Interviews with Morris: II.
From The Woman's Signal,
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A Living Wage for Women

Journeying from town, direct by road to Hammersmith, I travelled over the ground which Mr. William Morris has made famous in his “News from Nowhere,” and I must confess that the dream of transformation which he describes seemed impossible of realisation. Where on earth, I queried, are all these houses, shops, and people to be banished, in order that the charming district of Mr. Morris’ dream may become possible?

A short turning from the main road of Hammersmith brought me suddenly face to face with old Father Thames and a pretty stretch of country lining the further bank. It all looked so pleasant, gleaming in the sunshine, and was so great and sudden a contrast to the dirty Hammersmith road, that I began to wonder whether I had not been to sleep, dreamed a dream, and reached the land of “Nowhere.” A row of old-fashioned, capacious houses, with many windows and innumerable shutters, stand upon the river bank. One of these is Kelmscott House, the abode of William Morris – poet-Socialist, reviver of English art, and the author of “The Earthly Paradise.” A notice-board by the front gate announced the forthcoming Sunday evening lecture – one of a series upon socialistic topics which is given under Mr. Morris’ auspices in the hall adjoining his house.

Upon entering the house, I encountered Mr. Morris himself, a short, thick-set man, dressed in loose navy-blue suit, with a sky-blue shirt well in evidence. He has a bright, ruddy face, twinkling grey eyes, and a large, splendidly-shaped head, covered with a disordered mass of grey, curling locks. He looked alarmingly busy as he led the way to his “den,” a sunny room upon the ground floor, the windows commanding a full
view of the river. Books in plain cases lined the walls; an antique carved oak chest, two or three easy chairs, and a large plain deal table comprised the furniture. There was no carpet upon the floor, no curtains at the windows.

"Mind a pipe, eh?" said Mr. Morris, standing appealingly with a large empty pipe in his hand, and a longing look at his tobacco bag hanging on the wall. The most rabid anti-tobacconist could not have withstood that look. Very soon Mr. Morris was puffing vigorously as he paced backwards and forwards over the boards, and talked in jerky sentences, studiously careful that conversation did not imperil the pleasure of the smoke.

THE LIVING WAGE.

"What do you think, Mr. Morris, about a living wage for women?"

"Of course, a woman ought to be adequately paid for her work, the same as a man should, but I am bound to say that in the present state of society it is all but impossible for her to get, even for equal work, the same rate of wages as is paid to men. You will understand that I am speaking only of the industrial classes. In the present non-socialist state of things there are two scales of wages for women employed in the handicrafts or manufactures. One scale is confessedly inadequate to their livelihood, because it is only a part of that earned by the whole family. In many manufacturing districts, husband, wife, and older children are all wage-earners, and employers regard their united earnings as being adequate to the decent support of a home and family. This system results in women being underpaid.

"The other scale of pay to women assumes a living wage, but is, I fear, nearly always, certainly most often, below what would be paid to a male worker. In fact, as a rule, women would not be employed at all in the industrial trades if their wages were not lower than those of males. This means that the necessities of women are used for the purpose of reducing the wages of men, and it has a very serious effect in keeping all wages down. I believe this to be inevitable under a non-socialist system. The best remedy at present is trade unionism; let women organise."

A REFORMED SOCIETY.

"How would you bring about a better state of things?"

"In a properly organised society, viz., under a socialist system, opportunity would be given to all persons for doing the work most suitable to them. The economical position of women would be the same as that of men; they would take their place in production according to their capacities, whatever these might turn out to be in a state of things so much improved from our present conditions. What we want is to get things on a sound basis; to have the right sort of people to do the right sort of work. We shall not hear then about underpaid female labour. But when women, with their more nervous and less muscular structure, come to compete in the labour market with men, it is inevitable that they must take less pay if they are to be employed at all. I do not say, mind you, that woman is inferior to man, because she isn't; but she certainly is different, therefore her occupation, broadly speaking, should be different."

"May not the differences be largely the result of habit and training, rather than fundamental?"

"I cannot, of course, say what strength of muscle and strength of limb women may acquire by training, but I fail to see that the physiological differences between the sexes can ever be done away with. At present it is woman's bodily weakness which
cheapens her in the labour market. It is a mistake to suppose that the fine and delicate work of the handicrafts can be done by weak hands; muscular strength is required. Look at my weavers and tapestry makers at the Merton Works – strong, burly fellows, yet they can deftly handle the finest thread of silk. It is strength that makes their touch so delicate.”

“And training too, Mr. Morris?”

“Well, yes, strength without training wouldn’t be much good, I admit.”

THE PIT-BROW WOMEN.

“Of course, I should like to see women liberated from all legal disabilities. I do not wish to shut women out from whatever work they can adequately perform, when competing upon equal terms with men, but I think it a pity for women to do manual labour for which they are manifestly not suited, and so be driven to accept insufficient wages. Now, think of the pit-brow women – you remember there was a deputation of them came to petition Parliament not to forbid their work. Well, I am bound to say that those women would be better tending their homes than doing the hard, rough work of the pit-bank.”

“But, Mr. Morris, many of those women have families to support – often they are widows, and oftener still women with lazy and drunken husbands; they are bound to work, or starve.”

“With bad social conditions one cannot dogmatize on this question; but in the Tyneside colliery district, where the women do not work on the pit-banks, the homes of the working people are better in consequence; the wife and mother gives her whole attention to the home and the children. A splendid set of women they are, too, and so are the men. I feel very strongly that a working man’s wife is needed in her home, and it is a pity when she has to leave it to compete in the labour market. At home she is doing the work to which she is best suited, and is earning her maintenance if she performs her duties properly. When married women are also industrial workers, they, the weaker sex, have the double burden upon their shoulders of tending the home and helping to earn a living too. This is greatly to be deplored. Our women should not be coarsened and crushed down by this unfair strain; we want to have them healthy and happy, that they may be the mothers of beautiful and intelligent children. Women suffer terribly under the present social system.”

THE ART OF HOUSEKEEPING.

“Do you think, Mr. Morris, that women are only fitted to be housekeepers?”

“By no means; women’s talents vary, the same as those of men. There are many things which women can do equally as well as men, and some a great deal better. I think that people ought to do what they clearly appear to have the ability for doing. I am sure I don’t know why women should want to be lawyers; there’s too many of that craft already. The medical profession seems to be suited to women; and I am sure women make excellent ‘men of business’ a little stingy, though. They have a decided faculty for managing and organising. Look at French women; what an important part they take in business affairs. Yes, there’s no doubt women have a born faculty for business. They can hold their own, too, in the intellectual field, but they do not excel in the arts or in inventive power. You haven’t got a female Handel, you know, nor a first-rank woman painter.”

“What about Miss Thompson and Rosa Bonheur?”
“Not up to the high-level mark. I consider,” continued Mr. Morris, “that a woman’s special work – housekeeping – is one of the most difficult and important branches of study. People lift their eyebrows over women mastering the higher mathematics; why, it is infinitely more difficult to learn the details of good housekeeping. Anybody can learn mathematics, but it takes a lot of skill to manage a house well. Don’t let the modern woman neglect or despise housekeeping.”

“The advanced woman does not despise housekeeping, Mr. Morris; she only brings brain to it.”

“Good; let her bring brain by all means, and let her cherish the art as her own special domain. Men will never do any good at it. You remember the story of ‘How the Man Minded the House’? The result of the minding was that, after various tribulations, the man and the family cow balanced each other at the end of a rope, the man hanging half way up the chimney, the cow dangling from the roof. Hard on the cow, wasn’t it? Ah, well, I hope the time may soon come when there shall be no question of rivalry between the sexes, and when Hood’s song of the shirt shall be a tragedy almost inconceivable to the minds of women.”

A SHORT CATECHISM.

“You are in favour of giving the suffrage to women, I suppose, Mr. Morris?”

“Yes, but not on the property qualification. I go in for adult suffrage, to include both men and women.”

“Should women vote for, and serve upon all local governing bodies?”

“It is most desirable that they should.”

“Ought not university honours to be given to women who – like Miss Fawcett, for example – have earned them?”

“That is but common fairness.”

“What do you think of the two moral codes now in vogue – one for man, another for woman?”

“There can only be one moral law, the same for both sexes; I go in for fair play all round.”

“You think women should speak in public?”

“If a woman has the gift for public speaking, let her ‘hold forth’ by all means. A woman’s tongue is reported to be long; but I consider that men are the worst gossips – infinitely worse than women.”

By this time, Mr. Morris looked as if he wondered whether I had taken leave of my senses that I should question him upon such points of common-sense justice; and being assured that he was perfectly “sound in the faith,” I bade him good morning.

Sarah Tooley was an experienced interviewer, who was later to discuss the idea of ‘Interviewing as Women’s Work’ with Arthur H. Lawrence in The Young Woman Vol. V (Sept. 1897), 441–7. There she provided some further reminiscences of Morris (p. 444):

About a year before he died, I interviewed William Morris at Kelmscott House. He had kindly consented to give me this interview on the subject of women’s work, but I noticed that for some time he seemed very uncomfortable. Not a word could I get
him to say on the subject, and I almost despaired for my article, when suddenly he said, 'Do you mind tobacco?' and after I had convinced him that I did not mind in the least, he solemnly walked to the fireplace and abstracted a handful of loose tobacco from a large print bag which was hanging up there, and as soon as he had lit his pipe he talked away as fluently as one could wish. As he talked he walked up and down the bare floor of the study, which was scantily furnished, and had a charming outlook over the river. Mr. Morris wore his usual sky-blue shirt, and had on a navy blue pilot coat. As he kept pacing to and fro, I thought how much he looked like an old sea captain walking the deck, and I wrote something to that effect when describing him in the interview. Some time later, I was asked to interview him for another magazine, and when I called he was seated in his study busily at work at a manuscript. It was only a week or two before he died, and he looked so ill that I scarcely liked to trouble him. After some hesitation about promising the interview, he said in his quaint, kindly way, 'Well, I don't like to disappoint a neighbour, and if you will come again in a fortnight I may feel better able to talk.' Then he added, 'You had better send me a list of questions, and I will think out the answers; it is always difficult to me to dictate without a good deal of previous preparation. When I have the nib in my hand,' he said, suiting the action to the word, 'thoughts come rapidly, but I cannot dictate.' I mentioned that I had a copy of my previous article with me, and he expressed a wish to look at it. Running his eye down the page, he caught sight of my little bit of personal description. He pretended to be highly indignant, but smiled all the same. 'Now, if you write another interview with me,' he said, 'you must leave my clothes alone. None of that delicate tracery and lacework, you know! People don't want to hear about my clothes!' I could not help laughing, and he laughed too, with that comical twinkle of his, as he showed me out. I felt too sorry for his evident suffering to take advantage of his invitation to call again, and shortly afterwards he died.

"Here is a piece of Mr. Morris's MS.," said Mrs. Tooley, producing it from her collection of autograph letters and manuscripts. "He once wrote me this brief summary of his views upon women entering the labour market, and I shall always value it as a precious relic of a great and noble man.

The following passage, in facsimile, reads:

There are in the present non-socialist state of things two scales of wages for women employed in the handicrafts or manufacture: one scale is confessedly inadequate to their livelihood; the wage paid is only a part of that earned by the whole family. The other scale assumes a livelihood wage, but is perhaps always, certainly most often, below what would be paid to a male worker; so that women would not as a rule be employed at all, if their wages were not lower than those of males. This means that the necessities of women are used for the purpose of reducing the wages of males, and has a serious effect in keeping all wages down. I believe this to be inevitable under a non-socialist system.

On the other hand under a socialist system the economical position of women would be the same as that of men, and as opportunity would be afforded to all persons for doing the work most suitable to them, women would take their place in production according to their capacities, whatever these might turn out to be in a state of things so much improved from our present conditions.