

A Meeting with William Morris¹

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When I was eighteen I was a serious-minded young woman: intelligent enough, but I fear lacking in humour, although with a capacity which I have retained all my long life for hero worship of those I thought great, or getting to know as much about them as possible, which has brought me much interest and pleasure to this day. The time of which I write was about 1895.

My eldest sister Irene, I and about four other girls, among them Chris Knewstub, whose father had been a friend of Rossetti's, and her very beautiful sister Grace, who later married William Orpen the painter, formed a little circle with the grandiose title of 'The London Research Society'. The research was of a very ephemeral kind, for it consisted chiefly in going to see places where famous people had lived, or looking at anything that had belonged to them or was in any way connected with them. For instance, one of our researches was to the British Museum where we were allowed by the librarian to handle the manuscript of Blake's *Songs of Innocence*. Another time we visited Keats's house at Hampstead and saw some of his manuscripts and the mulberry tree under which he wrote 'Ode to a Nightingale'. On another occasion we visited a man living in a fashionable part of London to see his relics of Walt Whitman. He was a slight acquaintance of one of our members and it astonishes me now to think of the kindness of strangers in allowing this intrusion of half a dozen raw young women whose only excuse for asking such favours was their keen enthusiasm. He had a death mask of Whitman but what particularly struck me was a plaster cast of Walt Whitman's hand – the hand of a countryman and worker. Hands – particularly strong working hands – have always appealed to me, and it was the strong yet sensitive workmanlike hands of Edward Thomas which first attracted me to him.

Owing to Chris Knewstub's association with Rossetti and our own keen interest in the pre-Raphaelites, we decided to 'research' Rossetti. We had only a few hours on Saturday afternoons for these activities and though they gave us pleasure, they added nothing to scholarship, as may be imagined.

William Morris was at that time living at Kelmscott House in Chiswick (*sic*), and because my father and mother had once stayed there with the George Macdonalds who had occupied it before William Morris, I was deputed to write to William Morris to ask him if we might come to see his Rossettis and to hear anything he cared to tell us about the great pre-Raphaelites.

William Morris very kindly gave us permission to come and see him, so five of us set out for Kelmscott House. We walked there from Wandsworth Common, for that was part of the adventure. We were all about the same age, all immature and gauche and all interested in the arts: myself particularly in literature, and my sister Irene in pictures.

We arrived on Chiswick Mall (*sic*) at about three in the afternoon to find the beautiful house surrounded by scaffolding and ladders and workmen in process of redecorating. We knocked at the door and were admitted I think by a man-servant

and shown into a room which overlooked the garden, not the river. I was extremely interested in the house because my parents had often described it to me when the family of George Macdonald lived there in untidy but strictly moral bohemianism. The chief features of the room into which we were shown were an enormous round oak table scrubbed to whiteness and on the wall a large tapestry depicting, I think, a scene from *Morte d'Arthur*, designed by Burne-Jones but the handiwork of Morris himself.

We stood silently waiting for the appearance of our host. Presently the door opened and there stood before us a grey-haired, short and thickset man dressed in a blue linen smock. This I remember, for I loved such things. It was of the traditional pattern with a yoke of close and elaborate smocking which was repeated at the wrists. The shoulder pieces were beautifully embroidered in white thread, and so was the collar. He had an impressive head covered with thick grey hair.

When he set eyes on the five serious girls, only one of whom had any pretensions to good looks, he stood for some seconds speechless and motionless with obvious embarrassment, rumpling his hair with his hand. Then I, who had written the letter and was felt to be the authoritative one, having this slight connection with Kelmscott House, stepped forward and introduced the London Research Society. I told him how my father and mother had stayed in the house with the George Macdonalds and did my best to warm the icy atmosphere of shyness. Gradually our host became responsive to our obvious enthusiasm and in a little while he could not do enough to please us.

He brought out his original drawings and manuscripts and his exquisite edition of Chaucer and reached down from a shelf illuminated manuscripts of the Middle Ages, all carefully kept in stiff outer coverings. I shall never forget the moment when one of us – happily not myself – touched very delicately the beautiful gold ornamentation of one of the parchments and the anger which flared up for a moment in our host. Morris told us that the gold was of so delicate a nature that it must never be touched. Our horror at what one of us had in ignorance done and the humiliation at his anger, I can feel to this day. But it was over in a moment and we breathed once more, worshipping the man who had so graciously forgiven us and who brought more and more lovely things to show us.

Some of the parchments had had holes where the skin was thin and worn and these had been darned across and across by nuns with fine linen thread, with exquisite skill and neatness, incorporating tiny patterns. William Morris told us that from this darning of parchments ornamented with minute flowers and formal designs sprang the idea of lace-making by interweaving on a network of linen threads. Much else of interest he told us which I have forgotten, but the gentle fancies of the nuns darning being the origin of lace-making stayed in my memory.

He told us that he could not show us over the house, which he would like to have done, because it was in the hands of workmen and covered with dust-sheets; but he ran up and down stairs and in and out of rooms bringing us pictures by Rossetti and Burne-Jones and books and manuscripts for us to see. He talked especially to the Knewstub girls whose father he had known, and was obviously anxious for us to forget his momentary displeasure. Grace Knewstub, I used to think, was so like the painting of Rossetti's – the head of a girl with a mass of fair hair, wearing an amber necklace with a pendant heart, called 'Jolie Coeur' – that I used to imagine Rossetti had used her as a model.

I think we were with William Morris about an hour, and then after his shaking each of us by the hand, we left, thrilled and awed by this momentous interview.

The fifth member of the Society who was with us that day, whose name escapes me, was a journalist and she kept a record of the Society's activities, but I do not know if she ever made any use of it. The little company of earnest young women had to separate to go their ways and earn their livings; and I had met Edward Thomas.

NOTES

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