

A visit to May Morris, 1925

by Elfrida Manning

I find in one of my old diaries an account of a visit with my parents to May Morris at Kelmscott Manor in 1925. Miss Morris, with her friend, Miss Lobb, had previously visited us at Coombe near Woodstock, where my father, the sculptor Sir Hamo Thornycroft RA, who was to a great extent a disciple of Ruskin and William Morris, had lately finished the conversion of an old Cotswold stone farmhouse, using mainly local traditional craftsmen, into a comfortable central-heated dwelling in which he hoped to spend a long retirement. Sadly, however, he died soon after it was finished; but my mother lived on there as a widow for many years. The small but beautiful garden she had created, in the style of Miss Jekyll, Miss Morris had been invited to see.

This account of our return visit to her at Kelmscott, being written at the time, may have some interest as a youthful first-hand impression.

March, 1925

The house is damp: the plain, old-fashioned piano has to be put on legs in case of floods. But it is most beautiful and nearly everything in it is beautiful. The little dining-room is hung with very faded 'Strawberry-thief' pattern; we had tea there, Miss Morris pouring out lovely China tea. The cake she made herself, as everybody in the house does something to help to run it. Miss Lobb, her friend, who is enormous and wears a tweed jacket and breeches and has cropped black hair (she is a Cornishwoman) looks after the pony and there is an arty little old secretary and a cook and that is all.

Miss Morris showed us some coverlets of flannel embroidered with silk in Morris designs. One charming one for a child, with a little house, a river and every kind of animal, foxes, ducks, a

smiling lion and a weak-kneed elephant, etc., and round them was a border of mottoes: 'First plough your furrow, then God will send the seed', 'Better unborne than untaught', and an Italian one, a German one and a Persian one. But the most beautiful was a coverlet embroidered in pinks, golds and reddish purples: a wonderful pattern of intertwining honeysuckles, wild fritillaries (which grow in the fields there) and Crown Imperials. I never saw anything more beautiful, I could have gazed at it for ever.

Among the small things she showed us was a pair of Bishop's gloves which she had embroidered very finely; the design was by Ricketts: three gold ears of corn and the whole glove covered with a golden tendril design. *Petit point* she despises, but she works at it because of the great demand, making chair seats and table mats and designing them as she goes along. She showed us her tapestry loom which she takes more seriously but has not worked for a year.

Upstairs we saw Morris's tiny bedroom and his bed with its lovely embroidered hangings and bedspread. At the end of the bedspread is an embroidered picture of Kelmscott Manor and on the other side Morris's motto: 'Si je puis'. In Miss Morris's own bedroom there were many charming printed fabrics and three Rossetti drawings that Dad very much admired. Miss Morris used always to sit for his cherubs, she said she was very fond of him and liked sitting to him.

Of course there are many drawings of Mrs Morris and a photograph which shows how true the drawings of her were, with her classic profile and wonderful eyes and hair. Miss Morris herself is not so beautiful, but has the same eyes and long, straight profile. Her hair is grey and she is very fair, a sort of ice-fairy queen. She was wearing a charming white coat and blouse, yellow beads and a homespun white skirt with blue and yellow striped pattern. She looked charming. She struck me as more matronly than when I saw her before, and as making an effort not to be 'arty'. She dislikes the words 'efficient' and 'technique', but she says Burford has become 'too artistic' for her. She cannot bear driving in a car.