

# Reminiscences of William Morris

## Edmund & Ruth Frow

These reminiscences of William Morris appeared in *The Comrade* in February 1903.

*The Comrade*, an illustrated Socialist monthly was published in New York between 1901 and 1905. But it was not an ordinary propaganda journal. It was specifically a literary magazine and the editors claimed that their aim was to bring Socialist 'belles lettres' to 'the great mass of the world's disinherited'. But in reality, the journal catered for the middle-class Socialists, the sort of people who already read William Morris.

At first the journal prospered as a result of the growth of European Socialist parties. It was refreshingly non-sectarian compared with previous publications. But after a few years it became embroiled in the disputes that characterised the American Socialist scene in the first decade of the century. Joseph R. Conlin, writing from Eynsham in 1969, said that *The Comrade* laid the basis for such influential publications as *The Masses*. But he assessed those later journals as not being 'of the cultural world of the genteel tradition with which *The Comrade* died'.

Sophie R. Sharman was the wife of an influential Unitarian Minister in Preston, the Rev William Sharman. The North-West Lancashire Unitarian community had a long history going back to Cromwell's time. Sharman took the Chair for Morris at several lectures including one at Blackburn. They were possibly introduced to each other by Moncure Conway, an American who became so interested in the arts and crafts movement that he stayed in England for many years.

After her husband's death, Mrs Sharman visited America, returning in 1897. During her visit she may have met the group of Socialists who became the editors of *The Comrade*, and they solicited the reminiscences.

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## Sophie R. Sharman

You asked me if I could not write something of what I remember of Mr. Morris. This is most difficult: for those who have read of, or care for, him are familiar with the superficial points of his striking personality. The picture of the Guest in the beautiful illustrations to 'New from Nowhere' gives a fair idea of him. To try to express in a few lines what he really seemed to me, to tell how his character impressed itself, so that, as the years pass, more and more I am filled with admiration, is an impossible task. It is not for me in a familiar letter to endeavour to give the keynote to his character. But the better I knew him, the longer I think of him, the deeper knowledge I gain of his work, the surer I am of the genuineness of his nature. Essentially there was nothing trivial about him.

I recall his various visits to our home as among my happiest memories. He made himself one of us, and I am glad to know that he enjoyed these 'holiday' trips, somewhat as a boy out of school. His first visit was on October 23, 1884. He had undertaken a tour in the northwest of England to lecture on Socialism, and appeared

as one of the lecturers in the eclectic course at our chapel in Percy Street. Writing to a friend in America at the time, I said: 'He is very charming. Very handsome, with wavy gray hair thrown back like a glory round his fine head. He lacks height, his figure being too massive for his height. He dresses something like a retired sea captain, in loose blue serge, wears a sky-blue linen shirt, with porcelain buttons, rolling collar and cuffs – all unstarched. He talks incessantly and walks incessantly with short, quick steps, occasionally running up to some picture or other object to examine it... As a popular speaker he does not do well, stammering and stumbling. But his manuscript is most beautiful, the sentences rolling off like organ music.

'It is not very long since he took up this Socialistic propaganda, and while he is in genuine earnest, I fancy that he at times is a little amused at finding himself lecturing... He and I grew enthusiastic over our mutual admiration for "Lavengro" and "Romany Rye", both of which he knows as well as I do.'

The year after this Mr. Morris, on coming home after his lecture, asked me how he had done. I told him I was puzzled; something had gone wrong. He laughed and said: 'I am trying to become popular.' But it would not do. The Oxford scholar, the purist in English, could never learn the quick, nimble wit of the stump orator.

It has been said that he was impatient in discussion. I do not agree. He and Auberon Herbert met to fight the battle of Socialism and Individualism, and never did two more courteous opponents meet in debate. One evening a working man in his audience rose and said: 'Mr. Morris, if what you tell us ever comes true, how will you do? You are a rich man now.' With an indescribably sweet smile, Mr. Morris answered: 'When that time comes, I hope that I shall not be found unwilling to have less, that others may have more.'

On one of his trips to Lancashire he agreed to meet Mr. Sharman at Garstang to have a walk together. The day proved rainy, with no pause in the down-pour. I supposed the walk would be given up, but no, the appointment must be kept. Mr. Sharman could not fail, nor could he think that Mr. Morris would. They met, walked by Garstang canal, through those lovely meadows fragrant with the hawthorn, and on high thoughts bent, till the rain cleared. When they reached Preston, and the prudent woman, both were soaked thoroughly. What was to be done? It was two o'clock; the evening lecture was due at eight. Mr. Morris had only the dripping clothes he wore, nor could he wear Mr. Sharman's. He looked at me for aid a little like a penitent boy. 'The only thing that can be done, Mr. Morris,' I said, 'is for you to go to bed and let your things be dried.' And so it was. As the maid and I turned and pulled and dried and rubbed before the kitchen fire, there would come from the room above great peals of laughter at the situation.

His last and longest visit was in late October, 1889. He was more than ever at home, but there was a touch of sadness like a shadow of the near future. But we had one walk over the nine fields back of Preston, and he talked of the autumn of the 'tilth,' in gentle and tender words.

Then came the end. The break-up of our English life – the few words in which he mourned his friend – and, on my return to England in 1897, the few words dictated to his secretary a very short time before we heard of his death.

Edmund and Ruth Frow would like to thank Ray Watkinson and R. W. Jones for their help with this article.