the fire of Heaven on us as a race of half-witted atheists. Probably they would have been quite right.

This clear and fine perception of what may be called the anæsthetic element in the Victorian era was, undoubtedly, the work of a great reformer: it requires a fine effort of the imagination to see an evil that surrounds us on every side. The manner in which Morris carried out his crusade may, considering the circumstances, be called triumphant. Our carpets began to bloom under our feet like the meadows in spring, and our hitherto prosaic stools and sofas seemed growing legs and arms at their own wild will. An element of freedom and rugged dignity came in with plain and strong ornaments of copper and iron. So delicate and universal has been the revolution in domestic art that almost every family in England has had its taste cunningly and treacherously improved, and if we look back at the early Victorian drawing-rooms it is only to realise the strange but essential truth that art, or human decoration, has, nine times out of ten in history, made things uglier than they were before, from the "coiffure" of a Papuan savage to the wall-paper of a British merchant in 1830.

But great and beneficent as was the æsthetic revolution of Morris, there was a

very definite limit to it. It did not lie only in the fact that his revolution was in truth a reaction, though this was a partial explanation of his partial failure. When he was denouncing the dresses of modern ladies, "upholstered like arm-chairs instead of being draped like women," as he forcibly expressed it, he would hold up for practical imitation the costumes and handicrafts of the Middle Ages. Further than this retrogressive and imitative movement he never seemed to go. Now, the men of the time of Chaucer had many evil qualities, but there was at least one exhibition of moral weakness they did not give. They would have laughed at the idea of dressing themselves in the manner of the bowmen at the battle of Senlac, or painting themselves an æsthetic blue, after the custom of the ancient Britons. They would not have called that a movement at all. Whatever was beautiful in their dress or manners sprang honestly and naturally out of the life they led and preferred to lead. And it may surely be maintained that any real advance in the beauty of modern dress must spring honestly and naturally out of the life we lead and prefer to lead. We are not altogether without hints and hopes of such a change, in the growing orthodoxy of rough and athletic costumes. But if this cannot be, it will be no substitute or satisfaction to turn life into an interminable historical fancy-dress ball.

But the limitation of Morris's work lay deeper than this. We may best suggest it by a method after his own heart. Of all the various works he performed, none, perhaps, was so splendidly and solidly valuable as his great protest for the fables and superstitions of mankind. He has the supreme credit of showing that the fairy tales contain the deepest truth of the earth, the real record of men's feeling for things. Trifling details may be inaccurate, Jack may not have climbed up so tall a beanstalk, or killed so tall a giant; but it is not such things that make a story false; it is a far different class of things that makes every modern book of history as false as the father of lies; ingenuity, self-consciousness, hypocritical impartiality. It appears to us that of all the fairy-tales none contains so vital a moral truth as the old story, existing in many forms, of Beauty and the Beast. There is written, with all the authority of a human scripture, the eternal and essential truth that until we love a thing in all its ugliness we cannot make it beautiful. This was the weak point in William Morris as a reformer: that he sought to reform modern life, and that he hated modern life instead of loving it. Modern London is indeed a beast, big enough and black enough to be the beast in Apocalypse, blazing with a million eyes, and roaring with a million voices. But unless the poet can love this fabulous monster as he is, can feel with some generous excitement his massive and mysterious joie-de-vivre, the vast scale of his iron anatomy and the beating of his thunderous heart, he cannot and will not change the beast into the fairy prince. Morris's disadvantage was that he was not honestly a child of the nineteenth century: he could not understand its fascination, and consequently he could not really develop it. An abiding testimony to his tremendous personal influence in the æsthetic world is the vitality and

recurrence of the Arts and Crafts Exhibitions, which are steeped in his personality like a chapel in that of a saint. If we look round at the exhibits in one of these æsthetic shows, we shall be struck by the large mass of modern objects that the decorative school leaves untouched. There is a noble instinct for giving the right touch of beauty to common and necessary things, but the things that are so touched are the ancient things, the things that always to some extent commended themselves to the lover of beauty. There are beautiful gates, beautiful fountains, beautiful cups, beautiful chairs, beautiful reading-desks. But there are no modern things made beautiful. There are no beautiful lamp-posts, beautiful letter-boxes, beautiful engines, beautiful bicycles. The spirit of William Morris has not seized hold of the century and made its humblest necessities beautiful. And this was because, with all his healthiness and energy, he had not the supreme courage to face the ugliness of things; Beauty shrank from the Beast and the fairy-tale had a different ending.

But herein, indeed, lay Morris's deepest claim to the name of a great reformer: that he left his work incomplete. There is, perhaps, no better proof that a man is a mere meteor, merely barren and brilliant, than that his work is done perfectly. A man like Morris draws attention to needs he cannot supply. In after-years we may have perhaps a newer and more daring Arts and Crafts Exhibition. In it we shall not decorate the armour of the twelfth century, but the machinery of the twentieth. A lamp-post shall be wrought nobly in twisted iron, fit to hold the sanctity of fire. A pillar-box shall be carved with figures emblematical of the secrets of comradeship and the silence and honour of the State. Railway signals, of all earthly things the most poetical, the coloured stars of life and death, shall be lamps of green and crimson worthy of their terrible and faithful service. But if ever this gradual and genuine movement of our time towards beauty--not backwards, but forwards--does truly come about, Morris will be the first prophet of it. Poet of the childhood of nations, craftsman in the new honesties of art, prophet of a merrier and wiser life, his full-blooded enthusiasm will be remembered when human life has once more assumed flamboyant colours and proved that this painful greenish grey of the æsthetic twilight in which we now live is, in spite of all the pessimists, not of the greyness of death, but the greyness of dawn.