Memories of May Morris: 1923-1938
by Una Fielding

At Kelmscott Manor a green door in a high stone wall leads from the farm road outside right into the garden. On entering one steps on to a flower-bordered path which takes one to the front door and so into the house. It was on this path that May Morris greeted me when I first entered the garden one afternoon just before Easter in 1924.

We had met once before in London on the steps of the British Museum; she had asked me then to carry one red flower in my hand so that she would know me, and said that she would do the same. Her letter making this arrangement was waiting for me at my bank when I arrived in London from Australia in September 1923. It was an exciting day; there was only just time to send a reply saying that I would be at the British Museum at noon the next day - and that day, she told me, would be her last day in London for some time as she would be leaving 8 Hammersmith Terrace finally the following morning, and would live at Kelmscott all the year through.

We met easily: I would have found her without the red flower, for I remember thinking how very like she was to the Watts portrait of her father. She took me into the Museum for a first peep, and then we went off to Soho for lunch and a long talk.

I remember that at that meal she introduced me to zabaglione: later I came to know that it was one of her amusements to introduce her friends to new foods and see how they liked them. As our likes in these things turned out to be similar I came later on to have my turn of first move in this game.

She enjoyed cooking too, and it was during that first of many Easter holidays at Kelmscott that she taught me to make zabaglione and pasta after the manner of the good Italian housewife.

It was a great thrill that first holiday at the Manor. There
were lovely sunny days in the garden where primroses and polyanthus of many colours were in full flower in the borders.

In those days she did a great deal of gardening herself and I remember talking to her while she clipped the yew-dragon which she told me her father had himself cut in the hedge. And I remember that she planted two fig trees by the wall in the northeast corner of the garden. They did well, and in later years it became a regular custom for me to go down for a long week-end in October, before the term's work in London held me too closely, to see the last of the flowers and help eat the last of the figs. We used to savour them in comparison with the best figs we knew, hers Italian, mine Australian.

It was during that Easter holiday in 1924 that May took me for a walk by the river that was never to be forgotten. We followed the left bank of the Thames down stream until we were opposite Eaton Hastings and then turned north and soon came upon a great patch of fritillaries. She knew they would be there: it was my first sight of these things, a complete surprise and a joy that has never departed. That walk became an annual affair, and when Easter was early and the fritillaries were not yet out when my holiday came to an end, she used to send or bring a bunch to me in London. A few years ago she found a fritillary in Raffam, the river field at the back of the house, and wrote with great pleasure to tell me about it and of her hope that next year there would be many more. But we could never find that fritillary again.

She loved the garden at Kelmscott, not only the look but the smell of things therein, and when sending off flowers to friends almost always put in a little posy of resinous and aromatic plants like rosemary and cystus.

She had a great affection for the elm trees around the house and used to enjoy their fine patterns against the winter sky with the rooks' nests making nodal points in the tracery.

May taught me how to do cross-stitch and it was great fun making patterns and springing them on one another. In winter we often worked by the fire in the tapestry room and in summer in the green room by the window looking out on the mulberry tree and the little box-bordered flower beds.

She was always very kind to my efforts and helped me to realise the design I had in mind and never demolished my attempt to replace it by a better one of her own.

She delighted in children's toys and often came back from
Oxford or Lechlade with a strange collection of oddments. When these had been tried out and admired they went into the toy-box ready for the Christmas party at the village school or filled in the odd corners of the boxes of books and clothes that were sent off to Iceland or the Hebrides.

All May’s days at Kelmscott were busy days though outside happenings were few. She got up about 8 and breakfasted with Miss Lobb. In warm weather all meals, even breakfast, were served under the verandah in the kitchen courtyard. Visitors always had breakfast in bed, with permission to smoke. About 9.30 she made a round of the garden for flowers then went on into the kitchen garden to select the vegetables for the day. Then came work – writing or sewing till lunch time. The two girls from the village who came each day to do the house work had lunch with us except on the rare occasions when there were visitors for this meal. After lunch there was coffee and halva and Russian cigarettes and talk. Then followed an afternoon session of writing or designing for some serious job of needlework. In the afternoons, especially in holiday time, people often came to see the house and May usually liked to take them round herself, but during the last two years of her life she was often too tired to do this.

Sometimes big parties came and then Miss Lobb and Miss Whitaker and myself, if we were there, all helped, including the two village girls. The girls who stayed for long periods – and most of them did – came to know the house and its contents very well and became discriminating in their appreciation of colour and design in household objects, and several of them in recent years have become expert needlewomen.

May Morris could not be happy for very long without some manual occupation. After the evening meal she did ‘play’ work, usually knitting, or ‘play’ reading, often detective stories, those of Dorothy Sayers in particular. Sometimes we read aloud to one another.

We went to our rooms about half past nine, but May always read till very late, usually some book of travel or archaeology to begin with, Aurel Stein or Gordon Childe, then a novel as a night-cap in the small hours.

It was not only at Kelmscott that we met. In my memories of the nineteen twenties when I was a junior demonstrator and festivities were not frequent, there are some red-letter days. These were the days when she came up to London for some
meeting—the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, The Women's Guild of Arts, The Council of the Tate Gallery or the Kelmscott Fellowship—and business over, had invited me to dine in some interesting restaurant and go to a show.

In the matter of 'shows' her likes and dislikes were vigorous—especially the dislikes. But I remember that she greatly enjoyed 'Bitter Sweet' and 'Grand Hotel'.

The background for each of us was very different: her daily work interested me but mine did not interest her. It was only later—after Jenny died—that she ever spoke of illness or death and wished to know what was in my mind about these things, so much woven into my life. But she allowed me to share in her own richly coloured and complicated background. The common interest of pattern-making made a channel through which there flowed from her shy, aloof, yet very kindly spirit, some of that wealth of experience in life which she had garnered but found difficult to communicate. And so my life was greatly enriched, and there will always be a vitalizing stream flowing from that past to this present.

These notes were prepared for the meeting of the Women's Guild of Arts held at 6 Queen Square, London in March 1940 as a memorial to May Morris. I was unable to be present at this meeting owing to examining duties in Sheffield where I was stationed during the first year of World War II. So this account was never used.