Memories of Kelmscott
House

by James Alfred Wilkes

It is twenty-one years since on a delightful morning in October a little group of men and women assembled at The Mall, Hammersmith, to pay a silent tribute to the passing of the borough's most famous citizen. It was difficult to believe that the sturdy, uncompromising, poet-artist who seemed a veritable picture of health and vigour was no more, but William Morris had put into his comparatively short life, as men count age nowadays, activities and achievements sufficient to lend fame to half-a-dozen ordinary men. To many a one who gathered there on that autumn morning, however, his passing had a significance quite apart from that on which his fame chiefly rests. To them it was the snapping asunder of all those associations which are summed up in the words 'Kelmscott House.' In the coach-house attached to the poet's residence had foregathered, week after week, a little band of pioneers of the new movement towards the emancipation of the workers. As the rallying place of a branch of the Socialist League, and later as the headquarters of the Hammersmith Socialist Society, Kelmscott House was a name to conjure with in the 'eighties' and 'nineties' of the last century. From the little hall trooped forth from week to week men and women who, having become converts to the new faith, were bent on spreading the gospel of divine discontent. For the new faith, like the old, could not be fully grasped until its votaries were convinced of the futility of their previous outlook on the world and its crooked ways. Faith could only be arrived at through the thorny path of repentance. But what a faith was theirs. Many of these simple souls had read in the Commonwealth the inimitable Dream of John Ball, in which their leader had portrayed for them the spiritual forces that lay behind the Peasant's Revolt of the Fourteenth Century, and not a few of them believed that similar results must attend the preaching of the new gospel in their own day, that as serfdom had received its death blow by the persistent efforts of the poor preachers, so
the people had but to realise the iniquities of the capitalist system, and the new order would forthwith come into being. To the enthusiasts of twenty-five years ago, the Socialist Commonwealth seemed as imminent as, let us say, the end of the world war seems to us.

It was in this faith that the Socialists of the eighties worked and hoped. The character of the little group which gathered at the hall week after week has been well summed up by its leader in the opening paragraph of News from Nowhere, where he tells us that at a branch meeting of the League there were five members present, and five sections of the party represented. Question time at the Hall revealed the presence of every point of view from that of the philosophic anarchist to that of the Fabian. In the earlier days parliamentary action was laughed out of court, and those members who joined the Liberal Association to further the policy of permeation were looked upon as heretics of the worst type. There were battles royal when George Bernard Shaw put in an appearance. Gas and water Socialism had no attractions for these men, who were out for a revolution much more thorough and convincing. The writer remembers well the dismay depicted on the face of one of the faithful when he suggested that it would take at least twenty years to bring about some minor reform in which we were both interested.

But the centre figure of this motley group was of course Morris himself, and as is always the case when men come into contact with a commanding personality there was much unconscious imitation. The ipse dixit of Morris was usually preceded by the phrase ‘in point of fact’ which became one of the Society’s catchwords. One especially recalls a lecture on the simple life delivered in the best Wordsworthian vein. It was noticeable that Morris, who was in the chair, was unusually restless during the evening, and that his pen was particularly active in the sketching of initial letters on the paper in front of him. One missed, too, the shrill ‘Hear Hears’ with which he was wont to punctuate those views which especially appealed to him. The reason for this was made clear in the speech in which the chairman summed up the debate. Wordsworth and Morris were as far as the poles asunder, and the poet-Socialist did not mince matters. After a heated tirade on many of Wordsworth’s views he said, in conclusion, ‘In point of fact Wordsworth was an ass.’ This was, of course, final.

It was always a matter of surprise to the writer that these folk, who were bent on reforming the world, seemed so loth to begin.
It was rarely that the meetings began within half an hour of the advertised time. There were, however, a few exceptions. On one occasion when Morris himself was the lecturer – on Architecture, with lantern illustrations – the little hall was crowded out, and those that sauntered down half an hour late were surprised to find that the lecture was half over, and that there was no room, not so much as about the door. Perhaps the biggest crowd that one remembers, apart from the occasion just mentioned, was that which greeted Mrs Besant, who came down to administer a severe castigation to those who incited the ‘unemployed’ to make a disturbance on Lord Mayor’s day. Whatever may be said of the right of revolution, Mrs Besant showed quite clearly that nothing could come of a spasmodic and unorganised rising such as she averred was then in contemplation. One of the speakers in the debate created a small sensation by the statement that he carried in his pocket an explosive which was sufficient to send us all to kingdom come. In the earlier days we were thrilled by the stories of Russian refugees who had settled in the neighbourhood. Volkhovsky held us spellbound while he told of his escape from Siberia. Kropotkin, the saint of the movement, and the burly Stepniak, whose untimely end cast a shadow over our little circle, broadened our outlook as they told of the conditions under which their countrymen existed – now as we hope gone for ever.

So far as the writer remembers, Keir Hardie only spoke at Kelmscott House on one occasion. He had a good house, and impressed us all with his transparent sincerity. Other notabilities graced our platform on occasion. There was Walter Crane, who lectured on Art and Education, making us envious of the skill with which he illustrated his remarks on the blackboard. Edward Carpenter, fresh from India, told us of his experiences. While much of the lecture is forgotten, we cannot forget our feelings at seeing the author of ‘England, Arise!’ face to face. Although the party politicians, as a rule, boycotted the Socialist schism shop, we remember seeing the member for Hammersmith (Sir W. Bull) and Mr. Haldane!

In ‘Old Craig’, as he was familiarly called, we had an interesting link with the Socialism of an early day. Craig was a personal disciple of Robert Owen, and had carried out with considerable success a communistic experiment at Ralahine, in Ireland. He told us all about it one Sunday evening, and astonished us with his wonderful vigour and staying power. He must have been considerably over eighty at the time. Old Craig had been in many
movements in the course of his long life. He was one of the first lecturers in phrenology in this country, and was not at all backward in exercising his powers when called upon. A great apostle of fresh air, he was an ardent hygienist before the word had become so well known as it is to-day. He was full of the strangest fancies and theories on all sorts of subjects. It was a weird spectacle to see this wizened old man seated on the edge of the platform with his ear-trumpet, eagerly following the lecturer of the evening. One wonders what he thought of it all. On one or two occasions we caught a glimpse of William James Linton, engraver and Chartist, another strand which helped to bind our movement to those that had gone before. Champion of freedom in many a well-fought struggle, Linton had been deputed by the English workers to carry a message of greeting to the Provisional Government in France in that year of revolution, 1848. He had also taken up the cause of the political refugees, and made an effective protest against the opening of Mazzini’s letters by the English Government during the time that he was domiciled in this country. Kelmscott House was always open to men in the apostolical succession of the champions of the people’s cause.

The outdoor propaganda to which we have already alluded was a prominent feature of the Society’s work, and one in which Morris himself took his fair share. In the early days of the movement the task seemed somewhat irksome to him, and, truth to say, he never seemed quite at home in extempore speaking. As he was addressing an outdoor audience, he was constantly on the move, poking the ground with his stick, while he blurted out his message in his strong and abrupt fashion. The Socialists could not always be sure of their pitch, being sometimes forestalled by the ‘gospellers’, as Morris humorously termed them, but the flag was seldom driven from the field altogether.

Perhaps, on the whole, the Sunday morning meetings, at the foot of Hammersmith Bridge, were the most successful of the Society’s outdoor work. George Bernard Shaw was always a great draw on these occasions. He would hold his audience for a full hour, while he expounded to them the principles of Socialism as he understood them. But in this all-important work the humbler members of the society also took their part, and by twos and threes managed to cover a wide field. We are all Socialist now, but in the early days it was not at all unusual for the adherents of the new gospel to suffer persecution. To carry the flag thirty
years ago was a risky business, involving loss of status, and, in more than one case, loss of situation as well.

The Society at one time boasted a choir, the leading spirit of which was an old army bandmaster, who had composed a rousing tune to Morris' 'March of the Workers', one of the most inspiring strains the writer has ever heard. One will never forget the thrill which accompanied the prophetic vision of 'the people marching on'. Then there was a reading circle which tackled Carlyle's *Past and Present*, and dabbled in Wordsworth (before the ban). One of the members invariably opened the discussion with the query, 'Mr Chairman was – (the author) – a Socialist?' An answer in the negative seemed fatal to his further interest.

There was indeed a curious crowd at Kelmscott House. It reminded one of the strange folk that gathered round Emerson in Concord, of whom Hawthorne has told us in his stories of the Old Manse. There were men of all views and no views at all. There was the man who was engaged in writing a book in refutation of Huxley, which has not yet seen the light. The most terrible portent of the times, according to another, was the introduction of cremation, which was the sure precursor of a nation's decay. Then there was the foreigner, with broken English and a strong German accent, who seldom missed a chance of speaking, defying the chairman's bell with a persistency worthy of a better cause. In outdoor propaganda one could not fail to note the tall man with fur cap and long coat, in the tail pockets of which he carried fruit and sweets for the children of the crowd. But at the Hall there was always the modest and courteous secretary to welcome us at the door, and the gifted poet's daughter, who held the bag for our coppers as we left.

These were great days, for out of such beginnings has sprung the movement which even in these dark times fills one with hope for the future. And as this movement gathers force, surmounting great obstacles, we think of the old bandmaster's stirring refrain, 'Tis the people marching on.'