The Morris Family remembered
by Teresa A Lock

Although it is now over forty years since the last member of the Morris family, Miss May Morris, died at Kelmscott, they are still remembered in this remote area of West Oxfordshire. I use the words, "family" and "remembered", deliberately, for although the creative genius of Morris has been immortalised through his writings and designs, and the face of Mrs. Morris immortalised by the paintings of Rossetti, it is essentially as people that Kelmscott remembers its most famous of families today.

Mr. George Swinford, a Cotswold stonemason, was ten years old when William Morris died. He is probably the last

The illustrations to this article come from Aymer Vallance's
William Morris: his Art, his Writings, and his Public Life (Bell, 1897)
person in West Oxfordshire to remember seeing Morris and his wife, Janey, ride in their pony and trap along the gated road from Kelmscott to Filkins, on their way to Burford. Mr. Swinford recalls:

"When he used to come along, we used to run along and open the gates for him. We generally had a penny for that. Sometimes the gate was open, and we used to run down, when we heard the bottom gate slam, and shut him in, before he got there. Then, when he got to the gate, he used to hold up his whip, pretending to hit us with it. Then, after he got through, he always chucked us a penny."

Mrs. Morris died in 1914, at Bath. Those who remember her recall the grey-haired lady visiting the village school, wheeled there in a bath-chair. Mr. W.A.D. Morris, then a school-master at a neighbouring village, recalls;

"I spoke to her for just a few minutes. May had wheeled her to the dancing green at Kelmscott, for she was getting very feeble. She was dressed in black, spoke slowly and softly; a pleasant thing in a woman. She was like Rossetti's paintings, she had not lost her beauty altogether. She wanted to know why I had come to see the children dance. I told her that her husband would have rejoiced to see this day. She replied that the music of his verses was the nearest he got to music."

Mrs. Hilda James was born at Kelmscott and went to work for Miss May Morris in 1922. She is possibly one of the last people to be able to describe, clearly, the interior of Kelmscott Manor as the family knew it. Although the basic structure of the house has changed very little, it is interesting to follow Mrs. James's description of each room.

"On the left-hand side of the front door was the kitchen," recalls Mrs. James, "and from there a door going into the scullery. It was all dark in those days. I always had to have a candle out there in the winter, when it was a bad day . . .

"On the right-hand side of the front door was the dining-room, then through into another little hall. If you turn left from here, then the stair-case is on your right. Straight ahead of you is the Green Room, and round the corner to the left, the Devil's Room, with the door to the garden."
"If you go upstairs, on your left on the top of the landing, was the toilet, then the North Bedroom. From the North Bedroom are three steps to the Tapestry Room. There is a little place out of the Tapestry Room where a single bed was kept. Miss May used to have her books and things in there when she was working, so that the Tapestry Room was kept tidy.

"The rooms that were papered had Morris designs. Up in the Cheese Bedroom — that’s at the top of the back staircase-first bedroom on the left and then the little bedroom on the right, which was always called, "Miss Jenny’s Room". There was another bedroom on the landing, then to the ordinary bedroom where Miss May used to sleep the latter end of her days. Then you went out of there and turned left on the landing by the front stairs and into Mrs. Morris’s bedroom.

"Miss May told me herself she used to sleep in the attic when she was a child, she and her sister. There was one she always called the Apple Room — that was the one she told me she slept in."
There were two rooms on top of the attic stairs. The first one on the left was one of the servants' bedrooms, then the one on the right where I think she told me her sister used to sleep. Miss May called one of these attics her "Silver" attic. It was where she used to do a lot of work.

"Downstairs, the farthest room to the right of the hall was called the "Panel Room". It was always painted white. There were two easy chairs covered with Morris cretonne, also a settee, though it wasn't a three-piece suite. To the left of the door, on the wall, were drawings of the two daughters, then a little mirror above the doorway to the little room. Then there was the painting of Mrs. Morris on the big wall to the left, near the piano.

"We were never allowed to touch the blue china in the little room — well, not to move it off those shelves. When Miss May wanted that spring-cleaned out and us to wash the paint, the night before she would move the china out onto the table her-"
self. We would clean the shelves, then she would place the china back. It was very special to her."

It is with obvious affection that Mrs. James remembers Miss Morris. Upon hearing that Mrs. James's mother was looking for a new home — her cottage had been a tied one and was now needed for a young carter — Miss May had offered the cottage ajoining the Manor grounds so that the family would not have to leave the village. It was a feeling of obligation that prompted Mrs. James into accepting the job of the house-maid.

"Miss May was a very nice homely lady. She wasn't proud. You felt at home with her. You didn't uncomfortable.

"She used to give the old people she'd known from her girlhood so many yards of material each year. One year, one family would get it, the next, another. She used to give a hundredweight of coal each Christmas all the way round."

"She used to give out soup every Friday. It was made in the brew-house in the court-yard in a big, galvanized copper. When the children came out of school at twelve o'clock, 'up street' of Kelmscott used to go one week and 'down street' the next."

(The villagers so described the two main parts of the village.)

Some of the villagers also went to the Manor for choir practice, as Mr. Sam Faulkner remembers:

"Miss May taught us to sing 'Jerusalem'. In the Green Room, round the piano, boys at the back with men, girls in the front."

Kelmscott villagers apart, Miss Morris did not always take kindly to visitors — that is, if they had only come to stare. But to the true pilgrim and admirer of her father's work, she was most hospitable. Such a visitor was Mr. W.A.D. Morris, who particularly remembers the manner in which Miss Morris spoke of Rossetti.

"May always referred to him as Mr. Rossetti. In her conversation with me she spoke little of him. When she did refer to him, there was always a feeling of distrust behind her words."

At Miss Morris's tea-table, one place always stood empty — that which her father had occupied. Mrs. James recalls Miss May allowing someone to sit there once, that privileged person being Sir Gordon Bottomley.

"He was thrilled. She never let anyone sit at that end of the
table, nor in that chair. He was the only person I ever knew to sit there."

During the First World War, a Cornish land-army girl had gone to work at a farm in Kelmscott. Weighing easily twenty stones, having hair cut very short and wearing plus-fours, her appearance was predominantly masculine. This was Miss Lobb, and she was later to become Miss May’s companion, living at the Manor until her death.

Possibly it was Miss Lobb’s style of dress, or her unfortunate manner, that intimidated many of those who came into contact with her. That she was devoted to Miss May is obvious to anyone reading Sir Basil Blackwell’s account of her. Mrs. James remembers her helping to organize tea after the opening of the Morris Memorial Hall in 1934.

“It was quite an occasion. The little field that the hall is in was full of buses that brought people. Ramsay MacDonald was a guest at the lunch at the Manor, and Bernard Shaw. We had 300 in the house to tea, so many in the different rooms. Some people were out in the kitchen and some in the penthouse scullery. Miss Lobb saw to the two tea urns and kept the kettle boiling. Everything was laid out and they had to help themselves”. But Miss Morris’s day-to-day life-style was not so extravagant. Mrs. James recalls Miss May and Miss Lobb using the kitchen as a living room, lit by a lamp, for there was no electricity.

“She didn’t like lots of modern things; but I think that was her way, of always having candles. She had a lamp in the kitchen. There was a big lamp for the dining room table, but it was very seldom lit. We used to have candles, four of those on the dining room table. Up in the Tapestry Room we used to have candles. There was a big chandelier on the stairs, but it was never lit as I can remember.”

Beyond the candle-lit world of Kelmscott, the flame of war was kindling throughout Europe. Mrs. James remembers that Miss Morris “was dreading this second World War coming. She used to talk about that to us”.

But she never lived to see the crisis break, dying quite suddenly in 1938. Although several years younger, Miss Lobb outlived her companion only a matter of months, dying the following year.
And so after over fifty years, Kelmscott Manor was no longer the home of the Morris family. Hobbes and Chambers, Chartered Surveyors and Estate Agents of Faringdon, had the task of auctioning what must have been almost the entire contents of the house with the exception of those items specifically bequeathed. In many ways the sale catalogue for those two days in July 1939 makes pitiful reading — simple, everyday objects that must have held an intrinsic value to their previous owners, but to the outside world are too commonplace to care about, went 'under the hammer'. Janey's gowns and jewels, Morris's painting equipment, hap-hazard contents of drawers, cupboards and boxes, everything, was sold, and is now almost totally untraceable.

One thing that everyone attending the sale remembered was the weather, for there was almost a deluge of rain on both days. On each day the rain began to pour as the Manor clock struck eleven—the exact hour Hobbes and Chambers had intended the sale to begin. As Mrs. James says,

"It seemed as if a curse had caused the rain."