Memories

Luke Ionides

This memoir first appeared in *The Transatlantic Review* in 1926. Luke Ionides was a member of the extensive Greek family which patronised the Pre-Raphaelites and Burne-Jones, and the brother of Morris’s friend and correspondent Aglaia Coronio.

I always admired William Morris very much. He had a quality which is rare, and I felt that at a time when I was over-burdened with trouble; I would go to him in the depths of misery and after being with him for an hour or two I would leave him feeling absolutely happy. I always compared him with a sea-breeze, which seemed to blow away all one’s black vapours. I first knew him in 1865, long before my troubles began. He was then, as he always remained, a great friend of Burne-Jones. I may say that until he died I loved and admired him. I have often seen him at his work, designing some ornament, and he seemed as if his whole heart was in it. Though he was a strong man he had the delicate feelings of a tender woman. I one day heard him consoling a friend who had been abandoned by the woman he loved. He said, “Think, old fellow, how much better it is that she should have left you, than that you should have tired of her, and left her.” I really think he saved his friend’s life through his companionship and his help. He was dining one day with my brother Alecco, who told him that in the afternoon a partner in a firm of great upholsterers had been there, and having seen some of the work designed by Morris had said that he would willingly give £8000 a year to Mr. Morris if he would agree to work for them only. Morris said, “I don’t want his £8000 a year. I’ve never known a man who hasn’t been spoilt by the accession of wealth. I only want enough to pay my butcher and baker and candlestick maker, and to buy an occasional book.”

That reminds me that one day I had been to see him, and he showed me a 12th century psalter which he had bought for £700. Then another one for which he had paid £800. Then a third one, which he called his “Seif-El-Noluck”, from a story in the Arabian Nights, of a tale which was given to the narrator by a village storyteller, on condition that it was not repeated to any woman or child. Morris treated his psalter in the same way, as he did not consider that any woman or child could appreciate it. He had given £1,000 for it, and when I said to him that I liked the one he had got for £700 better, he answered that of course the £700 one was the better of the two, but that he had had to give £1,000 for the other, as it belonged to a rich man who would not part with it for less; and he, Morris, had to consider whether he preferred having the £1,000 or the psalter and he chose the psalter.

I have often thought of what he said when I wanted to buy a thing, and generally decided like Morris that I preferred the thing to the money.

Mr. Graham, a patron of the arts, and M.P. for Glasgow, was asked by John Bright to invite him some evening when Morris would be there. Mr. Graham accordingly invited them both, and several others, including B.J.
In the course of the evening B.J. saw the poet and the orator in deep converse, and curious to know that was the subject of conversation, he went near them, and heard Morris say, “Yes, yes, there’s no doubt about it. A pike should be eaten with a pudding in its innards,” to which John Bright agreed.

Morris once disillusioned two American girls who wished very much to meet him, and who were asked to breakfast at B. J.’s one Sunday morning when Morris was expected. Morris is very much read in America and to the two girls he was a poet-hero. When he sat down at table, B.J. told him that he had a fresh ham, he wouldn’t call it pork, on which Morris said, “When I lust for pig’s flesh, I don’t care how it is called,” to the surprise of the girls, who expected a poetic answer.

B.J. was very fond of caricaturing Morris. I had a set of caricatures of him doing catherine wheels in Cavendish Square, and another at the Turkish bath, where we had gone together.

Morris once paid me a great compliment—he sent his man to see how my drawing-room was decorated, and he had B.J.’s drawing-room done with the same paper and the same colouring. He decorated the ceilings of my brother Alecco’s house in Holland Park, and they were most beautiful small arabesques, painted in gold and other colours. It is sad to think that the tenant of the house, which my sister-in-law sold after my brother’s death, had those lovely ceilings white-washed.

His socialistic tendencies, of which so much has been made, were more the dreams of a poet of a very kindly disposition, than of any practical value. He wanted everyone to be happy and imagined that it could be done by giving everybody congenial work, but he had no practical idea as to how such a state of things could be brought about. I once heard him say he had a notion that wealthy people should spend their full incomes, and not hoard.

He was once invited to a noble Duke’s house, with a view to his suggesting some decorations. He went there and was silent on the subject of decorations the whole time. After his return he had a letter from the Duke, saying he felt rather hurt that Morris had said nothing about the decorations of the house. In telling the story Morris said, “Everything was so frightfully ugly I didn’t know where to begin, and I gave the Duke to understand so, when I answered his letter.” He lived himself in a charming house facing the river at Chiswick, from whence we often saw the boat-race, and met many friends. It was very simply decorated, with his own papers in light colours, and it had a nice garden.

In the year 1876 or ’77 the Wagners were in town, staying with my sister Chariclea, and Madame Wagner told me she much wished to meet Morris, as he treated the same subjects that her husband had treated in his music. So I invited them both to dinner. Morris came, and asked if his bag of gala clothes had arrived. I told him it had not, so he said, “How can I sit down with all you people dressed as I am!” and then he showed us his hands which were blue from some experiments in dyeing he had made with indigo. I said all that did not matter, and introduced him to Madame Wagner, who was most charming, and delighted to have him next her at table. I don’t think he was equally impressed with her, for he was not a bit susceptible to the charm of women; he was too full of his love for his ordinary work of decoration and design, and his literary work. He had a few men friends who were mostly artists, or people who sympathized with art, but women did not seem to count with him.